

# BALSOT

**AN INITIATION RITE FOR A NEW BRIDE**



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## **Key Words:**

Balsot, Nifhora, Initiation rite, Bride groom, Milsot, Nkhwakhi, Hema

## **Abstract:**

Balsot is an initiation rite done when a new Bride is back with her paternity from honeymoon. And it's always practiced as she is about to return from (milsot) reversion. In these ritual 2-3 women from the Bridegrooms family, take with them ornaments, bags of (flour and grains), flask of butter, coffee, sugar (in kilos) and visit the bride's family. On that day, therefore, they braid and crown their daughter in-law with the ornaments they had brought with them. Nevertheless, this rite of passage is known as ritual of erecting Nifhora to the bride. Nifhora is a traditional jewel worn by woman on their head over a braided hair and this rite signifies her transition to new social status. Hence, gives the women acceptance and recognition in the society for new status of womanhood. Accordingly, a woman who she is not undergone through this rite is therefore, considered as neither girl nor woman. Meaning she is in a state of limbo.

## **Definition of blin Terms:**

**Balsot:** Rite of erecting Nifhora for a new-wed bride

**Shingale:** Manhood rite for youngster

**Mirtate:** Initiation rite done next to the rite of shingale

**Gewra:** Engagement

**Simdo:** Rite of Investiture for to-be bride or Bridegroom

**Jenbil:** Basket

**Sebba:** Winnowing fan

**Meshrefet:** Fan

**Seteta:** Disc

**Milsot:** Ritual of returning bride to her paternity from honeymoon

**Nifhora:** Jewel worn on fontanel over braided hair

**Slfi(plu.Aslaf):** Sister in-law

**Nkhwakhi:** Mother in-law

**Hema:** First wife

## Introduction

*Marriage is the mostly extended event which has many stages, rites and customs (Abba Brhane Habte, 2007) Hence, someone who she/he is undergoing the ritual of marriage passes through various Rites of passages. Rite of passage is a ceremony of passage that occurs when one individual leaves one group to enter another. And involves a significant change in status of an individual (Wikipedia).*

*Among the Blin community one who is to undertake the wedding ceremony is culturally expected to fulfill all pre-wedding rites such as Gewra(engagement), Shingale, Simdo, Mirtate and post-wedding rites including Milsot and Balsot. This article explains the ritualistic meaning of Balsot, defines the perceived origin of the practice, and examines how the practice is currently done among the Blin people.*

Although, it is impossible to exactly know the time when did it start as a practice, *Blin* people have had a long history of practicing Balsot as part of their culture. Balsot is rite of initiation of young bride, which is nowadays one of the vividly practiced wedding rites among the Blin community. Most often, practiced by new bride just right when she is back with her family from honeymoon and when she is about to return from milsot. But, still in some Blin communities it is done in her husband's locality.

This ritual involves erecting Nifhora for the bride by her in-laws. Years ago Balsot as a rite was most often done in the months of autumn season in general and in the month of October in particular for the practice to be done with new yield of grains. Otherwise, as if the grain stays not fully ripe at that month, they used to pluck heads of grains, roast it on ember or flame then after, rub it using their hands. And give it to her instead of the new crops believing that giving new crops as symbol of good omen for the bride, whom she is starting new life and setting new dreams, so as to be new as the fresh yield. But nowadays this practice is hardly adhered.

According to the tradition Balsot is typically performed to make the newly married bride recognized as legal wife to her husband. Because putting *nifhora* signifies her transition to new social status

as a woman. That enables her to be inviolate in the community. And here it is a myth which is about the perceived origin of the practice.

## **Tradition about Origin of the Practice**

It is believed that until 1980s Blin communities were led by chieftains and village headmen. According to Oral tradition their daily lives were also almost associated with plundering and raids. Once upon a time a certain dignitary with his son journeyed to visit his friend. As they were walking back to their home, on the way they met water place so the man step down from his horse and ordered his son to take the horse to the water place while, himself turned to a shade of wayside tree to wait his son there. As what his father told him the son took the horse and directed her to drink. But the horse which was quaffing at first suddenly started to spew the water out of her mouth. Then after, the son quickly checked what was inside the horse's mouth. And found a tress curled up in her tongue. So he removed and kept it with him. And after he had come back from the river he showed off it to his father, pleading to bring him the girl whom that tress belongs. But, his father carelessly giggled at him and asked him that how did he knew that tress was not of an animal. Nevertheless, his son assured him saying "Am I unable to differentiate a hair that is of an animal and human". The man then noted that his son might annoy him unless his quest is fulfilled. Hence, he sent 3 adult men to the river and told them "Go and minister carefully when she uses to come to the river so as to fetch water. They then departed and did as what they were told to do, by moving to the place where she was expected to come. Accordingly, they told him that she used to come once in two days. Then having heard their speech he delivered them the horse to bring her. Accordingly, the men went out and brought her just as they were asked by him and gave her to his son. Even so, then the man feared that her parents may follow their way and cause a damage to his family. Thus, he took choosy 7 adult men from his neighboring clans to defend his (son, to be daughter in-laws and family). So they sojourned in the grooms courtyard guarding the chiefs family, he himself providing them with all the necessary provisions.

