

## **Exodus and reconstruction of identities : Somali "minority refugees" in Mombasa**

Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos<sup>1</sup>

The question of resettlement of asylum seekers, in the light of the flood of demands, makes very strict selection imperative right from the outset and addresses less than 1% of the world refugee population every year. Regarding individuals, the process sometimes looks like a sort of lottery, hence the name given by the Americans for distributing such immigration visas. Regarding whole communities, the victims of ethnic, political, racial or religious persecutions are more clearly targeted. Somalia's "minority refugees" in Kenya show this very well. Their fate differs remarkably from other resettlements that, in Eastern Africa, resembled repatriation, like the 32 000 Indians who went to the UK after being expelled from Uganda in 1972 or the 43 000 Ethiopian Jews, the Falasha "migrants", who were evacuated to Israël between 1984 and 1991 with the so-called Operation Solomon.<sup>2</sup> Except a few cases, the former had British citizenship, whereas the latter were part of the Jewish diaspora.

In Mombasa, Kenya, Somali refugees did not have these advantages. But they all presented convincing arguments to justify the impossibility of a return to their homeland. Even the Marehan, of Siad Barre the deposed President, who do not even represent 2% of the Somali population, are today condemned to exile because enemy clans took power in Mogadishu. One had to make a choice. The selection made by Western immigration officers rested on the concept of cultural

---

<sup>1</sup> A researcher at the French Research Institute for Development, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos teaches at the Institut d'études politiques in Paris, lived several years in Africa South of the Sahara and wrote books on Nigeria, Somalia, South Africa, Refugees and Humanitarian aid. A French version of this article was previously published in *Autrepart* n°11, Paris, IRD, 1999, pp.27-46. The paper was written after fieldwork in 1997 and 1998. In order to make it easier for the reader, Somali geographical localities are given according to their Italian colonial names. The Latin transcription of Somali, dating from 1972, is often misleading as far as pronunciation is concerned. As for clans and peoples names, they are based on I.M. Lewis' terminology which is closer to English. There is no "s", except when groups are mentioned with reference to their Somali nationality and not the lineage which might not be Somali.

<sup>2</sup> Mamdani, M. : *From Citizen to Refugee : Uganda Asians Come to Britain*. London, Frances Pinter, 1973. 127p. ; Westheimer, R. & Kaplan, S. : *Surviving Salvation : the Ethiopian Jewish Family in Transition*. New York, New York University Press, 1992. 148p. ; Kessler, D. : *The Falashas, the forgotten Jews of Ethiopia*. New York, Schocken Books, 1985. 182p. ; Parfitt, T. : *Operation Moses : the untold story of the exodus of the Falasha Jews from Ethiopia*. Londres, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985. 131p.

minorities, that is to say on an irreducible otherness which does not allow for any future reintegration into the lineage system of Somali society.

The initial difficulty in choosing the candidates was thus to identify the most marginalised groups according to the degree of discrimination they suffered. Lobbying by the refugees played an important part in the decision making, so much that some of those in charge of resettlement are today talking of falsification or fraud. In fact, significant historical alterations were made in the development of the establishment of a "minority position" amongst the refugees who fell into a group that could claim rights for expatriation. The war, even before the resettlement programs, precipitated the process of identity reconstruction. Descendants of Bantu slaves, for whom a settlement was planned on the land of their ancestors in Tanzania, preferred to be called Mushunguli rather than Gosha, the name they were given in Somalia. The half-cast traders of the coastal ports decided to regroup under the genetic term "Benadir" which designates greater Mogadishu. As a result, some succeeded in calling themselves "Benadiri" while they were not of mixed blood at all.

The criteria used by immigration officers to sort out the candidates for resettlement are equally faulty. The notions of minority and discrimination as they were applied are extremely vague, confusing community's identity with territoriality, and persecution with demographic weakness. In one area could live a very mixed population. Brava, for example, was chosen to define traders of Arab or Indian origin who inhabited this port and inter-married with the surrounding Somali lineages. As refugees in the West claimed a right to family reunion, selection procedures in the Mombasa camps reached out much further than what was expected by those in charge of the resettlement programs. After all, the Sab low castes, Bantu farmers or Bajun fishermen of the area also deserved to be considered as marginalised minorities. If the choice by immigration officers rested on "Bravani" or "Benadiri", it is certainly because these urban traders stood a better chance of being integrated into the market economies of developed countries.

### **Being a "minority" refugee in Mombasa**

The Kenyan government policy towards refugees is to contain them in camps away from the main urban, economic and tourist centers of the country. Furthermore they are kept in a state of dependency which is supposed to compel them to return to their homeland as soon as possible. It is not our intention here to

explain the reason for this policy. We will content ourselves with a brief mention that the refugees are perceived as a threat to State security especially as far as Somalis are concerned, knowing the role they played in the *shifita* war of secession in North-Eastern province at independence (1963-1967).

The Mombasa refugee settlements, close to, or right in the city center, constitute a special case in this regard. They sheltered Somalis who fled war in 1991 and who arrived overland or by sea. The government would have liked to send them at Dadaab or Kakuma, in the barren Northern part of Kenya, and threatened to close Mombasa camps by force in March 1996, December 1996 and June 1997. But the refugees managed to stay on with the help of African philanthropists, among whom some links exist with coastal Somalis. The settlements which resisted closure were all situated on private land, given by well-intentioned individuals, while camps established on public land, at Utange and Marafa, were emptied.

The main argument by the Somali refugees, for their presence in town is that a transfer to Northern Kenya would deny them the opportunity to start again in a third country of asylum. In the Dadaab and Kakuma camps, UNHCR officers regularly come to select candidates for emigration. But compared to the miserable conditions of living in Northern Kenya, Mombasa offers economic and indeed political opportunities as far as lobbying is concerned. As a result the refugees demand special treatment. They insist on their rights as non-Somali minorities. They also put forward discrimination as a proof that a return to Somalia would be dangerous. According to them, their lives would be in jeopardy in Dadaab and Kakuma camps where most of the ethnic Somali are to be found. A refugee representative in Utange camp said it quite clearly: “it is better to die of a bullet you know in Mogadishu than from a bullet you don’t know in Dadaab”!<sup>3</sup>

The limited number of asylum seekers chosen for resettlement in the West is another good reason for claiming an irreducible otherness, since immigration officers usually try to favor the most threatened people, who are often from minority groups. The United States, which is the primemover in departure programmes, has taken some 17,000 Somalis, this being two thirds of the African refugees admitted in this way into its territory between 1991 and 1996.<sup>4</sup> The

---

<sup>3</sup> *Nation* 7/10/1994 : p.1. For Somali refugees, Dadaab is more dangerous than Kakuma in this regard. Consequently, the UNHCR decided that 11,000 Somali "minority" Bantus were to be relocated from Dadaab to Kakuma in 2002.

<sup>4</sup> In 1980 thanks to the detente with the USSR, the Refugee Act enabled the removal of the clause which favored dissidents from communist countries, opening the way for Latin-American and African refugees. The selections

selection of candidates often elicits much resentment from those left behind, who want the "first to come to be the first served". They blame the American "quotas" for causing a brain-drain, while the handicapped, the widowed and the sick are sidelined. This is in spite of the fact that some of them could not be adequately cared for in Kenya and that they are categorized as vulnerable groups by the UNHCR. Two Somali minorities that have benefitted from resettlement programs are the people of "mixed heritage" from Mogadishu and Brava. From the first group, 3,300 left for the United States in 1996. Amongst the second group, 3,000 went to Britain in 1995 and 4,600 were to be sent to the United States in the course of 1997.

In this context, minority status is equated to discrimination and therefore the need for resettlement to a third country of asylum. In Mombasa, the logic for humanitarian aid as well as idleness and the concentration of refugees in small relatively homogenous camps precipitated a reconstruction of identities around the concept of minority status. Somali refugees on the Kenyan Coast interpreted their history to fit the donor criteria. If the donor was local, they recalled a distant common ancestry. If the donor was international, they wheedled their profile in a manner likely to bring about the correct results.

The argument is based on a few strong points.<sup>5</sup> Firstly, from a political and military standpoint, these refugees have not participated in wars and they do not belong to any armed faction. Their people do not control any land and they therefore have nowhere to return to in Somalia. Secondly, from an economic point of view, they are not nomads but farmers, traders or fishermen, therefore their property was easily looted. Finally, from a social standpoint, they feel relatively isolated because they do not belong to the Somali lineage system and have not received government prebends since Independence, nor have they any links with a diaspora that might have been able to help them; that is with the exception of the traders of "mixed heritage" in coastal cities.

