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WIRSHATO: THE GOURD-SMASHING CEREMONY

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ABSTRACT On Ashura, the tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram, Hararis celebrate *Wirshato*, a gourd-smashing ceremony that commemorates the prohibition of alcohol indicated by the Prophet Muhammad. During the ceremony, young boys run around the city holding sticks and singing the *Wirshato* song; when they enter the house compounds, they are given traditional gourds, habitually employed to contain liquids. The boys hence smash the gourd with their sticks and make toys out of the broken pieces, to symbolize the benefits that derive by breaking bad habits. Other members of the community take part in the festivities by donating gourds and by feasting on porridge to usher in abundance for the coming year. This brief paper will show how the activities surrounding the *Wirshato* ceremony in Harar are concerned with the concept of renewal and are derived from Islamic and customary sources.

Key Words: Gourd; *Wirshato* ceremony; Islamic rituals; Harar; Ethiopia.

A BRIEF HISTORY

In Harar, as in all Muslim countries, New Year's Day falls on either the nineteenth or twentieth day after the celebration of the feast of Arafat (*Waqf al Arafat*, a day of observance during the annual Hajj when pilgrims pray for mercy and blessings) depending on the sighting of the new moon. As the beliefs and customs of particular locales influence the variety of ways that observances are carried out, also in Harar New Year's Day is celebrated in the city's own distinctive style, which will be explored below.

The first month of the Islamic calendar, Muharram, is known as Ashura in Harar, which in Arabic means "tenth." This tenth day of the month is so exalted in Harar that the whole month is named after that tenth day.⁽¹⁾ To fast on this day, in the tradition of Moses and the Prophet Muhammad, is considered a holy and devout duty by Sunni Muslims. Also, Islam teaches that on this day the Prophet Noah and his family and all creatures destined for survival entered the Ark that was to save them from extermination by the Deluge. Moreover, on the tenth day (Ashura) of this first month, Ashura, Hararis celebrate *Wirshato*, a gourd-smashing ceremony that officially commemorates the prohibition of alcohol indicated by the Prophet Muhammad.

In Harar, oral tradition relates another activity of *Wirshato* to the story of the Deluge. It is also recounted that on this tenth day when all had entered the Ark there was one woman who was left behind, but survived. It is said that she was spared because she happened to be preparing *ghenfo*,⁽²⁾ a kind of hot buttered porridge. The connection that the people of Harar have with this story of the Ark is twofold: a short prayer is recited during the local ceremony in order to avert disasters ("Deliver us from calamity with this holiday of the boys of Harar. *Wirshato*,

the breaking of the gourds!'); and *ghenfo* is consumed by community members.

THE CEREMONY AND ITS SYMBOLISMS

The observance of *Wirshato* in Harar starts on New Year's Day and continues for nine consecutive days, the last day being the eve of the tenth day. From New Year's Day, high-spirited groups of young boys walk around their neighborhoods between four and six o'clock in the afternoon; that is after they have attended the Qur'an school to its usual daily conclusion. But quite different from the usual school day, these nine days are extremely special for the young boy because they are *Wirshato* days where every late afternoon is gourd-smashing time. Every boy, after having put his books in their place, makes sport of finding a quality-hewn stick that reverberates well in his firm hold. Having selected their ideal stick the boys set out on their way to participate in the exciting annual ceremony of gourd-smashing, enjoyed by Harari boys for ages. As they promenade from house to house the boys sing:

*Dearest Grandmother,
We have swatted and our sticks are tired.
Please look around in your kitchen
And throw us a gourd to smash!*

When they receive dry gourds from the neighboring households, they proceed to smash the gourd with their sticks and make toys out of the broken pieces, in order to symbolize the benefits that derive from breaking bad habits (such as consuming alcohol, which the Hadiths prohibit).

Not all of the gourds are smashed on each of the nine evenings, however. After gathering a collection of gourds whose interiors are too moist to break easily, the boys perforate and fill them with dry reeds. These bundles of drying gourds are then amassed in the Qur'an schools and in the many shrines of the city. Finally on the evening of the tenth day, Ashura, the boys sit around the gourds and eat *ghenfo* in commemoration of the woman who did not board the Ark, but was saved nevertheless.

Throughout the Harari community, it is believed that whosoever does not manage to eat his/her just portion that day is doomed to suffer from hunger for the rest of the year. Therefore, the women ensure that everyone is served plenty of *ghenfo* and that a fresh supply of gourds is provided for the coming year, thus ensuring abundance of sustenance and renewal of determination to break bad habits. In conclusion, if all medium were indeed an extension of some human faculty, so I would argue that the Harari gourd-breaking ceremony of *Wirshato* is an extension of the Harari's desire and aptitude for continual renewal of spiritual and physical nourishment.⁽³⁾

NOTES

- (1) The term *ashura* is often synonymous with month of Muharram throughout the Muslim world.
- (2) *Ghenfo*, a porridge usually made from barley or wheat, is also referred to as *genfo* and *gonfo* elsewhere in Ethiopia.
- (3) Further exploration of the concept of medium as an extension of human faculties, see Marshall McLuhan's (1964) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw Hill, New York & Routledge, London.

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