

THE ROLE OF WOMAN IN BLIN TRADITION

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Blin tribe is one of the several Agow groups dispersed in a few isolated pockets in the Eritrean lowlands.

The Agow, once politically powerful and a dominant population in the northern highland plateau are now scattered in several enclaves.

The Blin are second known kushitic group, located in the Bogos area, in the Keren district in Eritrea. And as we know from history, they occupied this place by a succession of emigration. The earliest time of their emigration is believed to have been in the second half of the 10th century.

Although, the Blin are surrounded by non-Agow tribes on all sides, they still preserve their physiognomy and language. They share cultural traits with their neighbouring tribes, for example they took the caste system from the Naptab of the Beja of the 6th or 7th century, which in the 10th century was well established in the Beni-Amir and Tigre tribes. Due to this caste system the Blin started becoming the lords and serves.¹ Furthermore, they were influenced by other cultures and languages (especially today.)

Eventhough the Blin have been influenced strongly by other cultures, they still preserve a traditional culture which makes them distinct from other ethnic groups. Here I want to make an attempt to show the position of woman in Blin society from birth up to initiation time which is called "Bal-sot", before twenty years ago. Since

bibliographical materials on Blin social life are rather scarce, I have based myself more on primary sources which have been handed down by oral tradition to us through the elders.

The essay will be subdivided as follows:

1. Blin girl from birth to adolescence
 - A. Circumcision of a baby girl
 - B. The reason of girl's circumcision.
 - C. Girl's change of character
 - D. The role of a girl in traditional dance.
2. Engagement
 - I. The manner of looking for a girl.
 - II. mentioning the requirements (simey)
 - III. The covenant.
3. Metlu (the bride cattle)
4. Marriage and dowry.
5. The rite of initiation of a young bride.
6. Cultural restrictions for a woman.

1. BLIN DAUGHTER FROM BIRTH TO ADOLESCENCE.

The concept that woman is inferior to man is a common belief among the Blin nationality.

In the Blin areas there are some experts in traditional midwifery who help women over child birth. When the midwife arrives she immediately does a superficial diagnosis to assess the condition of the child. Once the baby is delivered the women ask her whether it is male or female. But this is

not revealed until the after-birth is discharged. After a while, if the baby is female the midwife gives a sign by striking the mat which encircled the traditional bed (Êrg) and saying "edgt edgtna" which means the baby is female. It is a figurative expression. In the past the women had been keeping silent but nowadays they ululate (አላላ ይብላ) whether it is female or male. If the baby is female they express their happiness ululating four times; three for the newly born child and one for our blessed virgin mary because they believe that she helps the woman to deliver safely.

While this process is at progress, the other women prepare a porridge. and they take a small porridge, dips it in a butter and they place it on the woman's palm, hips, cheeks, in her back and on the chest as well. This porridge is called 'Tukudix' which means burning porridge. In the mean time the gathered women, when they eat the porridge, ululate (êlal) four times if the baby is female and seven times if it is male. The seven times ululation for the latter is due to his paternal role which indicates men's superiority over women. The newly delivered mother is adorned with palm leaves, which is done as a sign of veneration of the Vivgin Mary. A bundle of palm leaves are always put near the mother; and she shakes them whenever a stranger enters her house or when a donkey brays. This is done in order to make the child accustomed to strange voices.

On the eighth day, two or more neighbouring women take all the palm leaves and the mother's and her child's clothes to a nearby river where they wash the clothes and throw the palm leaves there. The throwing of the palm leaves in the river indicates that they wish the mother's and her child's

prosperity. This ceremony is called "shiki." The mother does not leave her traditional bed for three weeks if the baby is female and a month if it is male. After these weeks she can walk around the house and putting on her ornaments. she starts to have smokebath and then she jumps over the fire embracing her baby and it has its hair cut for the first time.

