

Banaadiri – The Renewal of a Millenary Identity

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Book Review: The Banaadirs (also spelled "Benadir") are people with their roots in ancient Arabia, Persia and South and Central Asia. Their name is derived from a Persian word "bandar" which means "harbor" or port, reflecting their origins as sea-faring traders who crossed the Indian Ocean to the easternmost part of Africa and established centers of commerce. The first Banaadiri communities were established in what is today southern Somalia about one thousand year ago. Banaadiri historical profile started probably in the Mesopotamia, crossed Yemen and reached the East coast of Africa where the Banaadiri civilization grew and flourished. Profile and book review.

Key words: Banaadiri, Historical profile, Horn of Africa, Banaadiri Coast, Southern Somalia, ancient Yemen, Mogadishu, Ibn Batuta, Kingdom of Saba (Sheba), Perso-Arab civilization, Indian Ocean commerce, Portuguese in East Africa, Art and Culture, Nuredin Hagi Scikel.

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BANAADIR IN HISTORY

The history of East Africa without its association with Islam and Arab influences is like European history without Rome and Greece. East African region had historical and cultural ties with Arabia and Persia because of geographical proximity and the impact of monsoon winds which blow all the way to Zanzibar for six month and the rest six month to the Persian Gulf.

Unlike hinterland, the "Banaadiri Coast" had more cultural contacts with the people plying Indian Ocean trade routes following the monsoon winds over the last two thousand years.

The most important source on the Indian Ocean during this period is "Periplus Maris Erythraen" (Circumnavigation of the Erythraen Sea) written by an unknown Greek commercial agent based in Egypt, written about 156 CE. Since the Periplus of the Erythraean Seas, the Banaadiri Coast was an ancient trading center. From India and Arabia, trading sea vessels anchored at Mogadishu, as the first natural harbor in the Horn of Africa to trade and take supplies on their journey to Zanzibar, Kilwa and Sofala

Because of natural highways of the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, the East African coast had received many visitors. The Archeological investigations are still in an embryonic stage but are supporting oral traditions. The excavation during 1910 proved that the ancient Egyptian, Sumerians and Sabaeans visited the East Africa coast for international trade.

Trade during 3000 BC flourished between Mesopotamia, Southern Arabia and the East African coast. It was also in the Persian Gulf where the first ship building industry started. Other early visitor to the East African coast were the Phoenicians, a navigating people from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

At the very beginning of the first Century CE, all the region stretching up to Zanzibar was part of the Kingdom of Saba (115 BC-525 CE), also known as Sheba. The Sabaeans were maritime people with large kingdom in Yemen and used the seasonal monsoon winds to travel regularly to and from as far as Zanzibar. They sailed south between November to February, during the Northeast Monsoon, carrying beads, the Chinese

porcelain and clothes. Between March and September, they returned to north on the Southwest Monsoon, carrying food grains, mangroves poles for timber, spices, gold from Sofala, ivory and ebony.

The Arabs knew the East African coast as "Zinjibar" and hence the romantic name "Zanzibar" is derived. Chronicles indicate the existence of Perso-Arab civilization in East Africa before the birth of the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH).

Islam reached peacefully East Africa during the seventh century, and by the tenth century it became a dominant religion in Ethiopia, Somalia and the East African islands of Zanzibar, Pemba, Kilwa, Mafia, Pate, Lamu and Mombasa.

During the later Middle Ages, i.e. in those crucial three hundred years that appear to have been the formative period of a number of towns and nations along the Indian Ocean shores, the Arabs and Persians spun a network of Moslem connection across the waters in all directions.

Ibn Battuta during his visit in 1331 observes that Arabic was already the common literary and the commercial language spoken all over these coastal islands. Ibn Battuta was extremely marveled at the splendor of Mogadishu. In 1516, the Portuguese navigator Duarte calls it "a very big town of blacks called "Magadoxo":

"It is ruled by a Sultan. It undertakes much commerce of different merchandise and many ships arrive here from the big Kingdom of Cambaya, bringing large quantities of clothes of different types and different goods and spices"...

And again in the 18th century, Sultan Sayed bin – Said of Oman calls it "the most brilliant of all the princesses of Arabia".

Mogadishu known as Hamar by the native founding Rer Hamar people, emerged through the centuries as the cultural and religious center of the Banaadiri Coast. This prosperous trade was rudely interrupted by the arrival of the Portuguese who came round from the other side of Africa, suddenly and unpredictably with bigger and faster ships and better guns.

