‘Absuma’: A Folkloric Analysis of an Indigenous Marriage System among the Afar of Ethiopia

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Abstract
The major objective of this study was to examine the general pattern of "Absuma" and understand its significance in terms of shaping the socio-cultural relational matrix among the Afar people of Ethiopia. The research was mainly qualitative in design and explanatory in analysis. To this effect, data were gathered from community elders, tribal leaders, and married members in order to learn about various phases of the ‘Absuma’ and its related marriage rites and practices. The data gathered from the field were subjected to descriptive analysis. The finding of the study shows that as a cultural marriage system, "Absuma" is still in practice by the virtue of its relevance with the culture and religious tradition of the society. In the "Absuma" marriage system of Afar, "Festive meal" receives a primary consideration. This pre-wedding preparation has its own distinct features as organized by the families of the bride and the groom although the meal festivity prepared by the bride family is given much cultural emphasis. As various social activities in the Afar culture are conducted and performed in groups, pre-wedding tasks are accomplished by youth teams (Feima) who are responsible for making the wedding ceremony absorbing and engaging such as by performing a variety of cultural dances. They are expected to escort and help the couple enjoy themselves beginning a week ahead of the actual event. As women bear greater responsibility in the culture, they are bound to prepare the necessary food and beverages a month before the wedding date. Even after the wedding, the mother of the bride has a great social obligation to manage the home of the couple until they are capable of living by themselves independently.

Keyword: Marriage, Absuma, wedding, Ritual, Feima, and Fayidi.

1. Indigenous marriage In Afar Society

According to Wimalasena (2016, 169) Marriage is the foundation of social existence. In the real world a human being is one of the creatures that seeks to live by substituting themselves by their replica. And marriage, which a human being living in a stable condition undertakes, is one custom, rather the foremost one, which enables them to produce their replacement. This makes marriage a matter of survival for human beings.

Different scholars define marriage in different ways. Wimalasena (2016, 166) defines, marriage is a personal association between a man and a woman and a biological relationship for mating and reproduction. Marriage is a custom that assumes constant refinement through cultures, customs, and religious human beings create and sustain. The "Absuma" marriage system of the afar is also a custom guided by cultural and customary values in addition to having a strong bond with religious beliefs. Like the other nation nationalities of Ethiopia, the afar people have their own cultural attractions, values, tales and habits. These cultures, values, lifestyles, etc. created by ancestors woven together with the arts and wisdoms produced currently formulated and built the distinct identity of the people of Afar. Local verbal arts, folklore, sayings, riddles, oral poetry, narratives, belief systems, and products of handicrafts which the society employs to maintain its culture no doubt indicate the value humanity gives to art, its servile attitude toward it. What I attempt to raise in this writing is about the marriage system, the "Absuma" which is the social means of performing the generational relay.
As institution, marriage seems to be the common element of all culture around the world. According to Augustyniak (2009, 99), there are different types of marriage practices in Ethiopia. In Afar, two marriage systems, namely "Absuma" and "Fayidi" are still in use. The people have a habit of using both although they pay more focus to "Absuma". The term "Absuma" in Afar-af means the son (daughter of one's uncle), and the marriage system "Absuma" originates from this meaning to which it has a direct relation. In this culture, a groom who gets married to the daughter of his aunt is called "abu" in Afar-af meaning uncle.

In many societies, it is regarded as preferable that a man should marry the daughter of his mother’s brother; this is the form of the custom known as cross cousin marriage. Thus the female cousin of this kind, or all those women whom by the classificatory system he classifies as such, are potential wives for him, and their brothers are his potential brothers-in-law (Wimalasena; 2016,166).

The initial source of "Absuma" as a marriage system is ethnic or racial line in which a couple from the same family forms a new institution. This marital tradition has its own manner of execution. In this system, a young man mature enough for propose, enters a marriage found with the daughter of his aunt (the daughter of his father's sister). In other words, this is a tradition in which a mature enough young woman gets married to the son of her mother's brother. In case a boy or a girl appropriate for the marriage is not available in both families, the next possible spore in the ethnic line is selected by the scrutiny of great fathers. Since "Absuma" is a tradition in which sons and daughters of uncles and aunts marry, it somehow differs from such practices in the other nation nationalities in our country.

