

FEATURE

# AN ACT OF FAITH

All images  
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As a rising star of Ethiopian photography, **Hilina Abebe** eschews poverty porn representations of Africa and is determined to capture her homeland in all its complexities. Donatella Montrone reports.

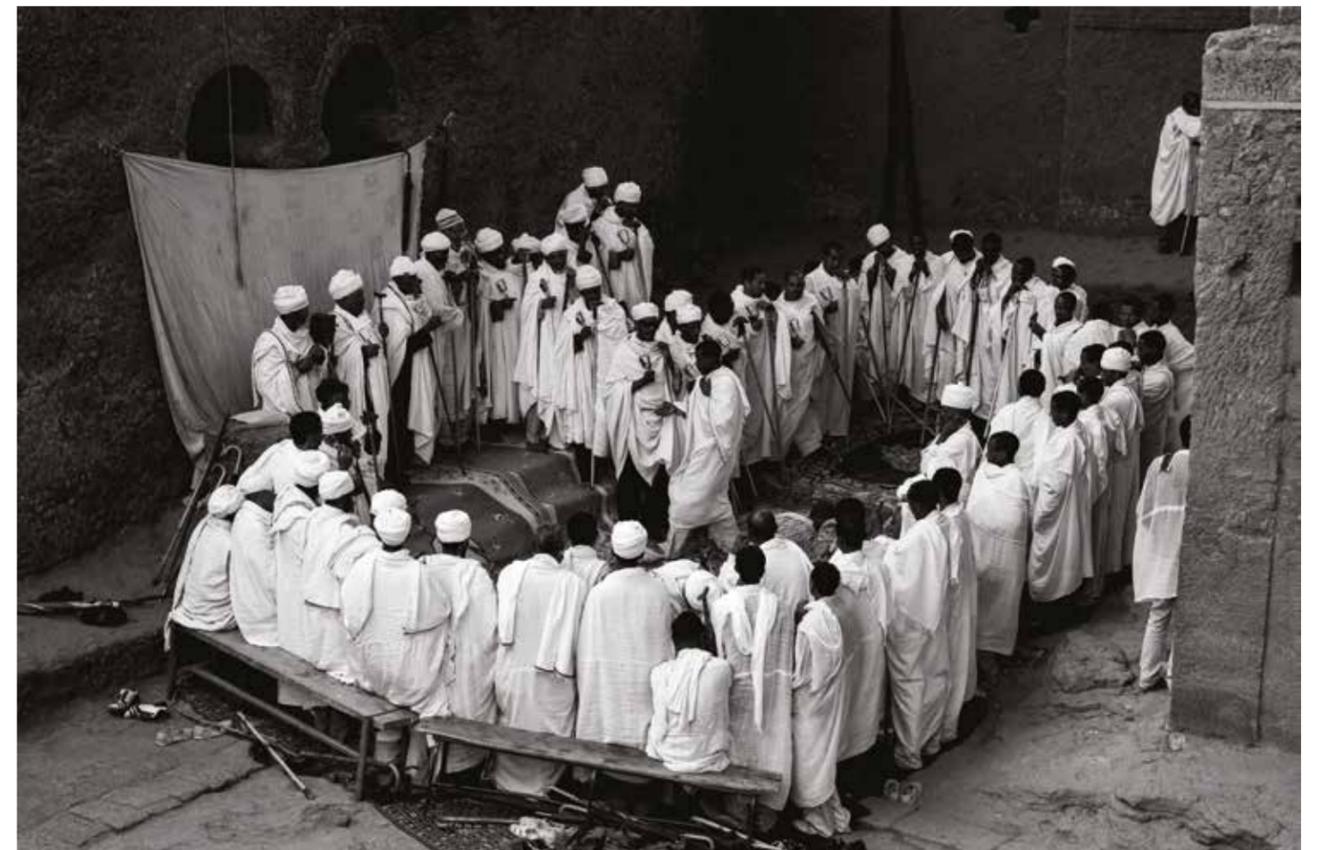
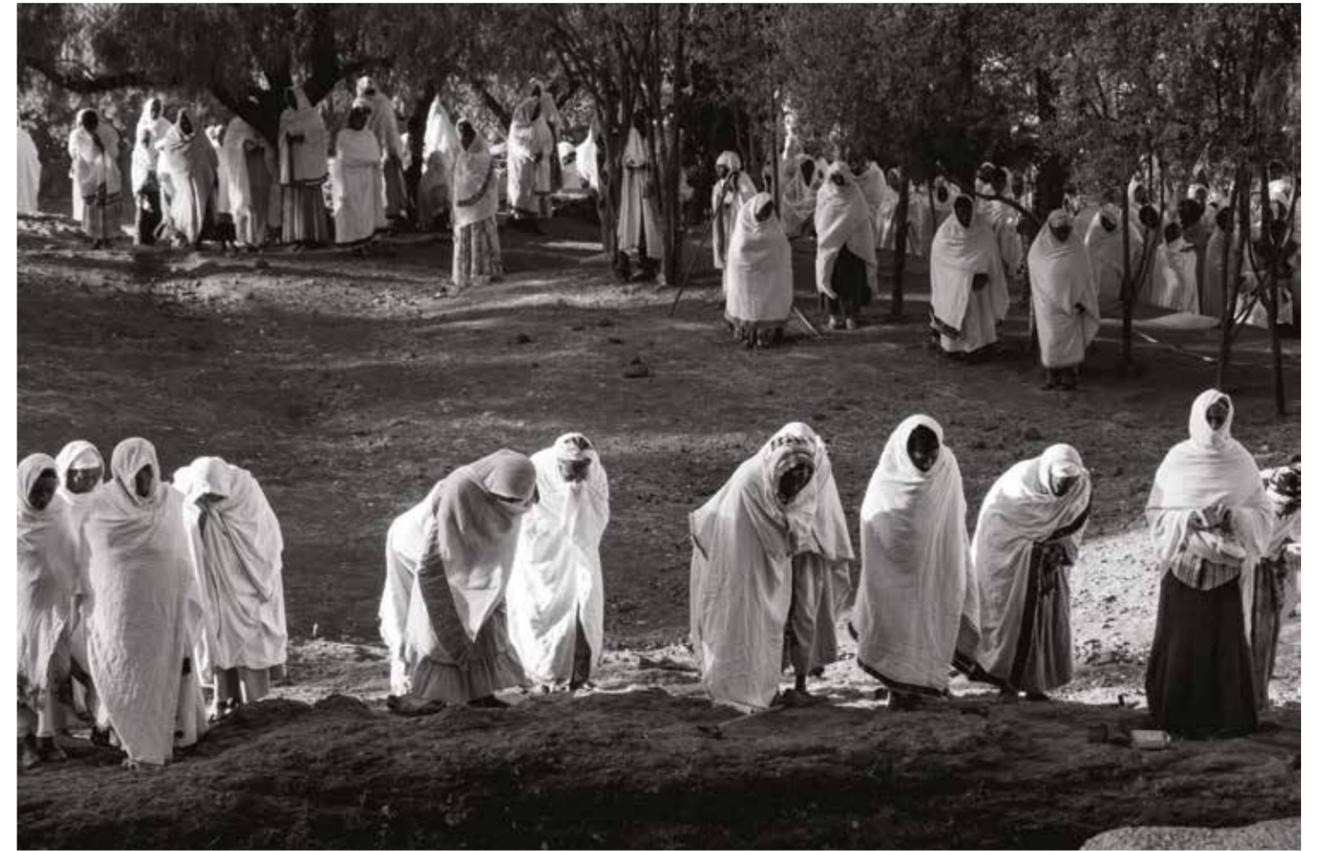
Lalibela is a holy place like no other. Ethiopia's crowning achievement – its 11 medieval rock churches awarded Unesco World Heritage status in 1978 – Lalibela is considered the holiest Christian site in Africa. Hewn from rock in the 12th century, during the reign of King Lalibela, the churches were carved out of immense stone masses, chiselled from the top down into angular structures with doors, windows, columns, stairwells and even catacombs. Seven of the churches share a wall with the mountain into which

they were carved, like sunken monoliths hidden inside Earth's very core. The other four are free-standing, each a colossus that seemingly erupts from the Earth's surface. Each year tens of thousands of Orthodox Christians visit Lalibela in the month of January – the Orthodox Christmas period – in what is the largest pilgrimage in Ethiopia.

