

An unforgettable Experience of Eritrea  
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In Halhal village in the Anseba zone of Eritrea a visitor in one house is the guest of the whole village. In a short visit of three days to Halhal I experienced the warm love and hospitality of the people of the whole Halhal village.

My hosts were my sister, Sr Celine and her whole community of Carmelite Sisters of Charity of Vedruna (CCV). My sister and her community of Sr Mary Thannipara, Sr Georgie and Sr Lilly as well as the two CCV sisters Bonita and Chinny from Keren organized a grand celebration to honour me with their hospital staff and the leaders of their medical and development activities in the village.

A community meal, a special boon (coffee) ceremony, dances to the tune of music and exchange of gifts were the high light of the celebration. The community meal began with the ceremonial washing of hands with a lady making the round and pouring water and helping to wash and wipe the hands of the guests in the order of their importance or social standing. Then, groups of eight people sit around a table on which in an extra large basin like plate typical Eritrean food called – Ingera is served. People eat together with their hands from the same plate.

When a guest comes according to the number of people who will share the meal with the guest, the host will slaughter an animal in his/her honour. For big festive occasions like marriages many goats or bulls are ceremonially slaughtered and eaten.

In my case the village people had bought a goat and called me to witness the ceremonial killing which I declined as I did not like to see the shedding of any blood.

My sister told me that there was a big problem of who would kill the goat because, if a Christian killed an animal the Muslims would not eat it and if a Muslim killed it, the Christians would not eat it. They solved the problem by casting lot. My sister told me that both the Muslims and the Christians joyfully shared the meal without bothering who killed the goat.

When eight of us around one table finished eating only half the foods served were consumed. When I commended about the wastage of the left over food, my sister told me that no food will be wasted as children and others who did not come to the feast will eat the food. There is no such thing as 'left over' food in Eritrea.

I think that the boon or coffee drinking ceremony is also unique to Eritrea and Ethiopia. The host roasts the coffee beans in front of the guest. When they are roasted, the host comes with the pot for the guest to take and enjoy the flavour of the small and freshly roasted coffee beans. Then she pounds the coffee beans into powder and puts the powder into a special type of coffee pot called Jebana with a handle and long neck and boils the coffee. When the coffee boils and overflows, the overflow is received into a mug and it is poured back into the coffee spot. After boiling the coffee, the pot is taken out from the charcoal fire and left it for a few minutes for the coffee powder to settle down. Then the host puts a generous helping of sugar into small cups and pours

coffee and serves the coffee with a small spoon so that the guests can mix the coffee and sugar to suit their taste. The coffee preparation goes on and on. The guests are served as many cups of coffee as they wish to drink. The guests are expected to drink an odd number of cups of coffee as an even number is considered inauspicious and disrespectful to the host.

After a delicious Eritrean meal in the house of a young Eritrean couple Mr Aklilu Sele and Rehwa when boon was in progress my sister whispered into my ear that I should show appreciation for the coffee. An expression of depreciation of the coffee means that the host has to begin again roasting the coffee beans in front of the guests till they show appreciation. With the first sip of the coffee I learnt to say 'toam' (delicious) as the coffee was indeed top class.

In the celebration when I thanked the lady of the boon ceremony for the "top class coffee" she beamed from ear to ear. After the first round of drinking coffee the people began to dance in a circle. Men and women, young and old joined the dance abandoning themselves to the catchy tune of music and drum beats.

My sister told me that the dancing and drinking of coffee in the village many go on and on for all the night.

The local parish priest Abba Kibrab while enjoying the party invited me to concelebrate in the Sunday liturgy the next day and preach a homily which I accepted as he promised me that he would translate my sermon into the local Tigrina language. He certainly did it with a flourish with the result that the people showed appreciation for my sermon.

The Coptic Catholics in Eritrea start their prayer early Sunday morning at 4 AM. And I was told to join them at 5.45 just before starting the Eucharist. The Gospel text was about Jesus withdrawing from the people for prayer and instructing the disciples not to be afraid. In the homily I was able to give a short message recalling Pope John Paul II's interview with an Italian journalist Vittorio Messori after about 15 years of his election as Pope in 1978. The Pope told the journalist that Jesus' message of "Be not afraid" gives him inspiration, strength and courage and that Jesus got this characteristic virtue of fearlessness through his constant prayer and communion with his Father. By assimilating the message of Jesus through prayer we too are called to become fearless, as He, who said 'Be not afraid', is with us till the end of the world, I concluded.

Though I did not know a word of the liturgy in the Geese language, the main celebrant Abba Kibrab made me an active participant by time to time pointing the corresponding English text before me and also asking me a few times to bless the congregation solemnly with a cross in hand. After a two hour long liturgy, at the end the Parish Priest led me to the main door where as the people came out of the church, each one greeted me kissing my hand and saying 'welcome', 'congratulation.' For, Fr Kibrab had already introduced me to the congregation as a priest brother of Sr Celine Paul and that it was my silver jubilee year of priesthood.

Visiting a few houses and talking with some people in Halhal village also gave me some idea of family life in Eritrea. The family of Andamariam Tedla & Timnit and their children showed me that strong family bonds exist in Eritrea. Mr Andamariam is the driver of my sister's hospital.

His wife is a very industrious woman like the one described in the Bible whose works are appreciated and praised in the market place (Book of Proverbs).

Along with bringing up her children of 3 boys & 2 girls Mrs Timmit raises chickens and also buys eggs from the village and sends them with her husband to sell with a profit whenever he drives to the nearby towns on his work. She proudly showed me the gold ornaments, clothes and other household articles she bought through her business of chickens and eggs. She also finds time to do embroidery work. The CCV sisters are loved and respected so much that a young boy in a house told my sister that he too would like to become a 'sister' when he grew up.

Halhal is a mixed village of Muslims and Coptic Christians with a population of a few thousands people in the Anseba region bordering Sudan. Mr sister's hospital serves a population of 10,355, about 135 km away from the Eritrean capital, Asmara.

Eritrea is the newest African nation which became a member of the UNO in 1993 after 30 years of war of independence with Ethiopia. This small nation with 1,24,300 sq. km. territory is about the size of Greece or six times larger than Israel. Eritrea with its 3.5 million people is surrounded by Sudan in the west, Ethiopia in the south and Djibouti in the east and the Red Sea in the north. The country has nine distinct ethnic groups spread among six administrative zones.

Eritrea is one of the poorest countries of the world with only 15% literacy. Most of the country consists of rugged stony mountains. Like most semi-arid countries Eritrea has extensive water problem. Only 3.4% of land area is under cultivation. Ninety five percentage of farm lands depend entirely on rainfall for cultivation and over 70% of the country receives less than 400 mm of rainfall annually. The majority of the people are farmers, shepherds or a mixture of both.

The 30 year long War of Independence and the three year-long conflict with Ethiopia of 1998-2000 have left Eritrea devastated in every way. But the Eritrean people are determined now to preserve their independence and peace at any cost and develop the country. With this goal the three Catholic Bishops of Eritrea have called on their people to seek ways of peace, reconciliation and socioeconomic development and have appealed to the world humanitarian community and relief agencies as well as NGOs to "offer and accelerate their support and generosity, so that people can stand on their own two feet and life may begin again."