---

made by the UNHCR have to be approved by the U.S. Immigration services which distinguish three classes of refugees : persons who have right of priority (like the Somalis), former employees of the American government abroad (for example Vietnamese) and immigrants who fall into the family reunion category (such as Burundians, Liberians, Sudanese and Zairians in 1997). Those with rights of priority have the highest chance of being taken since the rate of acceptance goes up to 90% as opposed to 65% for those claiming family reunion rights. The program is run by the Joint Voluntary Agency which groups ten or so NGOs under the aegis of the World Council of churches. The main office is in Nairobi, which further favors the Somalis. The Khartoum and Freetown offices closed down in 1994 while those in Cairo and Addis Ababa deal with less than 600 cases a year.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Cassanelli, L. : Victims and Vulnerable Groups in Southern Somalia. Ottawa, Research Directorate, Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board, polycop., may 1995 : p.15. See also Amnesty International : Concerns Regarding Human Rights Violations Against Minority Tribes in Somalia. Toronto, 15/2/1993 ; Samatar, S. : Somalia, a Nation in Turmoil. Londres, Minority Rights Group, 1991 : 1995 update.

On this account, the occupants of the four existing Somali refugees settlements in Mombasa in 1997 all claim special protection (fig. 1).

St. Annes, the oldest of these "camps", is a former school right in the center of city, wedged between a Customs building and a luxurious colonial Hotel that is to be refurbished. About 750 Somalis from Brava live in St. Annes, 1,400 if we include the "clandestines" who are not on the UNHCR lists, or even 4,000 if we include those registered there but living in others parts of the town.

Hatimy, the second "camp", is a farm about fifteen kilometers to the North which also accommodates Somalis from Brava, 3,000 of them without counting an equivalent number of compatriots who came from Mombasa, Lamu, Malindi or Nairobi, attracted by the prospects of a resettlement in developed countries. Those are ready to buy a refugee card for up to one thousand dollars, which is the price of a forged Kenyan passport or a visa.

Swaleh Nguru is another farm, near Hatimy and Utange. The four sections into which this "camp" was divided, A, B, C and D, were initially planned for the mixed heritage Somalis from Benadir, that is, those from Greater Mogadishu. Later on, they were occupied by former Marehan civil servants who constituted the back-bone of the Siad Barre regime and who feared the Ogaden refugee majority clans in the Dadaab camps after these two groups fought around Kismayo.<sup>6</sup> Swaleh Nguru also harbours the Dadaab "social cases", admitted in Mombasa for medical reasons. In January 1997, its population included 7,156 UNHCR registered refugees and 8,560 who could be classified as "clandestine" and who only appeared on the Kenyan Red Cross list. The first group is for the most part made up of refugees expelled from Utange, Majengo and Marafa. Utange was the largest camp in the area, followed by Marafa. Majengo is a section in Mombasa and its waste ground near the Makupa industrial area was able to accommodate up to 3,800 Somalis from Benadir. More than 800 families who were not selected for resettlement in developed countries ended up in Swaleh Nguru, where they created a section called New Majengo.

---

<sup>6</sup> For instance in Dadaab refugee camp, a former Kismayo district commissioner, who was a Harti close to the Marehan clan, was shot dead by the police after being accused of robbery by Ogaden. African Rights : The nightmare continues... Abuses against Somali Refugees in Kenya. London, African Rights, sept. 1993 : p.24.

Lastly, the Kwa Jomvu "camp" is in the western part of Mombasa. In 1997 it was home for 5,231 Bajun fishermen, mainly women and children. No resettlement to a third country was planned for them.

The three main communities in the Mombasa camps, i.e. the half-casts from Benadir in Swaleh Nguru, the Brava refugees at St. Annes and Hatimy and the Bajun fishermen in Jomvu, all present certain peculiarities, but they are not the only ones. Somali Bantus, especially the descendants of slaves in Marafa camp, are also communities apart, as are the lower Sab castes. Moreover, minorities exist right within these settlements. In Swaleh Nguru, for example, one could find very small groups: approximately 300 single Ethiopians compromised by the deposed Mengistu regime and about one hundred stateless people expelled to Mogadishu in 1989 when the Kenya government decided to track down clandestine immigrants by giving its Somali citizens special pink identity cards. More specifically, the "S" section of the Swaleh Nguru camp was created to shelter 205 Somali families with distinct backgrounds: Nubi from Sudan who were employed in the former British colonial army at the time of the cession of Kismayo and Jubaland to the Italians in 1925.<sup>7</sup>

### **The making of the "Benadiri"**

The reconstruction of identities around the concept of minority is often very artificial since each Somali clan can on its own claim to be a minority. Resettled in the United States, the "Benadiri" who occupied the Utange and Swaleh Nguru camps (renamed Mogadishu and Benadir) constitute a clear example of this type of manipulation. The name does not correspond to any well defined sociological reality. It rests on an administrative entity whose citizens do not merit the name "Benadiri" any more than the people of Rift Valley province in Kenya would merit the name "Riftians". The Benadir Protectorate was a colonial designation centered around the city of Mogadishu. It constituted one of the six provinces of Italian Somalia, which included Upper and Lower Juba, Mijerteinia, Mudugh and Shebelle (fig. 2).

For all that, the area does not highlight one group over another, especially knowing the cosmopolitan character of the capital city. When Révoil explores it at the end of the XIXth Century, he calls Benadirs (*sic*) all the coastal populations. "Benadir, he says, is the eastern coast under the authority of the sultan of

---

<sup>7</sup> Their colleagues who remained on the Kenyan side were at the time settled at Mazeras in the Mombasa hinterland.

Zanzibar, from the Equator until M'routi [now Uarsciek]. Kismayo, Braoua, Meurka and Moguedouchou are the most important towns of the Benadirs”.<sup>8</sup>

The term Benadiri, as a community, did not fully appear before the 1990 war. In the spoken language, it implies a cloth called "alindi" and hand woven by city craftsmen with yellow, red, blue, white, green or black stripes.<sup>9</sup> Etymologically it comes from a Persian word, "bandar", which means "harbour". In the strictest sense of the word as the Americans interpreted it, it applies to the traders who were the first inhabitants of Mogadishu but have always been seen as foreigners by the Somali: the Bandhabow, the Morshe-Iskashato, the Abdisamad, the Sadiq Gedi, the Bafadal, the Amudi, the Duruqo, the *rer* Shikh, the *rer* Manyo, the Gudmane in Hamar-Weyne section and the *rer* Faqi in Shangani section.<sup>10</sup> The problem is that asylum seekers used it in the widest sense of the term, which refers to Greater Mogadishu.

It is thus difficult to know who is deceiving who: the so-called Benadiri refugees who took the initiative to approach diplomatic staff and insisted on their "foreign status" in order to explain the discrimination they experienced in Somalia, or the American and Canadian immigration officers who sought to stipulate education as a criteria for admission and to favor Mogadishu's urban elites because they could more easily be integrated into an industrialized economy. One thing is certain. The exodus forced a certain class of refugee to regroup in a predominantly pastoral society on the basis of a special status, that of traders established in coastal cities such as Zeila, Brava, Mogadishu, Afgoi and Merca.

Their position on their inexorable difference is not without foundation. They are mixture of Portugueses, Somalis, Bantus and Indians or Arab immigrants from Yemen, Hadramaout and Persia. Some of them fled the Abbasside caliphate in the VIIIth century. The Asharaf for instance claim to be direct descendants of the prophet Mohammed and are well known as devout muslims. Others like the Amarani, hardly a thousand in number, are supposed to come from a Southern Arabian Israeli group chased away by Islam. Their name refers to one of the oldest areas of Mogadishu, Hamar Weyn, that they founded before the arrival of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Révoil, G.B. [1885], “ Voyage chez les Bénadirs, les Çomalis et les Bayouns en 1882-1883 ”, *Le Tour du Monde, Nouveau journal des Voyages* (Paris, Hachette), vol.49, n°1253, p.12.

<sup>9</sup> Mohamed-Abdi, Mohamed : Xeer Soomaali. La cohésion de la nation. Besançon, Université d’histoire, polycop., 1995 : p.47.

<sup>10</sup> Along the coast were also nine lineages called “ the twelve *koofi* ”, from the name of a muslim cap. Cf. Refugee Information Series : Benadir Refugees from Somalia. Washington, US Catholic Conference, 1996. 4p.

Somali from the hinterland. They speak a typically urban dialect, Chimbelaizi or Chimini, which is tinged with Portuguese, Swahili, Arabic and Somali.<sup>11</sup> In 1956, there were also 40,000 Arabs, Indo-Pakistaneses, Ethiopians and Eritrians in Italian Somalia; only about one hundred in British Somaliland where the 1936 war between the Ethiopian Negus and Mussolini brought in a cosmopolitan class of traders. Despised, they saw their shops looted at independence and nationalized in the early seventies. Yet the country still had some 30,000 Yemenites before the fall of Siad Barre: almost all of them have left seeking refuge in Djibouti or Aden.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Bravani traders**

In the St. Annes and Hatimy "camps", one sees an identification process centered around the region of Brava which in many ways resembles the "Benadiri" one of the Swaleh Nguru camp (fig. 2). The term Bravani is just as ambiguous, although it covers an urban community that is more homogeneous and much smaller than Mogadishu, making the feeling of being discriminated better founded than with the "larger Benadiri" group of the capital city. The *rer* Brava designates a territorial community on the same level as *rer* Manyo refers to a socio-professional category, that of "sea people".<sup>13</sup> The confusion between territory and clan or ancestral identity brought about the grouping of a much larger body of people than one would have expected from a traders minority group of foreign origin. It is thus not surprising that numerous candidates for resettlement were able to slip through the UNHCR selection.

