

# ECAS 2013

5<sup>th</sup> European Conference on African Studies (Lisbon)

June  
27-29



African Dynamics in a Multipolar World

ISCTE - Lisbon University Institute

## **ECAS 2013**

5<sup>th</sup> European Conference on African Studies

*African Dynamics in a Multipolar World*

©2014 Centro de Estudos Internacionais do Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL)

ISBN: 978-989-732-364-5

## **RELIGION AND HEALING AMONG SOMALIS IN SWEDEN WHEN EXPERIENCING ILLNESS AND SUFFERING**

**Johan Wedel**  
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

[johan.wedel@globalstudies.gu.se](mailto:johan.wedel@globalstudies.gu.se)

## **Abstract**

*Today, about 40 000 Somalis live in Sweden. This paper, based on anthropological fieldwork in the city of Gothenburg, inquires into the role of religion among Somali-Swedes when experiencing illness and suffering. When ill, many Somalis turn to both biomedicine (“Western medicine”) and Islam. Faith in Islam and its Holy book, the Qur’an, gives not only religious guidance but also a profound meaning to ill-health in a way that biomedicine cannot. The paper shows how the biomedical view of illness, with its individualized perspective and mind-body distinction, is challenged by a religious and more holistic view of illness and suffering. By presenting a number of cases, it is shown how illness is sometimes manifested as spirit (jinn) possession, the evil eye, sorcery and curses, and related to existential issues and to the social world of the sufferer. To deal with these afflictions, people may use Qur’an recitations and other techniques involving the Qur’an, herbal oils, rituals of exorcism, and they may travel to powerful healers (sheikhs) in Somalia or neighbouring countries.*

**Keywords:** Somali, diaspora, Somali-Swedes, Islam, healing, medical anthropology

During 2010-2011, I carried out an anthropological fieldwork among Somali-Swedes in Gothenburg, Sweden, and interviewed 25 people concerning their view of illness, health and healing.<sup>1</sup> Since the beginning of the 1990s, Somalia has been haunted by conflicts and civil war. Around two million Somalis have fled their country (Anderson et al., 2007, p.152) and about 44 000 have settled in Sweden (Statistiska Centralbyrån, 2013). Many suffer from traumatic memories from the war. Dispersed families, long-lasting asylum processes, economic problems and worrying reports about the war in Somali all contribute to feelings of stress, worry and despair. When coping with these feelings, religious beliefs and especially Islam have had an important and prominent role (Wedel, 2011; cf. Johnsdotter et al., 2011; cf. Svenberg et al., 2009; cf. Tiilikainen and Koehn, 2011).

### **The Qur'an**

Many Somali-Swedes, who for the most part belong to the Sunni branch of Islam, have some knowledge of healing practices based on Islam and its holy book, the Qur'an. The verses in the Qur'an are said to be the words of God the Creator, Allah, and written down by the prophet Mohammed. When someone becomes ill, it is common to read the Qur'an for the afflicted. One woman told how her niece had woken up one night and felt sick and that several family-members together had read the Qur'an until she fell asleep. The Qur'an is said to be read *on* the afflicted or *over* a certain body part.

When used in healing, the Qur'an should preferably be read by a *sheikh* (learned person within Islam) or imam (religious functionary). The sheikh may recite the Qur'an, but also blow on his right hand and put it on the sufferers' ailing body-part, or read verses from the Qur'an over a

---

<sup>1</sup> Research was funded by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (Forte) and approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Gothenburg.

glass of water which is then given to the afflicted to drink or to put on the body. The sheikh may also blow on the ailing body part while reciting the Qur'an. Another, more uncommon, therapy is to write down Qur'an verses on a paper, cut the paper in pieces and put fire to them. The smoke is then inhaled by the sufferer. A group of people may also read Qur'an verses for the sufferer in the mosque. In addition, the Qur'an could be read before visiting a medical doctor to facilitate a medical diagnosis or treatment. In Gothenburg, sheikhs and imams frequently read Qur'an verses for patients at the hospitals and let them listen to recordings of Qur'an verses downloaded from Youtube and other Internet sites. In one case, a little girl was said to have been very sick at a hospital, without getting better. When an imam finally read prayers from the Qur'an for her, she became well, according to the narrator.

