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## BANTU ETHNIC IDENTITY IN SOMALIA

Ken Menkhaus

Until 1990, Somalia was routinely portrayed as one of the few countries in Africa where nation and state were synonymous, an island of ethnic homogeneity in a sea of multi-ethnic states. The country's collapse into extended clan warfare in 1990, and subsequent international attention to the plight of Somali "minorities" as principal famine and war victims, shattered that myth.

One such minority, the Somali Bantu, attracted special attention. In 2002, 12,000 Somali Bantu refugees in Kenya were targeted for resettlement in the US; they are one of the largest refugee groups to receive blanket permission for resettlement to the US in years<sup>1</sup>. This policy was based on the conclusion that the Bantu face chronic discrimination, are weak and vulnerable to predatory attacks and abuse by ethnic Somalis, and hence cannot be safely repatriated back into lawless Somalia. For the Somali Bantu, this transformation from a virtually unknown minority to a category of Somali society receiving preferential treatment in international refugee resettlement has been an extraordinary turn of events.

Aside from the conventional wisdom that the Bantu are among the most vulnerable communities in Somalia, few observers outside of a very small group of Somali intellectuals and foreign area specialists know anything more about this minority group, which is estimated to constitute roughly five percent of the total population of Somalia<sup>2</sup>. Most international observers and aid agencies would be surprised to learn that the notion of the "Somali Bantu" which they take for granted never existed prior to 1991. They would be even more surprised to discover that the ethnic category of Somali Bantu was an inadvertent creation of the international community – specifically, aid agencies and the media. For social scientists who subscribe to constructivist theories of ethnic identity, the

<sup>1</sup> Rachel Swarns, "Africa's Lost Tribe Discovers American Way," *New York Times* (10 March 2003).

<sup>2</sup> No reliable census figures exist on Somalia; population estimates by region and by clan and ethnic group are even more unreliable and subject to gross exaggeration for political purposes. The five percent figure suggested here is not derived from a census, but is only a "best guess" approximation based on the author's years of fieldwork in Somalia and the opinions of other long-time observers. If Somalia's total population is somewhere near seven million people – again a consensus figure accepted in most publications – then the 5% estimate offered here would amount to a total Bantu population of about 350,000. Given the concentrations of Bantu along the relatively densely populated Jubba and Shabelle river valleys, and the large Bantu populations which have arrived in Mogadishu and Kismayo as internally displaced persons, these figures seem reasonable, but should be taken only for what they are – a best guess. Though demographics have obviously changed since the colonial era, a colonial census of Italian Somalia (which would obviously not have included the population of British Somaliland) in 1935 concluded that 6.2% of the population was "Negroid groups" a figure which is not far off the estimate given above. See Istituto centrale di statistica, *VII censimento generale della popolazione V* (Rome, 1935).

case of the Somali Bantu is attractive grist for their mill. It is hard to make a “primordialist” case for an ethnic identity which is little more than a decade old.

This article traces the history of Bantu identity in Somalia. First, it conducts a mapping exercise of Bantu groups in Somalia and develops a typology of distinct Bantu communities. The typology is intended to underscore the thesis that what we today call the Somali Bantu is actually a very diverse group linked only by a common physical trait (specifically, tightly curled or “hard hair” [*tiimo jareer*], distinguishing them from “soft-haired” ethnic Somalis); low or no status within the Somali lineage system; an historical identity as subsistence farmers in a predominantly pastoral and agro-pastoral society; and a shared history of discrimination and oppression. Until the 1990s, many of these scattered Bantu communities had little knowledge of one another and hence no common sense of identity. The one physical marker which sets them apart from ethnic Somalis – their “hard hair” – earned them the common nickname *Jareer* (“hard”) from their Somali countrymen<sup>3</sup>.

Second, the study reviews the history of the Bantu communities of Somalia in the twentieth century, tracing changes in social relations with dominant Somali clans. The thesis advanced here is that the rise of a colonial and then post-colonial state appeared to provide Bantu communities with greater protection and equal rights under the law, but in reality provided Italian colonizers and then dominant Somali clans with an additional tool – the state itself – with which to exploit and harass this weak social group. From the 1920s to 1990, the state was used first and foremost to control and exploit Bantu agricultural labor. In the 1980s it was also a vital instrument with which to dispossess the riverine Bantu of their most valuable commodity, their farmland. The state, and the laws which it wielded, were never a friend to the Bantu.

A third focus of the article is on the impact of the collapse of the Somali state and the ensuing war, famine, and international intervention on the evolution of Bantu identity. The thesis here is that the crisis and external response have had a transformational effect, creating the notion of “being Bantu” both by producing a strong sense of grievance among Bantu minorities and by creating economic and political benefits to claiming Bantu identity. It is at this important moment in Somali history that international aid agencies, UN peacekeepers, and the media came to play such a critical if unintended role in identity formation among the Somali Bantu.

Finally, the article assesses the future of Somali Bantu identity. The argument developed in this section of the paper is that while Bantu identity is on the one hand a very recent social construction, a variety of factors have contributed to the “hardening” of the identity, so that we can expect it will remain an important part of the Somali social and political landscape for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>3</sup> It is hair, not skin color, which is key in differentiating Somali Bantu from their ethnic Somali countrymen. This is a point which is almost always lost in western media coverage, which falsely presumes skin color is the defining feature of discrimination against the Bantu. For a lengthy discussion of hard hair and ethnic identity, see ch. 5 in Catherine Besteman, *Unraveling Somalia: Race, Violence and the Legacy of Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

In the highly uncertain and insecure environment of Somalia, however, the Somali Bantu will continue to treat Bantu identity as the equivalent of a second passport, as one of several social identities to be invoked only when it confers tangible benefits and does not entail risk. In this sense, Bantu ethnicity in Somalia is not unlike Somali clan identity – a flexible tool designed principally to manage risk in a very dangerous environment, to maximize personal security and access to resources in a context of scarcity, violence, and lawlessness.

