

Traditional religious customs in Bilin Society: the 'Candle Mael' and the 'Covenant'

ጠ ር ና ፊ ሓ ሳ ብ

ብሔረ - ሰብ ብሌን ባህሉን ቋንቋኑን ዚሓለወ ኅብረተ-ሰብ ከም ምዃኑ መጠን በብጊዜኡን ዙነታቱን ዚተፈላለዩ ልማዳትን ባህላዊ ሥርዓታትን የዘውትር = ኣብዚ ጽሑፍን ዘክል ሥርዓታት ወይ ባህላዊ ልማዳት ብሓጺሩ ተገሊጾም ኣለዉ ። ግን እንከ መእስን ብከመይን ከምዚተመሥረቱን ብርግጽ ንምፍላጥ እሺጋሪ እኳ እንተኾነ ገሊጻቶም ሽማግሌታት ብሌንን ሊቃውንቲ ታሪኽን ከም ዚኣ ምንም እንተደለ ኮይኑ፣ እዞም ኣብዚ ጽሑፍን ተገሊጾም ዚርከቡ ክልተ ሥርዓታት፣ ኦርቶዶክሳዊት ቤተ ክርስቲያን ኣብ ምድረ በጉስ ክትዝሕትልን ክትደክምን ኣብ ዝተረኸበትሉ እዋናት ማለት ካብ መበል 16 ክሳብ መበል 18 ክፍለ ዘመናት ኣቢሎም ክዝውተሩ ከምዚጀመሩ ይእመን ።

ኣብ መጀመሪያ ክፍሊ ጽሑፍና ብዛዕባ ሥርዓት ኣበዓዕላ ፍልሰታ ለማርያም (16 ነሓስ) ተገሊጹ ይርከብ ። እዚ ሥርዓት'ዚ "ናይ ማርያም ቀንዲል" ወይ ከዓ "መኣዲ ማርያም" ብዚብሃል ሥርዓት ዚፍለጥ ኢዩ ። ኣብ በጉስ ቅዳሴ ዚቐድሱ ካህናት ምስ ተሳእኑ፣ ንፍልሰታ ማርያም ኬብዕሉ ቢሎም ሽማግሌታት (ዓበይቲ) ብሔረ - ሰብ ብሌን ዚጀመርዎ ልማድ ኢዩ ይበሃል ። ክሳብ ሕጂውን እንተኾነ፣ ሓድሓደ ቦታታት በጉስ ገዲፍኪ፣ ብዓቢይ ስምዒትን ምስንዳውን ዚግበር ኣከባብራ ኢዩ ። ካህናት ምስተሳእኑ፣ ንቅዳሴ ኪትክእ ተባሂሉ ዚተጀመረ ሥርዓት፣ ሎሚውን ከም ብሓድሽ ክርስትና ኣብ ዚግዕበለሉ ጊዜ፣ ማለት ካብ መበል 19 ክፍለ ዘመን ጀሚሩ፣ ምስ ቅዳሴ ኪዝውተር ይርከብ ኣሉ ። ኣቦታቶም ክርስቲያን ዚነበሩ፣ ሎሚ ግን ኣሰላም ከይተረፉ ዚፍጽምዎ ሥርዓት ኢዩ ።

ኣብ 2ይ ክፍሊ ጽሑፍና ተገሊጹ ዘሎ ብዛዕባ ሥርዓተ ቃል ኪዳን እንኪኸውን፣ ኣጀማምራኡ ከምቲ ናይ ቀዳማይ እኳ እንተኾነ፣ ካህናት ኣብ ምድረ በጉስ ምስ ተሳእኑ፣ ንምስጢረ ተክሊል (ቃል ኪዳን) ተኪኡ ኪፍጸም ዚተጀመረ ኢዩ ይበሃል ። ብመዓልቲ ሕፃ ክልቲኦም ቤተሰብ፣ ማለት እንዳ ወድን እንዳ ዓልን ብስም እግዚአብሔር "ቃል" ዚተኣታተውሉን ተኣማንነቶምን ውዕሎምን ዚረጋግ ጽሑን ሥርዓት ኢዩ ። ብፍላይ ከዓ ከምቲ ኣብ ምስጢረ ተክሊል ካህን ነቶም ሕጹያት "ኪዳንዶ ይኹንኩም" ዚብሉ ቃላት ዚመሳሰል፣ ብኸልቲኦም ቤተ ሰብ "ኪዳንዶ ይኹንልና" "ብስም እግ ዚአብሔር ትቐበሉና" ዚበሃል ኣተሓሳስባን ውሳኔን ዚገልጽ ሥርዓት ምዃኑ ኢዩ ። እዚ ሥርዓት'ዚ ሎሚውን ምስጢረ ተክሊል መሠረት ክርስቲያናዊ መልክዑ ጊዙ ኣብ ዚዝውተረሉ ጊዜ ከይተረፈ፣ ብኹሎም ኣባላት ብሔረ - ሰብ ብሌን ይዝውተር ኣሉ ። ኣሰላምን ክርስቲያንን ብሓደ የዘውትርዎ ።

