



## **TIMKET PRESERVES CULTURAL LANDSCAPE AND CULTURAL HERITAGE IN ETHIOPIA**

**Dr Rabindra Nath Pati**

Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology Institute of Paleoenvironmental and Heritage Conservation, Mekelle University, Mekelle, Ethiopia.

**Dr. Shaik Yousuf Basha**

Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, Institute of Paleoenvironment and Heritage Conservation, Mekelle University, Mekelle, Ethiopia.

Email: [sainathpati2011@gmail.com](mailto:sainathpati2011@gmail.com)

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### **ABSTRACT**

The orthodox Christians of Ethiopia practice numerous festivals and ceremonies throughout year which are manifestation of cultural practices, worldview and belief of nations and nationalities of Ethiopia. This paper is the outcome of participant observations and case studies on Timket festival observed in five regions of Ethiopia. The celebration of this festival provides a platform for realizing cultural identity, social solidarity and acculturation process for young generation. The ceremonies are treated as integral part of indigenous communities which facilitate collective prayer, dance, and singing, eating and socializing. The paper attempts to critically assess the relevance of Ethiopian culture and values to contemporary societies and explains how these social values, moral values, religious values, political values, economic values and aesthetic values ensure wellbeing and holistic development of the society.

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### **Keywords:**

*Socio-cultural dimensions, Timket, Baptism, Orthodox Christians, Worldview, Community Based Ecotourism.*

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## **Introduction**

Timket popularly known as Epiphany annually celebrated by Ethiopian Orthodox on January, 19th and 20th as a mark of symbolic celebration of baptism of Jesus Christ in Jordan river. In some regions, celebration of baptism of Jesus Christ starts on 10th January every year. The celebration of this popular festival among Orthodox Christians is closely interlinked with conservation of cultural landscapes and bio-cultural territories in different rural regions of Ethiopia. The Orthodox churches enforce religious customary rules to showcase the age old world view customs, values, rituals interlinked with cultural, political, economic and social systems of indigenous communities of Ethiopia. This celebration not only promotes collective consciousness and social solidarity but also creates a platform for acculturation and socialization of age old tradition by younger generations backed up by community, administration and religious autonomy. This ceremony upholds unique cultural heritage and cultural diversity of the country since time immemorial in spite of threats and challenges posed by globalization, introduction of western technologies and influence of dominant culture. The colorful ceremony is celebrated for three days covering taking arks to holy rivers in procession led by religious leaders, baptizing the worshippers by priests in second day and memorizing the miracles of Jesus Christ on the third day. All villagers including male and female, elders, young boys and girls, children, village paramilitary force and priests participate in this colorful ceremony and perform all the rituals prescribed by the religious tradition since time immemorial. The celebration of Orthodox Christians symbolically represents baptism of Jesus Christ in Jordan River and celebrates baptism every year for purifying all worshippers and infuses religious and moral spirit among them for sustaining harmonious and peaceful living in the society. This ceremony is manifested in different forms in different regions of Ethiopia. The celebration of this festival involves possession by all villagers to sacred river carrying Holy Ark known as Tabots symbolizing ark of covenant and tablet of love. The clergy and priests dressed with colorful traditional robes and umbrella of many hues perform rollicking dance and songs. The participants in the ceremony are priests and deacons, old mothers, village elders, young girls and boys, paramilitary force of the village. The role of each group is different as prescribed by religious customary rules of Orthodox Church. This colorful ceremony is celebrated by indigenous communities of Zoble, Kobo, Alemata, Mehony and Ofla (Korem) of Ethiopia. The orthodox churches located in the villages have assigned different responsibilities to priest, deacons, hymn groups, church singers and worshippers



who restore their religious cultural tradition by maintaining traditional hymn style, dancing style, praying style and traditional dressing style along with use of traditional musical instruments.

