

Blin dances and songs

By the Blin Language Forum

The following Blin dances are performed at different occasions and events depending upon the occasion, relevance to the main event or the aim for which they are performed.

The following seven genres, or types of dances, are played, variously, in any event or occasion in a Blin community. Which of these are also played in other Eritrean communities is not dealt with in this entry, although this is an important dimension of studying about Eritrean dances. The following list is ordered according to the usage pattern in a typical occasion, i.e., often Sisiit (ish-kish) is the opening genre, followed by the others in the list. But this does not mean that all seven types are played at any one time, occasion, or serially ordered manner.

Sisiit (ish-kish)

Golia

Wessomia (Wad Somia)

Shelil dance

Beredg

Alelele (welelewo)

Chefera

Although these genres are described as dances, due to the songs associating them, the lyrics, the sound, and the body movements, all these make them to be characterized as *theatrical performances*. None of the dances described below can be played without moving the body in one or another direction, clapping of hands, with intensity sometimes, and often an active audience commenting or reacting to the performances, with appreciation, comprehension or other evaluative behavior. This means that the body constitutes part of the musical instruments used to play any of the dances, and each player or actor follows a certain common pattern that allows features particular to each dancer or performer. Thus, the dancers have also an artistic skill. Consequently, the use of the whole body in performing these *theatrical and artistic performances*, there may be gender implications as the body is moved often differently depending upon whether one is a male or a female. As important this aspect might be for gender studies, however, it is not dealt within this introductory description of Blin dances and songs. As alluded above, the duration, intensity of performance, and use of any musical instruments, such as the drum, may vary according to the players and audiences. Below we have described four important aspects of each genre or dance type.

What is it, and how is it danced?

Who plays it?

When and under what conditions is it played?

Which musical instruments are used?

Sisiit (ish-kish)

Sisiit is the most popular dance among the Blin community. It is conducted in anti-clockwise movement in a circle of both males and females, with females playing the *Kelebura* (Kelebura, drum)) and males often striking two sticks against each other (if available) the sound of which combine with the rhythmic movement and lyrics (*wetter*). Songs are sung in two groups, one group leading and the other following the suit, until the current lyric is changed. A lyric is often changed after a longer movement is followed by a shortened one, usually three times. During the shortened movement, the circular movement is replaced by pairs facing each other, appearing as if one encircles the other, and at times lowering down the body or their knees, and hastening the body movements in unison with the drum beats. Often the pairs face each other in a manner that does not lead direct to eye-to-eye contact, pretending that they do not imitate each other and yet coordinating each other's patterned movement. The main focus is on the performance and the sound, with assumed audience watching them. Although direct eye contact is not the main focus, the pair may look at each other for a short period of time, and then change. But this description is too simplistic for generalization, because the artistic performance may also include the extent to which the paired dancers are acquainted to each other. From their experience, any two dancers during the short, rhythmic movement may establish specific dancing skills.

Any lyric (*wetter*) is initiated by one of the dancers while the rest follows him or her. The two singing groups moving in the circle sing once a time, while the other half or equivalent is silent and then repeat after the other group ends singing. There are two speed movements, slow and heated. During the slow movement, the whole song is sung and the movements get less slow, and only the last half of the lyric is repeated on turn by the two groups. During the hastened moment, the movement is shortened, each dancer turning to the other beside him or her, and encircling each other, synchronizing their movements and the songs, with the *Kelebura* (drum)) and the *ish-kish* sound, the mouthpiece (*fam-fam*), and sound of the two sticks played by boys who strike against each other in rhythmic style.

Who can play it? All age groups can play *Sisiit* and it takes as much time as the dancers would like to play. Every dance occasion usually starts with *Sisiit*, followed often by *Golia* (see below) and *Wessomia* (or Wad Somia). In a typical festive occasion, young men and women may stay dancing *Sisiit* for almost half of a night, a day or any other time period. Most often, female elders do not participate in youngsters' *Sisiit* due to two reasons: *Sisiit* is said to have been diffused widely only for the last 60 to 70 years and most elders may not play it as enthusiastically as the younger generations. The classical Blin dance is *Golia*, and it was *Golia* that was prevalent until the 1950s, since memorial times in Blin Society. The other reason may be that male and female adults (elders) have a different way of songs during important festive events and that is why *Sisiit* is supposed to be mainly a domain for youngsters, especially for unmarried boys and girls for whom *Sisiit* constitutes a formal conversation of what is going on amongst them, in their social surroundings, or elsewhere. Adult male elders instead sing what is called *Awle* during weddings, while adult female elders often play women's *Sisiit* (*ekwina-Sisiit*). Moreover, female elders have the right to play their own drum (*Kelebura*) even if it is often youngsters who own it. Female married women playing ground should, however, be inside a

house during wedding occasions; adult males may also join them especially those cohorts from a previous generation who had played as youngsters together.

