

SHEIK HUSSEIN:
*THE MECCA
OF THE POOR*



Sheikh Hussein is a town in south-eastern Ethiopia. Located in the Bale zone of the oromia region. The tomb of the 13th century sufi Sheikh Hussein who introduced Islam i the area, and is said to have performed many miracles is still visited by thousands of people. A huge pilgrimage takes place twice a year.



Tens of thousands of people from Eastern, southern and western Oromia, various parts of Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, and Djibouti visit the shrine. The area is remote and two days of muddy roads are necessary to reach the pilgrimage.



You need to be barefoot to enter the holy area. Once inside, everybody respects the sharia: thieves, fightings, loud music or insults are totally prohibited. The atmosphere is rather relaxed. The tradition of tolerance enabled Muslims and even Christians to attend peacefully the cult.



The Sufis sheiks of the oromo groups wear huge wigs made with necklaces and prayers beads during the pilgrimage. The bigger it is, the more they are devoted to Hussein. They have a great prestige in the community, like this one, sheik Feycal who welcomes his guests with honey, a great sign of respect.



Y-shaped wood sticks can be seen everywhere during the pilgrimage. They are called « hanqee » and are replicas of the walking stick of Sheik Hussein. Pilgrims say it a « peace and love » symbole. Sheik Hussein used to do miracles by using his hanqee. Lot of shops sell them on the way to the shrine.



The pilgrims live under shelters, to pray around their sheiks, like those people from Jima. But the main activity remains khat chewing in the frankincense smoke. Khat is a leafy plant which acts as a stimulant when chewed and is supposed to open the minds. These effects are quickly replaced by mild dysphoria, anxiety, reactive depression, insomnia and anorexia.



Every leader of the pilgrims groups has a special task during the celebrations. Some take care of the dances, some of the prays, while others take care of the gates leading to the shrines.



One keeper of the shrines blow a horn to gather the pilgrims for a celebration. All day and night, ceremonies happen and each group try to catch attention of the pilgrims to have more visits and more prestige.



A major practice in the local cult is the singing of songs in praise of Sheik Hussein, called baaroo. Singers roar loudly with loudspeakers. They also attract the pilgrims who would provide them with food, water, and Khat to thank them.



The white walls of the shrines are decorated with giant inscriptions of the Koran. Pilgrims spend time to go from gate to gate, and enter thru the very small doors into the shrines. If a Muslim cannot afford to visit Mecca, he can visit Sheik Hussein, called the Little Mecca by the Ethiopian Islamic community, like Lalibela is called the Little Jerusalem by Ethiopian Christian community.



Children put jarawa (whitish limestone powder which comes from a cave 8 km from the shrine) on the face as it has magical powers. Adults can be spotted eating it for the same reasons. The water from the ponds around is also sacred and people drink it and use it for washing their bodies.



As pilgrims believe Hussein is a link between humans and God, many pray to get solution for their health problems, success in job, and wellbeing of their family. Sheik Hussein is a place where pilgrims exercise a mixture of islamic religion and african traditional belief, known as Muda.



Extremists have endangered the celebrations of Sheik Hussein by posing major threats. The most serious one has been social marginalization of adherents of the cult. This led to a decline in the number of its adherents due to harassment and destruction of shrines.



The pilgrimage is a time for prays but also for gifts and offers. It attracts hundreds of beggars, blind people, and humpbackeds who collect small notes or coins from the visitors. The weathiest pilgrims offer camels, goats or beefs to sacrifice and the meat is shared with the community.



The Sheik Hussein cult exhibits a living tradition that may be classified by UNESCO. But it is not registered on the permanent list of World Heritage yet, only on the Tentative list. A little miracle as going there is really not on the touristic path like so many sites already listed!

eric lafforgue
lafforgue@mac.com