1.1. Wedding in "Absuma" marriage

When people plan to start married life, the first thing that occurs to their mind is the wedding. Since wedding is a plat form on which the marriage of a couple is introduced to relatives, it is attended by numerous details. As it is especially intended to amuse relatives in addition to displaying self-grandeur, the volume of the feast and the number of the guest’s exceeds the limits of propriety.

In different parts of our country, this custom is known to highly take away from the couple’s time of dwelling on the essential features of married life. These days, wedding have became utter challenges to many; posing obstacles that are swelling up the member of divorces right on the eves of the marriages. In the Afar society itself, marriages are being accompanied by huge festive meals. However, at the moment, when a camel is worth over ETB 40,000, it is difficult to have feasts by slaughtering two to three head of animals. To be organized a wedding in the "Absuma" tradition an appointment of at least one month, during which the whole preparation is expected to be completed, is made.

According to the culture of this society a wedding is required to be more glorious in the entire cost of that is covered by the family of the groom. The payment is considered as a gift and honor done to the family of the bride. In order to reveal that her parents deserve praise for bringing her up with dignity and to give due recognition to her for honoring her parents and her clan by virginity, the wedding in the family of the bride needs to be more fascinating. In fact, the family of the groom also makes its own preparation though it need not be as huge as the other one.

1.2. Preparations for the wedding event

In Afar society, the day on which the bride and the groom stay in "bridal confinement" is notable in that a variety of activities take place on it. For example, it is on this day that the festive meal for the participants of the ceremony is prepared. This and other related activities are carried out by groups of men and women known as "Feima" for all necessary activities at wedding. Especially when wedding take place in the country, the female "Feima" grind the cereals for the festive meal, while the male slaughter animals and prepare the meat for cooking.
The camel is the most popular beast of burden; in fact, it is the pillar of the survival of the Afar nation. For them, it is a ship, the most distinguishing symbol of their identity, and a trustworthy servant. That is why the members of this society kill even the camel on the occasion of their merrymaking to please relatives and to enjoy themselves. The volume of the festive meal in general depends on the capacity of the family of the groom to pay. Since the expense of the meal in the family of the bride is covered by that of the groom, the latter faces challenges. Therefore, depending on the capacity of the family of the groom to cover, a camel or some other mirror animals could be killed for the event. The men pass the meat they have cut and sorted into types the woman "Feima", who share the task among themselves so that some cook the meat sauce while others keep caking loaves throughout the day. The flour of the cereals ground on the same morning is needed to cake the "ge-anbo", the cultural food of the Afar, frequented at wedding. Milk, butter, and honey spiced on the spot are used for cooking the cultural delicacies.

1.3. Cultural Dances and Entertainment

According to Catherine M. Bell (1997, 95), in most cultures, social life is a series of major and minor ritual events. While predominantly secular cultures may have just a few rites to mark birth, marriage, and death, more traditional or religious societies may envelop one in a nearly endless sequence of ritual obligations. Human express their pleasure in a variety of ways. Marriage is particularly noteworthy in that it is a point at which a new chapter of life begins for a couple and parents realize (witness) the result of the prolonged hard work of their children. Therefore, on this day everyone cheers, hops, claps, and dances to the best of their ability. Starting a week ahead of the event, male and female "Feima" gather and sing the cultural lyrics and perform such dances on the stage. The songs and dances which constitute identity and used to record the history of the Afar people are also performed at weddings. The ways of entertainment frequented at weddings, id, and other celebrations are numerous. These types of songs and dances have their own societal rules and guidelines of beginning and ending. These types of songs and dances are classified in accordance with social structure, age, sex, and the nature of events.

Some of the songs and type of dance of the society need the movements of the whole body, others require movements of the legs and shoulders, and still others focus on lyrical melody and are performed in accordance with events and the performance of musicians and dancers. Among such dances and songs Ke’ke’, melabo, koa-iso, seae-a, hoarana, and lale are notable.

The social song Ke’ke’ is what girls dance in groups of two, that is, two girls take turns and dance together. This is a dance frequented in the society and performed by singers and dancers who rhythmically double their legs up to their bottoms and stretch them and dance again. Although the dance is for women, there are moments at which the lyrics for the dance are escorted by men. That is why it is displayed on shared stages "Melabo" is one of the other favorite dances in which both the singers and dancers are only women. More often than not, the dance is performed at wedding and "Id" ceremonies. At wedding, bridesmaid and escorts glorify and amuse the bride by this cultural number. As the purpose of the bridesmaids and escorts is to add color to the joy of the bride and her family, this piece is played as of the eve of the wedding.

