

Galloping Heritage: An Ethnographic study of the Socio-cultural and symbolic life of the Agaw Horse festival in Injibara, Ethiopia

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Submitted: August 26, 2026

Accepted: September 06, 2026

Published: September 15, 2026

Citation: Negalign Birhanu (2026) Galloping Heritage: An Ethnographic study of the Socio-cultural and symbolic life of the Agaw Horse festival in Injibara, Ethiopia. *Epistora J. Soc. Sci. & Glob. Stud.* 1(1), 1-09. Article EJSSGS-2026-101

Abstract

Festivals are key sites for cultural expression, social cohesion, and the transmission of intergenerational knowledge. The Agew Horse Festival in Injibara, Ethiopia, is a longstanding equestrian event that commemorates ancestral heroism while reinforcing community identity, values, and cultural heritage. This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach, using participant observation, in-depth interviews ($n = 14$), and focus group discussions ($n = 2$) to explore the festival's social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions. Purposive and snowball sampling engaged elders, horse riders, organizers, and youth, with data collection continuing until saturation. Findings reveal that the festival serves as a living cultural institution, transmitting horsemanship skills, moral values, and historical memory across generations. Horses act as central cultural symbols, representing courage, prestige, lineage, and communal identity. Ritual performances, traditional songs, ceremonial acts, and collective activities strengthen social cohesion, solidarity, and cultural pride. Elders actively mentor youth, ensuring the continuity of traditions. Participants emphasized that caring for horses and performing festival rituals are expressions of cultural responsibility and ancestral reverence. Despite modernization, tourism, and external pressures, the festival maintains its symbolic and social core. The Agew Horse Festival thus represents a dynamic institution integrating ritual, performance, historical memory, and communal unity, highlighting its significance as intangible cultural heritage worthy of preservation.

Keywords: Horse Festival, Cultural heritage, Social cohesion, Intergenerational learning, Symbolic meaning

Background of the Study

Globally, festivals and cultural performances have long been recognized as critical sites for social cohesion, identity formation, and cultural heritage preservation. Across societies, festivals serve multiple roles: they commemorate historical events, enact social hierarchies, provide spaces for intergenerational knowledge transfer, and foster communal solidarity (Turner, 1969; Bourdieu, 1986). Equestrian festivals in particular found in regions from Central Asia to Latin America symbolize bravery, skill, and cultural pride, often reflecting local histories of warfare, resistance, or elite status (Gugliotta, 2015; Cieslak, 2018). These global perspectives illustrate the universal importance of performance, ritual, and symbolism in the cultural life of communities, highlighting the value of ethnographic study in documenting and analyzing such practices.

At the African level, festivals are pivotal in expressing ethnic identities, maintaining traditions, and negotiating modernity. Across the continent, community-based celebrations ranging from masquerade dances in West Africa to horse-riding festivals in East Africa serve as cultural repositories, sustaining historical memory and reinforcing social cohesion (Ndebele, 2017; Adeyemi, 2019). Equestrian traditions in Africa, particularly among pastoral and semi-pastoral communities, not only symbolize valor and status but also act as a medium for intergenerational knowledge transfer and socio-political organization. These African examples underscore the broader relevance of ritualized horse culture, both as a form of symbolic communication and as a resource for socio-economic and heritage development.

Within the Ethiopian context, festivals play a central role in cultural preservation, social integration, and tourism promotion. Ethiopia's diverse ethnic groups celebrate unique festivals that combine ritual, music, dance, and performance, reflecting histories of resistance, spiritual beliefs, and local knowledge (Hoben, 1973; Zewde, 2002). Among these, equestrian traditions are particularly significant in the northern highlands and Amhara region, where horses historically represented military strength, social prestige, and lineage authority (Kebede, 2020). Festivals in Ethiopia often carry dual significance: honoring historical achievements while simultaneously contributing to contemporary community cohesion, economic activity, and identity affirmation. Focusing specifically on the Injibara context, the Agew Equestrian Festival is a longstanding cultural event celebrated by the Awi people in the Amhara region. The festival commemorates the historical role of Agew horsemen in resisting Italian fascist invasion in the 1930s, blending equestrian performances, rituals, and communal celebrations (Africa Press, 2025; Fana Media Corporation, 2024). Organized by the Agew Equestrian Association, established around 1940 by fewer than 30 men, the festival has expanded to include tens of thousands of participants over decades (Fana Media Corporation, 2024; AfricaPress, 2025). Horses are symbolic markers of courage, masculinity, social status, and cultural heritage, and the festival showcases horse racing, traditional dances, and cultural exhibitions that transmit local skills and knowledge (Addis Standard, 2024; NewsCentral, 2022; Borkena, 2022).