Lalibela, like many other visitor attractions, is one of the most photographed places in Ethiopia, inspiring a trail of Instagram posts and images taken from an outsider's vantage. 'Lalibela is not simply a place of prayerful meditation,' says Ethiopian

photographer Hilina Abebe. 'It's a place of immense beauty and, in a way, identity.'

The outsider's gaze often fails to capture notions of identity, place and kinship – the nuances of selfhood. 'It's one of the reasons why I wanted to make *The Faithful*,' explains Abebe of her series on Lalibela. 'I have always found peace in going to places of worship, and I wanted to show the importance of faith and the Orthodox Church in Ethiopian society from the perspective of someone intimately connected to it. *The Faithful* is a more personal project than some of my other work.' >





◀ As a self-taught photographer, Abebe was drawn to photography at a young age, inspired by her father, a visual storyteller who took charge of documenting family events.

'My father was the family photographer, so to speak. He was passionate about preserving family history and loved telling stories about the past. I think it was my parents' love of communicating and sharing stories that inspired me to want to delve into storytelling myself. But I didn't pick up a camera until I was 25 and didn't really understand that my father was a storyteller in his own right until I started understanding photography myself. My father's photographs were profoundly embedded in my subconscious.

'About three years before he passed away, he gave me his analogue cameras, which he had bought as a university student. I treasure those cameras just as much as he did. To me, his photographs are not only snapshots of our family history, they also represent the importance of

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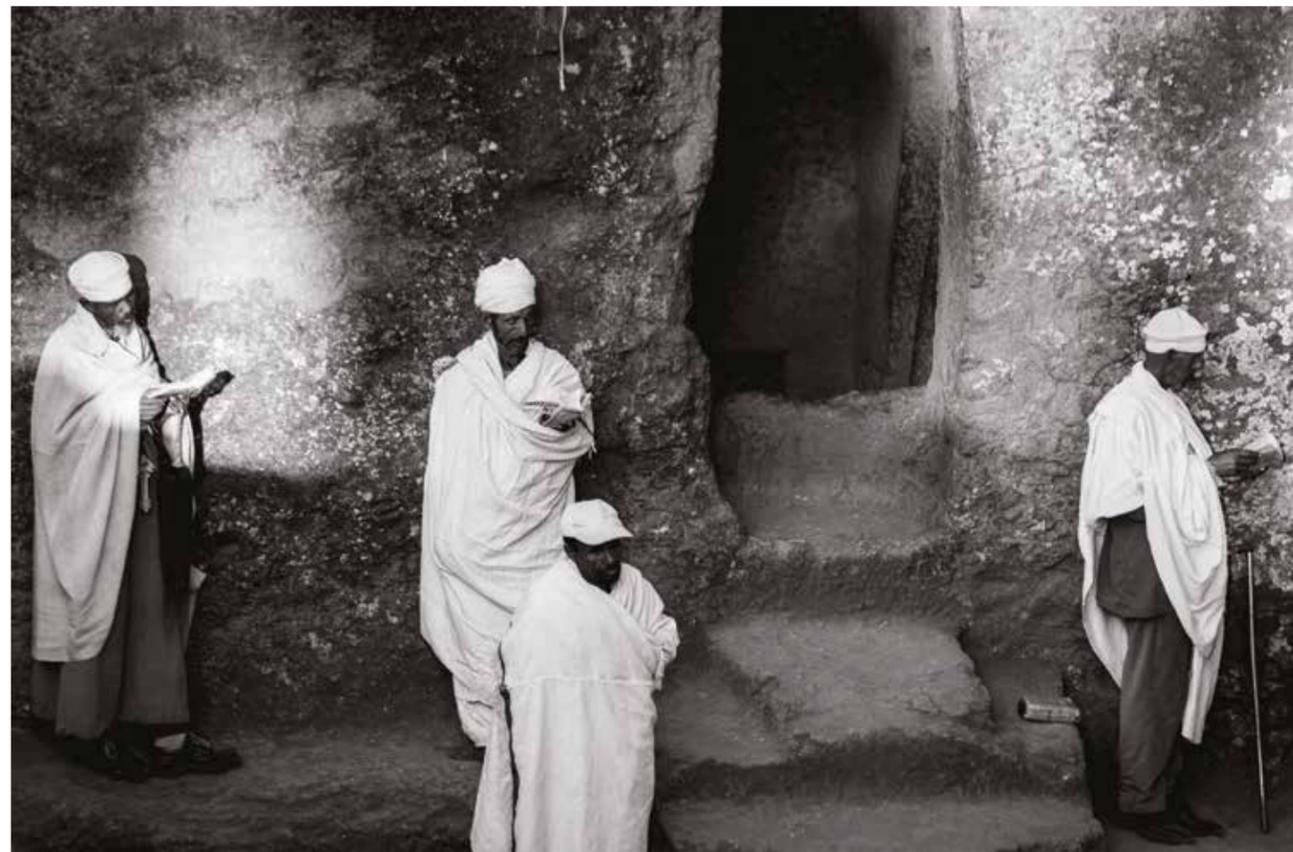
memory and shared experiences.'

