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## **Marriages in Ethiopia**

### **Resumé**

Le mariage semble être un élément commun à tous les milieux culturels dans le monde. Cependant, dans chacun de ces milieux, le mariage est perçu différemment. On dit souvent que l'Éthiopie est – ou l'était au moins jusqu'à présent – un bastion du christianisme. On pourrait donc croire que l'institution du mariage dans ce pays ressemble à celles des autres pays chrétiens. Pourtant les mariages en Éthiopie ont un caractère bien plus africain. On y accepte des liaisons variées, pas toujours sanctionnées juridiquement (conformément avec la loi européenne) et pas toujours monogamiques.

Cet article parle des différents types de mariage pratiqués en Éthiopie depuis des siècles. Aussi bien les voyageurs du XIX-ème que les chercheurs du XX-ème siècles ont remarqué la diversité des liaisons et la facilité avec laquelle les Éthiopiens se marient et se divorcent. On a distingué six principaux types de liaisons et de nombreux types mineurs. De plus, chaque couche sociale préférerait un seul type de liaison. Les mariages contractés par le clergé et l'aristocratie étaient différents de ceux contractés par la bourgeoisie ou encore par les commerçants.

L'Éthiopie est un pays diversifié au niveau ethnique et la multiplicité culturelle fait que les coutumes liées au mariage sont très différentes. Les mariages chez les chrétiens d'Amhara n'ont rien à voir avec ceux des communautés musulmanes des Afars ou des Somaliens. Certains pratiquent ainsi «la taxe matrimoniale» tandis que d'autres doivent faire preuve de courage et de ruse pour gagner les faveurs des parents de l'élue de leur cœur. De nombreuses coutumes décrites dans l'article ne se pratiquent plus, alors que d'autres ont toujours lieu.

## 1. General remarks

The institution of marriage seems to be the common element of all cultures around the world. Nevertheless, in every culture the institution of marriage is treated differently. According to our European thinking, term “marriage” is a coherent term. Marriage is usually understood as a relationship between a man and a woman that forms a base of the family, which provides biological and cultural continuity of the mankind. However laws and customs regarding marriage vary depending on the community. Most cultures consider marriage as monogenic and heterosexual relationship. In European cultural circle marriage is a legal institution and in most religions it is a sacramental institution.

It is often said that Ethiopia is, or at least was until the revolution of 1974, a bastion of Christianity<sup>1</sup>. Yet, marriages in Ethiopia have more African character. In Africa marriages are not only those relationships that have been contracted in front of a civil servant, priest or a person who has sanctioned power. Also those relationships that have been contracted in a traditional way receive the marriage status. Many different types of marriages are permissible, not necessarily sanctioned by law (according to European thinking) and not always monogenic. It is very common that an Ethiopian has a wife with whom he was married according to the law (religious or secular one) and many concubines. That is generally acceptable and such a situation is not a cause of ostracism.

The institution of marriage in the Ethiopian Empire, due to its African character, was one of the issues that interested Western travelers in particular when they visited 19<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopia. Thanks to travelers like Aleksander Ksawery Bułatowicz, James Bruce, Ludwik hr Huyn, Józef Kalmer and Charles Rey we have a clear picture of how Ethiopian ceremonies and wedding traditions looked like. 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars like Richard and Helen Pankhurst, Edward Ullendorff, Reidulf K. Molvaer and Donald N. Levine have scientifically described types of marriages that can be found in Ethiopia, ways in which they are contracted and legal principles on which they func-

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<sup>1</sup> Bińkowski A. (1987), 15f.

tioned. Thanks to those two types of sources we can have a reliable description of institution of marriages in Ethiopia.