In recent years, the festival has attracted attention from local and regional authorities as a potential cultural heritage and tourism asset, with initiatives underway to register it under intangible cultural heritage frameworks, potentially aligning with UNESCO standards (AfricaPress, 2025). Despite its prominence, there is limited systematic ethnographic research on the Injibara Horse Festival. Existing studies, such as Kebede (2020), primarily focus on the socio-economic and tourism potential of horse culture in Awi Zone, and media reports provide descriptive accounts without analyzing ritual, social structure, gender dynamics, or symbolic meaning. This highlights a clear gap in understanding how the festival functions as a site for collective memory, identity formation, and cultural continuity, and how modernization and globalization affect these practices.

Therefore, this study, titled “Gallopings Traditions: An Ethnographic Study of the Social, Cultural, and Symbolic Life of the Agew Horse Festival in Injibara Ethiopia,” seeks to provide a comprehensive ethnographic and sociological investigation. It aims to document rituals, performances, and social interactions, explore symbolic meanings, gender and generational roles, and examine transformations under modern and external pressures, contributing both to scholarly knowledge and to cultural heritage preservation in Ethiopia.

Specific Objectives

To explore how the Agew Horse Festival reflects and passes on Agew social and cultural practices.

To examine the symbolic meanings of horses and horse-riding in expressing community values and history.

To analyze how the festival strengthens community identity, unity, and shared traditions.

Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach. Ethnography is appropriate because it allows an in-depth exploration of the social, cultural, and symbolic life of the Agew community as expressed through the Agew Horse Festival in Injibara. Through participant observation, interviews, and engagement in local practices, the study captures the lived experiences, meanings, and traditions associated with the festival.

Study Population

The population includes: Festival participants: horse riders, trainers, and owners, Community elders and cultural custodians who preserve knowledge about the festival, Spectators and youth who engage in or learn from the festival, Local leaders who organize or support festival activities. The study focuses on individuals actively involved in or knowledgeable about the festival, ensuring culturally rich and authentic data in awi zone.

Sampling Technique

A purposive and snowball sampling strategy was employed. Purposive sampling was used to select key informants who had direct knowledge of or involvement in, the festival. In addition, snowball sampling was applied to identify further participants recommended by community members, which ensured access to highly knowledgeable and culturally embedded informants. The final sample size was determined by data saturation, reached when no new themes emerged from subsequent interviews or observations.

Data Collection methods

Interview

In-depth interviews were used to explore participants' experiences and perspectives through open-ended and flexible questioning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). A total of 14 interviews were conducted with elders, horse riders, festival organizers, local leaders, and community members. Interviewing continued until data saturation was reached, when no new themes emerged. These interviews generated rich insights into the festival's social, cultural, and symbolic significance and complemented observations and focus group discussions for data triangulation.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Focus group discussions were used to explore collective perspectives, shared experiences, and cultural meanings (Krueger & Casey, 2015). In this study, two FGDs were conducted: one with 8 youth participants and another with 12 elders. The discussions examined perceptions of the Agew Horse Festival, including its cultural significance, symbolic meanings, intergenerational learning, and role in community cohesion. These FGDs complemented observations and in-depth interviews and contributed to the triangulation of collective insights.

Participant observation

Participant observation was used to immerse the researcher in the social setting and gain an insider understanding of practices, behaviours, and cultural meanings (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). The researcher observed and participated in key festival activities, including horse-riding demonstrations, rituals, songs, communal gatherings, and preparatory events, while taking detailed field notes. This method allowed close observation of intergenerational learning, elder youth mentorship, and community participation, revealing how the festival reinforces cultural continuity, social cohesion, and collective identity.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in interviews, focus group discussions, and observations. The study ensured confidentiality and anonymity, with personal identifiers removed from all data and findings. Permission was also sought from local authorities and community leaders to conduct the research, ensuring alignment with community protocols. Moreover, the study adhered to cultural sensitivity, respecting local norms, values, and traditions during data collection and interaction with participants. These measures helped maintain ethical integrity and fostered trust between the researcher and the community.

Analysis and Discussion

The findings of this ethnographic study demonstrate that the Agew Horse Festival functions as a multidimensional cultural institution that shapes, expresses, and sustains the social, cultural, and symbolic life of the Agew community. This analysis integrates the major themes that emerged from the field data social and cultural practices, symbolic meanings, intergenerational learning, social cohesion, community identity, and historical memory while relating them to broader theoretical and empirical literature.

