BANAADIRI THEN AND NOW

[In 2011 Anita Adam completed doctoral research at London University, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), on Benadiri People of Somalia: with Particular Reference to the Reer Hamar of Mogadishu. The following essay draws on that research and on her longstanding interest in and association with Somali society.]

INTRODUCTION.

Who Are the Banaadiri?

The Banaadiri are a people who have their roots in southern Somalia’s Indian Ocean coast. Culturally they are communities of townspeople that live in the oldest parts of the Stone Towns of Muqdisho, Marka and Baraaawe, and in a string of smaller coastal settlements that are interspersed, from Warsheikh north of Muqdisho, through Jasira, Gandershe, Jilib Marka, and Torre south of Baraaawe. The people refer to themselves as Banaadiri, and to their town enclaves as ‘sarahas’. Demographic changes have of course taken place over the centuries so not all Banaadiris are today confined to this coastal stretch.

Some Terms

Banaadir is a geographical designation that pre-dates European colonial occupation of this part of the Horn of Africa, and derives from the Arabic bandar (pl. banādir) for “port” or “sea-city” - hence ‘Banaadiri’, or ‘people of the ports’. (A similar and more familiar construction is found further down the coast with sawahil – Arabic for coast, and Swahili, ‘the people of the coast’.)

Sarta or saraha, ‘building(s) made of stone’, distinguished the Old Town quarters of the Banaadir from the more modest huts of wattle of the rural hinterland – and so we have the term Stone Town (again, familiar to students of Swahili, and of which the most famous of the Stone Towns of the East African coastal region is Zanzibar).

Legendary History

Oral traditions date the founding of Banaadir port towns to between the 10th and 12th centuries CE or AD. Banaadiri traditions speak of 39 families migrating to the coast from Arabia/Persia’ around this time, with names that indicate the tribes and towns where they originated. We know from an ancient sailing manual from the 1st century CE, The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, that this part of the East African coast was involved in the great trading arc of the Indian Ocean that had been carried out on the unfailing monsoon ‘trade winds’ from time immemorial. We must assume, therefore, that the communities that evolved here were a fusion of the indigenous and the immigrants. What is clear, however, is that sometime in the early part of the second millennium Arab-Muslim traditions began to be established in the Banaadir settlements. Muqdisho, the largest and most important of these, is the site of three of the earliest mosques on the East African coast, attested to by inscriptions therein. These are the Jaam’a (Friday) Mosque in the heart of Xamar Weyne, built in AH636 (1238CE), the Fakhirudin and the Arba’-Rukun, also in Xamar Weyne, and which both date to AH667 (1269CE). There are no existing built environments of similar age elsewhere in the country.

Social organisation in the Stone Towns

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1 In this period from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries Persia was part of the Arab Empire (until its breakup in 1258), I will therefore refer to the migrations and associated influences as Arab.
Banaadiri communities together comprise two dozen or more lineages, with genealogies that trace through the male line, eventually leading to illustrious Arabian-born ancestors and lineage founders. This is not very different from the traditions of origin of the vast majority of Somalis.

A different characteristic of Banaadiri clan structure from that of the more numerous Somali clans is the non-convergence of the lineages. Banaadiri lineages are parallel, free-standing descent lines that do not meet at a legendary common apical ancestor. The descent pattern of Banaadiri groups does not therefore fit within what is often referred to in the academic literature as the ‘total genealogy’ model that is held to underpin Somali society overall. This factor may be said to have led historically to a marginalisation of the urban Banaadiri from the national core, and to an impression in the public psyche of the Banaadiri as ‘foreigners’ or as ‘not quite Somalis’.

On closer consideration of the descent lines of the coastal and the clan Somalis, it is of note, nevertheless, the similarity in time-depth of genealogical traditions as constructed by each. The abtirsiinyo (family histories) of the large clan confederacies of the interior contain around thirty to thirty-five generations of ancestors before arriving at eponymous founder ancestors who came from Arabia – of which Sheikh Isaaq and Sheikh Darod are examples. Based on a calculation of an average four generations per century, this takes the ‘founding’ of the clan-families to around the twelfth century. Banaadiri founding traditions, as already noted, are of similar time span – eight- to ten-hundred years - before lineage lines cross to Arabian soil, to continue their ascent to eminent ancestors such as the Prophet Mohamed and his Companions.

Origin stories tell how a people’s culture came into being, and none of the legends of origin for any of the Somali groups that we have referred to pre-dates Islam (though elements in the folk literature may do so). We are not here making any judgement on what is or is not history, and although this part of the world was clearly peopled before the beginning of the second millennium, it is the history that the people construct that is a social fact, and that affects their way of life, and colours their world view. The point being that whether these traditions date to one particular time or represent the conflation of memories of movements at different times, they are relevant to a group’s perception of self and inform their actions.