### **Minorities, Ethnicity, and Nomenclature in the Somali Context**

Discussion of ethnic minorities – especially in a context of widespread human rights abuses – is a sensitive subject in any country. Somalia is no exception. That Somalia is more ethnically diverse, and far less egalitarian in culture, than its orthodox nationalist rendition of history acknowledges; that Somalia has a pre-colonial history of slavery, in which tens of thousands of East Africans were purchased in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to work on southern Somali plantations; that even into the 1970s and 1980s, “low caste” Somalis suffered discrimination; and that in the 1990s weak minority groups were subjected to the worst levels of looting, assault, rape, and forced labor at the hands of the militia of more powerful Somali clans, are all deeply contentious assertions. To their credit, Somali intellectuals have been increasingly willing to acknowledge these troubling “revisionist” allegations. That has meant that the topics are no longer taboo. But discussion of minorities remains controversial.

Apart from political sensitivities, discussion of the status of minorities in Somalia is complicated by genuine confusion over what actually constitutes a “minority” in the Somali context. This confusion has been exacerbated by the scramble by Somali asylum seekers in the 1990s to assert minority status (legitimately and fraudulently), in order to improve odds of being accepted as refugees. In reality, Somalia features a range of different social groups with variable claims on being a minority. The Bantu are only one of many such groups.

*Ethnic non-Somalis.* One minority category are communities which are ethnically non-Somali, meaning they have no affiliation (client or otherwise) within the Somali lineage system that ties all Somalis to a mythical common ancestor. Put another way, these are Somali citizens who are not members of any Somali clan<sup>4</sup>. This includes several diverse groups. One is the southern Somali coastal commercial populations of the Barawan and Benadiri, a generally lighter-skinned group who trace their origins back to Arab, Persian, and other

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<sup>4</sup> The fact that “Somali” can mean either a citizenship identity or an ethnic identity creates real confusion in discussions of some communities that are Somali by citizenship but not Somali ethnically. Calling them “non-Somali” runs the risk of being misunderstood to mean that they are foreigners in Somalia, in the process disenfranchising an already disadvantaged group. The fact that some Somalis consider groups such as the Barawans and Bajuni to be something less than full citizens makes this a real concern. It is for that precise reason that some observers have been reluctant to use the term “non-Somali” to describe those who stand outside the lineage system.

sea-faring peoples and whose presence in Somalia (over 2000 years) pre-dates that of the Somali nomads by many centuries. The coastal trading groups are politically and militarily weak but were in the past economically privileged, a fact which made them particularly vulnerable to predation during the civil war. Another minority which stands outside the Somali family tree are the Bajuni coastal fishing communities which have lived on the islands and coast of southernmost Somalia for centuries. Unlike the commercial coastal populations, they are both politically and economically weak. Finally, some Bantu Somalis, historically farming communities concentrated in riverine areas, retain a tribal identity outside the Somali lineage system. But it should be stressed that only a portion of the Bantu population remain outside of the Somali lineage system. The bulk of the Bantu population has affiliation within a Somali clan.

*Low-status lineages within Somali clans.* Another minority category are Somalis who enjoy membership in a clan, but occupy a low status position within that lineage. There are many variations on this complex spectrum of social hierarchy; only a few reasonably qualify a group as a “minority.” There are occupational minorities — low-caste groups within every Somali clan known variously as the *Yibir*, *Midgaan*, *Bon*, and *Tumal* which have historically been linked to “unclean” occupations such as hair-cutting, metal-work, and hunting<sup>5</sup>. Unlike the Bantu, these minorities bear no physical traits which might distinguish them from “noble” Somali lineages. The status of these minorities varies from place to place, but they are generally treated as second-class members of the lineage, with limited claims on resources, protection, and leadership; they are often considered ritually impure and Somalis of noble lineages will not share food with them. A second category are Bantu clients of Somali clans, communities of Bantu farmers which have been adopted (*shedad*) into a Somali clan as a separate lineage. Most of the clans in the inter-riverine areas of southern Somalia feature a Bantu client lineage, and most Somali Bantu possess affiliation with a Somali clan. Here again, treatment of these minorities varies over time and place. In a few instances, the Bantu make up a sizable portion of the clan and as a result earn greater rights and occasionally even leadership positions. In general, however, this client status affords the Bantu few rights and at worst can involve exploitative relations bordering on serfdom. They must contribute *diya* or blood compensation payments when called upon by the clan, but are rarely assisted by kinsmen when they incur *diya* payments<sup>6</sup>; they are rarely compensated fairly for injury or death at the hand of a Somali kinsmen; and they have little recourse when pastoral kinsmen graze their herds on their crops.

A third group are lineages which are considered “commoner” (*boon*) as opposed to “noble” (*bilis*). Commoner lineages within a Somali clan are not

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<sup>5</sup> For more on these occupational castes, see I.M. Lewis, *People of the Horn of Africa: Somali, Afar, and Saho* (London: International African Institute, 1955).

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Besteman, *Unraveling Somalia: Race, Violence, and the Legacy of Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 128.

minorities per se, but can include a collection of low status members – Bantu clients whose descendents were slaves, pre-Somali populations, and destitute Somalis – whose claim to protection and resources is limited and who thus are treated like a disenfranchised minority. The *boon* generally do not intermarry with noble Somali lineages, thus reinforcing their separate identity. Among the Rahanweyn clan-family, Bernhard Helander estimates that up to 30% of the population falls into the category of *boon*<sup>7</sup>.

