

Bantu

Profile

The so-called 'Bantu' groups - Gosha, Shabelle, Shidle and Boni - collectively known as (Wa) Gosha (literally, 'people of the forest') live in the Lower Juba Valley. Other Bantu communities are located in the Shebelle Valley. Gosha are the principal non-Somali minority group in the country. Gosha speak a Bantu language and are often referred to as, and call themselves, Bantu.

Historical context

Gosha are descended from slaves were originally brought into Somalia in the 19th Century, from southern African countries, such as Tanzania and Mozambique. Between 25,000 and 50,000 slaves were absorbed mainly into the Shabelle River Valley area from 1800 to 1900. By the 1840s, the first fugitive slaves began to arrive in the more remote Juba River Valley in the South of the country. According the Somali Bantu Association in the US, by the early 1900s there were an estimated 35,000 ex-slaves living in communities along the Juba River. Anthropologists sometimes distinguish between Bantu along the Juba River, and those who remained in the Shabelle Valley as being two distinct groups. In 1845, the first slaves were freed by the Italians – but the practise endured until the early 20th century, until it was eventually abolished by the Italians. But only thirty years later, the Italians introduced conscripted labour of ex-slaves to establish plantations along the river valleys. This was accompanied by harsh working conditions and brutal treatment – in effect, a re-introduction of slavery.

Some Bantu were able to keep their distinctive languages and culture alive, but others – notably in the middle Juba –became more assimilated. Many aligned themselves to dominant clans as a means of protection. Although many eventually established themselves as farmers, or worked as tradesmen in the cities, Somali Bantus continued to face considerable discrimination, which persists to this day. Under the regime of Siad Barre, Gosha had their lands confiscated and handed over to members of bigger Somali clans.

The downfall of Siad Barre

The downfall of the dictator in 1991, and the accompanying collapse of law and order, hit Somali Bantus hard. As food stocks fell low, the Bantu farmers found themselves targeted by all sides – and they were outside the traditional clan protection system. During the breakdown of law and order, displaced Gosha in camps were frequently targeted for abuse. Those who were able to return were forced to work the land they used to own as contract farmers, providing labour to the dominant clans. In Hiran, Gosha lands were seized and throughout the Juba Valley they were forced to pay protection money. There was evidence of measures to prevent them from organizing independent organizations.

Gosha women were particularly vulnerable. Members of the Bantu agricultural community of the Juba River area described rape as a routine of the raiders who looted, intimidated and sometimes killed the rural population. Gosha were also pushed from the west to the east bank of the Juba River, primarily by

Ogadeni bandits looking to expand their territory. Many fled to neighbouring Kenya – in all, a total of 20,000 fled to other Africa countries and Yemen. 5000 were resettled in Tanzania. In 1999, the US agreed to resettle the remaining 12,000 in over 50 cities in 38 states.

Current issues

A 2002 UN report found that in comparatively peaceful times, Bantu communities in the riverine areas were actually better off than many Somalis, as their agricultural practises gave them greater food security. However, in 2000, a UN security officer told a European fact-finding mission that Somali Bantus employed on plantations worked in virtual slavery. Somali Bantu elders told the same mission that Somalia was more racist than South Africa during the apartheid era. Bantu not affiliated to specific clan families are particularly vulnerable in times of severe fighting – because of their lack of militia. If Somalia returns to all-out war – as some are predicting following the events of December 2006 - then the prospects for the Somali Bantu look bleak.