## 2. Types of marriages in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is one of the oldest African countries. It is also one of the few that had its own legal system. The book of *Fitha Negest* deals with criminal and civil laws while *Sirate Mengist* deals with the customs and etiquette of Ethiopian people. The twenty fourth chapter of *Fitha Negest* is about the institution of marriage. It consists of all injunctions and rules that concern the family. In this chapter it is clearly said who and on what grounds can be married. It is written that one cannot marry nuns, women older than 60 years and those who were sentenced for adultery. One can only have three wives during one's lifetime and concubinage is strictly forbidden. Except monogenic no other relationships are allowed<sup>2</sup>.

The law of kings, *Fitha Negest*, was not strictly obeyed even by Ethiopian rulers. As an example can serve *ytēgē* T'aitu,<sup>3</sup> who has been married four times before she became a wife of emperor Menelik II in a *k'al kīdan* ceremony with emperor Menelik II. According to the law *ytēgē* should not be married because *Fitha Negest* allows Ethiopian people only for three marriages during their lifetime.

Based on the information found in *Fitha Negest*, Edward Ullendorff, a British scholar interested in Ethiopia, distinguished three types of marriages.

The most common type of marriage is a *sirat* marriage. Usually a marriage ceremony is preceded by a long time of betrothal. It is also common that in some, mostly rural areas of Ethiopia marriages are arranged by parents of both sides even when the future spouses are only children. This long time of betrothal allows the future bride

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<sup>2</sup> *Fitha Negest. Nibabuna tīrgwamēw* (1969/1970); English translation by Paulos Tzadua (1966), 130-154.

<sup>3</sup> *Ytēgē* T'aitu Birhan (ca.1850-11.02.1918), the fourth wife of emperor Menelik II. She has played an important role in Ethiopia, especially during her husband's illness. She took part in the battle at Adwa. More about this subject: Bartnicki A., Mantel-Niećko J. (1987), 312-315 and Kluesza M. (2005).

reach the age when she will be able to have children. The wedding itself is a civil ceremony. Priest is not needed because the ceremony is led by *danya* – a judge or a civil servant. He has also power to issue a divorce.

Another, also very common, type of marriage is *demoz*. It is often confused with prostitution, because this kind of relationship is based on a contract between man and woman. For a settled period of time a woman agrees to cohabit with a man and act as his wife. For that she receives salary either in money or in grain. The marriage can be prolonged (with the agreement of both sides) or finished at any time by both man or woman. It is strictly formal relationship and in case of man's death, the woman has no right to his heritage. However, children from that relationship are eligible for the inheritance. This type of marriage is often contracted by people who already have a spouse. The *demoz* marriage often occurs among merchants in cities and, in the past it was common among warriors. A man, during his stay in a city, can hire himself a wife. Furthermore, he can marry her every time he will be in the city. According to Ullendorff neither the Ethiopian Orthodox Church nor Ethiopian political elites are in favor of this type of marriage<sup>4</sup>.

The type of marriage that carries the greatest commitment is called *k'al kīdan*. This is a type of religious ceremony called *bek'warban*. The ceremony consists of joint communion called *k'warban*. This type of marriage, in contrast to those mentioned before, is irrevocable under the threat of excommunication. According to Ullendorff, it is exactly because of this aspect that *k'al kīdan* marriage is “[...] frequently chosen by elderly people who have long been united in civil marriage and now feel sure that divorce can safely be ruled out in their case”<sup>5</sup>. This church ceremony is often contracted by ruling classes and clergy. Priests can only get married before they are ordained, never after. In addition, they can have no more than one wife and in case of her death, they cannot remarry<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Ullendorff E. (1960), 178f.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, 179f.

<sup>6</sup> Pankhurst R. (1990), 36.

Edward Ullendorff has published results of his research about marriages in Ethiopia in 1960. Thirty two years later another researcher interested in this country has distinguished yet another three types of marriages that can be observed among peoples of Ethiopia. Between 1988 and 1989 Helen Pankhurst was doing field research in Menz (eastern Ethiopia). One of main goals of her research was assessing how the revolution in 1974 changed lives of the Ethiopian people.

