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Berat: Another Wedding, Meat Fresh Off The Hoof, and Trying to Buy Beer

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Dear Peter;

A couple of months ago, I described one aspect of a village wedding (KWC-2) -- the wedding night party at the groom's house. During a recent four week stay in Berat, I was able to glimpse some of what transpires on the bride's side of the fence.

The groom's family holds a major hafla (party) at their house the night of the wedding. This hafla features a performance by a hired band and singer, as well as a feast for invited guests. A smaller hafla is held at the bride's house, with a supper for their guests. Much of the bride's time is spent getting ready for the time when the groom will arrive to transport her to his house.

Sayida was 15½ years old at the time of her marriage in August. A small, slender girl with a slightly mischievous smile, she was then living with her mother Gadriya and three younger brothers, Sayid, 17, Hajaj, 13, and Badowi, 10, in the hamlet of Ezbat Basili. Two older sisters, Hamida, 32, and Suad, 22, had already been married off.

The future husband, Hassan, was in his early 30s and lived with his family in the hamlet of El Qatar. He works for a travel agency in Luxor.

Hassan's family had been looking for a wife for him. Since Sayida's father was deceased, Hassan's father came to talk to Mohamed, 29, her oldest brother. Mohamed knew that Hassan came from a good family, in fact one of the most prosperous in El Qatar, so he had no objections. As far as I know, Sayida had no objections either, although I was clearly told that it was the two families who made the decision. She probably had little choice.

It is common in Islamic countries for a man to marry the daughter of his paternal or maternal uncle. If you trace family ancestries in Berat, you might find that everyone is related somewhere down the line. But I do not think Sayida's father was one of Hassan's uncles.

Courtship in the village is generally conducted at long range. Mohamed told me he had never spoken at length to his wife, Houda, until he began negotiations with her father.

A village marriage is not simply a union of two individuals. It is also an alliance of families. Parents seem to have veto powers.

This is true of Christian, as well as Muslim, families. A Christian friend told me about a farmer friend of

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Sayida (left) with two friends the day before her wedding

his named Nabil (a pseudonym). Nabil once fell in love with a beautiful cousin of his and wanted to marry her. But his father refused, saying the girl had no money. He warned his son that if he persisted in his plans, he would be disowned and have to live apart from his family. Nabil yielded and married a girl of his father's choosing, a girl with money and land. But his bitterness remained. When his cousin married, Nabil was so upset he fled to Cairo for a couple of weeks with a friend. When he returned, he visited his cousin and wished her good fortune. But he rarely goes to visit her now. He also rarely speaks to his wife or son. It is well known in the village that relations in the family are very bad.

Once the decision to marry is made, the man pays a bride-price (mahr) and the two fathers sign a contract. The groom pays two-thirds down and the other third in case of divorce. The money is used by the bride's family to purchase her trousseau.

I have no personal knowledge of this aspect of Sayida's wedding, but it is standard practice, according to two of the best authorities on Egyptian village life.*

The day before the wedding is filled with much activity as the women prepare for the next evening's feast.

Sayida, Gadriya, and Houda set to work in the late morning making about 100 loaves of bread. This is the thick, nutritious, leavened bread that villagers eat, rather than

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* Ayrout, Henry Habib. The Egyptian Peasant. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963; Ammar, Hamed. Growing Up In An Egyptian Village. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1966.

Sayida

the coarse, flat, unleavened bread found in the cities.

The women work in front of an oven constructed of mud and straw and built into the wall of Gadriya's house. With very little ventilation in the room, it is intensely hot work.

In the evening, the women had a more relaxing activity.

Since Pharaonic times, the village women have used the leaves of the henna bush (lawsonia inermis) as a cosmetic. Older women use the henna as a dye in their hair; the younger ones use it to color their hands and feet. A poultice made from the powdered leaves and applied hot to the skin will leave an orange-red tint.

This evening, the women were applying the henna to Sayida. With all the small girls, and some small boys as well, joining in to put henna on their hands and feet, it became a rather festive occasion. The children derived much amusement from applying the mud-like mixture and then wrapping their hands and feet in cloth to keep it moist.

I used the occasion to give Sayida a present.

Earlier in the day, a man named Haboodi had come by on his donkey. A stout man with a black mustache, he is one of several village men who earn extra money by collecting eggs from the women in exchange for perfumes, soaps, shampoos, and small items of clothing. Wooden baskets hung from both sides

of the donkey to hold the eggs and wares.

I didn't have any eggs to give him, but for LE 5 I bought a pink malaya that Houda picked out for me. This is a scarf the village women wear around their heads. This one was made of polyester, in Japan.

