

'SITAAD': The Somali Women's Traditional Spiritual Gathering



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*"SITAAD is a genre of religious
panegyrics laced with spirituality and
a yearning to emulate and fuse with
some respected earlier women of Islam"
(Awale, 2013)*



It was Friday afternoon. I and my friends have been planning to attend a Sitaad session for quite some time. Today is the day. The place we're heading to opens its doors only on Mondays and Fridays and is closed for the rest of the week. While Monday is a working day, we have decided to go on Friday. We haven't made a booking or anything else because it was not needed. Every woman is welcome to join as long as she is following the rules which are quite simple: you should come early, you should not enter in the middle of a session (in this case, if you come in the middle of a segment, you should wait at the door until that segment is over), you should participate (sing and clap your hands), you should not make distractions (no side talking, talk on the phone), you should respect everyone and bring *Sadaqah* (small amount of money for the purpose of donation and the maintenance of the place). After forty minutes of drive, we finally arrived at the destination. It was an old house consisting of one big room, a kitchen, and a veranda. The session room was about six to seven-meter square. Its walls were covered with curtains and some calligraphy and writings. There was a big green flag on the right wall of the room with Arabic calligraphy which says 'الله لا اله الا هو' which means 'There is no God truly worthy of worship except Allah'. On the left wall, the name of the place was written 'Xadrada Hooyo Diran' which means 'Mother Diran's Spiritual Place'

As the woman who is in charge of the place told us before the beginning of the session, the place belonged to her grandmother who

was called Diran. This place was her house originally and she was the one who turned her place into a spiritual gathering location. She was the session leader as well. Once she passed away, her daughter took over, and now, the granddaughter runs the place. It is kind of obligatory and the place should run as long as it's possible.

There were about thirty women in the room sitting in a circle. The middle space was empty as it is inappropriate to sit in the middle because it is the dancing area. Apart from the woman, the flag, the calligraphy, there was also a very big *Durbaan* (Drum), a few bottles of perfume, a small container of *Uunsi*: frankincense (Somali prepared scent), a pair of curtains on the window, and undeniably loads of positive energy. The lady in the middle started playing the drum loudly with two sticks. With a very loud and pure voice, she started a spiritual song as well. The rest of the women started chanting and singing after her. She and a lady next to her were leading the session and the rest of us were chanting and clapping. The rhythm, drumming, and clapping were balanced and spiritually uplifting. After a few intense intones, two of the women reached their spiritual climax (*Jibbo*), started shaking, and finally fell on the floor.

Sitaad (*Sittaata*) is also known as *Xaawiyo Faadumo* (Eve and Fatima) or *Madaxshub* (the anointment of the head) and particularly in the south as *Abbaay Sittidey* are songs throughout Somalia. Sitaad forms part of a rich and varied range of cultural expressions of Islamic devotion in the horn of Africa, forms of worship that are often directly linked to Sufi brotherhoods. (Kaptjeins, 1995)

The word Sitaad has different meanings. The most familiar name is that the word is from the Arabic term *Sayidaat* which means mistress or a respected woman who has authority. Arguably the Sitaad culture began a long time ago, during the prophet Mohamed's time. While there is no accurate information, it is believed that the daughter of Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) was somehow the initiator of Sitaad because she organized a feast for poor women and children while she was pregnant with her sons (Hassan and Hussein). The purpose was with this act, to ask or beg Allah for safe delivery. In Somali culture, this tradition is called *Taraaraysi* and it is a ritual act performed during the last month of the pregnancy. (Awaleh, 2013)

Sitaad is very familiar among Somali women, specifically older women. In Somali culture, age and gender have always defined the social roles and responsibilities in society. The status in society is usually determined by age. For example, older men were always the community leaders because of the patriarchal culture and their wisdom. Both cultural and religious leaders were mostly older. Likewise, older women were more respected among the women as well. The traditional midwives, decision-makers, and Sitaad session leaders were mostly older women. These women have specific and important roles, obligations, and status in society and they are very well respected.

Married women had a distinct social circle because of their common roles, duties, and challenges. They have common responsibilities including wifehood and motherhood. This special bond in which they usually share their daily challenges, pray together,

and link their roles and responsibilities to the previous Muslim women as role models are one of the main reasons Sitaad forums were formed and became familiar among Somali women. Sitaad is a form of empowerment forum for women. In every session or occasion, they use to console those among them who experienced misfortune: sickness, poverty, infertility. They also advise themselves from the evil doing. The ideal goal of every woman in the Sitaad is to become Raalliyo (the Good Woman) because their end goal is to be in the heavens.

