

# MASQALAA

A BONFIRE IN SPRING

PILGRIM



*As the demera stands tall in all its golden glory, members of the clergy commence the Demera procession and when they come to an end the demera is set ablaze.*





*The Demera bonfire is lit after mass service in Finfinnee*

Abel Gashaw

**A**s the sun says its farewells and darkness begins to fall gently upon the land, people emerge from different parts of the city and come together to prepare the large bonfire called demera. Tying flowers to the tops of branches, they build a huge, pyramid-like pyre, and once finished, they crown the demera with a cross bedecked in golden flowers. These flowers, called Siddise in Afaan Oromo and Biden Macroptera in Latin, are endemic to Ethiopia and emblematic of the season. As the demera stands tall in all its golden glory, members of the clergy commence the Demera procession, a prayer which announces the beginning of the official ceremony, and when they come to an end the demera is set ablaze. Every year on the 26th of September, the eve of the finding of the True Cross, upon which Jesus Christ was crucified, is commemorated in Ethiopia in this manner.

Ethiopia's capital Finfinnee is where the biggest and most colourful Masqalaa (Meskel) celebration is held and it is a holiday that draws visitors from all over the world. On September 26th, the True Cross celebration is held at Hulluuqa Kormaa, or Meskel Square, a square named after the festival itself. As crowds slowly begin to trickle into the square, large groups of brightly colored umbrellas embellished in gold details and interlocking patterns appear over the horizon. When the square is full, members of the clergy lead the crowds in the celebrations, and when the mass comes to an end, the crowd erupts with cheers that ring like silver bells through the streets of Finfinnee.

The late afternoon is when the more intimate stage of the festivities begin. This is when families gather around their own demera to sing traditional folk songs and hymns while the young dance in endless merry circles around the pyre, whirling and twirling to the rhythm of the music. When night settles over the land, the time is rife for the lighting of the demera. The plumes of smoke climb higher and higher into the deep abyss of the night sky, and the dancers grow ever more ardent as they compete against the splendour of the rising flames. The bonfire is lit in

memory of the mother of Emperor Constantine, St Helena, and the efforts she made to find the True Cross in the 4th Century. In a dream, St Helena was told to light a big fire, and she was told that if she followed it, the smoke would lead her to the place where the True Cross was buried. So moved was she by this dream that when she woke, she ordered the people of Jerusalem to build a pyre. It is said that after it was lit, the smoke showed her the exact place where the cross was buried. Every year, a fire is lit in memory of this discovery, and when the fire dies and only smouldering embers remain, the pious will collect ashes and paint the sign of the cross on their skin to symbolise their devotion to God.

This UNESCO inscribed cultural heritage is probably the most celebrated holiday across the country. It is of such importance that in many Southern Ethiopian nations, calendars either mark Meskel as the start of the new year or use it as a gauge to decide what day their own new year falls on. Coinciding with the end of a long and heavy rainy season during which many dirt roads have been impassable, Meskel is also a time where people can leave the city and return home to their villages and hometowns. Being one of the most celebrated religious feasts of the year, Meskel is always long-awaited and eagerly anticipated.

But it is not only Meskel that makes this time of the year so very special. In Ethiopia, the end of the rainy season is an animated time of celebration and festivity; it is a time steeped in rich culture and soaked in lavish history. Falling in the middle of the country's festive season, Meskel in Finfinnee is a colourful and vivacious experience you simply can't afford to miss. Especially as it comes surrounded by holiday celebrations and festivities like the Buhe Festival commemorating the Holy Transfiguration, the joyful singing of the spring songs Goobee and Shinooyyee, the New Year celebrations bringing with them the hope of change and prosperity, and the grandest celebration of them all, the Oromo Thanksgiving Holiday, Irreechaa.

A large, dense crowd of people is gathered at night, celebrating the Demera festival in Finfinnee, Ethiopia. The scene is filled with the warm glow of numerous lit candles held aloft by the participants. Many individuals are wearing traditional white head coverings (netela) and face masks. The crowd is diverse in age and appearance, with people of various ethnicities visible. The overall atmosphere is one of joy and communal celebration. A semi-transparent red circular graphic is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing text.

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inscribed cultural  
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Crowd celebrates  
Demera in Finfinnee  
© Abel Gashaw

# THE S HIGHL



# HAWWA LANDS

*Springtime (Birraa) blankets the valleys and escarpments of Derba in yellow daisies (Ilillii Birraa) in North Shawa*

📷 Ashenafi Yemane

# THE REALM OF FLAWLESS MOUNTS

Bathed in the spring sun, the Shawa Highlands show off a thousand shades of green and yellow as small bushes sprout and flowers bloom

📷 Ashenafi Yemane

*Shawa highlands will continue to become the treasure troves of all the goodies that make for a great life for years to come."*

**L**ocated in the heart of Africa's highest country, the Shawa highlands are an expansive plateau known for their horses, fields of grains, and the yellow daisies that flower as the heavy highland rains subside in spring. Featuring dramatic seasonal changes, the highlands boast a dry season made golden as the sun sparkles off dried wheat stalks, a rainy season that cover the countryside in a thousand shades of green, and a spring of immense beauty as all plants, big and small, see it fit to flower once the heavy rains no longer beat their leaves and the sun no longer hides behind thick, dark clouds.

