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Somali Women's Religious Poetry Through the Figure of Eve: Representing the Sacred and Engaging with Tradition

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of Eve — *Haawo/Xaawa*, the first woman — in Somali women's religious poetry, focusing on one *qasiido*, one *sitaad*, and two *buraanbur*. The study addresses the poetic language deployed in the Somali context and argues that this language constructs an aspirational model of motherhood, womanhood, and the ideal female believer. Scholarship on Somali *sitaad* and *buraanbur* is notably sparse, and its interaction with the figure of Eve within Islamic contexts remains underexplored by scholars. By analysing these poems, the article shows how they articulate representations of the sacred, how women aspire to and negotiate particular feminine ideals, and how the texts engage with broader Islamic tradition. Over time, *sitaad* and *buraanbur* have functioned as vehicles for transmitting Islamic teachings and socialising women to pursue a proper model of femininity.

Keywords: Eve, Somali poetry, Islamic literature, Qur'an, Religious poetry, Sacred.

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1. Introduction

The article aims to analyse the contents of four religious poems in the Somali language, which, although differing in their purpose, are addressed to a single figure: Eve, in Somali *Haawo* or *Xaawa*.¹ Although belonging to different genres - a *qasiido*² from F. Declich, two *buraanbur*³ from Abdisalam Yassin Mohamed's doctoral thesis and one *sitaad*⁴ from Lidwien Kapteijns's research with Mariam Omar Ali - converge in celebrating the figure of the first woman, Eve. This paper does not intend to classify literary genres in Somali literature or explore their overlaps, but rather to focus on the content and ritual function of these hymns.

The category into which religious poetry is placed is the Somali poetic corpus, on the basis of characteristics that justify its sacred qualification: texts of this nature are hymns of praise addressed to the Prophet Muḥammad or prominent figures in the Islamic tradition, other poems are didactic and others are

¹ Methodological note: The transcriptions used in this study differ because they were produced by four separate authors under various transcription conventions. The orthography has not been standardized to preserve the integrity of the original contents.

² The term *qasiido* (Somali plural: *qasiidooyin*) is a loanword from the Arabic *qaṣīdah* and refers to a form of poetry that originated in pre-Islamic song and spread following the expansion of Islam. For an extended discussion on the topic, see Andrzejewski (1983, 2011); Gori (2003); Orwin (2019); Reese (2008).

³ The *buraanbur* is a form of classical Somali poetry primarily performed by women while the male counterpart of this form is the *gabay*. Compared to the *gabay*, it is shorter, with lines of roughly 14–16 syllables and a natural pause near the middle. Performances often incorporate rhythmic elements such as hand-clapping, stepping, drumming, or a chorus. Though intended for female audiences, men have occasionally been present as listeners. Cf. Andrzejewski & Lewis (1964). *Somali Poetry: an Introduction*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁴ The *sitaad* genre denotes both prominent women in Islam and the songs Somali women compose in their honor, with further discussion provided later in the article. For more comprehensive discussions, see Ackley (2018); Cawaale (2013); Declich (2000); Kapteijns & Ali (1995); Tiilikainen (2012).

exhortatory.⁵

The aim of the article is to reflect on the representation of Haawo in the Somali tradition and to illustrate how the praises shape an alternative female identity to the proposed institutionalised model. Eve has undergone a substantial metamorphosis in Islam, from Qur'anic to post-Qur'anic sources, where her history has been shaped not only to explain women's physiology but also key aspects of their character.

Although based on a small number of poetic texts, this collection would highlight that Eve's symbolism and qualities merit further investigation. By combining literary and theological perspectives and providing a more comprehensive picture of Eve's representations, a comparison with the Qur'an, *tafsīr* and *ḥadīth* (plural: *aḥādīth*) could deepen our understanding of her character.

However, fully understanding the political and contextual meanings of these texts requires a multi-level approach: translations produced by scholars should be supplemented with direct testimonies from women participating in *dikri*⁶ circles, who explain the ritual and its symbolic nuances.

2. *Nabi-ammaan*

Somali Women's religious poetry is often neglected by academic studies. The *dikri* of Somali Sufi confraternities is often celebrated in Arabic, being inaccessible to many women who could not receive religious education. Exceptions are verses of mystical hymns translated by Sheekh Awees Maxamed⁷ (d. 1909), which

⁵ Orwin, M. (2010). Language Use in Three Somali Religious Poems. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 14(1), 69–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/136968101750333978>, p.69.

⁶ From Arabic, *dhikri* is a devotional act performed collectively to praise God and prominent Islamic figures, involving specific postures, movements, and prayers. The hymns (*qasiidooyin*) are recited orally in an antiphonal or responsorial form, with variations in tempo and rhythmic intensity. Their content includes Islamic teachings, invocations, and exhortations. During these performances, participants sway with their bodies, physically engaging in the prayer. See Esposito (2003).

