

BENADIR REFUGEES FROM SOMALIA

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An Introduction to Benadir History and Culture

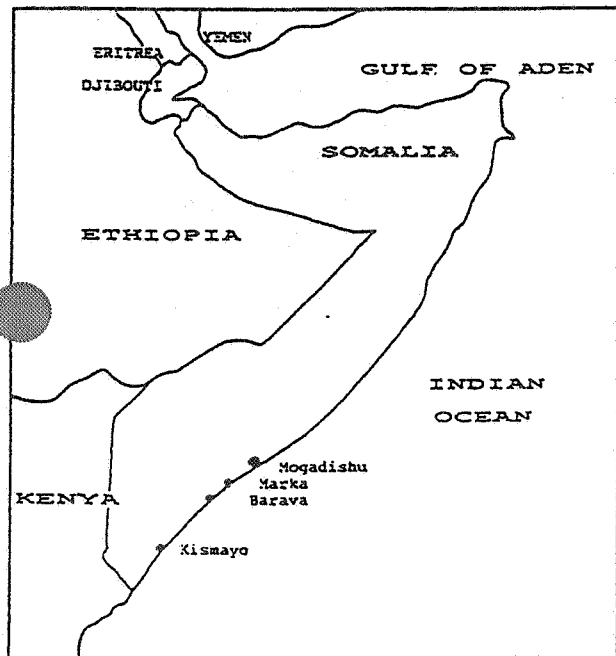
The Benadir (also spelled 'Benaadir' and 'Banadir') are a people with their roots in ancient Arabia, Persia, and south and central Asia. Their name is derived from a Persian word which means "harbor" or "port," reflecting their origins as sea-faring traders and fishermen who crossed the Indian Ocean to the easternmost part of Africa and established centers of commerce which linked that continent with Asia. The first Benadir communities were established in what is today southern Somalia about one thousand years ago; their reputation as the settlements of a prosperous and peace-loving people is set down in the written accounts of foreign travelers to Africa dating back to the 13th century. "The Benadir Coast" as a proper name for coastal northeast Africa was used well into the 20th century, and as an informal designation for southern Somalia remains in use today.

Being the first to live in this region -- nomadic "Samale" (Somali) peoples from the African interior did not press south and east to the Indian Ocean until centuries later -- the Benadir very much view themselves as natives and even founders of Somalia. The Benadir port city of Hamar eventually became Mogadishu, Somalia's capital; until displaced by war in the 1990s the Benadir continued to live in ancient stone homes their forebears built in Mogadishu's old quarter. Although there has been some intermarriage and influence from African peoples over the centuries, the Benadir today very much remain a light-skinned minority whose economic livelihood, unlike most of Somalia's people, is based on commerce and not agriculture.

Somalia's Civil War and the Benadir Exodus

European colonial interests -- the British in the north and the Italians in the south -- advanced into Somalia in the 1800s. After World War II, colonialism gave way to less formal control by Great Britain and Italy, and in 1960, with United Nations support, the two former colonies joined and became independent as the Somali Democratic Republic. But the stability of this new nation did not last long. An alliance between the main ethnic Somali clans broke down in 1969, and in the 1970s Somalia fought Ethiopia over Somali-claimed territory as a civil war developed at home. The struggle for clan dominance became a war to control Somalia's resources: rich agricultural land in the south and the coastal export centers.

By 1991 fighting raged in Mogadishu; the Benadir were living at ground zero. Their homes and businesses were ravaged in the crossfire, and as a prosperous, neutral, and unarmed minority they became the victims of all parties to the war. Many Benadir families experienced severe violence, including the rape of their wives and daughters by Somali clan soldiers or bandits. Life savings and other material wealth were looted or destroyed.



Those Benadir who could fled for their lives, overland or by boat to Kismayo to the south and then on into Kenya. Some did not survive their flight, dying at sea or along the land route; others became victims of malaria after reaching refugee camps in Kenya (including some already accepted for resettlement in the U.S.) Many Benadir families experienced the death of a family member. By 1994, the Benadir community of Somalia existed only in exile.

