

Query response

Somalia: Low status groups

- Is Midgan a generic term or the name of one clan or group?
- Which groups live in Somaliland?
- Which groups have myths about impurity and fallen livestock?
- What is the status of these groups today?
- Are these groups protected by other Somali clans?
- Relations between members of these groups and other Somalis

Background

This query response is based on written and oral information from multiple different sources, including articles by the renowned British anthropologist Ian M. Lewis and other Somalia experts, online media reports and meetings with various Somalia experts. Furthermore, Landinfo has discussed the topic with representatives of these low status groups, which have traditionally been referred to as occupational groups (meetings in Nairobi, 2001, 2005, Hargeisa, April 2016).

However, there are no comprehensive anthropological studies or other systematic surveys of the various groups, their living conditions and position in Somalia today. Members of these groups live spread throughout the country - and in Somali areas in neighbouring countries. Traditionally they have had habitats in the northern and central parts of Somalia, where they were originally associated with clan members from main clans in a so-called client-patron relationship (a servant-like relationship that was beneficial for both parties). Lewis (1955; 1994; Lewis & Goldsmith 1958) draws parallels to the relationship between non-Somali traders and local Somali partners, which has traditionally worked as such:

Each foreign trader appointed a Somali abbaan¹ to protect his general interests, preferably a man of high personal status and of a strong and respected lineage. The abbaan, who was often paid a regular wage and sometimes received a share in profits, acted as an agent, broker or general assistant. And in all Arabian and Indian stores

¹ Abbaan is Somali and means protector or leader.

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Somali abbaans were to be seen often acting as little more than caretakers, or doorkeepers, responsible to their clients for maintaining order amongst Somali customers. They and their lineages were also entrusted with the general security to their client. The latter, however, was not required to contribute to, and did not share in, the financial and legal obligations of the Somali lineage which he was attached. The client did not participate directly in payment of blood wealth, and the remunerations which the abbaan received were considered to exonerate the client from this responsibility.

The institution also operates in relation to those who practise the specialist (and in Somali eyes) degrading crafts of leatherworking, metalworking, pottery and hair-cutting. These trades are despised by Somali and are followed by three groups of bondsmen, known collectively as sab, and traditionally attached to Somali lineages in a servile status.

[...] Each of the three groups is divided into a number of small, nonlocalized, lineages segmented on the Somali pattern. Somali do not intermarry with sab, who marry among themselves, and traditionally sab individuals and families are attached to specific Somali patrons (abbaans) upon whom they are economically dependent, especially for bridewealth and blood-compensation (Lewis 1994, s. 126-127).

Physically, members of Midgan, Yibir, Tumal, Yahar or other so-called occupational groups are not distinct from other Somalis.² No one knows how large a proportion of the population these groups constitute: Some sources believe one percent, others claim that there are far more. A study conducted by UNHCR in 2002 estimated that there were about 20,000 members of these groups in Northwest Somalia (Ambroso 2002, p. 32). Landinfo met with two organisations that represent the groups in Hargeisa in April 2016, and they gave different estimates. One of them estimated that there are 4,000 such households in Hargeisa, i.e. between 20,000 and 30,000 people. The representatives for the other group, VOSOMWO, Voices of Somaliland Minority Women Organization³, said that the number of households in Hargeisa alone is about 8,000 or an estimated 60,000 people.⁴

² Blood samples taken in the 1950s from a group of Midgan and a control group consisting of Somalis from main clans in Hargeisa in Northwest Somalia, did not show differences between the groups that might indicate different ethnic origins (Goldsmith & Lewis 1958).

³ VOSOMWO was founded in 2004 and is engaged in activities relating to human rights, domestic violence, migration and trafficking. They also provide medical assistance to rape victims. They also work with internally displaced persons and refugees, women and children's rights, as well as work and education opportunities for minorities. The organisation has members from the local Somali clans and Gaboye.

⁴ The population of Hargeisa is estimated at one million.

Is Midgan or Gaboye a generic term or the name of one clan or group?

Midgan seems to be both the name of one specific group and a (somewhat disparaging) generic term that many Somalis use for all the various occupational groups.⁵ In Northwest Somalia they are called *Gaboye*.⁶ This term was introduced during the Barre era, but this is not a clan/group name - nor the name of an ancestor. The most common generic name for the groups in other parts of Somalia is *sab* or *bon*.⁷ In this query response the term Midgan is used, except where local representatives themselves use another term.