A. CIRCUMCISION OF A BABY GIRL

Circumcision is the cutting off the internal labiae and clitories. It is difficult to know when and where circumcision started all over the world. But it is mostly believed that it was well established among Egyptians in 4000 B.C. or probably earlier.² It was common in North and east Africa and among the Arab tribes before the christian era. In Ethiopia the excision of the clitories was practiced among the Abyssinians, Agow, and Gaffat. Infibulation was also practiced among the Beja, Galla, Dankali, Somaly, Saho, mensaê and Bet Asgede who lived around Massawa.

Since the Blin ancestors are Agow, who had preserved their own culture and physiognomy for a long time, it is certain that they acquired circumcision from them. But since the Agow did not practice infibulation, which is the removal of the clitories, the whole labiae minora and majora and the stitching together of the two sides of the vulva, it seems that the Blin got it from the Beja and others.³

In most African tribes infibulation is performed immediately after circumcision. Only a small aperture (opening) is left for the discharge of urine and menstrual blood. At marriage the vulva is forcibly reopened by sexual intercourse with

her husband. Furthermore during parturition (child birth) it becomes necessary to perform surgical operations for safe deliverance. And often after child birth, infibulation is repeated several times; for example if the husband goes on a long journey.

In the Blin tradition baby girl is circumcised within twenty days after birth.

The operation is performed by an "expert" woman in the village. The excision of the clitories and infibulation are performed one after the other. After excising the clitories, they wound the labiae of the vagina with a blade and infibulat (unite) them leaving an aperture. And the baby is tied in three positions; from her buttocks to the front, her thighs and calves for about three days. Later this becomes very dangerous for the woman's health, because it is very painful and in some cases it results in death, especially at child birth time. During the period of pregnancy and particularly at labour time women often become emotionally and mentally disturbed due to the process of laceration which is the consequence of infibulation at early age. And every pregnant woman is aware of that kind of suffering she's going to endure.

In some areas infibulation is repeated after delivery which causes a bitter pain for weeks or even months due to a serious infection inside her sexual organ.⁵ This practice is imposed on and taken for granted by women. This is extremely awful practice which is operating in many tribes of our country, which must be abolished from our cultures. To put an end to this practice is too hard, for it is connected with the culture. However by educating the youth and making the people aware of its danger will be affective.

B. THE REASON OF GIRL'S CIRCUMCISION

1) Traditionally circumcision is thought to be an assistance for the girl to control her sexual feelings. It is difficult to accept this idea completely, although it could have some truth in it. The reason is that the scar left behind the cut could minimize her sexual feeling.

2) Circumcision is a must for a girl, because there is a belief that the girl won't become adult if she is not circumcised.

3) It is said that circumcision helps the bridegroom to know his bride's virginity. Traditionally the bridegroom, during the honeymoon goes to his uncles in order to be blessed in seven different houses of his relatives. After this long and exhaustive journey, his friends take him to a river where he takes bath and washes his clothes. In the afternoon, on the way back home, he reveals whether his bride was virgin or not. This is expressed in two ways: First if she is found to be a virgin, he enters home dancing with a sword in his hand. Second: If she is found to be non-virgin he refuses to dance. However he can not divorce her and if he does so, he will be condemned by the church and rejected by the society which will make it harder for him to remarry.⁷

C. GIRL'S CHANGE OF CHARACTER

Before she reaches puberty, the girl works for her family in the same way as a boy does. Until the age of 15 she fetches water, gathers woodfire, looks after large or small cattle. When her physical appearance gradually develops, she becomes reserved and all

her activities are confined in the house. Her attitude towards herself and her parents changes and starts to feel as if she does not belong to the house any more, because sooner or later she thinks that she will get married. At this period she starts to go to dance which run for days or even for weeks with her friends. Even though the sexual attraction of both sexes is natural at the period of adolescence, the boys are reliable and rarely try to rape the girls. Furthermore, because they grow together as brothers and sisters, they play together and are open to one another.

D. THE ROLE OF A GIRL IN THE TRADITIONAL DANCE

For both sexes of Blin youth, it is not easy to express their love for dancing. However they have great desire and ability to play day and night without interruption. There is a time in which they prefer dancing to eating. When they hear a beat of a drum, they travel for more than seven kms. by night to take part in the dancing. Even though this is a tendency of both sexes, it is the girls that have a greater role to play in the traditional dancing.

