

HARRARI FUNERAL CUSTOMS¹

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The following is a detailed description of funeral customs and ceremonies such as are practiced today among the Harrarians, and, with trifling variations, in the Gallan and Aroban areas near Harrar.

Commonly, the death of any person is naturally announced primarily by the lamentations of the relatives, if the deceased person has any. But in the city of Harrar the death is officially announced by an appointed person, a man if the deceased is male, a woman if the deceased is female. The announcer completes a round summoning the master or the mistress of every house as he visits each and announces the death of the particular person. Usually this summoner is the nearest neighbor of the deceased. His task is to assemble the "guild," a group of men who unite for the purpose of burying each other. There are a great many such guilds, since funerals are not commercial in Harrar; in fact, a man or woman who belongs to none will have hardly anybody to bury him or her except hired coolies, and this is considered miserable and shameful by the community. Some of these guilds are ancient and respected associations descending uninterruptedly from father to son, and they have survived competition against others, say, as to the accommodations they offer the deceased and his family, or the skill and the speed with which they bury him.

The burial ceremony begins with the washing of the dead body which is a complicated business including the stuffing of the body orifices and the use of different ointments for embalming and straightening the appendages. This is the task of specialized old women; they perform it behind closed doors.

Clothing will follow the washing of the corpse. For this, the corpse is laid prostrate and is first enveloped in an unseamed white cotton shroud, and then is wrapped tightly in another white sheet which is tied at both ends. A female corpse is clad in a white ankle-long, long-sleeved robe, trousers, and a white headdress.

While this washing and wrapping takes place inside the house of the deceased, outside, in nearby houses, a portion of the men of the guild already called are reading chapters from the Holy Koran aloud and melodiously together, and the women assemble, usually spreading all over the yard and

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in the street, weeping and mourning. The female relations of the deceased, adhering to the futile and wasteful custom, tear their gowns, which are minutely decorated with colourful hand-knitting, virtually asunder, pluck out their hair by the roots, and cry in touching, lamenting verses.

By the time washing and wrapping are done, and a few chapters read from the Holy Koran, men from other portions of the guild, who have been digging the grave and furnishing the grave implements, arrive with a wooden and leather bed. The cries of the women now culminate into a climax of outbursts. The Holy Koran is closed gently, and men rise to escort the deceased to his eternal resting place. The corpse is tied to the bedsticks strongly, and the bed is shouldered by four men. The procession sets forth towards the burial ground, just outside the walls of the city, singing hymns and repeating the name of Allah accompanied by unison litany. On the way, the heavy bed is constantly exchanged from shoulder to shoulder, and nearly everybody, even an unknown passer-by, gives a helping hand in shouldering the bed for a distance, as a sign of respect to the dead.

When the grave is reached, the bed is placed on the ground, and the body untied. It is left just at the edge of the grave, lying face upward for a moment so that anybody present could say the prayer for the dead man on the spot. This "prayer of the corpse," as it is called, has to be said at one time or another. The relations and neighbours of the deceased may say it for him in his house after the death, but most commonly it is conducted at the graveyard by anybody who wishes to pray. If the death takes place on the Holy Day, Friday, the corpse is carried to the mosque and a mass prayer is said for it; this is always an honour.

The grave itself is an oblong ditch about seven feet by four feet and five feet deep. At the bottom of the grave on the right side as you face north, (since all the Harrar, Moslem graves, on religious principle, are dug facing Mecca) horizontally another oblong cave is dug about the size of the adult man. The corpse is lowered slowly and carefully into the grave, and from this outer grave it is forced gently into the little den, the inner grave, in a sleeping condition face upwards. This chamber is then walled with blocks of stone and mud, to separate it from the outer grave which is then filled with the soil and leveled to the ground. The burial is completed by erecting the grave stones on either side of the grave. These grave stones are usually a pair of flat white blocks, often carved into artistic shapes, one of them slightly bigger than the other. They are erected on the top of the grave facing one another on the north and south ends, the bigger one being located on the northern end, i.e., directly above the head of the buried body. A short epitaph, "God

bless his soul," coupled with the date of birth and death, is written on the bigger block. The two main gravestones are then joined by linings of small stones on their adjacent sides in order to show the rectangular outline of the grave. A distinctive, cylindrical piece of stone is inserted in the middle of the rectangle on women's graves.