Traditionally the members of these groups have been considered unclean by many Somalis, and this view has been linked to the work the occupational groups do - which most Somalis will not perform - and myths of unknown or uncertain origin, or ingestion of unclean food (Gundel 2009; Hanley 2004; Lewis 1955; 1994; Menkhaus 2003; conversations with representatives of two Gaboye organisations in Hargeisa, 18 April 2016). There are also examples that doubt regarding ancestry has excluded groups (and sub-clans) from marriage with members of other clans, see Landinfo 2010.

Which groups have myths about impurity and fallen livestock?

The common origin myth(s) about Midgan and other traditional occupational groups told amongst Somalis with backgrounds from so-called noble clans⁸, is that the group's ancestor ate meat from fallen livestock - which in Islamic and Somali tradition is unclean (Ambroso 2002, p. 29). This myth explains why the groups are perceived as unclean by other groups in Somali society, and it has legitimised the groups' inferior status in a society where the power to define belongs to the so-called noble clans.

At the same time, some Midgan clans have their own origin myths, where impurity is (understandably) not a theme. According to Lewis (1955) members of these groups usually claim that their ancestors were found in the wilderness by members of the clan they are associated with. This story explains and justifies their connection to the local clan. According to Lewis some Midgan also claim that they originate from one of Sheikh Issaq's younger sons.⁹

Language

Midgan speak the same Somali dialect as the clan they are associated with, but both Kirk (1904; 1905) and Lewis (1955) explain that these groups also have their own secret

⁵ Ambroso (2002, p. 29–30) points out that the status of these groups – and other peoples' attitude towards them – is similar to the situation of gypsies. In Djibouti they are often referred to as “les Gitanes” – the gypsies.

⁶ In Somali *gabooy* means hunter or user of bow and arrows, and *gaboye* directly translated means “the arrow's tremor/movement” (Luling, Osman & Zorc 1991). The term shows that the groups originally were hunters, i.e. they had a profession that other Somalis would not stoop to having.

⁷ According to Lewis (1955) the term *bon* was used amongst the Digil clan to avoid confusion with their (and the Rahanweyn clan's) ancestor, who is also called Sab. Abdi (2000) uses the term *waable* for midgan groups. This means craftsman in Somali (or directly translated: he/one who builds).

⁸ The so-called noble clans Somalis and others refer to are the nomadic ones, i.e. issaq, dir, hawiye and darood.

⁹ Sheikh Issaq is the issaq clan's ancestor.

“languages.” Today we would describe these as sociolects, i.e. forms of language that are determined by social factors. Kirk describes conditions that are now more than a hundred years old, in a limited geographical area (Northwest Somalia). Lewis (1955) is largely based on sources like Kirk and some other anthropologists, who also conducted their studies around the turn of the last century.

Various representatives of these groups have over the past decade claimed that most of the groups’ members have knowledge of this language. However, in Landinfo’s opinion there is reason to believe that there are major variations in the level of knowledge amongst members of the groups, depending on age and residency. It is unlikely that groups that have lived so far apart for generations have been able to convey uniform knowledge to all members in all parts of the country. The age-old conflicts in Somalia, migration and social upheavals seem to have also contributed to changes and variations.

What is the status of these groups in Somali society, and how are the relations between members of these groups and other Somalis?

What these groups have in common is that marriage between them and members of the noble clans is not accepted. Some groups may be far more integrated into local clans than others, and not all of them have had a particular profession. However, they all have a special status, which is closely related to the fact that they are not recognised as full members of a Somali clan. A full member has a known origin, i.e. a renowned ancestor.

[...] the social distance from "noble" Somalis of a pastoral background remains great and forms of discrimination persist. Marrying a Gaboye remains by and large an unbreakable cultural taboo. Secondly, although their traditional occupations and trades place them among the most productive sectors of the society, they also become a sort of “socio-economic ghetto” as it restricts their social mobility. For example, no jobs in the public sector/civil service are normally available to them and agriculture and cattle are also restricted. In their main neighbourhood in Hargeisa, Dami (next to Sheikh Nur, one of the main returnee areas), Gaboye women reported to have been often the object of discrimination when queuing up at water points. Even more worrying is the "vicious cycle of education" (Ambroso 2002, p. 30).

