

Women's Cultural Festivals and Peacebuilding: Examining Ashenda, Shaday, and Solel in Ethiopia's Fragile Peace

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Abstract:

The Ashenda, Shaday, and Solel festivals, celebrated annually in late August across northern Ethiopia, represent a distinctive cultural heritage that intertwines religious devotion, seasonal transition, and communal celebration. This article examines the religious, astronomical, and peacebuilding dimensions of these interconnected festivals, drawing on ethnographic literature, historical accounts, and contemporary media reports. The festivals mark the conclusion of the Filseta fast, a 16-day observance commemorating the Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin Mary in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, while simultaneously heralding the end of the rainy season and the approach of harvest. This dual anchoring in liturgical and astronomical rhythms establishes the festivals as moments of renewal, transition, and hope. The article further analyzes how the festivals serve as public platforms for expressing aspirations for peace, particularly in the context of post-conflict northern Ethiopia, where the 2026 cancellation of the Mekelle gathering due to drone attack fears underscored the fragility of peace. The festivals' focus on women and girls provides a culturally grounded mechanism for women's empowerment and peacebuilding, challenging patriarchal norms and fostering leadership skills among participants. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of liminality, cultural peacebuilding, and social capital, the article argues that the Ashenda festivals function as "peace indicators" whose occurrence signals the state of peace, while also serving as vehicles for social cohesion, resilience, and community renewal. The article concludes with a framework for institutional responsibilities and community roles essential for translating the festivals' symbolic peace aspirations into tangible, lasting peace.

Keywords:

Ashenda festival; Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church; peacebuilding; women's empowerment; intangible cultural heritage

I. Introduction

In the highlands of Northern Ethiopia, the late August season brings a transformation. Young women and girls don their finest traditional cotton dresses, adorn themselves with jewelry, weave tall green grass into skirts and backpieces, and take to the streets in celebration. This is Ashenda known as Shaday in the Wag Hemra Zone of the Amhara region and Solel in the Raya-Kobo area, an annual festival that marks the end of the Filseta fast, a 15-day period observed by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in honor of the Virgin Mary (Tefera et al., 2021). The festival's name derives from the Tigrinya word for "the tall green grass," reflecting the central role of this natural element in the celebrations (BBC News, 2026).

Yet Ashenda is far more than a religious or cultural event. In a region scarred by the 2020–2022 Tigray War and haunted by the specter of renewed violence, these festivals have emerged as powerful symbols of resilience, hope, and the possibility of peace. When Tigrayan women gathered in Addis Ababa in 2023 to celebrate Ashenda for the first time since the war began, one participant captured the sentiment succinctly: "We did not celebrate [Ashenda] in this country for the last three years, because our Tigrayan people were... in a war" (Kuwaittimes,

2023, para. 15). The act of celebration itself became a political statement, a reclaiming of joy, identity, and normalcy in the aftermath of devastation.

However, the fragility of this peace was starkly exposed in August 2026, when authorities in Tigray cancelled the planned mass Ashenda gathering in Mekelle's stadium, citing ongoing drone strikes and fears of renewed conflict (BBC News, 2026). The cancellation was widely interpreted as a test of whether the November 2022 peace deal had genuinely opened space for social and cultural recovery (Radiogeneration, 2026). This juxtaposition between the festival's aspirational role as a symbol of peace and its vulnerability to the very violence it seeks to transcend forms the central problematic of this review.

This article offers a comprehensive review of the Ashenda, Shaday, and Solel festivals through the intersecting lenses of peacebuilding, social capital theory, and intangible cultural heritage. It makes three interconnected arguments. First, these festivals function as a distinctive form of social capital, generating bonding solidarity among participants, bridging connections across communities, and linking local cultural practices to broader institutional frameworks of peace and development. Second, the festivals' religious and astronomical grounding provides a cosmological architecture that reinforces their significance as moments of communal renewal and spiritual reorientation. Third, in the post-conflict context of Northern Ethiopia, these festivals have taken on an explicit peacebuilding function, serving as sites of resilience, hope, and public expression of aspirations for lasting peace, even as they remain vulnerable to the unresolved tensions that continue to threaten the region.

