

# Festival notes

## TIMKAT FESTIVAL

**T**imkat, or the Ethiopian Epiphany, is the greatest festival in the Ethiopian calendar. It takes place on 19 January, two weeks after the Ethiopian Christmas and lasts for three days. On the eve of Timkat, there are colourful processions, and on the day itself, Christ's baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist is commemorated. The third day is devoted to the Feast of St Michael, the archangel (and a popular saint).

For the occasion, special mead and beer are brewed, African sheep are fattened and slaughtered, gifts are prepared for the children and everyone wears new or mended and best clothes. Many local people wear traditional dazzling white dresses, and the priests wear ceremonial velvets and satins with sequined velvet umbrellas.

On the eve of Timkat, the priests remove the tabots (replicas of the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed) from each

church and bless the water of the pool or river where the next day's celebration will take place.

The tabots are consecrated and carried under layers of rich cloth accompanied by priests, the ringing of bells, the blowing of trumpets and the swinging of incense. The tabots are placed in special tents in meadows close to the next day's celebration site.

The priests pray all night and say mass at around 2.00am. Huge crowds of people camp out. Towards dawn, the patriarch dips a golden cross and extinguishes a burning consecrated candle in the altar. Then he sprinkles water on the assembled congregation in commemoration of Christ's baptism. Some people leap fully dressed into the water to renew their vows.

The tabots are processed back to their churches while the feasting, singing and dancing continues. The elders march, accompanied by singing priests, young men and the beating of staffs and prayer sticks.

## KU-OMBOKA

**T**his famous ceremony takes place in the Western province of Zambia. It usually takes place between February and Easter, when the water levels are high enough. The Lozi King decides the date.

Towards the end of the rains, the levels of the Zambezi River rise and flood an area that is used by many subsistence farmers. The people must leave to travel to higher ground. This retreat from the rising waters is known as the Ku-omboka and is usually led by the King (the Litunga).

The Litunga's departure is heralded by the beating of three royal drums. The drum beat summons the people from miles around until the

drums are loaded on to the royal barge (a large black and white striped wooden canoe). Almost 100 polers paddle and punt the barge along. Each poler wears a skirt of animal skins, a white vest and a scarlet hat with tufts of lion hair.

The royal barge is scouted along by two smaller white-painted barges, which search out the best route to follow. Behind the royal barge is a barge bringing the king's wife, the Moyo, followed by local dignitaries and attendants.

The journey takes most of the day and is accompanied by music from local musicians. The Litunga arrives wearing a splendid dark blue and gold costume with a hat that includes a display of white Egret feathers.