A final group in this category are non-Bantu *shegad* or adopted clan members in various stages of absorption. The use of *shegad* is especially common in southern Somalia, where high rates in migration occur and where newcomers must seek protection by adopting the identity of more powerful local lineages. The agro-pastoral Digil-Rahanweyn clans in the inter-riverine region of Somalia are mainly composed of such adoptees. Over time, *shegad* lineages can attain full rights in a clan, but newly-adopted members enjoy fewer rights to resources and protection. To call these *shegad* groups a “minority” is inappropriate, since they can be easily and fully integrated into the clan, but they can, under certain circumstances, fall into the category of a vulnerable group, particularly if they remain destitute and become a *boon* lineage.

Historically, one of the major clan-families in Somalia, the Digil-Rahanweyn, has itself been viewed as a “low-status” lineage due in large part to its association with a sedentary, agricultural and agro-pastoral lifestyle (a mode of production which is considered in low regard by pastoral clans), and in part to the slightly more “African” physical features prevalent in some Rahanweyn, all of which make the Rahanweyn somewhat “less Somali” in the eyes of other Somali clans<sup>8</sup>. The Digil-Rahanweyn, who speak a dialect of Somali (*af-Maay*) which is arguably a distinct language from standard Somali, have in the past been quite weak politically and militarily, and have been dominated by surrounding Somali clan-families. In 1991-92, Digil-Rahanweyn villages were overrun by warring militias of the stronger Hawiye and Darood clan-families and were repeated targets of looting; the inter-riverine home of the clan became the epicenter of the 1992 famine. This traumatic experience has galvanized the Digil-Rahanweyn and has led to claims that the entire clan is an oppressed minority in Somalia. While that claim has some merit, the sheer size of the Digil-Rahanweyn clan-family makes it a somewhat problematic “minority” category. Moreover, its recent (post-1995) acquisition of more robust military capabilities (thanks to Ethiopian patronage) has improved its political stock in southern Somalia considerably. For our purposes, the Digil-Rahanweyn occupy an ambiguous position in Somali social hierarchy. On the one hand, it is treated as a low-status

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<sup>7</sup> Bernhard Helander, “The *Hubeer* in the Land of Plenty: Land, Labor, and the Vulnerability Among a Southern Somali Clan,” in *The Struggle for Land in Southern Somalia: The War behind the War*, edited by Catherine Besteman and Lee V. Cassanelli (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 51-52.

<sup>8</sup> Helander, “The *Hubeer* in the Land of Plenty,” p. 49.

group by the dominant Darood and Hawiye clans in southern Somalia. On the other hand, it possesses its own low-caste groups, including a large population of affiliated Bantu farming communities.

Adding to the complexities of the calculation of a Somali's right to claim "minority" status is intermarriage. Though not especially common, it is also not unusual for ethnic Somali males who settle in a predominantly Bantu riverine area to take a Bantu wife. Somalis of mixed descent occupy an ambiguous place in the racial hierarchy; while their hair type remains the principal marker of identity, their family background is a matter of public record as well.

Nomenclature for these minority groups in general, and for the Bantu in particular, has been an additional source of confusion. This is in part due to the fact that, like many minority groups, the Bantu have always been named by others. Only two group names currently carry no pejorative connotations. The first, "Bantu," is a label applied to the group by foreigners since 1990, and quickly adopted inside Somalia. Ironically, only one so-called Bantu community, the Mushunguli people of the Lower Jubba valley, actually uses a Bantu language, so this linguistic appellation is somewhat misleading. In fact, some *jereer* communities, particularly those in the Middle Shabelle and Hiran regions, are resisting use of the new term Bantu on grounds that they have never spoken the language.<sup>9</sup> The second, *jereer* is a more accurate group name, as it alludes to the one feature binding the Somali Bantu. It is now widely used by the Somali Bantu themselves, and carries no pejorative connotations; indeed, the name is employed with a certain sense of pride, perhaps because of its double meaning (suggesting both hardness of hair and hardness of the people themselves). Other group names for the Bantu/*Jereer* are employed by ethnic Somalis but are, in varying degrees, offensive. They include *Oggi* (from the Italian word for "today," implying people who think only for the moment); *afrikan*; *Mushunguli* (a misuse of one Bantu tribal name to depict the entire Somali Bantu people); and *adoon*, or "slave," clearly the most offensive term but one in common useage<sup>10</sup>.

Even at the local level, many of the group names assumed by Bantu communities have been imposed on them by others and have changed over time. In the Jubba valley, for instance, the riverine Bantu communities have gone by the names *Gosha* (a label used almost exclusively by colonial authorities); *Rergoleed*, or "people of the forest," a Somali appellation; and *Shambara* (a term used by the Bantu themselves to describe a collection of separate Bantu tribes)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Fieldnotes, 1998.

<sup>10</sup> In 1994, a Somali faction leader was embarrassed when a reporter familiar with the Somali language overheard him referring to the Ghanaian UN Special Representative to Somalia as "the *adoon*." See Michael Maren, "Spoiled: Mogadishu Postcard," *The New Republic* (December 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Menkhous, *Rural Transformation and the Roots of Underdevelopment in Somalia's Lower Jubba Valley* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Carolina, 1989), pp. 153-59.

## Mapping Somali Bantu Communities

The *jereer* or Bantu populations of Somalia are much more diverse than commonly presumed. This diversity manifests itself geographically, linguistically, ethnically, and historically.

Geographically, the Bantu are increasingly dispersed. The Bantu are concentrated along the Jubba and Shabelle rivers in southern Somalia, but are also numerous in the interriverine regions of Bay and Bakool, and even exist in very small numbers (mainly as fishermen) in northern coastal towns. Urban migration starting in the 1970s increased the number of Bantu living in Mogadishu and Kismayo. Massive displacement caused by war and state collapse in the 1990s has dramatically increased the outflow of rural Bantu to large cities, where they hope to secure access to aid. Displaced Bantu are now thought to be the single largest group in Kismayo. Economic duress has also led to a small but growing migration of Bantu into central and northern Somalia, where they work in towns as casual laborers. Today one can encounter Mushunguli (from the lower Jubba valley) in Galkayo, Hargeisa, and Bosaso. The Bantu community thus remains largely concentrated in riverine villages, but is increasingly concentrating as a destitute urban population. It is mainly in the urban centers that Bantu communities from different regions encounter one another. The rapid urbanization of the Bantu in the 1990s is likely to be irreversible and will almost certainly have a major impact both on Bantu identity and Somali cities.