The review proceeds in six sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 establishes the theoretical framework, drawing on social capital theory and peacebuilding scholarship. Section 3 examines the religious and astronomical foundations of the festivals. Section 4 analyzes the festivals as generators of social capital across bonding, bridging, and linking dimensions. Section 5 explores the festivals' role in post-conflict peacebuilding and resilience. Section 6 concludes with a synthesis of findings and an agenda for future research.

II. Review of Literature

Understanding the peacebuilding potential of the Ashenda, Shaday, and Solel festivals requires a theoretical apparatus capable of bridging cultural analysis, political science, and development studies. This review draws on three interconnected theoretical traditions: social capital theory, the peacebuilding literature, and the framework of intangible cultural heritage.

2.1 Social Capital Theory

The concept of social capital, as developed by Bourdieu (1986), Putnam (2000), and Woolcock (1998), refers to the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Putnam's influential distinction between bonding social capital (ties within homogeneous groups) and bridging social capital (ties across diverse groups) provides a useful analytical lens. Bonding social capital strengthens intra-group solidarity and mutual support, while bridging social capital enables cooperation across social divisions, a crucial function in societies recovering from ethnic or regional conflict.

Woolcock (1998) added a third dimension: linking social capital, which refers to connections between individuals or communities and institutions in positions of power. This dimension is particularly relevant for understanding how the Ashenda festivals connect grassroots cultural practices to state and international frameworks of peacebuilding and development.

2.2 Peacebuilding and Cultural Approaches

The peacebuilding literature has increasingly recognized the role of culture in post-conflict recovery. Lederach's (1997) influential work on conflict transformation emphasizes the importance of indigenous resources for peace, arguing that sustainable peace must be built from within communities rather than imposed from outside. Mac Ginty (2021) develops the concept of "everyday peace," highlighting how ordinary people navigate conflict and build coexistence through routine practices (Goshu, 2025; Goshu and Ridwan, 2024a).

Cultural festivals have been identified as particularly potent sites for peacebuilding. Cohen (2017) argues that festivals create "liminal spaces", temporary zones outside everyday social structures where new forms of relationship become possible. In such spaces, participants can experiment with alternative social arrangements, rehearse reconciliation, and express collective aspirations for peace. The Ashenda festivals, with their emphasis on women's leadership, communal song and dance, and the exchange of gifts, exemplify this festival-as-liminal-space dynamic.

2.3 Intangible Cultural Heritage

The UNESCO framework for intangible cultural heritage provides an additional analytical lens. The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines intangible heritage as "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage" (UNESCO, 2003; Goshu, 2025a).

Ethiopia has actively sought UNESCO recognition for the Ashenda, Shaday, and Solel festivals. UNESCO has underscored the importance of these festivals as part of Ethiopia's intangible cultural heritage, noting that "Ashenda is celebrated colorfully in Tigray State while Shadey in Wag Humra, Ashendiye, and Solel in Lalibela and Kobo respectively took place colorfully in North East Amhara" (UNESCO, n.d., para. 7-8). By advocating for the registration of Ashendye, Solal, Shaday, and Ayini Wari festivals as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, Ethiopia aims to preserve its traditions, strengthen cultural identity, and promote sustainable tourism (Naol, 2025; Goshu and Ridwan, 2024).

III. Research Methods

3.1 Religious and Astronomical Foundations

The Ashenda, Shaday, and Solel festivals are temporally and cosmologically anchored in both the liturgical calendar of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the astronomical rhythms of the solar year. This dual grounding gives the festivals their distinctive character as celebrations that connect earthly communities to divine and celestial orders.

3.2 The Filseta Fast and the Assumption of Mary

The festivals mark the conclusion of the Filseta fast (Ge'ez: ጸመ-ፍልሰታ), a period of abstinence observed by adherents of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Filseta, meaning "movement" in the Ge'ez language, referring to St. Mary's assumption is one of the seven canonized fasts of the Ethiopian church, commemorating the Dormition (falling asleep) and Assumption (heavenly ascension) of the Virgin Mary (Filseta, n.d.; Goshu and Ridwan, 2025). The fasting and liturgy extend for two weeks, starting from 7 August to 22 August (Filseta, n.d.).