As these seasons cycle through the years, it creates a rhythm that dictates how the people live. The rainy season is Ganna and to the inhabitants of the Shawa highlands, it is a time to scale back on activities. The fields are plowed and planted, but the food produced the previous year would be close to running out. It's a lean time. The streams that criss cross the Shawa highlands hurtling to join the rivers Awash and Mogor overflow and become impassable, isolating villages and keeping lovers apart.

Once the rains subside however, the rivers clear up and the sun peeks out from behind tufts of clouds to invite all plants to flower, exploding in a rainbow of colors. Birraa, as spring is known in Oromia, is finally here.

In Birraa the Oromo people rejoice. From young girls going out to sing Shinooyyee throughout their villages to the men singing Goobee, everyone is on a high that culminates in Irreechaa, a beautiful celebration of all the blessings received.

At the end of Birraa, the harvest begins. It's a time of plenty. It's a time of work and play and bountiful festivals. The Cuuphaa (Timket) festival takes place around this time and marks the beginning of Bona - the hot, dry season. Horsemen take to the fields and hold events where they race against each other or against horsemen from other villages. It is a spectacle and, predictably, love is in the air as young men eye girls dressed up in their colorful Timket outfits.

This is the rhythm of life in the Shawa highlands.

Encompassing parts of East Shawa, and all of Southwest Shawa, West Shawa, North Shawa, and the cities of Sheger and Finfinnee, these highlands are also some of the most important population centers in the country today. The Shawa highlands and the plateaus their populations live in are demarcated from the rest of the country by the two largest valleys running through Ethiopia. To the East and South, Shawa plunges into the Great Rift Valley - that massive scar running across the face of the Earth. To the north, the highlands



Horsemen stand in formation with their stallions decorated in matching colored tacks at an annual function in Sendafa around Finfinnee  Arganne Markos

suddenly drop to meet the Blue Nile and its tributaries, the Jemma and the Mogor. Elevations drop by hundreds of meters and the weather turns much warmer down here. In between these two massive valleys is a relatively flat land that is home to the Mecha and Tulama Oromos of the Borana moiety.

Boasting the nation's capital and several of its most populous cities and towns, these highlands have been theaters of political history as far back as medieval times. For the Oromo, however, the Shawa highlands are the lands of the Maccaa-Tulamaa, the descendants of Borana, the Son of Orma - the first Oromo.

The Maccaa and Tulamaa Oromos inhabit the Shawa highlands starting all the way down at the Great Rift Valley in areas and towns such as Batu and Modjo. They are farmers tilling the land to grow wheat. They are horsemen who ride their stallions and mares to the market, hauling grain and asheeta - fresh sprouts of legumes and maize. The agriculture here and the produce it floods markets with every harvest season is famous all over the country. Even more famous, however, is the horsemanship of the Maccaa and Tulamaa. From battles in the age of the Portuguese and the Ottomans to more recent campaigns against Italians and internal aggressors, the Shawa horsemen have been shown to be the most decisive force the country possessed.

Originating, like all Oromos, at Madda-Walabu, the primordial waters that all beings came from, the Maccaa-Tulamaa are a Borana sub-group of the Oromo people. Their history is deeply interwoven with the history of the rest of Oromia with Oromos from as far west as Wollega and as far south as Borana coming to celebrate Irreechaa at the Hora Arsade for centuries.

This Irreechaa celebration takes place in the town of Bishoftu, which is home to several crater lakes. One of these, Hora Arsade, has been hosting the largest Irreechaa celebration of recent eras. Added to the history of this celebration is the culture of the five Odaa trees throughout Oromia one of which, Odaa Nabee, is located close to the towns of Dukem and Bishoftu. The five Odaa trees are the most important gathering places for the Gadaa systems of their areas. People in central Oromia and those from as far north as Karrayyu come to Odaa Nabee to take part in different ceremonies as this Odaa is the spiritual center of these highlands.

Giving the Shawa highlands even more spiritual heft are the many significant mountains that dot the landscape. Erer, Mogole, and Entoto frame the capital Finfinnee and are all important areas of ceremonies and practices. Mount Chukala to the south of the capital, however, has always been one of the most important sites of the Irreechaa Tulluu (Ir-

reechaa of the Mountain), which takes place at the end of the dry season. The mountain overlooks large parts of East Shawa zone, where several clans of the Tulamaa Oromo live in harmony.

Today, the Shawa highlands are central to the country's identity and economy. Its cities of Waliso, Ambo, Fiche, Modjo, Adama, Dukem, etc. represent the most important gateways to the rest of the country and the city of Finfinnee and the amalgamated city of Sheger are the country's two most important cities. This relatively highly urbanized part of the region and country has drawn people to it from all over the country and the horn region. The beauty of the highlands and the customs of the people that call it home have meant that this is one of the most desirable places to reside in the whole country.

With history to fill books, customs that intertwine the rhythms of nature with sophisticated systems of governance, a weather that's perfect all year round, and views of hills, mountains, and valleys to rival any in the world, these Shawa highlands will continue to become the treasure troves of all the goodies that make for a great life for years to come.



*A long procession towards lake  
hora for Irreechaa in the town of  
Bishoftu*  
Amensisa Ifa





*Irreechaa has always been the largest and most important celebration that, much like the solstices of northern Europe, is celebrated twice a year.*