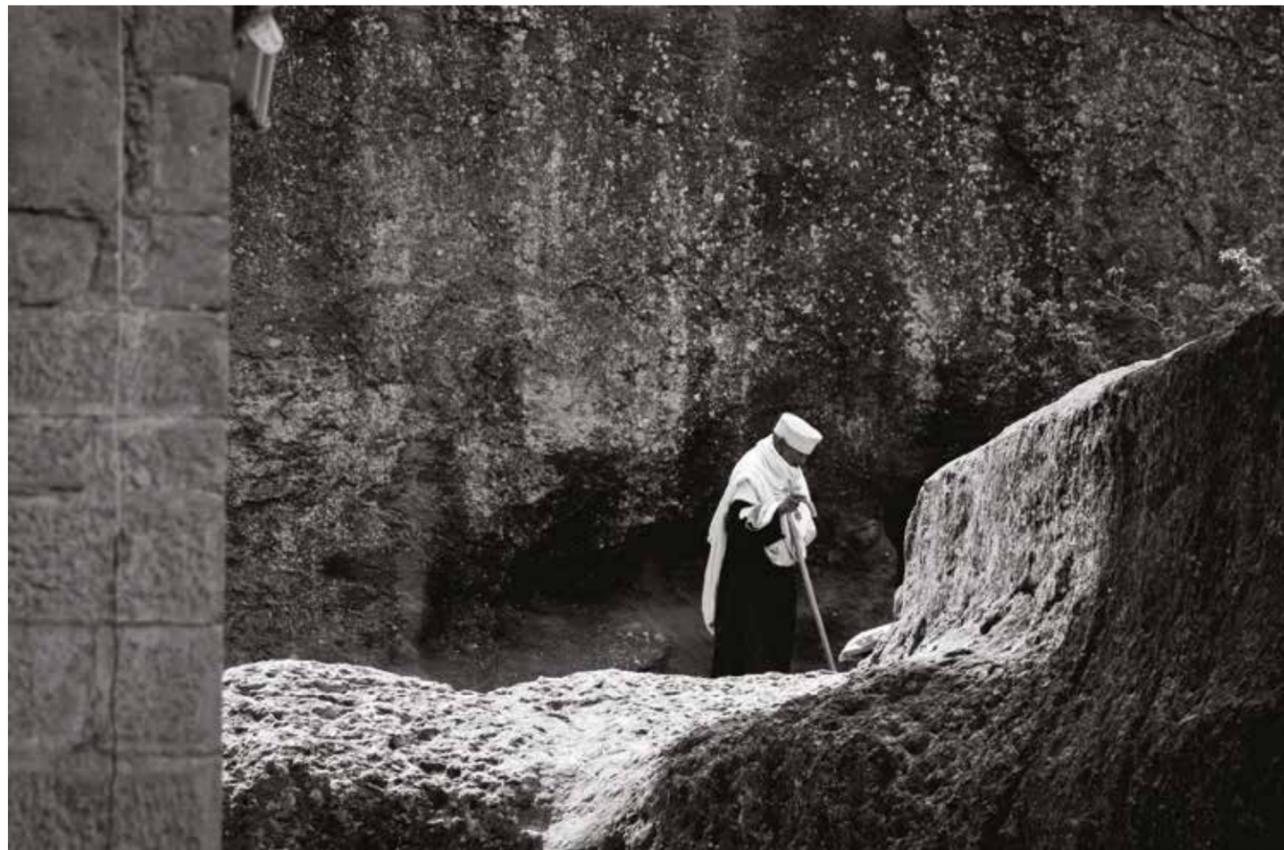
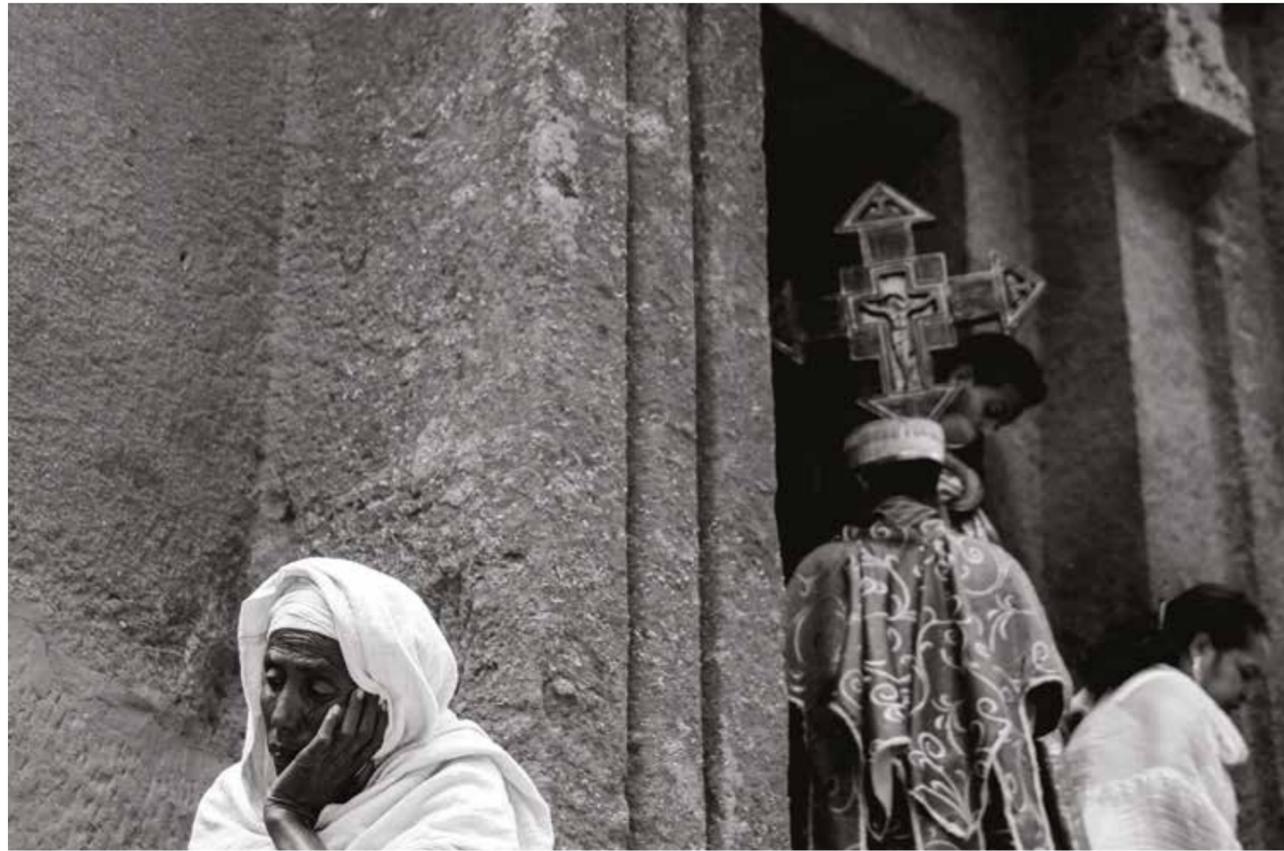
Abebe grew up in Debre Zeit, a small town about 48km south of the capital city, Addis Ababa. 'Debre Zeit is a picturesque town, a popular weekend gateway because of its scenic, volcanic lakes and calming surroundings. As a child, photography as a profession was limited to studio portraiture and events like weddings, so I never considered it as a journalistic tool. I used to love looking at back issues of Ethiopian Airlines' inflight magazine, *Selamta* – it was rich with photos of