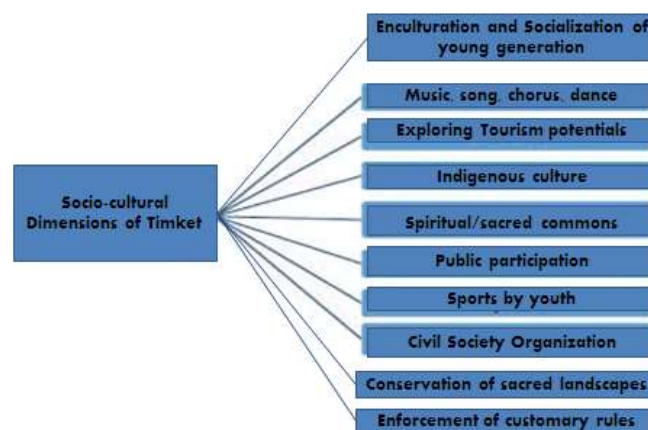
## **Materials and Methods**

This paper is the outcome of ethnographic investigation covering participant observation and multiple case studies on religious process in Timket festival conducted in Raya Kobo, Almata, Hiwane and Mekelle city of Tigray region during 19th and 20th January, 2018. The study covered focus group discussions with village women, men, paramilitary forces separately along with key informant interview conducted for priest and religious leaders. The qualitative ethnographic methods were adopted to describe real life context in which the celebration of Timket was occurred. The participants in the interview expressed that the celebration of festival upholds social, cultural, religious, political and economic values that mainstream not only their ethnic identity but also wellbeing of the society. The perceptions of the followers of orthodox Christians endorsed that the Timket as festival creates a platform for social cohesion, entertainment, renewal of cultural identity and conservation of cultural landscapes in the village. Purposive sampling technique was used to select 20 traditional priests, 12 clergy and 25 clan leaders and 14 old mothers from different villages where the festivals were celebrated. These respondents have adequate knowledge on significance of this festival as they were very important key stakeholders in the planning activities and execution. They shared valuable information on different key features of the festival. They have strongly advocated that the celebration of Timket festival not only boosts up the social and cultural identity of the community but also serves as a concrete resolution mechanism for settling outstanding disputes and misunderstanding among people. The festival is a mechanism for facilitating the natives and youngsters to learn about their traditional dances, folklore, songs and religious values. The authors have synthesised and made rigorous content analysis of good number of published research papers to answer series of research questions and key hypothesis designed at the time of planning the research. The findings of this research have outlined a wide range of research hypothesis to form further advance research on intangible cultural heritage and bio-cultural territories of Ethiopia preserved through multiple festivals and ceremonies observed year round by nations and nationalities of Ethiopia.



### Key Findings And Observations

The celebration of Timket across different regions of Ethiopia is instrumental not only for preserving sacred landscape and water reservoirs in different regions of Ethiopia through symbolic ritual practice of baptism and taking all arks to sacred river or sacred water reservoir but also for memorizing Jesus Christ baptism since centuries. The celebration of Timket has symbolised the presence of God and connected with particular sacred landscape and sacred geography. The sacred landscape associated with this festival have unique features which manifest unbound wonder and reverence and honored as places of transaction with spirituality. This sacred landscape exhibits manifestation of spiritual experience that becomes tangible. As per customary rules, the orthodox churches of the villages have selected these sacred landscapes treating as auspicious sites that embody balance and harmony of the universe. The landscape has vibrant potentiality for observing beneficial life forces and mitigating negative spheres. This sacred landscape provides a platform for meditation and facilitating spiritual journey apart from providing enabling environment for artistic expression of contemplation towards promotion of dialect and practice of spiritual view and poetic field of wisdom where a pure mind will visualize pure land, paradise, nature, breath, God and silence.



**Chart-1. Socio-cultural Dimensions of Timket, Ethiopia**

The world view, customary rules, social values preserved by orthodox Christians of Ethiopia revolve around celebration of Timket and sustain community based conservation of sacred landscape and bio-cultural territories of the regions since time immemorial. The cultures of Nations and



Nationality around Ethiopia attach national value to natural and cultural sites showcased through this ceremony. The sacred landscapes such as sacred river and water reservoirs used for baptism manifest strict behavioral restriction, essence of separateness as well as strong emotion oriented and attached with the celebration. The sacred landscapes have potential tourist destination which can be explored through community based ecotourism projects. There is urgent need for redesigning policy for converting this sacred landscape and festival into popular tourist destination through reshaping spiritual value and reproducing local perceptions of landscapes.

**Discussion**

The worshippers preserve holy water reservoirs locally known as Mai hiyet which refers the healthy harmonious relationship between nature and physical world where law of nature are always honored. There are two separate space for taking bath before baptism for male and female. The followers of Orthodox Christianity strongly believe that washing entire body in this holy water would eliminate all the sins committed by them and purify their body for baptitization. Both male and female finish their bath before mid-night. Community based approach for conserving sacred water resources as well as sacred landscapes linked with religious ceremonies throughout the year leads to safeguarding of bio-cultural territories and bio-cultural heritage of Ethiopia.