By pronouncing the words in the Qur'an in Arabic, preferably in a loud voice, healing is achieved. However, the afflicted must also have a strong faith in the power of the words of the Qur'an. A sheikh explained:

*The Qur'an is the word of God, the Creator. By reading God's word the illness is affected and one gets better. I only treat with the words. If the person believes in the strength of God's word, it will help me to help. How you read is also important. The structure of the words in the Qur'an, the structure of the sentences and the melody can affect the soul. I explain the message of the Qur'an and try to affect the person emotionally. The deeper the knowledge, the better the healing. It's about understanding why you live, from where you came and where you are going. Balance and harmony in the body and the soul also strengthens the immune system (Wedel, 2012, first section, para.10).*

During my fieldwork in northeastern Gothenburg, I met a woman who had taken care of several refugees in her apartment in Sweden. She said:

*We read the Qur'an. We also try to talk to them [the refugees] and make sure they have food and clean clothes. You try to establish contact so that the person can begin to trust you and begin telling about her problems (Wedel, 2011, p.80).*

One of the refugees in the apartment was a woman in her thirties, she related her story:

*I came to Sweden one and a half years ago. Each day on the news, we hear about the chaos in Somalia. You hear about someone in another family who has lost her son or daughter. If I would sit and think about that every day I would become crazy [waali]. I don't have the power to bring my children here today, but I wait and have patience. I read the Qur'an to gain strength. [In the Qur'an] there are stories about people who have gone through great difficulties and who overcame their problems. If you are strong in your faith, you know that all problems come and go. Just that thought may hinder many bad things from happening (Wedel, 2012, first section, para.5).*

Qur'an reading is commonly used when suffering from psychological problems and mental illness. A woman told about her ten-year old cousin who was energetic and was diagnosed with ADHD (**Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder**):

He was medicated. He became calm. He became different. But he wasn't crazy. He was over-active and rowdy and just needed to grow up. When he became older he was sent to Somalia for six months. They read the Qur'an for him the whole time.

Qur'anic verses may also be read against the evil eye (*isha*). This may come into existence when someone feels envy, or is jealous about someone. A man explained. "If you are pretty, have a nice wife, money, a house and a car, people can get envious and you can have problems" (Wedel, 2012, section The Evil Eye, para.2). Those affected by the evil eye are said to become passive and introvert. In one case, a woman in her late 20s was believed to be suffering from the evil eye because of other people's envy, as she was economically well off. A friend to the afflicted girl narrated what had happened:

*This woman, who is 28 years old, lives in a house. She thought that someone had put the evil eye on her and she didn't want to go to work or study. She said to the family doctor that she didn't have the strength. He gave her tranquilizers but she just got a little better. Her family invited several sheikhs for dinner who read the Qur'an and prayed for her to become well. Then they [her family] brought her to Kenya where they did different things [Qur'an readings and other non-biomedical therapies].*

In another narrative involving Qur'an reading, a woman told about her brother, who, when he was in his teens, had delusions: "He believed that there were spies in the computer and he talked for himself. My mother brought him to Hargeisha [in Somaliland] where they read the Qur'an the whole time."

Today, it is common to download Qur'anic verses from the Internet and some sheikhs and imams recommend people who are ill to listen to Qur'an recordings. Moreover, the reading and the listening is often combined with the use of herbal medicine. It is commonly held that God, Allah, has created all medicines. Several natural medicines and plants, such as garlic and honey, are said to be described and recommended in the Qur'an (e.g. chapter 16, verse 69). Of special importance is an oil called *xabad sowda*, made from seeds from the plant *Nigella sativa* (L.). The oil is sold at some mosques and grocery stores in northeastern Gothenburg. It is said to be effective "against all kinds of illnesses except death" and could be drunk in small amounts combined with olive oil, honey, garlic or lime, or applied on the skin while reciting the Qur'an. One woman claimed that the oil had cured a friend from cancer and several informants emphasized its healing properties. The various uses of *xabad sowda* are also commonly discussed and recommended on the Internet.