Except for those mentioned by Ullendorff, *semanya* is a very popular type of marriage among the inhabitants of Menz. The marrying couple signs a quasi-contract, commonly known as a contract of equals. Also two witnesses, who are present during the ceremony, sign this contract. This type of marriage is usually arranged by both families, and until recently, there was a tendency to marry off eleven or thirteen-year-old girls<sup>7</sup>. Such young girls were not prepared, both physically and mentally, to start a family, so in those situations a *k'ot assir* marriage is applied. The *k'ot assir* marriage is also appropriate where there are not many boys in future bride's household. The future husband comes to work and live in the house of the girl. He helps her family until the girl is mature enough to give birth. Then bride and groom can arrange a *semanya* ceremony.

Term *t'ilf* is used to all marriages in Ethiopia that have not been arranged. In the past, this term was used for those marriages by kidnapping. The abduction might have been spontaneous or planned by one or both partners. The bride to be was usually abducted by the future groom and his friends when she was alone; that is, when she was going for water. During the abduction, it was acceptable for the girl to scream and try to escape even if the abduction was planned and she had nothing against the kidnappers. Term *t'ilf* is also used for all marriages that have not been arranged and there were no ceremonies. The abduction might also be a prelude to a *semanya* marriage. That kind of marriage can often be observed in situations when the families of future spouses (either both or one of them) are too poor to prepare a decent wedding.

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<sup>7</sup> Lvova E. (1997), 577-584.

### 3. Wedding ceremony among the Amhara people

The Amhara people live in central highlands of Ethiopia. Through many years they were the dominating ethnic group in the country, but now they comprise only one third of country's population. Amhara are farmers and their social structure was based on considerable class diversity determined by the amount of land owned.

In Amhara culture, tradition requires that boy's parents find him a wife. Before they start negotiations concerning the marriage, parents precisely check whether they are not related with the girl's family. In the past, the check was conducted for seven generations back, but now this number has been reduced to five. Moreover, not only relationship by lineage is verified, but also so-called social kinship. This means that if the boy's godparents are anyhow connected with the future bride's family it is impossible for the marriage to get approval. Another important issue is virginity of the chosen girl.

When it is proved beyond doubt that future spouses are in no way related, the boy's parents send a match-maker, whose task is to persuade girl's parents. After they agree, a meeting of parents is arranged. In the past, it was not the match-maker who negotiated in the name of parents but the boy's friends. This custom was observed and described by two German travelers, Józef Kalmer and Ludwik hr. Huyn, who in the 19<sup>th</sup> century visited the Ethiopian Empire. In their book *Abisynja. Ognisko niepokoju* they wrote: "A traveler can often find young men storming a hut on horseback or on foot, shooting and shouting; it is not an attack, but groom's match-makers who are storming the bride's house to 'abduct' her and then to be happily received with joy. Previously, abducting women in Christian Abyssinia was a common practice; today it is merely ceremony".<sup>8</sup>

When parents agree on the conditions, young couple engage. Fiancés start wearing special kind of ornament, that shows that none of them is single and they are meant for each other. When the youngsters are mature enough to get married, parents decide on the

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<sup>8</sup> Huyn hr. L., Kalmer J. [1936], 155.

amount of dowry and the equipment each spouse gets; parents and the elders decide what presents and in what order the future husband should give to his future parents-in-law. The date of wedding is settled, during which the boy and the girl will meet for the first time. Before the ceremony, the boy sends his fiancée a new dress and some money. In the past, a young girl had to be ‘examined’ by an elderly woman, who ‘knew the things’ in order to find out whether she is a virgin. If she was not – the engagement was void, the wedding was canceled and girl’s whole family was covered in shame. Nowadays this custom fades.

The essence of wedding preparations is collecting alcohol, *t’ella* (traditional Ethiopian beer), *tej* (traditional Ethiopian honey wine) and preparing sauces and dishes that are essential at every party. This is the task of bride’s relatives.

