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Somali Women's Songs for the First Ladies of Early Islam

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East Africa
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When a Somali woman is about to give birth, older women often arrange a ceremony to call blessings on the mother-to-be, in which they sing *sittaat*² – songs of praise for the leading women of early Islam, especially Faduumo (Fatima), daughter of the Prophet. Although there is no doubt that this genre of songs is old – it may even have a relationship to non-Islamic Oromo songs for the goddess of fertility – scholarly references date back only to the late nineteenth century and do not include song texts.³

There are three reasons why *sittaat* did not receive scholarly attention during the colonial period (c. 1885–1960). Firstly, the Orientalist paradigm in Islamic studies gave preference to what were regarded as foundational core texts from the ‘Islamic heartlands’, written, of course, in Arabic by men. African women’s devotional oral poetry in Somali, not Arabic, was marginal to this type of Islamic studies. Secondly, it was part of especially British colonial strategies towards Islam to promote an Islamic elite (e.g. judges) trained outside of Somaliland in Islamic centres of learning that were solidly under British rule, such as Cairo, Aden or Khartoum. By insisting on ‘upgrading’ local Islam, the colonizers undermined representatives of popular local Islam.⁴ Finally, irrespective of colonial policies towards Islam, the new educated elite in all the Somalilands (French, British, and Italian), even if undoubtedly Muslim, were deeply influenced by secular European culture and European languages. While its nationalist project included an articulation of the Somali pastoral tradition as cultural authenticity,⁵ older women’s religious songs did not fall within its purview.

The group of *sittaat* singers with whom I became familiar in Djibouti in 1989, held small weekly semi-private devotional sessions in their leader’s home. They also performed on special occasions, for example to call upon the Sittaat (the first ladies of Islam) to bless a woman about to give birth, or on a much larger scale, to celebrate a religious holiday (such as the Prophet’s birthday). When *sittaat* are sung, women sit in a circle on mats on the ground, while the leader beats a round, low and wide drum with a stick. The atmosphere is festive as between songs the women pass around herbal tea, orange sherbet, coffee, popcorn (*salool*) and Turkish delight (*xalwad*), as well as bottles of perfume and incense burners. The singing always begins with praise to God, the Prophet, and the *awliya* (those saintly individuals of Islamic history who continue to inspire many Muslims today), including the twelfth-century founder of the Qadiriyya, ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani. ■

God, we begin with God’s *bissinka* [the phrase ‘in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate’]
God, we begin with my heart loving you.
God, we begin with the blessing of Prophet Muhammad
God, through the merit of Faduumo, daughter of the Prophet, we seek succour.⁶

Once the women begin to address the Sittaat, Xaawo (Eve), the ‘mother of the believers’, is the first to be praised. ■

Before you, [the name] ‘mother’ did not exist
Before you, ‘mama’ did not exist
Before you, respected one, people did not say ‘mother’ to each other [...]
Mother, Eve, don’t sleep, spread a bed of silk for us
Mother, Eve, don’t sleep, weave your ropes for us.⁷

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After Eve, the *sittaat* address the Prophet’s mother (Amina), foster-mother (Halima), wives and daughters. It is with the songs for Faduumo (Fatima) that the session reaches its climax, for these are the songs that are believed to bring about the Prophet’s daughter’s actual presence in the women’s midst. Some women get up and dance, at times carrying incense burners with burning coal on their heads; others are overwhelmed by emotion and are lovingly covered with shawls and sprayed with perfume by friends trying to calm them. ■

Madaad, madaad,⁸ Faduumo, daughter of the Prophet
Give us that for which we call upon you
Ecstasy has me in its grip, my body is burning
Madaad, madaad, Faduumo, daughter of the Prophet
Give us that for which we call upon you.⁹

In the *sittaat* Somali women explicitly assert the common bond and plight of womanhood in two ways. First, the singers address their common problems as wives, mothers and providers in the urban slums of underdeveloped and French-dominated Djibouti. Second, as women, they appeal to the women of early Islamic history, asserting the values central to their own self-image, those of good wife- and motherhood. They praise Xaawo (Eve) as humanity’s first wife and mother, Khadija as the Prophet’s loyal and most beloved wife, and Faduumo (Fatima) as the Prophet’s only daughter (as well as wife of ‘Ali and mother of Hasan and Husayn).

Reinforcement of the Status Quo?