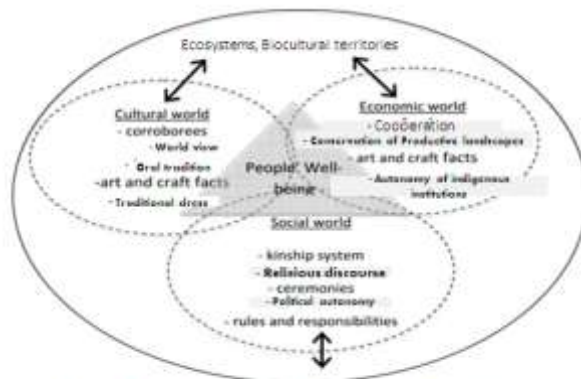


Chart-2. Matrix of Social solidarity sustained by Timket

The ceremony has maintained a balancing mechanism among social world, economic world, and cultural world and ecosystem bio-cultural territories of the region. These domains are interrelated and interdependent structurally and functionally. The celebration of festivals and ceremonies by



Orthodox Christian communities during different occasions round the year boost up renewal of the interrelationship among these domains as explained in the above chart.

Timket renews a platform for people to learn the dynamics of their surrounding culture and acquire value and norms that sustains the world view for generations together. It is a mechanization of enculturation that teaches individuals the accepted norms and value of the society and promotes cultural identity. The ceremony has vibrant impact on safeguarding the nexus and the core area of indigenous culture in spite of challenges and threat of modernization, globalization as well as impacts of economic, psychological and social changes. The following components of the festival ensure social cohesiveness and social solidarity through participation of children, elderly persons, youth, parents, young boys and girls and peers.

1. Gedil cultural play game
2. Religious preaching and Singing ceremony
3. Mihlela by old mothers
4. The celebration of Timket by youngsters

1. **Gedil Cultural Play Game:** Gedil is the most colorful and popular cultural game observed during Timket ceremony in many regions of southern zone of Tigray. It is very popular and famous in Hiwane in Tigray. The game is played between two groups of youths following traditional customary rules of the society. A leader is elected from amongst the playing teams to coordinate the game appropriately. The leader is known as Abo-Gedil. He is required to follow certain rules and norms for coordinating the game. The game is organized among young people who showcase their strength through wrestling following the customary rules of the game. This cultural sport event plays an important role not only to attract visitors to participate in Timket ceremony but also creates space for entertainment and recreation for the participants in the festival. This festival covers a wide range of events under one umbrella preserving huge potentials for local tourism and related business for increasing economy benefit to local community. Timket as cultural festival of Tigray region act as dynamic force behind cultural innovation and social cohesiveness.

2. **Religious Preaching And Singing Ceremony:** The priest and deaconat dress with colorful spiritual dress code of orthodox christianity carry different spiritual pictures and tabote of the church



to showcase the spiritual and religious identity of the community. Tabote decorated with colorful covering are accompanied by colorful and shining well decorated religious umbrella. The priests observed all religious norms and praying all through the previous night. The villagers well organized in terms of sex and age such as elders, old mothers, adults, young boys, girls, young women and village paramilitary force assemble separately on the ground and participate in the prayer for celebrating Timket led by priest. After prayer the priests deliver spiritual preaching from the holy bible and infuse a sense of moral value and cultural identity among all the worshippers. In the eve of epiphany (Timket), all the priests and deacons from different churches gather together and sing different spiritual songs followed by group dance. The traditional musical instruments such as Kebero, Tsenatsil and Mekuamia are played along with clapping of hands by the participants. The beating of drums accompanied with group dance and chorus singing by spiritual singers creates a holy atmosphere. Cadres of spiritual singers have been assigned to continue spiritual singing with expression of honor to Saint Mary, angels and saints. The message of the song is “the son of God comes down to the Earth”. The son of God is baptized who came from the heaven. Ethiopia is a land of festivals, ceremonies and unique cultural heritage that sustains rich cultural diversity along with bio-cultural heritage of the country. The spiritual landscapes are preserved and honored through series of festivals, ceremonies and fasting observed by followers of orthodox Christianity all around the year. This country is the land of diversity upheld by different nations and nationalities since time immemorial. The festivals observed in different months throughout the year not only offer people a temporary relief from the daily routine but also provide them deep inner peace derived from multifaceted celebrations. All these festivals are celebrated by orthodox Christians with great enthusiasm and social harmony in a colorful atmosphere that provides religious and recreational platform at community level. The celebration of Timket is closely associated with describing the stories from holy bible through spiritual discourses that gives an insight into the deeper spiritual significance of the festival as well as underlying the celebration. These stories are the part of common folklore which reaches out to the ordinary people for renewing the cultural and religious heritage of the community. The celebration of festival has its own meaning and related beautifully to the life and brings in lots of happiness, color, prosperity and entertainment to the community life. The significance of this festival manifested through vital components such as:



- Timket brings the community closer to the religion and orthodox Christian tradition.
- It promotes community consciousness, social solidarity and harmony.
- The celebration of Timket carries the message of past generation to present generation and future.
- The celebration of Timket plays important role in preserving cultural landscapes and bio-cultural heritage of Ethiopia.
- This festival provides a unique opportunity to followers of orthodox Christianity to gather and spend time with family, friends and community.
- It provides a stress relieving mechanism from hectic agricultural and pastoralist work and relieves from monotony of life.
- It creates a platform for exchange of views and celebrations.
- This festival promotes a strong platform for building social relationship and social communication which leads to social cohesiveness among nations and nationalities of Ethiopia.