The Festival as a Reflection of Agew Social and Cultural Practices

The findings of this study clearly show that the Agew Horse Festival functions as a living cultural institution, reflecting the community's social structure, identity, and everyday cultural practices. This closely aligns with anthropological literature that views festivals as spaces where cultural meanings are enacted and negotiated. Turner's (1969) theory of performance helps explain how the festival becomes a stage for expressing social order and hierarchy, while Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital clarifies how symbolic knowledge seen in traditional foods, clothing, livestock practices, and ritual displays is reproduced and valued within the community.

Participants' descriptions of how the festival connects the Agew people to their indigenous food, traditional clothing, livestock, and the natural environment, emphasizing the deep interlink age between culture and daily life. Additionally, horses play important roles in social ceremonies, such as weddings and funerals, strengthening relationships with relatives and reinforcing communal bonds. The discussions also pointed out that the horse challenges the Amharic saying, "ፈረስ ያደርሳል እንጅ አይዋጋም," as historically, horses actively struggled against Italian forces during the Battle of Adwa, demonstrating courage, strength, and cultural significance.

FGD one discussants of young members of the festival said to me as, 'On the day of the festival, we don't just participate by galloping alone. We also create friendships and strengthen our social relationships with the community. We recognize each other, we perform ritual activities, and we sing different festival songs like Aymolo Aymolo. We also take part in ceremonial activities such as eating traditional foods like abzi, which is produced from different traditional things what we call it in Awigna. For us, the festival is not only about riding horses but it is about sharing our culture and renewing our bonds with one another.'" "Another respondent told me, 'I feel very happy on the day of the Agew festival. Before the celebration, I prepare my horse beautifully with all its traditional wearing materials. I do this because the festival truly reflects our ancestors' status, courage, heritage, identity, and honor. When I decorate my horse and ride it during the celebration, I feel that I am representing the meaning and culture of my forefathers.'

Overall, these findings showed, the Agew Horse Festival is a meaningful event that reflects their everyday social relations, identity, and cultural responsibilities. According to this study, the Agew Horse Festival serves as a living cultural institution that reflects the community's social structure and identity, reinforces social cohesion, and transmits cultural knowledge across generations. Horses, rituals, songs, and traditional practices embody courage, prestige, and historical memory, highlighting the festival's role in sustaining and enacting Agew cultural heritage.



Figure one, cultural practise of festival
Source, festival of 23/05 / 2016 E.C

Symbolic Meanings and Cultural Semiotics of Horses

Horses occupy a central symbolic position in Agew culture, embodying strength, Honor, and historical pride. The ritualized riding, the stylized movements of horses, and the elaborate presentation of riders reveal a complex semiotic system where horses operate as cultural signifiers. As the findings indicate, horses symbolize moral virtues such as bravery, discipline, loyalty, and social responsibility values central to Agew cultural identity. This aligns with global ethnographic literature on equestrian cultures, where horses frequently represent power, masculinity, and community prestige (Gugliotta, 2015; C ieslak, 2018). In Agew, riding performances are not merely recreational but serve as living enactments of moral and historical narratives. During the in-depth interview, my one participant told me, “I communicate easily with my horse. We have our own system of symbolic communication, especially when riding in different styles. There are styles such as shimik gilbiya, gugis, sigriya, and shirt gugis and my horse performs these actions based on my commands. The horse understands my signals, and it responds exactly as I directit.”

On the other hand as one influential horse rider explained, “People respect me everywhere because I am an influential and famous horse rider. They admire me during competitions, religious ceremonies, and on the festival day. I see my horse as one of my family members, and because of that, I give it great respect, which in turn brings me prestige in the community. Every day, I give it extra food, check its health, and if anything seems wrong, I take it straight to the clinic. I treat my horse just as my fathers and grandfathers did. It carries our lineage and identity, especially during the festival. For me, caring for this horse is both my cultural duty and a way to keep my ancestors’ heritage alive.”

This study revealed that, based on the respondents’ accounts, horses hold profound symbolic and cultural significance in Agew society. Participants described a system of communication and stylized riding, where horses respond to commands and perform specific movements, reflecting skill, discipline, and mutual understanding. Preparing and adorning the horses for the festival allows riders to express ancestral values, honor, and social identity. These practices show that horses are more than companions or instruments of recreation they are living cultural symbols through which moral virtues, historical pride, and community values are enacted and communicated across generations.



