

SOME SOCIAL COPTIC CUSTOMS.¹

By MARCUS SIMAIKA BEY.

The following is a brief account of the customs observed by the Copts, who are the direct descendants of the ancient Egyptians, on the occasions of weddings, christenings, mournings, etc.²

Some of these usages are very ancient, and date from pre-Christian times. After having been faithfully kept up for so many centuries, in spite of all the troubles and vicissitudes the country and the people have suffered from, some of these customs now tend gradually to disappear before the spread of education, especially amongst women, more particularly those customs which are foreign to the race, and which the Egyptians had to adopt in time of persecution from the Moslems.³

It is in compliance with a desire expressed by many English friends that the writer—who, belonging to one of the old conservative Coptic families, has been familiar with these customs since his childhood—has tried to give them a crystallized form before they are either given up and forgotten or modified beyond recognition.

Birth of a Child.

The Copts look upon children as the most valuable of God's gifts. In the highest as well as in the lowest

¹ Read at the Monthly Meeting of the Institute, July 7th, 1897, by Somers Clarke, F.S.A.

² When Egypt was conquered by the Arabs, Christianity was the religion of the whole country. It, however, began soon to give way to Mohamedanism because of the persecutions and disabilities inflicted on the Christians. Those of the Egyptians that remained true to their faith were distinguished from the others by retaining the name of Copt, which is derived from the Greek *Αιγύπτιος*, and means Egyptian. The apostates were called "Awlad Arab," children of the Arabs.

According to the census made this

year, the Copts number a little over 800,000. But the writer has every reason to believe that their real number is considerably greater; he knows personally several families who, through ignorance, fearing lest the Government in making the census should have for its object the imposition of new taxes, or obtaining data for the much-abhorred conscription, have not declared any of their male children.

³ About one-fifth of the pupils attending Government schools are Copts. They form the greater majority of pupils in the missionary schools, and have besides a large number of schools of their own, both for boys and girls.

home great is always the joy felt on the birth of one, especially if it is a boy. Both before and after the event the mother is made the object of the tenderest care. For a week after the birth the mother keeps her room, and is not allowed to do any work; if she is poor, her relatives or her neighbours come to her help quite willingly till the 40th day after the birth.

On the seventh day the child is generally given a name. When it is the first-born, during the day, a lunch is given to all the lady friends. To accustom the baby to unexpected sounds or shocks, a gong is sounded near its ears, and it is afterwards rocked in a sieve. Afterwards the mother, dressed all in white, carries the baby in her arms, and, escorted by the midwife, is taken in a sort of procession all over the house, preceded by all the little folks carrying candles and singing nursery songs; some of them also carry incense burners.

On this occasion the parents of the young mother make at home some sweets and cakes, called "Komaga," of which a portion is sent with a certain quantity of dried fruit, such as almonds, walnuts, cocoanuts, etc., to each family in connection with them.

In the evening a water bottle, covered with silk and adorned with diamond and gold ornaments, is placed in a shallow metal basin. Three wax candles are attached to the edge of the basin, and are given each a favourite name chosen by the family. These candles are then lighted, and that which lasts the longest gives its name to the child. Each guest present is expected to put a piece of money into the basin, and the collection is presented to the midwife in addition to what she receives from the father. The names used by the Copts furnish traces of all the nations which have successively dominated Egypt. Besides old Egyptian names, such as Hûr from Horus, Serapamoun from Serapis and Amon, there are Greek names, such as Theodorus (pronounced Tadrûs), Philotheos (pronounced Faltaûs), Roman names, Claudius (pronounced Ekladiûs), Persian names, Narouz; Arabic names are, of course, commonest. Now some begin to use English names, such as Henry, Jeffrey.

People of the old school believe that every person is connected with the star under which he or she was born.

Superstitious people have recourse to an astrologer for the choice of a name for a child, also to see whether the name of the bride-elect will agree with that of her future husband.

I was present a few months ago at a betrothal, when the uncle of the bride, a man of some position, insisted on the name of the maiden being changed because an astrologer whom he had consulted declared to him that unless that were done the pair will not be happy.

Baptism of a Child.

According to the rules of the Church, a male child should be baptized when forty, and a female when eighty days old. But this rule is not strictly adhered to. When a child is delicate, the baptism is sometimes put off for months.

The baptism always takes place in the church unless the child be dying, when it is celebrated at home. It is done by triple immersion in pure cold water mixed with a little consecrated oil.

Every child should have either a godfather or a godmother, who answers for him, and is considered by the Church as a parent. Starting from this idea, the Church does not allow a young man to marry the daughter of his godfather or godmother, she being considered as his sister.

