

Mirtate in the Blin Community: A Reminder

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Cultural events like wedding, engagement, rites of passage have been instrumental in preserving community spirit in Eritrea. In the Blin community of the country, one of these cultural elements is Mirtate. Mirtate is one of the elaborate and striking rites of passage. This is how it is celebrated.

Rites are inescapable obligations in the Blin community. Hence, a male community member who has passed through the rite of shingale (manhood rite held at eighteen or above) immediately prepares himself for Mirtate. One of the major obligations one has to conform to is keeping the hair uncut from the time of shingale until next fall when Mirtate is to be celebrated. The long hair has to be kept clean using butter and through frequent combing. Butter and traditional wooden-comb serve as water and soap.

As the great event approaches, the young man preparing for Mirtate has to refine the beauty of his hair. Besides, he has to make behavioral changes. He has to act seriously—he has to talk and laugh less.

Thus, having prepared himself physically and behaviorally, he awaits for this great event with anticipation. On the day of Mirtate, village elders and young people, including the one to undertake the rite, all dress in traditional clothing, often single white robes. They then flock to the site of the celebration. Everyone is expected to reflect a perfect traditionalism. Imperfection is a sign of deviance, irresponsibility and moral corruption. The main foods in the celebration are Burkutera (traditional bread) and milk. Preparing these dishes is up to the village community. Thus, young and old men who are to attend the celebration have to bring milk, and millet or barley flour with them. Collecting firewood for baking Burkutera is the responsibility of the younger men. Young men laugh, shout and sing traditional songs as they perform their duties. The laughter and the cacophony of these people is the 'slow music' of the opening ceremony.

When the great moment is due, people gather under a big tree. They encircle the young man who is ready for Mirtate. Elder men then braid his long hair on the lower part of his head. The hair on the upper part of his head is combed artistically and left uncut. This new hairstyle is called Lankit. As the elders do the braiding, young people cheer and shout. They sing, tease one another, and wrestle. They eat Burkutera and drink milk. Milk is the soup of the festivity. It circulates among people in traditional containers called Kfat. Older people drink first, then younger ones. This practice cultivates respect for the elderly, a cherished value in all Eritrean communities. As young people eat and drink, village elders tell stories, myths and jokes. These are meant to strengthen the virile qualities of the person. Myths of responsibility are narrated and weaknesses ridiculed. Values like respecting the elderly, serving the community are presented through the stories in a subtle way. Those who are yet to attain the age of Mirtate listen attentively and learn in advance. At the end, older people and relatives give their blessings—"May you be known for greatness! May you be the delegate of your people! May you live healthy and strong!" Mirtate confirms the rights the young man is entitled to during Shingale—the right to sit with elders during engagement and wedding ceremonies, the right to drink silkh (traditional beverage) in public, the right to order younger people, the right to act as a witness, the right to attend village meetings and the like. And above all, the event gives the person a special importance. The place where the ceremony takes place, if different, is named after him. For example, if the name of the young man is Hajay, the place would be called Hajay-Mertetsakh (the place where Hajay went through Mirtate). The name is maintained for generations. At the same time, Mirtate confirms duties shouldered during Shingale.

After the rite, the young man is expected to actively participate in community events. He is expected to visit the sick, bury the dead, take obituary to villages, act as mortician, take revenge, serve the community freely when called for and participate in wars. Mirtate is organized during fall seasons. Fall is a season of abundance in Eritrea. Milk and bread, the main foods in the celebration, are in plenty and fresh. The abundance of milk and bread leaves a lasting memory in the minds of young people and other community members who all share from the refectation prepared for that event. Fall is, thus, the most-anticipated season of the year too.

Mirtate was a separate rite for centuries. Unfortunately, it has now changed its characteristics. It has merged with wedding ceremony and has totally lost its significance. Nonetheless, it is a reminder; a reminder of the need for preserving cultural elements that cultivate noble values of Eritrean society.

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