

Samaritans Caste: A History of Thousands of Years

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Abstract

The current study aims at introducing the Samaritan caste which is one of the most ancient and most glorious castes ever known by human history. The study has addressed this subject and its dimensions in terms of origin, history, beliefs, customs, traditions and social circumstances. The study findings have indicated that the Samaritan caste is conservative and what in fact distinguishes it most is its preservation of its magnificent past, firm doctrine, and fortitude to adapt, holdfast and challenge, for more than three thousand and six hundred years, the fierce forces of Globalization and modern time technologies which are slowly controlling everybody. The Samaritan story is one that tells how to safeguard humans, their place and Holy Scriptures.

Keywords: Caste, Samaritan, Beliefs, Traditions, Holy Scriptures

Introduction

The Samaritan faith has been a focal point of interest to several sociological studies and researchers from all over the world. This has become so obvious thanks to the numerous studies conducted on the topic of castes for the purpose of addressing and analyzing their different forms and places. However, the Samaritan caste, in particular, did not gain such interest and attention, so this led to the emergence of several questions and queries in the minds of researchers which the present study shall seek to answer and clarify.

The Samaritan caste is one of the most glorious and most ancient castes ever witnessed and recognized throughout history. It is still holding fast to the Palestinian entity and is taking Gerizim Mountain south of Nablus city (Shechem) as its heaven within an area of about one hundred dunums with a total population of 378 adherents.

Who are the Samaritans? What is their way of life? What are their beliefs, customs and traditions?

Samaritan Etymology, Origin and History

The term Samaritan was derived from “Shamerim” an expression that denotes keepers and conservatives; it refers to the keeping, abidance and practice of the laws of Pentateuch (Samaritan Torah). Following the ruling of the Holy Land by the Arabs, this term was transformed and it became the Samaritans (Sadaka, 1997; Wasif, 2012). The Samaritans were given this name as a reference to the land of Samaria in Palestine who were the Israelites who entered the Holy Land under the leadership of Yusha Bin Noon the successor of Moses, May peace be upon him. The lineage of the Samaritan caste descends to three of the twelfth Israeli tribes; they are Levi, sons of Joseph: Ephraim and Manasseh. The history of this religious sect extends to more than 3652 years when the folks of Moses arrived at the lands of Palestine. The Israeli people continued living as one people under a unified religious and political leadership until schisms and seditions led to the partition of the Kingdom of Israel into two: Kingdom of Samaria with Sebastia as its capital in the north and the Kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem as its capital (Society For Samaritan Studies, 1993; Shreydeh and Gorani, 1994; Sadaka, 1997; Kahen, 2012; Wasif, 2012).

The adherents of the Samaritan faith differ from the Jews in several ways; namely a religious difference regarding the holiness of Mount Gerizim to the Samaritans especially in light of the fact that it was mentioned 13 times in the Torah and the fact that it is the fourth pillar of the Samaritan doctrine, whereas the Jews believe in the holiness of Jerusalem instead. Jews view the Samaritan caste as infidels who glorify Mount Gerizim rather than Jerusalem where Solomon Temple exists despite the fact that Jerusalem was not mentioned in the Torah (Wasif, 2013). The present population of the Samaritan caste is about 763 inhabitants; half of them live on Mount Gerizim in Nablus city while the other half live in Holon city near Tel Aviv city. A number of Samaritans immigrated to Holon city in 1948 and 1967 in search for a better future. However, they are in constant contact with their other brothers on Mount Gerizim and they jointly celebrate their joys and share their sorrows. The geographic and political distance did not change the fact that Samaritans, regardless of their place of dwelling, make one entity that has a joint life with common interests (Radwan, 2012). The Samaritans were exposed to a number of demographic changes over the passage of centuries until it almost came to the verge of extinction for the number of its adherents, in 1850, did not exceed 80, then in 1913, it reached 175; however, it receded to 163 inhabitants in 1922 (Sadaka, 1997). Later their number increased and reached about 763 people at present. The Samaritan caste consists of five families namely, Kahen family which is responsible for running the religious affairs of the caste; the oldest male member is the caste high priest. A committee is elected every four years and it is supervised and presided over by the high priest; it runs the different affairs of the caste and represents it before other people and different authorities. It is the official spokesperson of the caste at all local and international forums. Kahen family is the descendents of Levi tribe; the caste also comprises Defni, Sirawi, Sadaka and Mfarij families who are descendents of the lineage of Ephraim and Manasseh (Shreydeh and Gorani, 1994; Wasif, 2013).

