

Death and Mourning in the Tigrigna Ethnic Group

Written by Abrahaley Habte

Death is always new, says a Tigrigna saying. People never get used to it. It is never fully comprehended. Never fully understood. People see it every day, but forget that they, too, one day will die.

It is so common, and yet, it is a fresh experience, as if people have not buried their loved ones before - family members, friends, and others close to them. In the Tigrigna ethnic group, it is perceived as such a permanent separation that people have developed beliefs about what it means to die and how, in their opinion, they can conquer death. Such beliefs (so ingrained in the public imagination) determine their actions after the death of a loved one.

But, as a Tigrigna song has it, there are various ways of dying, and they evoke different reactions, and are associated with various feelings in the Tigrigna ethnic group. Some evoke pride, others make people feel ashamed of the way their loved one lost his or her life, which makes them want to hide its cause. And still other kinds of death cause such strong reactions -- anger, rage and insult -- so deep that the close relatives of the dead are driven to take the law into their hands and take the life of the person that caused their relative's death.

One kind of death, the natural death (death through illness or old age), the kind of death caused by natural means, the kind that is thought not to be caused through the agency of human beings, is one that causes little negative reactions against other people. It is thought to be the work of God, and people often resignedly accept it saying, "You can't stop His [God's] day" or "What He has ordered no one can stop".

In an event of death, the most common question asked among the Tigrigna is, "Has he got any children?" or "Has she got any children?" Up on receiving a positive reply, people say, "If he has children he has not died. Man is survived by his children. Man is not eternal and can't live forever." People become grief stricken if the dead has had no children. "It is then," people say, "that man truly dies, if he or she has no offspring to keep his name alive."

Death due to accidents is one kind of death that causes much grief. Often accidents are not foreseen, and, therefore, they are not expected at the time they occur. For this reason, death through accidents is considered unfortunate, an unwelcome intrusion that cuts a man's, a woman's, or a child's life short.

Death and Mourning in the Tigrigna Ethnic Group

Written by Abrahaley Habte

The age of the dead person determines whether the grief of the family will be very bad or not so bad. If the dead person is past middle age, the grief of the family is not that bad. However, if the family lost its breadwinner, the family grieves due to the fact that it has lost its source of income, and life will not be easy for the family with the passing of its bread winner. "Poor children, who will look after his children?" is one of the comments, people make in such circumstances.

In the past, the various customary laws of Eritrea took into account the circumstances of the family in an attempt to alleviate the family's hardship if a family lost its bread winner in a murder. In the Tigrigna ethnic group, not less than three customary laws can be found. These customary laws served the people for hundreds of years and kept its peace, until the coming of the Italians in the 1880s. These laws made sure that the family of the dead was compensated for the services they got from their loved one. The laws, which the Tigrigna population accepted whole-heartedly, and gave full support to, decreed that the family of the victim be compensated with 1,000 (one thousand) Maria Theresa thalers in the case of a murder when the killing is intentional, and 500. 00 (five hundred) Maria Theresa thalers when it is an accident.

In the present, murder, as a criminal act, is dealt with by the state. In Higtat Indaba Bimenxir Zemenawi Higi Nxotawi Maerinet, a book on the customary laws of Eritrea, Muluberhan Berhe (p. 249) states that according to the Transitional Civil Code of Eritrea the compensation paid the heirs of the dead person have the right to demand compensation that takes into account three things: (1) the damage in income caused due to death of a loved one (2) moral compensation, which includes psychological damage due to loss of care and love from the loved one killed, which should not exceed 1,000 Nacfa (3), damage or loss of income that may occur in the future as a result of the death.

If the dead person is a young married man, his wife is said to have lost her best opportunity for happiness or happy or successful married life. "Tegorishuwa," people say, of the young widow. "Togorishuwa" means that what she possessed has been irreparably broken. Similarly, a young man who has lost his wife to death is considered to have lost his best opportunity for happiness.

