This is How You'd Spend Easter in Sudan

Marjorie Turner
Iowa State College

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EASTER in a land of tall, feathery palm trees, hot sands and strangely garbed, brown-skinned people walking to church at sunrise. No, it’s not a Hollywood movie set, it’s Easter in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.

Carolyn Brewer, a young Presbyterian missionary to the Sudan, says it’s a far cry from the cold blustery Easter Sunday that often greets Iowans as they leave for church. Carolyn is taking special home economics courses at Iowa State College and plans to return to her African “home” where she is in charge of a school for young girls in the Sudan. Many of her students belong to the Coptic Church of Egypt and the Sudan so she’s visited the church many times during the 3 years she was in Africa. Her home when she’s in the United States is Washington, Iowa.

Passion Week

Passion Week in the Sudan is especially impressive, Carolyn says, because it captures the pageantry and symbolic beauty of the Easter holiday as only a country near the Holy Land can. Easter has sincere meaning for the members of the Coptic Church who have been persecuted for centuries by the Moslems. For the 4-day Lenten period the Coptic people live on vegetables and grain, giving up meat for Lent.

The Coptic customs differ markedly from those observed in the United States, she reports, but the deep religious sincerity of these people can’t be questioned.

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of the Holy Week celebration in the Sudan. Early in the morning the families start out along the dusty roads to the church, stopping on the way to strip the young palm branches from the trees along the way.

Families don’t sit together in the Coptic Church. The men enter the main door and sit on chairs on the main floor. The women and children sit on a balcony built around three sides of the church. Here they remain, carefully screened from the men by an inch-square wood lattice-work which reaches to the ceiling.

While the priest conducts the service and delivers the sermon to the men below, the women chat among themselves in the balcony, disregarding the service. They strip the leaves of the palm fronds they have brought and weave them into a large heart shape, leaving a few leaves at the top of the heart to flutter when waved in the air. With other leaves, the women weave tiny donkeys, symbols of the animal Christ rode, and pigeon nests which are attached to the large hearts. Then they weave flowers to complete the heart.

Much of the Palm Sunday service is preached in the Coptic language, which only the priest understands. In order that the listeners may be able to get something from the sermon, the priest gives parts of it in Arabic, the spoken language of the Coptics. The men listen attentively to all of the service, even though they cannot understand part of it. The women pay no attention to the words of the priest.

Choir boys sing in the Coptic language. They sing unaccompanied, using a 5-note scale in a minor key. If each singer starts on a different note, it doesn’t seem to bother anyone at all. This strange, fascinating music is high-pitched and has a weird rhythm.

For the Palm Sunday communion service the priest wears a white robe and headdress, elaborately embroidered in gold, with a huge gold cross on a chain around his neck. At communion the men go to a table at the front of the church, but the priest gives the women their communion through the lattice. After communion the children go downstairs and pass to the front of the church waving the decorated palm branches and singing. The priest blesses them by sprinkling water on the branches.

During Passion Week following Palm Sunday, the Coptics fast, taking no food or water a part of each day. The fasting period is increased until Friday, when they do not eat until nightfall. Friday morning everyone goes into mourning and wears black
garments. The day is spent in sorrow and prayer at the church. Saturday, too, is spent in mourning and weeping.

On the joyous Easter Sunday morning, the black clothes and sorrow are cast off and the Coptics arise early and put on their best and brightest clothes. Singing and rejoicing, the worshippers travel along the roads to the church.

After the service, the families return to their homes to eat Easter Sunday dinner, which includes the finest delicacies. A typical feast would omit our traditional baked ham, but might feature grape-leaf mashe, a grape leaf stuffed with chopped lamb, rice and red peppers as a first course. The main course would be an individual roast pigeon, stuffed with rice and almonds, which would be followed by eggplant cooked with meat, and brown bread. For dessert there might be oranges or bananas, tea made with boiled milk and sugar, or cinnamon, and tea cakes.

Easter doesn’t end on Sunday in the Sudan. The best part of the holiday is Monday, the “Shemana-seen”, which means “the beginning of the breezes.” To the Coptics it means a big picnic. All day the streets are crowded with people celebrating. The picnics are held under large palm trees, preferably along a river bank. Because everyone wants a good spot for his noonday picnic, each family sends a son out early in the morning to pick a good tree for the picnic. He sits under the tree all morning, holding the spot until the rest of the family comes later in the day. The picnicking lasts until sunset when the families sing as they return to their homes-ending another Coptic Easter holiday.

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