

## Female Initiation Rites of the Iraqw and the Gorowa

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## Female Initiation Rites of the Iraqw and the Gorowa

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The Iraqw rite of initiation, called *Marmo*, has been abandoned. Nevertheless it is crucially important to know its meaning in order to obtain a further understanding of Iraqw culture. It is said that the same kind rite existed among the Gorowa, another Southern Cushitic people, who even now retain a similar rite called *Uleemis*.

From a comparison of the *Marmo* and *Uleemis* rites, it is apparent that they are composed of similar cultural elements, and a hyena is the common symbol for both rites.

### INTRODUCTION

The female initiation rite (*Marmo*), one of the Iraqw rites of passage, was abandoned in the 1930's. According to Mzee Hemedi, [HEMEDI 1962: 13], at that time Mikael Ahho, appointed chief of the Mbulu (*Wawutumo*), forbade this rite owing to a deep concern about the fact that some women died in the course of the ritual.<sup>1)</sup>

During my first Ethno-history survey in 1964, too, the elders were telling horrible stories of women dying during the *Marmo* rite, and of their bodies being discarded in the bush or left in an isolated hut. Since the question of whether or not the *Marmo* rite included ordeals of such suverity was a secret heavily guarded by the women, the details were not known, but it is true that Mikael Ahho detested this ritual as an evil custom, and strictly censured it. So in this way one of the most important of the women's rituals related to marriage disappeared during that period.

Nevertheless, as illustrated by the resistance of some old women to its abolition [PARHAM 1976: 95], the women felt a strong attachment to *Marmo*, and it seems that its various elements became even more firmly interrelated with the subsequent Iraqw culture. The *Marmo* was not simply a ritual to celebrate female maturation. It functioned also as an association manifesting women's dignity, and was effected on the basis of the belief in death and resurrection held by the Iraqw as a whole. Accord-

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1) With regard to the reason for the outlawing of the *Marmo* Thornton's text [THORNTON: 221] states that "They came to take Michael Ahho's daughter to the *Marmo*. It was her time to go in. He refused to pay the fee..." In an interview with an old man, however, I saw that the real origin of Ahho's feeling about the *Marmo* was that a girl he loved had died during the course of the ritual.

