

Healing Rituals and the Role of Fatima

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Introduction

As a physician who has worked in a variety of African and Central Asian countries, in addition to my ongoing work with ethnically diverse patients populations in the greater Boston area, I have developed a growing awareness of the role that healing rituals play in the lives of many of my patients. In the course of my participation in the “Women Healing Women” program – a working group of women healers, clinicians, and chaplains organized by the Center for the Study of World Religions, I chose to investigate how immigrant and refugee Muslim women residing in the Greater Boston area incorporated their religious and cultural beliefs into their health and well-being practices.

The specific goal of my project was to document healing rituals associated with Fatima, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad. I chose healing rituals associated with Bibi Fatima because she is venerated by both Shi’a and Sunni Muslims alike and also because the rituals associated with Bibi Fatima have not been adequately studied. To date, there are no cross-cultural comparative studies of these rituals among Muslim women from different parts of the Islamic world.

My initial plan was to interview women of the Muslim diaspora in the Greater Boston area about their knowledge of these practices. I had not anticipated that the women would continue some of their ritual practices in this country and was astounded when some of my interviewees stated that these rituals were a meaningful part of their religious practice and social lives, especially in their current, unfamiliar cultural environment. Women in traditional Muslim societies have evolved alternative expressions of their faith which involve pilgrimages to local shrines – for example, the shrine of Sayyidna Zainab in Cairo or the Qadamgah shrine in Shiraz – cooking of ritual meals, prayer, and other ritual ceremonies involving only women. It was therefore very inspiring that these women have been able to continue to practice some of their rituals in Boston. The majority of women stated that they do meet in

small groups, but there were some women who stated that they perform their rituals alone in their homes.

Over the past few months, I interviewed more than twenty women between the ages of forty and the late seventies. I interviewed both Shi’a and Sunni women from a number of different countries, including Iran, Pakistan, India, Tanzania, Somalia, and Uzbekistan. The Shi’a women were Twelvers (the majority Shi’a sect in Iran) or Ismaili (Sevener), and the Somali women were Sunni.

While the specific rituals within the different groups of women seem to be quite different, there are several common features that emerge and coalesce among the variations. Most rituals begin with a prayer to God (Allah) and then a supplicatory prayer to Bibi Fatima, followed by the recitation of stories or songs emphasizing good ethical and moral conduct and the cooking and serving of specific foods. For most of the rituals, women are expected to be in the state of ritual cleanliness – i.e., not menstruating, abstaining from sexual intercourse, and not pregnant, except for the ritual of *sitaat*, which is sometimes specifically performed in the third trimester to facilitate a woman’s labor and delivery.

Rituals Associated with Bibi Fatima

Sitaat

Sitaat is an Arabic word derived from *sitt*, which means lady. *Sitaat* in this context has multiple meanings and refers to the gathering of women for the ritual; it is also a collective term used for the first ladies of Islam, namely, Hawiyo (Eve), Khadijah, Hajra (Hagar), Maryam bint Imraan (Mary) Ayesha, Fatima, and other female members of the Prophet’s immediate family. Finally, it refers to the specific songs that are sung during these gatherings to honor the “first ladies” of Islam. The gatherings are held for specific occasions, such as the celebration of Prophet Muhammad’s birth or other religious holidays and prior to a woman’s delivery.

The Somali women whom I interviewed informed

me that delivery was one of the predominant reasons for holding a *sitaat* in Boston. The *sitaats* that are held specifically for the expectant mothers are also referred to as *madaxshub*, or the anointing of the head. The women emphasized that it was essential to call upon Bibi Fatima's assistance to facilitate the woman's labor and delivery in spite of the fact that most deliveries occur at local hospitals. The *sitaat/madaxshubt*, they insisted, provides the pregnant woman with support and encouragement that she would not receive in the hospital setting. It also guarantees a good outcome since Bibi Fatima and the other first ladies are involved in her care. An incense burner is generally passed over the pregnant woman's head and an older, experienced woman touches her head and abdomen, reciting special prayers, calling on the *sitaat* to ease her travail during her labor and safe delivery. The *madaxshub's* climax and conclusion is the anointing of the expectant woman's head.

Attendance at a *sitaat* is by invitation only, both here in Boston and in Somalia. Women come, dressed in their best clothes, to an individual woman's house in the afternoon. There is generally incense burning in the room. The women sit in a circle on cushions or mats on the floor. Various types of perfumes, *eaus de cologne*, and incense are passed around to the women attending the *sitaat*. The perfume is from the prophetic tradition, as Prophet Muhammad is said to have been very fond of perfume and is sometimes referred to as *Udgoon*, or the fragrant one, in Somali poetry. Coffee, tea, and *halvah* and other sweets are also passed around. The Somali Muslims believe that the use of fragrance, good food, music, and dancing not only enhances the spiritual experience but also helps to attract the spiritual presence of the saints invoked in the prayers and songs. The ceremony starts with a prayer or a song invoking God, Prophet Muhammad, and the "first ladies," and the *sitaat* reaches a climax with the songs that invoke Bibi Fatima's help.