When the burial is over, everybody goes back home, the men of the guild carrying their shovels, pickaxes, or spades, and the bed. The family of the deceased continues mourning.

The members of the guild, having accommodated their dead fellow-man in a relatively comfortable resting place, and wished him a restful sleep, disperse in the direction of their homes, their spades and pickaxes hanging on their shoulders. Some of them carry important community implements, such as the couch on which the deceased was conveyed, and the shelves, etc., to the house of their chief, under whose care they will remain until required for the next burial.

Though the man may be buried and gone, his spirit, according to the common belief, still demands a lot from the living, in order that it may gain complete peace and tranquility. To be able to understand how the living relatives render the rights and duties they owe their dead, let us follow their domestic activities after a death has taken place.

The first remarkable event, after the departure of the corpse for the burial ground, is the production of "*kafara*," a kind of unleavened plain bread, baked in small circular shapes (about three inches in diameter) from a ready made, sweetened dough. The cakes, which are baked only at the time of a funeral, are produced only in the case of the deaths of mature men and women, i.e., those over sixteen years of age. No sooner does the male procession, carrying the body of the deceased, leave the gate of the house, than a group of the female kin start a bon-fire in the open air, and set a pan on it. Another group prepares the dough from wheat flour, and still another moulds the small, round cakes. In a matter of minutes, basket after basket is filled with these *kafara*; some are served to the temporary female mourners, who keep them until they go back to their homes to divide them among their children, if they have any; another part is sent to the grave-yard where it is distributed among the paupers and beggars who gather around in multitudes. In some Harrarian societies, this traditional *kafara* is being replaced by some other form of alms, notably dates, because they are handy and sweet. It is not uncommon, on the other hand, for the family or the relatives of the deceased, particularly if these are wealthy, to slaughter a domestic

animal, varying from a goat to an ox, and divide the parts among the poor neighbours and mendicants as a rich sacrifice for the dead man.

An outburst of confused noise and lamenting outcries on the part of the female mourners, as they see the first attendants of the burial returning from the cemetery, heralds the end of the funeral ceremonies for the day. The members of the guild address a few words of consolation to the chief mourner and depart. The women force the last tear from their eyes and disperse. But they never cease to cooperate fully in sustaining the relatives of the deceased and in helping them in any way possible. It is, for instance, considered the duty of every woman who lives in the vicinity of the house of the deceased, or who is a member of the guild, to provide the family during three consecutive days with at least one meal, either lunch or supper, the dish being cooked and arranged in an extremely delicious and careful manner. Occasionally they may bring a calabash full of milk, or some other present, to say nothing of the contributions of money, the amounts of which are stipulated by convention established, as we shall see, on ceremonial days.

The nearest blood kinsmen abandon their houses and reside with the family of the deceased, usually for a week or a fortnight, during which period they share the grief of the chief mourner and continue their silent meditation. The men all stay in one room and the women in another, and, for the first days, their main concern is to appear deeply grieved and to receive wholeheartedly the sympathisers who come by scores every morning. In the men's chamber, the chief mourner, wrapped to the head in a white shawl, sits nearest the door, so that it is not difficult for the guests to reach him and to shake his hands. Sympathisers formulate short phrases of solace and well-wishing, while the mourners "Amen" till the end, when they too join in the refrain, which, incidentally, is the first chapter of the Holy Koran.

An informal ritual, known as the "*Fatah*," is held on the fourth day. This religious ceremony, organized by the family of the deceased with the help of the members of the guild, each of whom contributes the Ethiopian equivalent of twenty-five cents, is attended by the men of the guild and aged neighbours, who all unite to pray God to forgive the deceased his sins and to save his soul from the tortures of hell.

For the remainder of the week there is no special event. The unfortunate bereft still go on with their lamentations, although by now most of them begin to recover. The women dress in black gowns, head-dresses, and tight-fitting trousers, and the girls go out wearing their gowns inside out, gowns which they have, as I described previously, torn to rags. The men have no special mourning markings or clothes.

The end of the first week witnesses the climax of the religious ceremonies that follow a death. A huge ox is slaughtered and a great festival is organized mostly from the private contributions of the family, although the fund raised by a contribution of one dollar from each member of the women's group does help.