ናይ'ዚ ጽሑፍ'ዚ ዕላማ፣ ጠቐምን ኣድላይነትን ባህላውን ጽናሕን ልማዳት ብሔረ - ሰብ ብሌን ንምሕታት ዘይኮነስ፣ ኅብረተ - ሰብ ብሌን ካብ ጽናሕን ባህላውን ሕይወት፣ ናብ ዘመናዊ ሥልጣኔን ምምሕያሽን ኣብ ዚሰግረሉ እዋናት፣ ነቲ ባህላውን ልማዳቱን ብከመይ ዚኣመሰል መጽናዕትን ትሕ ዝቶን ኪጀምሮ ከምዚግባእ ንምግንዛብ ዚኣክል ኢዩ ።

OBJECTIVE : There are some Bilin socio - cultural practices and customs strongly held and celebrated by the people to this day. Such practices sometimes are challenges to both Non - Bilin religious leaders, whether these are Christian or Moslem Sheiks, and sociologists, although these may have little to do with secular administrative policies. Nowadays, some such practices are losing ground and are becoming of less significance even to

a 'Bilina' himself. The objective of this paper therefore is to describe briefly how the people perform and interpret these customs and what value they attach to them especially if one is to consider the context within which they are performed, both religiously and culturally .

Two of the most practised customs are therefore presented in this paper .

METHODOLOGY: Since bibliographical material on Bilin social and religious life is rather scanty, I have based myself on interviews with several Bilin elders both at Asmara and in the Keren area. The article therefore is rather descriptive. The scope of the study then is not intensive, and I consider this to be merely a starting point for further study on the field especially by local students.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION:

Although it is difficult to trace the exact historical origins of the prevailing socio-cultural practices of the Bilin, the people strongly believe that most of the customs I am concerned within this article had started when the position of the Orthodox Church was weakened as a result of the disturbed situation of the country starting from the sixteen century onwards. Once cut off from the mainland Church, the Bilin people were supposed to fill the gap by developing certain quasi-religious customs which replaced the original Christian rites with the office of the priest itself gradually taken up by the elders. (1) This was especially true for those activities having to do with marriage contract and feasts, cults which in themselves require formal and solemn performance. First, the so-called 'Candle Meal' feast, the feast of the Virgin Mary, will be presented, followed by the second part of the paper, 'the Covenant' (መስከረም).

The Candle Meal: (ካላ-ጊዜ ስላሳ), this is commonly known as the 'Meal of Mary'. (2) The feast of Mary Assumption() is celebrated in the

whole country on the 16th of Nehassie (22nd August). Ordinarily, it is known as 'Maria' (ማሪያ). In Bogos it is the most celebrated as well as the most culturally assimilated feast. Enthusiastically and fervently celebrated, the ceremony lasts for two and a half days; the eve (girg-gef = ግርግ-ገፍ), the actual day, (mariamr girga = ግርግ-ገርግ ግርግ) and the next day (Jebba = ጆበባ). As usual, work and any other major undertaking is discontinued during these days. On the day of Mary (mariamrka), the 'Meal' is formally prepared by all concerned families, (3) the central rite being the holding of the candles (Tixw dna) by all male participants. The central cult, the holding of candles, is led by the head of the family, the candles being made of strips of cloth dipped into butter. The meal (poridge) is made from selected seeds, which are usually stored for this purpose on the harvest time.

When 'meal' is ready, an elder man leads the prayer saying "Mary You come and we stay". (4) The family head, the father or the elder son, then prepares the candles, lights them and passes them to the others one by one to hold or just touch them, babies included.

Each one holding the candle whispers 'Mary', signifying that it is for the glory and praise of Mary that the candles are held and the fire lit. Thus, much value is attached not to the eating of the poridge as such but to candle holding as described above. Still, when the people were left on their own, this signified the Christian Mass, with the elder men acting as the main celebrant and all the others

following suit. Exactly when and how this started to be used in place of the mass is not yet clear and it needs further research. Even after the re-introduction of Christianity (Catholicism) in the nineteenth century in Bogos, the strength of the cult still continued to be felt in the heart and mind of many Bilin men. Moreover, Bilin Moslems whose grandfathers once celebrated the feast of Mary are still celebrating it, of course with some exceptions. Christians and Moslems celebrating the same traditional Christian cult together would seem ridiculous especially if one considers the historic conflict between both adherents of these religions in the other parts of the country. For the Bilin even today, however, this is more an expression of their brotherhood and cohesiveness than a point of difference. (5)

The religious significance of this cult now is more over whelmed by the Mass and, in any case, it is still celebrated fervently and considered perhaps as complementary to it; for the ordinary men it is more than that, especially as one tries to analyze the context within which it is held, that is, families claiming the same pedigree and ethnic feelings.