After some tutoring by Mohamed, I approached Sayida and said, ''Sayida, khadi (you take) hadiyya (present).'' Whether I said it correctly or not, she took the proferred gift with a shokran (thank you).

On the wedding day, the women spent many long hours over their cooking pots and ovens. While they were making some round biscuits during the afternoon, I caught a glimpse of Sayida. Her hands and feet were stained with henna,* as I had expected, but her face was now covered with a dark, mud-like substance. Mohamed identified this as trommus, which he said was made from ground-up beans. I assume it was supposed to be of some benefit to her complexion.

In the early evening, around six, Sayida had a religious duty to fulfill before getting dressed in her wedding gown. I wasn't there at the time, but I heard that she took a taxi to the neighboring hamlet of El Kom to visit the tomb of a religious sheikh. There was no ceremony or Qur'an reading involved, just a visit. It was a custom for village women to do this before marriage.

I asked one male villager if it was for good luck. ''Yeh, something like that,'' he replied, adding that the visit would make the bride a ''good person.''

I found this interesting because Muslim women in Berat generally play very little role in their religion, at least in the public sphere. You never see them in the village mosque. At religious haflas, they sit on the ground in the darkness while the men occupy the benches underneath the electric lights to hear the sheikh recite from the Qur'an. Sayida's visit to the sheikh's tomb was the closest thing to a religious act I've heard of a village woman performing, other than undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca.** On the other hand, tomb

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* Henna has more than just cosmetic applications. Mohamed said the men sometimes use it on their hands to protect against callouses. Village women use it as a home remedy to treat fevers. I witnessed this use of it one time at the house of Zeynab, Houda's mother. The youngest girl in the family, Moona, probably four or five years old, was lying on a mat coughing and moaning sporadically. Her face was plastered with a henna poultice. The idea behind this was that the henna would draw out the heat. Moona did recover a few days later, without having seen the doctor. I asked Mohamed what Dr. Boutris, the village physician, thought about this business. Mohamed laughed and said, ''I think that make Dr. Boutris nervous when he sees that.'' Mohamed himself is a modern man. He goes running off to see Boutris at the first sign of medical trouble.

** And that was a case of a woman talking about making the trip.

visiting in general is a predominantly female obligation.*

The incident was interesting for another reason. As far as I've been able to tell so far, Muslim sheikhs do not possess as much supernatural power as the Egyptian Christians attribute to their priests. Coptic priests are considered to have healing powers, even by Muslims.** But I've never heard of a village Muslim going to a sheikh to be healed. The fact that Sayida went to the sheikh's tomb seems to indicate that dead sheikhs, at least, can provide some spiritual protection.*** Living sheikhs do enjoy great prestige and respect among their fellow Muslims.

While Sayida was off on this errand, Gadriya and Houda set off on the 15-minute walk to El Qatar carrying pots and pans on their heads. These items were to be delivered to Hassan's house as part of the bride's trousseau. I have seen a similar, although much larger, procession of women carrying household items on their heads before a wedding in a Delta village.

After 8 p.m., the first of about 50 guests began to arrive to eat the supper the women had spent all day preparing. This meal consisted of beans in a tomato sauce, bamia (okra) stew, rice, bread, and small pieces of beef carefully parcelled out by Mohamed.

The male guests ate at Mohamed's house, and the female guests at Gadriya's. They all ate, in true Egyptian peasant fashion, sitting cross-legged on the ground in front of a very low table.

Afterward, the male guests sat outside on benches in the open air and chatted, smoked cigarettes, and drank tea.

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* Ammar has an interesting comment about the role of village women in Islam. ''Women do not participate either in individual or communal worship in the mosque as they are excluded altogether from it, but there is no Koranic support for this. On the other hand, they are generally the performers of magicoreligious rituals connected with averting the evil eye, bringing about pregnancy, or healing the sick; and men are less engaged in this sphere.''

** I have actually seen a Muslim woman consult a Coptic priest about some bad dreams her child was having. This occurred at the Church of St. Tadros the Warrior in the desert outside Berat. The woman came to the church with her small boy to ask the priest to say a ''special prayer'' for him. The boy had been having nightmares about a dog attacking him. The priest took the two into the church and apparently obliged her. A Christian informant told me this was not an uncommon occurrence.

*** A young Muslim villager told me about a special power living sheikhs have ''because they know Allah.'' If a sheikh sees a man approaching him, he knows what is on the man's mind before a word is said.