The U.S. and International Humanitarian Response

In August 1992 the United States began airlifting emergency relief supplies into southern Somalia; a few months later, "Operation Restore Hope" involved the U.S. military directly in ending the violence and providing humanitarian relief. The United Nations, who earlier assisted Ethiopian refugees in Somalia, took over control of the U.S.-led operations in 1993 and continued efforts to stabilize the situation.

About ten thousand Benadir escaped from Mogadishu, many of them ending up in a United Nations refugee camp near Mombasa, Kenya. In early 1995, refugee officials from the U.S. Department of State visited the camp and took a decision to consider Benadir refugees for resettlement in the United States. U.S. immigration officers traveled to Kenya in December 1995 and conducted interviews of the Benadir; as a result, almost three thousand were approved for resettlement. In early 1996 the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Joint Voluntary Agency Representative (JVAR) began Cultural Orientation and English as a Second Language classes to prepare the Benadir for their new lives in the United States.

Culture, Clan, and Community

The dominant factor of Benadir life is that it is clan-based. Each clan, in theory at least, traces its' origins to a single male ancestor. Among those Benadir being resettled in the U.S. there are about a dozen clans and three or four times again as many sub-clans; the most prominent of the clans are the Bandhabow, Dhabar-Weyne, Faqi, Morshe, and Rer

Manyo. One's family name generally corresponds to a specific clan, and interviewing by U.S. officials in Kenya focused primarily on establishing a refugee's Benadir identity by identifying their clan.

Clan elders, both formally and informally, serve as the cornerstone of Benadir community. Under their leadership the Benadir historic identity as an organized, educated, and enterprising people is affirmed and perpetuated. Family disputes, inheritances, and other civil matters are addressed and resolved under their authority. United Nations and U.S. government officials working to assist Benadir refugees in Kenya dealt with the clan elders as primary counterparts who facilitated their mission. Resettlement communities should be prepared for the elders' expectation to continue in this role after their arrival in the U.S.

As merchants and traders, the Benadir are energetic, enterprising, and perhaps a bit assertive. These characteristics will be more apparent among the men, who are responsible for family activities outside the home, than the women. Whereas most Benadir men have at least a formal secondary education -- many speak English, Arabic, Italian, Russian, or another foreign language -- women generally do not complete high school, opting instead for marriage at the young age of 15 or 16 and responsibilities inside the home. The language the Benadir speak among themselves is a dialect of Somali, but as this was not established as a written language until 1972, some of the older Benadir women can not read or write. This, as in other aspects of the position of women in Benadir society, is not seen as a deficiency, but rather as a simple difference in roles and responsibilities. The younger generation of Benadir females have had opportunities for education, with some women becoming professionals in a range of fields.

As an urban and educated people the Benadir, except for skilled tailors and weavers of the renowned Benadir "Alindi" cloth, worked almost exclusively in commercial occupations. Many were bankers, businessmen, or shopkeepers in their own firms or otherwise self-employed (due in part to their aversion of working for someone else). Such are their entrepreneurial talents that within a year of

their arrival in Kenya as destitute refugees, commercial activity and relative prosperity had been established in the UN camp. This may prove to be both an asset and an obstacle for the Benadir in the U.S., particularly to the extent that it translates into a reluctance to take menial or entry-level jobs. Few will arrive with savings salvaged during their escape or from relatives or friends abroad; expectations about their immediate economic prospects in the U.S. will have to be tempered with careful counseling and support.