The values that the women singing the *sittaat* assert are mostly dominant values that appear to reinforce the *status quo*. They do not complain about difficult husbands, but pray for help to get along with them; they do not complain about unemployed or disobedient children, but pray that their children will not go astray. As I watched the participants in these sessions – middle-aged and older women, some widows, others divorcees, many the mothers of grown (often unemployed) children, and almost all compelled to still provide for themselves as well as others – one aspect struck me as an act of resistance to their *status quo*. For these women, however old or run down by life, insist vociferously and explicitly on their own daughterhood in relation to the Sittaat in heaven. Using metaphors such as ‘teaching a child how to walk’, and being allowed to hold onto their ‘mothers’ skirt hems’, they ask their heavenly mothers for the love, care and teaching daughters receive from their mothers. By expecting and asking that the Sittaat in heaven take care of them in infinite and intimate detail in this life, on the Day of Judgement, and in paradise, Somali women challenge in song the harsh age and gender-based realities of their daily lives.

That you take and welcome us, daughter of the Prophet, for that we clamour
That you come and teach us how to walk, daughter of the Prophet, for that we clamour.
You child of the Prophet, most obedient of women, give us that for which we call upon you.
[...]

Lady Faduumo, lead us with your light
Lady Faduumo, make us as you are
Lady Faduumo, give us your musk to smell
Lady Faduumo, spread your bed for us
Lady Faduumo, bring us in the presence of the good Muhammad
Lady Faduumo, help us climb your ladder
Lady Faduumo, spread your wrap as our bedding
Lady Faduumo, wrap us in your silk. [...]

Teach us how to walk, look upon us as your children
Merciful God, don’t keep Faduumo away from us
May she take us by the hand on the Day on which One is Sorrowful
Make us their [the Sittaat’s] companions, Compassionate God
May we all live in one home with their mothers and daughters
May we all eat together with the Sittaat and the Prophet’s family
May we come to live in paradise.

In Djibouti, Somali intellectuals and scholars such as Muhammed ‘Abdillahi Rirash and ‘Umar Ma‘allin (who introduced me to the *sittaat*), have begun to reverse the colonial marginalization of Islamic Somali orature and to record and preserve it as part of the Somali cultural heritage. However, as they undertook this project in the 1980s, other middle-class men (merchants, shopkeepers, teachers and civil servants) adopted a lifestyle of intensified Islamic piety and looked upon Islamist movements further East for guidance. While deeply critical of any colonial or neo-colonial Western influences, the latter share with the erstwhile Orientalists a focus upon a relative small number of foundational Islamic texts. As they have resolutely turned their backs on local Somali expressions of Islamic devotion and wisdom, they appear, for the moment at least, to have contributed to the increasing marginalization of Somali Islamic orature. ◆

Notes

1. This article is based on Lidwien Kapteijns, ‘Sittaat: Somali Women’s Songs for the “Mothers of the Believers”’. Boston: African Studies Center, Boston University, *Working Papers in African Studies*, No. 25 (1995). See also *The Marabout and the Muse*, ed. Kenneth Harrow (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996), pp. 124-141.
2. *Sittaat* refers both to the distinguished women of early Islam and the songs Somali women sing for them. The latter are also referred to as *Xaawiyo Faduumo* (‘Eve and Fatima’), *madaxshub* (‘the anointing of the head’) and, especially in southern Somalia, *Abbaay Sittidey* or *Abbaay Nebiyeey*.
3. For an early reference, see Leo Reinisch, *Die SomaliSprache*. Sudarabischen Expedition. Band I (Vienna: Alfred Holder, 1900) p. 256. Georgio Banti, ‘Scrittura’, in *Aspetti dell’ Espressione Artistica in Somalia*, ed. Annarita Puglielli (Roma: Bagatto Books, 1988), pp.19-29. The latter gives a photograph of a late nineteenth-century *Abbaay Sittidey* text (pp.24-25), which is, however, too bastardized to deserve the name.
4. Lidwien Kapteijns, ‘Islam in Ethiopia and the Horn’, in *The History of Islam in Africa*, eds. Nehemia Levtzion and Randall Pouwels (Athens: Ohio University Press, forthcoming).
5. See Lidwien Kapteijns, *Women’s Voices in a Man’s World: Women and the Pastoral Tradition in Northern Somali Orature, c. 1899-1980* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, forthcoming).
6. *Sittaat* session led by Luula Saalih, recorded by Muhammad ‘Abdillahi Rirash and ‘Umar Ma‘allin for Radio and Television Djibouti in 1988. The song texts, as are all texts quoted in this article, were transcribed and translated by Lidwien Kapteijns and Maryan ‘Umar Ali.
7. *Sittaat* session led by Luula Saalih, Djibouti, 2 October 1989.
8. This is an invocation often used in Sufi devotional practice.
9. *Sittaat* session led by ‘Asha Muhammad (from Hargeisa), Djibouti, 13 November 1989.

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