Though the death of spouse affects both the man and the woman, it is the woman that it affects very badly. Due to attitudes of the society, a young widow has less an opportunity than a young widower for remarriage, especially if she has a child or children. The man has a much bigger opportunity, a less darker future (than a widow) and often remarries even if he has children. Close family members and relatives put pressure on him to remarry, while similar pressures are absent regarding a widow, and people who want to marry often choose previously unmarried

Death and Mourning in the Tigrigna Ethnic Group

Written by Abrahaley Habte

women to widows. But, sometimes widowers remarry, and often they marry a widow.

The different Customary Laws of Eritrea had articles that instructed the family of the murderer pay blood-money to the family of the victim (specified in the articles) but varies from one customary law to the other, and this settled the feud in a way satisfying to both. In the past, if such murder cases were not settled, a member of the victim's family settled it by killing a member of the murderer's family. In other words, murder led to revenge in kind.

Suicide is an abnormal kind of death in the Tigrigna, and often people do not want to reveal the cause of death if a person has taken his or her life. Despite the fact that people commit suicide for different reasons, people do not see victims of suicide in a favorable light. The Orthodox Tewhado Church teaches that a man's life belongs to God, no one should take human life for whatever reason. This teaching is in agreement to people who reject mercy-killing. For this reason, in the past people who committed suicide were buried in a separate place in the graveyard, away from the other dead.

In Eritrea, we have a separate name for the fighters killed during the armed struggle for independence and the national service men and women killed in defense of the sovereignty of the country. They are the semaetat, or swuat, the martyrs. To talk of the death of non-fighters and non-national service men and women, we use arifu (for men) and arifa (for women), which literally means that that person has rested from his labour, implying that this world is a place of drudgery and hard toil. In other words, the dead have gone to a better place, where they can 'rest' undisturbed. On the other hand, to refer to the death of fighters and national service men and women we use the root word, mswae (to be martyred). It is the same word used in religious contexts, when a sheep or a goat or any other animal (acceptable) is killed for the sins of the people. It implies that the one that got martyred died for the people, or he or she died their death. He took away the death they should have died. In other words, the word swue, a martyr, suggests theirs is not a common death, but one for a noble cause.

As with other peoples, the Tigrigna have some undocumented rules about different things, and members of the ethnic group are informed through experience how they should behave in certain circumstances. If we take death and mourning in the Tigrigna, the members of the ethnic group observe some rules. Death and mourning have their own rules - what is socially acceptable and not acceptable.

In the Tigrigna ethnic group, it is a taboo for a man to weep loudly. It is the women who weep

Death and Mourning in the Tigrigna Ethnic Group

Written by Abrahaley Habte

the loudest. In the Tigrigna, it is not acceptable for men to weep uncontrollably. They may be excused to wail their hearts out during the first few minutes only. After that, they are expected to be 'tough' and control their emotions. You have to put a brake on your emotions, as a man, they are told, and people disapprove loud wailing from a man as unmanly, and men are sneered at if they didn't check their grief. It is thought unbecoming of a man to show such grief, as they are expected to bottle their emotions up, and put a tight lid on them. "How can you uncontrollably weep like a woman?"

It is not uncommon for the dead to be brought to their homeland for burial, even from such distant places as the USA and Canada. Though there could be other reasons, the main one is to give the family an opportunity to say goodbye. It is thought that such a burial (in the dead person's hometown) gives the family an opportunity to announce the death of their loved one to all family, friends, and acquaintances. If, for some reason, the dead are buried elsewhere, the family arrange what is known as Kalaai Qebri (literally, second burial) though there is no body present for a real burial. People from far and near gather to an arranged place, usually the home town or home village of the dead person, or the town he lived in before he left, or the town where his family live in.