As documented by Tefera et al. (2021), "Shadeye/Ashendeye/Solele festival has religious roots in the Resurrection and Assumption of Virgin St. Mary to Heaven fasting (Filsata in Ethiopia)" (p. 29). The festival is understood as commemorating "Angels' delight in the resurrection of St. Marry" (Tefera et al., 2021, p. 29), giving it a spiritual significance that transcends mere cultural performance. The religious dimension is underscored by ritual practices: on the first day of Ashenda, participants gather and travel to their local Church of St. Mary, or any Orthodox Tewahedo Church in their community, playing music and dancing (ENA, 2025). This church visit establishes the festival's sacred character and connects communal celebration to the institutional church.

The fast is one of the most rigorously observed in the Ethiopian church calendar, and its conclusion is a moment of collective relief and celebration. As noted by the Ethiopian News Agency, the event "signifies the conclusion of a two-week fasting period called Filseta, which is observed by the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church in honor of the Virgin Mary" (ENA, 2025). The physical and spiritual preparation of the fast gives way to the embodied joy of song, dance, and feasting, a pattern found in many religious traditions that reinforce the festivals' character as moments of renewal and reorientation. The culmination of the Filseta ushered in several outdoor festivals, such as the Buhe, just right at the end of the fasting days, and the Ashenda (ethotelecomt, 2024).

Table 1. The Filseta Fast in the Ethiopian Liturgical Calendar

Aspect	Detail
Name	Filseta (ጸመ-ፍልሰታ)
Type	One of seven canonized fasts of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church
Commemoration	Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin Mary
Duration	15 days (1st to 15th of Nehase)
Gregorian Dates	7 August – 22 August
Etymological Meaning	"Movement" in Ge'ez, referring to St. Mary's assumption
Theological Basis	Remembrance of the fast the apostles held while witnessing Mary's assumption

3.3 Astronomical and Seasonal Anchoring

The festivals occur annually in late August, typically beginning around 16 August and continuing for several days (ENA, n.d.). This timing is significant for multiple reasons. First, it aligns with the Ethiopian month of Nehase, the final month of the Ethiopian calendar year, which is followed by the New Year celebrations in Meskerem (September). The festivals thus serve as a prelude to the New Year, a time of transition, renewal, and hope.

Second, the late August timing coincides with the end of the heavy rains and the approach of the harvest season. The Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation notes that "though their names vary across different regions, these festivals share a common root, drawing their meaning from the lush, green grass that heralds the end of the rainy season and the annual renewal of nature" (EBC, 2026). The festival derives its name from a tall, green grass referred to as "ashenda," which girls weave into bunches and wear as a decorative accessory, often fashioned into skirts or worn on their backs (ENA, 2025). This grass represents vitality, growth, and a bond with nature (Table 2).

Third, the festivals' timing at the end of the Filseta fast creates a rhythm of spiritual discipline followed by communal celebration. In rural areas, the celebration extends for almost a month, running from mid-August to mid-September every year. The length of the festival varies from three days to one month depending on location: shorter in urban areas, longer in rural areas. The culmination of Filseta ushers in several outdoor festivals, including Buhe at the end of the fasting days and Ashenda (Ethotelecomt, 2024).

Table 2. Astronomical and Seasonal Timing of the Ashenda Festivals

Temporal Dimension	Significance
Month	Nehase (final month of Ethiopian calendar)
Gregorian Dates	16 August – 21 August (sometimes extending to late September)
Relation to New Year	Serves as prelude to Meskerem (Ethiopian New Year)
Seasonal Context	End of heavy rains; approach of harvest season
Agricultural Symbol	Tall green grass ("ashenda") representing vitality and renewal
Spiritual Rhythm	Fast (Filseta) → Celebration (festivals)

Figure 1 presents the Filseta Fast within the Ethiopian liturgical calendar, outlining its theological foundation, duration, and relationship to the Ashenda festivals. The table systematically organizes key aspects of this 16-day observance, which commemorates the Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin Mary, an event of profound significance in Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo theology. The fast begins on 1 Nehase (7 August) and concludes on 15 Nehase (22 August), with the Ashenda festivals commencing immediately thereafter on 16 Nehase. This temporal sequencing establishes the rhythm of spiritual discipline followed by communal celebration, a pattern that reinforces the festivals' character as moments of renewal and reorientation. The etymological meaning of Filseta ("movement" in Ge'ez) reflects the theological understanding of Mary's assumption as a transition from earthly to heavenly existence. This liturgical framework provides the religious foundation upon which the Ashenda, Shaday, and Solel festivals are constructed.