Thaali

Bibi Fatima's *thaali* (platter) is an elaborate ritual that is performed by Shi'a Muslim women from the Indian subcontinent. The women I interviewed stated that they had participated in this ritual in their countries of origin, but not in the United States. One of the reasons why this ritual was not performed in the United States was because of the intricate details required by this specific ritual. However, one of my interviewees informed me that the *thaali* may be performed by women residing in Canada,

because the community there is much larger and lives in greater proximity. Like the *sitaat*, the *thaali* is by invitation only and is generally held in a private home. The invited women, usually seven or multiples of seven, can be either married or single. On the morning of the *thaali*, the women swallow a clove given to them at the time of the invitation by the woman who is hosting the ritual; the women ingest the spice with some water and fast. They are expected to be in a state of ritual purity, that is, neither menstruating nor pregnant. The *thaali* is held in a private home at mid-morning. The women sit on a floor covered by freshly laundered bedsheets and recite individual prayers silently. When all the women have arrived, a tray with some perfume, *'ud* (oil-based perfume), hair oil, a hair plait of wool strands, *kohl*, and other items is passed around and each woman anoints her head with some oil, applies *kohl* to her eyes, puts on some perfume, and gets herself ready to participate in Bibi Fatima's ritual. After all the women have finished grooming, an older woman starts the prayers that are recited aloud together. After the prayers, the women are served a vegetarian meal with seven items on the menu. Each woman takes out about half a teaspoon of all the foods and puts it on a plate for the woman who has made the pledge. None of the women I interviewed seemed to understand why all the women had to share a portion of their food. Many informed me that this was the tradition. After the meal, the women are given a small token gift, generally a handkerchief and a small bottle of perfume. The women then disperse. All this occurs without the knowledge of the male members of the household.

Rott

The origin or meaning of the term *rott* was not known to my interviewees. One of the women I interviewed postulated that it could be a modified form of the word *lott*, which means flour in Gujarati. I have not been able to ascertain whether this is accurate, and I doubt that this is so, because most of the women who participate in the ritual have their origins in Sindh, not Gujarat. *Rott* is also the term for the special sweet made from whole wheat flour, butter, sugar, almonds, and pistachios, which is served at the conclusion of the ritual ceremony. *Rott* is also by invitation only and is held in a private home. A couple of the women informed me that they have performed the ritual either by themselves or with one other female member of the family since not all women are familiar with this ritual. One of my interviewees informed me that she rou-

tinely participates in this ritual when she goes back to India as she has a number of friends who perform this ritual regularly. In Boston, she generally reads the story by herself or with her mother and daughter. When she attends the ritual in India, there are generally about eight to twelve women participating in the ceremony.

The rite begins with each woman praying silently and individually, until the point when all the invited women have arrived, and an older woman reads a story in which Bibi Fatima comes to the assistance of a person. Then the women recite some prayers together, and finally the *rott* (the sweet) is distributed to all the women, somewhat like Communion.

Osh-e-Nazri

Osh-e-Nazri is literally translated as “the soup of wishes.” Unlike the rituals discussed previously, the women generally gather in the late evening at the local mosque for *Osh-e-Nazri*. They make noodles from dough, which are then dried overnight on the mosque grounds. The following morning, the women return to the mosque with whatever they desire to contribute toward the soup. Some women may bring a piece of lamb, others may bring some vegetables and fresh herbs, while others may bring oil or seasonings. The women then make the soup, generally finishing its preparation by noon. The soup is then consumed by everyone at the mosque – man, woman, or child. Alternatively, some may elect to take a portion of the soup home. There are no special prayers to Bibi Fatima, but this is a women’s ritual even though men and children do partake of the soup. The women I interviewed stated that they have not participated in *Osh-e-Nazri* in Boston, but it is conceivable that in other cities with large Iranian population, such as Los Angeles, this ritual may be performed. I was informed of another ritual called *sofreh*, which is performed in Boston by a small number of women, but I was unable to get any meaningful details about this ritual.

Ritual Significance

As nurturers of their families, these women regard the care of their families’ physical and emotional well-being to be their primary responsibility and priority. They indicate that their participation in these rituals is just one facet of this multifaceted role. Spiritual and ritual caregiving is complementary to the physical caregiving that they carry out on a daily basis. In fact, rituals of this sort serve to elevate and sacralize the daily burden of women’s childcare, eldercare, and household chores.

Women enjoy and are empowered by these rituals. Most immigrant and refugee women are at the lower ends of the socioeconomic class of their adoptive societies. Ritual gatherings serve as an opportunity to connect with other women of the same background who share their cultural symbols and expectations.

These gatherings also subvert their usually subservient social position in the normally male-dominant religious and cultural hierarchy. At these rituals, the women are in control not only of the rituals themselves but, symbolically, of the well-being of their families and communities. These rituals also serve to remind us that, despite the protestations of male-dominant orthodoxy, Muslim women, like women of other faiths, have their own, parallel expressions of religiosity.

However, these rituals are under significant threat, as the pressure to conform to orthodox fundamentalist interpretations of Islam has perhaps never been so great. World events, financial domination of fundamental Islam perpetuated by petro-dollars, and significant cultural threats in their new domiciles are some of the causes of these pressures. The documentation of these rituals, and their “reformulation” within new paradigms of discourse will, I hope, enable these empowering rituals to prevail and be passed on to further generations of educated, American Muslims.