



## Meat Consumption Culture in Ethiopia

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### Abstract

The consumption of animal flesh food in Ethiopia has associated with cultural practices. Meat plays pivotal and vital parts in special occasions and its cultural symbolic weight is markedly greater than that accorded to most other food. Processing and cooking of poultry is a gender based duty and has socio-cultural roles. Ethiopians are dependent on limited types of animals for meats due to the taboo associated culturally. Moreover, the consumption of meat and meat products has a very tidy association with religious beliefs, and are influenced by religions. The main religions of Ethiopia have their own peculiar doctrines of setting the feeding habits and customs of their followers. They influence meat products consumption through dictating the source animals that should be used or not be used for food, and scheduling the days of the years in periodical permeation and restriction of consumptions which in turn influences the pattern of meat consumption in the country. In Ethiopia, a cow or an ox is commonly butchered for the sole purpose of selling within the community. In special occasions, people have a cultural ceremony of slaughtering cow or ox and sharing among the group, called Kircha, which is a very common option of the people in rural area where access of meat is challenging frequently.

**Key words:** meat, consumption culture, Ethiopia

### Introduction

The food practices of humans are determined by values, attitudes, beliefs, and environmental and religious circumstances; all of which are the products of tradition, culture, and contacts (Onuorah and Ayo, 2003). Knowledge and culture affect the intake of a particular food (Asp, 1999). The success in understanding the culture of other countries or ethnic groups lies in understanding their rituals in food consumption customs (Nam *et al.*, 2010). In developing countries, culture plays a crucial role in determining food patterns (Lahsaeizadeh, 2001). According to Kebede (2010), cultural diversity is the unique feature of Ethiopia; the country's population composed of about 80 ethnic groups whose cultures are diverse one another. Each ethnic group has its own culture manifested to the widely practiced diet (national foods), way of living, celebrations, dressing and dances at the cities and the cultural fabric intertwining is still con-

tinuing (Kebede, 2010).

It was indicated by Twigg (1984) that almost all cultures build their principal meal around meat. Meat has social significance in family gatherings, making friendships, prestige by offering dinners etc. (MAPP, 1994). In Ethiopia, there are occasions in which meat plays pivotal and vital parts and its cultural symbolic weight is markedly greater than that accorded to most other foods. These include holidays, initiation rites and visitations by important guests (Kifleyesus, 2007). On feasting days and social ceremonies of Ethiopia, according to Bea (1993), meat products are eaten and the stews are also made mainly from chicken, beef, lamb and mutton.

Meat and poultry consumptions in Ethiopia have associated peculiar cultural practices, for instance: the peoples use the oldest and cultural preservation of meat and prepare traditional dishes from meat, processing and cooking of poultry is a gender based duty and has socio-cultural roles, meat by-products are utilized for preparation of traditional dishes, and the peoples are dependent on limited types of source of animals for meats due to the taboo culturally associated.

It is a fact that the share of meat in the human diet has been closely related with a life style, wealth, habits, reli-

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gious beliefs and human awareness. Fashion, marketing and advertising also play a considerable part. Of all, cultural and religious considerations have always played, and still play, a significant role in the preparation and consumption of meat products (Borowski, 2007). Religious-beliefs shape also the social behaviors where differences in religious affiliations tend to influence the way people live, the choices they make, the food they eat, and with whom they associate (Kim *et al.*, 2004).

The population of Ethiopia is diverse in religious beliefs: Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and Islam are the major religions, traditional animist religions being practiced by many ethnic groups, and minority of followers of other Christian denominations is existing (United Nations, 2004). Varying in their beliefs, Ethiopia's religions have a significant role to play on consumption of meat and meat products by setting the feeding habits and customs of the people which in turn influences the pattern of meat consumption in the country. Therefore, this review will consider various factors, mainly religious and their beliefs, which have a considerable effects on consumption of food of animal origin in Ethiopia, positively or the negatively.

### Factors Affecting the Meat Consumption Culture

#### Religion

The consumption of animal products and more specifically meat and meat products is most strictly regulated in cases where religious considerations prevail (Shatenstein and Ghadirian, 1997). It was posited by Sheikh and Thomas (1994) that the religious groups to which people belong will determine food practices according to their religion. Differences in religious affiliations tend to influence the way people live, the choices they make, what they eat and whom they associate with; the beliefs play significant parts in sculpting social behavior (Kim *et al.*, 2004) and are inbuilt to dictate what a person can eat and what he cannot (Onuorah *et al.*, 2003). The consumption of meat and meat products in Ethiopia has very tidy association with religious beliefs, and are influenced by religions.