According to Kapteijns, in his article: Sittaat: Somali Women's Songs for 'The Mothers of The Believers', the singers of Sitaad explicitly emphasize their common problems as wives, mothers, and providers in the urban slums of underdeveloped countries. They also appeal to their common bond of womanhood with the famous women (mothers, wives, and daughters) of early Islam. In doing so they explicitly assert the values central to their own lives. They sing in praise of eve as humankind's first wife and mother. They celebrate the loyal wifeness of Khadija, so beloved by the prophet. In Fatima, they praise the significance of daughterhood, her wifeness to Ali the fourth caliph, and her motherhood to Hassan and Hussein. The imagery used in the Sitaad concretely links the singers to the heavenly ladies by the way of chains ropes and ladders. (Kapteins, 1995).

The big question is how did the Sitaad start? According to the only written book about this topic: Sitaad: is da'reen gelinta diineed ee dumarka, by Ahmed Ibraahim Awale (2013), it all started with the love for the religion

and the scarcity of the basics of Islam among Somali women decades ago. It has been said, back in the day, the knowledge of the religion among the Somalis, in general, was insufficient. While there were no available religious schools in the area, families, and communities used to send selected male individuals to Harar (Harar is an old city in eastern Ethiopia that is also known as the 4th holy Islamic city because of its historic role in Islamic teachings) The reason of sending those young men was to study religion and come back to educate people back home.

Unfortunately, men were the only lucky ones who used to receive such knowledge, and women were always left behind. Not only women had not received these opportunities, but they also were not able to attend the teaching sessions as well. Women then started to become very curious about the Islamic knowledge that only men discussed under the trees and to get any insight they could get, one of them used to sneak into the men's meetings and listen to their conversations and discussions. With the little information they overheard, women started to learn about Adam and Eve, the Prophet's names, the Prophet Mohamed and his families, the caliphates, and more. In order to share the little information, they had with other women, they started composing spiritual songs based on their hearsay along with rhythm and chanting. That is how Sitaad was born. To educate the religion among women.

Sitaad was the only place women found anything related to their religion. Every session was educational and inspirational as well. Furthermore, they expressed freely the love

they had for Xaawa (eve) and the other Muslim women figures including Khadija: the wife of the prophet. Fatuma: the daughter of the prophet and others. For example, this song:

*'Ummooy hortaa ma jirinoo
Hooyooy hortaa ma jirinoo
Hortaa, heybedley, hortaa
Hooyo la isma odhan
Xubkeed xariiraay'*

'Before you (the name of) mother did not exist

*Before you 'mama' did not exist
People did not call each other mother
Mother eve, silken beauty'*

Sitaad session is also a place of awareness. Women constantly remind themselves of the result of bad deeds like gossiping. There is always a constant reminder of death, after-life and how every woman should prepare herself for the day of judgment. Look at those verses:

*'Lama ridhoo reer adduun raasa-
maalba maleh
Ballami maysaane, waa kala baqool-
aysaan
Minkaaga oo buuxa waxa laga baxaa
madhnaan
Adiga oo diiran baa dawga lagu
marshaa
Qasil la qooshiyo biyaa lagugu qoy-
nayaa
Adiga oo qaawan baa qayd lagu
xidhaa
Adiga oo qudhiya waxa lagu dhigaa
qabriga
Adiyo camalkaaga cidladay isku
mudanaysaan'*

*'The people truly have no wealth
(wealth is useless as we shall all pass
away)*

*There will be no promises amongst
you to meet rather you'll all leave
each other*

*You shall leave your full home
empty-handed*

*Naked you will be carried down a
road*

*They will wash you and apply qasil
on you*

*And whilst naked they will wrap you
in cloth*

*And you, by yourself, will be lowered
into the grave*

*You and your deeds will be with each
other alone'*

In recent times, the Sitaad has been in line with the progress and civilization of the modern world and women discuss and raise awareness on the recent issues. For example, during elections, they warn themselves not to vote for tribalism, but to vote for one who is in their best interests and those of the nation, while in times of conflict in Somalia, they urge each other to take part in conflict resolution efforts and contributing to peace.

