

# THE HARRARI WEDDING CUSTOMS<sup>1</sup>

Mohamed Abdurahman

## Part I

In order to do full justice to Harrari Wedding customs, I shall try to illustrate the marriage system which was in operation before the Italian invasion; after that, though fundamentally the same, the customs underwent many changes and modifications.

The contract of marriage begins with formal engagement. The boy might have been attracted by a girl he met in the street, or his family might have proposed to him a certain girl. The young man goes in search of her, and, if necessary, he may even drop into her house with some trifling excuse, such as having gone astray, or to ask the residence of such and such a fellow in the neighbourhood. By such means he might make contact with the girl, but will not allow his real purpose to be perceived. If he is satisfied by her posture, complexion, and manner of answering, the boy agrees that his family should arrange his betrothal to the girl. The family, at first, sends an elderly man or woman with the suggestion to the girl's family. They, in turn, may reject or consent to the proposal. If they consent, the elderly messenger is given a day upon which the boy's family may bring a pile of "Qat"<sup>2</sup> as an official promise of engagement. The "Qat" is brought in the morning of the appointed day, and the girl's family adds some more of their own; they distribute it among all their neighbours and kinsmen in the city to announce the engagement. This done, the engagement is sealed, and a new relationship arises between the two families and between the young couple.

Now the girl begins to hide from her betrothed, perhaps to arouse his curiosity. If she does not hide, he considers it as an insult towards him, and he may hit her; if he does so, he has to send her a suit of clothes. This amusing play of hide-and-seek goes on until the wedding day.

There are other seasonal duties on the part of both. On the arrival of Ramadan (the Islam fasting month), the girl prepares a dish of "Butur," small, spherical, fried biscuits in honey; and the boy, with the help of his friends having emptied the dish, sends it back with a dollar note. On the arrival of Arafa (the biggest Mohammedan festival, at the end of the year),

<sup>1</sup>Abridged and reproduced with permission of the Ethnological Society of the University College from Bulletin No. 2, December, 1953.

<sup>2</sup>A habit-forming, but non-addictive, weed cultivated in Harar, and in great demand for chewing, especially among Ethiopians of Arab extraction.

the girl's family expresses gratitude by a present of a bottle of diluted honey and another of milk. This cycle goes on till the wedding day, which is heralded with Zagan, i.e., the presentation of the dowry.

At the request of the boy's family, the girl's family appoints the date for the presentation of Zagan. On the eve of the appointed day, the boy's family, accompanied by relatives and outstanding men of the neighbourhood, solemnly marches to the girl's house, where they are cordially welcomed. Then the eldest of the group begins to present, one by one, the objects comprising the dowry. The dowry varies, but generally it consists of two gowns, two lighter robes, a pair of trousers, a valuable necklace in the shape of a bee-hive, and \$100 in cash. The boy's family departs and the things are left in the girl's home where they will remain on exhibition to all the relatives and friends for several days. Then several loads of wood pass from the boy's to the girl's family, heralding the advent Tunaus, i.e., the commencement of the wedding ceremonies. This wood delivery is all done by the boy's friends, who ride donkeys to the nearest forest, chop the wood, and carry it into the girl's home.

The day of Tunaus being decided upon, the girl roams through the city at the head of a group of her friends, who line up in twos and threes, every group clad in a single gaudy mantle. In this way, they frolic through the main streets of the city. This announces her Tunaus and also serves to invite the young men of the city to her house for dancing and amusements. This begins on the day of the announcement. Formerly it continued for seven days, but now lasts for three only.

On that day, the girl chooses three or four of her intimate friends to participate with her in the colouring of the hands with henna (a leaf which, rubbed on the hands, stains them red), and the taking of medicine such as Epsom Salts.<sup>3</sup> On the day of the announcement, these intimate friends go to the boy's house and stick a needle with a highly decorated head on a basket hung on the first pillar of the house. The nearest girl-relative of the boy picks up this needle, sticks it near her temple, and begins to invite all the girls and women among the boy's relatives. The usual form of the announcement is "Mr. So-and-So orders you to crush hops." This traditional announcement indicates that formerly this community did not abstain from alcoholic drinks. When this has been done, the wedding ceremony commences in both families. Smoke ascends sky-high, and the noises begin to attract beggars and to announce the fact to the passers-by. On the day of the announcement,

<sup>3</sup> As a physical purgative. Formerly koso, a treatment for tapeworm, was used.

the girl invites her relatives, together with the young men in her neighbourhood. She goes to their families and announces that she proclaims them as brothers. These "brothers" have certain responsibilities. They provide the girl's house with lamps, and they also act as masters of ceremony during the nights of dancing.