⁷ Sheekh Awees Maxamed was born in Brava and died in Biyoley 1909. He was one of the prominent Islamic figures responsible for the spread of the *Qaadiiriya* in the Horn of Africa.

aim to disseminate the doctrines of the *Qaadiiriya*.⁸

On the contrary, women may understand hymns of *Nabi-ammaan* ("Praise the Prophet [Maxamed]"), or in colloquial language *Abbay Haawo iyo Abbay Faadumo* ("Sister Eve and Sister Fatima"⁹), praises addressed to personalities of the Islamic tradition, mostly women. Among the most commonly mentioned figures are Eve, Aamina¹⁰, the mother of the Prophet; Xaliimo¹¹, who took care of the Prophet when was orphaned; Faadumo¹², who was the youngest daughter of the Prophet Muḥammad and the wife of the fourth caliph, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib; Saynab¹³, the eldest daughter of the Prophet; Khadija¹⁴, his first wife and Ruqiya¹⁵, another daughter of Muḥammad.¹⁶ In this article, I focused mainly on the figure of Eve praised as the "Mother of believers" and as the "First wife", but each female character is praised for their specific role: Khadija for being a loyal wife and the first to follow the Prophet or Faadumo for her significant presence as a good daughter, wife and mother.

The personalities of these women are viewed as perfect models to whom one can turn for favours. *Nabi-ammaan* are seen as a way of visiting the ancestors in question, in close relation to local female role models and aspirations. Although *Nabi-ammaan* have been restricted since 1969, as they challenge the dominant values promoted by the Wahabi Islamic tradition of Saudi Arabia, which are becoming more influential in the Islamic areas in the Horn of Africa. However, *dikri* celebrations are popular among women from various social backgrounds in rural and urban areas.¹⁷ Their

⁸ The term *Qādiriyya*, derived from Arabic, refers to a Sunni Sufi order founded by 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī in Iran. For further details, see Cerulli (1957).

⁹ Declich, F. (1996). *Poesia religiosa femminile Nabi-ammaan, nel contesto rurale della Somalia*. Africa, 51(1), 50–79, p.51

¹⁰ 'Āmina bint Wahb.

¹¹ Ḥalīma bint Abī Dhu'ayb.

¹² Fāṭima bint Muḥammad also known as Fāṭima al-Zahrā'.

¹³ Zaynab bint Jaḥsh.

¹⁴ Khadīja bint Khuwaylid.

¹⁵ Ruqayya bint Muḥammad.

¹⁶ Declich, F. (1996). *Poesia religiosa femminile Nabi-ammaan, nel contesto rurale della Somalia*. Africa, 51(1), 50–79, p.62.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.52.

diffusion is linked to the fact that the Sufi tradition manages to bind traditional ritual forms from the Cushitic area. The persistence of these practices is also due to the fact that poetic production and transmission take place, with some exceptions, in single-gender groups, exclusive and coexisting groups, and constitute a relevant factor in the differentiation of female or male gender identities.¹⁸

The composition of new verses and the reformulation of hymns tend to build up spontaneously during the *Nabi-ammaan* sessions in relation to “aspirations”, rather than out of fidelity to the historical tradition concerning the life of Muhammad and his family members. Indeed, the process of identification with the female personalities who are invoked and praised in the hymns themselves is relevant. The Qur’anic figures invoked in the hymns are characterised by elements that make them resemble farmers and nomads in their customs, thereby fostering, within the ritual context, an integration between the values of nomads and those of farmers. This is made possible by the fact that the set of practices implemented in the Sufi tradition in female environments is more flexible than that of men, since the latter follow institutionalised norms and practices.

In F. Declich’s ethnographic work conducted in Southern Somalia between 1985 and 1988, she noted that some pre-Islamisation cults are also re-enacted in *dikri*, such as *madaxshub* — the practice of pouring and rubbing fried sesame oil along participants’ hairlines. That hair line is called “Eve’s way”, suggesting that she practised *madaxshub* herself. The ritual performance of the *dikri*, characterised by rhythmic chanting, repetition of verses by the participants and body swaying, sometimes induces a state of collective ecstasy accompanied by the melodies and words of the *qasiidooyin*.¹⁹

3. Eve in *Nabi-Ammaan*

The following mystical hymn, *qasiido*, was collected by Francesca Declich among farmers living along the Juba River in southern Somalia’s Lower and Middle Juba regions. The recording was made with a *khaliif* (leader of a female’s *dikri*

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.59.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

group) in the village of Mareerey.²⁰ The author remains anonymous: the text, which is collective in nature, constantly changes in the celebrations.