Bantu communities are also distinguished by language and dialect. Because most of the Bantu population is concentrated in the inter-riverine area of the south, the most common language used by Bantu is the *Af-Maay* dialect associated with that region and with the Digil-Rahanweyn. But some Bantu communities, such as the Makanne in Hiran region, speak *Af-Maxadtiray*, or standard (central region) Somali. One Bantu group, the Mushunguli of the Lower Jubba valley, retain a Bantu tongue (*Zegua*) as their first language. Finally, a stretch of riverine Bantu communities in parts of the Middle Jubba region use *af-Maay* as their first language but understand Kiswahili<sup>12</sup>.

The historical roots of Somali Bantu constitute another source of diversity. The group shares no common history and origins. One portion of Somali Bantu are descendents of East African slaves brought to Somalia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while others are “first people” predating the Somali expansion into southern Somalia centuries ago<sup>13</sup>. In some cases, a Bantu community’s origins are clearly known – the Makanne of Hiran region are an aboriginal group, while the Mushunguli of the Lower Jubba are descendents of enslaved Zegua people of

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<sup>12</sup> This is due in part to the fact that Swedish missionaries schools which were established in the 1910s along the Lower and Middle Jubba valley were taught in Kiswahili. Menkhaus, “Rural Transformation,” p. 234.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the 19<sup>th</sup> century slave trade and the Somali settlement of southern Somalia, see Lee V. Cassanelli, *The Shaping of Somali Society* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).



contemporary Tanzania<sup>14</sup>. But in other cases aboriginal Bantu and descendents of slaves are mixed in common lineages, especially in the Lower Shabelle region, among for instance the Jiddu, Biimaal, and Geledi clans<sup>15</sup>. Because the history of enslavement carries a stigma, some Bantu claiming aboriginal status are unenthusiastic about embracing a common identity with Bantu descending from slaves.

Bantu communities can be further subdivided by the status of their affiliation within Somali lineage system. Some have tribal identities outside the Somali lineage, while others are fully assimilated in a Somali clan. Those retaining separate tribal identities include both aboriginal groups and descendents of slaves. In some instances, Bantu communities retain a distinct tribal identity but have developed an association or federation with a nearby Somali clan, usually as a client of some sort<sup>16</sup>. These associations with Somali lineages can range from minimalist (mainly ritualistic acknowledgement of a sultan) to substantial (*diya*-paying obligations), and can shift in significance over time. Where Bantu communities are integrated or affiliated with weak Somali clans, such as the Digil-Rahanweyn, they are essentially a minority within a minority, doubly disadvantaged as a group occupying the bottom rung in a Somali social hierarchy which seems a far cry from the egalitarian, “pastoral democracy” so often invoked in describing Somali political culture. One of the more intriguing political aspects of the recent mobilization of Bantu ethnic identity is the extent to which this will weaken some of the federated relationships which many Bantu groups have with Somali clans – a concern discussed below.

Finally, those Bantu which have retained a distinct group identity (either autonomous from Somali lineage or as a federated group within a lineage) are themselves divided into distinct units. In the Jubba valley, this includes the Mushunguli, the Shambara (which in turn is subdivided into up to twelve East African tribes such as the Yao and MaKua), and the Gabawein (an aboriginal group in Gedo region). Along the Lower Shabelle river, the Tunni Torre are federated with the Tunni/Digil, while the Rer Shabelle are federated with the Ajuraan clans<sup>17</sup>. Further up the Shabelle river, the Shidle and Makanne are aboriginal Bantu groups.

The picture which emerges from this brief typology of the Somali Bantu is of a highly diverse group with no shared history or, until recently, even shared knowledge of one another. Most of these groups lived in riverine or inter-riverine enclaves and had few opportunities for meaningful contact with one another. Their enthusiasm for a common Bantu identity varies, with *jereer* from the Jubba valley much more assertive about the identity than *jereer* from the upper

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<sup>14</sup> Unlike most of the East Africans sold into captivity in Somalia, the Mushunguli were not children, but adults. This may account for why they retained their Bantu language when other slave groups did not.

<sup>15</sup> Virginia Luling, “The Other Somali – Minority Groups in Traditional Somali Society,” in *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Somali Studies*, ed. Thomas LeBahn, (Hamburg; Buske, 1983), pp. 39-55.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn*, pp. 39-42, 127.

<sup>17</sup> Besteman, *Unraveling Somalia*, pp. 170-71.

reaches of the Shabelle river. The tie which binds them is above all else the discriminatory attitude of ethnic Somalis to those with “hard hair.” They are a distinct group because the dominant ethnic group in the land treats them so, much as Americans of African descent are lumped together despite deep divisions between those of Caribbean descent, those whose ancestors were slaves in North America, and those who have recently migrated to the U.S. from Africa – including, ironically, both ethnic Somalis and Bantu Somalis, who find themselves sharing a common “black” ethnic identity upon arrival in the US, because white America labels them so.

The other significant aspect of this typology is that it underscores the fact that Somali Bantu identity is a cross-cutting ethnic label, one of several social identities which a Somali *jereer* can invoke. A Somali *jereer* can now simultaneously embrace identity as a Somali (by citizenship), a member of a Somali lineage, a member of a Bantu group federated to that Somali lineage, and a member of the “Somali Bantu.” For example, a resident of Buaale can claim to be Somali, Ajuraan, Rer Shabelle, and Bantu. Each of these identities can carry costs and opportunities, depending on the situation at hand.