This description is still accurate - Midgan are considered unclean and inferior, and they have a low status in Somali society.¹⁰ Midgan therefore rarely marry members of main clans (Ambroso 2002; Hassan 2006; local researcher and resource person, conversation in Hargeisa on 16 April 2016; conversation with Sultan Naasir Abdi Ismaail (Muse Dheriyo), Sultan Ibrahim Cabdi Huss (Yibir), Sultan Sicid Yoonis Abdillahi (Tumal) and Sultan Deex Cajuun Kaariye (Muse Dheriyo) in Hargeisa on 16 April 2016).

Although the groups’ low status is primarily linked to the stigma that unknown origin (and presumed impurity) carries, the social exclusion is reinforced by low levels of education. Children’s schooling suffers because families are poor and have many children, and many thus end up in a vicious cycle of unemployment, poverty, weak organisation and split leadership

¹⁰ A local Somali source in Jijiga in the Ogaden, Ethiopia said in conversation with Landinfo in April 2016 that her mother did not even like the idea of Midgan working as cleaners (either in private homes or in public spaces).

(local researcher and resource person, conversation in Hargeisa on 16 April 2016). The representatives of the groups also pointed this out and emphasised that with education the livelihoods of Gaboye would improve.¹¹ Unlike members of the local clans - and Somalis in other parts of Somalia - few Midgan receive remittances from relatives inside or outside Somalia.¹² This is because there are few Midgan in exile (Bradbury 2008, p. 150; conversations in Hargeisa on 18 April 2016) and because Midgan in other parts of Somalia generally do not have significant economic resources.

Women from main clan families who marry Midgan may be ostracised by family and clan. It may be easier for a man from a main clan to marry a Midgan than for a woman from a main clan to marry a Midgan. It seems in general that the members of the noble clans must bear the major consequences of such marriages to a greater extent than Midgan (international organisation, conversations in Nairobi, March 2002, March 2007, March 2009).

However, there are not many specific examples of those who break this taboo and marry someone from these groups. One of the Gaboye representatives Landinfo met in Hargeisa is married to a local Issaq woman. He said that his wife's family tried to stop the marriage - unsuccessfully. They have since not been on speaking terms with their daughter, and her husband said: "She is dead to her family." The representatives for this Gaboye organisation also mentioned an event in the Saleh district where a Gaboye had married a woman from a local clan. The woman's family not only opposed the relationship, they also attacked the man physically and shot and injured two other Gaboye. Most of the perpetrators were arrested, but her husband suffered the same fate, even though he had done nothing punishable. The marriage was dissolved, and her husband was jailed for a week before being released.

The representatives of VOSOMWO talked about a case in 2011 in Gebiley where a Gaboye married a girl from a majority clan. The local community responded by arresting the man and bringing him to court. The judge asked the woman who she chose: the man or the clan. Her family demanded that the man be imprisoned, but the court ruled in favour of the couple. The woman was still, against her will, sent to the clan's home area and married off to someone else (conversation in Hargeisa on 18 April 2016).

Various Midgan groups

According to the British anthropologist Lewis, Midgan do not have a special recognised genealogical system, but operate with a simpler and shorter clan system. As mentioned, Midgan is not the name of a common ancestor. There are several Midgan groups in various parts of Somalia:

¹¹ The representatives said that in 2002-2004 the entire local community discussed the need for education for the groups. At that time there were two primary schools and secondary schools with a total of four classes in the Dami district. There are private secondary schools (no secondary schools are operated by the government) and some Gaboye get free secondary schooling. This is dependent on having the Ministry of Education on board and there are currently three free places at the university in Hargeisa and two-three free places at private secondary schools. Moreover, the authorities earmarked funds in the budget for 20 students for four years. These places will then be extended for another four years.

¹² See, for example, Maxwell et. al. 2015, p. 9–15.

Madiban is supposedly the largest group. Members of this group live in large parts of Somalia. The group is originally from the counties Mudug and Nugal, where they were traditionally associated with different Hawiye clans, including Gurgate.

Muse Dhariye has traditionally been associated with the Issaq, Gadabursi and Dir clans in Northwest Somalia.

Hawle have traditionally resided in Ogaden in Ethiopia, but there are also Hawle in Northwest Somalia.

Gagaab have traditionally resided in the Hiran region, where they have been associated with Hawadle.

There are also *Garyeеле* in Hiran.

In Galgaduud, *Guuleed Hadde* have traditionally been associated with the local Hawiye clans Habr Gedir and Abgal.