Historically, the city of Brava can be compared to the port of Merka, where the Arabs from Zanzibar allied with the Tunni, a Digil clan, in order to counter the Hawiye from the hinterland, the Abgal, Murosade and Wadan. Brava was the scene of numerous battles. It was successively coveted by the Portuguese in the XVIIth century, the Omanis in the XVIIth century, the British in 1824, the Egyptians in 1875 and the Italians in 1885, many of them establishing lineage. The town was also attacked by Somali of the mainland, especially from Bardera in

---

<sup>11</sup> Lewis, I.M. : Peoples of the Horn of Africa. Somali, Afar and Saho. London, Haan, International African Institute, 1994 (1st ed. 1955) : p.43.

<sup>12</sup> Rouaud, A. : " L'émigration yéménite ", in Chelhod, J. (ed.) : L'Arabie du Sud, histoire et civilisation : tome 2 : La société yéménite de l'Hégire aux idéologies modernes. Paris, Maisonneuve & Larose, 1984 : pp.227-50.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, I.M., 1994 : p.116.



1840, as well as the Rahanwein-Geledi in 1843 and the Dir-Bimal at the beginning of the XXth century. As a consequence, the city was completely “mixed-up”.<sup>14</sup>

The coming of Siad Barre to power in 1969 then exacerbated a feeling of dispossession for the natives. Brava was divided into six districts : Dayax (“the Moon”, which replaced al Bamba and Biruni), Wadajir (“Unity” instead of a swahili toponymy, Mpai), Hawlwadag (formerly Baghdad), Qaasih al-Barawi (in respect of a local piety), Oktoobar (the “October Revolution”) and Saqaawadii (Abdulkadir Saqawadin Sheikh Uweys, a founder of the Somali Youth League before independence and a grandson of the sheikh who established the Qadiriya brotherhood in the area). These new names denied a good part of Brava’s original history.

Moreover, the Barre administration decided to settle on the Southern coast some 20,000 nomads, victims of drought in 1973. The president's clan, the Marehan, were forcibly brought in from 1976 while they were battling with other Darod groups. Qat appeared with them. This stimulating plant is widely used by pastoral Somali but it contradicts the religious strictness of a town that counted 31 mosques (“more than in Mogadishu”) and from where spread Uweysiya (an offshoot of the Qadiriya brotherhood whose branches are found all the way to Uganda). For Mustafa Hassan Noor, spokesperson of the St. Anne's and Hatimy refugees in Mombasa, “there were no thieves and no beggars at all as long as the town was inhabited by the Brawans only”.<sup>15</sup>

However, the small port, abandoned since the 1950’s, did not play a strategic role and did not represent an important outlet for the area’s inhabitants, approximately 60,000 people amongst whom the most enterprising went to Mogadishu. The Bravani were overwhelmed by the upheaval of civil war. First with the Darod who were fleeing from Mogadishu, then in February 1991 with the Hawiye of the United Somali Congress, then the Darod again, in this case the Marehan of the Somali National Front who retook the city the following month but lost it thirteen days later to other Darods, the Ogaden of the Somali Patriotic Movement. All clans taken together, the *ghir ghir* “mices” finished off the plundering at the beginning of 1992. Disputed by the Dir-Bimal of Abdi Warsemeh Isar’s Southern Somali National Movement, Brava has since fallen

---

<sup>14</sup> Révoil, G. [1888], “ Voyage chez les Bénadirs, les Çomalis et les Bayouns en 1882-1883 ”, *Le Tour du Monde, Nouveau journal des Voyages* (Paris, Hachette), vol.56, n°1459, p.389. See also Révoil, G. [1880], *Voyage au cap des Aromates*, Paris, E. Dentu, p.56.

<sup>15</sup> Noor, Mustafa Hassan : Brava, the Sarajevo of Africa. Mombasa, polycop., 1993. 10p.

under the sphere of influence of the Hawadle, a Hawiye clan that rivalled the Habr Gedir of General "Aidid".

According to Mustapha Hassan Noor, who manages St Anne's camp, the Bravani were easily targeted as a minority group. They did not have the means to defend themselves and they were not part of any Somali lineage system. Moreover, they are deemed to be foreigners, half-castes who are "fair-skinned" (*gibil 'ad*), seafarers who eat fish and not meat, coastal traders whose wealth was envied by the hinterland nomads<sup>16</sup>. The cordon of dunes which separates Brava from the surrounding areas adds a rural urban divide to this dialectic. The contempt with which the pastoralists regard the city traders is similar to the one of Ogaden nomads who look down upon Isaaq merchants as being *idoor* ("traffickers"). To a large extent, it is also at the root of the Hawiye "schism" which, from, 1991, caused much bloodshed when the Habr Gedri, who were mainly stock-breeders from the hinterland, confronted the Abgal of Mogadishu, who were accused of being profiteers *afar jeebleh*, that is to say "four pockets traders" or "crooks". In relation to this, the Bravani put forward their urban civilization, their commercial dynamism and their knowledge of islam, in direct contrast to the illiteracy and the razzia tradition of Somali nomads<sup>17</sup>.

The common hardships and tragedies experienced, notably, the memory of rapes and murders, have certainly reinforced the sentiment of an identity and uniqueness. However, looking closer, we discover communities with very diverse backgrounds despite numerous instances of inter-marriage. On the one hand there are immigrants of Arab origin : the Hatimy, the Bida and the Asharaf. On the other hand, there are the Somali of the Brava surroundings, "the five" *shangamaas* whose minority status is more doubtful because they are part of the Tunni lineage of the Digil (fig. 3). Here we find the "three of the rear-guard", i.e. the Dafarad, numerically the largest, the Werile and the Hajuwa, as well as the "two of the shore", i.e. the Daqtira and the Goygal. As opposed to the traders of the Brava port, these clans were engaged in agricultural, breeding and fishing activities. Proof of this difference is that they are mostly found in the Hatimy camp, whilst St. Annes holds the clear-skinned Bravanis whose Arab heritage is more pronounced.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Such an opposition could also be found on the West African coast before colonization, when fishermen were living completely apart from peasants and traders in the hinterland.

<sup>17</sup> It is indeed quite ironical that Somali clans such as the Darod discriminate the Bravani on the basis of being foreigners while they themselves trace their descend from a Yemenite cheikh, Ismail Jabarti, who is said to have landed in Bosaso on the North-Eastern Coast.

<sup>18</sup> Derthick, David : Profile of US-bound Bravan Refugees. Nairobi, International Office for Migration, polycop., 1997 : pp.2 & 3.

Yet the exodus brought these groups together and eclipsed the heterogeneousness of the hinterland Tunni, who by dint of being incorporated into various groups, namely the Asharaf, the Amarani or the Bantu, could put forward their lineage self-help system on a territorial basis.<sup>19</sup> A common political experience also facilitated this process: founded in 1947, their Hizbia Digil Mirifle Movement, which included Arabs and Bantus, opposed the Darod and the Hawiye of the Somali Youth League in Mogadishu<sup>20</sup>. Today the SNU (Somali National Union) also aims to bring together the minority groups of Southern Somalia, to support a "Benadir" identity and to group the refugee associations in Mombasa with their diaspora throughout the world<sup>21</sup>. Referring to an homonymous party launched in 1940, the SNU boasts of being the only political movement that did not take up arms during the war. Run by a Nairobi based lawyer, Mohamed Rajis Mohamed, it advocates a demilitarized Somalia and tries to go beyond racial or social barriers. It has attempted to unite the "half-casts" city traders and the Bajun fishermen of the coast with the Bantu farmers of the hinterland, who formed a Somali African Muki Organization led by Mohamed Ramadan Arbaw.<sup>22</sup> All these populations live in Benadir region and were victimized for the same reason, i.e. being a minority group.

### **The Descendants of Slaves**

Yet the marginality of the Bantus is more easily seen. Made up of the descendants of slaves who came during the XIXth century and negroid groups who live in the area before the the XVIth century Somali migration, they represent less than 2% of the inhabitants of the country.<sup>23</sup> Called *habash* ("servants") or *jarrer* ("kinky hair" as opposed to *jileyc* hair) by the Somali and *shangila* by the Ethiopian Oromo along River Shebelle, they are despised. While some succeeded in making themselves respected and in working on an equal footing with their

---

<sup>19</sup> Lewis, I.M., 1994 : pp.119-21.

<sup>20</sup> At first, the Italians supported this party because it grouped farmers and traders in the only viable part of the country. But the colonizer stopped doing so in 1955 when Rome got a political deal with the Somali Youth League. To avoid anti-tribalism legislation, the Movement had to bear another name, the Constitutional Party of Independent Somalia, still with the same acronym HDMS, i.e. Hisb al-Dastuur Mustaqil al-Somal.

<sup>21</sup> Cassanelli, L.: The Role of Somali Diaspora Communities in Homeland Politics. Washington DC, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, polycop., août 1994.