Figure 1. The Filseta Fast in the Ethiopian liturgical calendar, detailing its commemoration, duration, and theological basis as the foundation of the Ashenda festivals

3.4 Pre-Christian Roots and Syncretism

While the festivals are now closely associated with Orthodox Christianity, evidence suggests they predate the arrival of Christianity in Ethiopia. According to Abadi Desta, a public relations expert in the Bureau of Culture and Tourism at Tigray Regional State, "Ashenda has been celebrated during the era of Axum civilization even before 4th century AD before Christianity was introduced into Ethiopia" (ENA, n.d.). Abadi added, "after the introduction of Christianity, the celebration took religious dimensions and was marked in connection with a two weeks fasting season in memory of the Virgin Mary and her ascension" (ENA, n.d.).

The festival is believed to be thousands of years old, existing before Ethiopia became Christian in the 4th century AD (Ashenda, n.d.). Scholars at the 20th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies suggest that "Ashenda might have originated as a Christianized form of Pagan traditional harvest festival or traditional match-making festival" (Gebremicale & Gebremikael, 2018; Goshu and Ridwan, 2025). Ashenda (n.d.) notes that the festival existed before Ethiopia became Christian in the 4th century AD, and that following the introduction of Christianity, "the celebration began to have religious tone and merge with Christian beliefs" (para. 1). This syncretic character, the layering of Christian meanings onto pre-existing cultural practices is characteristic of many Ethiopian festivals.

The festivals thus represent a palimpsest of religious and cultural history, embodying both the deep indigenous traditions of the Ethiopian highlands and the transformative impact of Orthodox Christianity. The regional variations, Ashenda in Tigray, Ashendeye in Lasta and Gonder, Shadey/Shaday in Wag Himra and Sekota, and Solel in Raya-Kobo, underscore the festival's profound historical significance and its integration into local cultures, all while maintaining the overarching theme of honoring women (ENA, 2025). As the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation observed, "these festivals share a common root, drawing their meaning from the lush, green grass that heralds the end of the rainy season and the annual renewal of nature" (EBC, 2026).

Table 3. Regional Variations of the Ashenda Festival

Region	Local Name	Distinctive Features
Tigray	Ashenda (አሸንዳ)	Girls wear tall grass skirts; door-to-door singing and dancing
Lasta and Gonder (Amhara)	Ashendeye	Similar traditions with regional dress variations
Wag Himra and Sekota (Amhara)	Shadey/Shaday (ሻደደ)	Distinctive style of dress unique to the community
Raya-Kobo (Amhara)	Solel (ሶለል)	Celebrated on August 16
Aksum (Tigray)	Ayni Wari	Local variation in the historic city
Adigrat (Tigray)	Marya	Local variation in eastern Tigray

IV. Result and Discussion

4.1 Social Capital and Community Cohesion

The Ashenda, Shaday, and Solel festivals function as powerful generators of social capital across all three dimensions identified in the theoretical framework: bonding, bridging, and linking.

4.2 Bonding Social Capital: Sisterhood and Solidarity

At the most immediate level, the festivals strengthen bonds among participants. Young women and girls form groups to visit homes in their communities, singing, dancing, and playing hand drums. This collective activity fosters a sense of sisterhood, togetherness, and shared identity. The festivals are described as "powerful public expressions of women's freedom, unity, and joy" (EBC, 2026, para. 7-8).

The bonding function extends beyond the festival period. The preparation for the festival—making traditional dresses, styling hair, adorning themselves with jewelry is itself a communal activity that strengthens social ties. According to Tefera et al. (2021), "The females seek social opportunity; experience the social desires, gain knowledge, social enhancements, and increases communication" (p. 29). The festivals are "sources of cultural and societal interaction and are infused with the culture of the society" (Tefera et al., 2021, p. 29).

The festivals also reinforce intergenerational bonds. Elderly community members play a role in transmitting the traditions and norms of the festival, ensuring its preservation across generations. This intergenerational transmission is a key mechanism for the maintenance of intangible cultural heritage.