Sisiit is played in all festive occasions and events, such as the Christmas, the whole week or two following the Easter Sunday, the first new year of the Julian calendar, combined with *qdus yohanns* feast (*yaxeni*) in September 10, during weddings, honeymoon week, etc. In general, *Sisiit* is played during religious, cultural, and political and other social events marking the importance of the event. The *meanings* of the *lyrics* may also depend upon the purpose of the event. In ordinary, cultural events, the meaning may be relating to individual, group or societal conduct, often commenting, criticizing, praising or appreciating behavior as bad or good, right or wrong, and most often suggesting for corrective measures, or what has to be done in the future. The norms and values of the community are underlined as the accepted patterns that all people, especially the youngsters should follow. Both *Golia* and *Sisiit* are supposed to be 'schools' in themselves, as far as they constitute socialization of youngsters into the social fabric of the community, and also spreading the news of what is going on within or outside the particular community, including comments on the ongoing political, religious, or any other events. Most of the lyrics take methodical or even symbolic connotations whose meaning can only be understood within the context in which the lyric is being said and the dance is being played. Adult women may often repeat old day's lyrics particular to their youth times, or may repeat what the youngsters are singing for the occasion. The most traditional lyrics are said by adult women while adult males may often withdraw to their due elderly domain of *Awle* or simply find themselves where they should during the formal occasion, which is in the festivity locality, also called the *das*.

The paramount dancing instrument is the ever-existing *Kelembura* (the drum) in all dance types and genres among the Blin. In *Sisiit*, females have the prerogative to play the *Kelembura* as other females clap their hands. Boys often beat two sticks against each other in a rhythmic sound in unison with the drum, the song and the clapping of the hands. Even those who stay in the circle but are not moving along the inner anti-clockwise movements are expected to participate by singing and clapping their hands in unison.

Golia (welila, with Hoy verses interjected)

The classical dance genre for which the Blin people have been known since time immemorial is called *Golia*, sometimes also extended as *Golia welila*. In most cases, singers insert newly formulated poems referring to past, present, or indicated in the future event, happening, and news. Among those people who practice *Golia*, it is considered to be a school in itself, due to the relevance of the lyrics, diffusion of new ideas, news, comments on individual, group, village or societal behavior. Moral, political, religious or cultural behavior are all liable for criticism, evaluative comment, to be either rejected, joked upon, endorsed, or just for fun, as *Golia* is rightly considered to be a school in itself. The short, two versions *Hoy* inserted during *Golia* are said while the audience pays attention by not singing until the *Hoy* is said. *Hoy* singer points out his stick towards the inner point of the circle for anticipated attention. The *Kelembura* (drum) stops, the clapping of hands also silences for the time being, and once the *Hoy* is said, the original lyric is resumed until another a *Hoy* singer responds in similar manner. Once the topic has been conversed upon,

consumed, commented on, it may be rejected, endorsed or avoided, a singer may initiate a new Hoy with a differing or relating topic, and the dancers may dance the whole night, day of any duration of time, as it is difficult to end such an engaging conversation joining relevance and fun, youth behavior and effective socialization, etc. The initiator of *Hoy* may invite for a conversation on a particular topic, and people repeatedly converse with each other skillfully. Not all *Golia* participants, however, may enjoy Hoy, as sometime it may lead to uncomfortable anticipated or unanticipated consequences if not ill feelings; However, *Golia* is a such the paramount, formal conversation on event and people sing about everything that pertains to be relevant or educative.

While dancers move anti-clockwise in Sisiit, they do not move in any direction in *Golia*. Instead, they stand in the circle and move their bodies to each side, synchronizing their moves with the rhythmic beats of the drum, with the corresponding clapping of hands, and the song. In the meantime, males put one of their hands on a female's shoulder as if trying to encourage her to sing more and better. A half of the circle jumps up, boys holding their sticks, with the pointed or sharpened end of the stick directed to the sky. Once they have jumped upwards for a couple of minutes, the other half-circle takes over, jumps upwards, and the performance continues until the dancers feel satisfied with the lyric (*wetter*), the beating of the drum, and the synchronization of all the sound. Finally, a male singer initiates a new lyric with a new sound (*wetter*). The audience attends to the new singer or initiator as he sings twice and they follow suit each time he says it. After he sings the third time, the initiator says the lyric in full range, with words taking a particular meaning. If the audience is satisfied with the new version, then the girls start playing the drum and the whole process resumes, until all have moved three jumps each. It is a very rhythmic performance. The participants may converse on a particular topic by communicating through what is called Hoy in which one singer interrupts the drum and *Golia* and says two-versed poem in anticipation for responses from the concerned audiences. His initiation may be accepted or rejected depending upon the participant's expectation of the importance of the entailed meaning conveyed by the original singer of theory. They may also agree not to say the Hoy, and thus continue just playing *Golia*. Thus, *Golia* may be danced without saying any *Hoy* verses. While Hoy was the standard previously, nowadays people have started interpreting the meaning as provocative or instilling hate, and thus it often is avoided. Hoy verses when taken seriously may of course become provocative and may instigate quarrel among the participants or another group. Consequently, the church and the political leaders were not in favor of *Golia* altogether since the 1950s albeit the youngster's insistence that *Golia* was merely the only entertaining moment of youth age.