Hawr Warsame (Orarsame, Hararsane) have traditionally been located in Gedo and Galgadud, where they have been associated with Marehan.

Habar Yaqub have traditionally resided in Belet Hawa in Gedo and Galgadud, and been associated with Marehan.

Sadde Geeddi have traditionally lived in the Mogadishu area.

Yahro have traditionally lived in Hiran and Central Shabelle, where there is reportedly a weak association with noble clans.

Madgal have traditionally resided in the Somali regions of Ethiopia, i.e. the Ogaden region.

Warabeeeye have traditionally resided in El Wak in Lower Juba, where they have been associated with the Garre clan¹³ (Norwegian Embassy in Kenya, e-mail 1996; 1997; 2004; 2007).

Yibir and Tumal

Yibir and Tumal, which mean blacksmith in Somali, like the Midgan have a simple genealogical system. Older sources (Kirk 1904) mention these groups and according to Yibir tradition, Mohammed Hanif is their ancestor, and he supposedly had five sons. Newer (Yibir) sources also mention five sons (and a number of descendants), but with different names. Tumal is said to consists of three different groups: rer Osman, rer Anbur and rer Isse (Norwegian Embassy in Kenya, e-mail, 25 September 1997).

Traditional occupations and the current labour market

Midgan have traditionally been leatherworkers, shoemakers, hunters, hairdressers, midwives and circumcisers. Tumal are potters and blacksmiths, Yibir have traditionally worked as medicine men, they have been regarded as sorcerers or people with supernatural abilities, and

¹³ According to Lewis (1955, p. 54) these are blacksmiths who claimed to originate from Warabeyu Abdi, a Somali child who got lost and was raised by hyenas. According to the story the boy was found by a Dhulbahante (Darood Harti) who took him in. The Warabeeeye claim that the boy probably was Dhulbahante, and therefore trace their lineage through the adoptive father of the Dhulbahante clan's alleged ancestor.

Yahar have traditionally been weavers. However, due to globalisation local production of textiles, shoes and other types of goods have been replaced by goods from Asia. The jobs these groups traditionally have monopolised are thus becoming fewer, and competition for jobs is increasing, as youth unemployment in Somaliland is very high.

There are also (Ethiopian) refugees who offer their services in these occupations (Sultan Naasir Abdi Ismaail (Muse Dheriyo), Sultan Ibrahim Cabdi Huss (Yibir), Sultan Sicid Yoonis Abdillahi (Tumal) and Sultan Deex Cajuun Kaariye (Muse Dheriyo), conversation in Hargeisa, 18 April 2016). Hargeisa is the economic center of Somaliland, and when asked about other job opportunities than the traditional ones, the representatives of one of the Gaboye organisations explained that status limits the opportunities. The public sector is small and dominated by the local clans, and in the private sector where the telecommunications companies Somtel and Telsom and financial companies such as Dahabshiil dominate, there are not many opportunities either (Ambroso 2002, p. 33; Bradbury 2008, p.15). Some Gaboye are still able to get in: one Yibir and one Madiban work at Telsom, and a Muse Dheriye works at Dahabshiil.¹⁴

Ownership

Many Gaboye fled Somalia when Siad Barre's regime fell in 1991 because they feared reprisals for their support of the regime. Ambroso (2002, p. 30) discusses this and points out that almost all Gaboye who returned in the 1990s got their property back.¹⁵ The Gaboye representatives Landinfo met in April 2016 confirmed this. But land disputes and property disputes are not uncommon in Somaliland, and the most disadvantaged, including Gaboye, often come up short against both the authorities, who confiscate property, and individuals who acquire property using false title deeds (OCVP 2014).¹⁶

Affiliation with clans and protection

As mentioned, the various occupational groups have traditionally been associated with members of the noble clans in a mutually dependent relationship, where the occupational groups are granted protection, and their protectors (and the local community) benefit from the occupational group's skills. But members of the occupational groups are not fully members of the host clan, and they must demand compensation (diya, maq) through the host clan.¹⁷ In

¹⁴ One of the representatives said that his younger brother first got work in Dahabshiil and was then able to establish his own business (conversation in Hargeisa on 18 April 2016).

¹⁵ These groups have never been excluded from owning property, but usually their properties are small (Norwegian Embassy in Kenya, e-mail 25 September 1997; conversations in Hargeisa on 18 April 2016).

