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Profile

Benadiri comprise a number of different communities. Rer Hamar, living in Mogadishu (at Independence about half of its population), meaning the 'clan' of Hamar (another name for Mogadishu), speak their own dialect of the Somali language (Af-Hamar), and are divided into a large number of different segments or sub-clans. Another group is the residents of Merca port (the former coastal capital in the thirteenth century), sometimes called Rer Merca, who also have a separate Somali dialect (Af-Donte) related to Af-Maymay of the local Rahanweyn clans/ Barawani (Bravanese), living in the coastal city of Brava, have a partially separate historical and urban cultural identity deriving from the sixteenth century when Brava (founded in the ninth century) was an important self-governing trading port and fought off Portuguese attacks. Bravanese speak Chimini as a first language (also known as Chimbilazi), which is a local Kiswahili dialect, as well as the local Tunni subclan dialect of Af-Maymay. Bajuni, a low-status and poor fishing community, reside in the southern port of Kismayu and the offshore Bajuni islands near the Kenyan border. They have some remote South-East Asian ancestry from trading links centuries ago between the Somali coast and China and South-East Asia. They speak Kibajuni, a local Kiswahili dialect, as a first language. There is also a relatively small community, descendants of European (mainly Italian) settlers and Somalis who mostly live in Italy, also called '*meticci*'. Although historically economically better off than some minorities, they also fall outside clan structures, leaving them socially invisible and vulnerable to discrimination.

History

Benadiri originate from mercantile urban communities established by migrants at different periods (some up to 1,500 years ago) from what are now Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Iran and India. They settled along the 'Benadir coast' and inland towns, and built stone towns for defence and trade, becoming a key influence in the spread of Islam. They interacted with local clans (pastoralists and Rahanweyn), while retaining a partly separate identity. Today, Benadiri speak Somali as a second language and have no other national identity than as Somali citizens.

From the 1950s, Benadiri were engaged in nationalist politics through their own parties, sometimes aligned to other clan-based parties. They were not attached to or incorporated into pastoralist clans for protection, nor subject to exclusion and discrimination like Bantu and the occupational groups. During the post-1991 civil wars, the formerly privileged status of Benadiri, many of them wealthy merchants, was reversed, as they did not form an armed militia for protection. Rer Hamar suffered heavily from warlord militia attacks; rape of girls and women; looting of their properties and businesses; and theft of women's jewellery. Most Benadiri fled to Kenya as refugees.

Current issues

Despite the deep insecurity suffered by the community, a few thousand Benadiri still remain with their businesses in Mogadishu, Brava and Merca, paying clan militias or privately-employed gunmen for armed protection. Bajuni fishing people remain in the port city of Kismayu and the Bajuni Islands, although civil war has subjected them to attacks and looting by armed factions in Kismayu, which has seen chronic fighting between rival clan militias since 1991.

Even so, their circumstances today are arguably better than those experienced by some other minorities. For example, there have been cases of Benadiri intermarrying with majority clans, providing a significant measure of security and protection for Benadiri women. Moreover, as traders, their economic marginalization has been less pronounced.

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