It is mainly young, unmarried adults who are the 'owners' of *Golia*, although male elders may also participate in it. There is an age-significant divide on *Golia*, because elder's domain is at home or the formal festivity locality (*das*) where they sing *Awle* instead. Married females are excluded from participating in the youngsters' domain of *Golia*. However, adult married women may play *Golia* inside a house during weddings or other important events. But no male can put his hand on their shoulder as the body of married women belongs only to the husband. If not for special difficulty, or occasion, it is the young, unmarried (girls) who have the prerogative to play the drum, each girl playing one drum in a synchronized manner with the other

drummers who stay in a circle, facing each other, while the boys stay behind them slightly touching the girls' shoulder. In case the girl falls or misses her pattern of bodily movement, it is the boy who should keep in watch lest he would be rebuked as unfit for playing Golia and holding the girl's shoulder in the future. The beats in playing the drum in Golia are quite different from that in *Sisiit*. The girls carry the drum on their shoulder, holding it with stripes of rope on each side of the drum and hanging it often on her right side even if left-handed ladies may carry it to their right.

When to play Golia? Golia is played in any important event as far as skilled players and drumming females are willing to play it. However, in seasonal, annually conducted Golia, it is mainly played during the night when youngsters want to spend their leisure time together, after *Sisiit*. Most often they play Golia outside the home or village so that older people are not disturbed (or unduly attracted) by it. Most often elders are a bit reluctant to Golia since the 1950s when some political leaders wrongly considered it to be the cause of illiteracy. However, the real reason behind the latter was lack of schools and right political situation and lack of tranquility. On the other hand, religious leaders also tried to forbid Golia as if it were the cause for promiscuity among youngsters. However, both assumptions were not substantiated and youngsters still play Golia with ever more vigor and intensity. Yet, in post liberation Eritrea, the prevalence of schooling and the Sawa recruitment of youngsters have somehow diminished the participation level of youngsters in every day Golia relative to the level their predecessors did. Finally, since mid 1990s Golia has even been recorded in DVDs, CDs and cassettes for the readily solidaristic market. When Golia and *Sisiit* were recorded for the market since mid-1990s, buyers paid above the market price in order to encourage the newly emerging Blin singers and musicians.

Golia is played using the drum which is played by the girls. Sticks are not stricken against each other as in *Sisiit*. Those girls who for the time being do not play the Kelembura (drum) may clap their hands in unison with rhythms of the Kelembura (drum), the lyrics, and the whistling of the lips by boys as an encouragement and accelerating the sideways movements. In contrast to *Sisiit*, the *fam-fam* is not used in Golia

Wessomia or Wad Somia

Wessomia dance is typically performed by boys who move to and fro in front of the sitting girls who play the drum in a different beat compared to Golia and *Sisiit*. The singing girls may be encouraging, appreciating, rebuking or even discouraging, if not directly insulting the boys. The girl's have a crucial role in the intensity by which *Wessomia* is played. Once encouraged, the boys may intensify their jumping steps in unison towards the girls, in a horizontal line, and once they are so close to the girls, they may show bow or lower their bodies as a sign of bravery, and by moving their stick up and down, forward and backward. *Wessomia* signifies an evaluative conversation between girls and boys in the sense that the behavior of an individual or group male behavior is at stake. Most often it is an age group that may be on focus. After playing *Sisiit* and Golia, respectively, or in as reverse order, *Wessomia* is often played in all important occasions but from our experiences we have never seen *Wessomia* that starts any dance event.

Wessomia is played under all festive vents, weddings, and nightly entertainment occasions or even at any leisurely time of the young. Instruments used are the Kelebura (drum) as played by girls, the boys holding their sticks with the sharp edge pointed towards the sky, and the clapping of hands by other girls sitting to the right and to the left of the drummers – those who are not playing the Kelebura (drum) at the moment. The Kelebura (drum), boys sticks and clapping of hands. But really, no other instrument is crucial other than the Kelebura (drum) and the jumping boys who may play Wessomia either by moving in a circle and tramping down on the ground by their either of their legs in unison, or forming a parallel line in front of the girls, and other jumping upwards in the climax of the play, before the next line of boys takes over.