¹⁶ The majority of Gaboye in Hargeisa live in the neighbourhoods of Dami A and B and Sheikh Madar. The buildings here are characterised in part by slums, in part by simple standard.

¹⁷ If a male member of a minority group is killed, the protector clan will be entitled to receive compensation from the killer's family (diya group). The compensation for a murdered minority member is the same as for other Somalis: 100 camels, or the equivalent amount in money. The victim's immediate family will receive a small portion of the compensation paid from the protector clan. If a minority member kills a "noble" Somali from another clan, the killer's protection clan or his family does not pay compensation, because "noble" Somalis will not stoop to receiving compensation from minorities. It is claimed that the killer will often be killed along with several of his family, without the protector clan intervening. If someone from a minority kills a member of another minority, compensation negotiations will be held between the two minority families (Norwegian Embassy in Nairobi, e-mail 1997). See also Landinfo 2016.

conflict situations, and particularly when the resources in the local community are scarce, naturally the relationship between the parties may be weakened. The host does not necessarily feel the same obligation towards those who are not full members of the clan compared with their own relatives in times of need. But when conditions stabilise, the relationship between the parties allegedly functions as it did before the crisis arose. Members of the Midgan clans who move will usually align themselves with representatives of clans who can give them protection in the new location, preferably clans they have been associated with before (Norwegian Embassy in Kenya, e-mail 2007). This is also true for other Somalis if they move to a new place in or out of Somalia: You look for members of your own clan, because you feel safe amongst your own.

This dependence is not reflected in daily life. Midgan do not pay for protection, and do not have specific duties. It is only in situations where Midgan need protection that the relationship is expressed. Then they will contact a representative of the protector clan to ask for help and as part of this the Midgan must contribute something, depending on what the case concerns (Norwegian Embassy in Kenya, e-mail 2007).

The traditional relationship based on affiliation changed during Siad Barre's regime. In line with the regime's ideology, Somali society was to be modernised and the clan system – in principle – to be abolished.¹⁸ As such the occupational groups had shared interests with the regime. Some Midgan also had prominent positions during this era.¹⁹ However, the positive attitude that many Midgan had towards Barre and the support they gave the regime resulted in retaliation when the regime began to fall, and many thousands fled (from Northwestern Somalia) to camps in Ogaden in Ethiopia. Those who returned after the civil war were apparently not vulnerable to reactions:

To the credit of Somalilanders it must be said that, out of the some 2,000 Gaboye returnees from Teferi Ber and Darwanaji who repatriated in 1997-99 (mostly to Hargeisa), none has been observed or reported having suffered retaliation or persecution on account of their past. Also encouraging was the fact that – in the Gaboye's own words – they have been able to regain possession of up to 90% of their landed property. Hence we may argue that reintegration has proceeded well, if we define it as the recreation of conditions prior to exodus (Ambroso 2002, p. 30).

Members of the occupational groups do not seem to be significantly more vulnerable to abuses than other Somalis. The representatives of both of the two interest organisations Landinfo met in Hargeisa said that, for example, rape affects both the majority and the minority, and that their own people can commit abuses as well (against other Somalis and against their own). However, the local resource person and researcher Landinfo met in Hargeisa said that there were probably no cases involving Gaboye abuses against non-Gaboye.²⁰ When asked what happens if a

¹⁸ In a speech on 29 April 1979, which marked the end of the nationwide campaign against the clan/tribe system, Barre declared: "We have replaced Tribalism with Socialism, my cousin with compatriot, and fear with courage" (Lewis 1994).

¹⁹ The Prime Minister and Defense Minister under Barre, Mohammed Ali Samatar, was Tumal (Wikipedia 2016).

²⁰ He added that no majority clan man would rape women from these groups because of the social taboo. In Landinfo's opinion this perception is probably too extreme.

Gaboye kills or injures an Issaq, the representatives of one of the organisations explained that the case would be resolved in the traditional way. However, they claimed that Gaboye were considered equals in negotiations with majority clans.

Weak clans or groups have typically allied themselves with stronger clans, not only to gain protection and secure their territory, but to have influence as well. It is probably still the case that the interests of smaller groups are not always taken into account, and VOSOMWO's representatives said that the minorities are dictated a solution in the traditional system. But they also pointed out that Gaboye women are no more vulnerable to violence and rape than other women, and justified this by saying that their organisation does not receive reports or inquiries that indicate the contrary (conversations in Hargeisa on 18 April 2016).

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