<sup>22</sup> Cassanelli, L.: History and Identity among Somali Refugees: A Recent Example from Coastal Kenya. University of Pennsylvania, Dpt. of History, polycop., may 1994. 17p.

<sup>23</sup> Chapin Metz, Helen : Somalia. A Country Study. Washington DC, Dpt. of the Army, 1993: p.78-9; Luling, Virginia : The other Somali. Minority Groups in Traditional Somali Society. Hamburg, Helmut Buske Verlag, Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Somali Studies, vol.4 : pp.39-56.

neighbours, they do not belong to Somali lineages and are considered to be second class citizens.

A first category includes nearly one hundred thousand Swahili-speaking Gosha that are sometimes called *dalgolet* ("forest people" in Somali), *molema* (or *mlima*, "mountain people" in broken Swahili), *watoro* ("runaway slaves" in Oromo) or *oji* (from the Italian word *oggi*, "today", because these Bantus were said not to think beyond the present day). They are descendants of slaves, for the most part originating from Tanzania where they were loaded onto ships from Kilwa Kivinje or Dar es Salaam to Brava in Somalia.<sup>24</sup> Although the British forbade the export of slaves North of Lamu in 1845 and the French stopped buying from Kilwa in 1864, Somali continued this trade from Zanzibar. Up to 300,000 East African people were sold on the Benadir coast between 1770 and 1896, that is, two-thirds of those en route for India, Persia or Arabia. In the 1870's, 10,000 Tanzanian slaves were sent to Somalia annually, be it by ship or by caravan through Lamu.<sup>25</sup> Those who succeeded in their escape bids hid along the Juba and Shebelle rivers on land that was not used by Somali nomads because humidity and tsetse flies' decimated livestock. They were joined by slaves liberated by the British Navy, fugitives who had escaped Italian forced labor in nearby plantations and servants freed by their indigeneous masters from coastal cities (fig. 2 & 4). Places like Jumbo, on the mouth of the Juba River, developed rather well before Kismayo became a permanent settlement in 1869.

Some became farmers in the Jamame area between Camsuma, Banta and Malenda, that is, the Kismayo hinterland around what the Italians used to call Margherita. They formed small autonomous communities whose villages were very scattered because their founders, the *gamas*, strictly controlled the entry of new comers, the *majoro*, and because the latter often preferred to establish their own communities further away. Despite a very high rate of exogamy due to the

---

<sup>24</sup> Lehman, D.J. : Resettlement of the Musunguli, Somali Refugees of South Eastern African origins. Nairobi, UNHCR, Worcester, Holy Cross College, polycop., 1993. 10p. ; Declich, F. : " Gendered Narratives, History, and Identity : Two Centuries Along the Juba River Among the Zigula and Shanbara ". *History in Africa* (Atlanta) vol.22, 1995 : pp.93-122.

<sup>25</sup> These figures are certainly overestimated when compared with early British and Italian data of 30,000 Gosha along the Juba River, already a suspect evidence because colonial officers usually tried to emphasize the importance of their areas. Cf. Cassanelli, L.V. : *The Shaping of Somali Society*. Philadelphie, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982 ; Beachey, R.W. : *The Slave Trade of Eastern Africa*. Londres, Rex Collings, 1976 : p.153-4 ; Collister, P. : *The Last Days of Slavery*. Dar Es Salaam, East African Literature Bureau, 1961 : pp.39-68 ; Martin, E. & Ryan, T.C.I. : " The Slave Trade of the Bajun and Benadir Coasts ". *Transafrican Journal of History* (Nairobi) vol.9, n°1, 1980 : pp.122-4 ; Sheriff, A. : " Localization and Social Composition of the East African Slave Trade, 1858-1873 ", in Clarence-Smith, W.C. (ed.) : *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century*. London, 1989.

lack of women, these communities tried to regroup along ethnic lines and to preserve their culture, especially the Zigua, the first to arrive as they claim, who sold themselves as slaves to get away from the Eastern Tanzania's *kidyakingo* famine (the "cattle hide" that people were forced to eat) and then escaped from Somali Hawiye clans, the Abgal's Matan and the Wadan. They however ended up joining together under a "sultan" of Yao origin, Nassib Bunda, who, with the help of the Tunni from Brava, negotiated free passage for an Egyptian expedition in 1875.<sup>26</sup>

Figure 4  
"Mushunguli" of the Juba River according to their origins<sup>27</sup>

	Zigua	Zaramo	Magindo	Yao	Makua	Manyasa
Origin	Pare & Usambara Mountains, Handeni & Pangani, Tanga Province (Tanzania)	Bagamoyo, Dar es Salaam & Kisarawe, Pwani Province (Tanzania)	Lindi Province (Tanzania)	Masasi, Mtwara Province & Tunduru, Ruvuma Province (Tanzania) Lichinga & Mandimba, Nyasa Province (Mozambique)	Milange, Nyasa Province (Mozambique)	Kunyanga, Lake Nyasa (Malawi)
Number in Somalia before and after the war	20,000 -> 12,000	5,000 -> 2,000	18,000 -> 12,000	21,000 -> 15,000	8,000 -> 5,000	24,000 -> 15,000
Deaths through war and famine	4,000	2,000	3,000	2,500	1,500	7,000

Source : Lehman, D.J. : Resettlement of the Musunguli, Somali Refugees of South Eastern African origins. Nairobi, UNHCR, Worcester, Holy Cross College, polycop., 1993. 10p.

The end of the XIXth Century was probably the best period for the Goshia people. Then the colonizers came and imposed forced labour. At Independance,

<sup>26</sup> A Bantu hero, Nassib Bunda died in an Italian prison in Mogadishu in 1906. Cf. Cassanelli, L.V. : " Social Construction on the Somali Frontier. Bantu Former Slave Communities in the Nineteenth Century ", in Kopytoff, I. (ed.) : The African Frontier. Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987 : pp.216-38. See also Prins, A.H.J. : " The Somaliland Bantu ". *Bulletin of the International Committee on Urgent Anthropological and Ethnological Research* vol.3, 1960 : pp.28-31 & Grottanelli, V. : " I Bantu del Jiuba nelle tradizioni dei Wazegua ". *Geographica Helvetica* n°8, 1953 : pp.249-60.

<sup>27</sup> Only the main groups are mentionned. Others, briefly described by the colonial literature, seem to have disappeared, like the Bisa from Uganda, the Nyamwezi and the Makale (a Yao clan) from Tanzania, the Kikuyu, the Kamba and the Pokomo from Kenya, or the Shenzi, the Mrima, the Coma, the Mzaniga, the Mzugura and the Mtania; Mahindi refers to one of their biggest village, Hindi.

the Gosha were so marginal that they were advocating federalism. Some recommended the Juba region to be annexed by Kenya when at the same time Somali from Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti were fighting for a Greater Somalia<sup>28</sup>. From 1990, the Gosha received the full brunt of the civil war<sup>29</sup>. This was mainly due to a confrontation between two factions of the Somali Patriotic Movement, the one of general Siad Hersi “Morgan” and the one of colonel Ahmed Omar Jess.

The exodus thus exacerbated the feeling of discrimination. As opposed to other Kenyan communities who claim to have Tanzanian origin, such as the Kamba of Kitui with the Nyamwezi of Tanzania, who colloquially call them *atani*, the Gosha of Somalia are nostalgic about a mythical return to the land of their ancestors. They forged their own culture in exile and refugee status altered their collective identity, more or less like the “Benadiri”. The name Gosha is now refused or left behind. It is considered pejorative because it refers to the “sleeping sickness” of the tsetse fly, i.e. idleness. One instead prefers to be called “Mushunguli” although Mushangolo was only one of the nine *gamas* founders of fugitive slave communities along the Juba River. The word Mushunguli could also be a corruption of Zigula, the predominant Zigua group amongst them, or would recall the mythic Shungwaya Bantu kingdom that existed before Somali migrations. Other favourite names are *mahawai* or *shanbara*, a local alliance of five Bantu brothers<sup>30</sup>.

Only a small proportion of these “Mushunguli” spoke a Bantu language while in Somalia. But three quarters of those who sought refuge in Kenya wanted to “return” to Tanzania. More than 3,000 succeeded in getting there while others stopped in Kwale, a small town to the South of Mombasa. Their settlement in an urban setting in Kenya could therefore drag on, as happened with the slaves from Arabia, India and East Africa who were repatriated to Freretown and Rabai, in the Mombasa suburbs, at the beginning of the century.<sup>31</sup> A project, which aimed at giving them land in Tanzania, was interrupted by the Eastern Zaire crisis at the end of 1996, when the Tanzanian authorities decided to repatriate Rwandese refugees

---

<sup>28</sup> Castagno, A.A. [1964], “Somali Republic”, in Coleman, J.A. & Rosberg, C.G. (ed.), *Political Parties and National Integration in Africa*, Berkeley, University of California Press, p.534.

<sup>29</sup> Prendergast, John : The gun talks louder than the voice. Somalia’s continuing cycles of violence. Washington, Center of Concern, polycop., juil. 1994 : pp.16-7.

