



GADAA, AFRICA'S TOP-SECRET CEREMONY

Pictures by Eric Lafforgue - Words by Constantine James

The Gadaa ceremony is the most important event for Ethiopia's Karrayyu tribe. Dating back possibly millennia, this tradition that signals a transfer of power takes place only once every 8 years. The highly codified two-day gala has always been kept far from the eyes of outsiders, but this year an exception was made for one photographer. The Karrayyu want the world to know of their current struggle to maintain self-reliance. In the middle of terrible drought, facing war on two fronts, and with less and less grazing lands, they give the world a behind the scenes look at their most treasured rite.





From all across the region, thousands of Karrayyu gather at the ceremony's remote location. All contribute to the event in some way. Some help set up while others bring food for the families who welcome them. As the current drought has decimated their livestock, these gifts (milk, butter, sorgho...) carry an even greater value.



The hosts write down the names and corresponding gifts of all guests in a journal. Once everyone arrives and the elders grant permission, people can enter the ceremony's grounds by crossing the gate of the cows – a sacred barrier composed of dung and fruit.



The Gadaa is an occasion for the Karrayyu to look their best. The men pay special attention to their gunfura – the tribe’s signature hairstyle. The women unsurprisingly spend hours getting ready, picking outfits, and doing their hair.



If warriors have killed an animal, they proudly wear the hide on their backs (if it was salvageable); if they have killed a human, then a feather stands alone. Known as “Qondaala”, most of these respected men are strapped with Kalashnikovs.







Some temporary housing is built to accommodate thousands of Karrayyu. Each member of the current ruling party owns a different house where they host family and friends in their final moments in power. Here, people will eat, sleep, and socialize under the same roof. The festive decorations along the walls represent good luck and an auspicious future.



Night falls and gifts continue to amass. People wander in all directions shouting in search of their friends. The more technologically adventurous even text, seemingly the only indicator that we are in the 21st century.



At midnight, a group of men is searching for the sister of the current chief who has hidden herself somewhere in the vicinity. Once they find her, the ceremony can officially begin. The full moon is their only source of light.



Throughout the night, men dance in circles, entering one at a time to sing improvised poetry.



4 AM: The chief's sister has been found. She begins to gently sing the somber "Oohiyoo Amayyoo Oroboo" in an ostinato. Like wildfire, the melody spreads to the rest of the women. The Karrayu record themselves on their cell phones to listen to their songs later.



Finally, the gate of the cows can be crossed. People bring in the food to the temporary houses inside and then settle in for some late night revelry.



At noon of the second day, the incumbents who will soon lose their power must shave their heads. Among those abdicating are a few children. Though members of the same generation in a certain party are supposed to be close in age, this is often not the case.



As the current chief nears the final moments of his reign, his eyes well up and begins to cry. With all eyes on him, he takes out his gilee – his traditional knife – and sacrifices a cow.



The chief covers his entire head with the blood of the sacrificed animal. The other elders next to him dip their hands in the thick red liquid and also rub it on his head



During this time, the men of the family bless the women by spitting on their heads. Then the women's ears are pierced by a thorn of the agamsa tree, showing no pain.

Karrayyu have been known to practice female genital mutilation. 75 percent of women between the age of 15 and 49 have undergone it in some form.. Parents believe this guarantees their daughters' virginity, a prerequisite for an honourable marriage.



The transfer of power is imminent. Members of the current leadership all hold a handful of grass in their hands. The process is complete once the current chief exchanges grass with the new one.



The new ruling clan. All the families in power will build an isolated village where they will reside for their eight-year term.



Elated by their newly acquired power, the newcomers will celebrate non-stop for the next few days. In their songs, they pray for peace, rain, and good luck, invoking ancestors from 40 years ago who last held the power.





The nomads return home. Amid war, drought, and an ever-shrinking territory, the Karrayyu have some tough times ahead. The uncertainty of the future may have some questioning whether the mood at the next Gadaa ceremony will be so joyous. But this view fails to take into account the most defining characteristic of this persevering tribe: their intense desire to preserve their culture.



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