About ten, every evening, when the bride comes back from visiting her friends and relatives, the dancing starts. It is peculiar to the Harrarians that dancing is permitted only on such bridal occasions, and that is why we find this dancing is open to all and sundry of the bachelors of the city. The party opens with the beating of drums and singing. A group of boys come into the house and announce, through their song, their wish to have a girl in front of them. A girl descends from among her friends on the dais and stands erect in front of the boys, with her back to them, just at the corner of the main pillar. Slowly one of the boys lowers a corner of the mantle on her head. The song begins with praises of the girl and then strikes far and wide covering many themes, all expressed in lyrical terms. The house of Tunaus may be the birth-place and the source of inspiration of many deep and lovely verses. Such is the origin of the famous verse which runs:

"Amina Ali Nur, though you may look as ugly as a rat to others,  
to me you are as beautiful as a siren."

This verse really voices and enshrines a major trust about love. It illustrates how blind love is, and how little connection it has with beauty, and announces the fact that people fall in love in spite of peculiarities evident to all.

Thus the young men come in groups from all quarters of the city and have a pleasant time; some may not leave until the day is almost breaking, still regretting the too-rapid passage of the night in verses such as this:

"The day comes before I am satisfied!"

The bride and all the family spend a drowsy day during which they drag through their preparations for the next night. The second night is quite similar to the first. The third, and last, is the jolliest and most active of all. The girl's friends go to the bridegroom's house with bandages of henna. After that a famous and melodious chorus begins. The friends of the girl, on one side of the room, compete with the bridegroom's group across the room, each group repeating the following verses once:

“By the name of Allah the graceful and the merciful,  
O bridegroom, you are the successor of Ali.

“The residence of your father is a Hadas (aromatic herb)  
Shaded with Ayoban (aromatic herb) roof.

“Your father’s residence has Yasin (the most famous chapter of the  
Koran read by the prophet during his escape), as its wall, and  
Tabarak (another highly valued chapter) as its shield.”

When this is ended, the girls among the bridegroom’s friends will go in their turn to the bride’s house and sing the same song with the girls attached to the bride’s party. Then both the groups go to their houses and the jolly singing and the dancing resume. With the dawn of the third day, the dancing night ends, and on the fourth night the marriage takes place. The guild-members and other men pass the day in reading aloud the biography of the prophet. With the advent of evening, activity increases, and soon a whole group of elderly men, friends of the bridegroom, come to witness the ceremony. The marriage oath is taken at the house of the preacher, where both parties will be presented by their kinsmen. With the arrival of the boy’s friends, leading a well-decorated mule, the ceremony reaches its close. The girl, entirely wrapped with a robe, is put on the mule, and is shaded by a gaudy umbrella. She is driven to her new home by the boy’s friends, who sing and jump in front of her, while her girl friends follow close to the mule, singing different verses all in her praise. By Harrari customs, it is the girl’s family which provides all the furniture and fittings for the newly married couple. The new home reached, the bride is carried into the inner recesses of the house, where she awaits the bridegroom. The young man, as soon as he comes, dashes in through her friends, who still swarm around her, and exercises his new mate by striking her three times with a whip, to which all the girls respond by roaring, “Happy marriage,” thrice after each lash. They depart, and the bridegroom goes to visit his family and close relations. He leaves a conical basket in the houses of the families closest to him to denote that he expects an invitation at the end of the honeymoon. He returns to his new house, where he is reconciled with his wife. Here ends the first phase of the Harrarian bridal ceremony.

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## Part II

Early in the morning after the consummation of the marriage, a calf is sent to the bride's house to announce the virginity of the girl. As soon as the calf steps in the bustling yard, a cry of rejoicing bursts out. The scared animal is pushed to the kitchen where it is daubed with butter in appreciation of its breaking the good news. Its mission fulfilled, the poor creature is pulled and led back by the messenger to the house it came from. The bride, who has so far obstinately refused to take any food despite the severe measures taken by the groom's helpers, receives a messenger from her family telling her to help herself and to assume a more humane attitude; then she begins to eat. The first of the seven days of the honeymoon is relatively uneventful. The married couple spend their day swarmed by their friends, and occasionally are paid visits by the bride's girl friends.

At noon, when lunch comes from the boy's family, the number of visitors and friends swells. The people sit in circles at two places: one in the bridal room where the young couple lunch with their intimate friends, and the other for the rank and file of the group. The lunch over, the activities decline; at about four p.m., life begins once more; friends from both sides begin to drop in and, as they do, the groom, majestically seated on his chair, blesses with a lash every lass from the girl's party as she flies before him to the darkness of the bride's room and complete security. The girls from the boy's party are similarly treated by the bride. But the wretched boys, no matter whose friends they may be, are lashed by both the bride and groom.

The visitors, mostly young men, are received with lashes, then are accommodated and served with spurring drinks. As the number of the boys increases and the atmosphere begins to grow in fervor, the young bachelors start to sing by couples and gradually, towards the evening, burst out into sprightly and frantic dances to which the whole group joins to build up a song at once fascinating and contagious. The dancing group trots in a circle to rhythmical clapping until a veritable frenzy is attained, and nothing is seen but flying shemmas, brandished sticks, and leaping heads. This goes on until the band drops; for a while, nothing is heard but the clacking of cups and the panting of exhausted figures.