The religious preaching delivered by priests at inaugural ceremony of Timket plays a very important role in enculturation of community members and provides them with healthy rejuvenation.

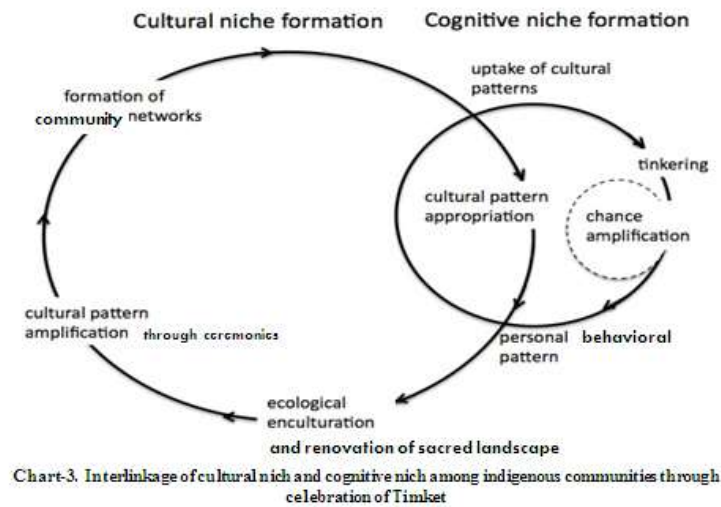
3. **Mihlela By Old Mothers:** The participation old and young mothers wearing white ceremonial robes and dressing their hair like “Sheruba” create a divinely atmosphere in the ceremony. They pray St. Virgin Mary and sing prayers clapping their hands. They participate in baptismation ceremony and continue different spiritual songs which signify the glory of St. Virgin Mary and other saints. Their prayers manifest emotional realization of unity in the community in spite of age and sex diversity and philosophical world view. Their participation in the celebration defuses the glory of St. Mother Mary and emanates from the philosophical concept all-pervading supernatural female power.

4. **The Celebration Of Timket By Youngsters:** The young girls dress themselves with colorful traditional robes and traditional hair dressing in different style participate in dancing with beating of drums, ululation and clapping of hands. They sing different folk songs glorifying the activities of





different saints. They dance in circle which popularly known as “Hura”. The participation of youngster promotes friendship among unmarried boys and girls and facilitates them for choosing their life partners. Their participation signifies a wave of relationship, norms of behavior, values, obligations and information channels. The participation of youngsters along with other segments of the society has significant impact on the social life and structure of the community by either enhancing or detracting from social environment of the region. The youngsters are future generation of the community and encouraged to participate in the performance and maintenance of religious activities as a part of the shared life of the community and development of social capital. They are encouraged to make effective use of community resources within complex of social web of community structure and strengthening community network with high level social connectivity and healthy relational dimension of the society. The participation of youngsters also promote social capital through social cohesiveness in festival attendance and providing opportunity to unite with other members of the society and share world view through ethnic, linguistic, religious and historical bonds. The youngsters affirm the pride, joy, dignity of their community and their people through different events of celebration in Timket. The performance of the youngsters and other stakeholders are identified by performance of cultural symbols, entertainment, honoring sacred landscapes and community celebration. The youngsters realize the opportunity of participating in the festivals that provides them a break away from their daily routine and allow them to socialize with family, friends and community elders, priests to safeguard ethnic and religious identity. The youngsters draw aesthetic and social values based on increasing the joy and beauties of their social life. Their participation in this ceremony infuses in them a sense of secular, increased joy and realization of beauties of social life in the community. The ceremony honor young children below age of 14 as future priests and clergies. The children are dressed with colorful attire of priests and carry colorful umbrella and participate in the festivals as would be spiritual leaders of next generation. The celebration of Timket as cultural practice provides a platform for socialization and enculturation to younger generation to acquire religious values, worldview, customary rules and orthodox Christian tradition.