Three days before the ceremony, the fiancée arrives. She stays in the house of a neighbour of the groom’s family, where there she awaits ... the best man. Upon his arrival, he promises the bride to protect her – now and after the wedding – against violation of the law by her husband. In order to be able to carry out his promise, the best man has a special permission to enter into the house of the newlyweds. However, if he abuses their hospitality, he will be punished and banished from community.

The wedding feast takes place without participation of the bride and the groom. Afterwards the marriage contract is read out and the master of ceremony delivers a special formula: “The married couple should keep the contract that bounds them no matter what evil they might encounter”.<sup>9</sup> After several rounds of blessings everyone present cement the word of oath with sacramental “Amen”. Next, a procession is formed to go and pick the bride. The groomsman brings the bride outside from the neighbor’s house and he sits her on a mule. She is totally covered in veil. He sits himself behind and opens a big umbrella over her. After the arrival to the house of parents-in-law the bride hides herself in a corner of the house behind a curtain. Next the best man leads the groom to his future wife. Once he finds her, the wedding ceremony finishes and a wedding feast begins. It

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, 156

lasts until there is food and drink. After the wedding ceremony, the groom takes his wife to his parents' house.

*Yets'agula gīzē*, which is the term for Ethiopian honeymoon, lasts from week up to three months, depending on the wealth of husband's family. During this period, the best man lives with the couple. The wife cannot leave the house of her parents-in-law during the day, and she can only go out at night. After the honeymoon, the couple comes back to girl's parents where they stay for some time. Also during that period the best man lives with them. The marriage is considered as concluded when (during its first year) woman becomes pregnant or both sides like each other so much that they decide to stay together even though they do not have a child.

Usually, despite begin in a formal relationship the husband has sexual relations also with other women. However, a man may be subjected to peer pressure if he acts otherwise and be called a hen-pecked husband. If he refuses to go out with his friends to see other women, not only will he be called a hen-pecked husband, but also his actions may become a source of rumours about his sexual orientation.

Interestingly, the wives are completely aware of their husbands' infidelity; in fact, they return the favour. In contrast to men however, women do not flaunt with their affair for fear of violent reaction from their husbands and even being thrown out of their own houses. Women tolerate their husband's affairs as long as they are their 'personal matter' and do not undermine the stability of their marriage and man's lover is not related to his wife.

#### **4. Marriage among the Afar and Somali people**

The Afar people who live in northeast Ethiopia are nomads who in 10<sup>th</sup> century converted to Islam. According to the laws of this religion, every man can have up to four wives, but only the wealthiest can profit from this privilege.

In times of the Ethiopian Empire, a man who wanted to marry had to bring special gifts for the father of the chosen woman. Among those gifts were a shield, a lance, an empty bottle for storing water and a piece of skin to sit on while praying. Next step were negotia-

tions about the quality and quantity of animals that are supposed to be offered to the father. If both sides reached an agreement, the father gave his permission for marriage. The type of gifts depended on the man's personal wealth. They could vary from 10 to 100 camels and/or from 100 to 400 goats and sheep. If the man was not wealthy enough, he had to gain or steal the agreed number of cattle.

Józef Kalmer claimed that in times of the Ethiopian Empire, in addition to offering cattle a man had to kill at least one enemy and he had to prove this act by bringing the enemy's genitals. According to one of the authors of *Abisynia...*, it was a barbarian custom whose sources are both "material and life motives: the lack of water on desert. A man, setting up a house and raising children, had to provide conditions for his family. In desert water means life; there is very little of it so there was a necessity of depriving one's life to create a possibility of existence for another".<sup>10</sup>

Once the father of the girl accepts gifts (as well as his future son-in-law), a wedding ceremony can be prepared. Marriage can be granted by a local *qadi* or *hadji*. If there is no one near of that kind, "just someone who can read Quran."<sup>11</sup> Next, the newlyweds go on horseback to the men's hut. It is very common among Afar people that a man builds his hut just before he gets married. Wife's first responsibility is to bring husband a goat or a sheep which he kills in accordance with the rules of Quran. The woman dips her right hand in animal's blood and sprinkles doors of the hut. She smears rest of the blood onto her forehead. Next the woman enters the hut followed by the man who is holding a whip. He whips her three times. This ritual symbolizes his dominant role at home and in marriage. A woman who starts to cry during those whips is ridiculed by the whole village. After those rites, the man and the woman are accepted by the community as a married couple.

