



## Query response

### Somalia: The Ashraf

- Do the Ashraf only exist in Somalia?
- What kind of status do the Ashraf have?
- Are the Ashraf a minority group?
- Are the Ashraf a part of the Benadir population?
- What Ashraf groups are there in Somalia?
- What dialect do the Ashraf speak in Somalia?

#### Introduction

The term Sharif (plural Ashraf) is an Arabic honorary title. It is used by the descendants of the Prophet Mohammad's clan – Hashim – and particularly by the descendants of Mohammed's daughter Fatima and her husband Ali, who was the son of one of Mohammed's uncles; Abu Talib (Wikipedia 2018b; Jiwa 2016). In Sunni Islam, *Sharif* is used for the descendants of Hasan ibn Ali while *Sayyid* is used for the descendants of Hussein ibn Ali, both of whom were grandsons of the prophet Mohammed.<sup>1</sup> In Somalia, the name Sharif/Ashraf is normally used for descendants of both Hussein and Hassan.

The Ashraf were originally heads of the most prominent families in the Arabian Peninsula. Later they received positions as heads of Mecca and Medina (Britannica 2015). Members of the Hashimite family still live in Jordan (Wikipedia 2018a).

The Sharif/Ashraf is thus not a distinctive Somali group, but exist throughout the Muslim world (Wikipedia 2018b; Jiwa 2016; Kazuo 2004).

#### What is the status of the Ashraf in Somalia?

Because of the (supposed) relationship with the Prophet, the Ashraf in Somalia have traditionally been respected and considered to have a distinct religious affiliation and

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the ancestor of the Issaq clan in Somaliland, Sheikh Issaq, according to tradition, is a descendant of Hussein, and is therefore referred to as a *Seyyid* (Adam p.102). However, it is not the case that his descendants, i.e. the Issaqe, are Ashraf.

knowledge. However, it does not mean that the Ashraf generally have religious duties or are greater believers than other Somalis.

Traditionally, the leading Ashraf have mediated in clan conflicts and/or had religious positions. However, the various communities, traditions and roles are not static. They develop and change according to political, social and technological changes. How the different developments have impacted on the Ashraf in Somalia is hard to say. During the civil war and conflicts in southern Somalia in the 1990s, the Ashraf, like many other groups, were subject to abuse. Armed militia groups robbed the properties of many Ashraf, and little suggests that their traditional status protected them at the time.

However, vulnerability and risk of abuse are undoubtedly situational, and the normalisation of conditions in the country appears to benefit the Ashraf in the same way as other Somalis. Traditions and Islam still have a strong position in all parts of the country. This implies that respect for the Ashraf in general and the specific social tasks of individual Ashraf has not significantly changed.

### **What Ashraf groups exist in Somalia?**

Both Somalia experts and Ashraf representatives divide the Ashraf into two main groups: one with Hussein, and the other with Hassan, as their ancestor.

#### **The Hussein group**

The descendants of Hussein comprise various groups or families, traditionally based in the coastal cities of southern Somalia, including Mogadishu. These are considered to be part of the so-called Benadir population. Reese (1996, p. v-vi) describes these coastal city groups, including the Ashraf, as follows:

*The existence of the leading lineages inhabiting the towns of the Benadir coast of Somalia (Muqdisho, Marka, Barawe and Warshaykh) has, in its essence been defined by the ability to remain distinct from, other elements of the wider society in which they operate. Since at least the tenth century, all of these communities have earned their livelihoods via commerce. [...] The key to their intermediate position lay in a delicate balancing act in which town elites managed to maintain social and cultural links with both local and overseas trade partners, while at the same time remaining separate from each. The end result of such cultural juggling was the creation of a coastal identity which, while closely linked to the Somali culture of the interior on the one hand and sharing strong affinities with overseas, particularly Arab, merchants on the other, was distinctly “Benaadiri”.*

The Hussein groups also come under common term *Ba-Alawi* (which means “descendants of Ali”, i.e. the husband of the prophet’s daughter Fatima). The summaries are probably not exhaustive, but the groups mentioned in the literature and oral sources are:

- Al Nadir
- Ahmad
- Jamal al-Leyl
- Maqbul

These coastal city groups are to a large extent so-called *gibil cad* (light-skinned) (Abbas, conversation in London 2005; Adam 2013, p. 123). The terms light-skinned and dark-skinned (*gibil madow*) in principle describe skin colour and facial features, but, within the Benadir groups, they primarily refer to rank/status differences. Light and dark are found in both categories, although other Somalis usually refer to all the Benadirs as light-skinned (Adam 2013, p. 122).

### The Hassan group

Hassan's descendants, on the other hand, live mainly inland, but they are also found in the capital and probably other coastal cities (Abbas, conversation in London 2005; Adam 2013, p. 140).

- Al ahdali (from Merka)
- Sarman (traditionally based near Hoddur in the Bay region, where they are affiliated with the rahanweyn clan Leysan (Lewis 1998, p. 18)). They are also found in Lower and Middle Shabelle, and in Gedo.<sup>2</sup>
- Sharif Ali
- Sharif Ahmed
- Mohamed Sharif

### The Ashraf in Somaliland

Somalia expert and anthropologist I. M. Lewis (1998, p. 18) points to the fact that there are also Ashraf in Somaliland. He considers that some of them originally come from the district of Shangani in Mogadishu.