After the triple immersion, the child is anointed with the chrism, which answers to confirmation in the Western Church, and the baby is given the communion.¹

Children receive a second name when baptized, usually that of the saint of the day unless the parents prefer the name of a favourite saint. For boys "Girgis" (George) and for girls "Maria" (Mary) or "Miriam" are very common names.

Choice of a Wife.

According to the old Coptic traditional customs which prevailed up to the present time, it belonged to the

¹ In the Coptic church communion is received in both kinds ; in the cases of little children a drop of wine only is given.

parents to marry their children, both sons and daughters; to whomever they thought fit. The young people had practically no voice in the matter; in fact, matches were sometimes arranged long before the intended husband and wife became of age.¹ Some thirty years ago, fifteen years for the male and twelve for the female was considered a suitable age for marriage. Now, at least twenty for the man and sixteen for the girl are insisted upon before the licence for the celebration of the wedding is issued.²

So long as the two sexes were kept strenuously apart, and no mixing was ever allowed, things went on pretty smoothly³; but, with the spread of education, these customs had to be gradually relaxed, and as young people came across persons more to their liking than their mates there was a great deal of friction in families.

To remedy this situation, the Patriarch, who is the head of the Egyptian Church, was obliged to interfere, and he issued, two years ago, a circular to all clergy, 1st, reminding them that, it not being contrary to the canons of the Church, young people intending to marry should not only see but mix with each other, so as to know one another well; 2nd, calling upon them to ascertain this fact, and that both parties freely consent to the marriage before the ceremony is celebrated.⁴

Engagement.

As soon as the consent of two families has been obtained for the union of two young people, the young man sends to the maiden, with a priest, a gold or a diamond ring, which is called "El-Shabka" (the engagement ring), and a day is fixed for the betrothal ceremony.

¹ These customs still prevail in the country, where most families live in patriarchal fashion. The authority of the "Lord of the house," who holds the common purse, on all matters is undisputed.

² At present no priest can celebrate a wedding ceremony without a licence from the Patriarch or the Bishop of the Diocese.

³ This is one of the customs imposed on the Copts after losing their indepen-

dence. Before, Egyptian women had as much freedom as their European sisters.

⁴ The canons of the Church have not been changed since the Council of Nicea, but several practices contrary thereto have sprung up and obtained the sanction of long usage, such as the consecration of monks only as bishops, allowing male heirs double the share of female, the seclusion of women, etc. The first practice is based on Corinth. vii. 31 and 32; the two last are evidently due to Mohamedan influence.

Betrothal.

The betrothal ceremony, "Jepeniôt," or the "Lord's Prayer," generally takes place soon after. In the evening of the fixed day, the groom, accompanied by a number of his relatives and friends and a priest, go to the maiden's house, where her relatives are assembled to receive them.

The priest opens the proceedings by reciting the Lord's Prayer, in which all persons present join. Then the priest delivers an appropriate speech, showing the antiquity of the ceremony, and alluding to the betrothal of Rebecca to Isaac.

The marriage contract is drawn up, and the dowry, which the bridegroom then pays, and the date of the wedding are therein mentioned. The priest and the most important people present sign the document, which is afterwards registered at the Bishop's offices. It is kept in the archives of the diocese, and in exchange a marriage licence is issued. At present there are printed forms for both these documents. The dowry varies in amount according to the pecuniary resources of the bridegroom. It is usually from £10 to £100. The bride's father generally contributes the same or double the sum paid, and the whole amount is spent in buying ornaments and on the trousseau.

After partaking of refreshments, supplied by the groom, the people separate.

When the date fixed for the wedding is a distant one, the young man is expected to send to his bride-elect from time to time gifts of flowers and fruits. If festivals such as Christmas or Easter intervene, he generally sends her a robe and some cakes and sweets.

Weddings.

Weddings are, as a rule, celebrated on the nights of Saturdays and Sundays.¹ The first is called the bride's

¹ Weddings are never celebrated during Lent or any of the Fasts kept by the Coptic church, except under very exceptional circumstances. Lent lasts 55 days. There are 3 other long fasts, the Apostles, from 30 to 45 days; the

Nativity, 30 days; the Virgins, 15 days, besides several minor ones. Although these fasts are now kept by very few people, they actually preclude marriage altogether for more than one-third of the year.

night. The ceremonies on this occasion take place at the bride's house.¹ In the course of the day the bride goes with her friends and relatives to a public bath, which is specially reserved for the party, and at night she is adorned and holds a sort of reception to which all relatives and friends are bidden. All the guests stay to dinner, and spend the night listening to singers, music, etc.²

The house is tastefully decorated with flowers and bunting, and it is brilliantly illuminated at night. The women generally occupy the upper stories, and the men the ground floor. Very often a large and lofty tent is erected for the men in the courtyard or garden, or even in the street, and the whole house is left to the women. The food is prepared by cooks especially engaged for the occasion, and all the china, plate, tents, and decorations are supplied by contractors called "Farrasheen."