<sup>30</sup> Cassanelli, L.V., 1987 : p.225 ; Declich, F. : “I Goscia della regione del Medio Giuba. Un gruppo etnico di origine bantu”. *Africa* (Rome) vol.42, n°4, déc. 1987 : p.585 ; Declich, F. : “Multiple Oral Traditions and Ethno-Historical Issues Among the Gosha : Three Examples”, in -Mohamed-Abdi, M. (ed.) : *Anthropologie Somalienne*. Paris, Annales littéraires de l’Université de Besançon n°495, 1993 : pp.89-93.

<sup>31</sup> Harris, J.E. : *Repatriates and Refugees in a Colonial Society : The Case of Kenya*. Washington, Howard University Press, 1987. 201p.

by force. In any case the position of the "Mushunguli" on the matter was not unanimous. Those of the Dadaab camps, 7,600 of them, maintained that they wanted to go to Tanzania because they were living in poor conditions and had to protect themselves from armed bandits by seeking refuge in enclosed areas. On the other hand, those who came from Kismayo were better integrated into Somali society. They were already used to living in the city and were not keen on following a "cultural revolution" in the Tanzanian countryside. Some returned to Somalia. Some 3,300 others preferred to remain on the Kenyan Coast and cultivated the surrounding fields when the Marafa camp was closed. Some 3,000 eventually reached Mkuyu near Handeni in Tanzania.

The "minority" stance adopted by the "Mushunguli" is thus not homogeneous. Moreover the "Mushunguli" are not the only Somalis of Bantu origin, neither are they the only descendants of slaves. The slave trade was stopped by the colonial Italians in 1903 but bondage continued in the interior up to the 1920's, officially to respect local customs, but in reality because the authorities did not have the means to buy back the domestic staff from their masters.<sup>32</sup> The slaves from the hinterland included Oromo prisoners of war (or Galla as they were called at the time in Ethiopia) and not just the Mushunguli. They could not inherit, had no legal rights and were literally at the very end of the social scale, underneath the low Sab castes. Their descendants could be promoted in cases of mixed marriage where the father was Sab or Somali, but only if the father recognised the offspring. As for the fugitive slaves who lived in the swampy areas of the Shebelle River at Awai, they were quite different from the Gosha of Juba. Their villages were not established through ethnic background but according to the clan of their former masters, the Gurreh, the Mobilen, the Helai, the Bimal and the Tunni. Since they integrated with the surrounding population and accepted protection from a Digil clan called the Jiddu, it has become very difficult to distinguish them from the Bantus who were there before the Somali.<sup>33</sup>

Apart from the "Mushunguli", there is a second category of negroid groups made up of pre-Somali settlers, the so-called Zendj. The Arab travellers and Swahili referred to them as Kashour ("fugitives") and Wa-Nyika ("bush people"), respectively. Historically, most of these Zendj were chased away by Ethiopian Oromo in the XVIth century from their Shungwaya shrine towards the present Kenyan border, or deported in the VIIth century as slaves into Mesopotamia,

---

<sup>32</sup> Only 4,300 Bantu slaves were officially liberated by the Italians between 1900 and 1916. Cf. Cassanelli, L.V. : "The Ending of Slavery in Italian Somalia : Liberty and the Control of Labor, 1890-1935", in Miers, S. & Roberts, R. (ed.) : *The End of Slavery in Africa*. Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1988 : pp.308-31.

<sup>33</sup> Cassanelli, L.V., 1987 : p.232-3.

today's Iraq, where they rebelled against the Abasside Caliphate in 869. Others remained in Somalia as farmers, hunters, fishermen, and artisans. They lived between the Shebelle and Juba Rivers in the greener part of Somalia, especially Jalalaksi, Kurtunware, Sablale, Dujuma, Garbahare and Jowhar districts where the Barre government forcibly moved 30,000 nomads, victims of the 1974 drought, and then a further 100,000, displaced by the Ogaden war in 1977 (fig. 2).

Situated between the Darod and the Hawiye, the area is strategic. It is of great economic importance notably due to its banana, cotton and sugar plantations. From 1911 in Jowhar (ex-Giohar), Italians like the prince of Savoy, Luigi Amedeo, started to expropriate the local farmers and resettle them in specific villages. At Independence, the Italians went away and were not replaced by the new elites in charge because cattle trade and urban assets were more profitable at this time. With a "socialist" regime in 1969, such a fertile land was nationalized anyway and was only available to cultivators through fifty years leases. The government fixed the prices of agricultural products and could purchase up to 80% of the harvests. Under Co-operative Act n°70 of 1973, petty farmers were expropriated again to leave place for the State orientated Fanoole Rice Farm, Mogambo Irrigation Project and Juba Sugar Complex.

The Land Registration Act n°73 of 1975 then confined the Bantu peasants to small plots. Because of corruption, deeds were expensive and required at least a trip to the nearest administrative post. Actually, the land was confiscated and redistributed to the President Barre's Darod clan, the Marehan. An administrative reshuffle confirmed this trend. The only province not to be divided into smaller units, Shebelle could not get more grants from the central government. On the contrary, Gedo, Middle Juba and Lower Juba provinces were created for three Darod clans, respectively the Marehan, Ogaden and Mijertein. In the 1980's, land speculation was eventually prompted by the Bardera dam project on Juba River, the abolition of price controls on grains, and the growing demand for fruits, vegetables and charcoal to supply expanding urban centers. Inflation, a drop in cattle exports and a return of the Somali diaspora from the Gulf also urged to invest in durable assets<sup>34</sup>.

After the fall of Siad Barre in 1991, the Hawiye winners seized these valuable lands.<sup>35</sup> Conscripted into the lowest echelons of the military hierarchy at the time

---

<sup>34</sup> Cassanelli, L. : " Somali Land Resource Issues in Historical Perspective ", in Clarke, W. & Herbst, J. (ed.) : Learning from Somalia. The Lessons of armed humanitarian intervention. Boulder, Westview, 1997 : p.71.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Besteman, C. & Cassanelli, L. (ed.) : The Struggle for Land in Southern Somalia. The War Behind the War. Boulder (Colorado), Westview Press, 1996 ; Waal (de), A. : " The UN and Somalia's Invisible Minorities ".



of the Ogaden war in 1977, Bantu farmers were not ready to fight. SAMO (Somali African Muki Organisation), the only movement that could represent them, kept a low profile and its militia, the Helai of Colonel Mohamed Nur Aliyow, adopted a defensive position. *Samo* means “peace” in Somali and *muki* refers to a tree that grows along rivers and whose twisted roots remind how the Bantus are scattered in the country.

Indeed the Negroid groups of Southern Somalia are made up of heterogeneous communities that are relatively widespread. At independence, they had a Shidle Party but no political movement was able to unite them. Most of these communities are in fact linked to a Somali lineage with a more or less inferior status.<sup>36</sup> Those of the Shebelle River thus acknowledge the authority of Hawiye clans (the Shidle are associated with the Mobilen, the Kabole with the Molcal, the Makanne with the Badi-Addo, the Rer Issa and the Shebelle with the Ajuran). Those of the Juba River, the Gobawein, work for the Gasar Gudda of Lugh, a Rahanwein lineage which is seen by the other Somali clans as a low Sab caste, but is considered by the Rahanwein as being noble (*doula*), claiming the title of Chief (*Au*) due to its Arab origin and its history as leaders of the Digil. Along the Juba River, one also finds hunting, farming and fishing communities such as the Ribí and the Boni. The Boni, or Bon, escaped the Oromo and now pay a tribute to the Somali<sup>37</sup>.

Other groups between the Juba and Shebelle Rivers are despised. The Eile of the Bur Eibi hills, for example, have a name which etymologically, comes from *ei*, their hunting dog. It is important to understand that all these names are appellations and not tribes, since the Somali deny the Bantus any genealogy that would legitimize their presence in the South of the country. The Helai of Baidoa thus claim to be a homonymous Rahanwein lineage, settled at Bur Acaba; this relationship is obviously denied by the latter. The same case goes for the Tunni Torre of the hinterland who for some of them claim a relationship with the Ajuran, the Galjaal and the Gurreh of the Hawiye family, and for some others with the Helai and the Hadam of the Rahanwein family. Actually, they are the vassals of

---

*Cultural Survival Quarterly* vol.18, n°1, 1994 ; Helander, B. : “Vulnerable Minorities in Somalia and Somaliland”. *Indigenous Affairs* (Copenhagen) n°2, 1995 : pp.21-3 ; Helander, B. : *The Social Dynamics of Southern Somali Agro-pastoralism*. Uppsala, Uppsala University Press, 1986. ; Prendergast, J. : *The bones of our children are not yet buried*. Washington, Center of Concern, polycop., janv. 1994 : pp.5-12. On the “banana war”, see *Libération* (Paris) 10/2/1995.

<sup>36</sup> Lewis, I.M., 1994 : pp.39, 41 & 42.