### **History of the Somali Bantu in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

In the pre-colonial era, the status of the Somali *jereer* was generally very low. There were exceptions. Some freed slave (*watoro*) communities established themselves in the forested riverine areas of the Lower and Middle Jubba, where they successfully fended off attacks by surrounding Somali pastoralists<sup>18</sup>. Some aboriginal Bantu groups, such as the Makanne and Shidle, maintained considerable cohesion and were powerful enough to maintain political autonomy from, and minimize predatory raids by, surrounding pastoralists. But most Somali *jereer* lived either in a state of enslavement (especially along the lower Shabelle river, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century), or serfdom.

The arrival of colonialism, and the gradual establishment of a central administrative state, changed but did not necessarily improve this situation. The most dramatic improvement was the abolition of slavery by the Italian colonialists, a policy which had immediate impact on the Bantu population in the Lower Shabelle, where slave-based plantations were concentrated. Poor living conditions drove many emancipated slaves to migrate to the Jubba valley, where they settled amongst freed slave communities<sup>19</sup>. Colonialism brought a second advantage to the Bantu — it opened the door for Western missionaries (mainly Swedish and Italian) to open schools, which were concentrated in settled farming areas, and which thus gave Bantu disproportionate access to education.

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#### **But colonial law never stepped in the way of traditional practices of serfdom**

<sup>18</sup> See Menkhaus, “Rural Transformation,” pp, 106-179.

<sup>19</sup> Lee Cassanelli, “The Ending of Slavery in Italian Somalia: Liberty and the Control of Labor, 1890-1935,” in *The End of Slavery in Africa*, ed. Suzanne Miers and Richard Roberts (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).

visited by powerful Somali lineages on the Bantu. And by the 1920s the colonial authorities began expropriating riverine land for Italian plantations, setting in motion a long process of state-sponsored land alienation which hit Bantu farming communities – both ex-slaves and aboriginal *jereer* — especially hard. In tandem with land expropriation were state policies designed to coerce labor from Bantu villages onto the plantations. Initially this was done via rotating work groups which clan and village elders were made to supply the Italians. This eventually produced the infamous *colonia* period of forced labor in 1935 to 1941, in which working adult Bantu villagers were relocated en masse onto plantations, where work conditions were poor and punishments for failing to complete daily contracts were harsh<sup>20</sup>. Ethnic Somalis were not forcibly conscripted in this manner. Instead they were encouraged to enlist as fighters in the 1935-1936 Italian conquest of Ethiopia, a campaign in which 40,000 Somali recruits participated<sup>21</sup>. Somali *jereer* were used as porters in the war, but not as soldiers – armed *jereer* would have been alarming and unacceptable to the ethnic Somalis. This racial division of labor established by the Italians matched the stereotypes they embraced about the Somali population – the Bantu were viewed as industrious laborers, while the Somalis were seen as useless for manual labor but were excellent fighters. The colonial state thus ended up reinforcing the military strength of the ethnic Somali over the *jereer*, while dispossessing some Bantu communities of both their land and labor.

In the 1950s, as Somalia was prepared for independence under the tutelage of a UN Trusteeship, Somali *jereer* were under no illusions that the transition from colonial to post-colonial state would improve their situation. On the contrary, the Somali Bantu feared that an independent state dominated by ethnic Somalis would perpetuate and even worsen the exploitation visited on them by the state. This fear was shared by other weak clans and minorities — the Digil-Rahanweyn, Benadiri, Barawan, and Somali Arab “minorities” – who formed a coalition in the *Xisbia Dastuur Muustaqiil* political party opposing the dominant Somali Youth League. For the Somali Bantu, choosing to support the SYL was not even an option, as the SYL’s early membership criteria excluded non-Somalis<sup>22</sup>. Though the SYL earned the reputation as the nationalist party and *Xisbia* is remembered as “tribal,” from the perspective of the Bantu the SYL’s chauvinistic version of nationalism appeared to be more exclusive than inclusive. The Bantu thus gave lukewarm support to *Xisbia*, despite the fact that many of the Bantu’s day-to-day grievances were directed more at the *Xisbia* constituencies.

The core of Somali Bantu political anxieties over an independent state was

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<sup>20</sup> Menkhaus, “Rural Transformation,” pp. 252-262. Not all Bantu villages were made to relocate; those at considerable distance from the plantation belt (lower Jubba valley, lower and Middle Shabelle valley) were conscripted for local work, such as road-building.

<sup>21</sup> I.M. Lewis, *A Modern History of Somalia: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa* (Boulder: Westview, 1988), p. 111.

<sup>22</sup> Menkhaus, “Rural Transformation,” p. 298.

land. The colonial era had already served notice that commercial agriculture placed a high value on irrigable riverine land; a significant portion of Bantu farmland had been expropriated without compensation along parts of the lower and middle Shabelle river valley, and in the lower Jubba region. The Bantu recognized early on the paradox that they, a powerless social group, occupied riverine land which was once viewed as worthless but became increasingly viewed as a valuable asset. It would not be long before that contradiction would be resolved by further land grabs. The only solution the Bantu could see was some sort of political autonomy from the more powerful Somali clans, a position which coincided with the *Xisbia* platform calling for a federal system guaranteeing "full regional autonomy"<sup>23</sup>. Ominously, the SYL promptly denounced this proposal as "high treason"<sup>24</sup>. A pre-civil war interview with a Bantu who had served in *Xisbia* astutely captured the motives behind the federation movement:

*At first, what we wanted was not an independent state but a federation, in which the southern region and the northern region would be states. . . The idea came about so people would not intermingle, because if they intermingled there would be robbery and land would be taken away by outsiders as is happening today<sup>25</sup>.*