Samaritan Beliefs

Historical studies indicate that the Samaritan caste believes in the Torah as a holy scripture and this represents one of the pillars of their doctrine. In fact, it is the main source from which the Samaritans derive their faith and laws; the Samaritan religion is based on five pillars: Belief in the oneness of God, Belief that Moses is God's prophet, Belief in the five books of Moses, namely the Origin of Creation (Genesis), Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), Belief in Mount Gerizim (their Direction), and Belief in Resurrection Day. A Samaritan must firmly believe in all of the above in order to deserve the title a Samaritan (Society For Samaritan Studies, 1993; Sadaka, 1997; Sahib, 2000; Wasif, 2012). The Samaritans keep in their iron safe, at Mount Gerizim, the most ancient copy of the Pentateuch written on scrolls; its estimated age is about 3638 years; this copy of the Pentateuch is taken out of the safe three times a year especially on feasts – Passover, Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles) and Revelation of the Torah (Radwan, 2012). The most significant beliefs of the Samaritans relate to the Ten Commandments: You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not swear to God in false. You shall not give false testimony. You shall not steal. You shall not commit adultery. You shall save the day of Sabbath to make it holy. You shall honor your father and your mother. You shall not murder. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, house, camel or anything that is your neighbor's, and the Holiness of Mount Gerizim (Sadaka, 1997; Kahen, 2012; Wasif, 2012). Gerizim Mount, also named by the Samaritans, "Mountain of Blessing", enjoys a special holiness, since it is their direction and the place where they hold their religious rituals during Passover; it is the place where they hold outdoors celebrations, slaughter their offerings, and perform duties and prayers every year. As for Samaritan feasts, resources have indicated that all their feasts are religious rather than national as dictated by the Pentateuch. They are seven feasts: Passover, Unleavened Bread Feast, Feast of Harvest (Weeks), Hebrew New Year, Feast of Atonement, Sukkot (Tabernacle), Eighth Day of Revelation of Pentateuch (Society For Samaritan Studies, 1993; Kahen, 2012; Wasif, 2012). Samaritans worship God by performing two types of prayers: A prayer performed twice a day one: a morning prayer and an evening prayer. As for the second type of prayers, they are additional like Saturday prayer and feast prayers. The Samaritans wear white outfits during prayers as an indication of equality between the rich and the poor before God and the purity of hearts as the purity of dress. The Samaritans recite al Fatiha (The First Chapter of the Quran), a precondition for the correctness of the prayer. It is the one that Prophet Moses recited, and it is revealed in the Torah as follows: "For I will proclaim the name of the God; ascribe greatness to our God! "The Rock, His work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is He. Blessed is He and He shall be mentioned forever." Both men and women are required to perform prayers except when women are in menstruation or postpartum (Rashid, 1987; Shreydeh and Gorani, 1994; Kahen 2012).

The Samaritans attach great importance to Purity and Impurity in accordance with their doctrine and faith; purity to Samaritans is fulfilled through ablution which to a great extent is similar to Muslim ablution; it deals with washing every exposed part of the body three times along with a recitation of special verses of the Pentateuch which is a prerequisite for prayer, since it is not acceptable to perform a prayer without ablution in fresh water (Shreydeh and Gorani, 1994; Sadaka, 1997). Samaritans believe that a newly born male must be circumcised eight days after birth. Anyone who violates this shall be considered a non-Samaritan and shall be denied membership of the Samaritan faith; the only exception relates to medical reasons which prevent performing circumcision on the specified date in accordance with the Samaritan beliefs (Society for Samaritan Studies, 1993; Shreydeh and Gorani, 1994; Radwan, 2012). Samaritans observe a one day of fasting in the year which is on Atonement Day; it is required of all, old and young, including children except breastfeeding ones.