According to Wimalasena (2016, 170), commonly marriage, may prescribe the performance of a particular marriage ceremony of one kind or other. And no man and woman are regarded as husband and wife unless the conditions stipulated by custom or law are complied with. In Afar society, beginning at 3:00 p.m. of the wedding day, the best men and escorts of the bridegroom who gather note for from the latter’s house proceed to the house dancing and singing what they consider appropriate for the occasion. When they arrive at the house a religious father (kadi), who has been among them and has the duty of conducting the marriage, gets the groom put on his ceremonial costume and decorates him at a place performed for the purpose at the gate of the house.
On this day of marry making, both men and women wear the more conforming of their cultural costumes. The husband to be is groomed by dressing a wide whitish loose robe, open at both ends and warn by wrapping it at the waist. He also has a white piece of loose cloth hung on his shoulder. Then having combed his hair, armed with a small knife (gillie) a gun, and a club, and escorted on the right and left by his groomsmen and friends, the groom makes his way to the place of the bride. After the groom is dressed and decorated, the religious leader delivers a congratulatory blessing. If other fathers are present on the occasion, the blessing process continues. Next, gifts from escorts and kins are delivered to the groom to be followed by extended dances and songs.

In the evening, before the groomsmen and escorts go to the house of the bride, young men club in to two teams and play a cultural dance called “kouiso” in an open field close to the wedding site. Since the play takes place between two contending teams, it has its own procedures and rules of the game. It is a game in which the players of one team in turns hold a ball made of goatskin in their palm and dribble it fast the players of the other team it is, in fact, a highly physical and endurance testing game. As soon as the heavy contest of “kouiso” comes to an end, the bridegroom makes his way to the place of the bride accompanied by his escorts and best men. The journey to the bride is illuminated by dances, boastful shouts, and jubilance. Besides, escorts in possession of guns fire in to the air as they approach the house.

As the escorts and best men arrive at the wedding, the cultural dances and boastful shouts shift to glorifications with religious themes (menzuma). The glorifications reflect the honor and grader of the prophet Mohammed, and they thank and entreat Allah so the wedding may be blessed. Finally, by the invitation permission of the family of the bride, the groom and his escorted are bade to get in to the house, and all are given seats. The groom also sits on the bed made ready for him. He is the king of the day, he is honorable, and it is to express that he sits on the bed. The next important process is, ring-neaka ceremony.

The wedding of afar (possibly that of Ethiopia in general) is a system in which religious and cultural requirements are fulfilled side by side. That is, which religious leaders or fathers participate to authorize the marriage on one hand, dances and vocalists who add to the elegance of the event are given a special focus on the other hand. In the wedding tradition of this society, religious chief of Islam have a prominent part to play. Just like his best men and escorts, the religious chief in charge is wherever the bridegroom wishes to be. When the groom and his best men go to the bride’s family, the religious leader travels with them to sanction the marriage and prayer is said to Allah would bless it.

Although the“neeka” tradition is affected by religious beliefs, it has some modern touches at is “democratic”, just to use a modern term. At the beginning of the“neeka” ceremony, the uncle of the bride goes to her and returns having asked her whether she is willing to get married. After learning the positive response of the uncle, the religious chief in charge officially announces her agreement to the audience, and the“neeka” ceremony takes place. Then armed escorts demonstrate their joy by firing in the air. Following that ceremony, the face of the bride is unveiled, and she is smoked in a smoke that creates a sweet and fragrant smell. Then, the best men receive the bride from her relatives in the presence of the audience. Next, she is born on the back of a bride’s man and taken to the bridal suite and seated beside the bridegroom. After that, the bride and the groom stay in the bride suite set men near the family of the bride for about seven day.

1.4. The couples in the week of their marriage

In the culture of this society, the groom leaves the bride where she has been and goes to his own family after the seven days of bridal retreat. The purpose of his departure is to free the bride to decorate herself with the assistance of her mother. In the order to have a soft skill and attractive body scent, she heats up herself in smoke. As these seven days mark her transformation form girlhood to
womanhood, her manner of dressing and hair style change. Especially her hair changes to a fully circular form.