Several of the people I met during my fieldwork told that the Qur'an contains many secrets and that its words may also be used for evil purposes, such causing illness, accidents and

separations. In these cases, it is common to use the last three verses of the Qur'an, reading them backwards. An evildoer may for example "read over" an object which he/she then hides in a house. Those who live in the house are then said to get nausea, insomnia and body-pain. In this case, a sheikh is asked to read Qur'an verses in order to "clean out bad forces" from the house. One may also "read over," for example, a fish, while pronouncing the victim's name. As a result, the person is said to vomit when eating this kind of fish. Another act of sorcery involves making a phone call to a person and pronouncing secret spells while asking a question. If the unknowing victim answers "yes," the intended evil act is said to have effect.

Qur'an readings are also used against curses (*inkaar*). This is commonly said to struck a son/daughter who does not live up to the obligation of helping his/her parents economically, especially if the son/daughter lives a wealthy life and the parents live a poor life in Somalia or some neighboring country. The parents may then express their dissatisfaction, which, in turn, may result in a curse causing illness and accidents for the son/daughter and his/her children.

### ***Jinn***

The Qur'an may also be used to send a spirit, *jinn*, on someone. For this magic to work, something that has belonged to the victim is needed, such as underwear or a sweater. A sheikh explained: It only works if you have the persons DNA; hair, sweat, or saliva" (Wedel, 2011, p.83). These cases are often difficult to deal with and may require repeated Qur'an recitations and sessions of exorcism over a period of time. Sometimes the afflicted has to travel to powerful sheikhs in Somalia, Kenya or Saudi-Arabia. *Jinn* may also afflict someone who is depressed, afraid or likes to be alone. These spirits are mentioned in the Qur'an and they are believed to be attracted to dark and filthy places. A man said that God has created *jinn* by fire, in the same way

as he has created angels by light. A woman added that *jinn* may materialize and take the shape of humans and animals. Another man told about a friend in Somalia who had killed several *jinn* when throwing a hand-grenade into a stack of rubbish. He was then attacked and possessed by *jinn*. At night, he was said to be screaming and “speaking with another voice” (Wedel, 2011, p.81).

*Jinn* may cause both mental and physical problems such as irritability, a desire to be alone, bodily pain and strange body movements. A woman explained: “*Jinn* can manifest itself as physical illness. It turns out as pain in the legs, head, back, [and] heart. The person feels pain but might not know that it’s *jinn* and suffers alone” (Wedel, 2012, section *Jinn*, para.4). She also said that “if the person goes to the hospital, they won’t find anything and nothing can be seen on the x-ray. If it’s because of *jinn*, no medication will help. Then it’s only Qur’an reading [that helps]” (Wedel 2011, p.82).

To avoid these spirits, humans must be both spiritually and physically clean, and be pious and “close to God.” They should pray five times a day to Mecca, perform ablution before prayer and take care when stepping into the toilet or the garbage room. A sheikh explained: “If you have done something bad, or if you don’t practice Islam, the *jinni* will attack you. The *jinni* will then say, ‘If he becomes a real Muslim, I will leave him’” (Wedel, 2011, p.81).

