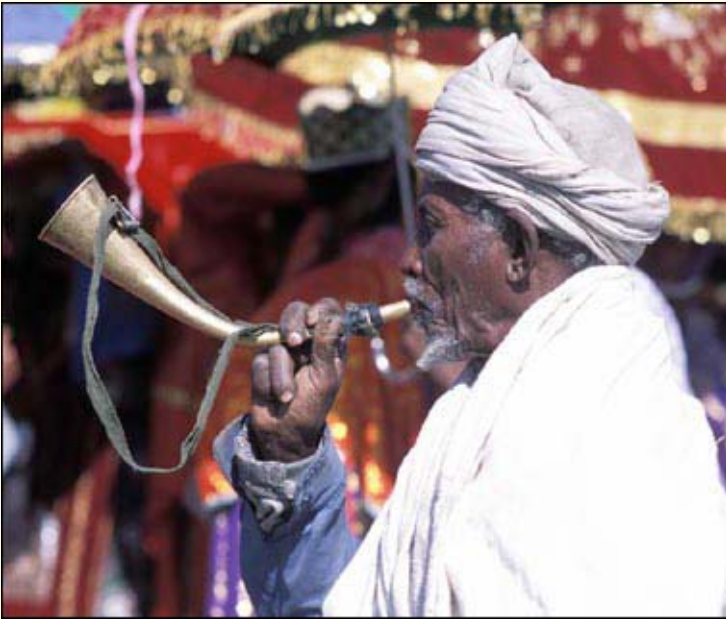


Timket



the Ark, covered by silks, are carried solemnly by priests from each church to the nearby body of water. Accompanying the procession are tens of thousands of church members and believers, chanting, dancing, drum-beating, horn-blowing, prayer-stick-waving and sistra (a simple musical instrument)-rattling. All in all, it resembles the scene described in the Old Testament.

As evening falls, the priests and the pious believers participate in overnight vigil around the Arks until dawn. Then huge crowds gather around the water. After the chief priest blesses the water,

Flamboyant embroidered umbrellas protecting the sacred Tabot and the priests. The umbrellas have become the most salient symbol of the festival.

Timket, or Timkat, is Ethiopian language for Epiphany. Although the holiday commemorating Christ's baptism in the River Jordan is observed by Christians all over the world, Timket is of special significance in Ethiopia. It is the most important and colourful event of the year.

The festival starts at Timket Eve, January 18, eleven days after the orthodox Christmas. Although the festival is largely religious, it has no lack of secular elements such as partying and match-making.

According to the Ethiopian epic *Kebra Negast*, the Ark of the Covenant was abducted from Jerusalem to Ethiopia during the first millennium BC. Since then, it has become the most sacred element of the Ethiopian orthodox church.

Early afternoon in the Timket Eve, the replicas of

the celebration reaches its climax. Many jump into the water, the rest are eager to get a splash. After the religious vows are renewed, some of the Arks are paraded back with the same celebrating fashion.

The festival does not end until the third day, dedicated to the Archangel Mikael. With parade no less magnificent than the previous two days, the rest of the Arks are carried back to their respective churches.

Timket in the town of Gondar is undoubtedly the most interesting. The bath pool in the historical palace built by the Emperor Fasiladas during the 17th century stages a dramatic backdrop of the event, while the garden surrounding the pool provides believers a perfect ground for prayers and overnight vigil.

Timket Eve (January 18th, about 2pm), traditional horns herald the beginning of the three-day festivity (above). Priests in colourful regalia carry the Tabot (the Ark of Covenant, but actually the tablet of Law housed in the Ark) of their respective churches gather at the town centre, accompanied by a troop of clergies and a huge enthusiastic crowd. Timket is one of the few opportunities that folks could be close to the Tabot, which considered to be the most sacred item in Ethiopian Orthodox Church. However, no one has taken a true glimpse of the Tabot, as it is always covered by gilded silks.





Young men in Gondar celebrate the festival fervently and zealotly, with prayer sticks and horns. Scenes like this was described in the Bible when the Israelis welcome Mose from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments.



Dressed up in festival gowns, young women chant "Haliluya" with their hands swinging left and right. While the celebrations by girls and young women are more gentle and melodic, elderly women also take part in. The tongue-twisting, high-pitch squeak can be heard all over the town.



Drum-dancing is one of the activities played through out the three-day festivity by both men and women. There are uniformed drum-dancing, there are also spontaneous ones.