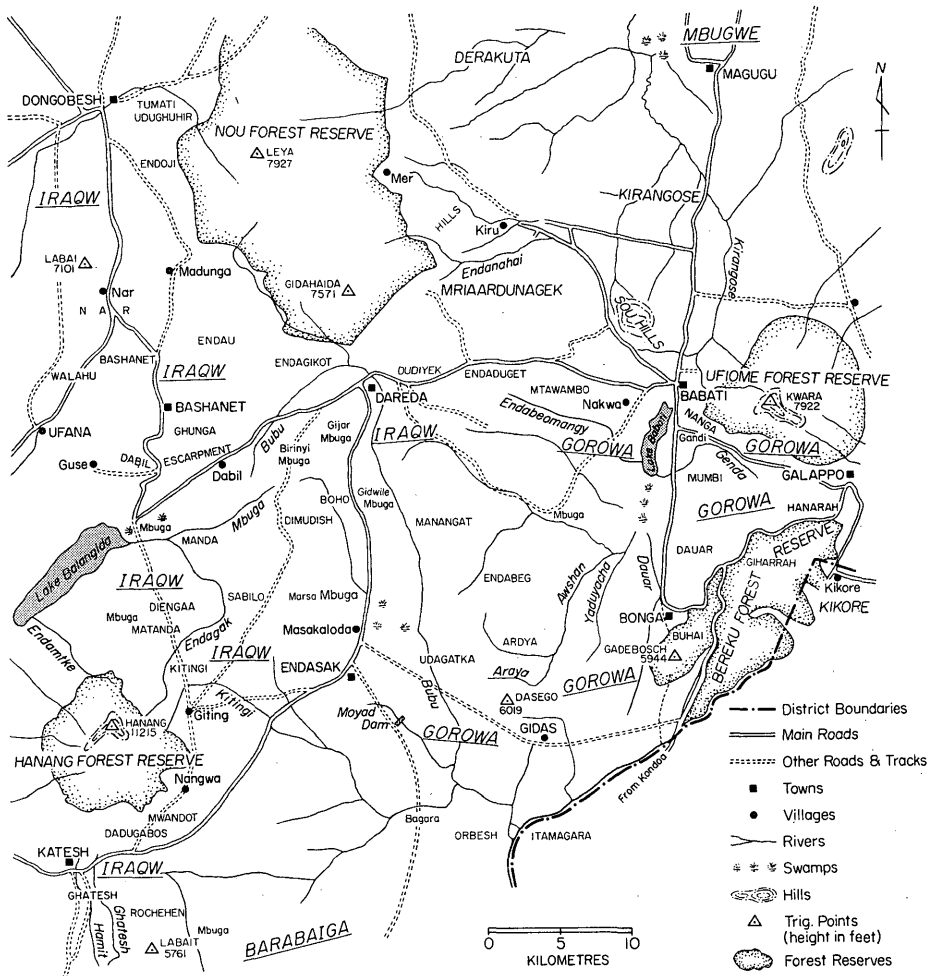


Fig. 1. Research area

ingly, it would be difficult to obtain an accurate understanding of the context of Iraqw culture without knowing what significance the *Marmo* rite held for these people.

One point of view holds that the initiation rite involving seclusion was introduced through diffusion [THORNTON 1980: 218-220], but during the period in question, at least, it was deeply entrenched in Iraqw culture. It is said that this custom existed also among the Gorowa, who belong to the same Southern Cushitic group, and who are the geographical neighbors of the Iraqw. I did not investigate sufficiently the case of the Gorowa, but in place of the *Marmo* they had developed another female initiation, called *Uleemis*, which is said to be still practiced. According to a female Gorowa informant, it would seem that this latter ritual includes the same elements as the *Marmo*. In other words, the basic idea underlying the practice of these rituals is common to both the discontinued *Marmo* of the Iraqw and the *Uleemis* of the

Gorowa. Owing to a scarcity of ethnographic materials for northern Tanzania, it is difficult to deduce whether these customs originated with the Southern Cushitic culture of the ancestral group, or whether they were taken from the surrounding Bantu-speaking peoples; but I would like to point out that in both *Marmo* and *Uleemis* the performance of rituals is carried out on the basis of the spiritual power of the hyena.

In Africa, the hyena often appears as something with a demonic character. This is the case among the Iraqw [WADA 1968: 55-76]. The question is how does the hyena intervene in the initiation rites, and what is the significance of the hyena's spiritual power?

The study of the Iraqw was carried out on four occasions between 1964 and 1974, mainly in the foothills of Mt. Hanang. The research was broadened to include the Gorowa territory in 1971. Since, however, the *Marmo* had disappeared thirty years earlier and because there was no opportunity to observe the *Uleemis*, the material included in this article is based entirely on verbal reports.

## 1. THE *MARMO* RITE

Unlike an individual puberty ritual, *Marmo* was a group rite involving confinement. The problem taken up by Mikael Ahho stemmed from this, but apparently this period was necessary in order to conduct the initiation necessary to fulfill the conditions for becoming a wife.

According to the old people, when girls reached the age of puberty, old women (*Amamii*) would take them to the place of the ritual, after obtaining the permission of their parents. The place was not known to persons unconnected with the ritual, but it was usually either a hut within the homestead of the ritual leader (*Amar ur*), or an isolated hut nearby. On the day of the initiation, the young girls, wearing leather robes draped from their shoulders, would go in procession to the home of the ritual leader. It is said that anyone presenting the slightest hindrance to this procession would be killed.

The period during which they were confined for the initiation process was reportedly from six months to a year. The ritual procedure, as remembered by the old people, can be summarized approximately as follows:

- 1) During the period of seclusion, the young women were fed foods rich in fat, and were caused to become obese;
- 2) Unlike the current hairstyle, the hair of the initiated girls was worn in braids hanging over the forehead;
- 3) The area around the mouth was blackened with charcoal;
- 4) They applied animal oil to their skin to make it shiny;
- 5) They perfumed their bodies with scent obtained from a tree;
- 6) They always kept their teeth clean by brushing them with twigs;
- 7) They were taught sexual manners;

- 8) They embroidered their leather capes with beads, making them into beautiful skirts; and
- 9) They learned folk songs, word games, and the like.