A Samaritan also pays homage to Mount Gerizim three times in the year especially on feast days: Passover, Harvest (Weeks), Sukkot (Tabernacle). As for Alms, it is required of all Samaritans except for priests, since it is paid to them, and they use these sums in carrying out public projects inside the caste (Shreydeh and Gorani, 1994; Kahen, 2012). Samaritans have their own slaughter rituals; there are several prerequisites that the offering should meet before it is slaughtered; they believe that these rituals, bestowed upon them by God, distinguish them from others; therefore, the only meat they eat must be slaughtered in accordance with their doctrine; it must be administered by an adult pure Samaritan who covers his head first and recites some verses prior to slaughter of the animal which must be by one draw; otherwise, it will be forbidden to eat from it (Sadaka, 1997). As for Samaritan burial rituals, the deceased is placed in the direction of Mount Gerizim (Mount of Blessing) and verses from the Pentateuch are recited on him. He is then bathed and the corpse is wrapped in white cloth. Then, there will be a funeral procession during which invocations and al Fatiha are heard; it is then followed by three condolence days (Kahen, 2012).

Samaritan Marriage

Marriage is considered a social system in which the most profound forms of human interaction are portrayed; it is one of the major decisions that preoccupy the minds of the Samaritan young men who seek to establish a family and keep the lineage of this caste especially when the number of females is little. The percentage of males to females in the caste is 2:1. According to Samaritans, marriage is confined to members of the caste only; a Samaritan has the right to marry one wife; it is forbidden to have two wives at the same time except for ailment of wife or her failure to have children. Marriage to another wife can only be done after divorce takes place. A Samaritan may be married to two wives provided that they are not sisters (Sadaka, 1997). Samaritans do not encourage marriage to a non Samaritan; however, the need and the meagerness of females in the caste forced men to marry from outside the caste to women who embrace Samaritanism especially Ukrainian girls. The High Priest has made this kind of marriage legal in light of the need to protect this caste from extinction, so a religious ruling was issued to this effect. The first instance of this type of marriage took place in 2003 (Radwan, 2012).

Exchange marriage among Samaritans is the most common type of marriage. The one who has females shall keep them until they are wedded to his other fellow male Samaritans inside the caste. Consequently, this internal marriage within the Samaritan caste has led to the spread of several hereditary genetic diseases. Divorce among Samaritans only takes place in the following cases namely, marriage treason, fatal and contagious diseases or infertility of a spouse. The Samaritan marriage ceremonial rituals are derived from the teachings of their religion the most important of which is the ceremony held between the girl's proxy and the young man. The wedding ceremony is held in the synagogue where a record of the couples qualities and those of their parents is listed on a large board; it also includes good invocations for the couple to have a happy life, good income and good offspring (Rashid, 1987; Shreydeh and Gorani, 1994). Samaritan marriage rituals are very much influenced by the Palestinian culture, customs and traditions spread in Nablus city and its suburbs (Society for Samaritan Studies, 1993).

Samaritan Women

The Samaritan religion focuses on the woman since she is the mother and the caregiver who is capable of making family decisions. She is considered the guardian of the Samaritan religion, customs and traditions; she is the one who brings up her children based on sound education of steadfastness and uphold of their religion and doctrine. She is the one who brings up her children in the best manner for the purpose of survival and longevity of the Samaritan caste (Shreydeh and Gorani, 1994; Kahen, 2012).

The Samaritan woman has both rights and obligations mostly domestic; a woman does not undertake any of the religious affairs since she is not completely pure (Shreydeh and Gorani, 1994; Kahen, 2012). The liturgy of the Samaritan Pentateuch dictate the significance of women purity; that's why girls and women in menstruation are isolated in a special corner in the house for seven days where they eat, drink and sleep alone. They are completely forbidden from doing any of the house chores, so everybody serves her in order to observe and uphold the laws of purity and impurity. However, girls and women have the right to go to school and work as usual. Women who give birth to male infants are secluded for a period of 41 days while those who give birth to female infants are secluded for 80 days (Sadaka, 1997; Radwan, 2012; Wasif, 2012). Kahen (2013) considers the seclusion period as part of the Samaritan way of giving comfort and showing respect to women. It is a process to exchange roles between man and woman within the Samaritan caste and an endurance test of man's ability to undertake family responsibilities and duties traditionally carried out by the Samaritan woman.