The ceremonies and festivals celebrated by orthodox Christians' communities of Ethiopia not only amplify the cultural patterns but also shape living expressions of oral traditions, performing arts, knowledge and practice relating to nature and universe and social practices shaping the intangible cultural heritage of the region. Such celebrations provide platform for intercultural dialogue and mutual respect for other way of life. The cultural practices, ceremonies, rituals observed by indigenous communities of Ethiopia are habitual activities which structure the lives of communities and groups. These activities are closely linked with communities' worldview and perceptions of its own history and memories. The social practices are not affected by changes and challenges of modernization and globalization encountered by the present generation. The migrations, individualization, expansion of education and market effects of globalization have not influenced significantly these customary social practices and rituals. These activities shape community based intangible cultural heritage which is highly valued and recognized by the people.

Timket has a lot of history behind its celebration which can be traced its root through common ancestry and instituted in the remembrance of the events and the value handed over from generation to generation illuminating in this annual Timket ceremony. The celebration of Timket is major attracting forces which draw people from all walks of life who take some days off their busy work scheduled to return to their roots for reuniting with their family, clan and communities to celebrate



the festival. The orthodox Christian communities organize this ceremony in concerted and coherent fashion to shape the artistic and cultural identity of the community. In many other countries of Africa, the globalization and influence of western civilization have severely affected traditional cultural practices of indigenous communities. But orthodox Christian's of Ethiopia have safeguarded their cultural practices and embraced their roots to rediscover what their forefathers executed with patience in form of celebration of festivals and ceremonies bringing people together for upholding common heritage. Timket is a major intangible heritage handed down to communities by their ancestors. The different activities performed by different age groups in the ceremonies may be treated as mechanism for protecting the cultural heritage by way of continuity for future generation to learn about it and contribute their efforts for safeguarding this heritage and keeping the cultural landscape alive.

### **Conclusion**

The nations and nationalities of Ethiopia upkeep unique cultural heritage and bio-cultural territories across different regions of the country through celebration of numerous religious festivals and ceremonies all through the year enforcing customary religious rule of orthodox Christianity. These ceremonies embrace various aspects of life such as ethnic identity, self-identification, feeling of belongingness and commitment to the community, a sense of shared values and attitudes towards safeguarding community ethnic identity. The sense of self image, ethnic affiliation and cultural affiliation revolve around the celebration of epiphany or Timket. The ceremonies, rituals and festive events are integrated in the life cycle of indigenous community of Ethiopia which structure their social life and lead to preservation of cultural landscapes. These events are very closely interlinked with community's world view and customary rules and values. The festivals demonstrate different socio-cultural dimensions such as religious ideology of celebrating of all the cultural festivals in the local area. These festivals are treated as carriers of local identify of both sacred landscapes and local community. The celebration of Timket provides a forum for shared cultural value and common purpose of the community which not only ensure social cohesiveness but also build connectedness, belonging and social support. The observation of this festival annually renews religious ideology, ethnic world view, social identity and physical survival of the community. The festivals observed by orthodox Christians all through the year have rich potentials for promoting community based



tourism and improving economic life of villagers apart from achieving a sense of collective living through shared vision and celebrating a sense of place, strengthening place and ethnic identity. These festivals ensure sense of community and wellbeing by renewing the life stream of the community through cultural and religious practices. The participation of communities and followers of orthodox Christianity in Timket festival serves as a medium for bringing economic, political, social, and cultural and environment effects on the community. This festival also stimulates the local community and rebuilds right for local products and reigniting the passion for local food both among young and elders of the community. The celebration of Timket serves as a means of commemorating and remembering important religious event such as baptitisation of Jesus Christian in river of Jordan. It also involves recreation of the past and provides occasions for transmission of traditional culture and values for one generation to other. Timket provides a unique platform for uniting the followers of orthodox Christianity in expressing confidence in themselves and loyalty to their priests and clergies. The celebration is recognized as an important sector of folk and popular cultural orthodox Christians. This observation of festival is a vibrant supporting mechanism for social integration through renewal of worldview and platform for human interaction which never occur in day today life. It is an indicator for social dynamisation of orthodox Christians. The celebrants are observed with colorful traditional clothes and all forms of body adornment and all of them express their happiness on the participation of the event. The participation of people in the procession to the river for baptitisation boosts up their energy and improves religious gratification in them. The activities of the ceremonies are carried out by traditional leaders and chief priests which attract more people to participate in the festival. To conclude, Timket as a traditional festival not only centers around religious, socio-economic, political, cultural beliefs and values of orthodox Christians but also upholds unique intangible cultural heritage of Habesha community. This festival reserves unique tourism potentials for attracting foreign tourists and visitors to participate in the festival and enjoy unique dance, songs, prayers that indeed appeal greatly to visitors outside the traditional area.



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