In Ethiopia, according to CSA (2004), Christians generally represent 62.8% of the population: 43.5% Orthodox Christians, 18.6% Protestant and 0.7% Catholic. Muslims are 33.9% of the population. The Animist, the traditional beliefs, accounts for the rest 2.6%. Because these main religions of Ethiopia have their own peculiar doctrines in

detecting the feeding pattern of their followers, it will be critical to understand the situation of animals flesh food consumption in relation to the religious influences. The influences of these Ethiopian mainly religions on the peoples' meat products consumption can be illustrated into two ways; the beliefs dictate the source animals that should be used or not be used for food, and schedule the days of the years in periodical permeation and restriction of meat products consumptions.

The Coptic Orthodox Church, the dominant religious sect, has been dictating many food customs in Ethiopia since the fourth century (Bea, 1993). According to the belief of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Christians, the faithful must abstain from eating meat and dairy products to attain forgiveness of sins committed during the year, and undergo a rigorous schedule of prayers and atonement (Teklehaimanot, 2005). Therefore, followers do not eat meat and dairy products (i.e. egg, butter, milk, and cheese) on fasting days such as Wednesdays and Fridays except the 50 days running from Easter, the Fast of the Prophets, the fast of Nineveh, Lent, the Fast of the Apostles and the fast of the Holy Virgin Mary (Teklehaimanot, 2005). The Ethiopian Orthodox Christians follow fasts in a way similar to other Orthodox Christians but with a frequency of approximately 250 days in a year (Rakesh and Tafesse, 2010). This religious influence along with the poor national economy results in the low per capita meat consumption (Table 1).

The three Ethiopia's Christian sects such as Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic, 62.8% of the total population, have the same ritual process for animal slaughtering, which is, slaughtering the animals in the name of "trinity": the name of "Father God, Son Jesus and the Holly Sprit". Whereas, Muslim's ritual slaughtering entails that the animal is killed in *God's name*, "Allah". Based on these differences only existing in ritual animals slaughtering between Christians and Muslims, the municipals abattoirs and slaughter house facilities in most of the Ethiopia's cities and towns are constructed and provide service by targeting of the Muslims and the Christians.

On the fasting days of Orthodox Christian followers,

**Table 1. Changes of Per capita meat consumption in Ethiopia**

Year	Per capita meat consumption (kg)
1996	8.0
2000	7.0
2004	8.0
2005	8.3
2009	8.5

Data source: FAOSTAT (2004) and FAO (2009).

which accounts for 69.27% of the Christian and 43.5% of the total population, most of the butchers don't slaughter and give service except those few owned by Muslims. In most of the cases, the Christians slaughtering services cease without considering any of the other Christian sects followers, for instance those of the protestant Christians, who are the abstainers of the Orthodox Christian's fasting. This is resulted from the dominance of Orthodox Christians in the country, according to Bea (1993), the Coptic Church of Ethiopia is the dominant religious sect since the fourth century that has been dictating many of the food customs.

A case study of Avery (2004) which was conducted in the title, "Red Meat and Poultry Production and Consumption in Ethiopia and Distribution in Addis Ababa", indicated that the live animals purchased by butcheries or supermarkets are sent directly to the official Addis Ababa Abattoirs Enterprise, and sent through the Orthodox, Muslim, or European slaughter facilities. The third slaughter service does not refer the local/citizens' service as it is not common in most the Ethiopian abattoirs.

The Orthodox Christians fasting influences consumption of meat by reducing the supply, for example, in the case of the Protestant Christian followers, 7% population, who their fasting doesn't forbid eating meat, children, people with medical case and others are forced to limit or withdraw from consuming meat. According to Avery (2004), about 85.3% butcheries in Addis Ababa were closed during the traditional Wednesday and Friday Orthodox Christians fasting to sell an average of 313.5kg raw beef per week. It was reported by Tewodros (2008) that the periods for low demand of cattle meat was observed in correspond to the fasting period of Ethiopian Orthodox followers. This is because the slaughter houses cease or minimize their services since the butcheries stop ordering cattle slaughter services (Tewodros, 2008).

