

HYENA PORRIDGE: ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMING IN THE CITY OF HARÄR

*Ahmed Zekaria*⁹⁹

Harär and the Hyena man have become synonymous in the minds of many people. Every tourist who has been to this ancient walled city knows about the man who feeds the hyena. About two years ago, we heard of an even more dramatic connection between the hyena and the people of Harär, who annually feed porridge to the hyena on a special occasion. This information created a strong urge in us to film this dying practice in which the people of Harär have established a pact between the man and the seemingly wild hyena.

As a walled city built on top of a mountain, Harär presents attractive cinematographic scenes. The appeal of the hyena's porridge festival was another pull for us to go and witness this unusual event. We reached Harär three days before the event of *Ashura* on the seventh day of *Muharram* 1411 A.H. (i.e. 9, July 1990). *Ashura* is a special period of the year which marks the commencement of various activities which includes the veneration of shrines throughout the year.

Our preliminary investigations came up with three major colorful activities in relation with *Ashura* celebration. The first one has a Biblical resonance since it is related to the main events in the lives of several prophets. It is believed that on the above-mentioned day Noah landed safely after the flood and as a thanks-giving the people on the ship prepared porridge made of different cereals. Moreover, it is said that Moses with his people fled from the oppressive yoke of the Pharaoh and crossed the Red Sea on this day. Furthermore, this was claimed to be the day that Abraham was saved from the burning fire of his opponents. These are a few examples of stories of prophets related to this eventful day. Because of its association with the line of prophets beginning with Noah the Haräris commemorate this day with porridge dinner.

The second major cause for the celebration is social in nature. It is said that once upon a time the people of Harär had a bitter argument about the role of alcohol in society. The supporters of alcohol claimed that it was useful whereas the opponents considered it "evil" presenting strong counter-arguments. However, it was difficult to reach a conclusion. Both sides therefore decided to carry out investigations about the effect of alcohol in the society. They immediately started their arduous field investigations. On their way they met a woman carrying a child on her back. They stopped her and started interviewing her about the effects of alcohol. The moment she heard alcohol she jumped up denouncing it. When she cooled down, she narrated how, under the influence of alcohol, her own son had forced his will on her and as a result produced a "bastard" whom she was carrying on her back. It was apparently a real shock for the traditional society of the time. That was the end of their investigation and the start of attacks on containers of alcohol.

⁹⁹ Assistant Museum Curator, Institute of Ethiopian Studies.

From that day on, school-children collected alcoholic containers, especially gourds, during a period of more than a week before they crash them to pieces on the eve of *Ashura* in the school compounds. After that they visit people chanting from house to house for more gourds to be thrown to them so that they can crush them with their heavy sticks, while chanting until late in the evening. The following verses, with slight amendments, were recorded by Professor Leslau:¹⁰⁰

wershato werish yassabar
wershato gel yassabar
eher amet ashurakhom bisharakhom yabordakhu
allo amat amatum mubarak yushlakhu
ehit-zinam taleqlakhu
abbayé hasan zita husén zita liji yastash
ummaw din baraka
umma kudow (din baraka) ziliman raga
barti-zinaw dalagew-wa
dera dafdaf wizi chifchif

Let bad habits be broken
 Let bad pots (containers) be broken
 May your AUSA of next year be blessed for you
 May God make every year blessed for you
 May our sister grow up for you (and serve you)
 My sister, may He give a good and blessed boy
 Grandmother, the blessing of the faith
 Dear grandmother, the blessing of the faith
 Even our sticks are tied
 Rummage through the storage room for us
 (to look for gourds) and we are sweating

The third main reason for the celebration is connected with hyena feeding. The hyena is supposed to be a messenger boy, as its name denotes *derma Sheikh*, or the young Sheikh for the *awlia*, the saints of Harär. Besides, there is a story told about how the hyena was fed with delicious porridge at least once a year. It is said that many years ago, there was a devastating famine in Harär. The Hyena which is a partially tamed wild animal started attacking domesticated animals and even human beings. Someone "with a pure heart" had dreamt about how the people of Harär should feed hyenas with porridge as a means to resolve the conflict caused by the famine. This was carried out successfully, and from that day on every year the people of Harär renew their agreement with the packs of hyenas by providing them with porridge made of different cereals prepared with an abundance of pure better lavishly poured over the dish like water.

¹⁰⁰ Wolf Leslau, *Ethiopians Speak: Studies in Cultural Background: I Harari*, California, 1965, p. 246

The eating habits of the hyenas is colourfully ceremonious. We heard the leader of hyenas comes and tastes the porridge, before the pack of hyenas surrounded the stone bowl. If the leader feels that the porridge or the butter is not enough he does not call upon his followers to partake of the dish. In this case individuals in charge of feeding hyenas make the requested improvements.

This is not the end of the story. The kind of year in store is predicted by the shrine leader who deciphers the fate of the community on the basis of the left overs of hyena's porridge.

We were informed of a simple classification of hyena's reaction to the porridge. If the hyenas ate more than half of the bowl of porridge then it would be assumed that the year would be good. But if the hyenas refused to eat or if they ate all the porridge served to them then one should be worried. The shrine leaders interpret both conditions as strong warning that either famine or pestilence is expected. In either case the people who gather in shrines spend the whole night praying.

We focused on these three eventful activities and selected shooting sites for the film. Our main interest was the feeding of hyenas and for this purpose we chose Abobker shrine which is located at the outskirts of Harär. Major filming was done at this site. Besides following of students from house to house in their gourd hunt, the other two centres of activities were Abadir shrine and the Harär house museum.

The film crew consisted of Ato Mohammed Idris, producer of the film, Ato Taffese Jara, director, Ato Getachew Erko, cameraman, Ato Teferi Tassew, sound man and myself as a researcher. The unforgettable support from the Haräri community facilitated our filming very much. I am eagerly waiting to see the finished product very soon and I hope it will be a step forwards in ethnographic filming in Ethiopia.