Figure 2 gugis style of the horse
Source, 23/05/2017 E.C

The Festival as a Medium for Cultural Continuity and Intergenerational Learning

Consistent with African ethnographic scholarship on ritual and knowledge transmission (Adeyemi, 2019; Ndebele, 2017), the Agew Horse Festival functions as a key mechanism for intergenerational cultural continuity. Elders and experienced riders actively guide youth, demonstrating techniques, rituals, and ethical principles. This apprenticeship-like process ensures that horsemanship skills, ceremonial conduct, and traditional knowledge remain embedded in lived practice. The repetition of horse-related activities throughout the year in religious celebrations, local ceremonies, and communal gatherings strengthens this learning process. The festival thus appears as a dynamic school of tradition, where knowledge transfer is experiential, embodied, and sustained through social participation.

One participant of an elder recounted his long-standing engagement with the Agew Horse Festival, noting that he became a member in the early 1970s, while the festival itself originated around 1930. He observed that membership has steadily increased over time, reflecting the festival's growing significance within the community. Having served as a local leader, or Yeferes Aleka, for six years, he emphasized the pride and satisfaction derived from his active participation. He highlighted that the festival continues to expand and gain recognition across Ethiopia and emphasized its intergenerational nature, noting how cultural knowledge, skills, and values are transmitted from experienced elders to younger generations, thereby sustaining both the tradition and community cohesion. Another official of the horse festival stated, "The festival itself is considered a medium for passing our culture to future generations."

Passing our culture to future generations. Experienced horse riders and elders always advise young people to preserve this tradition because it is very meaningful for the Agew community. From a young age, children are taught how to ride, how to gallop properly, and what materials are needed. Every experienced rider ensures that their skills and knowledge are transmitted, so the festival continues as a living practice of our heritage."

Another participant from Awi administrative zone cultural and tourism department stated as follows: "Of course, the festival is definitely a medium for transferring our culture to the next generation. In fact, its main purpose is cultural preservation keeping our traditions alive and making sure they don't disappear. We also hope that, through this festival, our culture will gain wider recognition, even at the international level, so that people everywhere can see its value. But above all, the festival creates a space where the younger generation can learn, observe, and inherit the practices that define who we are as Agew people."

The Agew Horse Festival serves as a vital mechanism for sustaining cultural continuity and facilitating intergenerational learning within the Agew community. Elders and experienced riders actively mentor younger generations, teaching horsemanship skills, ceremonial conduct, and traditional knowledge. The steady growth in membership since the festival's inception around 1930, along with the leadership roles held by long-term participants, reflects its increasing social significance and communal value. Functioning as a living, experiential school of tradition, the festival ensures that cultural knowledge, skills, and values are consistently transmitted, reinforcing community cohesion and embedding the heritage of the Agew people in both everyday practice and ceremonial life.



Figure three international participants and youths on festival
Source, celebration of festival in 23/05/2017 E.C

Reinforcement of Historical Memory and Collective Identity

The findings reveal that the festival serves as a conduit for historical memory, connecting contemporary generations to the legacy of Agew resistance, particularly during the anti-fascist struggle of the 1930s. Rituals, songs, and stories associated with the festival encode this memory, transforming the event into a symbolic reenactment of collective resilience. This aligns with Zewde's (2002) argument that Ethiopian festivals often carry historical and patriotic meanings, embedding narratives of resistance and cultural pride. Among Agew people, the festival acts as a living archive, preserving historical consciousness and reinforcing community identity rooted in shared heritage.

According to group one FGD discussants "the Agew Horse Festival functions as an important medium for transmitting historical knowledge to both current and future generations. Participants emphasized that the festival reflects a sense of patriotism, recalling the time of the Italian invasion when Agew ancestors defended their land and communities on horseback.

In this context, the festival is not only a celebration of horsemanship but also a living commemoration of historical heroism, instilling awareness of collective memory and national pride among younger generations. The festival thus serves as a symbolic and educational space where history, identity, and cultural values are actively remembered and transmitted through practice". According to, the focus group discussions, FGD 2: The horse plays a central role in the cultural development of the Agew people. It symbolizes their historical heroism and sacrifice for the motherland, tracing back from the Battle of Adwa to the present day. The horse also embodies the culture of democratic power transfer within the community, reflecting social order and leadership practices. Overall, the horse emerges as both a practical and symbolic vehicle for preserving and expressing the Agew people's identity, values, and historical memory.