Alike to the consumption of meat (Betru and Kawashima, 2009), the periods of low bird sales and consumption coincide with Orthodox Christians fasting; the pre-Easter fasting period which lasts about two months from February through March. The other low sales and consumption period is during the pre-Christmas fasting period (Betru and Kawashima, 2009). According to Aklilu (2007), in northern Ethiopia particularly in Tigray, most strict Orthodox Christians households - especially in rural areas - abstain from eating animal products during the Easter fasting period, pre-Christmas fasting period and on Wednesday and Fridays. There are fluctuations across the months of the year in sales as well as in consumption of

both birds and eggs (Betru and Kawashima, 2009).

In a nutshell, near 62.8% of Ethiopia's population, the total Christians, withdraw from meat products on an average for about 250 d of the year due to this religious belief. If some Christians consuming meat product could be found, it should be by slaughtering chicken as it is on a regular basis done at home or by illegal slaughtering sheep, goat and cattle (some hotels may be) at the backyard which is by itself trouble for meat quality and safety control in the country. Therefore, this system calls for the attention of Government in planning strategy and managing accordingly.

Regarding the consumption of fish, its demand and supply increase as the demand and supply of meat and poultry declines, and the vice versa. On those fasting days when meat is prohibited by Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox, fish plays an important role because it is not among the forbidden dishes. During lent, for example, Christians who abstain from eating meat, milk and eggs consume fish. As a common dish of fasting days, peoples consume fish and vegetarian meals by making the stews from pulses, lentils, peas, field peas, chick peas, peanuts and varieties of vegetables (Teklehaimanot, 2005).

Generally, there is a limited interest and habit of eating fish with Ethiopia's people. It has not been integrated into the diet of most of the population. This is because of the accessibility problem in related to the shortage of processing and distribution of fish, and religious influences on the consumption pattern. The demand for fish is only seasonal. In fact, Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Christians don't restrict the consumption of fish in all over the year inclusively of the fasting schedules. However, Ethiopian people have related eating fish with fasting days. Because religion may be regarded as the mainspring of culture setting principles for life, and influencing the attitudes in many instances, according to Kinsey (1988), most of the restaurants and butchers serve fish as substitute of meat. The fish market will have higher supply following the fasting days demand than any the other days, and this leads people to shift their dish towards fish.

For the reason that fish consumption trend is also influenced by cultural/geographical regions (Richard and Marcia, 2004), it will not be easy to find fish in other times than those fasting days of Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox followers unless it could be in the biggest cities like Addis Ababa, Adama, Bahir dare, Awassa, and Arba minch that have the supply of fish nearby, and many restaurants, super markets and centers where fish are sold exist. Therefore, people whose main dish is fish culturally or/

and those who prefer fish in their diet may have better access for fish on the fasting days. The religious influence in the consumption fish is observed, therefore, through periodical shifting of the access and the consumption behavior of the followers on fasting day's base. Seasonal consumption of fish could be culture in the society. Some conservative Coptic Orthodox followers are, moreover, exhibiting a tendency of withdrawing from eating fish in fasting days with a premise that fish has blood as any of the prohibited animals in nowadays.

In respect to the Ethiopian Muslim religion, there is no any periodical or seasonal restriction for any of the permitted animal products that influence the consumption behavior of the followers. However, there is a belief influence of the Muslim religion which is related with the restriction of the source of animal to which their fleshs are not allowed for food. Considering the two Ethiopian major religions in broad, the Christian sects in general and the Islam have influential role by restricting their followers for some of the type of animal's flesh foods. Both, Ethiopian Christians and Muslims in common do not eat pork as it is forbidden by their religious beliefs (Teklehaimanot, 2005). They have also types of meat animals they restrict independently.

In fact, the consumption of animal products, more specifically meat and meat products is most strictly regulated in cases where religious considerations prevail (Shatenstein and Ghadirian, 1997). The characteristics of the foods that *Koran* and the *Sunna* exhort Muslims to eat and not to eat were reported by Johanna (2009) as Muslims are expressly forbidden from consuming carrion, spurting blood, pork, and foods that have been consecrated to any being other than God himself. Except those that are explicitly prohibited in Islam, according to Abdullah (2004), Muslims are allowed to consume all foods (e.g., grains, vegetables, fish and meat). Following the ritual restriction of eating pork for all Muslim religion followers as Johanna (2009) indicated, Ethiopian Muslim similar to other world Muslims don't eat pork and it is recognized as "*Haram*" literally means "forbidden" food by the followers.