landscapes and is probably another influence on my relationship with documentary and environmental photography.'

Much of Abebe's work centres on economic inequality, identity and Ethiopian communities in the diaspora, often exploring the significance of memory in her visual narratives. Among her most evocative projects is *Portraying my Father*, a photo essay made as a celebration of her father's legacy, 'and the urge to look deeper into his life'. *The Shoeshine Girl*, an acclaimed series that caught the attention of CNN and which documents the life of a single mother in Ethiopia struggling to make ends meet by shining shoes for a living with her daughter strapped to her back, explores the hardships of single motherhood and survival in what is a patriarchal country and profession.

'One thing I have learned in my limited photography practice is the importance of ▶





< intentionality. As someone who grew up seeing Ethiopia often portrayed in a negative light, with endless stories of famine, drought and conflict, it is important to me that I contribute to showing the different layers of my country and its people, both here and in the diaspora. That is not to say we must turn a blind eye to these things, but that “how” these stories are told matters.

‘I have lived here my whole life and I understand the context and social relationships of what is a very complex country. As a documentarian, my role is to be sensitive to this complexity, to present stories with dignity, to ensure the subjects trust me and, importantly, to prove to the people of Ethiopia that photography is not a tool for exploitation.’

And so with *The Faithful*, one of Abebe’s first projects, she eschews the prevailing portrayal of the pilgrimage to Lalibela as otherworldly figures in flowing white attire descending on a mountainous region, but instead uses her lens as a conduit – a means

with which to connect her own sense of self with one of the most spiritual and important events in her homeland. The pilgrimage to Lalibela is spectacular. That it attracts an onslaught of tourists is unsurprising, ‘but I don’t feel that gives photographers the green light to be intrusive,’ she explains. ‘Being a local means there are certain norms you are expected to abide by and respect – you have no excuse. So, I had to be extra cautious in navigating the sensitivities of photographing Lalibela, especially as it’s a holy place.’

Photojournalism is a growing profession in Ethiopia, attracting young photographers taking control of their own narrative, and rejecting the poverty porn imagery that has, for decades, defined Africa for the western appetite. ‘Whenever an

international story breaks in Ethiopia, newsrooms around the world have tended to fly in their own photographers to cover it. I personally did not grow up hearing about Ethiopian photojournalists, and I believe this is the case for most Ethiopians my age,’ says Abebe.

‘One of the reasons I never saw myself as a photographer comes from this “invisibility of local photojournalists” and the value placed on the profession itself. Over the past few years, however, with the rise of social media in Ethiopia, there has been a growing base of young photographers finding their voice, telling their own stories, from their own perspective.’ Among them is Abebe, described in the *Ethiopia Observer* as a rising star in photography.

**Hilina Abebe is an Eddie Adams Workshop alumnus and has participated in the New York Times Portfolio Review and World Press Photo East Africa Masterclass. Her work has been published by the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times and National Geographic, and she has exhibited at festivals including Photoville in New York and Nuku Photo Festival in Accra, Ghana.**  
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