

The Rich Tapestry of Traditional Afar Matrimonial Rites in Eritrea



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Eritrea is home to nine ethnic groups, each contributing to the richness of the country's diverse heritage. Among these is the Afar ethnic group, primarily inhabiting the southern shores of the Red Sea. This ethnic group, with its own language and customs, thrives on fishing, livestock rearing, and trade and is renowned for its mesmerizing traditional dances, stirring battle songs, and the 'jile' – a distinctive curved knife carried by men. The culture is a captivating blend of the ancient and the modern, the terrestrial and the maritime. This article will delve into the intricate rituals and traditions of Afar matrimonial arrangements in the past, painting a vivid picture of practices, from engagement to marriage, and even through to divorce.

As it is broadly the case with the other ethnic communities in Eritrea, betrothal within the Afar community is steeped in tradition. Although the norms and rituals are changing with modernization and the enactment of new national laws on gender equality, parents indeed played a pivotal role in the traditional societies in Eritrea in the selection of potential partners for their children. Especially significant in traditional Afar community is the groom's mother, who handpicks a selection of suitable women she deems compatible with her son. The future groom then makes the final choice from this pool of prospective brides.

Following the groom's selection, the proposal ritual commences. A middleman or an elder carries the marriage proposal from the man to the prospective bride's father. Initially, the father sends them away, saying that he needs to consult with his kinsmen and the elders before he makes a decision. Only after this familial consultation does he convey his response to the groom's emissaries. Upon receiving an affirmative response, the date of engagement is set.



At the engagement gathering, the mediator, representing the groom's side, presents the conditions set by the bride's family. The bride's family typically requests (seven) cattle, each bearing a symbolic name and assigned to a specific member of the bride's family or relatives. The bride's family also receives additional gifts, such as traditional food items and money. The engagement ceremony is characterized by grand feasts prepared by the bride's family, ending with an agreement on a suitable wedding date.

Afar wedding rituals bear much similarity with that of the Saho ethnic group, especially the Saho Hidro ceremony. Guests bestow on the bride's family gifts that include coffee, butter, sugar, and both raw and cooked rice. The bride receives an array of gifts, including dresses, shoes, gold jewelry, perfumes, and clothing for her mother.

On the wedding day, the groom, garbed in white, carries a rod symbolizing his transition into manhood. His groomsmen brandish jiles and wear crimson fabric

headbands. The bride's family welcomes them, singing songs and cheering, and having tied a white fabric on their foreheads. The wedding festivities extend into the night, punctuated by traditional plays, dances, and a grand feast.

The wedding concludes with a unique custom known as 'offering to the ladies,' where the groom's family requests the bride's family's permission to take the bride away. This practice ends with the groom's family promising to take care of the bride. The traditional Afar wedding ceremony takes place at a mosque, and it is followed by a communal feast.



The Afar matrimonial journey doesn't end on the wedding day. It includes establishment of a honeymoon home called a'd aa'ri, around the bride's family house. The bride remains with her family until the birth of the first child, maintaining a strong bond with her maternal household. (There were variations of this traditional ritual in other Eritrean ethnic communities too). The newlyweds are then welcomed into the groom's family with a grand party called 'aa'ri mawa', celebrating their union.

In the Afar tradition, the bride price or 'mehar' was typically quite hefty, demanding a substantial commitment from the groom's family. This high price can vary across different regions.

The Afar community had also established specific procedures for divorce. Customarily, the bride's family gives the bridal money back to the groom's family in the event of a divorce.

The traditional matrimonial rules of the Afar ethnic group are a mirror reflecting the intricate social fabric of the community. They symbolize the interconnectedness of families, the important role of women in matrimonial proceedings, and the deep respect for customs passed down through generations.

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