On the side of all of the Christian sects in Ethiopia, they have a common restriction for some animal meats which is based on the old testament of Holy Bible that characterizes the animals used for consumption. For mammals, so as to be served as a food, they need to be ruminants as well as not to have hoof of two fully splits, and for birds, they need to have fingers of fully splits with no attachment one another. By relating with this stated religious

belief, therefore, pig doesn't fulfill the stated criteria. Therefore Ethiopian Christians don't eat pigs and it is among the "forbidden" called as 'erkuse' alike the term "Haram" used with the Muslims context. Meat of camel isn't also eaten by Ethiopian Christians using similar affiliation criteria that are used for animal selection in order to be served as food.

There is no restriction for the consumption of camel meat by the Ethiopian Muslim religion as far as religion restriction concerned. Rather, meat of camel is among "Halal" foods, literally means "lawful" or "permitted, for Ethiopian Muslim, and it is also beloved by the followers unless the production states and the agro-ecology of camel production limits the supply and consumption.

### Gender

Consumption of chicken in respect to the Ethiopian people has very cultural practices, that is, the preparation process of the national dish, *Doro wat*, has strict traditional guidelines and gendered roles. Cuisine may vary from region to region but regardless of their religion, Ethiopian women learn the ritualized process of making this traditional dish as a 'rite of passage (Natasha, 2011).

The chicken is *halal* or *kosher* slaughtered by men after having been blessed. Killing animals is a job reserved for men but only women know how to cook it - men are not allowed into the kitchen. A 'proper' lady knows how to cut a chicken into 12 perfect pieces (Janet *et al.*, 2013). When the blood is drained, according to Natasha (2011), women begin the laborious task of cleaning the carcass. The women then cut the chicken into 12 pieces. This is done very precisely so that each wing, leg, chest, thigh, back and breast mirror each other and all veins are done away with. In the West, of course, chicken is processed before being packaged and can be bought ready to cook from the grocery store. Ethiopian women, however, buy the whole live chicken and cut it up in the traditional manner (Natasha, 2011).

In Ethiopians' culture, a 'proper' lady needs to know how to cut a chicken into 12 perfect pieces. They all have names like *Feresenga* (a perfect cut of the breast served customarily to the man of the house) and no matter how many chickens she uses, they all come out the same shape. There are plenty of jokes about a woman who is not able to cut chicken properly (Janet *et al.*, 2013). Culturally, it is considered to be a shame when an Ethiopian woman failed in the art of cutting and naming the 12 perfect pieces of a chicken.

*Doro Wat* is a saucy chicken stew which is served with



Fig. 1. Ethiopian national dish, *Doro wat* (chicken stew).

*Injera* and boiled eggs. Chicken is a ‘must’ dish in Ethiopian culture for holidays and social ceremonies independent of the differences in religions. Chicken plays also an important function in their bartering value. Poultry are used for strengthening marriage partnerships and social relationships. In the local culture, women who can provide men with food like a chicken dish (*Doro wat*) are considered to be contributing to a stable marriage. Serving *Doro Wat* is also a demonstration of respect to guests, thus strengthening a social relationship which is especially important for poor households (Demeke, 2008).

Commonly, people in Ethiopia select the types of chicken for consumption; most consumers prefer to buy local chickens from village producers, since local chickens are considered to be tasty and better suited for preparation of the traditional chicken sauce (*Doro Wat*). Eggs from local chicken are often favored because of their deep yellow colored yolks.

As a consequence of the cultural taboo associated with chicken, the price of live birds varies depending on sex, color and size (Betru and Kawashima, 2009). In general, the chickens most frequently preferred by many consumers are the double combs or unique colors of native birds for sacrificial purposes (Avery, 2004). Most farmers, therefore, prefer to keep native birds of plumage colors, specially the white (*Netch*) and the red (*Key*) colors than others, due to the high price they fetch in the local market. This is mainly attributed to the preference of consumers in the market which is based on the cultural value that favor for rose (double) comb type of chicken.

Despite there is no religious recommendation for the types of chicken needed for the sacrificial purposes on the bases of the religious holidays celebrated, majority of the people correspond the plumage color of the chickens with the types of the religious holidays as a result of the cultural taboo associated. For instance, for Ethiopian *Zemen melewecha* (New Year) and for the Orthodox Christians’ *Meskel* (Finding of the True Cross) holidays, chicken with white (*Netch*) plumage color and double comb type of indigenous chicken are favored, whereas for Ethiopian



Fig. 2. Ethiopian cultural partition of an ox - ‘Kircha’.