In some tribes of our country, there is a dance which is performed only by boys, but in Blin tribe it is unimaginable to have a dance without girls, because they are the ones who beat the drum during the dance. Of course, there are exceptions to this, where the boys are compelled to dance on their own. During someone's honeymoon, the friends of the bridegroom accompany him up to the river beating the drum themselves. So, in this occasion no girl goes with them to the river. But this is an exception. However generally speaking champions of the dance are

the girls. If the boys disturb while the dance is going on, the girls throw away the drum and leave the place and the dance is interrupted immediately. If the boys want to start again the dance, the girls should be pleaded or forced to join them. Therefore, from this we can conclude that there is no dancing without the involvement of girls.

2- ENGAGEMENT

As we shall see later, the way how the parents look for a girl for their boy, the property given for the engagement settlement, and the covenant made between the boy's and girl's family expresses the value of a girl, and validity and firmness of the rite. The amount of property given for engagement settlement of today is not the same as that of twenty year ago. However the rite of the engagement is the same.

Twenty years ago the things given for the engagement settlement were mostly in kinds but today is in cash. The basic rite and the manner or process of looking for a girl for the engagement are dealt below.

I- The manner of looking for a girl.

When a girl or a boy becomes adult her/his parents are free to give him/her to any one they want. This tradition was widespread in the country. But today it is gradually changing, both the boy as well as the girl could freely choose their partner.

When a girl is asked for marriage there is a match maker who becomes the go between the two families.⁹ First he contacts the girl's parents in a diplomatic way and asks them for their daughter's hand in marriage in order to persuade them, he presents, usually

in an exaggerated ways, the good qualities of the boy and his parents.

Once agreed with the girl's parents he proceeds to make contact with the girl's kin (exrsko feraé) then eventually, starts the bargaining of the materials which will be given during the day of engagement from the boy's side to the girl's side. But this contact is done in the absence of both the girl and the boy. However, the two are informed of what is going on.

II- Mentioning the requirements

Mentioning the materials for engagement and marriage settlement are:

- Five quintals of grain
- Thirteen cows which are given at different times: one is slaughtered before the wedding at the metlu day. Metlu day is a day in which the bride's family go to the bridegroom's family to take the bride cattle.

The second is slaughtered for dinner for those who are invited to the girl's wedding. Six cows must be shown to the council, with the following qualities:

Four heifers; one of which must be already mated and two calfs. the remaining ones are to be given in money as a help. These are three heifers and two calfs which correspond to 30 birr all together.

The men who go to settle the engagement from the boy's relatives are usually about seven, from the girl's relatives only men wait for the seven invited at the courtyard. the boy's relatives bring with them ten meter white cloth which is a sign of light. At the entrance both sides finalize the "Sacrd" pact in the name of God which is called "Méakot tuna". and then enter a "Dass" which is a temporal shelter prepared for the guests.

III- The Covenant (méakot)

Both families sit outside the house forming a circle and putting the ten meter white cloth in the middle as a sign of light which shines among the council of elders and a good wish for the couple. An elder leads the prayer and the go-between (mengora) mentions the requirements (smey), then a neutral leading elder stands in front of them and asks both parts as follows.

B= boy's name, G= girls name)

1) To the girl's family he says:

Do you give your daughter G to B? All the girls family respond "Yes, we do."

2) To the boy's family:

"Are you willing to take G to your son B?" All the boy's family respond: "Yes we do."

3) To the girl's family he asks again: "May this pact be for you as God's covenant, for you have given him your daughter G?" All the girl's family respond. Yes let it be for us as God's covenant that we have given him our daughter G."

4) To the boy's family he asks again: "May this covenant be for you as God's covenant that you have received her?" All the boy's family together respond: "Yes, let it be as God's covenant for us that we have received her for him." Each of these questions and answers are repeated four times to show the seriousness of the pact. In the meantime all the participants touch the ground by their hands as a sign for the greatness and firmness of the contact.¹⁰ After this solemn act they enter the "Dass" to have lunch and in the evening the boy's family return to their village. From the time of engagement up to marriage the girl hides herself not only from her fiancé but also from his relatives too. Even if there was relation between them, it

interrupts immediately after the engagement. If she does not do so, she must face insults from the society. Therefore she hides herself because the culture compels her.

