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Virginia Luling

THE OTHER SOMALI - MINORITY GROUPS IN TRADITIONAL SOMALI SOCIETY

Traditional Somali society is famous for its egalitarian character; and yet we know that some of its members were much less equal than the rest. These people, comparatively few in number, lived as occupational castes1 in a client status among the majority of 'noble' Somali, with whom they could neither intermarry nor share food.

Another category of people whose status was traditionally inferior (though perhaps less markedly so) were the farming villagers of the interriver area. Though politically semi-independant, they also did not intermarry with their pastoral Somali patrons.

The minorities I shall deal with in this paper come roughly under one or other of the above headings. I do not include the people of the coastal towns, nor the gibelcad groups of the lower Shabelle area, since though endogamous they were not of inferior status; nor do I include the Bajuni.

In the modern context the situation of these minority groups has altered considerably. Their inferior status is officially a thing of the past; they have equal legal rights with any other Somali citizen, and equal educational opportunities if they have the means to use them. Individuals from this background may indeed rise to positions of power. Nevertheless, prejudice against these categories of persons is far from being dead, and hence the subject is a touchy one. Therefore, rather than the 'ethnographic present' commonly used by anthropologists when describing a changing situation, I
have used the 'political past' tense, outlining the situation as it once was, while admitting that I do not know how far it has yet been transformed.

The following paper, which is taken from published sources, together with observations of my own made in the Afgoi area in the late 1960s, is intended to reopen discussion about these groups, and to raise questions rather than to answer them. My reasons for doing so are two; in the first place, in the drive to record traditional culture which is fortunately going on, there is a danger that minority groups may be neglected; and in the second, the theories of earlier writers about the origins of these groups are based on a view of Somali history which is no longer tenable, and I believe it is therefore time to look at them in a new perspective.

Cerulli's work remains the most comprehensive attempt to study these people and their origins, and his research was done in the early years of this century. The only summary of available information on them is that of I. M. Lewis, in the Somali volume of the Ethnographic Survey of Africa, published in 1955. Since then, though there has been very little written directly concerned with the minority groups, there have been important developments in Somali studies generally, which must affect our ideas about them.

The Somali minority groups

Northern Somali pastoral society contained, as is well known, three occupational castes, the Midgaan, Tumaal and Yibir, referred to collectively as sab. The Midgaan were hunters and leather workers and also fought for their masters; the Tumaal smiths (gum = to beat or hammer), and the Yibir, the smallest of the three groups, professional magicians, though they also hunted. Sab groups were attached to 'noble' Somali lineages, for whom they worked; but individuals could also have individual masters. The Yibir, though held to belong with certain noble Somali groups, apparently also moved freely about looking for custom. Wherever there was a wedding or a birth, they would demand a payment of food in return for their blessing. Failure to provide it provoked their curse, which was greatly feared.

Members of the castes could own stock (Lewis 1961:78), but maintained themselves chiefly by their trades, which were considered degrading by the Somali nobles, however essential to their economy.

This comparatively simple picture becomes complicated when one looks at the evidence for the southern, interriver area of Somalia. Here, occupational caste groups were scattered through the clan system, as weavers and potters as well as smiths, hunters and tanners, each small group having its own name. The words 'Midgaan' and 'Yibir' appear not to be known, and Tumaal is generally simply the name of the occupation, not of a descent group. They were collectively known as Boon or Gum (the latter as opposed to Gab = noble). However, among those Darood groups who moved beyond the Juba, the names used in the north reappear. Thus the Kaballeh counted four groups of inferior status among them - the Midgaan, Tumaal and Yibir being collectively designated as gacan walaal, and distinguished from the fourth group, the Boon here to be identified as the Boni hunters (Zoli 1928:193).