This day is a grand day; it marks, to the delight of the relatives, the end of the burdensome mourning formalities. For the occasion, all the men and women neighbours and members of the guild are cordially invited. As every woman enters the house, she tosses a dollar note in the wide basket placed just beneath the threshold for the collection of the contributions, and proceeds to sit among her peers, Harrarian fashion. The principal occupation of the women during the whole day is to look after the kitchen and the cooking, to serve the men and furnish them with their multiple necessities, primarily "*qat*," a drug which the men must have if they are to do anything worthwhile. Then regular meals and tea follow at short intervals. Besides their kitchen activities, the women mostly gossip about successes and failures of other women who are not present, or reminisce about old times, except when the eldest ones strike up a religious hymn; then they all join in the singing, piously asking salvation for the dead person.

The men, on their side, are exempted from any contributions, but nearly everyone of them has to come with a bundle of the indispensable leaves of *qat* tucked under his arm. This he hands to the master-of-ceremonies, commonly appointed because he is the eldest or wisest of the lot, appointed permanently if he is to stay the day, and temporarily if he cannot.

By ten o'clock, the majority of the invited guests are present, and the master-of-ceremonies opens the *qat*-eating ceremony, called "*Barca*," dividing proportionately, as he sees fit, the huge heap of the eagerly awaited drug piled in front of him. The youngsters grind the herb with small wooden mortars and pestles, and sweeten it with sugar, in deference to the old who cannot chew it raw. Soon after a few mouthfuls, everybody warms up; the atmosphere becomes light and active. They pass the forenoon thus idly enjoying their *qat*, talking, discussing, and laughing. The master-of-ceremonies sees that the supply of the opiate and its auxiliaries, sugar and the Harrarian beverage, "*ghewa*,"² is continuous. At noon, lunch is served only to the few who have not eaten any *qat*, for the addicted consumers abhor any food during and long after taking *qat*. Early in the afternoon,

² Harrarian beverage prepared from coffee.

everybody feels hot. They stand up, clean the house, wash up, and piously say the mid-day prayer in a group under the guidance of a chosen Imam. When they have finished it, they settle themselves comfortably between cushions and pillows, ready for serious work. Texts of the Holy Koran and a couple of the other prayer books are distributed around. Soon they begin to recite the melodious verses of Holy Scripture, loudly and harmoniously. There is no pause or interruption once they start, and, sweating under their own spiritual enthusiasm for the reverent words of Allah, they complete the entire book, say the long prayer affixed to it, and take on the other books with sustained zeal and vigour.

Around sundown, the ceremony ends and the men, hungry and exhausted, joyously receive their reward in the form of a series of delicious dishes of many types of food, which they eat hastily and freely, in handfuls. Then tea follows, to clear the throat and terminate the banquet. When every man has had his fill, a last God-save-his-soul is said, and everyone takes his leave; a little later the women, who must delay a bit to assist in the cleaning, depart also.

These funeral rites, and their observance, help the emotional readjustment of the bereaved. Afterwards, the male relatives leave, and only a few of the nearest womenkin remain with the family of the deceased after the end of the first week. Notwithstanding the fact that the real ceremonies are now over, these family members and kin will continue to remain idle and wear black mourning clothes for some time. The women acquaintances will never fail to come with a present of some kind, up to the end of the first month. Some families may present a small lunch at the beginning of the second month, and invite the eminent personalities of the vicinity to conduct a ceremony, which is a perfect stereotype of the one I have just described, only on a much smaller scale. And then some may repeat the same ritual annually, renewing their grief and memory of the deceased, year after year.

In my endeavour briefly to describe the Harrarian funeral customs, I have limited myself to customs in case of normal death. I have avoided (as much as I could) out-dated customs, trivial details, and abnormal or emergency cases. But there may always arise simple modifications and slight alterations due to different conditions. For instance, they do not go out to the cemetery to bury a baby less than a year old; whereas, the burial of a centenarian is very ceremonious. The death-tidings of a wealthy aristocrat may ring far and wide beyond the walls of Harrar, and the demise of a religious eminence may shock hearts and attract multitudes from the remotest

distances. It should not, therefore, be surprising if these latter funeral rites differ greatly from those for a friendless pauper or a social out-cast. Among the Harrarians, much of the burial ceremony is simplified, often to bare essentials, by request of the deceased, whose requests are meticulously observed.