In the culture, heating oneself in smoke has its own procedures. A woman ready to heat herself bathes her body and moisturizes her skin with sheep, goat, or cow butter. In addition, she is made to apply ointments prepared by a variety of spices, such as "mora" (dayta), "addige", "aduu", "ye-adeskunni", and "abbish". For the smoke prepared by the society, the types of firewood vary by being "adaytu", "keelyatu", "medere", "bereheeneta", "kusra", and "boaboa-o". After the firewood is made to shoulder in the ditch prepared for it, she heats herself covered with cloth so the smoke cannot escape.

For about a mouth, the groom stays with his family in the day time and passes the nights with wife. Then, for about another mouth, the bride and the groom pass the day and the night together in the bride house made ready for them. After three months of marriage, both get a house constructed by the family of the bride. Following this moment, they start to live together without any prohibition. Since the families of the bride and the groom have the responsibility to organize a house for both the family of the latter contributes local/cultural furniture, like seats and a bed, while that of the former takes care of the raw material for the construction and other supplies for internal use.

After this, the bride lives learning skills from her mother. She especially keeps learning the ways of cooking cultural dishes and how to lead a married life for about one year. After a one year stay, the husband is granted the right to take his wife and live wherever he likes. In the culture, if the husband has no mother, the mother of the bride (his aunt) who realizes his loneliness, can permit the bride to go to the house of her husband's family so that he would not be hurt by his far lack of company. The journey of a married couple, who gets permission from the family of the bride and go to the village of the bridgroom’s family, is led by an old woman who is a close kin of the bride's mother. In this culture, old age is honor; it is also greatness. Thus, the person who entrusts a married couple to the family of the husband is such an old mother. In this culture, the leady who leads the journey is an epitome and model of the married lifestyle of the couple; also, she is like a mother to the man.

The journey of the couple is accompanied by gifts prepared by the family of the woman and known as “fayto” by the local community. The type of gift determined by the economic capacity of the provider can include goats, sheep, caws, and if possible, camels. This is what the woman presents as her own weather to the family of her husband. When the groom arrives at the place of his family with his wife, his friends come together and construct her a house. They collect firewood for cooking and lighting and prepare food and drinks in the house.

1.5. Absuma Marriage and Subsequent Gifts

According to Wimalasena (2016, 169), marriage take the form of an exchange of gifts by their respective parents for each other’s sons, or the exchange of sisters, or of some female relatives, by the young men themselves. In the afar culture, providing gifts to a bride and a groom is an honor to both parties, the providers and the recipients. In this culture, the process of providing gifts begins a head of the wedding. Daring the one month preparation for the wedding, the friends and best men of the groom give what they consider essential for the purpose. Those who have the capacity give goats. The groom also offers as a gift what his father has given him ever since his childhood.

Gifts from the families of the groom and the bride and friends take place at the wedding. One of the gifts provided to the groom on the wedding day is money (ETB) is made give by close family members and friends. The money is made to sprinkle on his right shoulder. What is done to express the meaning (desire) that his shoulder should be vigorous, and he is blessed on the occasion by repeatedly saying, "May your shoulder be vigorous" male participants begin the right process which is concluded
by a prayer. Soon after the gift of the men is over, female relatives and close friends provide their share to him in the presence of the audience and kin.

After lunch, the close relatives of the groom meet separately to provide a variety of gifts they have prepared for the bride. Often, her gifts are a 6-elbow thin robe, open at both ends, a black kerchief, and shoes.

An economically capable relative can give a sheep with the intention that it serves the new couple as a source of future income by producing its kind. On the wedding, gifts are provided by the family of the bride also. The process by the mother whose gifts is bound to be special because it soon becomes an issue of village gossip. It also receives extra attention because it is an expression of her love for her daughter. Parts of her gifts are displayed so that they can be clearly seen by the audience. Next, the aunts, uncles, and other relatives take turns of often. Guests who participate take thing, like china jars, butter, sugar, and coffee to the wedding. Such guests are called upon to bless the couple so missing the occasion is taboo. Among the after, wedding gifts are just expressions of joy, not obligation; so those who cannot afford gifts, can attend the ceremony, enjoy the festive meal, and leave.

1.6. Social Rules and Benefits of Absuma

According to Wimalasena (2016, 170), A marriage should be concluded in accordance with the rules laid down by custom or law, whatever these rules may be. They may require the consent of the parties themselves or of their parents, or of the parties as well as of their parents. In Afar, "Absuma" marriage is a practice initiated and conducted in accordance with rules set earlier rather than by the preferences of individuals or groups. Although the marriage is held to be based on blood relationships, it does not mean the practice inviolable. For a marriage to take place, the consent of the mother of the bride is essential.