*Abooyow waaye abooyow*²¹

She is the grandmother, she is the grandmother²²

1	<i>Abooy Haawadey</i>	O grandmother, My Eve
2	<i>Ilaah wadey hogan la guurtoy</i>	Whom God took away with the clouds
3	<i>Nasabow abooy Haawa Dheere</i>	O noble grandmother, Eve the Tall
4	<i>Abooy Haaway habartayna waaye</i>	Grandmother Eve is our mother
5	<i>Haawo dheer habarteyna horreysey waaye</i>	Eve the Tall is our first mother
6	<i>Haawo dheer hinshaal ha loo lahaado</i>	We must greet Eve the Tall with great respect
7	<i>Ay helley hortaa lama her geleyne</i>	Before her, there was no rest
8	<i>Haawo dheer hindeyna hortaa ma yeerine</i>	Eve the Tall, before you nobody was called mother
9	<i>Ay habar mataanyooday ay Haawo</i>	O Eve, mother of twins
10	<i>Ay Haawo hilowgaaga baa i haayo</i>	O Eve, I long for you
11	<i>Ay habaashaadii huddurka weyne</i>	Lady, the space of your tomb is truly large
12	<i>Haawo dheer her gel ha na looga yeelo</i>	Let Eve the Tall be our shelter in the shade
13	<i>Ay habaashaadi huddurka</i>	Lady, the space of your tomb is

²⁰ In the initial transcription work, the author was assisted by Cabdullahi Sheekh Abdi, a folklorist at the Somali National Academy of Sciences and Arts in 1988. The linguistic revision of the transcription and translation was then carried out by Cabdallah Mansuur and Giorgio Banti. The transcription and translation were made from a Somali dialect.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-66.

²² This poetry translation into English is my own and derives from the Italian versions of the original Somali poems. Any loss of nuance or potential inaccuracies are the result of this two-stage translation process.

- | | | |
|----|---|--|
| | <i>weyne</i> | truly great |
| 14 | <i>Haawo dheer haahaab ha lay yiraaho</i> | Eve the Tall, they tell me to find you again (what am I told to find?) |
| 15 | <i>Joogay leheede jaahay leheede</i> | She possesses height and she possesses beauty |
| 16 | <i>Haawo dheer jamaal yey leheede</i> | Eve the Tall was beautiful |
| 17 | <i>Afarta way ka illaamaneede</i> | She was protected from the four evils |
| 18 | <i>Haawo dheerey indhahaay ka kulaneede</i> | Eve the Tall had black <i>kohol</i> on her eyes |
| 19 | <i>Ay malastii oo madaxeeda ku taasho</i> | O straight-haired lady |
| 20 | <i>Haawo dheer maasho Allaahu kaana</i> | How extraordinary Eve the Tall was! |
| 21 | <i>Waa uumaneed waa aalfaneede</i> | She was a lucky creature |
| 22 | <i>Haawo dheer waa indhaha kulaneede</i> | Eve the Tall had black <i>kohol</i> on her eyes |
| 23 | <i>Ay / hareedloowgay abka Adamowe</i> | Our ancestor Adam with his big sideburns |
| 24 | <i>Haawo dheer araddiis beyha aheede</i> | Eve the Tall was his wife |
| 25 | <i>Ar abooy Haawo hahartayna waaye</i> | Grandmother Eve is our mother |
| 26 | <i>Ay Haawo ma ka huraddeene</i> | [Have you fallen asleep and] forgotten Lady Eve? |
| 27 | <i>Ay Haawo maadba ka hurraddeene</i> | What, have you forgotten Lady Eve? |
| 28 | <i>Hila abbay hawaasha ma hilmanteen</i> | Have you all forgotten her grave? |
| 29 | <i>Ay hawaasha waa na ka hor martaye</i> | She went to the grave before us. |
| 30 | <i>Ay handoosha waa na hor goobataaye</i> | Her coffin arrived before us. |
| 31 | <i>Haawo dheer misaanakay jogstaaye</i> | Eve the Tall is close to the scales [of Judgment Day]. |
| 32 | <i>Haawo dheer siraadkay taabataaye</i> | Eve the Tall walks [barely touching] the road [to the afterlife]. |
| 33 | <i>Haawo dheer siraadkay taabataaye</i> | Eve the Tall walks [barely touching] the road [to the |