Apart from the spiritual uplift and the constant reminder of the religious rules, Sitaad session also can be a group counseling session. Challenges of wifehood and motherhood are deeply discussed and sung by the women in the session. After the chanting and the rhythm, women usually feel lighter and supported. The songs and the chanting get rid of any negative feelings and troubles which eventually make them feel relieved and full of optimism and positive energy. At the end of

the session, they come out feeling strong, motivated, and happy. Sitaad is like immediate healing to everyone who attends. This particular feeling is what causes the commitment and the punctuality because Sitaad session is the only place in the community where women don't feel judged, lonely and unsupported. For example, those verses below highlight how helping each other is an obligation.

*'Naa tiina xaaska ah ku xurmeeya
baa la yidhi*

*Middiina dhali wayda u dhabreeya
baa la yidhi*

*Dhallaankiina u diroo dhawra baa la
yidhi*

*Oo naa waa is dhaantaane, isu
dhiiba baa la yidhi'*

*'It's been said; the wives amongst
you, respect them*

*It's been said; the ones who cannot
give birth, fight for them*

*It's been said; and send your children
to them and protect them*

*You vary in ability so give to each
other'*



Sitaad has psychological benefits for women, especially the stay-at-home moms & wives because those wom-

en have low or zero social life except the Sitaad colleagues. The sessions have given those women a platform to connect, socialize, chat, empower, and most importantly to have fun.

Shaadali (free tea) is usually distributed during Sitaad sessions. Most of Sitaad venues serve free tea on every session and free food on special occasions like the birth of Prophet Muhammed (PBUH). The free food (mainly meat & rice) is sometimes given to the neighbors or poor people. During and after the Sitaad session, the woman leader collects money which serves different purposes. Some of those purposes can be found in this song:

*'Isku samroo isku micinay Sahri ina
tidhi*

*Naa waa is dhaantaane, isu dhiiba
baa la yidhi*

*Oo tiina gaajoota u garaaba baa la
yidhi*

*Naa tiina kici wayda kaalmeeya baa
la yidhi*

*Naa tiina taagta daran taageera baa
la yidhi'*

*'Support and be patient with
each other, Sahra said to us*

*You vary in ability so give to
each other*

*It's been said; the one who is
hungry amongst you, be sympathetic to her*

*It's been said; the one amongst
you who cannot stand, assist her*

*It's been said; the one amongst
you who is weak, support her'*

Furthermore, Sitaad is all about prayer and asking for forgiveness and blessing from Allah. it is compulsory to chant with quite a lot of

songs that are a prayer. Most of them are asking Allah for forgiveness, blessing, wealth, children, ease, health, etc. For example, this song is prayer and the women are asking Allah to widen their graves once they are deceased.

'Qabriga labadiisa dhaban way isku dhawyihiin

Allahayow kala dhufuoy, maalintaan dhex galo'

'The two side of the grave are ever so close and tight

So O' God please separate them far [for me] the day I enter'

Overall, Sitaad is a joyous occasion. It is festive. Tea is delivered during and after the session. Cuud and Uunsi are always burning on the Dabqaad (incense burner) and the whole place smells nice the whole time. It is full of good spirit, joy and happiness. Not only women, but sometimes children like to come and celebrate with their mothers as well. It is a celebration and positive vibes.

Despite Sitaad being a joyous and crucial occasion for Somali women, it has been facing a tremendous challenge for the last decades. In general, Somali men never value women's poetry. There are a few lines from a famous poet: Hadraawi also known as the Somali Shakespeare which define Sitaad as something far from literature

*'Suugaantu iib maaha,
Erey iyo sunnee maaha,
Hugun iyo Sitaad maaha'*

*Literature is not for sale,
It is neither words nor free*

It is neither humming nor Sitaad'

This is clear evidence that Somali men haven't given any respect to the Sitaad and they don't see it as being a part of the poetic literature, as it should be. Not only they have dismissed and belittled Sitaad, but they have also tried to stop their wives and sisters from attending Sitaad sessions because some of them believe it is a waste of time. Some others assume that women consume Qaad (qaad is a green leaf hugely chewed by Somali men). Some others look at the actions of Sitaad with the suspicion of a forum to conspire against them. Recent religious ideologists also stamped Sitaad as something which is Haram (not allowed) they specified as shirk/bida'a (means forbidden). Their reason relates to the that some of the songs of Sitaad include believing and asking forgiveness of others rather than Allah only. Those challenges along with the heavy influence from the technology: televisions, the internet, cell phones have caused a huge decline in Sitaad sessions. So many places have been shut down.

However, Sitaad is something that is still familiar among Somali women and it is performed both in Sitaad places and at weddings. Nowadays, it is very common to hear some of the Sitaad songs at traditional weddings and other women's various occasions and festivals.

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