4.3 Bridging Social Capital: Unity Across Differences

While the festivals are rooted in the traditions of the Tigray and Amhara regions, they have evolved into celebrations that transcend narrow ethnic or religious boundaries. Ashenda is celebrated colorfully in Tigray State while Shadey in Wag Humra, Ashendiye, and Solel in Lalibela and Kobo respectively (UNESCO, n.d.). The festivals are described as symbolizing "peace, love, unity, and solidarity" (ENA, 2025, para. 32).

This bridging function is particularly significant in the context of Ethiopia's ethnic federalism and the recent inter-communal violence that has afflicted the northern regions. By providing a shared cultural framework that transcends regional identities, the festivals create

opportunities for connection across ethnic and political divides. As noted by Kuwaittimes (2023), Ashenda "has evolved into a celebration that transcends religion" (para. 27-28).

The Ethiopian government has recognized this bridging potential. The Ministry of Culture and Sports has called for unity in preserving culture at the Ashenda Festival, emphasizing that "the Ashenda festival, which symbolizes peace, love, unity, and solidarity, should be promoted as a cultural attraction" (ENA, 2025, para. 32-33). The event "empower young women by providing a platform for them to express their freedom, making it an important occasion for both social empowerment and tourism" (ENA, 2025, para. 33-34).

4.4 Linking Social Capital: Connecting Communities to Institutions

The festivals also function as linking social capital, connecting grassroots communities to state institutions and international frameworks. The Ethiopian government has actively promoted the festivals as symbols of national unity and cultural pride. Chief Administrator of Tigray Region Lt. Gen. Tadesse Werede has "underscored that Ashenda embodies the spirit of peace and unity" and pledged "to work diligently to ensure the festival's continued development and sustainability" (ENA, 2025, para. 36-38).

The push for UNESCO recognition represents the most significant form of linking social capital associated with the festivals. "By advocating for the registration of Ashendye, Solal, Shaday, and Ayini Wari festivals as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, Ethiopia aims to preserve its traditions, strengthen cultural identity, and promote sustainable tourism" (Naol, 2025, para. 24-27). UNESCO emphasizes "that cultural events play a vital role in promoting unity and creating livelihoods" (Naol, 2025, para. 17-18).

The festivals have also been utilized for development communication purposes. As documented by UNESCO (n.d.), "such kinds of festivals enable the world to increase and consolidate efforts at combating child marriage and gender-based violence" and "develop the confidence of girls and young women" (para. 29-31). This instrumentalisation of the festivals for development objectives represents another form of linking social capital, connecting cultural practices to broader agendas of social and economic development.



Figure 2. Conceptual framework showing Ethiopian festivals as linking social capital connecting communities, institutions, global heritage frameworks, and sustainable development outcomes

Figure 2 presents a conceptual framework illustrating how Ethiopian cultural festivals function as linking social capital by connecting grassroots communities with state institutions, international heritage frameworks, and broader development agendas. The left panel identifies Ashenda, Solal, Shaday, and Ayini Wari as culturally embedded festivals that generate strong bonding social capital through shared identity, reciprocity, collective participation, and community cohesion. These locally rooted networks provide the social foundation from which connections extend beyond communities toward formal institutions.

At the centre, Figure 3 conceptualizes linking social capital as the mechanism through which cultural practices establish vertical relationships with actors possessing greater institutional authority and resources. The connection to state institutions demonstrates how festivals can be incorporated into national agendas of cultural pride, peace, unity, and social cohesion. Government recognition therefore transforms local cultural expressions into instruments of national identity and public cultural policy.

The framework further highlights the connection between the festivals and international institutions, particularly UNESCO-oriented intangible cultural heritage recognition. This linkage increases the visibility of local traditions beyond their immediate communities and potentially supports cultural preservation, strengthened identity, sustainable tourism, and international recognition. The progression from community-level practices to global heritage frameworks demonstrates how cultural capital can be translated into wider institutional legitimacy and opportunities.