During the time between engagement and marriage the girl's family receive different gifts or presents from the boy's family but they don't reciprocate. This is interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, it expresses the greatness of woman and on the other hand, as some interprets it, it seems that later on the boy wants to have authority over the girl because he thinks that by offering his money he could make her a chatter.¹¹

3- METLU (THE BRIDE CATTLE)

Metlu is a dowry given to the girl from the boy's father. After the engagement the boy's father depending on his wealth and on the number of cattle he has, decides the right time for "metlu" to invite the girl's parents and give them the bride cattle.

The men who come to the "metlu" are usually about twelve. The boy's family prepare what is necessary for the reception in honour of the girl's family and at the entrance the women welcome them warmly with ululation. The most honoured guest is the girl's father, and in his honour a decorated bed is prepared, because usually the guests stay overnight. Early in the morning the twelve men go for a walk and discuss about the cattle given to the bride, how many to take and how many to leave. After completion of their debate on the matter, they return to the "Dass" to have lunch. Then they ask for a delegate in order to deliver their decision on the cattle which are usually six. They take two for the girl's parents and distribute others one for their daughter, the second for the

future father-in-law, as a present for he did good thing for them, the third for the women who welcome them (qbtiri) and the fourth one to any one they wanted to give. Then the girl's relatives return to their village with the two cattle received from the boy's family. Once the process of "metlu" is over the boy's family go to the girl's family with a mixture of water and milk wishing prosperity and harmony of the future husband and wife. After this visitation the boy's father can ask the girl's family their daughter for marriage.

4-"MARRIAGE AND DOWRY"

In Blin tradition the wedding period is confined between November and March (from christmass up to Lent.) Because this is a production season, so, it makes easy the economic problem. The boy's father accompanied by someone goes to the girl's family to ask them for their daughter for marriage and fix on a date for the wedding provided by the good will of her parents. At the wedding day, the bridegroom's father, some other elder relatives and lots of youngsters from the village, which altogether called "Kxan" go to the bride's home village often in the morning. The bride's family await them ready for reception. When the "kxan" arrive, the elders eater the "Dass" while the youngsters go to dance "Golia" around. The member of the men who are invited to wedding ceremony is not limited. After they have their lunch, in the afternoon, before their departure, the elders from both parts gather and the girl's family announce officially the dowry for their daughter. The bride, at her marriage, is obliged to bring with her all the necessary goods and pieces of furniture for her new house. Some

of the materials she should bring include the following.

- * About twelve mats of palm leaves, some white and some decorated.
- * One curtain, which is called Hirbet.
- * Two milk pots.
- * One churn (used for skimming).
- * Two big containers made up of leather called Shébatet.
- * Two leather ropes called Shabr.
- * Two small leather containers.
- * Two medium sided leather containers which are called Temamu.
- * Two or one trough.
- * One Meklie which is an ornament for her house contains six ropes with a length of about two meters decorated by different kinds of beads.
- * One "maxombia" which is a cover for a trough and other utensils¹².

During the departure all these things are put in to a big leather case called Hibsat and loaded on to a camel or a mule. Lastly, when the time for their departure is over, a chosen storn man enters the bride's house and he carries her and places her on a camel's or mule's back. The bestman rides together with the bride to support her in the way and they leave for good chanting their traditional slogans.

The girls of the village see her off saying the following songs.

"Eja segnina yshani nired erina" which means, "bye bye our sister, we wish you that the boy's family welcome you warmly.

"Brifsnix'nki lawed mariam tekewrnkut nrlawed." which means "we wish you goodness and happiness and may the virgin Mary be your guardian."

