



Istunka- A Yearly Ritual

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Editor's note: *Istunka- A Yearly Ritual* is an excerpts from the book *Somali Folk Dance* written by Abdulahi Ahmed (Somaliyow), [a librarian at the Library of Congress](#), the world's largest library. *Somali Folk Dances* is a great book with beautiful illustrations. It's a fascinating and great contribution to this rare and untapped field of Somali Folk Dances. WardheerNews also plans to publish soon the Somali version of *Istunka Afgoi*.

This is a yearly mock fight known as 'Istunka' or 'Dabshid' which takes place at the river-side town of Afgooye, situated on the bank of the Shebeele River about 30 kilometers south-west of Mogadishu, the capital city of the Somali Republic. The Istunka tournament was developed in the middle ages and still practiced annually in the town of Afgooye. Symbolizing the defense of one's community and honor, it coincides with the beginning of Somali New Year and the start of the main harvest season. Istunka was originally performed in full combat gear, with battle-axes, swords and daggers. However, for safety reasons, performers later replaced those weapons with large sticks or twigs. As there aren't fights today between one village to another as in the ancient days, still the performance of istunka remains purely a traditional battle with sticks between the inhabitants of Afgooye ; those who reside on the western bank of the river delta that intersects the town confronting others on the eastern bank.



The purpose of this voluntary fight between the people of the town's two sectors demarcated by the river-bed is, mainly, to mark the beginning of the harvesting season by the farmers inhabiting in the regions flanking the course of the river, which falls about the end of July or early August. However, other significances may be attached to this important event, such as the widespread belief amongst the natives that failure to stage the fight would entail misfortune and evil omens to the people, such as failure of crops followed by famine and plague. It is also considered that the natural progressions of the population would be hindered since it is strongly believed that large proportion of the women may not conceive at all. They believe that no rain will come if the practice of Istunka stopped. Several other traditional activities are also performed in the regions of lower and middle shabelle and Banadir region. The most common one is the bonfire "DABSHITKA" where the people gather sticks and hay and set them fire. Young boys and girls jump over the fire which indicates they're jumping over all the difficulties in the year to come "SHAR XIJAAB" at the end of the festival, the two groups embrace each other with love after their committee of elders tell them to stop the game whereas earlier, the late regime used water canoes to stop the fighting when the ran out.

Such beliefs held by the majority of the natives would, however, seem superstitious, particularly in this age of human progress and enlightenment. Nevertheless, considering the perpetuation, throughout the centuries, of this traditional fight, the practice is now a well-established phenomenon amongst the people in that it attracts the notice of the other sections of the Somali people living in many regions of the country.



Warrior's Décor

On the appointed day the members of the contesting parties both young and the old take their respective sides of the arena – a spacious field that affords ample space for the necessary maneuvers by the antagonists. The dress and weapon of the participants are prescribed by usage: a loin cloth known as “ma’wis” and a “Garbassar” usually used by Somali ladies as a shawl; a cloth band tied round the head with a decorative silken tassel attached to it and hung over the forehead, and a string of amulets or talismans worn round the neck or arm, usually form the warriors décor. Each combatant is equipped with a dozen or so sticks freshly cut from a certain tree famous for its strength and durability; these he holds in his left hand in one bunch, taking one at a time until he consumes them all on the bare bodies of his opponents.

Shirib

One of the most important elements among the preparatory steps of Istunka is the Shirib. Shiriba is night-time songs and poetry performed usually on Friday nights since it is convenient to the farmers who don't go tilling on Fridays. Shirib is performed by a group of men in two long lines, with a song master (Lashin) reciting the song and the others singing after him as soon as he gives them an easy piece of verse that contains the gist of the context he was reciting. Shirib may have various aspects in meaning and in use, but as far as Istunka is concerned, the songs recited and the most of the verses comply with the bravery and pride of a group or an individual who is a brave warrior. It is also a ritual song with which a rival group is taunted of cowardice and other evil deeds done by any member of them.

The highlight of the Shirib nights is that one of Dhafarka (the night of the sleeplessness). Since it is the last night of the Shirib, this gathering attracts high number of crowds and singers who cross the rival area, mostly singing verses of threats and boastful predictions of what the determined warriors would do the following day. At the end of every verse is marked by chanting and heavy stomping of feet on the ground- called Sarqaatis. Also when the men are at the peak of their Sarqaatis in chanting, or whenever the song master recited a meaningful verse, the female- folks are there ready with applause for a boost of moral. Another useful point of women's accompaniment in this night is that they carry food and thermos- flasks full of tea or sugarless coffee in baskets on their backs.

The Shirib of Dhafarka lasts until sunrise of the following morning after which most of the youths go to the bushes and up on the trees to get enough sticks for the afternoon fight. At around three o'clock in the afternoon different teams of each side gather dressed in smartly tailored uniforms, and sing their Shirib along the streets of their area after which all roads lead to the battle grounds again.