Just like Afar people, the Somalis who live in Ethiopia are nomadic people of Muslim faith. There are six different major clans among the Somali people: Dir, Darood, Isaaq, Hawiye, Digil and

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, 158.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

Rahanweyn. Among those only the Darood clan lives in Ethiopia. Nowadays Somali people constitute six percent of Ethiopia's population.

Same as in the Afar culture, when a man wants to marry he must to offer guns and other everyday objects to the girl's father. However, in contrast to customs of other peoples, after accepting the future son-in-law, there are no negotiations about the amount of cattle to be offered. Firstly, a beautifully dressed woman, previously anointed with fragrant oils which are supposed to arouse desire of the chosen man, is taken for a trip on horseback. After she returns, negotiations start. If they end up with success – the marriage is considered to be arranged.

Betrayed Afar man gets his revenge when he receives a goat from wife's lover as a compensation and his adulterous wife takes a ritual bath. In contrast, a betrayed Somali man throws his wife out of the house and she has to start living as a *dillo* – a wandering prostitute, while her lover is forced to pay a fine of ten camels.

## **5. Wedding ceremony among Oromo people**

Oromo people are one of Cushitic ethnic groups that live in southern Ethiopia. Nowadays they constitute 34 percent of Ethiopia's population. Virtually all of them are Muslims, with the majority belonging to the Sunni branch. Oromo people are farmers or cattle breeders. Among Oromo there is a strong belief that a boy aged 16 to 18 should find himself a wife, and a girl aged 12 to 16 is ready to get married. As in the case of the Afar and Somali people, the law of Oromo allows for polygamy, which is indeed very common.

Having chosen a girl, the man goes with a match-makers to her house, where they are treated with meat, coffee and bread, which they brought before. If the girl's father is in favor of the marriage, he calls for his neighbors and his daughter, the future bride, starts to dance with her friends. After they finish, her fiancé offers her a ring on a string of glass pearls. If the girl hangs the string on her neck marriage is officially concluded. Father of the bride receives from 6 to 80 oxen as a compensation for the loss of his daughter. Next day, the father sends those oxen along with other presents to his new-

lywed daughter. If a father hesitates to give his daughter permission to marry, she can always run away with her lover. In that case, the council of elders will also consider them as a marriage couple.

In case of a big difference in material status between the two families, the girl may resort to so called *assena*. The ceremony of *assena* consists of the girl jumping over the fence that is built around her boyfriend house and stands in front of the door of his hut until she is invited in. Usually inviting the girl is accompanied by loud protests of the boy's parents. The misuse of this custom led to evolution of a new custom in an attempt to preclude *assena*. A wealthy Oromo family builds extremely high fence that should stop girls from poor families from jumping over it. However that caused a counter-reaction on the part of the poor families with girls. They started sending six and eight-year-olds to perform *assena*, because it is easier for them to climb over and jump from the fence. Thus, these girls look for boys to be their husbands among twelve-year-olds. A marriage between children is also considered lawful and the young couple has their own hut built.

Among Oromo people, who are Muslims, a marriage ceremony is performed by *imam* and those Oromo who do not belong to any monotheistic religion are married by making an oath called *racco*. A *racco* ceremony consists of pouring animal's blood over a woman and applying butter onto her body. After this ceremony she is considered to be inseparably united with her husband. This means that even after his death children born to a woman are considered her dead husband's descendants.