The bride can not go to dances and other recreational activities outside her traditional house called "Ablura." Ablura is a new house for a young married couples. She stays there for

months, for this reason she becomes very sad over her honeymoon. The long stay in a confined house is very harmful for the spouse's health, because before marriage she was free to go wherever she wants, so, she is very active outside as well as inside the house. After four months at Easter time the bride returns to her mother. After her return the bride also knows that there is another rite, i.e, she has to accomplish the traditional way of making herself beautiful by having smokebath which lasts for two weeks. During this time her skin changes its colour. As it seems, this method is dangerous to the health of the spouse because it is done excessively.

5- THE RITE OF INITIATION OF A YOUNG BRIDE

In order to be considered as a full woman, the bride has to perform the process of initiation. Therefore, usually in between August and September about eight months after her matrimony, her mother-in-law accompanied by two other neighbouring women goes to the bride's house with three grams of gold to be put on the forehead of the bride (=gesheri), and a big ring type made up of lead to be put on the central part of the head of the bride which is called "Nfhora." After having worn these ornaments officially, she becomes a full woman with all rights and duties in the society.

6- CULTURAL RESTRICTIONS OF A WOMAN

In Blin culture, as in any other culture, a woman is not obliged to do a heavy work. But the culture puts some restrictions on her. Usually after marriage she is not allowed to go out

of her house until she becomes a mother of two or three children. This could take five or more years. Again a woman is not allowed to milk.

Other restrictions are mostly performed in honour of men. some of these are:

* A woman is restricted not to call her husband by his name.

* She should always put a veil on her head in front of any man and she should cover her face in front of her father-in-law, and his elder relatives. If she does not behave in this way, it is considered as a dishonour to man.

* a woman can't heir her father's property, even if she becomes a widow.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen above, Blin society have their own traditions and customs which make them distinct from other tribes. Ofcourse, in every tribe there are negative and positive customs or practices. In Blin tradition some practices creat uneasiness to woman and degrade her status as a human being. These practices must be abolished gradually in order to restore her dignity. Therefore, the new generation must think over it and understand that a woman is half side of every society and it is their role to avoid the negative practices and to preserve the positive ones.

Br. Amanuel Shakr

FOOT NOTES

- 1) Adhana Mengsteab, "Ancestor veneration in blin culture", in proceodings of the eighth international conference of Ethiopian studies, vol I, Addis Abeba, 1984, p.747.
- 2) William Benot (pub), "Circumcision", Encyclopedia Britanica Vol.V, Chicago, 1965, p. 801.
- 3) Cfr. Adhana Mengsteab, Ibid p. 747.
- 4) L.H.Gray, "Circumcision" Encyclopedia of religions and Ethics, Vol III, Edemberg, 1910, p.668.
- 5) An interview with woizero Letengus Eman, on February 20th 1995 Asmara.
- 6) An interview with Ato Medhin Asfeday, on February 17th 1995, Keren.
- 7) ወልደማርያም እክት: "አብ ደቂ ቤልን ካብ ግዜ ልደት ክሳብ ሽንጋል ዚፍጸሙ ሥርዓታትን ዝርእዩ ጠባያትን" ብዛዕባ ቋንቋን ባህልን ቤልን ዚምልከት ሰሚናር ክፍሊ: ጃ: ኣሥመራ: ሰነ 14 1978 ዓ.ም.አ. ገጽ 12።
- 8) cfr. ወልደማርያም እክት: "አብ ብሔረ ቤልን ኣብ ግዜ መውሰድ ዚረእዩ ሐደ ሐደ ጉዳኢ ባህልታትን" ብዛዕባ ኣብ ሰሜን ኢትዮጵያ ዚርከቡ ጉድኣት ዘሰዕቡ ባህልታትን ኢትገብረ ብሔራዊ ዘተ። ኣሥመራ: ሕዳር 25-26 1975 ዓ.ም.አ. ገጽ 1።
- 9) An interview with Ato Mengstu Maybettot, on September 20th, 1994, Keren.
- 10) Kiffemariam Hamde, "traditional religious customs in Blin society, the candle meal and the covenant," in Adveniat Regnum tuum, No. 50, Asmara, 1990, pp. 20-21.
- 11) ወልደማርያም እክት: "አብ ደቂ ቤልን ካብ ግዜ ልደት...: ገጽ 11።
- 12) An interview with experts of Blin culture.

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