*Town Polity and Social Organisation (with Xamar as representative)*

Over the centuries of relative separation, town polity developed differently from that of the agro-pastoralist and nomadic pastoralist clans. Up until the time of Italian colonisation, Muqdisho, with its alternate name Xamar, referred only to the Stone Town enclave that consisted of two moieties, or division -- Xamar Weyne and Shingani – all other districts being of later construction. The spatial distribution of the community correlates to the distribution of lineages, such that each lineage belongs either to one moiety or the other but not to both (with just one exception), and different locations within the enclave are the primary residence of a particular lineages. Within the town polity the lineages took on different roles and performed different functions - what might be called ‘ordered action’, the process by which a society is kept in being. Many such ordered activities - religion, law, or supervision of rituals - had traditional or hereditary associations for particular descent groups. Members of trades and skills groups, such as weavers and silversmiths, may be compared to the trade guilds in mediaeval Europe. There were procedures, too, for incorporating newer members into the town polity, whether incomers from the interior or non-Somalis from overseas (Arab and Indian traders, for example), who might settle there and who wished to subscribe to the urban order.

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2 In the Somali tradition this ancestor is known as Samaal.
Islam and sufí practices were at the heart of community activity. Banaadiri can boast a long line of 'ulama belonging to the Sufi brotherhoods. Among these, the names of Sheikh Sufi from Muqdisho, Sheikh Ali Maye and Sheikh Aw Osman from Marka, and Sheikh Qasim Al-Baraawi will have resonance for Somali society overall. The fame of Banaadir cities such as Muqdisho and Baraawe as centre of Islamic learning, attracted scholars and apprentices from afar. One of Muqdisho’s more famous pupils of the nineteenth century was Sheikh Zayla’i who was eventually to have a religious order named after him.\(^4\) So it may surprise some to learn of the large number of holy men from the Banaadir who were key in spreading Islam to the interior, travelling the countryside teaching the Koran and Arabic, and establishing religious settlements.

**Now to more contemporary issues**

At the present time (post-state collapse) the position of the urban Reer Xamar (and Banaadiri generally) is that of a small minority in the overall political landscape of Somalia, of little or no political significance in state administration. This is in spite of their noteworthy contribution to the spiritual life of the nation, and the key role they played in Somalia’s independence struggle. In the 1940s and 50s the number of prominent political activists from among the Banaadiri townsmen was out of all proportion to their numbers nationally. Six of the thirteen founder members of the first pro-independence political party in Somalia, the Somali Youth Club (SYC) later to become the Somali Youth League (SYL) and which took power at independence in 1960, were Banaadiris. They included both the SYL President, Abdulqadir Sakhawaddin, and Vice-President Haji Mahamed Hussen\(^5\) – both Banaadiri townsmen, remembered by older Somalis today but perhaps not so well-known to a younger generation.

**Maltreatment, Displacement and Exile.** Human rights violations against Banaadiri communities have been well-documented, in the asylum-related literature by external reportage, and by Banaadiris themselves.\(^6\) The list of violations is long: looting and occupation of property, physical violence including rape and murder; in the case of young men it meant abduction for ransom payments or for forced labour and conscription to clan-based militias; and for young women and girls it included sexual violation and forced marriage.

There were other controlling mechanisms, such as extortion, protection rackets, and economic exclusion. The ‘protection’ that Reer Xamar were said in UK Home Office reports to ‘enjoy’ was the criminal activity of gangster militias who extorted money from victims in exchange for freedom from molestation. Bizarrely, in the asylum assessment process, these rackets have been equated with the protection that a powerful clan could traditionally provide and could continue to provide to its own members. Regarding economic exclusion, for a people whose principle economic base had always rested on commerce and trade, this has meant that long-standing business activities have been curtailed or appropriated, and national economic resources monopolised by militarily dominant forces.

**Religious Tensions.** A further issue for Banaadiris to confront has been censure against local expressions of spirituality. The Islamic militant group of Al Ittihad had been operating somewhat


\(^5\) A biography of Haji Mahamed Hussen by Abdulaziz Mahamed, that explored this period of modern political history of Somalia, is in preparation.

clandestinely in Somalia well before the civil war, but in the failed state after 1991, Al Ittiihad was amongst those self-appointed groups who now found opportunities to fill the power vacuum and impose their own austere interpretation of Islam. The rise of the religious-based Islamic Courts Union (ICU) during 2006 reportedly brought a degree of stability and better security for Reer Xamar and related minorities for a period. Even so, ICU rule was accompanied by a strict interpretation of shari‘a. and banned the practice of veneration of ancestors and awliyya (saints), which are important annual rituals in the Banaadiri religious calendar.

Further, the Courts closed down cinemas, and commercial enterprises that dealt with entertainment. Before the civil war the Banaadiri had been prominent in the entertainment industry, both in the area of performing arts and in technical production of film and music videos. Another potential source of livelihood was hence closed.