Dinner is served on round metal trays about five feet in diameter, placed on stools. Each tray is placed on a central stool (Kürsi) about 2 feet 6 inches high. Cane chairs are generally set around; they have come into use within the last 30 years. Before that time the stools used were about 1 foot 6 inches high, and the people eating used to sit cross-legged on cushions, carpets, or mats, according to their condition. About ten people can sit round on chairs comfortably. Every guest is provided with a napkin, a spoon, and a cake of bread that serves for a plate, but no forks or knives.³ They all eat out of the same dish, every one using his fingers, which he must wash both before sitting to table and after leaving it. There are usually from twelve to fifteen courses that are presented in succession, beginning with soup, then meats and vegetables, and lastly sweets and fruits.

As each dish is placed on the table the most important man present is pressed by the others to begin, which he does after some little hesitation. He takes delicately a morsel with the thumb and the index, the others follow-

¹ This is also commonly called the night of "Henna," because before the bride goes to bed henna is applied to the palms of her hands and the soles of her feet, so that the red colour it imparts may be quite fresh on the next day.

² The immoral dancing of the Almis is no longer allowed in the better families.

³ Only families of the higher classes are beginning to use forks and knives.

ing his example. After a few mouthfuls have been taken, the dish is removed on a sign from the important man, and another dish is presented, and so on till the end. When a priest is present, he takes precedence over all other people, whatever may be their rank. He begins by saying grace; then, taking a loaf, he blesses, then breaks it, and gives a small piece to each person present.

There is generally little conversation at table, and, therefore, the meal, notwithstanding the large number of courses, does not last more than half an hour. Several of these trays are set in the dining hall, and as soon as a set of guests had done, the trays are immediately changed, and another set of guests take their places, and so on till every one has had his dinner. In the weddings of the upper classes the trays are now covered with a tablecloth, which is changed, but in ordinary weddings the trays are simply wiped with a sponge, and the things are then replaced by fresh ones. A great deal of tact is used in asking the guests to the dining hall, and on the whole there is usually nothing to mar the cheerfulness that seldom lacks at such gatherings.

The groom does not put in an appearance at the bride's house on this night, but he sends a small deputation of his nearest relatives, and along with them a bouquet and a wax candle that must be as long as the bride is tall. This candle remains in the maiden's bedchamber lighted during the whole night.

In the afternoon of the second day, Sunday—called the bridegroom's night—the best man, "Shebeen,"¹ accompanied by two or three of the nearest relatives of the groom, go to fetch the bride, who moves with all her friends in a procession to her future home, preceded by a band of musicians. Some years ago these processions only moved at night, and were very effective. First came the band, preceded by torchbearers, then the men carrying each a candle in a bouquet, then the pages carrying incense burners and perfume bottles, walking backwards, with their face to the bride, then the bride leaning on the

¹ The Shebeen, or groom's man, always pays for the carriages hired for the conveyance of the bride and her party to the groom's house, and he tips the servants. The bride's father pre-

sents him with a gold or a silver cigarette case. In old time the bridegroom and the Shebeen were presented each with a costume.

arm of the best man, followed by the ladies, with the servants in the rear.¹

At present the bride and the ladies are conveyed to the bridegroom's house in close carriages, preceded by music, and only escorted by the best man and his assistants. On arriving at the house, a sheep or a calf is killed, care being taken that its blood shall flow on the threshold. Its flesh is given to the poor, and the bride is carried or helped up to the ladies' apartment by the best man. As the procession leaves the bride's maiden home, and as it enters the groom's house, it is sprinkled with salt and sometimes rose leaves, to prevent the effects of the evil eye.

Wedding Service.

After resting a little and partaking of some slight refreshments, the wedding or "crowning" ceremony is gone through.

This ceremony generally takes place in the house of the groom, but it may be celebrated in the church. A table is placed in the middle of one of the largest halls in the house, on which a copy of the Holy Gospels in a silver case is placed, surrounded by six silver crosses, to each of which three wax candles are fixed.² Two armchairs are set in front of the table for the accommodation of the couple to be married. The groom is robed in another room with a richly embroidered cope, and conducted in a procession preceded by the choir to the hall. Afterwards the bride, who is dressed up in a white garment adorned with orange blossoms, her face being covered with a thin gauze veil with a few diamond or gold ornaments, is fetched in the same manner.