It is also worthwhile here to mentions some of the most popular shirib poets or “Laashins”:
Sacdi Muumin Xasan, Xasan Abuukar, Maxamed Cali Cismaan, Cabdullahi Soomow (Ul-qalin), Cismaan Cadow, Murriidi Maaxi Muumin, Muuse Cusmaan Maahi, Cumar Baharow Cali , Aadan Bilaal Cabdalla (Oomane) and Cumar Barrow.

Waramow Gaashamow
Guri Gooble walalkiisow

O spear! O shield
O brother of the town of Gooble

'Gooble' is an ancient name for the town of Afgooye. All the warriors visit the Sultan's residence before they proceed to the battle field. The Sultan comes out and stands in the doorway. All the men hold up their spears, slanting them towards him, and join in a solemn, wordless chant on one

note. The buun is sounded repeatedly. The parade continues; while other troops come up behind them to salute the Sultan, the first one has moved on and the chant continues.

A Laashin calls on the Sultan and his lineage to work hard at their recitation of the Koran so as to bring an abundant harvest.

Dayrta duraan aan u rabaa
Diine Adeer, diin ku dadaal

I want your prayers for the dayr rains
Diine Adeer, do your best with your sacred recitation

Gaalada horteeda goobeernaad eheed-ee
Ninkii ku guuhaado maxaas kaa galayaa

You who were the government before the Europeans
Whoever is angry with you, why should it trouble you?

Impressive View

The entrance into the battle field, by the contestants is an impressive spectacle to witness: the men on each side emerge from their side of the field in a long column of 3 or 4 abreast, followed by their high- shrilling women folk, whose main duty is to encourage and inspire the men in their engagement with the opposing party. The spectacle is, indeed, like that presented by those ancient legionaries of Rome, and sometimes seems set for one of those bloody battles, or those furious gladiatorial matches of the ancient world.

The ordinary Istunka spectator can imagine that the fight is about to begin when he sees an elderly man in the center of the arena. The elderly man in his traditional Allindi dress with the SIIMBAAR (a long local made trumpet) in his hand marks the start by blowing his trumpet after which all the troops run to the center of the arena to move into fierce battle ending their long anxiety and hurrying to reach for and give a hard time to the enemy. In doing so, the fighters have a stick or two in one hand and a bunch of others in the other for protecting. As it is in all contests, one of the antagonists sooner or later wins the field, because of their superior tactics or greater number, chase the vanquished hordes out of the arena in to the streets and finally seek refuge in their houses. Unfortunately even this may not help much, for no sooner they run for cover into the houses then the women in them shower a volley of mud bricks, bottles and such missiles at the men in retreat, yelling at them something like:

“You miserable cowards go back and face the men on your heels”.

But who cares for a female flattery once honor is irretrievably lost. The specter of the chaotically scampering crowds of men never fails to provide the spectators an exceedingly entertaining and amusing event for the sake of which, in fact, huge crowds travel to Afgooye. Sometimes the on-looking crowds may not find it all so funny, for it may happen that the defeated part may in their chaotic escape be forced to make their escape-route through the throngs of spectators consisting of men, women, and children, who then in their desperate flight get woefully trampled by the warriors in flight. The result of which can cause heavy casualty and many would regret their recklessness of ever going to this bloody Istunka. Others such as the ladies, often lose valuable objects, necklaces, bracelets, shoes ensuing the mad rush and confusion.

Festive Mood

The tournament usually lasts for 3 days, during which period the town of Afgooye is decked in festive mood: animals are sacrificed, the people put on their best clothes and folk dances and sing-song parties keep on long serenades praising the brave deeds of their warriors who in the fight upheld the honor of their people and town. While the victors celebrate all around town, the members of the vanquished party are obliged to keep to their side of the town and hardly venture to visit the victorious sector for fear of being ignominiously molested. However, normal daily life returns to Afgooye after the festive period is over.

In the afternoon after the morning fight, Istunka festivals begin with Aw-Daangoole dance. The name of this dance was derived from a man with the name Aw-Gaabow Adeer, a well-respected figure among the Istunka fighters, who requested to be commemorated during the joyous days of Istunka and hence this dance attributed to him. Aw-Daangoole is danced by boys in their Istunka uniforms lining in rows of fours or fives in the front rows, with girls in colorful Allindi dresses in the back rows to sing after them.

Portrait of Ancient bravery

The finale to the event is reached when, during the evening following the last day of the fight two elderly ladies representing the parties, stand one on each bank of the river in semi-nude condition, and start to hurl torrents of abusive language; they sway and make weird body contortions, while the crowds, look on and have fun at their expense. This is but a mutual decay at climax. In considering all the wonderful manifestations of this primitive tournament and the deep significance the parties attach to it, one could not fail to note that this remarkable event is one that portrays an ancient gallantry and manly qualities, the maintenance of which all men consider an honorable object in their lives.

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