A woman similarly told about the importance of reading the Qur’an with the intention of spiritual protection:

*We live in Sweden where the soul doesn’t count and where people don’t believe there are forces that affect us, that can make us ill. But these forces exist. To become healthy we must work with the soul and read the Qur’an which can heal. These are incredible forces. Many have become healed with the Qur’an and the Swedish doctors don’t understand how. The second chapter in the Qur’an, Al-Baqara, is read against jinn, sorcery [sixir], negative forces and illness. Jinn are creatures who make use of non-spirituality between*



*people. They can cause a fight and irritation within the family. If you read Al-Baqara once a week or listen [to Al-Baqara] on a CD, you are guaranteed that jinn won't come. It's a way of connecting the soul to God (Wedel, 2012, section Jinn, para.3).*

To clarify if a person is possessed by *jinn*, a sheikh may read certain verses from the Qur'an. This is said to weaken the *jinn* who cannot bear hearing the words of the Qur'an. Finally, the *jinn* will tell why it has possessed the victim. It is then told to leave the sufferer, commonly through the victims little toe or little finger. This is however a delicate process as the *jinn* may try to "take over" the situation, resist its expulsion and try to cause conflicts by blaming a friend or family member for having sent the *jinn*.

In one case of presumed *jinn* possession, a woman in her 20s was brought to a medical doctor as she suffered from bodily pain. Her friend recalled: "[She] had something inside her body that moved and went over to the back" (Wedel, 2011, p.82). She was also said to have twisted her arms in ways that "really wasn't possible" (p.82) The friend continued: "During the medical examination, the doctor tried to hold her still. He thought she was acting and said 'no, now you have to sit still.' Then she became cross-eyed."

According to the possessed woman's friend, the doctor could not find anything wrong with her. Instead, she was brought to a mosque in Gothenburg where a group of men and an Imam read the Qur'an. She trembled as her *jinn* began to speak. According to the friend, the spirit tried to confuse the sheikh and said things like "I'm a Muslim, I'm a Christian, I'm a believer, I'm not a believer" (Wedel, 2011, p.83). Moreover, the spirit mimicked those who talked to it and spoke various languages and dialects that were unknown to the afflicted woman:

Sometimes it [the *jinn*] spoke with a woman's voice, sometimes with a man's voice and sometimes with a child's voice. At first, it spoke English, Arabic, [an] Ethiopian [language]. Languages that are unknown to her. Then it began to talk Somali, but with

dialects that she can't [speak]. Every time someone tried to talk to her, it mimicked that person's dialect. Then it began to tell about everything that had happened and that she had been at the hospital and to the doctor.

Finally, the spirit revealed its identity and told that it "came from a man who once wanted her" (Wedel, 2011, p.83). Afterwards, the woman became better although she had to continue with the sessions at the mosque in order to become well.

In another case, a woman had become psychotic and taken to the psychiatric ward in a hospital in Gothenburg. She was treated by psychiatrists while her husband, who believed that *jinn* were the cause of the problem, let her listen to recordings of Qur'an verses. However, she did not get much better. Her husband explained:

*I had recorded Qur'anic verses on an mp3-player which I let my wife listen to. When she listened, she cried. The doctor said "no, no, no, she's crying. You should let her listen to classical music". The psychiatrist did not understand what was happening to my wife. He tried to do everything but nothing helped.*

Later on, the husband brought his wife to a sheikh in Saudi-Arabia who read the Qur'an aloud in a microphone. His wife began to scream: "We won't come back, we won't come back" (p.84). The husband added: "[After a while] she slept very well and became well. If it [the possession] does not return within three years, she is completely well. She was possessed by *jinn*" (p.84).

Milder forms of *jinn* possession may also be treated by inhaling pulverized seeds from the plant *Nigella sativa* (L.). As the person begins to sneeze, the *jinn* is said to disappear.