On the other hand, the Somali living around Negeleigh in the 1950s used Boon and Midgaan interchangeably (Haberland 1963:133).
In the interriver area appears also the other kind of outgroup, the villages of farmers, who once lived under the nominal patronage of the pastoral clans and in alliance with them, but essentially as independent communities. The most important of these are the Dube, Shiddle and Shabelle federations of villages along the Shabelle river; on the interriver plain the Kelay of Baydhabo and the Tuni Torre near Barawa; and along the Juba the Gobavlin, and the Wagosha ('forest people'), the latter apparently a name given collectively to a number of different groups. There are also the scattered small groups of hunters - the Boni of the lower Juba and further south, the Ribi, and the Eyle of the interriver plain and lower Shabelle. All these people had in common their low status with respect to the main Somali population, and their exclusion from intermarriage with them.

Occupational castes among other northeast African Peoples

It is well known that segregation and special status of groups practising certain crafts is almost universal among the peoples of the Horn of Africa, both those speaking Cushitic languages and others. The Amhara, the various Oromo groups, the Konso, the Gurage, the kingdom of Kaffa, and the Dime of the southwest, are only a selection, for whom the institution of occupational castes has been described in most detail.\(^2\) The trades most generally segregated in this way are tanning, hunting, smithing, pottery, basket-making, woodworking and weaving. A recurrent theme is the part played by some of these groups in the ritual and religious life of the dominant society, and the magical power often attributed to them.

(see e.g. Shack 1966; especially 133 ff.).

Origins of the occupational castes

The views of most writers on the origin of these groups has until recently been governed by the assumption, dating back to the last century, that the Cushitic speaking peoples had migrated to their historical situations from the north of the Horn - and ultimately from outside Africa. In this perspective minority groups were readily seen, whether in Somalia or other parts of the Horn, as remnants of 'pre-Cushitic' populations. This was particularly plausible in the case of hunting groups, who could be held to represent a lower stage of evolution, which accounted for their treatment as inferior by the incoming pastoralists (Cerulli 1959: 95 ff.). This assumption led to the attempt to find pygmy or bushmanoid traits in such groups (see e.g. Puccioni 1937: 71).

A different view, largely supported by linguistic evidence, has gained acceptance during the last decade. In this view, the Cushitic speaking peoples spread from the southeast Ethiopian region, in a gradual process of diversification, perhaps two or three millennia ago. The southward spread of the (mainly Darood) Somali during the last millennium then appears as a reflex movement (H. S. Lewis 1966; Fleming 1964; Meine 1978 and 1980; Turton 1975). But if the Cushitic speaking peoples have been in the area for such a long period, to be in fact its earliest traceable inhabitants, the term 'pre-Cushitic' becomes meaningless.

In this perspective a more convincing view of the origin of the occupational castes is that they became established by diversification of functions within the social group. The
extreme separation, the ritualisation of this division of functions, the basic assumption that the society must contain its own out-groups within itself, is a cultural feature common to nearly all the peoples of this area, and probably a very ancient part of their social organisation (Todd 1976).

This is not to say that conquered foreign groups might not become assimilated to occupational castes; this probably happened often, and southern Somalia is a case in point. My contention is that the foreignness of such groups is not the reason for their pariah status. Rather, the existence of such a status in the worldview of their conquerors provided a social slot into which alien groups could be fitted as required. This implies that the existence of a group in this status creates no presumption of its separate origin, unless this can be shown by other means.

It cannot be shown in the case of the occupational castes of northern Somalia. There is no evidence of their being of racially different origin and the differences of appearance that have been noted between them and the main Somali population are either cultural, for instance the way of walking (Cerulli 1959:289), or can be accounted for by a prolonged period of endogamy (Haberland 1963:133). As for their supposed separate languages, Cerulli pointed out long ago (even while arguing for a pre-Cushitic origin for the groups) that these are in fact a kind of slang or jargon, formed out of Somali for the purpose of confusing outsiders (1959:101). The same evidently applies to similar secret languages in other parts of the Horn (Haberland 1963:134). In some cases there are positive considerations which point to minority groups having the same origin as their patrons.

