

## Awi

Mounted horses adorned with bright red plumes of yarn thunder past a towering outcropping of stone which juts 800 feet (244 m) above farmland plowed by these same animals. Playfully, but aggressively, the riders hurl sticks like spears at leather shields wielded by other horsemen. This show follows an Ethiopian Orthodox Church festival in which a replica of the ark of the covenant and the tablets of stone are paraded on the heads of richly robed priests. This is the religion and culture of the Awi.



### Location

The Awi people live in northwest Ethiopia near the city of Bahar Dar and Lake Tana, though few have traveled as far as the lake since it is a long way off by local standards.

### Topography

Awi life is dominated by the mountains surrounding them. There are many huge outcroppings of rock that form the highest peaks. They are more or less in the shape of eggs standing on end, like a row of sentinels marching through the center of Awi territory.

The countryside of the Awi features rugged terrain, mountains, rivers and streams. Due to higher rainfall and traditional respect for the forests, the Awi highlands have retained more forests than other areas of northern Ethiopia. However, these forests are decreasing at an alarming rate.

Nearby are the breathtaking Blue Nile Falls and Blue Nile Gorge. The source of the ancient Blue Nile River is located just outside Awi territory and both Ethiopians and foreigners travel long distances to drink waters from the spring which is guarded closely by priests of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

The spring flows into a stream which grows and empties into Lake Tana which is sprinkled with islands, many of which contain monasteries dating back to the fifteenth century. The Abay River, known to Awi as the *Ghion*, flows out of the lake and soon cascades over a the majestic Blue Nile Falls or *Tis Isat*. The river is then cradled in a magnificent gorge flanked by mile-high walls of basalt. The Ghion twists and turns in a corkscrew around Awi country, though at a much lower altitude than where the Awi live. Although the Awi rarely actually see the river and many other people groups live between them and it, the Awi have many beliefs about the river.

### Culture

Culturally, the Awi are now very similar to the Amhara, a much larger dominating people group that is mixing among the Awi. The primary difference is language, although many young Awi who grow up in the towns do not necessarily know their language. Attempts have been made to revive the language among the youth by teaching it in public schools. The language was first put in written form within the past decade; the writing system is still under development.



Funeral activities are quite important to the Awi. When someone dies, there is much loud wailing. Photographs of all other family members are hidden, and the deceased one's picture is kept prominent for several weeks. Family members sit in mourning in their home for days or weeks, depending on the closeness of the relative, and are visited by neighbors and friends.

Weddings of course are much more joyful, and are celebrated with special Awi songs. Marriages are often arranged by the family. In some sad cases, every spring, terrified, screaming eight-year-old child brides are sold by their families to men five times their age rich enough to buy a virgin bride. These poor little girls are then often divorced in the fall for remarriage again the next spring to someone else.

The women shave their heads; the men generally have short beards once they are married.

At the beginning of their new year (congruent with the month of September), new clothes are bought for everyone, and freshly cut sticks - white with bark stripped from them - are placed by the doors of their homes.

The Awi are very proud of their horses, and use them in all their church festivals, as well as weddings and funerals. They decorate them in red and white plumes and ride them hard, often wielding a leather shield and spear, used strictly for ornamental purposes at this point in history. This is one of the few places in all of Ethiopia where farmers use horses instead of oxen to plow.

Due to the high rainfall and well developed community organization, the Awi are the most skilled in all of Ethiopia at the use of irrigation during the dry times of the year. Though their soil is over utilized and highly eroded in places, Awi farmers sometimes harvest three crops a year.

The major crops include *teff* (a very small grain unique to Ethiopia), barley, peas and wheat. Some corn is grown at lower altitudes. But the main staple of the Awi is the potato. They grow both the white Irish potato, which is eaten and sold outside their region, and the local Awi potato, which is eaten only by the Awi.

Awi houses are generally round with mud walls and grass roof. Wealthier people build rectangular houses with tin roofs. Health care is generally based on religious practices, including the use of witch doctors and amulets. The towns have poorly equipped clinics which are often only the last resort for countryside Awi. The nearest hospital is in Bahr Dar, at least a three hour ride in a crowded bus from Injibara, and it could take hours of walking to get to Injibara first. Unfortunately HIV/AIDS is already widespread among the Awi.

### History

Centuries ago, ancestors of the modern Awi ruled northern Ethiopia under Queen Yehudit, who imposed Judaism on the Ethiopians. Although that mighty dynasty broke up, several modern day people groups look to it as their origin. These include the Awi (sometimes called the southern Agew), the Agew (or Wag), the Kemant, and the Falashas, who are the Ethiopian Jews.

### Religion

The religion of the Awi draws on a strong Old Testament heritage. Similar to Ethiopian Orthodox churches in other people groups, each Awi church centers around a holy of holies that contains a replica of the tablets of stone and the ark of the covenant. These are regarded as holy, and are often worshipped by the country people. Mary the mother of Jesus, saints such as George, and the angels Gabriel and Michael, all play major roles in their religious life.

On a Sunday morning, less than 0.01% of Awi attend Protestant churches. These services are conducted in the national language of Amharic. To date, no services are available in the Awi language.

### SIM Involvement

SIM missionaries Mark and Debbie MacLachlan serve the Awi people in the town of Injibara near Bahar Dar doing the SIM Forest, Fruit, and Forage for Farm Families Project. This innovative project helps farm families to use and increase forest resources to better feed themselves, their cattle, and provide long term income.

SIM opened a station in Dangila, on the edge of Awi territory many years ago, but was forced out in the 1970s. The SIM-related national church in Ethiopia, called the Kele Heywet Church (KHC) sent evangelists to Injibara, the Awi capital, about 1997. Since 1999, SIM missionaries have been stationed in Injibara at the request of KHC. Several KHC evangelists work in Injibara, as well as one in the countryside. Several others work in the larger towns of Dangila and Chagni on the edge of Awi territory.

### Scripture Availability

No scriptures exist in the Awi language. The few Protestant churches in the area use the Amharic Bible, which the townspeople and men may understand, but country people and women do not.

### Urgent Prayer Need

Bingham Academy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, urgently needs a [French teacher](#) to join their staff team in August. Pray that God will provide the right person to meet this need.