### **Pre-Islamic religion**

Among Somali-Swedes, there are also followers of pre-Islamic Cushitic religion who venerate spirits known as *saar* or *mingis*. These spirits are generally not exorcised but may

instead be evoked in possession rituals that involve drumming, singing, handclapping and dancing. A *saar/mingis* spirit may become a person's companion as the person becomes part of a cult group. According to Abdullahi (2001, p.66), *saar* possession in Somalia may be considered "a form of psychotherapy for stressed individuals." However, this practice is considered un-Islamic by followers of stricter interpretations of Islam in Gothenburg. A man commented:

*They [those with stricter interpretations of Islam] said we should not worship demons. I know there are people who want to practice these rituals but they are not allowed to do so. If someone has a psychological problem and feels better when going to the mingis people, let the person do it. Faith is very important (Wedel, 2011, p.79).*

In Sweden, *saar/mingis* possession cults are transforming into more secular practices. During weddings for example, it is considered especially fortunate if a spirit temporarily possesses one of the female participants; the brides will then live happily together for many years. A wedding that took place in a town in southwestern Sweden is a case in point. While the women were dancing, singing, clapping hands and shouting "come down," one of the female participants was said to have been possessed. Her blood was said to "boil" as the spirit apparently took hold of her (p.78).

## **Conclusion**

Turning to non-Western or "traditional" forms of healing may, from an outsider's perspective, seem irrational and strange, especially if Western biomedicine is available. However, in a culturally comparative perspective, it is common to use various forms of Western and non-Western healing traditions simultaneously. Commonly, there is a search for a deeper, existential meaning and a wish to understand illness and suffering in relation to the social world

and to the spiritual dimensions in life. Implicitly, there is also sometimes a critique of Western biomedicine and its sharp distinction between body and soul, where illness tends to be considered as *either* a bodily *or* a psychological problem. While Western medicine tends to focus on something that is not functioning in the body (disease) and on curing a specific, often organic, problem, non-Western traditions commonly emphasize the whole experience of being unwell (illness) and of becoming healed (cf. Wedel, 2004, p.6-7).

Many Somali-Swedes, especially those who have arrived in Sweden as adults, have a holistic view of illness, health and healing. Healing may include biomedical interventions, herbal medicine as well as religious healing. In this perspective, Qur'an readings, exorcism of spirits, and ideas about the evil eye, sorcery and spells, are challenging the Western biomedical view of curing, its mind/body distinction, and its individualized view of illness causation.

## References

- Abdullahi, M. D. (2001). *Culture and Customs of Somalia*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- Anderson, D., Beckerleg, S., Hailu, D. and Klein, A. (2007). *The Khat Controversy: Stimulating the Debate on Drugs*. Oxford: Berg.
- Johnsdotter, S., Ingvarsdotter, K., Östman, M. and Carlbom, A. (2011). Koran reading and negotiation with *jinn*: strategies to deal with mental ill health among Swedish Somalis. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 14(8), 741–755.
- Statistiska Centralbyrån (2013). *Befolkningsstatistik. Utrikes födda*. Örebro: Statistiska centralbyrån (Statistics Sweden). Accessed March 7, 2013, in Statistics Sweden web site [http://www.scb.se/Pages/SSD/SSD\\_TablePresentation\\_\\_\\_340486.aspx?rxid=249424cb-7f75-4154-b529-c986db3c7c70&productcode=&menu=1&layout=tableViewLayout1](http://www.scb.se/Pages/SSD/SSD_TablePresentation___340486.aspx?rxid=249424cb-7f75-4154-b529-c986db3c7c70&productcode=&menu=1&layout=tableViewLayout1)
- Svenberg, K., B. Mattson, and C. Skott. (2009). 'A Person of Two Countries': Life and Health in Exile: Somali Refugees in Sweden. *Anthropology and Medicine* 16(3), 279-291.
- Tiilikainen, M. and Koehn, P.H. (2011). Transforming the Boundaries of Health Care: Insights from Somali Migrants. *Medical Anthropology: Cross-Cultural Studies in Health and Illness* 30(5), 518-544.

Wedel, J. (2012). Religion, illness and healing among Somalis in the Diaspora. XII Conferencia Internacional de la Cultura Africana y Afroamericana, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba, April 12-16 (Published conference paper).

Wedel, J. (2011). Mental Health Problems and Healing among Somalis in Sweden. *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 11, 73-89.

Wedel, J. (2004). *Santería Healing: A Journey into the Afro-Cuban World of Divinities, Spirits, and Sorcery*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.