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Bantu's worst fears were realized, as state-sponsored land expropriations dispossessed one Bantu village after another of valuable riverine land. The land grabs came in several forms, but all with the same result. One form was expropriation by large state farms, all major foreign aid projects. These farms swept tens of thousands of hectares of land from villagers; the lower and middle Jubba valley was especially hard-hit<sup>26</sup>. The state farms provided few benefits to the Bantu (except low-paying wage labor, which they avoided unless destitute) but served as major cash cows for Somali managers, who diverted millions of dollars from the projects into personal coffers. The state farms also triggered a major settlement of ethnic Somalis employed on the state farms into Bantu areas, which was viewed locally as a form of internal colonialism. A second form of land expropriation was via individual abuse of land registration laws. This massive land grab in the 1980s, in which Bantu villagers were dispossessed of thousands of hectares of prime farmland by Somali civil servants and others who manipulated a process of land registration to take legal deeds of land they had often never seen, is extensively documented elsewhere<sup>27</sup>. What is important for our purposes is simply to observe that the state served not as an instrument of protection and rule of law for the Bantu, but

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in A.A. Castagno, "Somalia," *International Conciliation* no. 522 (March 1959), p. 359.

<sup>24</sup> A. A. Castagno, "Somali Republic," in *Political Parties and National Integration in Tropical Africa*, ed. James Coleman and Carl Rosberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), p. 534.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Menkhaus, "Rural Transformation," p. 308.

<sup>26</sup> Ken Menkhaus and Kathryn Craven, "Land Alienation and the Imposition of State Farms in the Lower Jubba Valley," in Bestemen and Cassanelli, eds, *The Struggle for Land in Southern Somalia*, pp. 155-178.

rather as an instrument by which powerful ethnic Somalis expropriated the Bantu's land, not by force of arms but with bureaucracy and legal documents. Under the Barre regime, protest against this land alienation was met with fierce repression. By the late 1980s, most Bantu communities in Somalia found themselves weaker, poorer, and worse off than at any time in history. What they could not know is that this very bad situation was about to get infinitely worse.

### Impact of Crises of State Collapse on Bantu Identity

The crises of state collapse, protracted warfare, lawlessness, and famine in the early 1990s hit Bantu Somalis as hard or harder than any other social group in the country. In the final year of the Barre regime, the increasingly desperate government resorted to scorched earth policies as it retreated from multiple liberation fronts opposing it. Bantu communities along the Shabelle river from Beled Weyn to Jowhar were devastated by the tactic; Beled Weyn was the first hot-spot of severe malnutrition and famine in 1991, a direct consequence of the fighting. When residual government forces (mainly of the President's Marehan clan) fled Mogadishu in January 1991 to Kismayo and Gedo region, they looted and attacked inter-riverine communities as they passed. It was the first taste of a two year period of repeated attack, occupation, looting, assault, and forced labor imposed on a "shatter zone" of mainly farming communities between Mogadishu and the Jubba valley. The militias of the Hawiye clan's United Somali Congress (USC) and the Darood clan militias in the Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM) and Somali National Front (SNF) increasingly fought not so much to win but to gain control of villages in order to loot them.

The lawlessness and atrocities associated with this period are well-known, and need not be detailed here. What is important to underscore here is that the groups which suffered most from this period of banditry, warfare, criminality, and eventually starvation were the weak, largely unarmed clans and social groups in the riverine and inter-riverine areas. The Bantu were prominent members of this class of victims, looted and assaulted by all sides and with no means of protecting themselves. Militias took everything of value from farmers, including grain reserves; farmers who managed to plant a second crop found occupying clans grazing their livestock in their fields as they starved. Even *jereer* which had affiliation in a Somali clan were afforded little protection; indeed, *jereer* were often looted by their own Somali clan members, and were denied access to emergency relief by clan elders and leaders who apportioned food to "noble" lineages instead. Aid agencies which tried to circumvent militia theft of food aid by cooking it on the spot (so that grain could not be stolen and resold) faced immediate death threats. Food aid had become a principal target of looting, and those who were starving – of which Bantu were a greatly disproportionate number – were the bait which attracted the emergency relief. Even during the UNOSOM intervention, Somali militia jostled for control over Bantu internal-

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<sup>27</sup> See the contributions in Besteman and Cassanelli, eds, *The Struggle for Land in Southern Somalia*.

ly-displaced persons (IDP) camps, in order to divert the food aid delivered there. Dispossessed of all they had, the Bantu's destitution itself became a commodity to exploit.

International relief agencies operating in southern Somalia in 1991 – mainly the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and a handful of NGOs – were quick to realize that food aid was failing to reach certain social groups, chief among them the *jereer*. Reports identifying “vulnerable groups” in the famine began to make reference to the “Bantu,” shorthand for the Somali farmers with black African physical features<sup>28</sup>. As media coverage of the famine intensified in 1992, journalists appropriated the term from aid agencies, and dozens of stories were filed about the racial dimensions of the Somali famine. In the eyes of the external world, if not yet inside Somalia, a new ethnic category was taking shape.

Among the mainly western relief workers, a sense of outrage grew at what appeared to be the complete indifference of ethnic Somalis to the suffering of weaker groups such as the Bantu. The anger was not only directed at the young gunmen from “outside” clans such as the Haber Gedir and Marehan who diverted food aid from starving Rahanweyn; it was also directed at the clan elders of the Rahanweyn and other Somali clans who demonstrated no particular interest in insuring food aid reached low caste members of their own clan. The outrage eventually led to a chorus of calls for armed intervention. But the question “how can you starve your own people?” which was sometimes directed by reporters at militia and clan leaders was based on a false premise. The Bantu and other low-status groups were not “their own people;” in the particular logic of lineage-based societies, these groups were “others,” *adoon*, for whom they bore no responsibility.