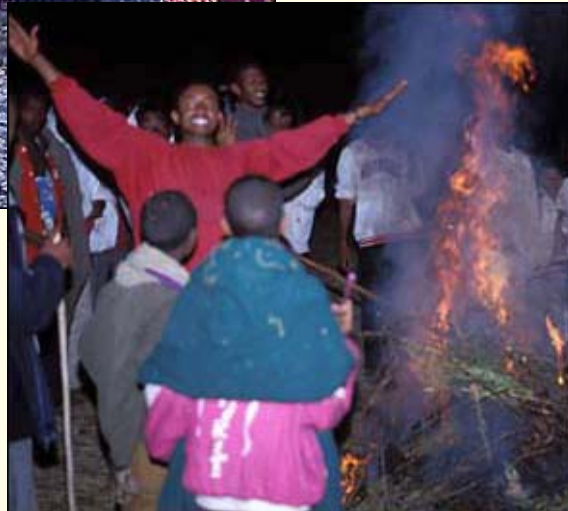
After gathering at the town centre, the Tabots are then slowly paraded to the nearby body of water - the 17th-century Fasiladas' Bath. A little more than two kilometres from the centre.



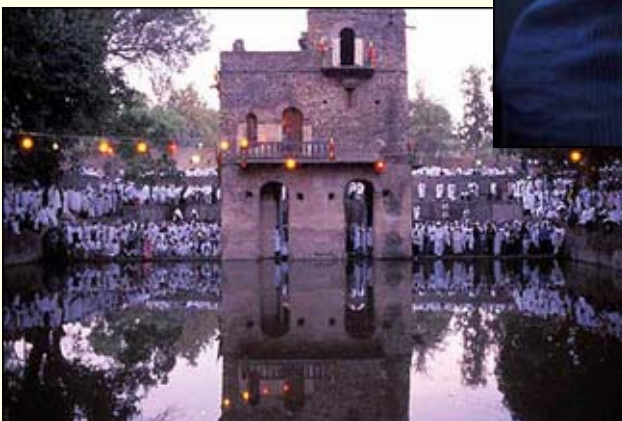


After a long and exhausted procession, the Tabot from each church finally arrives in 17th-century Fasiladas' Bath before sunset. Under thousands of revered eyes, the Tabots are brought into the seclusive tower in front of the pool, ready for the overnight vigil.

Folks light up bonfires in the garden of the Fasiladas' Bath. It's one of the happiest nights of the year!

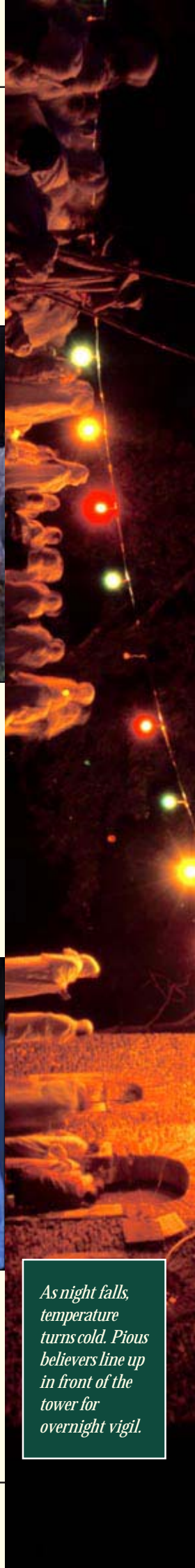


As dawn approaches, believers camp in the garden prostrate toward the tower housing the holy Tabots. Other monks and believers pray with the religious scripts in front of the pool.



Sunlight now emerges from the horizon. A hymn started spontaneously amid the pilgrims. But very soon the hymn spreads over every corner of the Fasiladas' Bath, turning itself in to a gentle but soul-touching chorus with every harmony.

As night falls, temperature turns cold. Pious believers line up in front of the tower for overnight vigil.



*Morning prayers
in the Garden of
Fasilada's Bath.*



January 19, Timket Day. About 7am. The moment has finally arrived. The grand priest, gathered around by other clergies, slowly descends to the pool side. In a breathtaking moment, he prays while dipping the holy cross into the water. Immediately after the blessing, the crowd erupted. Young men dive into the freezing water, others are pushing forward toward the pool. Religious vows are not renewed without taking a splash of holy water.



*(Below): Christian girls receive
blessing from a priest*



As the last man in regalia disappears into the door of the church, the three-day festival has finally come to an end. For a foreigner who has never witnessed the enthusiasm and ardent passion about religious faith, every bit of sound and action during the festival will not only engrave into his memory but also remind him forever the hope of life.