While there are no female sheikhs (in the original Arabic, sheikh means ''old man''), Muslim women can acquire some spiritual authority by transference. I was astounded one night to see a middle-aged woman join the dancers at a religious hafla. Young girls may occasionally dance at secular haflas, but only men perform religious dances. I was told that this woman was the mother of a sheikh who died when he was 17. The mother took his spiritual authority. Villagers now consult her when they have ''a problem of the heart.''

Sayida receiving contributions the day after her wedding
Houda is to the left of her, and Gadriya to the left of Houda

The women remained in Gadriya's house helping Sayida to get ready.

They achieved quite a transformation. There are no beauty parlors in Berat, but the skills of the village women are not to be scoffed at. They had teased out Sayida's black hair to give her narrow face a symmetry it had lacked before. The use of cosmetics, lipstick and kohl* around the eyes, imparted a new womanly maturity. There was still no hiding the undeveloped figure, but her white, western-style wedding gown dazzled the eye with its brilliance. For maybe the only time in her life, Sayida had an opportunity to be beautiful.

Everyone else thought so too. Shortly after 9, Sayida emerged from the preparation room in Gadriya's house and took her seat on a chair placed on top of a bench in the central hallway. The women, girls and small boys of the family and neighboring houses sat in an admiring semi-circle around her.

There she sat for an hour and a half, like a queen holding court, basking in the limelight. I was struck though by the passive, almost vacant, expression on her face. Hardly speaking at all, she looked more like a statue or an idol than a girl experiencing an exciting, momentous change in her life. There were none of the emotional outbursts, laughter and tears, that one might usually associate with a wedding.

At 10:30, there was a great stir as Hassan and his brother, disembarking from taxis, swept into the room. Hassan was wearing a light grey suit complete with shoes and tie. His brother also wore a suit.

A short man with a serious look on most occasions, Hassan took a chair on the bench next to Sayida and posed with her, very stiff and formal, as a photographer went to work with the flash.

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* According to Ayrout, kohl has another function besides enhancing beauty as an eyelash and brow liner (its color is black) — it wards off the evil eye.

The pictures taken, everybody rushed outside and piled into four or five taxis for a horn-honking procession around the neighboring village of Qurna. The route is apparently chosen because it follows one of the few paved roads in the area. When the taxis returned to the dirt paths of Berat, they churned up great clouds of dust.

Reaching El Qatar, the passengers got off at the house of Hassan's family. The bride and groom disappeared into an upstairs room, their new home, while the guests milled about in the courtyard for an hour or so.

The next morning, Gadriya, Houda, and several other women and children in the family returned to El Qatar around 7. I followed with Sayid, one of Sayida's brothers, at 8.

We arrived at Hassan's house to find Sayida wearing an attractive red dress seated on a chair atop a bench, as she had the night before at her mother's house. Her face carried the same vacant and passive look of the previous night. Women and children sat on mats in front of her, all in their best clothes.

As the guests arrived, almost all women, they said good morning to Sayida and also to Gadriya and Houda, who were sitting next to her. Sayida shook their hands limply and greeted them in a barely audible voice. As each woman gave Sayida a pound or two, Gadriya would write her name down in a ledger book.

This custom of giving contributions is a very important part of the social ritual observed at weddings and other haflas. The maze of reciprocal transfers essentially allows people to put on these parties.* The idea is that when you host a party, you can spend a lot of money on it knowing that your relatives and friends will help share the expense.

A week after Sayida's wedding, a woman in an orange dress and black cape came to visit Gadriya and give her a couple of pigeons. Gadriya had given this woman some food at her wedding, so now the woman was giving Gadriya something in return.

Since each person's gift is supposed to top the one he received, you end up with an Egyptian version of a chain letter.**

In the case of Sayida's wedding, I know that Gadriya

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* Ammar has this to say about the practice: "In ceremonies of circumcision, wedding, and preparation for pilgrimage, contributions (nakout) play a considerable part, especially in the case of the first two ceremonies, in covering the expenses incurred during the celebration. It is known by the villagers that on such occasions one usually gains financially, as the person celebrating is paid back in one evening all that he had invested previously at different times, and thus it is a time for getting back one's savings."

** An example: a man named Fuad gave a circumcision hafla in August. He spent about LE 500 for food, a band, and new galabiyahs for his male relatives. But he collected LE 225 at the door during the meal. A neighbor woman gave Fuad's wife LE 300, although the money will be returned when the neighbor woman has a hafla.

spent about LE 120 on the wedding supper and the trousseau, the pots and pans carried off to Hassan's house. She received about LE 70 in contributions. According to custom, the mahr would have helped pay for the trousseau, but I don't know how much that was in this case.*

Sayida's dowry was the greatest expense. Gadriya spent about LE 400 for a gold necklace and ring. To finance this, she sold one of her cows for LE 315. Before the wedding, Mohamed had been talking about buying Sayida some new shoes, so that apparently was his contribution.