<sup>37</sup> Piga de Carolis, A. : “Il quadro etnico tradizionale nelle prospettive di sviluppo della valle del Giuba”. *Africa* (Rome) vol.35, n°1, mars 1980 : pp.17-42.

the Tunni Digil of the Brava Coast, who themselves established a relationship with the Darod of General Morgan during the war, a position which was hardly shared.

### **The low Sab Castes**

In Somalia, Negroid origin and the status of the descendants of slaves are two discriminatory factors which have to be treated with precaution because of the subtleties of the social hierarchy. The low Sab castes suffer severe social exclusion and could also claim the status of "vulnerable communities". But they are part of a Somali lineage system and are not Bantu. In this regard, one must recognise the double sense of the word *sab*.<sup>38</sup>

In one case, notably as the Darod and the Isaaq of the North regard it, the word *sab* refers to professional castes without territorial or ethnic foundation, less than 1% of the country's population.<sup>39</sup> These communities' status is quite similar to the one of the Watta hunters amongst Oromo, the Fuga magicians amongst Gurage and the Waito or Taib sorcerers amongst Amhara in Ethiopia. In Somalia, three quarters of them are shoemakers or barbers who carry out circumcision: they are called "outcasts", Midgan, and try to impose the new name of "harmless" Madiban since the fall of Siad Barre. Less than a quarter are Tumul blacksmiths, who often became city mechanics. One also finds a handful of Yibir hunters, said to have magic power, and some weavers called Yahhar according to the shuttle's name of their weaving loom in the South.

These lower castes have more or less servile roles in relation to noble lineages. Not being tied to their masters *ad vitam aeternam*, they are not slaves as such but untouchable people. They eat the offal that islam prohibits. They can only possess donkeys or sheeps, but no cattle or camels. A child born of a Somali and a Sab mother keeps his inferior status if he is not recognized by the father. When the latter is of low extraction, the child is in principle killed at birth and the Somali mother is exposed to public disgrace. These communities cannot demand reparations from a Somali in case of murder, unless they do it through their master.

---

<sup>38</sup> Lewis, I.M., 1994 : pp.51-3 & 125-6.

<sup>39</sup> Hence Somaliland Parliament in 1997 allocated 9 of its 164 seats to minority groups, 1 each for the Gaboye (Midgan and Yibir), the Tumul, the Arabs of Yemenite origin and the Gugura Oromo, and 2 each for Akiisho and Madigan Bantus of the West and Jibrail and Gahayle Bantus of the East. See also Kirk, J.W.C. : " The Yibirs and Midgans of Somaliland, their traditions and dialects ". *Journal of the Royal African Society* vol.4, n°13, 1904 : pp.91-108.

Still, they commanded some respect, especially the Yibir because of their reputation in witchcraft. Amongst the Hawiye in Central Somalia, the members of this caste are called the “delivery’s beggars” (*umulo-tuug*): they sing and praise the new born child when he’s a boy and they expect some presents (*samaanyo*) which, according to a legend, compensate for the killing by a Somali of their Yibir ancestor, King Bucur Bacayr. As they could be easily manipulated, some Midgan were also appointed Ministers under Siad Barre’s regime. Hence at the beginning of the 1970’s, the number three in the military junta was one Mohamed Ali Samatar, the Army’s chief of staff and the Republic’s second vice-president.

In a very different case, the word *sab* refers to an ancestor of Somali lineages skilled in agricultural practices and cattle rearing but despised by the clans in the North who breed camels (fig. 2). These lineages are Digil, mainly the Tunni and the Rahanwein, more than a million people, almost a quarter of the Somali population. Historically the Tunni of Brava fought with the Darod. The fall of Siad Barre in Mogadishu in 1991, which precipitated a Darod exodus towards Kenya, forced the Tunni to flee looting. As for the Rahanwein, they started to organise their own army, the Somali Democratic Movement, which held the Baidoa region. They however split into two factions at the beginning of 1992, with Yusuf Ali Yusuf and Abdulkadir Mohamed Adan "Zobbe" on General Aïdid and "President" Ali Mahdi’s sides respectively. Baidoa, their "capital-city", fell into the hands of General Aïdid in September 1995.

The Rahanwein constitute a heterogenous community that includes few real descendants (*dalad*) of Digil lineages. Until the upper castes of the North expelled the Galla from the Horn of Africa, these Sab were not even considered as Somali. They spoke the Galla language of the Oromo of Ethiopia and their *maymay* dialect differed from the *mahaatiri* version of the clans of the North, which was used in 1972 for transcribing Somali into the Roman alphabet. However, the Rahanwein succeeded in forming a cohesive group and in assimilating external influences, due to their alliances based on oathing (*balan*).<sup>40</sup> With nobles (*bilis*) and commoners (*boon*), their society is more hierarchical than the Northern nomadic’s one. As opposed to other big Somali confederations, Rahanwein identity rests more on land tenure than on genealogical affiliations. The name Rahanwein ("large crowd") evokes at once, incorporation and disparity (fig. 3). Blurred genealogies and oral history allow all kinds of recomposition. Genealogies do not reflect so much the

---

<sup>40</sup> Lewis, I.M., 1994 : pp.34-40 & 95 ; Lewis, I.M. : “ From Nomadism to Cultivation : the Expansion of Political Solidarity in Southern Somalia ”, in Douglas, M. & Kaberry, P. (ed.) : *Man in Africa*. London, Tavistock, 1969 : pp.59-77.

past but the prevailing political and numerical power, which makes it easier to "downplay" names of smaller or extinct lineages.<sup>41</sup> In Somalia, the Rahanwein can amplify his belonging to the wider Somali family, while as a refugee in Kenya, he can insist on being a victim due to the fact that he is from a lower caste.

Indeed the upper castes despise the Sab for being a mixture of Oromo, Bantu, Arab and Somali. For instance, it is difficult to be sure whether the Dube lineage is part of a first wave of Digil migrants or if it is a remnants of Bantu people. While the Jiambelul are said to belong to the Rahanwein even though they do not appear on any genealogical tree, the Begeđa farmers in Afgoi include a very high number of slaves and they at once claim to be Rahanwein and first generation Digil. Another Rahanwein clan, the Ashya-Omarđin, emphasises an Arab ancestry which is supposed to explain its contacts with the Brava trading communities. Yet these groups are undoubtedly part of the Somali lineages system and they will still be able to negotiate when reconciliation comes.

On the contrary, minorities who are not part of it, that is Bantus or half-castes, argue that they will never benefit from any compensation or mediation procedures amongst the Somali clans. In this way, the Bajun fishermen constitute a community apart, since, they do not lay claim to being Somali, Bantu or Swahili and they may have Indonesian or Yemenite origins.<sup>42</sup> Locally called *tiku*, they are essentially found on the islands of Koyama, Ngumi, Chovayi or Chula and in the city of Kismayo, of which they claim ownership (fig. 2). Even before independence, the Bajun felt marginalised and formed a short-lived political movement, the Fiqarini Youth. Since then, the region has been the scene of battles between the Hawiye of the United Somali Congress and the Darod who escaped from Mogadishu and entrenched themselves in the South (Marehan of the Somali National Front, Ogaden of the Somali Patriotic Movement and Harti of the Salvation Democratic Front). The Bajun were in good terms with the Darod, but were accused of treachery when they refused to fight against the Hawiye. While they organized the Darod exodus to Kenya, they were then blamed for enriching themselves and sinking refugee ships which were refused entry by the Kenyan authorities.

-----

---

<sup>41</sup> Lewis, I.M. : Blood and bone. The call of kinship in Somali society. Lawrenceville (NJ), Red Sea Press, 1994 : pp.96 & 101.

<sup>42</sup> Grottanelli, Vinigi : Pescatori dell'Oceano Indiano : Saggio etnologico preliminare sui Bagiuni, Bantu costieri dell'oltregiubia. Rome, Cremonese, 1955. 409p.

All these examples show that the concept of minority is quite ambiguous and that its manipulation by refugees hardly clarifies it. All these minorities form a third of the Somali population and the war precipitated a sense of political solidarity<sup>43</sup>. Assimilated with that of victim, the minority notion is thus taken within a conflict dimension, a suffering community and not a demographical fact. The degree of discrimination overrides the number, be it a question of social class (the low caste Sab), professional categories (Bajun fishermen) or foreign elements (the traders of Arab origin). In order to obtain a visa for a third country of asylum, the confusion between the refugee and the vanquished is consciously promoted. The misunderstanding is obvious: the Tutsi of Burundi and Rwanda or the Whites of South Africa before 1994 show very well that demographic minority does not mean political weakness.

As debatable as it might be, the "minority" position of the refugees in Mombasa fits in well into an urban argument which tries to show that the option of a transfer to the camps of Northern Kenya is not possible, as much for security reason (to be kept away from the Somali mainstream majority) as for reasons related to economic opportunity (to take advantage of the city's facilities). Since the fears of these refugees are justified, identity reconstruction should not be seen only as of malicious intent or fraud. Rather than falsification, it is a question of alteration, a social reorganization that the historian L. Cassanelli compares to the quest for legitimacy during colonial times, when certain communities reinvented their past in order to deal with external forces and to impose themselves as main middlemen.<sup>44</sup> Such "riggings" are quite common with African oral civilisation. In Mombasa, the tragedy of the exodus compelled refugees to group together and present a coherent picture to the international community and the Kenyan authorities. This phenomenon is not peculiar to the Somali or the "Benadiri".<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Cassanelli, L., 1997 : p.76.