The priest begins the service by saying in a clear voice three times: "We are assembled to solemnize the union of N. & X.," repeating after each announcement the Lord's Prayer, in which all present join inaudibly. Then the wedding service is gone through. After the prayer of thanksgiving several chapters, both from the Old and New Testaments, referring to marriage are read. Then the

¹ The Moslem Egyptians have retained many of these customs.

² The three candles fixed to the cross

in many of the Coptic church services and processions is a symbol of the Holy Trinity.

priest blesses the couple and explains to them their duties towards each other.

Towards the end of the ceremony, two crowns of gold are placed on their foreheads, they are made to exchange rings, and to join hands. Their heads are drawn close together, and are covered with an embroidered sash. They are besides bound with a ribbon as a symbol of the indissoluble character of marriage, and that they are no longer two but one.¹

In conclusion, the priest, addressing first the groom, says to him: "I deliver unto you your bride N., who is now your wife. You have at present more authority over her than her parents. You must always treat her with love and kindness, and never neglect any of her wants," etc., etc.

Then, turning to the bride, he says to her: "You have heard that according to the Scriptures your husband is your head as Christ is the head of the Church. That means that you should obey and respect him as Sarah obeyed Abraham and always addressed him, 'My master.' You must keep his house properly, and make his home always cheerful," etc., etc.

Finally, speaking to both, he says: "If you obey what you have heard, God will bless you as He has blessed Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca," etc.

The service is concluded by some Coptic and Arabic hymns, and the women, who are never able to contain themselves, accompany the religious hymns by their "Zaghareet," a cry which they execute by moving the tongue in the mouth to manifest their joy.

After the ceremony the bride goes to the ladies' apartments and the bridegroom to the men's, to take their dinners and receive the congratulations of their friends, most of whom stay to dinner. An hour before midnight the bride and bridegroom retire, but the music is kept going through the greater part of the night.

On Monday the nearest relatives on both sides spend the day at the groom's house. The bride waits on them in person, and every guest presents her with some gift according to his means. This gift may be a diamond or a

¹ The crowns, as well as the cope, sash, etc., belong to the church.

gold ornament, or a sum of money, £1 to £10, receiving in return a handkerchief embroidered by the bride.

On the occasion of a wedding, it is the custom of all intimate friends to help by contributing something towards the coming fête. Some, for example, send a few sheep, another sends fowls, and a third, rice, sugar, coffee, candles, etc., etc.

The recipient generally makes a list of all the things received, and on a similar occasion sends something of the same value if he be of the same means, or of more or less value if a richer or a poorer man.

Mournings.

Of all the customs consecrated by long usage, none are more sacred in the eyes of the Copts, especially of the women, than those that are observed on the occasion of a death. It is customary to assemble the family in the house of the dying person. They watch all night by the bedside. Soon after the death the body is washed and placed in clean cloths. In the case of rich people the under garments are generally of pure flax that has been steeped in the River Jordan. The eyes are closed, a kerchief is tied round the face, passing under the chin to keep the mouth closed, the fingers are straightened, and the hands are laid across the breast.

As soon as a death occurs, and after that natural outburst of grief in which all members of the family, both men and women, join, the former withdraw to the rooms on the ground floor, leaving the upper stories to the women.

Like all bad news, that concerning a death spreads with rapidity, and soon all the friends and acquaintances of the family, both male and female, flock from all parts.

The men's and women's quarters present the most striking contrast. Whilst in the former all is decorum, the most frantic confusion conceivable reigns in the latter.

On entering, the men just touch the hands of the chief mourners, who sit together in one corner of the room, then they sit in regular rows; they hardly exchange a word with each other, but puff away at their cigarettes in silence as hard as they can.

The women behave differently. On reaching the door of the house they raise their voice in lamentation, and are answered by the women above with louder cries and wailings.

The scene that meets the eye in the women's apartments is most painful. Around the corpse, which is laid on a bed on the floor, and covered with a shawl, may be seen the women of the family decked in their richest garments. Their hair is dishevelled and their hands besmeared with indigo. The hired singers, who never fail to come uninvited, beat their drums wildly, and, by word and gesture, excite these unhappy creatures till they are quite beside themselves. Like mad women they furiously beat their faces, tear their hair, and do not cease shrieking till they fall down from sheer exhaustion, to recommence again soon after. From time to time all the women in the rooms join in a tremendous cry.