The attire and culinary customs of the Benadir reflect their identity as a group that is both ancient and modern. Men may wear Western attire outside the home and traditional clothing within. Women are usually veiled and clothed in Benadir Muslim dress that may indicate their clan or sub-clan. Their formal cultural attire will attract attention and perhaps derogatory comments by their non-Somalian peers, especially for school-age girls. As a coastal people the Benadir, unlike most Somalis, eat a significant amount of fish; as Muslims, they are forbidden to eat pork or lard or drink alcohol. They may require that the meat in their diet be 'xalaal,' prepared in a strict manner (for which kosher foods in the U.S. will suffice). The remnants of Italian colonialism can be seen in their consumption of 'baasto' (pasta) - spaghetti!

Special Cultural Considerations

ing Arabic and Muslim, Benadir culture and society comprise aspects of daily life with which most Americans will be unfamiliar and which may require special sensitivity and attention. Primary among these are practices relating to multiple marriages, the physical disciplining of wives and children, and female circumcision. Although these issues are addressed in the ten days of Cultural Orientation provided to all Benadir age 12 and over before they depart for the U.S., for sponsors and resettlement agencies these issues may, especially in the first days, be a continuing concern.

Benadir Culture, because of its' Muslim origins, allows a man to have several wives. Benadir refugees, learning of the earlier rejection of Somali refugees for admission to the U.S. on the

disqualifying grounds of polygamy, have produced documentation to show evidence of divorce, something easily done given the role of clan elders in authorizing and authenticating family matters. Many of these family relationships may remain intact nevertheless.

Benadir parents use corporal punishment to discipline their children to a degree which some Americans may view as "over-discipline." They do not physically abuse them, however, and there is the potential for miscommunication to occur on this issue, particularly in translation. Benadir men sometimes discipline or reprove their wives in the same way; this is not universal, and when it does occur it is not considered by the Benadir to be physically abusive.

The ritual circumcision of females, usually between the ages of 8 and 10, is almost universal among the peoples of Somalia, including the Benadir. Although not strictly required by the Muslim faith, it is seen by adherents as routine. It is difficult to present female circumcision to the Benadir as a backward or dehumanizing practice; in their communities, Benadir families must fear that an uncircumcised daughter will be refused for marriage. As in the treatment of this subject in Cultural Orientation, it will be easiest to emphasize simply that in the United States female circumcision is an illegal act.

Rebuilding Benadir Community in America

The Benadir identity as an independent minority and the emphases on family, education, and entrepreneurship so deeply ingrained within their culture are perhaps the greatest assets they bring to the challenge of rebuilding their lives in America. Those assisting the Benadir in this process should not be surprised if spontaneous cooperation emerges only within existing family and clan structures and not in the wider community of refugees from Somalia living in the United States. Although the Benadir should be given the opportunity to make such connections -- and despite hundreds of years of living in proximity -- there is not much more than the Sunni Muslim religion and related Somali dialects which the Benadir share with the Somali ethnic majority.

To the contrary, the Somali people and their clans are generally viewed by the Benadir as the perpetrators of the lawlessness and destruction which caused them to lose everything and flee for their lives. In seeing themselves as the founders and originators of the structures of commerce, education, and culture in Somali, structures of a civilization which endured for a millennium, the Benadir can see in the events of the past five years the tragic completion of the Somali conquest of non-Somali peoples which began centuries ago.

To the extent that resettlement in cluster sites maintains and reinforces clan and family structures, the Benadir are likely to make their best efforts to

rebuild their lives in the community where they are first received and placed: very few of them have relatives already resettled abroad. The potential for secondary migration does exist, however, particularly to reunify family or clan groups that were split either in the flight from Somalia or in the act of resettlement. In those cases where a non-family member or even a non-Benadir became attached to a larger family for the specific purpose of resettlement, this free individual may move on to join relatives or friends already living elsewhere in the United States. In such cases, it may be useful for the sponsors or resettlement agency to include the elders or other community leaders in any discussions about secondary migration.

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Additional resources, including reports on assistance to Somali refugees from the U.S. Department of State, the United Nations, and the International Committee of the Red Cross, are available on the Internet/World Wide Web by searching for the word "Benadir."