# An Ethnographic Study of Events and their Symbolic Representations in a Wedding Ceremony of Ethiopian Orthodox Church: a Bird's Eye View

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**Abstract**

Marriage is a social institution that prevails in a society. Depending on the culture of the society, various ceremonies of wedding takes place. Among Ethiopians, church marriage (sireate teklil) in the one which is practiced in Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The wedding ceremony has its own procedures and events, and every event has its own meanings and symbolic representations. Examining family trees and giving lessons about what expected from the couple are the tasks performed before the wedding. Sending elders to the family of the bride comes next. Once the family of the bride agrees, the wedding day can be fixed and the ceremony will be conducted.

**Keywords:** symbol, church marriage, Orthodox Church

## 1. Introduction

In human life, transition from one status to the other is a common phenomenon. There are rituals that are performed in the time of transition. Rite of passage is among these rituals. It is a ritual event that marks a person's progress from one social position to another. Marriage is among the rites of passage.

Marriage is defined as 'a union between a man and a woman such that the children born to the woman are recognized as legitimate offspring of both parents (Royal Anthropological Institute, 1951, 111 as cited in Kottak, 2002). This definition may not be fully accepted because of the fact that some societies have already allowed the same sex marriage. Since it is difficult to arrive at a consensus to give universal definitions, Leach (1955) as cited in Kottak (2002) suggested that, "… several different kinds of rights are allocated by institution classified as marriage. These rights vary from one culture to another and no one is widespread enough to provide a basis for defining marriage.' Athenagoras (2005) sees marriage as mystery or sacrament that has been instituted with God's blessing during creation. He further indicated that marriage for Orthodox church is more of a spiritual path, a seeking after God and the mystery of oneness and love. Various kinds of wedding ceremonies are practiced when couples get married. Since there are different forms, this paper focuses on religious marriage that takes place in Ethiopian Orthodox church.

## 2. Methods of Data Collection

Participant observation and in-depth interview were employed to collect data for this ethnographic study. The in-depth interviews were held with priests who had led several religious (*Sireate Teklil*) wedding ceremonies. Photographing and video recorder were also used to take important events.

## 3. Result and Discussion

### Pre-marriage Performances

There were activities which had been performed before the marriage takes place. These included examining the family's tree of both the bride and groom in order to check if they were related. It was indicated by informants that in olden day's race of the individuals used to be investigated. The race of the couple had been studied to check if there were diseases that transmitted from generation to generation. Syphilis and leprosy were among the diseases that had to be checked. Virginity is expected from them in order to get married in church.

After having examined the family tree, both of the couples were given lessons regarding what they should do and should not do. They were also asked if they were capable of performing all the actions according to the prescriptions that the religion (Ethiopian Orthodox) commands and other related issues. This was done by their God fathers. Once they were convinced and agreed, the groom was advised to send elders to his fiancé's family. After successful accomplishment of the above, the date for the wedding would be fixed.

### The Wedding Ceremony

On the wedding day, the groom and the bride came from different directions accompanied by their best men and bridesmaid, respectively. When the couple met (at the gate of the church) they greeted each other. The best men and the bridesmaid held lighted candle (*tuaf*) and let the couple enter the church compound. The lighted candles

that the best men and bride maid held have their own symbolic representations. The candles without light represent the life of the man and the women before marriage which is assumed to be dim and unpleasant. When the candles are lighted, it conveys a message that they are moving towards the brightest and happiest life. In other words, the couples transfer from the world of loneliness to that of togetherness which is assumed to be very pleasant.

While the bride and the groom were going to the hall (room) in the church compound where the ritual takes place, the best men, bride maid and other relatives accompanying sang religious songs that requested to be warmly received by the priests, deacons and others in the church. They also thanked God in their songs.

The room in which the marriage ceremony was conducted had been decorated with different religious pictures of Saint Mary, Jesus Christ, Saint Michael and other angels.