<sup>1</sup>Abridged and reproduced with permission of the Ethnological Society of the University College, from Bulletin No. 3, December, 1954.

As the hardy youths recover their breath, they begin once more to sing by couples, but this time softly and merrily praising the bride and groom. With the advent of supper late in the evening, the merry-making begins to fade away, and the whole song dies down, leaving the young house desolate and dreary. Apart from a few intimates, nobody remains to pass the night in the bride's home. Such is the routine of the seven days.

The "plate of mothers," two big black wooden plates filled to the brims with thin wheat breads steeped in liquid butter and sprinkled with sauces, hails the second morning's offerings from the bride's family. A large group is invited to this unusual meal, but after that all the conventions of the first day begin once more: the same visits and felicitations, the same dancing and merry-making. The seven days of transition are supposed to be eventful and gay, and in fact every new day hails the young couple with rare treats and new surprises.

The morning of the third day begins with a peculiar donation. All those bride's brothers, who acted during the three dancing evenings as masters of ceremony, collectively present several loads of sugar cane and a few baskets of bananas to the young couple. Nowadays plates of dates may be presented instead. In the evening, all the girl-relatives of the groom drop in, each with a basket of biscuits fried in butter or oil, the more distant relatives contenting themselves with the simple present of a gourd of soft drink made of sugar and orange juice. Everybody, over-stuffed, staggers into the room until finally the evening comes with its sprightly dancing and gay songs. Apart from an exquisitely prepared dish of food termed, "Lany Gabata Kaab," from the groom's family, nothing out of the routine occurs on the fourth day. The procession of dishes and plates does not stop here but continues with the dish called "Juma Sirkot" on the fifth day. A dish of sirri, a heavy circular bread steeped in honey, and a basket full of all kinds of seeds accompany the last dish on the sixth day. Those seeds in the old agrarian community symbolize the family's well wishing to the young couple to multiply and sprout as those seeds; the seeds are stored to be sown next season.

At noon, on the seventh day, messengers drop in to invite the groom to meals in his relatives' houses. First, he visits the bride's parents where the mother presents him with a ring, and the father with a book or whatever he thinks appropriate. While the groom is thus roaming, a group of girls comes to the bride; they wash her, comb her hair, and put her in proper shape. The groom, in a colourful attire, trots with his friends to the various homes to which he has been invited, where he eats hurriedly, and receives some presents from his hosts. He dashes from house to house, jumping and singing on the way.

After finishing the rounds, the group comes back to the home once more. Late in the afternoon, ladies from amongst his relatives flock in with a hair-dresser. They encircle the groom, and as soon as the shaving begins they sing ritual songs.

The clean-shaven groom leaves the house to the ladies, and goes on a sojourn to a friend's house or to his parents' home. The number of ladies, elderly and young, increases, and the large group solemnly march from both families' homes into the new premises. It should be noted here that the bride never mixes with the young men but stays during the seven days in her dark private room, while the groom normally stays with his male guests in the outer room, and meets his wife only at meal times, during the night, and perhaps on one special occasion. Now both parties of ladies cooperate in bringing out the young girl from her sequestered room into the main room where they will dress her hair in a new way significant of her ladyship, and dub her a woman. Surrounded by her friends and her parents, the girl sits on a stool and bends to a hairdresser. As soon as the operation starts, the chorus begins to sing songs in accordance with the actions.

Now that she has acquired all the signs of a married lady, the bride has to leave behind all her manners of girlhood and prepare herself for the serious duty of raising a family of her own and of cooperating with her husband to render their lives happier and more harmonious.

On the eighth day the young husband assumes his work, and the wife begins to look after her house. Both families, now that they have wedded their children, give them relative freedom and leave them on their own, but not completely. The boy's mother provides them for at least a year with their food, thus affording more leisure to the young wife to devote to the weaving of baskets for her house. The continuous aid of the parents in all the new phases of life ends with the birth of the first child. As soon as the wife advances in pregnancy, her family invites her for a visit in their house to help her in wading through those unaccustomed painful processes of giving birth. The young mother lives for about forty days after the delivery with her family, while the young father reverts to the solitude of celibacy once more in his house. The young family already increased by one gets accustomed to its new life; cooperation goes a step further, and their independence becomes almost complete. The boy's family provides the wife with all the utensils for cooking and leave her on her own. In addition to her taking the helm of her family, the young mother begins to cooperate with her husband in gaining their livelihood.

While the peasant husband takes care of the muscular work on the farm, the wife participates in converting their product into cash at the market every morning. In this way they achieve happiness and mutual confidence in dividing the labour between them. Similarly at the harvest of the corn, the wife prepares food and drink for the team of harvesters and winners. Thus the young couple go on sharing the tears and smiles of life, and contributing to the propagation of the Harrari race.

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