Mohamed said Hassan's family spent LE 900 on their hafla, but he did not know how much money came back in contributions.

There is clearly a lot of social pressure on villagers to give good haflas, to "keep up with the Joneses," so to speak. Mohamed was worried that if he did not have enough food at the wedding hafla, people would talk about him.

"I know some people who have small hafla," he said. "I hear people make jokes about them. I not like people to joke about me, say 'Mohamed, he not have any money.' "

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A prominent feature of any large hafla is the slaughter and cooking of a sheep the afternoon of the feast. When Fuad, one of Gadriya's neighbors, held a circumcision hafla for his son,** I got a close look at this event.

A man named Sayid Ali Lazhar, who is built like a linebacker, had been chosen as butcher.

As the crowd of men and children gathers around in an enclosed courtyard of Fuad's house, Sayid gives the sheep a last drink of water. The men swiftly wrestle the sheep to the ground, holding its legs. With several rough sawing movements of his knife, Sayid cuts the sheep's throat as the blood spurts upward. The sheep flails about as the men let go and its life escapes in a whimpering, gurgling scream.

Even after most of its blood has soaked into the dirt, the sheep continues his attempt to rise, apparently a muscle reaction. Even after the sheep is skinned and dismembered, and the meat sits neutrally on a serving dish, some muscles continue twitch

Watching this scene gave me an entirely new appreciation of the verb "butcher."

It is a custom on these occasions for the men and boys to dip their hands in the sheep's blood and put their handprints

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* According to Ayrout, the mahr ranges from LE 15 to LE 50. But his book was last revised in the early 1960s.

** Boys are usually circumcised between the ages of three and six. The hafla held to celebrate this is very similar to that held for weddings. Ammar mentions female circumcision as a common practice, but I heard nothing about that.

Children holding doomed sheep by the ears

Off with its head

Fresh meat, anyone?

Into the pot. Sayid holds the enormous stirrer

on the wall. They also write their names underneath, which neccessitates dipping into the sheep's blood several times.

Once the sheep lies still on the ground, Sayid takes a sharp, pointed stake made from a date palm frond and punctures the skin of the animal's right leg, running the stick up alongside the bone. Removing the stick, he puts his mouth to the hole and, with numerous mighty puffs, inflates the area between the sheep's skin and meat. The entire animal swells up like a water bag being filled.

Preparing the rest of the feast -- men cutting up tomatoes and okra. This was for the male guests. The women cooked for the female guests.

Sayid's next step is to pick up a heavy stick and belabor the puffed-up carcass for a couple of minutes. Then, two men hold it up by the hind legs and Sayid begins cutting away the skin, starting from the back. Occasionally he dips his hand in a bucket of water and splashes the water between skin and meat to help the separation process. In half an hour, the carcass is no longer recognizable as a sheep.

Because there are few refrigerators in Berat (only two in Ezbat Basili hamlet, which contains about 650 people), the meat eaten by villagers is always fresh off the hoof like this. There are basically two ways for a villager to get meat, when he can afford it. He can either buy it in one of the village markets, or get together with some neighbors and purchase shares in an animal, usually a sheep.

There is a butcher in the hamlet of El Kom, Berat's administrative center, who slaughters an entire cow or two every Wednesday. He then sells the meat for LE 3.5 a kilo

I went with Mohamed once to see this operation, but we arrived too late. There was huge dark stain in the dirt, two hides piled against a wall (these sell in Luxor for LE 25 each and are used for leather goods), and two naked carcasses hanging from hooks at the improvised butcher's shop.

The butcher, whose name is El Azap, has set a table up with a set of scales against the wall of a house and built a cloth-covered shelter over it. He uses the flat top of a tree stump as a cutting board and the inner layers of ''Romanian Portland Cement'' bags to wrap the meat in. His assistant, an old man named Taiya, notes the various transactions in a

small ledger book. Taiya's eyesight is so bad he has to hold the book two inches from his nose to be able to read the entries.

There is an itinerant butcher in El Kom named Yunnis. He does not have a shop, but will slaughter a sheep right at your doorstep and have the pieces of meat neatly arranged on a tray within an hour and a half. In return for this service, he keeps the sheepskin (used on donkeys, benches, in taxis or trucks for sitting on) and the animal's stomach, intestines, heart and head. He also gets LE 10 in cash.