This makes the members of the family feel that there is a continuous regeneration in their lives in order to break the daily monotony of their livelihood. According to Samaritan divine jurisprudence, a Samaritan woman has the right to inherit movable assets as man does, but she does not inherit immovable assets. If someone passes away, and he is only succeeded by females, they have to marry their cousins so as not to violate the balance of succession of inheritance in the caste (Sadaka, 1997; Wasif, 2012). An obvious change in women's status in the Samaritan caste has come about as a result of the changes that had taken place in the caste in general due to the fact that they relocated their dwelling place from the old city to Mount Gerizim. It is also due to the improvement of their style of living, and the impact of surrounding cultures. Nowadays, we have come to witness, over the last ten years, many Samaritan women completing their university education and holding several positions in government and private institutions in the Palestinian society.

Samaritan Astrology

Samaritans are distinguished for their astrological calculations called (Right Calculation) which is conveyed to them from prophet Adam till our present day life; it was transferred throughout thousands of years by different generations of Kahen family (Wasif, 2013). According to Samaritans, this astrological system is connected with an altitude of Gerizim Mount by which a calculation of the Hebrew year is done; this year is divided into twelve lunar months; each is thirty or twenty nine days only. This calculation is made according to the applied astrological calculations, in which each month is determined in accordance with the connection between the Sun and the Moon and in accordance with extremely accurate tables of astrological calculations. In the event that this connection took place after six hours following the emergence of the moon, then the beginning of the new month shall start on the following day. In this case, the new month runs for twenty nine days only (Atallah, 2012; Wasif, 2012).

Astrology constitutes the main feature of the Samaritan people who rely on the name and mother's name in order to tell ones fortune. Each alphabet in the name has a meaning depending on astrological calculations rather than on magic and witchcraft. Their role in this area is based on reconciliation rather than division. Samaritan horoscopes are associated with ones name and mother's name. These two names are used to identify the person's social, practical and emotional status as well as his personal qualities (Atallah, 2012).

Samaritan Museum

Despite the small number of its population, the followers of the Samaritan faith are very active in their pursuit to preserve their historical and religious legacy. To this effect, the Samaritan Museum is a prominent landmark which hosts remnants and antiquities from their ancient roots and the caste lineage tree as descendents of the lineage of Adam to the present High Priest; there are 163 detailed lineages representing all the stages that the Samaritan lineage passed through. The museum is a tourist attraction for international tourists and envoys (Wasif, 2013). The museum narrates the story of a caste that was inflicted by setbacks, epics and catastrophes to bear witness on the fact that these people had undergone a tremendous amount of hardship across centuries more than any other people on the face of Earth. The ancient Hebrew Language is the Samaritan language; it is the language of sign and image, so each alphabet is similar in shape to that of a part of the human body. It consists of twenty two alphabets read from right to left. A Samaritan child starts the process of reading and learning fundamentals of religion based on these alphabets from the age of five to seven years. By this time, he would have memorized the Pentateuch. Later, their children would enroll into different educational stages at Palestinian schools and universities in Nablus city (Society of Samaritan Studies, 1993; Wasif, 2012).

Samaritans in the Palestinian Society

The society consists of several communities which interact with one another in a systematic manner and share stable and organized social relations. They share joint interests and goals governed by a group of values, customs, traditions and norms which organize their behavior and relationships to guarantee the survival and sustainability of the society. Every group is characterized by the interest of its members in certain behavioral norms based on their own values so as to distinguish them from members of other societal groups; each group exerts pressure on its members to hold fast to these norms in order to preserve and sustain their group entity (Othman, 1999). Sociological theories and studies have indicated that humans are sociable by nature and live within groups. Ever since the existence of man on Earth, he moved towards living in social groups. An individual cannot survive and exist for his livelihood without a society; he should be in constant contact with others sharing their lives and everyday activities. By doing so, he can fulfill his different needs within the laid out values, customs and traditions by the group. Thus, he would be sociably acceptable. In light of this, we realize the big role of the group and the surrounding social environment in shaping the personality and social behavior of the individual living in them (Banat, 2012).