- afterlife].
- 34 *Ay helley helley hogan la guurtooy* The Lady is followed by clouds
- 35 *Ay helley laqley hogan la guurtooy* She is sparkling and the clouds have followed her
- 36 *Nasabow abooy Haawo dheerey* Noble grandmother, Eve the Tall
- 37 *Ar abooy Haaway ninkii xusayo* Or those who worship grandmother Eve
- 38 *Haawo dheer heybinaayo hai ma la* Those who worship Eve the Tall will be asked nothing [on Judgement Day]
- 39 *Haabiil iyo Qaabiil habartoode* The mother of Cain and Abel
- 40 *Habartooda hilowgeeda aa i haayo* I miss their mother
- 41 *Habartooda hilmaan kama qabaayo* I will never forget their mother
- 42 *Haawo dheer hilmaan kama qabaayo* I will never forget Eve the Tall
- 43 *Hogan la guurtooy abooy ow Haawo Dheere* O, you are followed by clouds, O Grandmother Eve the Tall
- 44 *Haawo dheer abooy ow Haawo dheer* Eve the Tall, Grandmother Eve the Tall
- 45 *Ninkii xusaayo hai ma la haybinayo* Those who celebrate her will not be asked anything [on Judgment Day]
- 46 *Haawo dheer horey yaa loogu yeerey* Eve the Tall was the first to be given a name
- 51 *Haawo dheer misaankay taabantaaye* Eve the Tall touches the scales [of Judgment Day]
- 52 *Ar abooy Haaway habarteyna waaye* Grandmother Eve is our mother
- 53 *Haawo dheer habartayna horreysey waye* Tall Eve is our first mother
- 54 *Joogay leheede jaahay leheede* She possesses height and beauty
- 55 *Haawo dheer jamaal ayey leheede* Eve the Tall was very beautiful
- (...)
- 57 *Ay dey ma dheer eebow allowe* My God, how forward-thinking she was
- 58 *Ay hareedloowgey abka* Grandfather Adam with his large

	<i>Adamowe</i>	sideburns
59	<i>Haawo dheer araddiis</i> <i>ayay aheede</i>	Eve the Tall was his wife
60	<i>Haawo dheer abooy</i> <i>Haawo dheer</i> (...)	Tall Eve, Grandmother Eve the Tall
62	<i>Ay helley laqley hogan</i>	She shines, followed by the clouds
63	<i>Hogan la gurtey aboo</i>	She is followed by the clouds, Grandmother Eve the Tall.
64	<i>Ay abooy Haaway nin</i>	Grandmother Eve, does who celebrates her
65	<i>Ninkii xusaayo ninkii oo</i> <i>xusuusaayo</i>	Does who celebrates and commemorates her
66	<i>Ay asal ahaanba la</i> <i>uumoyooway</i>	You who were originally created
67	<i>Haawo dheer abka Aadan</i> <i>waa dambeeyay</i>	Grandfather Adam came after Eve the Tall
68	<i>Abka Aadan ii abota</i> <i>Haawa</i>	Grandfather Adam and Grandmother Eve
69	<i>Haawa dheer asalkood</i> <i>ayaan eheene</i>	Eve the Tall, we originate from them
70	<i>Abkaayna Aadamow</i> <i>turaabe</i>	O our ancestor Adam
71	<i>Nasabow abotadaayn</i> <i>Haawa</i>	O noble grandmother Eve
72	<i>Nasabow asalkood yaan</i> <i>eheene</i>	We descend from this noble woman

In this *qasiido*, Eve is defined as “grandmother”, *abooy* (ll. 4, 25, 52), and “our first mother” (ll. 5, 53), *habartayna horreysees waaye*, terms that are part of the everyday context, become in the *qasiido* sacred terms, loaded with meaning: signalling Eve as the primaeval ancestor of all humanity. These examples show how an apparently simple term acquires a new symbolic power within the ritual. The concept of motherhood is foregrounded in line 9 — “O Eve, mother of twins” — and reiterated in line 39 (“the mother of Cain and Abel”) and line 40 (“I miss their mother”). Her intercessory figure, “close to the scales of judgement”, qualifies her as a mediator between souls and God and as a bearer of divine protection for the women who invoke her.

The song ascribes a significant primogeniture to Eve, stating that she was the first to be called by name (“Eve the High was

given the name first", 1.45), reversing the biblical-islamic paradigm in which Adam receives from God the responsibility of naming creatures (Genesis 2:19) and precedes Eve: "Adam called the name of his wife Eve, for she shall be the mother of all the living" (Genesis 3:21).²³ In this regard, line 67 makes explicit "Grandfather Adam came after Eve the High", identifying Eve as the progenitor of a "pure, noble race" (*nasab*). This term is typically reserved for the Prophet's descendants, but as F. Declich noticed in this song, it could be referred to the descendant through Eve.