This point is critical, because it suggests that the virtual holocaust visited upon low-status groups such as the *jereer* in 1991 and 1992 was not just a tragic result of warlords and young gunmen run amok; it was also the result of conscious decisions by clan elders and militia leaders over who lived and who died, an “allocation of pain” which reflected the ethics and logic of the existing social order and which betrayed the fact that low status members of the clan simply did not matter enough to live. It also underscores the point that, while “being Bantu” is very much a constructed ethnic identity in contemporary Somalia, it

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<sup>28</sup> How it first came to pass that journalists and aid agencies began to use the term Bantu would require an archival search through unpublished reports and newspaper clippings. This author may have been partially responsible. In June 1991, I headed up a team fielded by ICRC and the NGO World Concern to conduct an emergency needs assessment in the Jubba valley, where signs of famine were already appearing. The written assessment included background on the riverine populations there, referring to them as descendents of Bantu-speaking east African slaves. That study was one of the few field-based famine assessments in circulation for most of 1991; the term Bantu may have been “cribbed” as aid agencies created inventories of vulnerable groups for subsequent famine relief operations. See Menkhaus, *Report on an Emergency Needs Assessment of the Lower Jubba Region, Somalia* (Nairobi: World Concern, July 1991).

was hardly inconsequential. Who you were and what lineage and ethnic category you fell into was literally a matter of life and death in 1991-92.

For the *jereer*, the horrors of the Somali war and famine became the source of a deep, and in some quarters unforgivable, store of grievances against the rest of Somali society. These grievances have not so much driven the *jereer* to a common identity with one another as they have driven them further away from meaningful affiliation with Somali lineage whose responsibility for the starvation and suffering of the *jereer* in the 1991-92 crisis — by acts of commission and omission — was all the *jereer* needed to know about the value of such affiliation.

But the rapid and dramatic rise of Bantu identity in Somalia has been fueled by more than the combined “power of suggestion” of the international community and the grievances of the *jereer* against ethnic Somalis. Other, more mundane factors have been at play. One is economic. Given the horrific conditions in southern Somalia in 1992, it is untenable to make a case that any advantage accrued to individuals identified as a part of a “vulnerable group” by aid agencies. There was little advantage to be had in being a member of *any* group in southern Somalia at that time, except perhaps the small group of war merchants, warlords, and militiamen making a fortune off war booty, diverted food relief, and protection money. Still, the practice by relief agencies of identifying vulnerable groups and trying to target them for privileged assistance set a precedent with important local repercussions — it established an economic value to being Bantu. Since international aid was one of the few sources of sustenance and employment in southern Somalia in those years, this was not inconsequential. Once the famine ended and aid agencies could devote more attention to rehabilitation or post-conflict assistance, being Bantu had the *potential* to mean getting privileged access to whatever resources were being doled out — food-for-work, training, education, jobs.

In reality, dominant Somali clans and their militias continue to prey on the Bantu and effectively intercept most targeted assistance to them. In some cases, militias and strongmen have been clever enough to recognize the economic value accorded to the Bantu and use them as bait for aid programs. One of the most distressing and recurring instances of this predatory behavior is control over Bantu IDP camps in major cities. The Bantu are not allowed to leave the camp, as the concentration of misery it produces attracts periodic assistance, which the “camp managers” divert<sup>29</sup>.

Another factor reinforcing the rise of Bantu identity is political. Ever since the UN peace operation into Somalia in 1992, external diplomats have sought to convene representatives of Somali society to broker an accord over national reconciliation and the revival of a central government. This has entailed a constant search for legitimate representatives. During UNOSOM, political factions

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<sup>29</sup> Interview, July 2002.

– thinly disguised clan entities — were the preferred units of representation of the Somali people. To insure a place at the bargaining table, where coalitions were formed and positions of power allocated, Somali clans scrambled to establish a faction of their own. Fifteen factions were in existence by early 1992, 25 by 1995. The Bantu were no exception. In early 1992, a group of *jereer* intellectuals and political figures established the faction SAMO (Somali African Muki Organization) as the exclusive voice of the Bantu/*jereer* people<sup>30</sup>. SAMO became one of the fifteen signatories to the Addis Ababa accords of March 1993, which established the framework for national reconciliation and a transitional national government under UNOSOM. Though the UN and the international community understood that SAMO was a weak faction without any militia power whatsoever, there was general sympathy for the Bantu and an inclination to insist that they be included in political negotiations. SAMO had, in other words, what most of the other factions lacked – a certain *cachet* of political legitimacy, simply by merit of representing the vulnerable. Somali factions eventually took note of this fact, and sought to include SAMO in their rival alliances. This had the predictable result of splitting SAMO into two camps, one supporting the Somali National Alliance (SNA) of General Mohamed Farah Aideed, the other supporting the “Group of 12” led by Ali Mahdi. But the split did not obscure the fact that politically the Bantu were now somewhat valuable coalition partners, providing a modicum of sympathy and legitimacy in the eyes of the outside world. Regardless of the fate of SAMO (and factions in general, which quickly faded in importance by the late 1990s) there were now a group of Bantu urban political elites and intellectuals with a strong vested interest in perpetuating and deepening a distinct Bantu identity. It was not at all surprising that most of the SAMO leadership came from the Jubba valley, where most Bantu are descendents of ex-slaves and have some historical linkage to Bantu identity.