The Boni, small groups of hunters (and to some extent farmers) living scattered in the Lower Juba area and in northern Kenya, seemed the perfect candidates for the role of a primitive, 'pre-Cushitic' remnant. However, they have been shown to speak a language which is not only Cushitic, but the closest one known to Somali (Heine 1978 and 1980). It is a distinct language, however; they have not simply borrowed the tongue of their Somali neighbours, as some of their kin did that of the Oromo. In appearance, they are 'hamitic' as often as negroid, and Prins claimed to find a typically Cushitic feature in the dualism of their social organisation (Grottanelli 1957; Battaglia 1957; Prins 1963).

Cerulli (1957:54) has pointed out the coincidence of their name with that given to the occupational castes of the Shabelle area - Boon. He concluded that the Somali had adopted the name of an alien tribal group and used it as a general status label. But it would be equally plausible and more economical to suppose that it was from the beginning a status label, applied by outsiders to the Boni of the south just as much as to the groups of the Shabelle by the Hawiya.4

Another shared name, which has not been previously noticed, may be mentioned here.

The Rendille have been shown to be extremely close linguistically to the Somali, and the likelihood is that they were culturally so before the Somali became converted to Islam, in fact that the two cultures developed from a common origin. Thanks to Schlee's admirable recent book, we now know a great deal about Rendille culture, which had previously hardly been recorded at all.

An important ritual grouping among the Rendille is the Ilpirs
(sg. *Ibir* ) - evidently the same word as the Somali *Yibir*. The *Ibiri* are men from certain lineages who enjoy a high religious status - in fact the Rendille are divided into *Ibire* and *Wakhamure*, who are the rest of the male population, in a way reminiscent of the traditional Somali distinction between *Wadaad* and *Waranich*. The *Ibire* however are chiefly respected and feared for the power of their curse. Since their position is central in Rendille society, this is always exercised against deviants, to maintain justice and the social order (Schlee 1979:181 ff.). And yet these pillars of society share a name with the despised anti-social vagabonds among the Somali. But the Somali *Yibir* also have extraordinary powers attributed to them, and are feared for the power of their curse.

All that can be demonstrated here, of course, is the degradation of a word. Probably, among the pre-Islamic Somali the term (*Y*)ibir referred to a respected magico-religious status, but with the coming of Islam it was downgraded and applied to vulgar sorcerers. It is possible, however, that an actual group, or part of it, could have suffered degradation with the change in religion. In this context, it is interesting to consider the legend of origin of the *Yibir*.

According to this story, the ancestor of the *Yibir* was the magician *Mahmad Xanif*, who ruled and exploited the northern Somali before the coming of Islam. He was defeated by the famous Muslim saint *Sheikh Aw Barkhadde*, who exposed him as a fraud and caused him to be imprisoned inside a mountain. The payments made ever since to the *Yibir* at weddings and births, in return for their blessing, are recognised as compensation for the death of their ancestor, as though after all he had some legitimate claim (Lewis 1961:264; Zoli 1928; 194 has a different story). Perhaps in its symbolic shorthand this story reflects a historical reality.

The riverine farmers

When we look at southern Somali society, we have to consider the relation between two sorts of outgroup - the occupational castes on the one hand, and the village farming communities on the other. Here we have a set of people who are clearly separate in origin from the rest of the Somali, since they (like some of the hunting groups) are negroid in physical type. However, they speak Somali in the dialects of their region, with the exception of some of the villages in the Lower Juba area where a Bantu language is spoken.

By early European travellers it was often assumed that all these people were freed or escaped slaves, and this view is still generally held by the Somali majority. Certainly, southern Somalia in the 19th century did have a large slave population, imported from further down the East African coast, and numbers of these slaves did escape and found independent settlements, especially in the Lower Juba area (Christopher 1944:110; Colucci 1934:65; Zoli 1928:149). Others, set free by their owners, were given land - but this would normally be within the territory of the owner's group, and such freed men would not have formed politically independent units.