Adam (2013, pp. 100-103) points out that the Benadir population, unlike other (nomadic) Somalis, has a written tradition of Arabic as a written language. This could partly explain why the urban Benadirs have not needed to memorise more than two to four ancestors.<sup>3</sup> The Somali nomad community has the same oral tradition as other nomadic communities. However, their more in-depth knowledge of family relationships is primarily based on the need for such knowledge.

Nomad communities, unlike settled communities in general, are characterised by mobility with a view to finding water and grazing for their livestock. Nevertheless, they need to know who they can share water and grazing with, what rights they have and who they share solidarity with when compensation for damage to life or property is paid or received. Members of the Somali nomadic clan families can therefore usually cite several generations of their ancestors.<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed account of clan and identity, see Landinfo (2015).

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis (1998, p. 18) describes the Ashraf in the Sarman area as intermediaries in the conflicts between clans in this area. The role of intermediaries led to one of them, Haraw, being banished, and the other, Leysan (Rahanweyn), being divided into two: Leysan Horsi and Leysan Barre. According to Lewis, in this area the Ashraf are known as “three feet”, and they are peace brokers and intermediaries. The nickname is fairly descriptive of their broker role.

<sup>3</sup> The Benadir coast and the cities of Mogadishu, Merka and Brava have historically been important ports and trading centres. Here traders from home and abroad – and religious scholars – have had a base since the Middle Ages and onwards. The use of written language therefore has deep roots in these coastal towns.

<sup>4</sup> The village, on the other hand, is its most important frame of reference for the agropastoralist clan families Rahanweyn and

## Are the Ashraf a minority group?

Menkhaus (2016, pp. 92-93) points out that the concept of a minority is extremely complex in the Somali context:

*Discussion of the status of minorities in Somalia is complicated by genuine confusion over what constitutes a “minority” in the Somali context. The confusion has been exasperated by the scramble by Somali asylum seekers to assert minority status (legitimately and fraudulently), in order to improve their chances of being accepted as refugees. In reality, Somalia features a range of different social groups with variable claims to on being a minority. One minority category consists of communities which are ethnically non-Somali, meaning that they have no affiliation (client or otherwise) to a Somali clan. This includes several diverse groups, including the southern Somali coastal commercial populations of the Barawan, reer Benadiri and Bajuni. Another minority category is that of the Somalis who enjoy membership in a clan, but occupy a low status position within that lineage. There are many variations on this complex spectrum of social hierarchy, including occupational minorities - low caste groups within every Somali clan variously known as the Yibir, Midgaan and Tumaal, which has historically been linked to “unclean” occupations such as hair cutting and metalwork. A third group are lineages which are considered “commoner” (boon) as opposed to “noble” (bilis). Among the Rahanwyn clan-family, Bernhard Helander estimated that up to 30 percent of the population falls into the category of boon [...]. A final group in this category are sheegat or adopted clan members in various stages of absorption. The use of Sheegat is especially common in southern Somalia, where high rates of immigration occur, and newcomers must seek protection by adopting the identity of more powerful lineages [...].*

Menkhaus’s description illustrates the position of Ashraf in Somalia: the one category or group of Ashraf which is part of the Benadir population (Hussein), and traditionally has not been associated with local Somali clans, either in a so-called client-patron relationship or as being “adopted” (Somali: sheegad/sheegat).

On the other hand, the second Ashraf category (Hassan), primarily those living in the inland or agricultural areas of the south, is usually adopted clan members in one of the local clans and is therefore *not* a minority. Adoption is a process where a newcomer (and his family if any) announces to the elders/chieftains that he wants to settle in the area. He gives gifts to the hosts in the form of money and livestock, and after a formal ceremony, he is adopted into the clan. In principle, those adopted are equals and possess the same rights as the rest of the clan members (Besteman 1999, p. 80). However, there remains a distinction between the original members and those who have been adopted, irrespective of how many generations ago the adoption took place.

What both Ashraf categories have in common is their (assumed) origin and traditional religious position. Yet, while the former group (Hussein) can be characterised as a minority (outside the Somali clan system), the latter (Hassan) is part of the Somali clan system.

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Digil. The need to memorise their patrilineal family line *abtirsimo* is therefore less important, and the knowledge about family members is often far more limited than with the nomadic clans. In any case, these orally transmitted genealogies are not necessarily correct. But they have an important function for the different groups, not at least by creating solidarity among the members.

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Hamar Weyne, one of the two oldest districts in Mogadishu. There and in the neighbouring district of Shangani, the Ashraf have traditionally had a base (photo: Grethe Neufeld).

### What dialect do the Ashraf speak?

According to the mapping of Somali dialects by the linguist Lambertis (1986), there is a distinctive dialect, *af-Ashraf* (see also Landinfo 2011, p. 13). However, this dialect is not spoken by all Ashraf and is probably also used by others than the Ashraf (Adam 2013, p. 111). The Ashraf of the inland, for example in Bay and Bakool, speak the local May dialect (Adam 2013, p. 191).

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