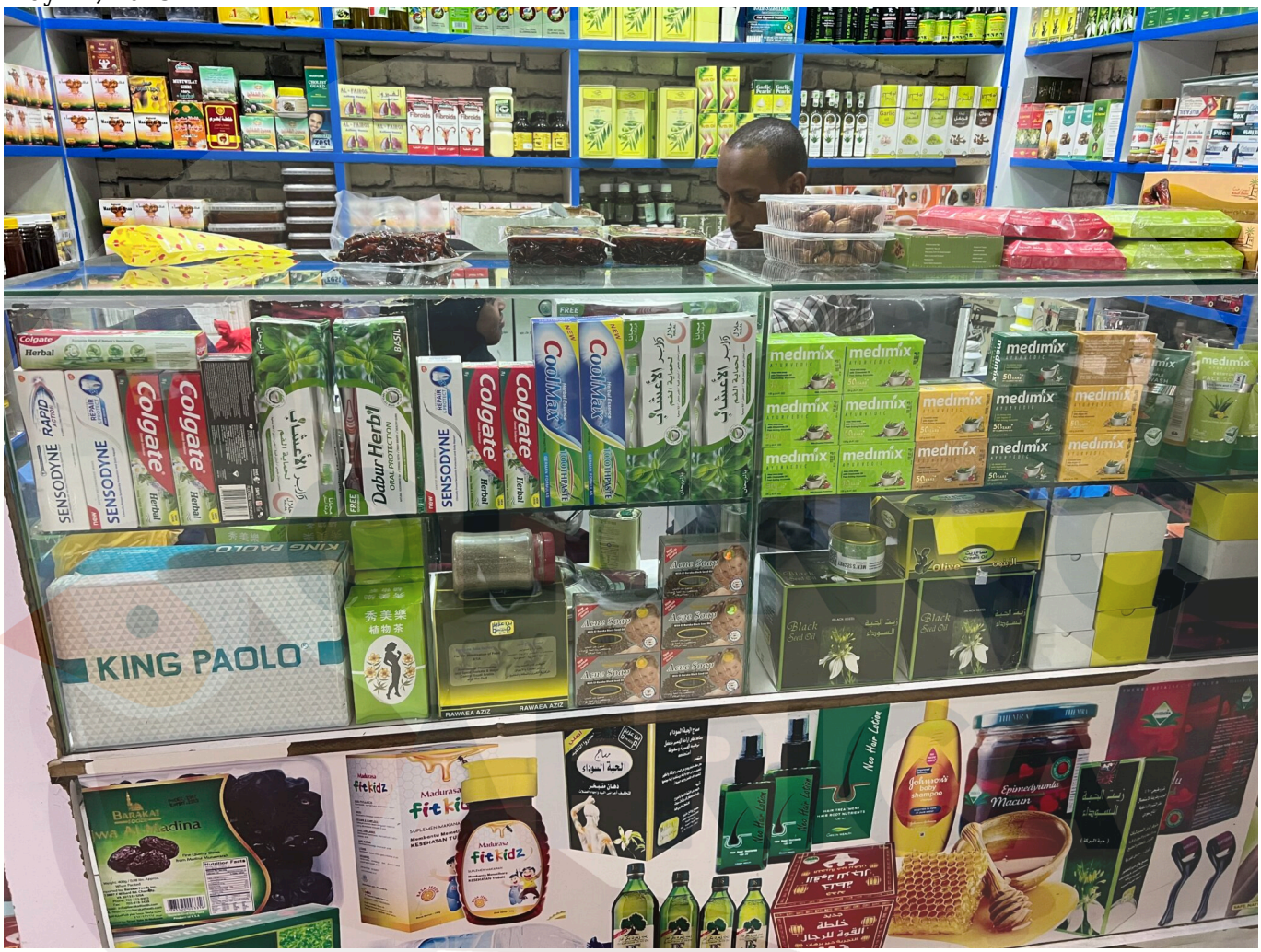
Somalis’ love for black seed oil

Salawu Olajide
May 17, 2023



In late 2020, when I pulled a hamstring while playing soccer, one of my friends suggested that I take a hot shower, apply black seed oil and wrap my thigh with a piece of cloth when I get home. “It will do wonders,” he said assuredly. I suppressed laugher amid the pain I was feeling. It wasn’t my first time hearing a Somali person advising another Somali person to use black seed oil for a pain or an ailment of any kind.

Black cumin (Nigel Sativa) is a flowering plant native to Asia and the Mediterranean. For more than thousand years, the plant’s seed has been used for medication ranging from fatigue to allergic reactions and even more complicated diseases like asthma. But for the Somalis, it is more than that. One would be forgiven to think that they hold it sacred.

Growing up, I used to see my asthmatic uncle applying it on his chest and neck and even adding it to his tea and milk when he is having asthma attack. My mother, too, would use it occasionally and she would try to give it to us when we have cold or even a slight fever, but my sister and I used to refuse it because we couldn’t stand its smell. Despite not liking its smell, my sister and I knew it was good for some ailments. I would jokingly tell her to use it whenever she is unwell and vice versa. Years later, when I was in college, I saw a 4-year-old boy holding a bottle of black seed oil and licking it and I said to myself, “this is the result of his parents giving it to him every time he feels unwell.” In almost every Somali household, the older members have it stored somewhere. It is not an uncommon

sight. You will see neighbours often borrowing it from each other when a family member is unwell and there is no black seed oil at home.