Even so then, a week later or weeks later he noticed that nothing dreadful thing would happen so far from the girl's parents. Therefore, he only left out a man for whom he supposed was brave and wise enough to defend his son. Hence, he let the rest to go their home. But the choosy man (best-man) stayed there for 40 days with the chief's family. And as he had stayed that many days there, he told him to go and mind his own business. But he reminded him not to forget to come occasionally and visit his friend's family. Week later, the dignitary beckoned all the seven men to his home and told them to take her to the place where they had brought her. Moreover, having said this, he advised them to ask her where her village was. Therefore, when they reached the river so did them. And being led up by her, they departed through the track to her home.

Beforehand, the adult men were strictly told by the bridegroom's father that they had to die on behalf of her whenever her parents launch quarrel against them. But as they had come to her parent's house they were welcomed and well received by her parents. The girl's parents were exceedingly pleased as they saw their daughter shining with complexion due to the goodtime she had spent there during her honeymoon times. Hence, they left her along with her parents and peacefully departed back to their own home. Then after, they recited to him all that had been done to them.

Though, for the dignitary man marrying the slave girl to his son was none of his thoughts his son told him that he wanted the girl to be his wife. Thus, his father was puzzled at his saying thinking what to do. For not to annoy his son by rejecting his quest like wise not to get shame for marrying slave girl for his son. Therefore, at the end he noted that in any case bringing her for his son was inevitable. So he took with him a mistress, carried out ornaments and drove about 12 cows and visited to her parent's family.

Thus, he delivered the cows to the family and left them there saying "*wantrenkha nashibsi qwali ekhwardenkha nashebsi jie*" Which means if they exist check their number and if they reproduce drink their milk. Moreover, he made the *nfhora* putting ceremony to the bride. It is said that, at that time women were taken by raiders now therefore, to be identified as legal wife to someone she has to pass certain rites. Hence, this practice was done for the bride by her

parent's in-laws. When that ritual had been done, days later he once again sent a man and had her back to his son. Therefore, thenceforth, she became legitimate wife. So it is said that, right then certain dignitaries like him started to imitate that ritual and accordingly, ever since then the practice as a wedding rite spread into surrounding villages and clans. Therefore, they gradually developed common ritualistic traditions for it, which are deeply rooted and built upon their culture. Thence forth the practice gradually has become not only part of their culture but one of the most commonly practiced rituals in the Blin culture. Therefore, it is believed that such ritual laid the foundation for the today's practice of Balsot. And it signifies the bride's transition to new social status as an adult woman.

### **The Initiation Rite Ceremony**

As the bridegroom's parents plan to bring back their bride from her parent's locality, they send a man who is supposed to tell to the bride's parents that they are coming one day to take their bride. Then after, bride's mother tells and summons her sister in-laws and neighbors. On that day women in that neighborhood stay there together. And the bridegroom parents bring with them *nifhora*, choker, Shawls, 6 bags of flour, 6 bags of grains, flask of butter, Salt, Pepper, kilos of coffee and sugar. Moreover, as a tradition the bridegroom's parents also come with couple of women from the Bridegrooms family among them with a woman who is called *Hema*(first wife) in order to perform the braiding and crowning rite for the bride. Now therefore, having all these things with them as they had come in the bride's family, they accord them with warm greeting. First they serve them with juices (*Asir*) to quench their thirsty, and then brew coffee for them. Most often, coffee is served along with biscuits, sweets, dates and popcorn, and accompanied with fragrant smell from burning incense. So after drinking the first and second round coffee locally known as *Akhor* and *Digom* respectively, Porridge which is filled up to the brim with butter and yogurt is served to them as a lunch. Then, after they had it, they take the ornaments and draw near to the bride. They display the ornaments on its case and show

it to all those who are in the house, saying "*Qwalakhr gewrakhr*" -which means watch and bless it. Therefore, those who are supposed to see and bless their daughter's ornaments reply saying:

**Naemr shirni Nageda bejakhni** - let them long live and be resourceful.

**Sernawr beldnawr**- let them to wear and rag it.

Then, after they had seen and blessed the ornaments they greet and braid the bride. Most often, the one who she erects Nifhora is the Mother in-law (*Nkhwakhwi*) but if she is not *Lini*(Second wife). If Mother In-law is not Hema a woman from her sisters in-law (*Aslaf*) who she is Hema erects the Nifhora for the bride. And just as she braided and crowned her she blesses her saying:-

- *Kueleta shirni* - May God grant you long lasting life.
- *Kugeda bejakhni* - And may you be a treasured woman.
- *Kumembrorukh akhni* - May it be a fountain of blessing.
- *Dima thefdnkut* - May all the days of your life abundantly blessed.
- *Kida grga akhnkut*- May God blesses your matrimony to the end of your life.
- *Kuhadarli beli* - May God bless you with everlasting matrimony.