This genealogical inversion underlines an alternative theological order, central to the construction of a different myth, which reverses the paradigm. In the previous line (1.66)²⁴, Eve is defined by the term *asal*, "origin", in the sense of "originally created". In southern Somalia, this representation is common among women, suggesting it is not merely inherited rhetoric but rather a way to articulate identity within a distinct sacred dialogue.²⁵

Eve also embodies the local canons of beauty: height ("Eve the High", "She possesses height"), straight hair ("O Lady with straight hair"), the use of *kohol*, black powder for the eyes ("Eve the Tall had black *kohol* in her eyes"). This representation indicates an aesthetic ideal that transcends the plane of beauty to become a sign of purity, elevation and power.

The eschatological character of the *qasiido* is evident when it states that "those who worship Eve the Tall will be asked nothing on the Day of Judgement" (1.38 and 1.44), suggesting unconditional and perfect salvation.

The image of judgement, with scales weighing actions (Qur'an 7:8-9) is taken up to suggest that Eve's purity allows her to "barely touch the path of the afterlife", inviting devotees to identify with her perfection: "On that Day the weighing of deeds will be true and just: those whose good deeds are heavy on the scales will be the ones to prosper, and those whose good deeds are light will be the ones who have lost their souls through their wrongful rejection

²³ *Ibid*, p.68.

²⁴ In this article, "l." refers to a line number of the poem, "ll." is used for the plural.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

of Our messages.”²⁶ (Qur'an 7:8-9)

During the *Nabi-ammaan*, the participants respond to the *khaliif*'s call with the refrain *Abooyow waaye abooyow* after each line, establishing a symbolic channel of communication with Eve. This chant is not just praise: it is an exercise in manifestation, in which every gesture and every word aims to evoke the spiritual presence of the ancestor. The women perceive Eve as a *sheekh* (spiritual leader), honoured in a similar way to how men honour the Prophet and the *sheekhs* of the male brotherhoods.

4. Eve in the *Sitaad*

The term *sitaad* or *sitaat* derives from the Arabic word *sittaat*, “lady”²⁷ and is used to refer both to illustrious women in Islam and to the songs that Somali women sing in their honour. As pointed out in the previous paragraph, similar practices take on different names; it is unclear whether there is any overlap in meaning between *Sitaad* and *Nabi-ammaan*. *Nabi-ammaan* shows parallels in content with *sitaad*, and it can be argued that the latter are part of the former, but unlike the former, they are sung only by women.²⁸ However, *sitaad* could be described as social and religious gatherings for women where they recite hymns for the “first ladies” of Islam and offer support to the women who attend. The origin of this Islamic devotion is uncertain: Cawaale (2014) suggests there is a direct link between *sitaad* and the *Qaadiriya* sufi order, providing a separate devotional space for women; Kapteijns and Ali (1995) affirm that it originated during a period of increased Sufi brotherhood activity, but its pre-Islamic origin is not certain.²⁹

²⁶ *The Qur'an* (M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, Trans.). (2005). Oxford University Press.

²⁷ Orwin, M. (2010). Language Use in Three Somali Religious Poems. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 14(1), 69–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/136968101750333978>, p.81.

²⁸ Kapteijns, L, & Ali, M. O. (1995). *Sitaat: Somali women's songs for “the mothers of the believers”*. (Vol. 25, Discussion papers in the African humanities). African Studies Center, Boston University, p.19.

²⁹ See Ackley (2018), Kapteijns and Ali (1995), Cawaale (2013). In her dissertation, Ackley (2018) discusses in Chapter 5 her observations of *sitaad* sessions, noting that “although none of the *sitaat* groups I

The following texts are *buraanbur*, which is defined as the most prestigious female poetic genre, often contrasted with *gabay* performed by men.³⁰ *Buraanbur* is a composition accompanied by hand-clapping and drumming, composed exclusively by women.³¹ Some aspects of Islamic literature have been extensively described by scholars such as B.W.Andrzejewski and I.M. Lewis ("Sufism in Somaliland"), but many elements remain undocumented.³²

The following texts, both *buraanbur*, are part of a collection of recordings of Somali female Sufi poetry performed by Khadiija Faarax Maxamuud, a Sufi poetess of the *Qaadiriya* order, considered an authority on sitaad poetry.³³ The authors of both texts are unknown, and their estimated dates of composition are "1800-1900" and "1500-1900" respectively. The following texts have been translated here from the English translation by Abdisalam Yassin Mohamed.

4.1 *Xaawi waxay lahayd*³⁴

Hawa was saying

- | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | <i>Xumo ku faanooyinow,</i> | O boasters about evil, Hawa was |
| | <i>Xaawi waxay lahayd</i> | saying, |
| 2 | <i>Naa Aakhiraa loo</i> | O women think again; people are |
| | <i>tartamayaaye, dib u</i> | competing for the Other World |
| | <i>tashada</i> | |
| 3 | <i>Xantiyo beentay intaa, u</i> | You are always vying in gossip |

attended had formal connections to a brotherhood and never identified as Sufi" (p. 147).