Figure 3 also emphasizes the developmental dimension of linking social capital. Cultural festivals provide platforms for development communication, including initiatives addressing child marriage, gender-based violence, and the empowerment of girls and young women. Their social legitimacy and participatory nature enable development institutions to communicate with communities through culturally meaningful channels. The right panel consequently illustrates the interconnected outcomes of these relationships, including strengthened unity, preservation of intangible heritage, sustainable tourism, empowerment, social development, and stronger institutional partnerships. Overall, Figure 3 demonstrates that Ethiopian festivals operate not merely as cultural celebrations but as multidimensional social infrastructures linking local traditions, formal governance, international recognition, and sustainable development.

4.5 Peacebuilding and Post-Conflict Resilience

The Ashenda, Shaday, and Solel festivals have taken on explicit peacebuilding functions in the context of Northern Ethiopia's recent conflict and fragile peace. This section examines the festivals as sites of resilience, hope, and public expression of peace aspirations, while also acknowledging their vulnerability to continued violence.

a. Resilience and the Reclaiming of Joy

The 2020–2022 Tigray War devastated the region, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths, displacing millions, and destroying infrastructure and livelihoods. The war also disrupted cultural life, including the celebration of Ashenda. For three years, the festivals were largely suspended.

The resumption of celebrations following the November 2022 peace deal was thus a powerful act of resilience. When Tigrayan women gathered in Addis Ababa in 2023 to celebrate Ashenda "for the first time since 2020," the event was described as marking "cautious hopes" (Kuwaittimes, 2023, para. 13-14). The act of celebration itself was a reclaiming of normalcy, joy,

and cultural identity in the aftermath of devastation. As one participant, Selam Haile, 15, explained: "We did not celebrate [Ashenda] in this country for the last three years, because our Tigrayan people were... in a war. It was so bad for us" (Kuwaittimes, 2023, para. 15-17).

The festivals thus function as what anthropologists call "rites of intensification", ceremonies that strengthen social bonds and reaffirm collective identity in times of crisis. By coming together to sing, dance, and celebrate, participants affirm their continued existence as a community and their commitment to a shared future. As another participant, Danawit Tesfaye, 23, expressed: "We didn't celebrate [Ashenda] for a long time... But after all, all came back to love and unity and celebrating together. That makes it so special" (Kuwaittimes, 2023, para. 35-36). Rebeka Seyum, 38, told AFP: "I do not know how to explain my happiness. There is nothing like peace" (Kuwaittimes, 2023, para. 37).

b. Public Expression of Peace Aspirations

The festivals provide a public platform for expressing aspirations for peace. The Ethiopian government has framed the festivals as symbols of peace and unity, and participants use the festivals to voice their hopes for lasting peace. As noted by the Ministry of Culture and Sports, the festival "symbolizes peace, love, unity, and solidarity" (ENA, 2025, para. 32).

This public expression is significant in a context where political speech is often constrained and where the peace remains fragile. The festivals create a space, a liminal space, in Cohen's (2017) terms where participants can publicly articulate their desires for peace, reconciliation, and a better future. The very visibility of the celebrations, the colorful dresses, the public singing and dancing, the communal gatherings; constitutes a form of political speech, an assertion of the right to joy and community in the face of violence.

The festivals also serve as a barometer of the peace. The 2026 cancellation of the Mekelle gathering due to drone attack fears was widely interpreted as an indicator that the peace remained fragile. As reported by BBC News (2026), "Tigray is still recovering from a brutal two-year civil war that ended in 2022. There are concerns the conflict might reignite" (para. 9-10). The cancellation was announced because of "ongoing drone strikes and the threat of war" (BBC News, 2026, para. 26-27). The festivals thus function as what we might call "peace indicators", cultural events whose occurrence or non-occurrence signals the state of the peace.

c. Women's Empowerment and Peacebuilding

The festivals' focus on women and girls gives them a distinctive role in peacebuilding. The festivals are described as "a vibrant and time-honored celebration deeply rooted in Ethiopia's cultural and religious heritage" that "especially encourages girls in building their confidence" (Africa-Press, 2025, para. 28-29; Minister says cultural values, 2019, para. 17-18).

