

## Of Honey and Honeycombs

Written by Natnael Yebio W.

Wednesday, 09 November 2016 01:33

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Is there anything sweeter than honey? Pleasant saying are often compared to a honeycomb, which is sweet to the soul and a healing to the bones, says the wise king.

Americans call their wives honey and in some villages in Eritrea children call their mothers Ma'aro, meaning "My honey", until they get married and find another honeycomb to relish. So much so good. Now let's come to the makers of honey, the honeybees! Which are everything but sweet, for their stings are painful and a swarm of angry bees can snuff the life out of a full grown person.

The honeybee (the killer type) gives you honey, which is sweeter than manna, and when angry gives you a sharp sting, which makes a mosquito bite look like a tickle by comparison.

As a child, I always wondered how something that made you happy could also make you scared at the same time. This is food for thought. You are prompted to say: You don't get anything for nothing. So much for philosophy! Now back to the honeycomb.

In traditional Eritrea, honey is collected by village keepers who craft a beehive (Known as Dkhwen) from mud and dung and hung it on a wall or in a tree in the backyard. The next step is to go and find the bees that produce the honey. In our tradition, the bees follow the 'king bee' not the queen bee and obey his instructions. Or you can go to the village market and buy a swarm of bees (With queen bee buried under crawling drones or workers) in one formless mass.

I remember once traveling by bus watching a certain man seated beside me carrying a tree branch covered with a crawling bees. Of course the bee merchant or perhaps the bee keeper kept his 'weapon of mass destruction' away from the people by having it hanging down the side of the bus using his outstretched hands. You can imagine a holocaust that could have ensued if the man holding the bee-covered branch had suddenly pulled back his hand into the bus. Ours belong to the killer bees. And imagine the driver jumping out the window leaving the passengers all by themselves in a drifting bus. Certain Death!

The beehive has now its new occupants which are supposed to produce honey for home consumption or maybe for sale. But the farmers are wary of ants and skunks, for the former irritate the bees and disturb their work, while the later simply make off with the honeycomb

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along with the bee population comprising queen, soldiers and nurses for a sumptuous dinner.

The dkhwen has a small opening for the bees to get in laden with pollen and nectar, (Well come home! Yummy) and come out with determination to travel farther for more sweet provision (May the lord bring you home safely). But what exactly is going on inside the beehive? According to tradition, the king bee is giving royal orders to his subjects for more supply for nectar and pollen. Quick, the bees (according to tradition) begin to shit honey as a response to the demand and shake their legs to unload the yellow powder. And if someone should come with an intention of stealing honey, the alert bees, again according to tradition, don't sting the culprit with their 'sharp tail' but bite him with their sharp teeth until he withers with pain.

So how do you officially steal the honey? The process is known in Tigrigna as mbrbar. First you wait until it gets dark and then you burn a bundle of kindle wood and smoke out the bees from their hives. They are supposed to leave the honey alone without a fight.

Some peoples also use the mouth spray method to slow the flight of the bees. The idea is to slow down the flight of a bee so that it cannot outrun you and sting you in the end. But, the stinging orgy may go on, smoke or no smoke, and the honey robber who gets all the stings is supposed to have a stoic endurance and focus with all his might on the honey.

"How is it that you don't feel any pain after being stung by so many bees?" I once asked a supposedly professional barbaray(Honey extractor).

"After eating so much honey all my life, the sting has no effect on me," he said.

The honeycomb is then taken home before the 'falling' eyes of the village kids who have been watching the whole process with faltering self-control.

Some countrymen eat honey in its pure form or mixed with water (birzi) or even mixed with tsiray sewa(made to settle down, in order to kill its sourness). Still others sell it for profit. Although it is rare in our country, villagers also make mies (mead) by mixing honey with water and adding hop and some spices and leaving it to ferment and mellow.

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In the past, warlords made their warriors drink strong mies so that they could fight like ferocious beasts in the battlefield. However, the same strategy was adopted on the other side of the fence with the enemy warriors downing goblets of strong mies, for the same purpose. The end result was that the fight became a carnage with frenzied soldiers unable to differentiate between friend and foe.

Eritrean use honey to cure a range of ailments starting from mild headaches to hypertension, but, honey is best used to heal broken bones, to clean wounds of germs, to make the eyes sharper and to my amusement I learned, during windy and dry summers honey was used as a sort of chapstick.

The wax is used to cure mild throat infection and to make twaf (wax candle) to be offered as gifts for church saints. The goldsmiths also use it in their crafting of gold ornaments. But villagers rarely use honey for home consumption, preferring to sell it for profit to make ends meet.

Here, honeymooners are exceptions and enjoy much honey which is brought to them in their love nest.

Thus, although the Tigrigna word for honeymoon (Histnot) doesn't contain the word 'honey' the honeymooners themselves are treated to bowlfuls of honey.

Alas, when merchants take their honey to the market to sell, they often make sure that it is not pure honey. So to make fast profit with make-believe honey, they mix it with banana or dates, and only experienced connoisseurs know the difference.

Once a certain honey merchant came to our house and showed us his sweet merchandize with pieces of honeycombs floating over a viscous white liquid in a large tin can.

"Is it pure honey?" Asked a neighbor

"God is my witness that it is so," Said the honey dealer.

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The neighbor hesitated, took a small lump of the stuff and tasted it.

“Okay I’ll take it all,” she said.

Hardly a week had passed than the honey began to change color and then texture and eventually revealed its real contents. Sugar and banana with some traces of pure honey.

There are several types of honey. Red, yellow, brown, and white. The last mentioned has higher demand. I have seen honey with mutilated parts of bees glued to it. It seems that the honey collector has crushed the honeycomb along with its occupants. They say it is good for health.

There is also a type of honey known as Me’ar tsigenay. It is made by ant looking flying insects and is found buried under the ground. It is used purely for medical purposes. A spoonful of that stuff and you find yourself vomiting and for compensation your Asthma is gone!

For wild honey, you have to follow the harharet, a quising of a bird that leads you to where the honey is in expectation that it will get a part of the booty. But, according to tradition, where there is wild honey, there is also a python ready to gobble you up. So pray before eating your honey.

“Simon, why don’t you stop your smoking habits, you are ruining your lungs,”

“But every morning before taking my breakfast, I eat three spoonfuls of honey.”

Simon is over fifty years old. If too much smoking has already destroyed his lungs, too much sugar will eventually increase his chances of becoming diabetic. But, since honey is taken as cure-all by almost the majority of our people, Simon will certainly continue smoking till the day he dies.