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.18.

³¹ Declich, F. (1996). Poesia religiosa femminile *Nabi-ammaan*, nel contesto rurale della Somalia. *Africa*, 51(1), 50–79, pp. 63-66.

³² Kapteijns, L, & Ali, M. O. (1995). Sittaat: Somali women's songs for "the mothers of the believers". (Vol. 25, Discussion papers in the African humanities). African Studies Center, Boston University, p.18.

³³ These recordings are stored at the Tape Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, under catalogue number SOM/XII/1. As regards the transcription, the symbols used correspond to the Somali National Spelling System.

³⁴ Mohamed, A. Y. (1977). *Sufi Poetry in Somali: its Themes and its Imagery*. (Doctoral dissertation). SOAS, University of London, p.166.

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| | <i>xusul duubayaan</i> | and lies |
| 4 | <i>Salaad baan kuugu taag waayaye, kadantow waad kogi doontaa</i> | O wretched one, I could not make you pray, but you will die and wither |
| 5 | <i>Oo soon baan kuugu taag waayaye, kadantow waad kogi doontaa</i> | O wretched one, I could not make you fast, but you will die and wither |
| 6 | <i>Oo banka Yawmal-qiyaamaad, keligaa bi'i doontaa</i> | And in solitude, you will perish on the plain of the Day of Resurrection |

4.1 Hooyo Xaawa³⁵

Mother Hawa

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 1 | <i>Hooyooy hortaa ma jirino, hooyooy hortaa ma aan ahayn</i> | O mother, I was not before you, O mother I did not exist before you |
| 2 | <i>Oo haybadleeyay hortaa, hooyo lays ma odhan</i> | O graceful one, the word "mother" was never said before you |
| 3 | <i>Hindaay Xaawaay hutkeed xariireey, hadhgalkeedu hooy janna</i> | O Hawa who is (as beautiful as the) Indian women, and whose clothes are of silk; your place of rest will be in the abode of Paradise |
| 4 | <i>Horgeeddiyaay halaw gabal, ayaannu haayirraa</i> | O guide of those on the trek, we set out on a journey in the emptiness of sunset |
| 5 | <i>Oo Xaawo teeri dheereey, Xaawaay ha naga tegin</i> | O Hawa, the stately one, O Hawa do not abandon us |
| 6 | <i>Oo Xaawo teeri dheereey, Xaawaay ha naga tegin</i> | O Hawa, the stately one, O Hawa do not abandon us |
| 7 | <i>Oo Xaawo teeri dheereey, Xaawaay ha naga tegin</i> | O Hawa, the stately one, O Hawa do not abandon us |

The first poem expresses regret for the irreligious actions of women, and devout women are warned about their fate in the afterlife, urging collective salvation.

The second hymn, like the first, invokes Eve, considering her a saint and asking for her intercession on behalf of all Muslim

³⁵ *Ibid*, p.167.

women: “the mother of all human beings” (1.2), “guide of those who are travelling” (1.4) and the repetition in lines 5, 6, 7 “do not abandon us”.

Another aspect that this composition has in common with the first is the ideal of beauty symbolised by Eve, who is depicted as tall, dark-skinned, with straight black hair, compared to “Indian women” (1.3).

The fourth song is part of a sitaad session recorded in Djibouti by Lidwien Kapteijns with Mariam Omar Ali and it started with greeting Adam (Aadan) and then it focused on Eve, the “mother of the believers”.³⁶

1	<i>As-salaam calaykum, Aboota Xaawa</i>	Peace be upon you, grandmother Eve
2	<i>As-salaam calaykum, feedhiisa weeye</i>	Peace be upon you, she is [Adam's] rib
3	<i>As-salaam calaykum, ooridiisa weeye</i>	Peace be upon you, she is his wife
4	<i>As-salaam calaykum, deeqdiisa weeye</i>	Peace be upon you, a gift to him
5	<i>As-salaam calaykum, nuurkiisa weeye</i>	Peace be upon you, his light
6	<i>As-salaam calaykum, Allaa jeclaaday</i>	Peace be upon you, God loved her
7	<i>As-salaam calaykum, Allaa u roonaa</i>	Peace be upon you, God was good to her
8	<i>As-salaam calaykum, Allaa kor yeellay</i>	Peace be upon you, God elevated her
9	<i>As-salaam calaykum, Allaa u roonaa</i>	Peace be upon you, God was good to her
10	<i>As-salaam calaykum, oo Aadan siiyey</i>	Peace be upon you, and gave her to Adam
11	<i>Ummooy hortaa ma jirino</i>	Before you [the name of] “mother” did not exist
12	<i>Hooyooy hortaa ma jirino</i>	Before you “mama” did not exist
13	<i>Hortaa, heybedley, hortaa</i>	Before you, respected one, before you

³⁶ Kapteijns, L., & Ali, M. O. (1995). Sittaat: Somali women's songs for “the mothers of the believers”. (Vol. 25, Discussion papers in the African humanities). African Studies Center, Boston University, p.5.