The empowerment of women is increasingly recognized as crucial for sustainable peace. Research has shown that women's participation in peace processes increases the likelihood of durable peace, and that women's economic and social empowerment contributes to conflict prevention. The Ashenda festivals, by providing a platform for women's public expression and leadership, contribute to this broader agenda of women's empowerment. As noted by the Ethiopian Minister of Culture and Tourism, "festivals like Ashenda, Shadeye, Ashendye, Solal helps to develop economic development of the country" and "especially encourages girls in building their confidence" (Minister says cultural values, 2019, para. 8, 17-18).

The festivals also challenge patriarchal norms by centering women and girls in public celebration. According to Tefera et al. (2021), "females learn a leadership and teamwork in the course of the celebration" (p. 29). In a context where women's public roles are often constrained, the festivals provide a space for women to exercise agency, express themselves freely, and claim public space. This challenge to gender norms is itself a form of peacebuilding, as gender inequality is a driver of conflict in many contexts.

d. Institutional Responsibilities and Community Roles in Sustaining Peace

While the Ashenda festivals demonstrate the power of cultural celebration as a vehicle for peace expression, sustaining peace requires concerted action from multiple stakeholders, including government institutions, regional leaders, women's organizations, and local communities. Drawing on the framework of "cultural peacebuilding" (Lederach, 2005), we identify key responsibilities and roles essential for transforming the festivals' symbolic peace aspirations into tangible, lasting peace.

Table 4 below summarizes the key responsibilities and recommendations for each stakeholder group.

Table 4. Institutional Responsibilities and Community Roles in Sustaining Peace

Stakeholder	Key Responsibilities	Concrete Actions
Federal Government	Ensure security; invest in cultural infrastructure; promote inter-communal dialogue	Implement ceasefire mechanisms; fund cultural centers; support joint regional celebrations
Regional Leaders	Foster reconciliation; protect cultural events; engage women and youth	Establish inter-communal dialogue platforms; ensure safety of gatherings; include women/youth in policy
Women's Organizations	Advocate for peace; build networks; conduct peace education	Establish peace committees; provide conflict resolution training; document peace experiences
Local Communities	Maintain social cohesion; organize inclusive celebrations; support healing	Foster inter-ethnic dialogue; create spaces for reconciliation; transmit peace values to youth
Civil Society	Support community efforts; provide resources; advocate for policy change	Offer training and resources; document peace initiatives; advocate for inclusive policies

The Ashenda, Shaday, and Solel festivals are not merely cultural relics but living traditions that embody the aspirations of Ethiopian communities for peace, unity, and a better future. The challenge for all stakeholders is to translate these aspirations into lasting peace, ensuring that future generations can celebrate the festivals in safety and joy, free from the shadow of conflict.

e. Vulnerabilities and Challenges

Despite their peacebuilding potential, the festivals remain vulnerable to the continued violence and insecurity that plague Northern Ethiopia. The 2026 cancellation of the Mekelle gathering "over drone attack fears" exposed the fragility of the peace and the limits of cultural celebration as a peacebuilding tool (BBC News, 2026).

The cancellation was "widely seen as a test of whether the peace deal that ended the 2020–2022 war had opened the way for a real social and cultural recovery" (Radiogeneration, 2026). The fact that the gathering could not proceed indicated that the peace remained incomplete and

that the threat of violence continued to shape daily life. As reported by Hamerintel (2026), "The cancellation of the Ashenda festival stadium gathering in Mekelle underscores how fragile the region's post-war calm remains and how quickly security concerns can reclaim public space" (para. 28-30).

Tefera et al. (2021) also identified challenges facing the festival, including "the changing face of the festival in the rural and urban communities, the past and present scenario of the festival celebration in its courses, lack of market-oriented operations to develop the festival as a tourism product and challenges of creating culture led development strategy and cultural regeneration practice" (p. 29).

This vulnerability raises important questions about the limits of cultural approaches to peacebuilding. Can festivals truly contribute to peace when the underlying structural conditions of conflict remain unaddressed? Or do festivals function primarily as coping mechanisms, ways of surviving violence rather than transforming its root causes?

The answer is likely both. The festivals provide immediate benefits; social support, psychological resilience, public expression of hope that are valuable in themselves. But they cannot substitute for the political and economic changes necessary for sustainable peace. The festivals are most effective as peacebuilding tools when they are integrated into broader peacebuilding efforts that address the structural drivers of conflict.