From the foregoing, which represents what is known of the content of the training, it is hard to understand why there might have been deaths. But it is true that during the period of the *Marmo* parents had absolutely no knowledge of what was happening to their daughters. Even when a girl had the misfortune to fall ill she was not returned to her home. The parents would discover the sad truth only when the body was discovered. They could not protest their daughter's death, however, because they were afraid it would be said that the disaster had been brought about by the mother's sorcery. Furthermore, the *Marmo* itself was a ritual that actually recognized the death of the girls. In other words, a woman initiated in the *Marmo* was called *Dena an Baha*, meaning a girl eaten by the hyena (*Baha* is hyena, and *Dena* a respect word for a woman who has undergone the *Marmo*). During the seclusion the girls were considered to have disappeared from this world, and their return to their families was interpreted as a rebirth. Accordingly, death and rebirth are symbolized in the words *Dena au Baha*, with the hyena used as the symbol of this mystical role.

After the *Marmo* was completed and the "reborn" *Dena* returned home, she was like a baby. She was not allowed to talk, and normally had to indicate her will by hand signs in the manner of a deaf-mute. She would be fed meals, and was not allowed to cook by herself. She was confined to the house during the day, and was given the freedom to go out only at night. These rules and restrictions on the behavior of the *Dena* were a symbolic expression of her rebirth as a baby. All these restrictions, however, were cancelled on the occasion of her marriage. On the day after the wedding, after the bride's relatives had gone home, the bride's mother and married women of the neighborhood would gather to perform the *Dawagwasa* ritual. In general, *Dawagwasa* means instruction regarding various customs and articles. In this case, the bride's mother helps her and introduces her to the art of cooking. After this ritual, the bride changes from a *Dena au Baha* to an ordinary person, and can begin to conduct herself as a wife. The respectful term *Dena*, however, continues to be applied even after marriage. For example, it is customary to use this appellation in conjunction with the woman's father's name, as in *Dena Rohay*. The term *Dena* was given only to women who had been initiated in the *Marmo*, whereas women who married without being initiated were called *Kendusuo*, and were looked down on. In this way, the term *Dena*, as a "coming out," was used after marriage as well to strengthen a woman's sense of membership and solidarity, and to elevate her position.

This kind of *Marmo* ritual existed also among the Gorowa. It is said that in order to perform this ritual, permission had to be obtained from the ritual authority of the Harnaa clan. The medicine for the *Marmo* were prepared by the successive chiefs of the Harnaa clan. It is said that were the *Marmo* to be performed without following this conventional practice, the participants would be cursed, fall ill and would die through the magical power of the Harnaa. Among the Iraqw it was the Manda clan which had this religious authority, as indicated by Thornton in his inter-

view materials [THORNTON 1980: 221]. At the time when this ritual became a political problem, the most powerful medicine man, Nade Bea, was the chief of that clan, and he had authority over the *Marmo* ritual. The disappearance of female initiation rites involving seclusion is a social change occurring in the process of historical transition, and the same phenomenon has been observed in other regions of Tanzania [BEIDELMAN 1967; BRAIN 1976]. Among the Gorowa, however, the *Uleemis* developed as a replacement for the *Marmo*. Let us now consider the manner in which the *Uleemis* is performed.

## 2. THE *ULEEMIS* RITUAL

Like the *Marmo*, the *Uleemis* is an initiation rite performed according to the customary practice of traditional society, to give young women a formal qualification for marriage. According to an informant, it is usual for girls from six to ten years of age to be chosen as novices. But it is possible for older girls to join if they are not yet married. Apparently, most Gorowa women participate in this rite, as it assures them a favorable condition for marriage.