The Covenant: When modern couples decide to marry, they affirm their feelings about each other and their intentions to continue a personal relationship. But marriage is more than a personal commitment. It is also a contract that creates a new legal status. Although a marriage is entered into by mutual agreement, it differs from the ordinary business contracts in that the partners cannot end it by

mutual consent just because they want to and also they do not decide what their legal rights and duties should be (6).

Whether the actual process for family formation is carried by the couples themselves or by other concerned parties, the legal aspect will always be there. In most African societies, marriage therefore is more a concern of the two families from the start than left to the individuals. The involvement of the latter is usually minimal and nominal. By family here is meant the extended family. (7) Any contract (agreement) is one between the two families. Add to this the role of the Church as a repository of the faith and sacramental institutions. (8) In history there have been times (and are still) when the role of religious institutions, including the Church, declined the such circumstances, the society tries to adjust and respond to the rather uncertain situation by means of cults and procedures supposed to meet the needs which once were met by these weakened rites situation. The matrimonial rite was one of the most affected ones when Christianity declined in Bogos during the 16th to 18th centuries. Instead, however, the people developed the so-called 'Entering into the covenant' (Meacot tuna = መእ ገብ ቲና). (9) The central rite here is the replacement of Matrimony with the above mentioned cult, of course not between the two individuals but between the families (ixriskow = እኸርሰከው).

After setting everything pertaining to the engagement agreement (gewra), the two families set a particular date on which to meet

and officially conduct the contract in the absence, but usually in the knowledge, of the prospective couples. As the boy's family (male) arrive at the courtyard (denaab) of the girl's home, both groups sit around forming a circular meeting in the open air. A neutral elder leads the prayer and the middle man (mengora) introduces the requirements, from the respective parties (the so-called Simey). It is then high time for the performance of the solemn and 'sacred' custom of entering into the contract, in the name of God (Meakot tuna). Both families swear once and for all to abide by the contract. The leading, neutral, elder asks three times whether both parties are really ready to adhere strictly to the commitment officially expressed before all the present on that occasion.

The general formula runs as follows : (10)

y = girl's name

X = boy's name

A = Asking the girl's family :
do You give this y to x ?

All girl's family respond :
Yes, We do give her (for him).

B = Asking boy's family :
Do you receive this y for x

All boy's family respond :
Yes, We do receive her (for him).

C = Asking again girl's family :
May this be for you as
God's covenant (meakot)
that you have given him
this y ?

All girl's family respond :
Yes, let this be for us as

God's covenant that we
have given him this y.

D = Asking again boy's family :
May this be for you as
God's covenant that you
have received her (for
him) ?

All boy's family respond :
Yes, let this be as God's
covenant for us that we
have received her (for
him).

All four questions and answers are repeated three times to show the seriousness of the contract. In the mean time all participants also touch the ground by their hands symbolizing the determination and good wish they may have for the agreement to be binding and lasting for ever. (11).

The seriousness of this practice is comparable to the Christian matrimonial formula only that in the former the central celebrants are all lay individuals while in the latter case a priest is required if the Matrimony is to be sacred. Even then a contract entered into in the Name of God would not be seen easily as the Name of God is much more greater than His messenger ! In all likelihood the people believe that this formula replaced the Christian one when the messengers were not able to perform their duties either as a result of their non-existence or as a matter of non-accessibility. (12) And yet at no cost could a breach of this contract be tolerated. There developed serious consequences to any such intended or realized breaches. The cost was as high as killing the brother or father of the girl if the breach happens from

her part. It is not apparent what the consequences were if that was from the boy's part. Killing of close relatives of the girl in case of deviation from the covenant, was then expected by the concerned party; may be that was the only possible alternative open to the people of those times! This bloody consequence of the breach was only to be discontinued by the force of the Italians when it was replaced by the heavy return the girl's family should pay to the boy's family (so-called *teriq*). 13

The marriage agreement then was not finalised on the wedding day but on the engagement day, and even then by the respective families, which is still the practice. Simultaneously conducted with the Christian Matrimony or with the Muslim Sharia, it would only be strengthening of the former ones;