<sup>44</sup> Cassanelli, L., mai 1994 : p.15. See also Jimale Ahmed, Ali (ed.) : *The Invention of Somalia*. Lawrenceville, Red Sea Press, 1995. 263p.

<sup>45</sup> As for the civil war in the Sudan from 1983, forced displacements and humanitarian aid created an Uduk entity made up of Kunama, Berta, Meban, Hill Burun, Gumuz, Komo, Kwama, Shyita and Mao in Blue Nile region. These minorities were right on the front line. Christianised from 1938 and merged into the predominantly muslim Northern region from 1953, they were specific targets of Arab Rufaa militia who suspected them of helping the Southern rebels. Another example, which reminds the one of the "Mushunguli" in Somalia, shows that ethnic labels are more than convenient groupings and can really create new collective identities, possibly for quite some time: during the first civil war in Sudan, from 1955 to 1972, many christian and animist villagers escaped to towns and melted with locals by becoming Nubi, i.e. muslim urban dwellers who were soldiers for Egyptian then British armies; the same thing happened after 1979 for Northern Ugandan ethnies who were believed to have supported Amin Dada. Cf. James, W. : "Uduk Resettlement", in Allen, T. (ed.) : *In search of cool ground. War, flight and homecoming in Northeast Africa*. Trenton (NJ), Africa World Press, 1996 : pp.184-6; James, W. : *Kwanim Pa : the making of the Uduk People. An ethnographic study of survival in the Sudan-Ethiopian borderlands*. Oxford,

In Mombasa, moreover, aid workers did not scrutinise historical or anthropological correctness of information provided by refugees. They preferred to rely on a region or a locality to aim the most vulnerable refugee groups, a position that neglected sociological complexities involved. In the Bravani case for instance, those responsible for the resettlement to the United States said that, as opposed to Somali clans, this community defined itself by home town rather than by its tribal affiliation, which in a certain sense is alright but opens the way for imposters.<sup>46</sup> With meagre resources, it was however impossible for immigration officers to check the genealogy of each individual, unless, like the Finnish or the Danish, they undertook costly genetic research on refugees who put forward their right to family reunion with exiled relatives!<sup>47</sup> Due to lack of time and money, aid agencies worked as fast as they could and promoted two fundamental confusions, that of discrimination with minority and that of community with land. The only granted fact was that these populations would surely become minorities in their new host country<sup>48</sup>.

---

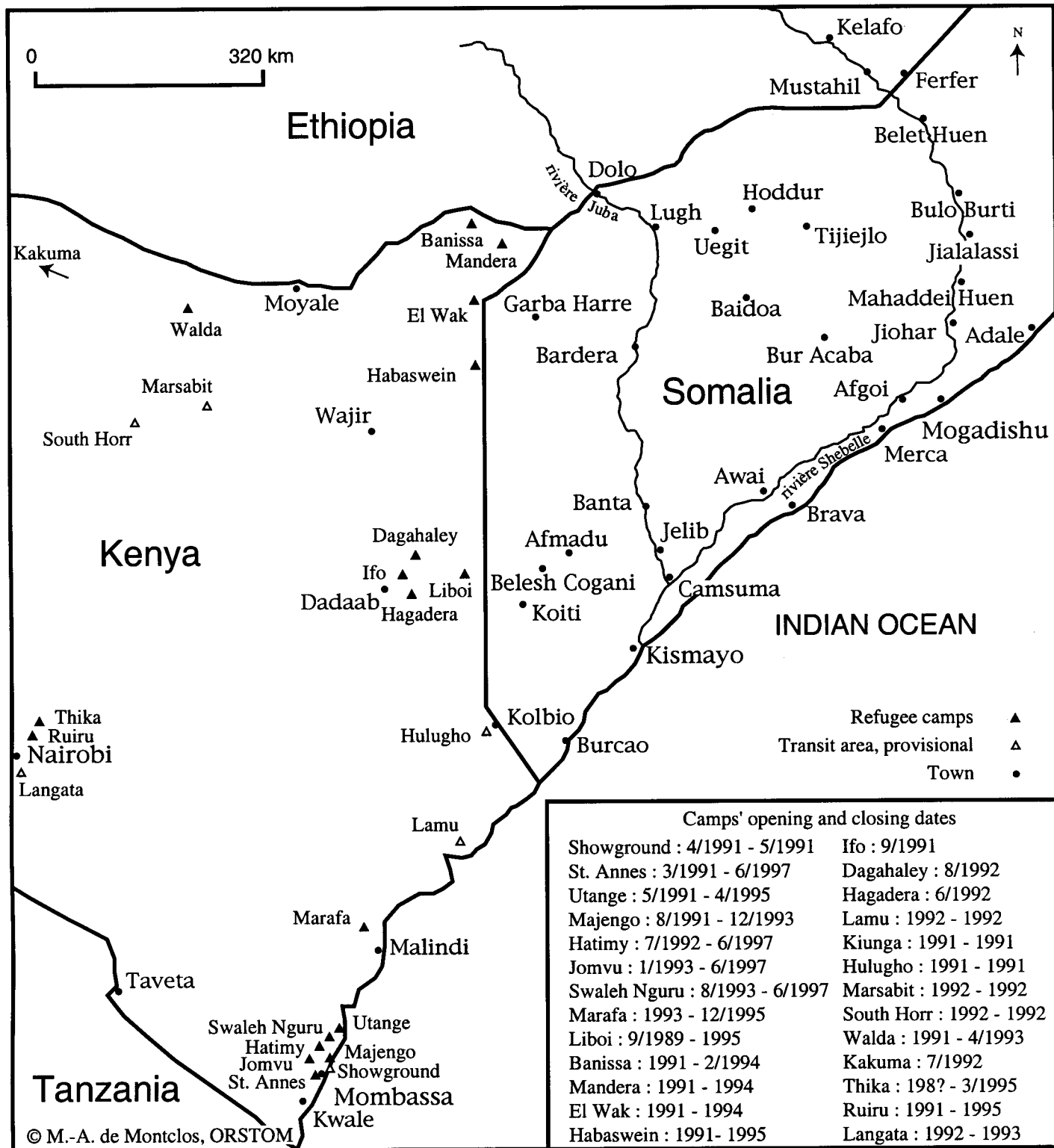
Clarendon Press, 1979; Donham, D. & James, W. (ed.) : The southern marches of Imperial Ethiopia : essays in social anthropology and history. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986; Crozon, A. : “ Les Nubi en Afrique de l’Est : Construction d’une identité ethnique ”. *Les Cahiers de l’IFRA* (Nairobi) n°4, mars 1997 : pp.22-3.

<sup>46</sup> Refugee Information Series : Barawan Refugees from Somalia. Washington, US Catholic Conference, 1997 : p.2.

<sup>47</sup> Canadians and Australians do charge for DNA tests. The problem of extended family in Somalia is a never ending story because it might include the four muslim wives, *shegat* dependants, servants and “ inherited relatives ” when a man marries the widow of his deceased brother or cousin, or the sister or female cousin of his deceased wife.

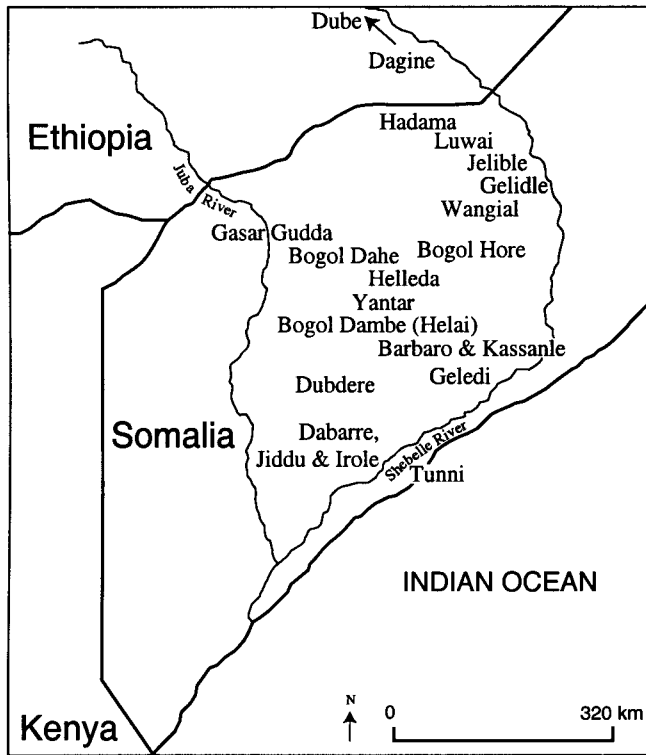
<sup>48</sup> Bach, R.L. : “ Third Country Resettlement ”, in Loescher, G. & Monahan, L. (ed.) : Refugees and International Relations. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989 : pp.326-8.