A small sheep costs about LE 40, a large one up to LE 100. The meat retails in the village for LE 4 a kilo.

After he has cut the meat and laid it out on a tray, Yunnis sets up the portable scales he brought with him on his donkey and portions out the meat to the villagers who bought shares in the sheep. The meat will usually be cooked and eaten that day.

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Liquor of all kinds is freely available in Luxor, where several small shops sell it. The selection, however, is limited to Egyptian brands and a few foreign brands.

Men from the village can buy it there if they take the time and trouble of going into town, a journey that requires at least two taxi rides and two trips on the Nile ferry.

Sometimes a man will buy a case of arak (a very potent cheap thrill) and sell the bottles for LE 1 each at a secular hafla. This is done openly and surreptitiously at the same time.

Everyone at the hafla knows what's going on, but the man will still keep the case of arak concealed in a burlap bag. Men in the audience will leave their benches one at a time and walk over to where the dealer is sitting. They hand him the money, slip the bottles into the pockets of their galabiyahs and return to their seats. Before long, many young men are lounging around blurry-eyed with foolish grins on their faces. Some get rambunctious and start bellowing at the singer or audience. I've seen one fellow forcibly ejected from a hafla.

But this being a country where Islam is the state religion, the government does not make life easy for imbibers, particularly in the villages.

The only places in Berat where you can legally buy beer are the three tourist inns (you can only buy arak or brandy in Luxor). This effectively keeps out most villagers because they would not feel comfortable around the tourists. Only young men who speak some English or French and work with tourists will come to these inns to drink.

Most villagers would also be reluctant to pay the tourist price, which is LE 2 for a liter bottle of Stella beer, the only kind available in the country. Shops in Luxor sell

Stella to Egyptians for LE 1.50 a bottle.

What happens then is that men will open up clandestine shops in the villages. But this is not always a reliable source of supply.

During one hafla, a village friend and I decided to try to buy some beer in the village. We walked into El Kom about 9 p.m. My friend stopped at several houses to make inquiries. There were a couple of furtive conversations in doorways.

We continued on to a part of the hamlet where one of these clandestine shops had been operating. Not wanting to attract undue attention, my friend left conspicuous me standing in the shadows while he went up the street to check out the situation.

He came back five minutes later to tell me that the man who operated the shop was in trouble with the police. He would make a trip to the Luxor police station the next day to talk with them about his selling beer without permission.

So we returned empty-handed and still thirsty to the hafla.

Fortunately, around 11 p.m., two other thirsty men drove off to one of the tourist inns on a tractor, bringing back four bottles of beer.

The four of us sat down in a nearby field, away from the lights and music, and enjoyed the welcome refreshment. There was one moment of uneasiness when a man with a rifle slung over his shoulder sauntered over to our group. But this man, a ghafir (rural policeman), just wanted to chat.

Across the field, lighted cigarettes, like clusters of fireflies, indicated where other groups of men were drinking arak or cheap French brandy, or smoking hashish.*

The Islamic religion, of course, frowns on all this activity, to some effect. Egyptian women don't seem to use intoxicants at all, and far fewer men do than in our western culture. The hijinks of Berat youths are nothing to compare with those of American college freshmen.

But there's some comfort in knowing that even here, in village Egypt, it all goes on.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Cline

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* Hashish is available in the village and costs about LE 4 a gram. I know one man who reputedly smokes some every day. Opium is also supposed to be available, and there are a few addicts, but it is rather rare. Since beer is comparatively expensive, the hardcore drinkers in the village rely on arak or cheap French brandy. Most villagers I know wouldn't touch arak because of its deadly effect on the stomach. But they considered the DuPuis brand of French brandy to be something of a luxury at LE 4.50 a bottle. When you come down to it, the most abused drug in the village is one that's perfectly legal --

Brewing up some tea at the end-of-Ramadan festival and ruining their stomachs, if not their characters. The boy's American Stars and Stripes button says ''Love''

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tea. Ayrout had some unkind things to say about the average Egyptian's propensity to drink vast quantities of heavily-sugared tea: ''By boiling it until it turns black and sweetening it heavily, a thick, syrupy liquid is obtained, rich in tannin and alkaloids, which sooner or later ruins the stomach and the nerves, weakens the body, and debases the character.'' Whew. Since the oppressive Egyptian heat tends to make one physically and mentally sluggish, I have found the tea to be a needed stimulant. But Ayrout is right about its effects on your stomach. Too much can make you nauseous. I just hope my character has not been seriously debased.

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