14	<i>Hooyo la isma odhan</i>	People did not call each other mother
15	<i>Ummooy hortaa ma jirinoo</i>	Mother Eve, silken beauty
16	<i>Hooyooy hortaa ma jirinoo</i>	Paradise is her shelter
17	<i>Ummooy Xaawaay, xubkeed xariiray</i>	Before you [the name of] “mother” did not exist
18	<i>Hadhgelkeedaa jannada</i>	Before you “mama” did not exist
19	<i>Ummooy Xaawaay, ha hurdinee</i>	Mother Eve, don’t sleep
20	<i>Xariirtaada noo gogolee</i>	Spread a bed of silk for us
21	<i>Ummooy hortaa ma jirinoo</i>	Before you [the name of] “mother” did not exist
22	<i>Hooyoo hortaa ma jirinoo</i>	Before you “mama” did not exist
23	<i>Ummooy Xaawooy, ha hurdinee</i>	Mother Eve, don’t sleep
24	<i>Xadhkahaaga noo sooh</i>	Weave your ropes for us
25	<i>Ummooy hortaa ma jirinoo</i>	Before you [the name of] “mother” did not exist
26	<i>Hooyooy hortaa ma jirinoo</i>	Before you “mama” did not exist
27	<i>Xabaasheedii xundhurta weyneyd ayay</i>	Her ancient grave
28	<i>Xeebta Jiddaa ku taallaa</i>	Lies on the beach of Jidda
29	<i>Ummooy hortaa ma jirinoo</i>	Before you [the name of] “mother” did not exist
30	<i>Hooyooy hortaa ma jirinoo</i>	Before you “mama” did not exist
31	<i>Habiil iyo Qabiil hooyadooday</i>	You, mother of Habiiil and Qabiil
32	<i>hilowgaagaan qabaa</i>	I am longing for you
33	<i>Ummooy hortaa ma jirinoo</i>	Before you [the name of] “mother” did not exist
34	<i>Hooyooy hortaa ma jirinoo.</i>	Before you “mama” did not exist.

This song extols the figure of Eve as the mother of humanity, in fact motherhood is central not only to religious discourse but also to traditional narratives. In the second line, there is a reference to the origin of Eve: “she is [Adam’s] rib”. However, it is not mentioned in the Qur’an that Eve came from Adam, nor is there

any explicit mention about her as *Hawwa* ' ("Eve").³⁷ The name of the first woman — yet tradition has universally accepted the Biblical version: "The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all the living" (Gen. 3:20). In Arabic, the name Eve (*Hawwā* ') bears a strong assonance with the concept of "life" (*hayāt*).³⁸ The creation of the first woman from a rib is not mentioned [in the Qur'ān], but many commentators have adopted the Jewish tradition that she was created from one of Adam's ribs.³⁹

Some Muslim scholars, both classical and contemporary, question and even reject interpretations that read the rib motif and the name *Hawwā* ' into the Qur'ānic text, arguing that such readings are largely influenced by prior scriptural traditions.⁴⁰ These sources are called *isrā'iliyyāt* and refer to materials from Jewish and Christian sources, such as the Bible.⁴¹ It is in the earliest *aḥādīth* collections that Eve is depicted in ways not found in the Qur'an: they include her name, the precedent she set in spousal deceit, her creation from a rib, ritual purity, and motherhood.⁴²

³⁷ Cf. the commentary on *Sūra* 2:35 in Ventura, A. (Ed.) (2010). II Corano. (Ida Zilio-Grandi, Trans.). (2010). Mondadori, p.435.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ From *Sūra al-Nisā* ' : "People, be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single soul (*nafs wāhida*), and from it created its mate (*zawj*), and from the pair of them spread countless men and women far and wide; be mindful of God, in whose name you make requests of one another. [...]" (Qur'an 4:1). See *The Qur'an* (M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, Trans.). (2005). Oxford University Press.

⁴⁰ Lamrabet, A. (2016). *Women in the Qur'an: an Emancipatory Reading*. Kube Publishing Ltd, pp.17-18.