The Samaritans consider themselves Palestinians; they have lived ever since their existence with Palestinians in Yasmina quarter in Nablus city. The Samaritans are an integral part of the Palestinian social structure; they take pride in their Palestinian belonging and loyalty since they constitute an authentic element of the Palestinian people and culture in general and the city of Nablus in which they have lived for hundreds of years in particular. They take pride in belonging to the city. This reflects the overwhelming harmony between Muslims, Christians and Samaritans across centuries in the city of Nablus (Radwan, 2012). Samaritans share the same culture with Palestinians in general and they differ in certain characteristics as a result of the cultural difference within a certain society which is called subculture. Samaritans wear traditional common Palestinian clothes in Nablus city; however, their priests wear cloaks and red or white head gear (Imama). They speak Arabic with a Nabulsi accent, and they speak old Hebrew language which they use in their religious rituals and within the members of the caste (Shreydeh and Gorani, 1994).

Samaritans hold Palestinian, Jordanian and Israeli passports; they are part of the Palestinian society and they abide by its values, customs and traditions; they share and contribute to the social, economic, cultural and political aspects of the Palestinian society. They work in trade and industry in the city of Nablus; they have their own stores, and some hold government offices in the Palestinian Authority institutions. The Samaritan children receive their primary education at Gerizim Primary School which follows the Palestinian Curriculum. Religious teachings, language and Pentateuch are taught in the afternoon sessions; then, Samaritan students pursue their education at Nablus city schools and academic institutions especially at An Najah National University (Society For Samaritan Studies, 1993; Radwan, 2012). The Samaritans have cordial and friendly ties with Nablus people and community; it is based on mutual love and respect and they exchange visits on different feasts and occasions. The Samaritans are keen on giving their children Arabic names like Ehab, Wasif, Abed Muin, Adil (Society For Samaritan Studies, 1993; Kahen, 2012).

The Samaritan caste took part in the Palestinian political system when the late president Yasser Arafat granted the Samaritans a parliamentary representation on the Palestinian Legislative Council in 1996 as part of the quota system applied in the Palestinian political system. Priest Salom Bin Imran was appointed as representative of the Samaritan caste. The Samaritans believe in the legitimate Palestinian rights and invariables and to have a state of their own. They seek peace for they are very hopeful that it would be fulfilled soon and spread to all Palestinian territories where full rights are returned to their lawful owners and everybody lives in peace and security (Radwan, 2012). The Samaritans have embodied their affiliation to the Palestinian society and its just cause through taking part in the Palestinian national struggle to get rid of the oppression of the occupation which has been perching on the Palestinian people for centuries. They have indeed proved that they are an authentic part of the Palestinian people by having the same concerns and fate; they never hesitated in making sacrifices for the exaltation of the Palestinian people and regain of its usurped rights; there were several prisoners and wounded Samaritans as a result.

Conclusion

The Samaritans are still considered one of the oldest and most deeply rooted castes ever known throughout history. "Sumara", as named by the people of Nablus, are still holding fast to a long chain of customs and traditions which they strongly protect and defend against the relentless process of globalization and modern advances which are dominating and controlling everybody. It is now more than three thousand and six hundred years and the Samaritans are still holding fast to their doctrine on Mount Gerizim; this caste is second to none all over the world; it is like a plant that existed in a foreign soil, but it succeeded to preserve its existence and entity over hundreds of years as stated by Dabbagh (1947). The Samaritans are still struggling for survival and the road ahead is very long and crooked bringing about a spectrum of different stories and concerns whether small or big in light of their glorious past and firm doctrine. The Samaritans have undertaken to live, interact and continuously come up with innovative solutions especially with regards to the issue of external marriage in an attempt to preserve and sustain their caste since life does not cater for all nor does it take everything; the story of a Samaritan is a story of perpetuation of man, place and holy scripture.

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