

The Veneration of Istaqfurow (Repentance) in the Benadir of Southern Somalia

Talking about the history of the Benadir and of the city of Mogadishu, in particular, without visiting the Istaqfurow and the venerated Uweis-ul-Qarni is not possible. Regarded as one of the most ancient and most respected annual commemorations in the Benadir, the Istaqfurow is predominantly a religious ceremony which brings together the indigenous people of the Benadir in a moment of repentance to Allah. It is a moment of prayers, where people come out in the open in thousands upon thousands, to implore forgiveness from Allah. Throughout the centuries, all along the Benadiri coast, from Mogadishu, Merka, to Brawa, people turn to Istaqfurow, once every year, to pray to Allah to protect them from the effects of famine, and from the high waves caused by the south-east monsoon winds in the Indian Ocean, the tusunami.

It is said that centuries back, once upon a time, a certain Aweys Mahad Ali Samo of the Dhabar Weyne tribe went to the beach in Hamar Weyne to take an early morning bath and cleanse himself with the warm waters of the ocean. He used to go there every morning to carry out his morning prayers long before the sun showed up in the horizon. After the prayers, he prayed to Allah to save his people from the ravaging effects of the devastating famine in the land.

One morning, however, Aweys Mahad saw the figure of a heavenly man come out of the “duluk”, a bushy green plant that grows thick along the beach. When he stopped, the man approached,

“Al-Salamu Aleika. Magaceyga waxa la yirah Uweis-ul-Qarni. Sadax mar aan ka gala 100ka jiilal. Waxan ku weydisana lama shey. Kow, ma i ziyara nay?. Lama, waxan raba duluukta xebtan ku talo in aad goysid. Lamadan shey ma i samay kartaa?” (May peace be upon you. My name is Uweis-ul-Qarni. I observe three times out of the 100 days of the dry season. I request you to fulfill two matters for me. First, will you observe me? Second, I want that you cut these shrubs that grow along the beach. Can you do these two matters for me?)”

Aweys responded,

“With the Help of Allah, I promise to commemorate your name once every year and to cut the ‘duluk’”.

When Aweys Mahad turned back to his people, he shared with them about his encounter with the heavenly Uweis-ul-Qarni and the two promises he made to him. He requested his people to build a mosque at the site of the miracle and to pay homage to Uweis-ul-Qarni once a year. The first to accept the message were his wife Gadija Ali Maxad (Dhabar Weyne) and his son-in-law Aw-Gaafu Abrone (Bandhabo). And the next morning, the two men set out to cut the “duluk” and to build a mosque at the site.

As soon as they began the work, the roots of the bush gave way to some construction work. More excavations, and they saw a minaret. Then they called the whole town folk for help. By the end of the excavations, three mosques, which had been buried underground for years, one next to the other, sprang out into the open. The first mosque was named after Uweis-ul-Qarni, the second after Sheikh Abdulkadir Jeylani, and the third after Awo Sheikh Mumin. The three mosques, known as the three brothers, symbolize the religious tradition of the Rer Hamar people who believe that the three mosques are there to protect them from evil, famine, and from the high waves of the Indian Ocean, the tusinami.

On Istaqfurow day, the ceremony starts in the early hours of the morning. Immediately after the morning prayers, the elders of the Dhabar Weyne and Ban Dhabo tribes set out for the cattle market to purchase some 300 - 500 goats which are fenced in an open area at the beach in Hamar Weyne. In most cases, most of the meat and the rest of the food are brought by people who want to donate to Uweis-ul-Qarni. Visitors from all over the Benadir Coast and its immediate hinterland bring in gifts as donation to Istaqfurow. The women with the help of several men prepare the kitchen.

Distinct among the whole group remain the “kitab” (scholars) and “ulumma” (priests) in their distinctive robes, reading the Holy Qoran on the shrines of Farado-bin-Ali mosque which is located in Hamar Weyne at the top of the desolate cliffs overseeing the Indian Ocean. There they continue commemorating the special occasion with repentance and prayers to Allah and with praises to the Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon him. They spend the whole night on the altars of Farado-bin-Ali mosque, reading the Holy Quran in isolation, far from the distractions of the town.

Thousands upon thousands come to the beach to pay homage to Uweis-ul-Qarni on this special day. At noon, the Qatib from the Gudmane tribe slaughters the cattle in the presence of all the elders, scholars, and priests of the Rer Hamar tribes. With their beautiful and distinguished robes, they move round and round the slaughtered goats while they solemnly beg Allah to forgive their sins. They chant in chorus,

“Istaqfurow Rabakum, inaho kaana tawaba, yursilu mni samaa caleikum midraaran” (Pray for forgiveness from Allah, Allah will bring you more rain from the skies.)

While part of the fresh meat is distributed at the beach to the elders and priests, the rest is cooked with rice and served to all with vegetables, milk and “sharbed” drinks. It is a day of supplication where the rich and poor sit together and pray together in commemoration of the venerated Uweis-ul-Qarni.

In the late afternoon, the priests, scholars, students, and elders, all dressed up neatly, walk around the city several times in groups, chanting, “O people, pray for forgiveness from Allah, Allah will bring you more rain from the skies.” Group after group, they walk in the narrow alleys of Hamar Weyne to remind the people to beg forgiveness from Allah.

In this way, the Rer Hamar lived in harmony, peace, and prosperity with their environment. They traveled for trade across oceans and mountains, they settled inland, along the banks of the Shebelle and Juba rivers, as far as Harar, and all along the coasts of East Africa. Their elders became known for their impeccable art to make peace at all times, with Islam as their sacred belief and backbone of their culture and tradition. They flourished united.

Account of the most respected Haajiya Murrey Haji Hussein, June 1998.
Translated by Abdulaziz Haji Mohamed