Afterward, the woman who braided the bride rides off from the bed on which she was performing the braiding process and washes up her hands with soap. Thereafter, they sit down for a meal and a woman either from those who stayed in the house or from the bridegroom's parents leads the prayer for thanks giving and praising God. Then, they eat porridge which is locally known as "*kala balsotukhw*" roughly translated as porridge for the rite of Balsot.



A. Mothers Watching and blessing their brides Ornaments.



B. Mother In-law braiding her daughter in-law.

Then, after they had the lunch they wash up their hands and then one by one greet and bless the bride, all except the hairdresser. Hereafter,



they take their baskets and get ready to depart to their own house. At that time, therefore, the bride delivers furniture such as *Seba* (Winnowing fan) *Seteta* (disc), *Meshrefet* (fan) or *Jenbil* (basket) to her mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law and also for the neighbors who has come with them to accompany as much as she can afford. Moreover, she sends a fan to one of her elder in-laws saying "give this fan to my mom's in order to bless me". This gift giving is done right when they are about to go home. Hence, the bride's parents go outside the house along with their in-laws to bid them fare well. Then, at that moment thinking if they could give them their bride, they say to them "*Ema gedm yna srgwit edno gn*" meaning, hence we are to take our bride. Her parents replay "*Weqeyro hmbeti*" she is a pregnant, if she had pregnancy. And if she has no pregnancy, they say to them, *Dahnegn lat hmbnekun*, no matter we are together, we can agree on it". So having heard what is being said to them, the groom's parents answer "all right" and depart to their home.



C. Participants eating porridge for the rite of Balsot.



D. Bridegroom's parents with their gifts from bride.

But few days later, again they send someone whom they trust that could deliver their message properly, that they are willing to take their bride back. Accordingly, on the day which her parents think is convenient to them, the best man (bridegroom's best friend) is responsible to bring her back.

## **Conclusions**

As we have seen in the former parts, a newly-wed bride is inevitably expected to undergo the rite of Balsot among the Blin community. Additionally, the new status and rights have been gained for being bride, by undergoing through different wedding rites consequently; she has to pass another additional rite of initiation to rightly represent the status of Womanhood. And that is through the ritual ceremony done for balsot which eventually approves her admission in to new group and bring honor, respect, acceptance and new duties to the initiate (bride).

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## **Primary Source**

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S.no.	Name of interviewee	Age	Village/Town	Date of interview	Place of interview	Length of interview (in Minutes)
1	Asfaha Suleman	87	Glass	09/07/2018	At home	10
2	Mibraq Tesfamichael	55	Glass	09/07/2018	At home	10
3	Netabay Abbe	51	Qunie	19/07/2018	At home	25
4	Betros Asfaha	85	Keren Laelay	20/07/2018	At home	5
5	Mussa Meybetot	87	Keren Laelay	23/07/2018	At home	6
6	Rista Haileab	83	Keren Laelay	23/07/2018	At home	6
7	Arafat Salih	71	Ash-ala(Begu)	28/07/2018	At home	8
8	Rahwa Teklegergis	65	Guba Raki	04/08/2018	At home	20
9	Roshan Zerai	83	Guba Raki	04/08/2018	At home	10
10	Zemichael Bahta	86	Guba Raki	04/08/2018	At home	7
11	Hadgu Redae	70	Musha	22/08/2018	At home	10
12	Letebirhan Tesfay	95	Musha	22/08/2018	At home	15
13	Tesfay Otman	96	Musha	27/10/2018	At home	

14	Weldemicheal yihans	75	<b>Fdeldukhw</b>	30/10/2018	<b>At home</b>	<b>11</b>
15	Hamenor Ishmael	65	<b>Megarih</b>	01/11/2018	<b>At home</b>	<b>5</b>
16	Arhet Hamde	75	<b>Megarih</b>	01/11/2018	<b>At home</b>	<b>7</b>
17	Abdelqadr Idrisay	85	<b>Sultanukhw(Halhal)</b>	03/11/2018	<b>At home</b>	<b>8</b>
18	Abdilai Kelifa	65	<b>Mearki</b>	03/11/2018	<b>Halhal</b>	<b>6</b>
19	Zahra Osman	70	<b>Sultanukhw(Halhal)</b>	03/11/2018	<b>At home</b>	<b>8</b>
20	Musa Nedel	95	<b>Halhal</b>	03/11/2018	<b>At home</b>	<b>10</b>
21	Gebremichael Qurban	85	<b>Halimentel</b>	09/11/2018	<b>At home</b>	<b>5</b>
22	Asrar Hinit	66	<b>Titri(Megarih)</b>	14/11/2018	<b>At home</b>	<b>10</b>
23	Hiwarshek Mehamed	85	<b>Ash-ala(Begu)</b>	23/08/2018	<b>Keren</b>	<b>11</b>
24	Gergis Damer	56	<b>Feledarb</b>	07/09/2018	<b>Expo (Asmera)</b>	<b>12</b>
25	Ametemaryam Okubamichael	70	<b>Ajerebeb</b>	07/09/2018	<b>Expo (Asmera)</b>	<b>15</b>