V. Conclusion

This review has examined the Ashenda, Shaday, and Solel festivals of Northern Ethiopia as cultural institutions with significant peacebuilding potential. The festivals function as generators of social capital across bonding, bridging, and linking dimensions; they are anchored in religious and astronomical frameworks that give them cosmological significance; and they serve as sites of resilience, hope, and public expression of peace aspirations in a post-conflict context.

However, the festivals also reveal the fragility of peace in Northern Ethiopia. The cancellation of the 2026 Ashenda gathering in Mekelle due to drone attack fears exposes the vulnerability of cultural celebrations to continued violence and the limits of cultural approaches to peacebuilding when structural conditions of conflict remain unaddressed (BBC News, 2026).

Synthesis of Findings

The review has made three interconnected arguments. First, the Ashenda, Shaday, and Solel festivals constitute a distinctive form of social capital that operates through bonding (strengthening intra-group solidarity), bridging (creating connections across communities), and linking (connecting grassroots practices to institutional frameworks) mechanisms. Second, the festivals' religious and astronomical grounding, in the Filseta fast, the Assumption of Mary, and the late August seasonal cycle, provides a cosmological architecture that reinforces their significance as moments of communal renewal. Third, in the post-conflict context of Northern Ethiopia, these festivals have taken on explicit peacebuilding functions as sites of resilience, hope, and public expression of peace aspirations, even as they remain vulnerable to the unresolved tensions that continue to threaten the region.

Gaps in the Literature

The existing scholarship on the Ashenda festivals is limited. While Tefera et al. (2021) provide a valuable study of the historical roots and significance of the festivals in North Wollo and Waghemera Zones, there is a need for more theoretically informed analysis that connects the

festivals to broader debates in peace and conflict studies, social capital theory, and cultural heritage studies.

Several specific gaps merit attention. First, there is limited empirical research on the peacebuilding impacts of the festivals. While there are anecdotal accounts of the festivals' significance for participants, systematic research on how the festivals affect social cohesion, inter-group relations, and attitudes toward peace is lacking. Second, there is little research on the political economy of the festivals, how they are funded, who benefits economically, and how they relate to broader patterns of inequality. Third, there is limited comparative research that situates the Ashenda festivals in relation to other Ethiopian festivals, such as Irreechaa, Meskel, or Fichee-Chambalaalla, or to women's festivals in other African contexts.

Future Research Agenda

Based on this review, the following research agenda is proposed:

- a. Empirical studies of peacebuilding impacts: Quantitative and qualitative research is needed to assess how participation in the festivals affects social cohesion, inter-group attitudes, and peace aspirations. This could include survey research, interviews, and ethnographic observation.
- b. Comparative studies of Ethiopian festivals: Comparative research on the Ashenda, Irreechaa, Meskel, and other Ethiopian festivals would illuminate the commonalities and differences in how cultural festivals function as peacebuilding tools in different regional and religious contexts.
- c. Political economy analysis: Research is needed on the political economy of the festivals, how they are funded, who benefits, and how they relate to broader patterns of inequality and exclusion.
- d. Longitudinal studies: Longitudinal research tracking the festivals over time would illuminate how they respond to changing political and security conditions, and whether their peacebuilding functions evolve or diminish.
- e. Policy-relevant research: Research that engages with policymakers, at the national level in Ethiopia and at the international level through UNESCO and other organizations, would help translate academic insights into practical peacebuilding interventions.

Concluding Reflection

The Ashenda, Shaday, and Solel festivals remind us that peace is not merely the absence of war but the presence of conditions that enable communities to thrive; to celebrate, to connect, to express hope, and to imagine a shared future. In a region scarred by conflict, these festivals offer a glimpse of what peace might look like: women and girls singing and dancing in public, communities coming together across divides, and cultural traditions being passed from one generation to the next.

Yet the festivals also remind us of the fragility of peace. The cancellation of the 2026 Mekelle gathering due to drone attack fears is a stark reminder that peace is not simply achieved but must be continually built, defended, and renewed. The festivals are not a substitute for the political and economic changes necessary for sustainable peace, but they are an essential part of the fabric of peace, a fabric that must be woven and rewoven, celebration by celebration, community by community.

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