If actions by Al Ittihad and the ICU were tantamount to an assault on the particular cultural and religious traditions among Banaadiri, worse was still to come. Since 2008 al-Shabaab have been operating a Taliban-like militia, and have assumed for themselves the monopoly of religious legitimacy. Against the Banaadiri in particular, they have engaged in the desecration and systematic destruction of the shrines of their awliyya, including the grave of Sheikh Aweys in Biyooley, and the mosque and shrine of Aw Osman in Marka.  

**Patterns of Dispersal.** By the time Muqdisho collapsed into chaos, the capital city was a cosmopolitan mix of people from all clans. In early 1991, residents of the city began leaving town, and people’s first instinct was to head for the ‘home territory’ of their clan, where they could expect to find relatives, extended family, and clan support. For the Reer Xamar this meant heading for the other Banaadiri towns of the coast, and to the villages of the immediate hinterland such as Afgoye and Awdhegle where they would probably have family who had settled there to trade, and where a history of trade and some marriage ties had developed over centuries. In these early years of the conflict, Reer Xamar families often moved back and forth, returning to the city when there seemed to be periods of relative calm, but where some would find that their houses had been squatted or otherwise appropriated – especially those that were situated outside of the enclave.

**Current state of affairs and potential for Political participation and inclusiveness**

In the two decades since 1991, the majority clans have continued to hold on to political power as they have done since independence in 1960, and have felt it unnecessary to incorporate minority representation in any but a token way into their succession of governments, and by so doing, they may be said to have presided over a dilution of the national heritage.

Perhaps the final outrage for the Banaadiri political class was the allocation of seats in the ‘4.5 formula’ - with ‘point five’ representing a wide range of groups styled collectively as minorities.

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7 The subject of Islamic militancy in the history of Somalia is not new. We can cite the conflict between the Bardheere religious settlement and the Geledi Sultanate in the nineteenth century, and the assassination of Sheikh Aweys of Baraaawe and destruction of his religious settlement at Biyooley early last century (1909).

8 Explanation: The 4.5 formula was ostensibly developed to give equal quotas for representation across the population, and in acknowledgement of the clan-based structure of traditional Somali society, with ‘4’ representing the four major clans designated as Hawiye, Rahanweyn, Dir and Darod. The .5 encompassing all remaining groups - a cluster of those styled ‘minorities’, and to include: not only Banaadirs, but also the Bajuni of the extreme south-west, Midgan/Gabooey who are scattered throughout the country, and the Bantu/Jareer farmers of the riverine regions. In a 225-seat parliament, therefore, 50 seats each belong to the four major clans, and 25 seats to all ‘Others’.
First promoted by the Transitional Federal Parliament of 2002, it continues to be the formula for the first four years of the new Somali Federal Parliament agreed upon in June 2012.⁹

Divisive also is the continuing use of ‘minority’. At best the term became useful shorthand for acknowledging the previously unacknowledged diversity of Somali society, but its connotations of ‘smaller’, ‘weaker’, ‘less important’ have arguably led to an entrenched disregard by ‘majorities’ and their supporters. If ‘weaker’ means not carrying arms, it is true that they did not engage in armed combat. As regards numbers, there are no reliable statistics on the different socio-ethnic groups in Somalia, but it is generally accepted that population density per square kilometer for nomadic pastoralists, who range widely over vast tracts of rangeland with their animals, is much lower than where people are living in urban settlements, or as sedentary cultivators in village clusters, and so the ‘minorities’ collectively may not be as statistically insignificant as the proportional formula suggests.

So what of the New Deal and the Road Map? There are some obvious questions to be asked. Can representation by clan overcome the problems that such a system has encountered in the past? Can the federal government structure as proposed deliver a system whereby a commitment to central government and loyalty to the state takes precedence over commitment to regional [tribal] entities?

In reviewing the main Banaadiri websites and chat-rooms, here are just two of the criticisms and opinions on the New Deal that I found repeated there:

- Clan rights have been given precedence over individual rights of suffrage, despite having failed to deliver inclusiveness in the past.
- Injured parties feel entitled to redress and accountability for crimes committed, and there are voices calling for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission or similar to be established.

Within the proposed structure that is to help Somalia to reconstitute itself, there is no mention anywhere by the international architects of the New Deal – European governments spearheaded by Britain, supported by the US, and with the backing of the UN and its specialist agencies - for mechanisms to address the stumbling blocks to serious reconciliation, without which long term peace might be impossible. Can the New Deal accomplish unity from diversity?

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⁹ The new constitution, Article 64, says The Number of the Members of the House of the People will be 225 and ‘must represent all communities of the Federal Republic of Somalia in a balanced manner. MEANWHILE, During the first term of the new Federal Parliament, ‘Each member of the New Federal Parliament shall be selected and appointed by the Traditional Elders, based on the 4.5 formula (Somalia road map protocol, ARTICLE 3).