Within thirteen years, by 1511, the Portuguese had made themselves masters of the Indian Ocean. More than ever before, the Indian Ocean became a link, a unifier of cultures.

The Banaadirs (also spelled "Benadir") are people with their roots in ancient Arabia, Persia and South and Central Asia. Their name is derived from a Persian word "bandar" which means "harbor" or port, reflecting their origins as sea-faring traders who crossed the Indian Ocean to the easternmost part of Africa and established centers of commerce which linked that continent with Asia.

The first Banaadiri communities were established in what is today southern Somalia about one thousand year ago. Their reputation as the settlements of a prosperous and peace loving people was set down in written accounts by foreign travelers to Africa dating back to the 13th century

"The Banaadir Coast" as proper name for coastal northeast Africa was used well into 20th century, and as informal designation for southern Somalia remains in use today. Being the first to live in this region as nomalid "Samale" (Somali) people from the African interior did not press south and east to the Indian Ocean until centuries later.



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The Banaadir port city of Hamar eventually became Mogadishu, Somalia's capital. The Banaadiris continued to live their ancient stone homes of their forebears built in Mogadishu's old quarter. Although there has been intermarriage and influence from African peoples over the centuries, the Banaadir today very much remain a light and few dark skinned minority whose economic livelihood, unlike most of Somali people, is based on commerce and not agriculture.

First group of settlers originally resided in Al-Ahsa on the Persian Gulf, near Bahrain, and Sa`dah (Asharaf) families from Yemen. Furthermore, they were exclusively composed of 39 families, led by seven brothers. These 39 families belong

exclusively to four clans in different proportions. There were 12 families from the Muqarri clan, 12 families from Jidati, 6 families from the Aqabi, and 6 families from Ismaili clan.

Successively, other groups emigrated from different regions of the Arabian Peninsula at different times, but mostly from Yemen. Among the followers of the first group of settlers were members of the clans Abdi Samand, Al-Awidin, Amudi, Asharaf, Ba-Fadel, Ba-Hamis, Ba-Jamal, Bakri, Ba-Muqtar, Ba-Said, Hamdan, Omar-Uuduin, Shamsudin, Shawish and Wali

Upon their arrival, these early settlers have established centers of commerce, doing business with traders from as far as India and China. In the tenth century along the Banaadir coast shoe factories and textile plants were established and the entire production of clothes was exported to Arab countries, Persia, India, China and other centers along the East African coast.

The construction of building and mosques with great artistic value was another feature of that time. So sophisticated with urban culture and extraordinary literate background, these early settlers along the coast of the Indian Ocean were described by foreign visitors as "people bound together by ties of citizenship and not by tribal relationships", remarking on their identification with locality and not by tribal affiliations. In 1891 one of the major chiefs was Sayyed Ahmed BaAlawi whose ancestors had come from Tarim in Hadhramawt, a governorate in the present day Republic of Yemen, seven generations earlier

Shamsud-Din Abu Abdalla Muhammed better known as Ibn Battuta arrived probably in November or early December 1330 in Aden and sailed with the favorable monsoon to Zeila, Mogadishu, Mombasa, and Kilwa. At Mogadishu the learned traveler was received with great honor and ceremony by then Qadi and the local ruler, Shaikh Abu Bakr Ibn Shaykh Omar.

The Shaykh was conversant in Arabic but his own language was different. We do not learn the name or even one word of this language but it is likely that it was Swahilli. For the Somali had not yet arrived in Mogadishu, and would not arrive for at least another 400 years

Many place names in what is now southern Somalia are clearly of Swahili origin, including Shangani, meaning "on sand" near Mogadishu. The Qadi was surrounded by his students who were at the same time his assistants doing a practical "stage" at his Madrasa which was no ordinary Qur`anic school. It was an institute for advanced studies in Islamic law, built near Shaykh`s palace to which aspiring law specialist came for study. Mogadishu then was already a center of Islamic learning and culture. The citizens were rich, and Ibn Battuta comments on their good food and well-to-do appearance

While many historians still maintain that the Portuguese came to the African East Coast as explorers for spices under the patronage of Prince Henry, a few have different opinion. Contemporary Islamic scholars view it as Crusade against Islam, normally associated only to the Middle East.