Before they set out for the funeral, women make sure that food for people attending the funeral is ready. Women go from door to door in the neighborhood, and inform the neighborhood that one of their members has lost a relative and the date and place of funeral. The neighbors assist the grieving family either by contributing cash or food. The womenfolk of the neighbourhood make sure that injera and stew is made ready. It is thought unfair to keep people hungry during the trip and back since it may take hours depending on the distance between the dead person's home village and his residence. If the family is well-off, it makes sure that the necessary purchases and preparations are made to provide food after the funeral.

Usually, families want to bury their dead in the hometowns or villages. If this is different from the family's residence, relatives, neighbours, and acquaintances are expected to be there during the funeral. Frictions arise between the mourning family and friends if the latter (whom the former thought as very close) didn't attend the funeral. For this reason, some people (because families are close-knit due to blood relationship or due to strong friendships and because they value this relationships) put-off even important engagements just to attend the funeral of a friend.

Most of the time, the dead are mourned for a week in a Christian family, but only three days in a Muslim family, which is accepted as Allah's will in the latter. During the mourning time, neighbours and relatives from far and near visit the family, in an attempt to comfort it. They

Death and Mourning in the Tigrigna Ethnic Group

Written by Abrahaley Habte

bring in tea, coffee, or other food, which is served to visitors, who come to share the family's grief and comfort its members. The visitors engage the family members in a conversation or storytelling, which distracts them, though temporarily. A stream of visitors keeps the mourning family company during their mourning days. Some very close relatives are required by culture to sleep at the home of the dead person as the family mourns its dead. People usually take this undocumented rule so seriously and often do not break it.

People take such visits so seriously that friendships can be strained if a friend fails to give a mourning family such a visit. For this reason, people are heard reasoning this way: It is much more acceptable for someone not to go to a wedding, if you can't make it. Death is different. One can't excuse oneself for not visiting a mourning family.

Often, telephone calls are not acceptable unless the caller lives in a country different from the mourning family's country of residence. It is perceived that the caller didn't take in the gravity of the matter, and that he has taken the mourning family's grief lightly.

In the Tigrigna, the dead are not dead and gone immediately the moment they breathe their last. Or even after the funeral. Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Christians and Catholics make sure that the dead are not forgotten immediately. To this end, and motivated by their religious beliefs or compelled by public opinion, they organize religious services for their dead, in which services are held (on 12th, the 40th, and the sixth month respectively named as Asur, Arbaa, and Menfeq) for the dead. One special event, named Tezkar (which means remembrance), is held to remember the dead, as the name implies. It is believed that the religious services are offered to get the dead person unbound (from his or her spiritual bondage) and that he may get remission of sins, which enables him to enter Heaven unhindered. Family members, relatives, and acquaintances are informed of these events, and attend them.

Teshale Tibebu, in his 'The Making of Modern Ethiopia 1896-1974', a study of Ethiopian history, which included Eritrea, for it was forcibly annexed to Ethiopia in 1962, writes about these feasts. Dr. Tibebu explains the reason behind these feasts: "There are supposed to be religious feasts every day. In practice, most of them take place immediately after the harvest season. ... To add insult to injury, not only the living but also the dead pay tribute to the clergy in the form of feasts. As the saying has it, the living pay tribute to the king, the dead pay tribute to the clergy. The feasts are the toll paid by the living relatives so that their dead relatives enter heaven. The will of the people on their deathbed included the obligation on their relatives to prepare the best possible feast in their name after their death. What they could not achieve materially in life, they mandated their relatives to do for them after their death" (p. 97).

Death and Mourning in the Tigrigna Ethnic Group

Written by Abrahaley Habte

In the Tigrigna, death and mourning have their own undocumented rules, and people follow these strictly because their violation may lead to strained relationships or even broken friendships. But due to the financial burden the dead put on the living, I think, people cannot fail to associate their loved one's death to the financial crisis that the family finds itself in after his or her death, especially if the dead person was a breadwinner. The living have no choice but to spend on religious services for the dead.