Bantu identity also gained currency as a result of international refugee resettlement and asylum policy. In the early and mid-1990s, a claim of minority status was very effective for Somalis seeking asylum in the US, Canada, and Europe, where there was a general, but very thin, understanding that minority groups were at special risk inside Somalia. This again placed a value on “being Bantu” (or Barawan, or Midgaan). Unfortunately, very few Bantu were in the relatively privileged position of requesting asylum in a western country. Instead, in the ultimate example of adding insult to injury, ethnic Somalis stole the final item of value from the Somali Bantu – their ethnic identity. Somali refugees began to claim they were persecuted Somali Bantu to win asylum abroad, exploiting the very weak knowledge that immigration officers and judges have of Somali ethnicity. The recent resettlement program for Bantu refugees in

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<sup>30</sup> “Muki” is the name of a tree under which traditional assemblies are often held. There is irony in the inclusion of this word in SAMO. — the Bantu, despite being considered non-Somali, are the only of the many factions which have a single Somali word in their factional name. All other factions have entirely English-language names, obviously because they are constructed exclusively for external consumption.



Kenya to the US will only place higher value on “being Bantu,” especially since resettlement papers are one of the most prized possessions in a country which lives mainly off remittances sent home by its large and growing diaspora.

Finally, Bantu identity was mobilized by the UN peacekeeping intervention itself, through a sort of accidental “Bantu consciousness-raising” syndrome. It is impossible to gauge how significant this factor is, but in 1993 the arrival of powerful, heavily-armed black US Marines, followed by black African UN peacekeeping forces, made an indelible impression on *jereer* populations raised in an environment in which black Africans – hard hairs – were viewed as powerless. Nor was the irony lost on ethnic Somalis, who pointed to black American Marines and said “*Amrikan adoon*”<sup>31</sup>. For Somali Bantu who had never seen foreigners except for white European aid workers, who had limited experience with the world beyond their rural enclaves, the sudden encounter with hard hairs who wielded real power – not only in the US Marines and UN peacekeeping coalition, but also in the UN political structure, where the Director for Political Affairs was a Zimbabwean — was an epiphany.

The reaction of ethnic Somalis to this rising Bantu identity has been predictable. A small group of intellectuals and civil society leaders have been frank about what they call the “race problem” in Somalia. But the bulk of the political leadership, and some intellectuals, have either dismissed the Bantu issue altogether or reacted defensively. Somali lineages which have significant Bantu minority members have the most to lose from this new claim on identity and loyalty, and have been the most resistant to separate Bantu representation by SAMO. One leading Rahanweyn political figure, Abdulkadir Mohamed Aden “Zoppo,” said in a 1994 interview in the Somalia newspaper *Runta* that the Bantu “don’t exist,” and were a creation of UNOSOM<sup>32</sup>. Bantu grievances are frequently met with resentment and counter-grievances; nearly every Somali clan and social group feels deeply aggrieved over losses and injustices it has suffered, and is reluctant to concede that others are worse off. By universalizing victim status, Somali clans which played a role in the plight of the Bantu absolve themselves from responsibility. When everyone is a victim, no one is a victim.

Perhaps more worrying for the Bantu has been the lack of a change in behavior on the part of ethnic Somalis since 1995. Bantu riverine communities continue to be subjected to predatory “taxation” of harvests by occupying militia. Reports of forced labor surface in both the Jubba and Shabelle river valleys. The conditions are so insecure in much of the Jubba valley that entire Bantu villages have been abandoned, and in some districts nearly half of the pre-war population has yet to return, preferring instead to remain as IDPs in cities or in refugee camps in Kenya. In the Middle Shabelle region, the Shidle Bantu have come under fierce pressure by neighboring Abgal clans to give up their autonomous identity and become adopted members of the Abgal. And mistreatment of Bantu IDPs in urban areas has involved restrictions on freedom of

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<sup>31</sup> Fieldnotes, 1993.

<sup>32</sup> Fieldnotes, 1998, p. 56.

movement which amount to a form of house arrest in squalid camps.

Confronted with these pressures, the Bantu have proven much less passive than a decade ago. Several thousand Bantu from the Jubba valley have given up on living in Somalia, seeking instead to resettle in Tanzania. For the majority of these refugees who are Mushunguli, this is an extraordinary story of a homecoming to ancestral land 170 years after the community was sold into slavery<sup>33</sup>. For those who remain, they have acquired arms and are now defending themselves – sometimes successfully – against raiding Somali militias. Several recent clashes in both Middle Jubba and Middle Shabelle have involved Bantu militias. This is not unprecedented – escaped slave communities in the Jubba valley successfully fought off Somali nomads in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, using firearms acquired through the Sultanate of Zanzibar – but it has been a long time since Bantu minorities have owned firearms. That they now dare fire those weapons on ethnic Somalis may be more a reflection of desperation than power.

### **The Future of Somali Bantu Identity**

Bantu identity may be a social construct of very recent origin in Somalia, an accidental creation of foreign relief agencies, but it is likely to endure as an ethnic identity for the foreseeable future. The continued poor treatment of *jereer* in Somalia insures a steady supply of grievances which will tend to express themselves in a heightened sense of separateness of the Bantu. But most important factor contributing to the “hardening” of this ethnic identity are without doubt the political, economic, and refugee status benefits which accrue to group members. These factors may even lead to more willingness on the part of the *jereer* communities in Hiran and Middle Shabelle regions to embrace the identity.

In Somalia’s highly insecure and unstable environment, however, it is very unlikely that *jereer* communities will embrace Bantu identity to the exclusion of other affiliations. Risk management dominates the use of ethnic and social identity in Somalia, a strategy which places a high value of flexible and astute use of identity to match the circumstances at hand. In the case of the Bantu, this is especially true because invoking Bantu identity comes with considerable risks as well as potential benefits. We can thus expect the *jereer* communities to use Bantu identity as a tool to access resources and maximize security, as one of multiple social affiliations individuals and groups have at their disposal. Where group security requires close ties to a Somali lineage, Bantu identity will be downplayed; where resources and claims on positions of representation can be acquired by being Bantu, that identity will be emphasized.

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<sup>33</sup> UNHCR, “New Life for Somali Bantus in Tanzania,” IRIN press release, 13 March 2003 (<http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf>).