Christians’ *Fasika* (Easter) holiday, chicken with red (*Key*) plumage color and double comb types are favored. In rare cases, chicken with plumage color of black (*Tikur*) are preferred by traditional belief followers for sacrificial purposes due the cultural taboo associated.

### Community spirit

In Ethiopia, a cow or an ox can be butchered for the sole purpose of selling within the community. In special occasions and holidays, people have a cultural ceremony for slaughtering cows or oxen, not any other animals and sharing among the group, called *kircha*, which is a very common option of the rural areas where access of meat is challenging. Commonly, a group of 10 to 20 people buy a live animal, slaughter and divide the meat among them. *Kircha* is a form of people’s organization and sharing meat among themselves - butchering live animal and sharing the meat in group. *Kircha* is considered by Ethiopians as their social capital. The style is also common in some of Ethiopia towns’ people by which the elders especially enjoy being involved in the activity.

On holidays, neighbors join together into *kircha* to buy a large ox and equally divide it then draw lots to decide which pile they get. It is cheaper than going to the butcher (Janet *et al.*, 2013). According to Kifleyesus (2007), the meat is divided on the basis of equal portions comprising a package of every internal organ, muscle meat, and bone of the slaughtered animal. Size of the package is determined by the number of divisions (Pankhurst, 1988). The greater the number of divisions, the smaller will be the size of a package of meat.

### Ethiopian Meat Consumption Behavior

The consumption of meat was one of the factors that differentiated the society of antiquity. Cultural and religious aspects have played a major role in the processing of meat and their consumption (Kim *et al.*, 2004). In different cultures, pigs, cows, horses, poultry, dogs, camels,

deer, cats or rats can be accepted or not as providers of meat (Borowski, 2007). A wide range of mammalian species are also eaten in different parts of the world according to their availability or local custom. Thus, for example, the seal and polar bear are important in the diet of the Eskimos, and the giraffe, rhinoceros, hippopotamus and elephant in that of certain tribes of Central Africa (Fredrick, 2000).

Despite all of these animals are used as sources of meat in other parts of the world, they are not incorporated nor have parts in the diet of Ethiopian people. In addition, the predominant bird species that is used as a food source by Ethiopians is chicken. Other species such as ducks, geese, turkeys, pigeons, quails, etc. are rare in Ethiopia, and were not seen to be used as food or tried to include in the Ethiopian farming system. There is no data available regarding these species except a case that was reported for the opening of a duck farm at Chanco in Oromiya Region in the early 2000's (Paolo and Wossene, 2008).

According to Sheikh and Thomas (1994), there is no specific theory considered as a universal theory of product acceptance which generally governs the behavior of people. Therefore, people could have different reasons why they are reserved from consuming meats of some animals. Every society has its own criteria according to its culture and religion. As far as the behavior of Ethiopian people is concerned, they are sensitive in respect to their culture and very conservative in food. As a result, they commonly tend to be reserved even from touching meats of animals that are not used culturally as sources of meat due to the taboos associated. For instance, Avery (2004) has indicated the uniqueness of behavior of Ethiopians, in which many of the people exhibit apprehension towards the meats sold in supermarkets because they are suspicious about the types of meat sold (i.e., pork).

In fact, there is no a well-regarded intervention in ameliorating the meager meat consumption culture of the Ethiopian people or/and the utilization of different species of meat animals available in Ethiopia as means of income earning. It is also observed that foreigners, who come to Ethiopia and have consumption cultures of meats of those animals not used by Ethiopians, withdraw from their culture and consume the locally supplied meats. This is because they are aware of the conservative attitude of local people to their culture and therefore, they tend to assimilate themselves in the local cultures than trying to shift the traditional eating habit of local people whose meat source are dependent on limited types of animals.

The attempts of changing the meat consumption culture

and the supply of meat sources in Ethiopia will be anticipated in order to enhance the utilization of meat from various species of animals, which could meet the challenge of improving the balance of nutrients available to the population, the opportunity of decreasing malnutrition, thereby improving food security and deriving economic benefits. A gradual change of the people's behavior in their meat consumption culture can be achieved, for instance, by encouraging the supermarkets to sell meats of different animals, by frequently preparing of experience sharing and exhibitions that avail the cultural practices of other worlds, and by celebrating national days of food which promote meat foods of different source animals. According to Abera (2006), once the types of food are selected in a gradual adaptation process, they become established as staple diets of a particular society.

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