The night of a full moon is chosen for the performance of the *Uleemis*. From among the members who have already completed the ritual, a girl rich in knowledge and experience is chosen to be the leader. She sets to work to prepare for the ritual several days in advance. It is especially important to make arrangements with an old woman who can preside over the ritual, and who apparently is given the medicines and permission for the ritual by the medicine man.

On the day of the ritual, the novices, who have been ordered to assemble by the senior girl, form a line and march singing to the homestead of the old woman who is in charge of the ritual. There are joined by other girls who are already members of the society, having previously been through the ritual. The dwelling, and even the surrounding bush, is totally devoided of all male presence. In addition, women who have not yet joined the society are excluded from this area and moved to another house. In this way, like the *Marmo*, the *Uleemis* is a ritual based on a female secret society. The content of the ritual carried out on this day is roughly as follows.

First, one of the novices is singled out and completely blindfolded with a piece of cloth. Her clothes and all her ornaments are then removed, leaving her completely naked. Next, another girl is chosen and stripped naked as well. The ritual leader orders this second girl to carry the blindfolded girl on her back and take her outside the dwelling. When the two have gone outside, the remaining girls follow them without making a sound.

Incidentally, the form of the Gorowa house is very similar to that of the Iraqw. In addition, they have more or less in common a spatial consciousness centering on the house [THORNTON 1980: 37-38]. A distinction is made between the house, the cleared front courtyard around it, and the bush connected to the field or pasture. In Iraqw this bush is called *Mundi*, and in Gorowa, *Gatlaamo*. From the homestead it is seen as being outside the dwelling, and is considered part of the outside world. The

blindfolded girl is carried from the site of the homestead to the bush (*Getlaamo*) and laid down in a grassy place, after which the girl who carried her returns to the house. When this has been ascertained, the girls who were following them scatter simultaneously and soon come back carrying leafy branches and pumpkin leaves. Then, they steal up to the girl who has been laid down, making threatening sounds with the leaves. They are imitating the sound of hyenas approaching. The blindfolded girl, frightened by the approaching sounds, begins to cry like a baby. When this performance has gone on for a while, the girl who had carried her comes running back to the house. This series of ritual acts expresses the rebirth of the girl as a baby after being eaten by hyenas, and is based on the same logic as the *Marmo*. The ritual is completed by having the two girls exchange roles and the entire procedure is repeated.

The group next proceeds to the indoor meal ritual. At this time, the naked girls are permitted to put on their clothes. The prepared meal consists of *ugali* (Swahili) made from corn flour, and a small bowl of cow's milk. The girl who had taken the part of the mother feeds the one who played the baby, and who waits with her mouth open. Dining etiquette requires that the "mother" eats all the food sticking to her fingertips, so that none remains. This second level of the ritual, following upon the rebirth, can be considered a reappearance of the *Dawagwasa* in the *Iraqw Marmo*. This is the end of the ritual for the first day, and the pair of girls who took the leading roles spend the night together with the rest of the participants.

On the following day, all the girls except for the novices head for their homes, take all their own body ornaments, and collect as many as they can from friends in their neighborhoods. They come back at around noon. The third level is the purification rite. The girl taking the role of the mother first washes the body of the "baby" with water. Next, she greases the girl's entire body with animal oil. Then she puts the collected body ornaments on the girls' head, neck, arms, etc., or else hangs a great number of them from her shoulder diagonally across her chest. She also decorates her own body with variously colored ornaments. In this case, all the novices are nude from the waist up, and wear only a cloth wrapped around their hips. When the participants come out into the front garden with this novice among them, a song of celebration is sung. But the novices keep silent.