Figure 1  
Southern Somalia's minorities and their exodus towards Kenya

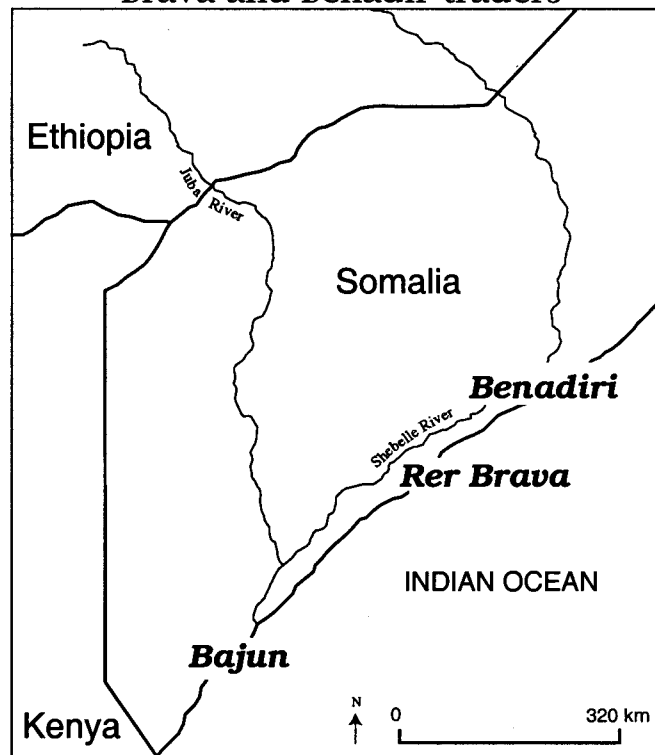


## Map 2: Minority groups in Southern Somalia

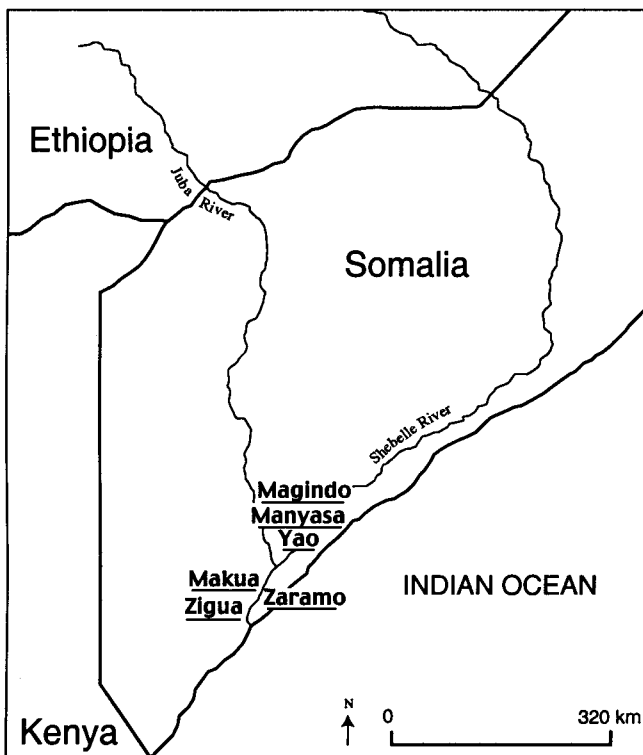
### The Digil clans (low Sab casts)



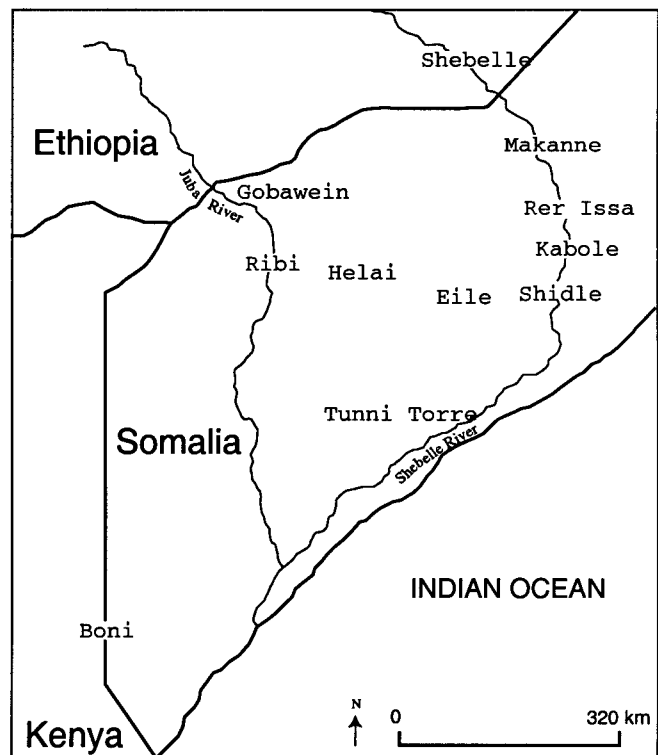
### Bajun fishermen and Brava and Benadir traders



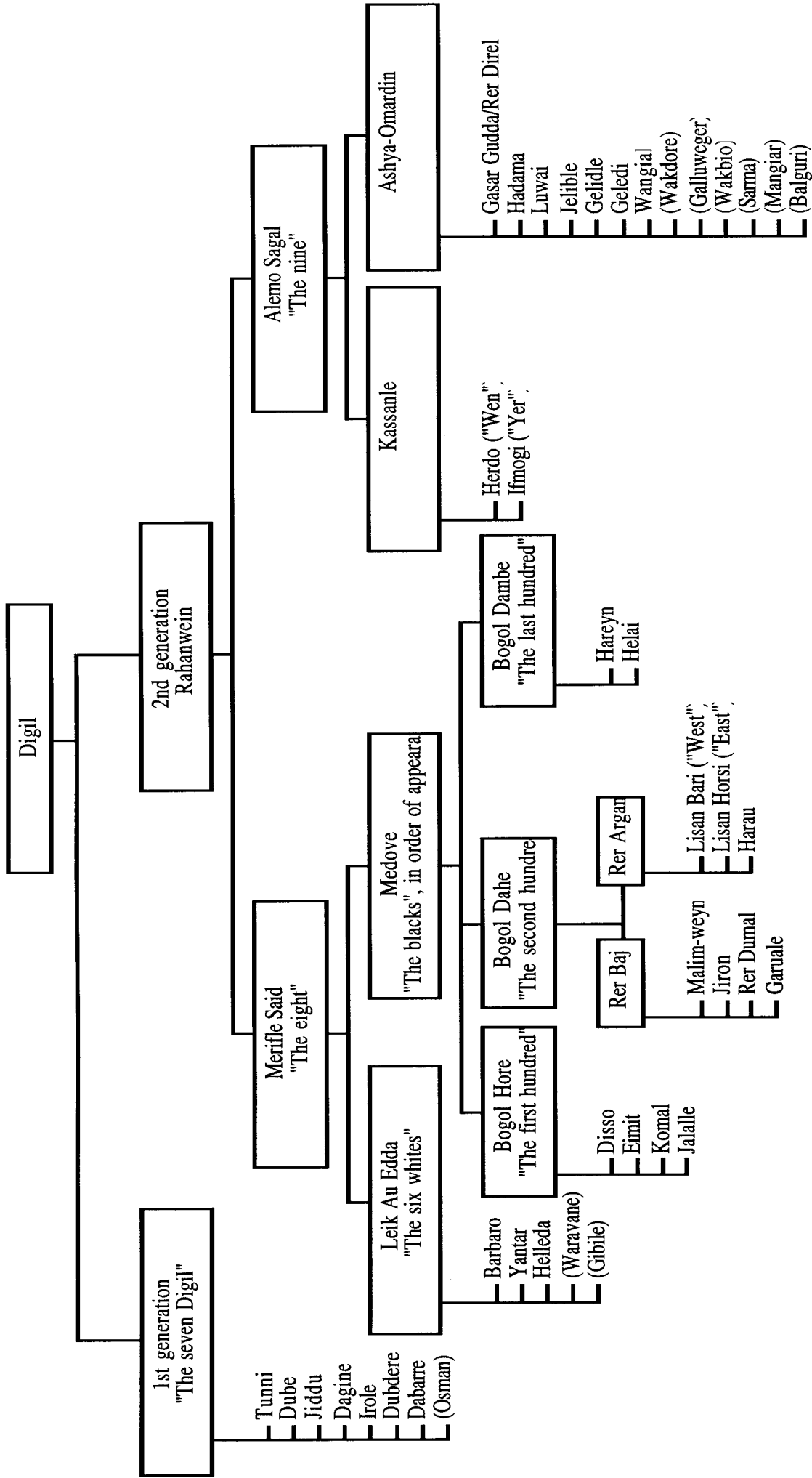
### The descendants of slaves Mushunguli/Gosha



### Other Bantu groups







Source: Lewis, I.M., 1994: pp.31-40.

(Sarma) = absorbed or extinct lineage.

Figure 3 : The low casts Sab, primarily agro-pastoralists