However, it has been generally accepted by students of Somali society, since Cerulli first suggested it, that such communities as the Shidle are not merely ex-slaves, but represent an early farming, and originally Bantu speaking population of the area. He also suggested the connection
between these 'Bantu' groups and the tradition of Shungwaya, the legendary point of dispersal for many East African peoples, especially as this is reported in the 'Book of the Zanj', which he edited (Cerulli 1957:54, 230 ff.). The 'Bantu' groups of Somalia, however, have themselves no traditions referring to such a place, and their connection with it is a matter of inference. There seems to be no reason to reject the idea of an early population of free negro farmers in Somalia, even if in other respects our conception of population movements may have been modified. Such farming groups could have arrived before, after or simultaneously with the pastoral population, since they occupied a different ecological niche and thus were not in direct competition with them. The question of whether some or all of them had previously come from something called Shungwaya, whatever and wherever that may have been, is an entirely separate issue. The alternative assumption, that the communities we find in historical times are after all made up entirely of freed slaves, would hardly account for their size and well-established nature. The large-scale influx of slaves into Somalia only began in the 19th century (Cassanelli 1982: chapter 5), and it was then that the villages of runaway slaves in the lower Juba and Haway were founded. The people there remembered the origin of their communities perfectly well, and could tell early 20th century enquirers about them. The villages of the Shebeelle, on the other hand, gave an account of their origin of a much more legendary character, going back much further in time (see e.g. Cerulli 1959:167).

Here some of my own observation in the Afgoy area may be relevant. There, in the traditional social system, the people whom their superiors called Habash 5 were not semi-independant villagers, but formed the lower stratum in a single community with the 'Billis' or 'Nobles'. The Geledi clan, the former rulers of the district and the main inhabitants of the town that later became known as Afgoy, contained both 'Billis' and 'Habash' lineage groups. There were formerly a large number of slaves among the Geledi, and freed slaves certainly formed a large component of the 'Habash' lineages, but I do not believe that they accounted for them entirely.

One fact that suggests a different origin is the existence among them, here as elsewhere along the Shabelle and the Juba (Zoll 1928:310), of the Bahar lineages. These fishers and frrymen, who ran the flat bottomed boats which up to the colonial period were the only means of crossing the river, were held to have a special power over the crocodiles, and hence could protect their passengers. Legends concerning the Bahar go back at least to the 1840s (Luling 1971:181; Cassanelli 1982:144). The ideas concerning this group, and its intimate association with the river, do not suggest a recently imported slave population, but a people whose ownership of the river is long established.

The same thing is implied by the rites which the 'Habash' of Afgoy perform at Dabashid, the New Year festival. At Afgoy this is a complex affair lasting three days, whose main feature is the famous stick fight (Istun). The celebrations of the 'Habash' are only part of the whole, and one which is not considered particularly important by their 'noble' superiors; in fact they think them low and vulgar, particularly on account of their sexually explicit character. At one point several elderly women stand in the water of the river, their skirts tucked up, each wielding a wooden penis, which
is in fact one of the sticks with mushroom-shaped ends that are used ordinarily for stirring grain porridge. During the day, children go from house to house, throwing water over the women who have been married in the course of the year. The kind of fertility symbolism implied here seems to belong with an association with land and river deeper than that of an imported workforce.


castes and villages

I now return to the question of the relation between these people and the occupational castes. In both Cerulli's and Lewis's accounts, 'Bantu farmers' on the one hand, and 'low castes' on the other are classified separately, as though there were no overlap between the two. "All through the Benadir the low castes are scattered among the various tribes with different names and designations, while the so-called 'freedmen' are organized in federations of villages" (Cerulli 1959:196).