The fourth level is an ordeal under a sacred tree. With the beautifully ornamented pair of girls in their midst, all the girls go in procession past the staring villagers, singing as they go, towards the sacred tree of the village. Near the foot of this tree is a sacred hole (*Wa'an*), and the area of the bush in front of it has already been freshly mown for the rite. When they arrive at the sacred tree, the girls in the procession sit down facing the hole, with their arms around each other's backs, and continue to sing the ritual song. When the excitement of the ritual group heightens, the leader first inserts a kind of nettle called *Pond* into the armpit of one of the novices. This is apparently excruciatingly painful, but the girl must bear it. Next, the novice is made to eat leaves of *Afahhari* brought from the bush. The inside of her mouth becomes black from the juice of these leaves. It is said that only those who have completed the *Uleemis* may taste these leaves, and by dying her mouth black, the girl

shows everyone that she has joined the society. This rite under the tree is carried out for each novice, and the procession makes several trips back and forth between the house and the tree. If any young man has stolen a look at this rite under the tree, the girls can pin him down and subject him to a group beating. In addition, on the following day they go to his house and confiscate one bull as a penalty. As seen above, the *Uleemis* does not involve a long period of seclusion, but it may be assumed that its basic context is almost the same as that of the *Marmo*, for which I believe it was developed as a replacement.

### 3. CONNECTION WITH GHOST MARRIAGE

It may be asked why there must be a performance of death and rebirth in the female initiation rite. In the case of the Iraqw at least one of the reasons is the relationship with the system of ghost marriage. The following origin of descent myth, recorded by the author, provides quite a clear account of this matter.

Among the Iraqw there is a descent group of Irangi origin, called Hhay Tlangka. According to the legend recited by an old man of this group, their first ancestors could be traced back eleven generations. But in the time of Kiwanga Nondi, eight generations back, the lineage group divided into two, giving rise to the Hhay Tlangka and Hhay Fiso. The event which occasioned this division was an Iraqw practice connected with the marriage and initiation, and the reason why women seek rebirth is illustrated here as well.

The content of the legend may be summarized as follows. Kiwanga had two sons, Hamadi and Maghway. Maghway got married and fathered two sons. The elder was named Lawi and the second Tsani. The two brothers grew to boyhood in good health, but one day the younger one, Tsani, became ill and died. The elder brother grew to adulthood and married, but, troubled that his dead brother would have no descendants, he decided to purchase a *Hante* (a girl who marries the spirit of a deceased man), and have the brother's patrilineal descent continued. A woman was chosen as the *Hante*, the marriage was carried out, and she gave birth to a son as hoped. In this ghost marriage, the pater was the deceased younger brother and the genitor was the elder brother. As the eldest son of the deceased younger brother, the child was named Yagamba Tsani by the older brother. After the continuity of the younger brother's lineage had been secured in this way, the *Hante* entered the *Marmo* ritual.

On the first day of the *Marmo*, when the women came along singing their song, the *Hante* presented a male goat and joined the ritual procession. The goat was apparently offered for the purpose of the *Hante's* purification rite. The *Hante* disappeared from the sight of the people and it was six months before she reappeared.<sup>2)</sup> At that time, however, she was no longer a *Hante*, but had been completely reborn, and had returned to the position of an unmarried girl. According to the explanation

2) It is said that when a married woman entered the *Marmo*, the time period was shortened to six months.



of the informant, if this woman (who had come out as another person) loved Lawi, the genitor of her child, she could indicate this through a ritual messenger (*Warae*), and become his lawful wife. If, on the other hand, she did not want to continue her relationship with Lawi she could marry another man. In this way, by means of the *Marmo* ritual, a woman was completely purified of her entire past, and transformed into a different person. Even the abominable experience of having been a *Hante* was erased forever.

In the case of this particular legend, the woman who had cancelled her *Hante* condition did love Lawi, and became his wife. She then gave birth to another son, whose pater and genitor were this time the same. The son was called Maghway Lawi, after his grandfather and father. This situation, however, gave rise to trouble within the family. Sociologically, the dead younger brother's son, Yagawha Tsani, and the elder brother's son, Maghway Lawi, had the relationship of father's brother's son to each other, and were cousins. Biologically, however, they had the same father, and were, moreover, brothers nurtured in the same womb. Under these circumstances, subtle conflicts arose between the parents and the children, and between the brothers themselves, resulting finally in the establishment of two different lineages, Hay Fiso and Hay Tlangka. Incidentally, Tlangka has the meaning of 'fight'. As indicated above, the *Marmo* ritual has a connection with the death and rebirth of the *Hante*.