The arrival of Portuguese to East Africa was the first landmark for the strong hostility and competition between Islam and Christianity. As a result Mombasa became the capital of the Portuguese when the whole of East African coast from Lamu to the north to Sofala in the south was virtually under the Portuguese domination. Mombasa was five times burned to the ground, its peoples put to the sword or carried into slavery. Yet it rose again and again from its smoking ashes. Kilwa was ravaged with fire and sword, its people were driven from their homes.

The Portuguese tried to capture the coasts of Banaadir on many occasions without much success. There is one famous account of the ransacking of the Banaadiri city of Barawa by Portuguese in 1499. The invaders spent three days in town and were ransacking it and gathering and loading their loot, a large amount of booty constituting of gold, ivory, and cotton and silk fabrics. The town was then set on fire.

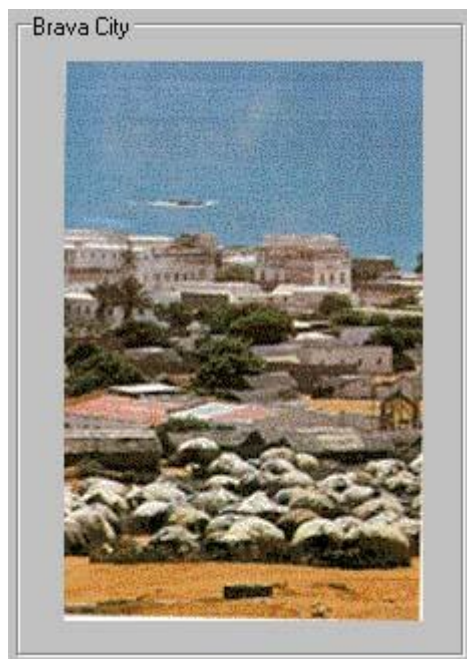


Image: Barawa

With the independence of Somalia in 1960, Mogadishu became the national capital of Somalia. For thirty years, Somalis all over the country and abroad, poured in their capital to build houses, made business and were part of the prosperous community it generated.

During the last 12 years, however, Mogadishu and other Banaadiri towns have seen one of the worst nightmares in its history. Decorations, antiques, and sacred patrimonies as far as 12th century were looted from ancient mosques. Archeological

sites, going back to ancient dynasties in Mogadishu, Gondershe, Merka, Barawa and Kismayo were vandalized.



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Banaadir and the regions between the two rivers of Somalia are of great strategic and economic value to the major tribes of Somalia who are contending for accesses not only to land, resources, port facilities but also to man-power skills.

Mogadishu, Merca, and Barawa are considered to be the major ports of Southern Somalia. UNDP listed the ancient places of Hamar Weyne and Shingani in Mogadishu as historic sites that should be preserved for their historic value.

THE BOOK "The Banaadiri: The Renewal of a Millenary Identity/ Il risveglio di una millenaria identita

For the past three decades we have witnessed radical interest in the history of the Indian Ocean and East Africa in particular. A new generation of local researchers are utilizing innovative research material at their own disposal. They are utilizing oral tradition, linguistic evidence and the archeological data. They have now produced excellent studies which have put the East African Coast into the center of her historical development

Born in Mogadishu, the author is descendant of Al Faqi, known also as reer Faqi or Qahtaan religious dynasty, appointed by the Banaadiri as administrators of justice in the territory, from the Middle Ages until the first years of the Italian occupation.

Nuredin Hagi Scikel later graduated in civil engineering at Bologna, Italy. Since 1990 has been active in the defiance of the rights of the Banaadiri people and has published several articles in Italian periodicals on the subject.

"Banaadiri: The Renewal of a Millenary Identity" is a remarkable book and a valuable contribution to the history of Banaadir. First of its kind, it is written simultaneously in Italian and English, the book examines the existing studies on the subject. It shows how rich and developed the Banaadiri society was well before Italian colonization.

The extraordinary pictures and drawings in the book help to visualize the Banaadiri historical profile that started probably in the Mesopotamia, crossed Yemen and reached the East coast of Africa where the Banaadiri civilization grew and flourished.

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We have thus arrived in the modern period with rather big strides. Our time of air traffic and jumbo jets has left the ocean below as a battle ground for aircraft-carriers and submarines. The once numerous elegant Arab dhows which connected all the colorful ports of the East African coast have been super-seeded by the giant tankers, while the business of carrying cargo in bulk is mostly in the hands of the Japanese Maru ships which bring Japanese printed cotton cloth to East Africa, replacing Indian cotton which once dominated the market

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