However, if one looks at the south Somali ethnography generally, the picture is much more confused. The distinction between farmers and hunters, for instance, is far from absolute. The Eyle are both, and this may go for other groups. In my own experience in the Afgoi area, the term 'Habash' was used to cover all 'non-noble' people, and referred primarily to the negro physical type. It was assumed that all craftsmen came into this category - smiths, potters, weavers, and workers in leather and wood - but these did not form separate social units. Or take the following part of a text from one of Cerulli's informants (1959:294-295):

"There are Boon who live with the Baddi Addo. The Gabalolley live with the Reer Weber ... the other men called the Gaggab live with the Hillibej, and so do the 'white Habash'. What are the White Habash? They're men who if you look at their faces seem to be Bills (Nobles), but if you count their descent, they belong among the Habash. They and the Gaggab intermarry. They don't marry with the Habash. They and the Reer Clise intermarry. The Gabalolley and the Tumal marry each other. The Gabalolley and the Gaggab don't marry each other ... the Eyle and the Habash marry each other ...""

This (and Cerulli gives much more material of the same kind) indicates a large number of small groups with complicated relationships among themselves. It also shows that it was not always possible to tell from an individual's appearance in which category he belonged. My own impression as an outsider looking at the Bills/Habash distinction, was that whereas some people could be assigned to one or the other category at a glance, many were in between, and to know their status one would have, like Cerulli's informant, to know their descent.

Given, then, that there was at one time a population of free negro, Bantu speaking farmers in the interriver region, it seems that while some of them retained a measure of independence in separate villages from the more powerful pastoral population, coming under the collective patronage of various clans, others attached themselves more closely to Somali groups, either merging with or becoming their occupational castes, as among the Geledi at Afgoi. It may also be that those Somali clans who came to rely heavily on slave labour had correspondingly less need for their traditional caste groups, whose places in the socio-economic order were taken by slaves and freedmen. The position of the hunting groups
in the south is less clear.

**Conclusion**

I have argued that the existence of occupational castes in traditional Somali society, as in other societies of the Horn, rests on a structure of assumptions which is deeply rooted in this whole culture area, and that such castes can be formed by internal differentiation from within the society; there is no need to look for 'pre-Cushitic' or other foreign origins for them. But also, that this structure of assumptions can accommodate groups of foreign origin, slotting them into the worldview of the dominant society, and that this has happened frequently in southern Somalia. Thanks to archaeological and linguistic researches, our picture of Somali prehistory is likely to become very much clearer in the near future. From this, and from the sociological point of view, anything that can be learnt about the minority groups is of vital interest. Current published information about them is extremely meagre; they have hardly ever been studied directly or enabled to give their own account of themselves; from a scholarly point of view more research is urgently needed, since so much social change seems likely under modern conditions.

But this is not the only point of view to be considered. The members of these groups first of all, and also their government, would be entitled to ask what the effects of such research would be for them. Would it only serve to stir up the embers of old prejudices, and confirm the low status they are striving to throw off? Or might it, by asserting that they have a past of their own worthy of attention, help them to claim a place of respect in a changing Somali society?

**FOOTNOTES**

1 Also referred to in the literature as outcaste, low caste (bassa casta) or pariah groups. I have adopted the term 'occupational castes' as being the most accurately descriptive, without wishing to enter on a discussion of the use of the term 'caste'.

2 See e.g. Haberland 1963, H. S. Lewis 1965; Hallpyke 1972; Shack 1966; Todd 1977. Levine (1974:187, appendix) gives a useful list of caste groups and their host societies, though his treatment of them is in other ways unsatisfactory.

3 K. Goldsmith and I. M. Lewis (1958) found no difference in their blood group analysis. No further work of this kind appears to have been done.

4 The village of Boni studied by Colucci in the Haway area was called Buulo Boon (Colucci I934:186).

5 This derogatory term was the most common one, in my experience, for people of lower social status, whether ex-slaves or members of free though inferior lineage group. It refers primarily to the persons of negroid character. The word, which originally means 'Ethiopian', as it does among the northern Somali, became a general term for 'black slave' among Arab dealers, and so probably was transmitted to the Benadir.
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