Shelil dance

A special type of dance where females dance by swaying their coiled, branded, and often well-oiled hair in public. This genre in fact is a variation of the common Sisiit. Lyrics associated with this type of dance consist of the aesthete character of the female body and the hairstyle, appreciative, as such, of the female sex. The lyrics act mean encouragement, praise and the engaging dance, and with the intensity of the dance and the singing of the verses at the moment, the performance accelerates until everybody get a bit tired and, eventually, it is followed by another Shelil dance or a different genre of dance. The dancing females may either dance alone, in groups, taking turns. The dancers turn their head and the hair to the right and to the left side in unison with the song, the Kelebura (drum) and the clapping of hands. A lead singer may say newly versed poems in praise of the dances, or may repeat already available poems common in the tradition of that particular community. This is common among the Blin and the Sahel Tigre speakers. Usually several Shelil players may perform simultaneously. Opening the hairstyle publicly is an appropriate occasion for adult ladies to express their emotional feelings and show their particular skills, thus owning these domains as theirs. It is a taboo for males to perform such skilled Shelil dance because of the hairstyle as well as the taken for granted assumption that is particular to females. It may be contrasted to Beredg and Wessomia which are mainly performed by adult males even if the females also are crucial participants as they play the Kelebura (drum), and ululate in Beredg. Ululating is common in Wessomia, as it is typically considered to be a festive expression of married women to express their joy and welcoming of a feast. Young, unmarried ladies are excused if they are not able to ululate.

In a wedding ceremony, especially of the bride-groom, his sisters and closer relatives females are expected to express their joy and participative mood by dancing Shelil, especially when the wedding group (Kxan) are entering the boy's family home with the bride,. Eventually, other female dancers also join the relatives, and the dance may stay so long as the males keep playing Beredg, to resume later in the night dance called *ferwenter* or *kondi*. When a relative male is getting married, the sisters and close relatives of the bride groom are expected to show their joy by welcoming the wedding group bringing the bride from her parents to the boy's family home. Mainly bride part girls in welcoming the boy's wedding party players who come to girl's home to bring her. Adults, mainly married women can also participate; seldom adult elders. Adult women with special hair styles and young girls also play the Shelil in all festive occasions, especially during weddings when relatives of the newly

wedding partners are expected to express their joy, participation and acknowledgement of the wedding event. The ever-present drum, the use of swaying of the oiled, well-prepared hair, and often the sound of the sticks stricken against each other, are the most common in this type of Sisiit – all in unison with the rhythmic beats and sounds.

Beredg

While Shelil is typically an adult female performance dance in the public, Beredg can be considered as the corresponding dance for adult males, both performed in festive occasion. Both Beredg and Shelil may be used simultaneously depending upon the occasion and duration. In a typical Blin wedding especially in the countryside, a wedding ceremony constitutes the paramount occasion in which Beredg and Shelil can be jointly performed in adjacent locations for men and women. The Beredg dancing men are welcomed by females singing good wishing songs; often the younger, unmarried women await a couple of kilometers some kilometers away from the bridegroom's family home, while married women dance the Shelil in a newly constructed home-sake (*Eblura* or *Itarora*). In the meantime, the males play the Beredg and other adult women accept them ululating and clapping their hands. Adult men, who have not accompanied the bringing of the bride from her home village, sit down as the former perform Beredg, the young girls sing sisiit type play, and the adult women play the Shellil. The reason that the rest of the wedding guests sit down and watch the playing parties is a symbol for stability and tranquility for the newlywed couple. Children and other youngsters of course are free from any obligation or duties during such a public festivity. But they have also the right to participate in the ceremony according to their own conditions, which means that young children are expected to deliver any gifts for the wedding ceremony even if they may be offered free meals.

Alelele welelewo

This genre is typical in wedding ceremonious. When the wedding party members (kxan) arrive the bride's family village, young ladies and adults women accept them paying singing wedding songs, but soon shift to singing *Alelele welelewo* which is aimed at evaluating the behavior of the boy, his attitude to the would-be in-laws, his friends or other extended family members, or neighbors, and the villagers where he comes from. Everything that pertains to the expected, traditional care-taking of assumed due to the girl's family are assessed, in view showing their satisfaction, dissatisfaction missing expected actions, etc. The boys who came to fetch the bride then try to defend the bridegroom, or his family, as well as other parties who become just the targets of that type of song. If the Allele welelewo singing women and the girl's praise, the boys also respond praising them also, and the turn taking continues until the dance is changed into Sissies, eventually also to change to Golia, Wessomia, and other wedding songs pertinent to that event