That day, after I pulled the hamstring, I bought one, used it for a few nights and put it on my nightstand just in case. It was the first time I had used it and, truth be told, it helped me a great deal. I was first uncomfortable with the smell, but later got used to it. Then one fine morning, I heard one of my neighbours knocking on another neighbour's door asking for — you guess it right — black seed oil. She was saying her few months old baby is unwell, and they couldn't sleep well that night. I was coming from the morning prayers, and I said, "I have one, let me get it for you," when the other neighbour said she doesn't have one. And that marked the end of my first relationship with black seed oil. This mother could take her child, who apparently had congestion, to the hospital, but the first thing she did in the morning is look for black seed oil to apply on the baby's chest. Something she believed would help the baby. Such is how Somalis believe in its powers to heal!

The varieties of the black seed oil found in Jamal's shop

After I gave away the first black seed oil I ever bought, I thought of getting another one and just keeping it even if I am not using it. It could be old age kicking in, but there was, and still is, the urge to get it although I somehow keep on forgetting it. And the one or two times I caught cold after that first encounter, I regretted not buying it. Will I ever buy it again? Yes, I will. Not once, but I will keep on restocking them in the future.

****

That the black seed oil is hold sacred by my Somali people cannot be gainsaid. Back in my hometown of Garissa, there was this Somali hawker who used to move around selling black seed oil while

singing some song, which, undoubtedly, he was doing to attract his customers. It would go something like this:

Dawaysaa, dawaysaa! (It treats, it treats!)

Wax walbeey dawaysaa! (It treats everything)

He moves around holding one bottle in the hand pretending that it is the last one and he would go on to sing some lines that go like:

Hal iga qaadaay hal iga qaadaay (take one from me, take one from me!)

Hal baa igu haree, hal iga qadaay (I am remaining with one, take one from me!)

This hawker might have romanticised the black seed oil, but with or without that cajoling, his stock would be sold out because for the old population in Somali towns, it is a necessity.

A tale is told of a family whose re-settlement in the US almost failed because a mother who was among the family members in the 'group' to be re-settled said she will not go if there isn't black seed oil in the US. This may have been a made-up joke, but it depicts the love Somalis, especially the old, have for black seed oil.

In a more comical one, Somalis online created a meme during the start of the COVID-19 showing what they called 'Somalis COVID-19 starter pack.' The meme, borrowed from the movie, *The Dark Knight* showed Tom Hardy (Bane) as COVID-19 and an image in all red replaced batman and named it as a concoction of black seed oil, garlic and honey coming up against him. The meme was depicting how Somalis literally throw black seed oil against any ailment and proving right the meme creator, Somalis the world over started using such concoctions for the COVID-19 when the pandemic spread to the whole world.

The COVID-19 meme that emerged in early 2020 at the height of COVID

****

The Muslim community at large holds the black seed oil in high regard because it is narrated in one of the hadiths that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said it is cure for every disease except death. It is highly regarded for its ability to help the body in its natural healing process whether it is used alone or in other concoctions or added to food.

In Eastleigh, the populous Somali neighbourhood in Nairobi, black seed oil and other concoctions are sold in almost every street corner. And even though hundreds of small shops sell it, the commodity still remains hotshot. Interestingly, these shops are all run by men and women in their mid 50s and above. For a young person who cannot stand the smell of black seed oil, fenugreek and the others, it is hard to spend minutes inside these shops. But these people know their clients and they work round the clock to make sure these commodities are always in stock.

Mohamed Jamal has a shop in Eastleigh Mall, one of the prominent malls in the neighbourhood. He sells varieties of items like the black seed oil and even spices. The items in Jamal's shop are all packaged unlike the other shops where they used the orthodox method. Items with different labels are arranged neatly on both the shelf and the glass in front, giving the shop a touch of panache.

"What we have in this shop are things that are remedial for varieties of ailments," he told me when I visited his shop. My friend was buying sesame oil for another friend, and I followed him to check what they sell. "But the black seed is the hottest commodity here," he tells me. In every five customers he receives, three will ask for the black seed oil. Jamal sells four versions of the black seed oil; three liquid ones which he says are from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia and a Vaseline-like solid one, which he says is good for muscle tension relaxing.

Jamal's shop is a busy one. When I went back to ask him more about the herbal medicines he sells, our conversation was interrupted on numerous occasions. In front of him was a packed lunch sent from his home at around 1 p.m., but at 4:30 p.m. when I visited him, it still lay there untouched. His daughter was with him, and they both wanted to eat the lunch, but there was no chance. Four customers came before he could start eating. A lady bought a slimming tea, an old man in his early 60s bought black seed oil and honey for his wife whom he says has a bad flue. The other two customers were a boy in his early 20s who was sent by his aunt to buy some herbs for her aching knee joint and two other ladies who bought slimming tea.

Jamal in this shop showing the various herbals he sells

A Development Studies graduate from a university in Sudan, Jamal, 44, says he has been motivated after attending numerous seminars in Khartoum, Sudan about herbal benefits while he was a student there. And when he came back, he started a small shop in Eastleigh's 6th street, but moved to this expansive shop in Eastleigh Mall after the one in 6th street was demolished to pave way for a bigger apartment. "I moved here, but my customers still followed me," says Jamal while smiling.

Jamal tells me that two customers gave him the most satisfying feedbacks regarding the black seed oil. He says a man came to him and told him that a problem on one of his knees is forcing him to sit on a chair during prayers. He gave him the Vaseline-like one and after a week of applying it on the knee, he started to pray without using the chair. Another one was that of a man from Canada whom he says was exposed to snow and one of his legs couldn't bend in the knee area. He came to Nairobi and when Jamal gave him the Vaseline-like black seed oil, things changed for the better. After one month the man was able to bend his knee.

For Jamal, he will keep on selling those herbal medicines, but Jamal knows is the black seed oil will always be the most sort after because he says everyone is now embracing it, including the youth.

Mkhadar Yussuf is a freelance writer, translator and humanitarian based in Nairobi. When he feels bored, he scribbles some dull poems. You can call him a wannabe poet.