The Afar people have a special respect for children and women. That is why only the mother has the liberty to sanction the evasion of even such an established and long cherished tradition as the “Absuma”. In the “Absuma” marital tradition, the mother of the bride is given a huge responsibility. Because she has the major right to select a husband, engage, and marry her daughter, she has the authority not to allow her brother’s son to marry her daughter. If the mother of the bride questions and forbids it, the marriage shall be cancelled. Most of the time, such rejections comes about when the mother of the bride feels that the proposer does not have the disposition to sustain the bond.

In the culture, when an offer for marriage is rejected, the family of the bride is bound to pay damages to the family of the groom for the moral harm. The family of a man that has rejected an "Absuma" marriage arrangement is not obliged to pay damages to the family of the woman. However, such a family can be criticized and blamed for disrupting the bond that should be prevail among ethnic groups. As such kinship relations diminish through time, marriage proposals are not refused unless there exist serious and difficult conditions.

The public rules and values which have made the "Absuma" tradition remain feared and revered have deterred a variety of social problems and enabled the people to lead a stable life. In this society, a woman who is mature enough to get married, has firsthand knowledge that she has one husband no one can dispossess her of. And this is knowledge has prevented after girls from migrating to local towns and overseas. An Afar young man who is ready to marry his "Absuma"shall not retreat in case she sustains a man made or natural misery, because she is his wife. Not only that, he cannot refuse the marriage even if she is not his age. The culture imposes the same obligation on the woman, too. That is why a woman in Afar does not need to worry about outliving her age without getting married.
Since either seeking to marry someone else’s "Absuma" or getting married to them in the society is held to be provoking conflicts among ethnic groups and individuals and results in a heavy punishment, no one dares to indulge in it; it is in fact an infringement considered as elopement. As a girl is recognized as someone’s "Absuma" as of her birth, no one else proposes to marry her. She is a special girl who grows up to be the wife of a predetermined husband. If the family of the husband to be fails to be ready for the marriage for various reasons and that of the woman does not want to delay the event, the social entitlement "Absuma" grants her to marry who she chooses and loves. Starting from the moment this change is noticed in the body of their daughter, parents begin their own preparations in line with the culture and customs. Their preparation begins by sending a message to the family of the young man in question. The message includes a congratulatory note of pleasure that they have successfully protected and nurtured their daughter making her ready for marriage.

The uncle or the brother of the bride’s father, who is given a special place in the culture regarding matrimony, delivers the message. In case he has passed away, his son is sent instead and finalizes the whole marital affair delegating his father and the family of the woman.

The family of the man who receives the message expresses its pleasure and acceptance by pointing out that they have been waiting for it. Besides, they congratulate the senders and pronounce their joy at her growth to maturity. The uncle takes the same message back to the other family. Following that, the same uncle who serves as the attorney of the family of his niece holds talks with the family of the man and proposes the start of preparations for the wedding. The month and the day for the wedding is then set by negotiations between the delegate and the family of the man and communicated to the family of the woman.

In this culture, junior siblings cannot get married unless their seniors are already married. Although coincidences otherwise are encountered rarely, the culture has established a solution a head of time. One of the principles of "Absuma" sanctions that the "Absuma" of a young man of Afar must be the eldest daughter of the other family. In "Absuma", the traditional marital system of Afar, when the family of the man is not ready for marriage, the wedding of the eldest daughter can be delayed. On the other hand, a similar problem arises when the son of an uncle who women in the other family can marry is only one. When a problem like this is faced, a young man who is a closer relative, but not the son of an uncle, is chosen and made to marry the additional woman.

Conclusions

Afar in general is a society that lives by cultural values traditionally inherited from ancestors. One of these cultural heritages is the “Absuma” matrimonial system. It is a culture which allows marriage among relatives and sustained itself to date by the virtue of its capacity of distancing/minimizing/divorce and spite in the society.

The fact that couples are blood relatives in the “Absuma” system helps the people to be strongly united. On top of that, it is believed that it enables the wife to get adequate comfort from her husband through her life. This culture highly blocks the migration of young women. Among the Afar, a woman does not stray from her locality, and migration is taboo in the society. And this has a notable role to play in discouraging migration from the country to towns.

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