⁴¹ Hassan, R. (2017). The issue of woman-man equality in the Islamic tradition. In *Women's Studies in Religion* (pp. 143-148). Routledge, p.71; Patel, A. K. (2022). *The Ascent of Adam: Re-Evaluating the First Prophet in Quranic Exegesis* (Doctoral dissertation). King's College London, p.83; Tottoli, R. (1999). Origin and Use of the Term *isrā'iliyyāt* in Muslim Literature. *Arabica*, 193-210. For more detail on *isrā'iliyyāt*, these pages also offer relevant discussion.

⁴² Spellberg, D. A. (1996). Writing the Unwritten Life of the Islamic Eve: Menstruation and the Demonization of Motherhood. *International*

Taken together, these observations suggest a possible link: the Genesis motif of Eve's creation from a rib (Genesis 2:22) may have been transmitted into certain representations via extra-Qur'anic traditions, thereby influencing her portrayal in religious poetry discourse.⁴³ Tracing the presence both Qur'anic and extra-Qur'anic elements in the poetic and oral repertoires is particularly interesting to trace, given the educational character of Somali female religious poetry.⁴⁴

5. Representing the Sacred and Engaging with Tradition

Somali Sufi devotion offers women spaces where they can play an authoritative and prestigious role.⁴⁵ The *khaliif's* control over female religious performances creates internal hierarchies, allowing participants to imagine powers and aspirations. It is possible that Somali women's attachment to these celebrations is based on their desire to represent, in a ritual context, a hierarchy in which women have a central role. Furthermore, the veneration of female personalities, sometimes depicted as extraordinarily powerful, seems to project a desire for omnipotence into an ideal world.⁴⁶ Such projections, repeated and acted out ritually, may represent the best models of power to which women can aspire,

Journal of Middle East Studies, 28 (3), 305–324.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800063479>, p.310.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p.313.

⁴⁴ See Declich (2000) and Spellberg (1996). In some *qasiidooyin*, women repeated that Adam is made of mud and Eve, the first mother of all, is the head of the noble race. This reference about the creation of Adam is confirmed in the Qur'an, where Adam is described as being created from "clay" or "mud" in 15:26; 15:33; 38:71. Expanding on this, some classical juristic formulations (cf. positions associated with Al-Shafi'i) assert that male infants are composed of water and mud (or clay), whereas female infants are composed of *lahm* (flesh) and *dam* (blood). Such formulations connect the representation of Adam and Eve to the notion of ritual symbolic purity and impurity, showing how early theological interpretations informed later discussions of gender and creation.

⁴⁵ Declich, F. (2000). Sufi experience in rural Somali. A focus on women. *Social Anthropology*, 8(3), 295–318. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0964028200000239>, p.313.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*.

but they may not be able to achieve them in the real world, given the dominant position of men.

The *Nabi-ammaan* celebrations become a tool that allows them to enjoy, produce, and create cognitive maps of the role of women in Somali culture. At the same time, women reinforce the dominant cultural values of motherhood and wifehood and, in doing so, they appeal to their common bond of womanhood with the famous women in Islam.⁴⁷

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the analysis of these four Somali women's religious poems dedicated to Eve reveals a significant portrait of this figure, inviting reflection on traditional theological and social paradigms within the space of female devotion. These compositions not only possess high symbolic value, but also become instruments of emancipation: through the power of poetry, participants are able to engage with theological paradigms and cultivate an ethical self. Eve in these texts becomes a mediating figure — an ancestor, intercessor, and exemplar — whose portrayal supplies moral instruction, social identity, and ritual authority for women. Women attending *sitaad* learn about Islamic teachings from other women and through the praise songs of their divine ancestors, creating sisterhood among participants and an intimate relationship with the divine.⁴⁸

The collective female identity is reinforced by sharing common problems, concerns, and aspirations among participants, and the link to the lineage of illustrious women in Islam is memorised and enacted in *sitaad*.⁴⁹ Women participating in these movements in the Somali region have negotiated spaces for participation, mystical experience and authority, engaging Islamic

⁴⁷ Kapteijns, L., & Ali, M. O. (1995). *Sittaat: Somali women's songs for "the mothers of the believers"*. (Vol. 25, Discussion papers in the African humanities). African Studies Center, Boston University, p.19.

⁴⁸ See Ackley (2018); in *Intimacy and morality in Hargeisa, Somaliland*, she shows that the sisterhoods created inform women's ethical self-cultivation, including learning virtues that are shared with others.

⁴⁹ Tiilikainen, M. (2012). *Sitaat as Part of Somali Women's Everyday Religion: Peace-making and Religious Emotions. Predicaments in the Horn of Africa*, 409-422, p.421.

tradition and representing their sacred values. The power behind poetic production emerges in mythopoesis: the act of rewriting an imagined community through the reworking of new narratives, symbols and shared memories.

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