The study found that the Agew Horse Festival plays a significant role in reinforcing historical memory and strengthening collective identity within the Agew community. The traditions, songs, and stories performed during the festival connect current generations to the legacy of Agew resistance during the anti-fascist - struggle of the 1930s, supporting earlier scholarship that Ethiopian festivals often embody patriotic and historical meaning (Zewde, 2002). Group discussants explained that the festival serves as a medium for transmitting this history to younger and future generations, particularly by recalling how their ancestors defended their land on horseback during the Italian invasion. As such, the festival is not only a celebration of horsemanship but also a living commemoration of heroism and resilience, preserving shared historical consciousness and reinforcing a strong sense of community identity grounded in collective heritage.

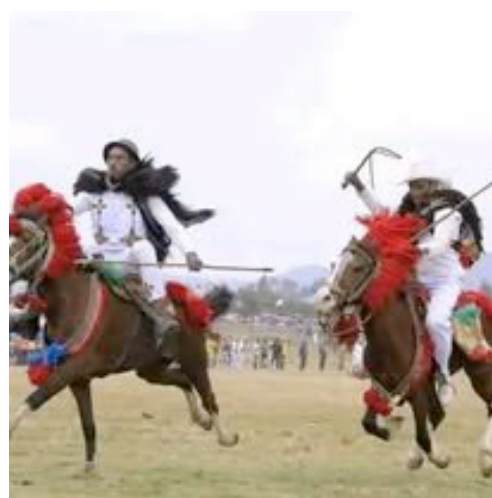


Figure four memory of historical gugis and taking cultural foods into stadium
Source 23/05/2015 and 23/052017 E.C

Social Cohesion and Community Solidarity

The festival plays a significant role in promoting social cohesion within and between communities. As the data illustrate, the festival creates an inclusive space where elders, youth, riders, families, and spectators participate collectively, strengthening ties of belonging and mutual support. This communal participation resonates with African anthropological literature emphasizing festivals as mechanisms for social unity, reciprocity, and collective renewal (Ndebele, 2017). The cooperative organization of the festival mobilizing local leaders, riders, households, and associations further reinforces social solidarity. The festival operates as a social integrator that bridges generational, familial, and inter-community divides.

One participant, who is a local leader of the Agew Festival, stated: "Socially, the festival creates a strong sense of unity, fraternity, sisterhood, and brotherhood among the Agew people, even those living far apart from Ambela to Dangla, Metekel to S atma Dangia, and Tilili to Zegem. It also reflects the social order and the structure of power within our communities.

Culturally, the festival showcases our hidden cultural identity and language, our colorful traditional dress, and the beauty of our girls, like Ambassador Kidist Birhan, Melkam Zemen and Birtukan Adamu. It serves as a platform for the cultural transfer of ambassadors and demonstrates our socio-cultural coexistence, ensuring that these traditions are recognized, valued, and passed on to the younger generation."

Another participant of elder man stated about festival as follows : the Agew Horse Festival is an inclusive cultural event in which people of all backgrounds and age groups participate without exclusion. Elders, youth, women, government officials, experts, children, and even guests from outside the community take part in the ceremony, reflecting the festival's strong intergenerational and communal character. Through these diverse performances and shared practices, the festival becomes a collective space that brings the entire community together, strengthening cultural identity and social cohesion.

The findings indicate that The Agew Horse Festival serves as a vital social and cultural institution that fosters unity, inclusion, and intergenerational participation. By bringing together elders, youth, families, officials, and visitors, the festival strengthens communal bonds, reinforces social order, and promotes cultural identity. Through shared rituals, performances, and traditional practices, it operates as a space for social cohesion, cultural transmission, and the recognition of Agew heritage, ensuring that these values are maintained and passed on to younger generations.

historical memory, and social cohesion. It reflects the Agew community's identity, values, and cultural heritage while simultaneously serving as a dynamic mechanism for cultural continuity and communal solidarity. The festival's social and symbolic functions align with broader global and African ethnographic patterns, yet its distinct historical and cultural context gives it unique local significance. This analysis demonstrates that the festival is not merely a celebratory event but a living social system that shapes and sustains the cultural life of the Agew people.

Recommendations

- The Agew Horse Festival should be officially registered by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage to ensure its recognition, protection, and sustainability.
- The government should provide legal protection, policy support, and institutional backing to safeguard the festival and its cultural assets.
- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and cultural institutions should support the festival through funding, capacity building, and awareness programs to enhance its preservation and reach.
- The festival's role in transferring cultural knowledge, skills, and values to younger generations should be strengthened through structured mentorship and educational initiatives.
- Measures should be taken to preserve the traditional elements of the festival, including horse-riding skills, ceremonial practices, cultural attire, and indigenous music, food, and rituals, ensuring the continuity of Agew heritage.

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