This terrible scene goes on till the corpse is removed, and at this juncture the excitement of the women reaches its climax.

All efforts to prevent at least the attendance of the singers, both in Coptic and Mussulman mournings, have been fruitless. The Church, and even the Government, had to interfere; but in vain, the women still have their way. The only concessions obtained after many years of struggles have been that the women should no longer blacken their hands and faces and accompany the funeral to the cemeteries, where sometimes terrible scenes took place.

The use of drums and of funerary dances has also ceased in the best families of Cairo and Alexandria, and tends to disappear gradually in the other classes of the people.

At the funeral procession the corpse is carried in turn by the best friends of the deceased. After being enveloped in a shroud of silk or cotton (which must be white if the deceased be young), the body is placed in a wooden coffin. Rose water and other perfumes are poured on the body, which is also strewn with flowers. After the service the lid of the coffin, which is ornamented with a large cross, is nailed before it is buried. The Mohamedans have no coffins: a bier is used for the conveyance of the bodies to the cemeteries.

The funeral procession does not differ much from that of Europeans. It marches in the following order :—First the choir boys carrying flags, and preceded by the sexton bearing a large silver gilt cross, then the priests, then the bier, followed by the chief mourners, and behind them their relatives and friends. After the service, which always takes place in the church, the corpse is buried.¹ All that can afford it have family vaults, with a courtyard and two or three rooms for the accommodation of the family when they go to visit the dead.

It is only after the corpse has been buried that the people in the house take some food ; it is supplied on the first and second days by their relatives. For three days the women in the upper storey, and the men on the ground floor, receive their friends. The women of the family wear their most magnificent clothes, whatever may be their colour, for the first three days. From the fourth day, and for one whole year, and sometimes much longer, both men and women wear black to indicate that they are in mourning.

In the house of the deceased all the furniture is covered with black. Some people put the carpets upside down, break the looking glasses, and commit great havoc. The women continue their wailings to the accompaniment of the songs of the hired mourners, in which they celebrate the good qualities of the departed, and his exploits, real or imaginary. On the third day a priest comes to the house, according to the women to dismiss the spirit of the deceased, which is believed to hover about the place till then, but in reality to bless the food before it is given to the poor, and to calm the minds of the people of the house by sprinkling all the rooms with holy water.

For forty days after the event the women of the house cry and wail every day two or three times, and the mourning continues one whole year. During this year the women resume the wailing and crying on every great festival, such as Christmas, New Year's Day, Easter, etc., etc.

The Copts believe that the soul is weighed by the

¹ In Upper Egypt it is still the custom to bury with the dead all their clothes and ornaments ; in Cairo only a

few favourite trinkets are not removed from the corpse.

Archangel Michael, who takes the place of Thioth. The uneducated believe that the souls are let loose from the places where they are confined awaiting the day of general judgment during the forty days succeeding Easter. On Whit Sunday prayers are offered for the dead in all the churches, and it is considered especially meritorious to feed the poor on that day. In the course of the week preceding that festival, the members of every family meet at a funeral meal, called "Sagda."

When one thinks of the resignation and fortitude, amounting almost to apathy, which the Copts, in common with most Orientals, show when any other calamity befalls them, such as the loss of their eyesight, or a limb, or their fortune, one wonders they give way to such despair on the loss of a near relative. This wonder even increases when you happen to know that during his lifetime the deceased was not the object of any special affection on the part of the disconsolate mourners. Sometimes quite the reverse.

Neither Christianity, with its pure morality and the consolation afforded by its beautiful teachings, nor Mohamedanism, with its fatalistic doctrines, seems to have been strong enough to sweep away in nineteen centuries the remains of Pagan habits. These heathen customs, along with many heathen beliefs, such as that according to which the soul remains at large for forty days after it leaves the body before it is called to judgment, its being then weighed in a scale, etc., still persistently linger amongst the Copts of the lower classes, and amongst all women, even of the upper class.

During the three days to which the male members of the family are condemned to inactivity, and which they spend listening to the songs of the hired mourners and the wailings of the women, the better educated have ample time to think of all these unchristian and irrational practices. Being generally far better enlightened than the women, there are very few men that are not disgusted with these practices, and wish that they should be abandoned.

The men alone, even when backed by the Church and by prohibitive laws passed by the Government, have not been able to effect any change worth mentioning, as has

been stated. But a new and strong element is coming to their help. Most young women, notwithstanding their limited education, find these customs senseless and absurd, and they rebel against them. So long as the elder women are mistresses of the situation, little or nothing can be done, but before thirty years have elapsed, most of these customs will be matters of the past.