According to Józef Kalmer and count Huyn there was a custom among Oromo men that allowed them to exchange wife with each other. The custom was called *zigbah*. In exchange for a sheep or an ox, Oromo man could hire other man's wife.<sup>12</sup> Another custom observed among these people was lending a wife to a guest who came for a visit. Authors of *Abisynja...* claim that in the past the same custom used to be seen among Amhara. Oromo women also can demand to borrow someone else's husband. In case if a woman

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, 162.

does not have a husband and she would like to have children, she can demand a strong and brave man from the same tribe who could become a father of her children and pass them his strength.

## 5. Divorces

Divorces are very common in Ethiopia and it is not hard to get one. It is not, however, due to weakening of family values and transience of feelings among Ethiopians. Rather, it is because (quoting count Ludwik Huyn) inhabitants of Ethiopia “in theory consider marriage irrevocable but in practice they feel that being faithful to one woman during whole life is more than their flesh and blood can stand.”<sup>13</sup>

The only type of marriage that cannot be annulled is a *k'al kī-dan* marriage. In any other case one can divorce when:

1. One of the spouses wants to become a monk or a nun.
2. One of the spouses refused to have sexual intercourse.
3. The wife is possessed by the devil.
4. One of the spouses is in prison or there is no information about his/her whereabouts.
5. Single life is “less burdensome”.
6. Woman is planning assassination of her husband or she knows about one and she does not inform him about it.
7. Man sleeps with other woman in a different city<sup>14</sup>.

Divorce is the last resort, after diplomatic attempts to reconcile the two parties led by their friends fail and husband says to wife: “This marriage is resolved”. Next, all gifts and home accessories are divided between spouses. Man and woman confirm in front of witnesses that they do not wish to be married anymore and their marriage is annulled. The divorce is preceded by drafting and signing of the act that describes division of the property and arrangements about custody over children.

According to Aleksander Ksawery Bułatowicz, a Russian officer who, intermittently, spent four years in Ethiopia, if a divorce

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, 154.

<sup>14</sup> Based on *Fitha Negest ...*, op. cit.

was caused by unfaithfulness of one of the partners, the betrayed partner has a right to half of the total assets.<sup>15</sup> The divorcees are allowed to marry other people almost immediately after they get divorce. However their next marriages cannot be accompanied by any kind of preliminary ceremonies.

As it is very easy to get divorced and atmosphere in the family often changes, the situation of children is often uncertain. The rule is that a woman takes care of children up to five years and then their father looks after them. It happens that after divorce the woman takes an infant with her and the older child stays with the husband. Woman can get married for the second time and have other children. In case of second divorce, all children (even those from the previous marriage) are left to the second husband.<sup>16</sup>

As it was already mentioned, Ethiopia lies at the junction of two cultures – Christian and African. Interpenetrating traditions result in a rather colourful social life of Ethiopians, which from our, European point of view is quite complicated. Nowadays Ethiopia (like all of Africa) undergoes a process of rapid urbanization, which weakens the bonds between individual and the community which he or she comes from. Everything transforms. Traditions change and taboos fade. However the institution of marriage stays more or less the same. Still, in Ethiopia one can find different types of marriages, although it is very rare for them to be arranged. On the other hand, it is still important that both partners are accepted by their corresponding families.<sup>17</sup> One rule that remained unchanged is that one has to find a husband or wife out of their clan (the rule of exogamy). Since in small communities people are bound with each other in many different ways, sudden globalization favors finding a partner outside one's family circle.

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<sup>15</sup> Bułatowicz A. (2000), 91.

<sup>16</sup> In the case of leaving children in the place where they have been brought up manifests the African element of Ethiopian culture. According to African customs children are 'common good' of the whole community. More about this subject, see: Wrzesińska A. (2005), 77-103, Wrzesińska A. (1994), 37-52 and Szupejko M. (2004), 41-50.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem. More about this subject: Levine D.N. (1972), 123-127; and Lvo-va E. (1997).

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