First, the bride and the groom were blessed by the priest who led the ceremony (i.e. celebrant) and the ritual was started by the Lord's Prayer –

> *'Our Father who are in heaven,*
> *Hallowed be thy name*
> *Thy kingdom come*
> *Thy will be done*
> *On earth as it is on heaven……'*

Once the couples were seated, the celebrant stood just behind them. This was done in order to show that the bride and the groom are the 'queen' and 'king' of the day, respectively. Thus, they had to be accompanied by everybody around them. Therefore, the priest (celebrant) standing behind them symbolizes the respect that has to be given to the couple. He extended his wishes that the bride and groom may have a peaceful and prosperous life. The next phase of the ritual was promise giving. The celebrant, this time, came in front of the couple to lead the ceremony.

> *'I (Christian name) take her/him (Christian name) to be my wedded wife/ husband…..'*

The occasion of promise giving continued by short questions and answers.

> *Celebrant: Do you help her when she is in problem?*
> *Groom: Yes, I do….*

The couple promised turn by turn but the groom did first. During this time, both of them put their right hands on the bible and cross. When they finished, the priest read about the way the couple have to lead their life. The phase that came after promise giving was concerned with the wedding rings. The rings were blessed before given to the bride and groom. In Ethiopian Orthodox church, the groom puts the ring on the bride's finger first and the bride does the same. The rings are worn on the third finger of the left hand. When they exchanged the rings, the people around applauded to show their approval and pleasure. The couple then gave their words.

> *'With this ring married you. Wear it as a symbol of love and commitment ….'*

Then, the celebrant brought a small bottle which had holy oil (*kiba kidus*) in it. He dunked his finger into the bottle to take some drops of the holy oil. He anointed the forehead of the bride and groom in the shape of cross. He also anointed the palms of them with it. The anointing of holy oil has a great meaning in Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It is done because it is thought that it is helpful to avoid devil and misuse of money. According to the information from the informants, it is believed that bad spirit may enter the body through the head. Thus, it prevents these kinds of evil spirits, and it is the hand that spends money. Hence, the holy oil helps them to use the money they earn properly.

The other phase of the ritual is started by letting the couple put mantle on. The groom and the bride were being worn by the priest (celebrant). The groom is worn first. Then, the saying of the blessing led to the ceremony of putting on the crown. The crown symbolizes respect and prosperity.

It is mentioned that in every accomplishments of the ritual such as promise giving, mantle wearing and crowning, the groom is first. It has its own justification. The priority is given to the groom because of the commands in the Bible, as to one of my informants. He indicated that in the bible, God sent gold, perfume and incense to Adam through the angels. Then, Adam gave them to Eve. Due to this fact, the priority is always given to the man (groom)

Towards the end of the wedding ceremony, the deacons started the liturgy (mass). When the deacons were saying the mass, they move round the groom and the bride. They held lighted candle in their hands. The priest stood in front and read from the bible.

> '*Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it*
> *lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every*
> *reason?"*
> *"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the*
> *Creator `made them male and female'*

> `For this reason a man will leave his father and
> mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become
> one flesh'?
> So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has
> joined together, let man not separate.'

Finally, the ceremony was coming to an end by saying the benediction. As it was done at the beginning, the groom and the bride left the room accompanied by their best men and bridesmaid and those who were around singing religious songs.

## 4. Conclusion

Church marriage *(Sirate teklil)* is a wedding ritual that is performed among the followers of Ethiopian Orthodox religion. It has several phases. It starts by some preparations such as examining the family tree of the couple and giving orientations about what expects from them once they have got married. The ritual is performed in the church in the presence of the best men, bride maid, friends, and relatives of the couple. Priests and deacons are leading the ritual. There are various performances and events that mark church marriage and every event has its own symbolic representations. In Orthodox Church, anybody who gets married by *Sireate teklil* is forbidden to be divorced unless either of them commits serious offenses such as infidelity.

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