## DISCUSSION

Many problems remain with regard to the *Marmo* and *Uleemis* rituals owing to the limitations of the study. In particular, the secret aspects of the ritual are not normally clarified, and ethnographic records were incomplete. Nevertheless, in the case of the Iraqw and Gorowa, I believe it is possible to gain an approximate understanding of the lines along which female initiation was (or is) carried out. To compare the two rituals, the *Uleemis*, unlike the *Marmo*, does not involve a long period of seclusion; the ordeals the novices undergo are therefore shorter, and their physical suffering is not such as to give rise to conditions from which death might result. It is conceivable that the *Uleemis* probably became widespread among the Gorowa as a replacement for the *Marmo* after the latter had been outlawed and eliminated. The question of whether the Gorowa thought of this ritual themselves or whether it was introduced from other Bantu-speaking peoples is one that requires further investigation. But it is certain that it functions as a replacement for the *Marmo*. It is questionable, however, to what extent death and rebirth are related to their present system, even if the hyena is recognized as a symbol of spiritual power.

It is said that among the Iraqw, women have come to refuse ghost marriage.<sup>3)</sup>

3) According to an old man, in the past the *Hante* was chosen from within the Iraqw, but the girls began to refuse this role, making ghost marriage increasingly difficult to carry out. For this reason, the men would sometimes resort to using a handicapped girl as the *Hante*, or bringing in an unsuspecting girl from another tribe under the pretext of a regular marriage. In the village of Giting, where I carried out my study, there were several cases where a *Hante* was sought from the Nyaturu.

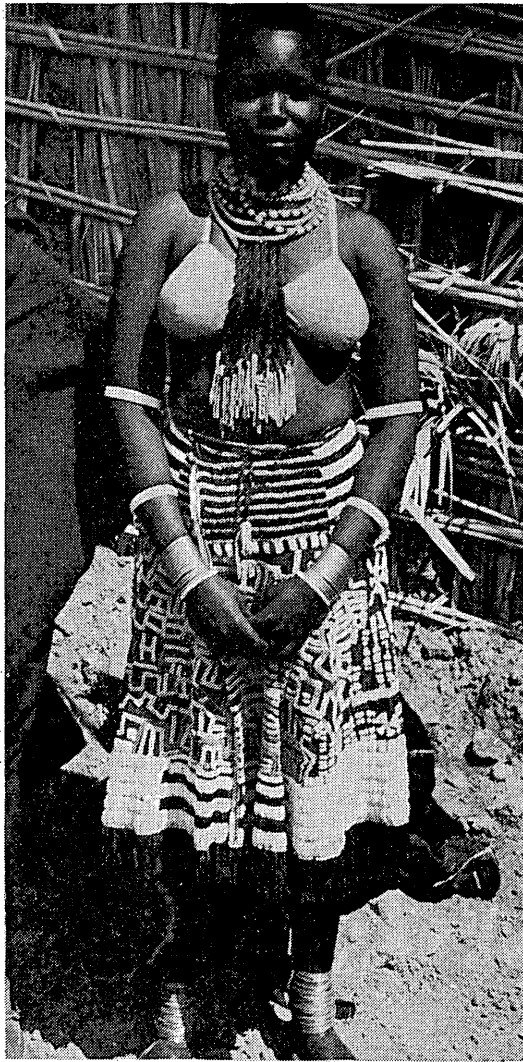


Photo: Fully dressed girl in ritual skirt

There are various reasons for this, but I think there is an important connection with the fact that the *Marmo* was discontinued, making it impossible for the women to erase their *Hante* status. When the women were no longer able to purify their past and to be reborn through the *Marmo* ritual, taking the role of *Hante* would mean being bound for life to marriage with the spirit of a dead person. The Iraqw women were not agreeable to this situation.

The *Marmo* has disappeared, but several of its elements still function in the life of the people. There are many cultural elements, such as the *Marmo* song sung at group rituals, the beaded skirts worn by girls at such times, respectful terms of address

such as *Dena* and symbolic words such as *Dawagwasa*, as well as folk tales about the disappearance of young girls, all of which must be understood in connection with the *Marmo* ritual.

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