Conclusion: As described above the social and cultural significance of these customs indeed is great. What is of much interest to us is that both are being performed in the same way as they have been some time earlier. Again for how long time these will be held depends largely on the value as means of satisfactory channels both to the individual as well as the social needs of Bilin society. Consistency with Christian and Islamic ritual legacies would not, I believe be of much discussion as with the relevance of such practices when one professes a different interpersonal dimension in marriage and observance of traditional and long held quasi-religious customs. It all will depend on how effectively the Bilin society will be able to assimilate its traditional customs with

modern developments in the realm of legal as well as religious consciousness. Immediate change seems less likely; gradual reassessment and committed self appraisal are indispensable. Whatever changes may be desired in the customary and quasi-religious practices, however, need careful and considerate study so as not to throw the baby together with the bathwater.

Keflemariam Hamde

NOTES

- 1) Bashai Tekle Tinsew as interviewed by me on March 5th at Asmara, 1989. Also Temnewo Baryay holds the same thing, (Keren, Friday 9th 1989).

See also Kevin O'Mahoney. W.F. *The Ebulent phoenix: A history of the Vicariate of Abyssinia 1860-1881* II, p. 40.

2. Strictly speaking, 'the poridge of Mary'; it is by preparing poridge only that the feast is celebrated. Using other types of food such as 'injera' is not allowed. Perhaps, this may be due to the nature of the traditional dish of the people which is predominantly poridge, although this is merely a personal observation.
- 3) Excluding even those married male youngsters but not initiated (*shengelgew* = ቸገገልገው). Uninitiated Bilin youngsters remain *minors* even when they may be having families. Those who participate in this rite are also male members of the people whether they are young, initiated, uninitiated or married. Only females are excluded from the ceremony, eating whatever has remained but not holding the 'candle'.
- 4) 'Mariam, Intixa interdu, Yinka diwnu' (ግርያም እንቲካ እንተርዳ ይገኝ ዲውኑ).

- 5) Ato Temnewo Baryay and Bashai Tekle Tinsew. Also any one who happens to come across any Bilin surrounding where such practice is observed can witness this.
- 6) L. Broom and others: *Sociology, A Text with Adopted Readings*, Hareperand Row, New York. 1981, pp. 352-353.
- 7) More family units organized under one common ancestor and having common economic and or social life. Extended family is the most common in African societies in comparison to the Western-type, the nuclear family. See L. Broom, *Ibid*, p. 326.
- 8) For the relation between Bilin customary marital practices and the Christian doctrine therefore, see, the work of Abba Mebrahtu Tesfaghiorghis: *Il Matrimonio bileno; confronto tra la prassi matrimoniale e familiare bileno e la dottrina della Chiesa sul matrimonio e la famiglia*, Pontifica Studiorum Universitates, A.S. Thoma Aq., in Urve, Romae, 1983.
- 9) Kiflemariam Hamde, *Bilin Language Project: The origin and Development of Bilin*, sponsored by Institute of African studies, Asmara, University, Asmara, Ethiopia 1986, pp. 56.
See also Mebrahtu, Abba. *Ibid*. p. 32.
- 10) *Bilin Version*:
 - ሀ) አንቂር ከውሲ : እናፍላነትቲ እናፍላንሲ እድ ኑኹመላ : አንቂር ከው የዋ ኡነዙንላ "
 - ለ) ቀረከውሲ : እናፍላነትቲ እናፍላንሲ አድነዙ መላ : ቀረከው : የዋ አድነዙንላ "
 - ሐ) አንቂርከውሲ : ጃር መእኩት አኸንግ እድ ነትላ : አንቂርከው : የዋ ጃር መእኩት አኸን " "
 - መ) ቀረከውሲ : ጃር መእኩት አኸንግ አድነትላ ቀረከው : የዋ ጃር መእኩት አኸን " ናውከ ብረስ ናንድ ጃኸፍ እንደዋ የነዙ (ሲተሲዙን)"
- 11) The holding (touching) of land signifies much more than this. May he is calling for the old Ethiopian "God of land" Ato Temnewo and Bashai Tecele, also Ato Jawed Berih has similar view, Keren, 1989.
- 12) The monasteries of Tsaada Imba (Inda Silassie) in the south of the

town of Keren and the monastery in Debre Sina are just adjacents to the locality of the Bilin people but it is not clear why the monks could not serve the people in Bogos during the times when the people needed their service. See also K. O'Mahoney, *Ibis*, page 41.

- 13) Teriq (compensation), the money and cattle which should be paid in double amounts according to the amounts the boy's family had given previously to the boy's family is said to have begun only during the time of Shiek Drar in the 1930's. Abba Woldeghiorghis (Halibmental) 1986, August as I was informed then).

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