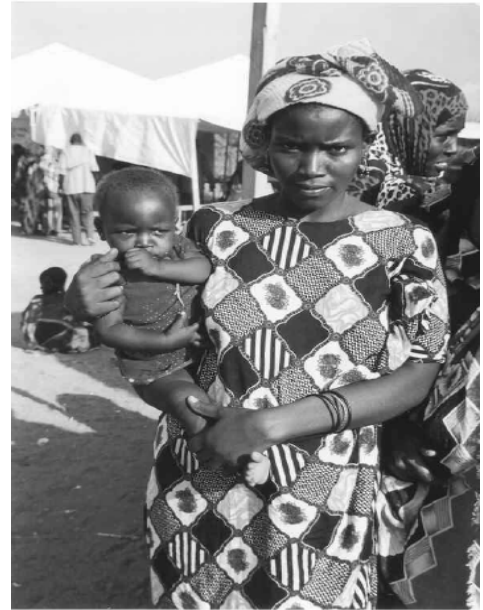


Who are the Somali Bantu?



Source: Sasha Chanoff, IOM.

Origin and Location

Most Somali Bantu arrived in Somalia thousands of years ago as migratory agriculturists from central and southern Africa and settled in arable regions characterized by high rainfall and extensive river systems. Others were brought to Somalia through the slave trade in the 1800s, and to provide a workforce for the Italian and British colonial powers. According to a recent IOM report, 95% of the Bantu claim to be from rural districts and towns situated along the Juba River, including Jamaame, Jilib, Bu'alle, Sakow and Kamsuma.

It is this last group of Bantu that has particularly suffered persecution in Somalia and is therefore in need of protection through resettlement. In 1991, as civil war tore through Somalia causing thousands of Somali Bantu to flee to Kenya and be placed in the Dadaab refugee camp. After over 10 years in this camp, the United States agreed to resettle 11,800 Somali Bantu but required a more secure location than the Dadaab camp. In 2002, the Bantu were moved to the Kakuma camp in northeastern Kenya.

Ethnic Background

Somali Bantu reflect a diversity of cultural backgrounds with varied histories and levels of integration into Somali society. They can be subdivided into distinct groups. There are those who are indigenous to Somalia; those who were brought to Somalia as slaves from Bantu-speaking tribes but integrated into Somali society; and those who were brought to Somalia as slaves but maintained, to varying degrees, their ancestral culture, Bantu languages, and sense of southeast African identity.

Languages

The main language of the Somali Bantu is Af Maay; a few speak Af Maxaatiri. Other languages spoken include Zigua (a tribal language of Tanzania) and Kiswahili. Few speak English.

Family Structure

The extended family is the main family structure among the Somali Bantu. It generally consists of grandparents, children, uncles, aunts, and sometimes other family members living in the same household. Married females continue to belong to their father's family and to keep their father's family name. The IOM reports that the average Bantu family consists of between 4 to 8 children often with a number of very young children.

Gender Roles

The role gender plays in Somali Bantu society is similar to other African cultures in which male elders are highly respected, and their presence and blessing are very important in traditional ceremonies and cultural practices. Women have played an active role as community representatives in the refugee camps and are responsible for food preparation and performing farming tasks. While in some cases women may be the head of the household, men are generally the head of the household, the primary wage earners.

Marriage

Arranged marriages, called *Aroos fadhi*, and the blessing of parents are very important to the Somali Bantu. Traditionally, the parents of the groom pay a dowry to the family of the bride and arrange a large party after the ceremony. If the parents do not approve of the marriage, some couples will run away and get married by the sheikh, an act which is known as *msaf*". According to the IOM, while some Bantu get married before the age of 16, the majority marry between 16 and 18 years of age. Somali Bantu rarely marry Somalis outside of their kin groups, preferring to marry within their own culture. Polygamy is practiced within the Bantu community.

Celebrations

The Somali Bantu observe Eid-al-Fitr and Eid-al Adha, both of which are Muslim religious celebrations. Non-religious celebrations include the birth of a child, marriages, circumcision, and the commemoration of saints.

Education

Most Somali Bantu are illiterate. The opportunities to participate in formal education were hindered due to children working on their parents' farms instead of attending school and to general exclusion from mainstream Somali society.

IOM officials report that while some Bantu children in the refugee camps attend primary school, only an estimated 5% of all Bantu have been formally educated. The IOM estimates that approximately 5% of the adult Bantu refugees (mostly males) are proficient in English.

Housing

The majority of the Somali Bantu community is not familiar with many aspects of life in the West. Modern housing, electricity, flushing toilets, telephones as well as kitchen and laundry appliances are all foreign to most Bantu refugees.

Religion

The major religion is Islam; however, some Bantu converted to Christianity while in refugee camps, and some practice various animist beliefs.

Mental Health

According to IOM, many Bantu suffer from trauma-related problems, including hopelessness and depression. Also, low self-esteem has been noted resulting from their social status and past treatment.

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The Somali Bantu Community Organization (SOBCO) is an ethnic community-based non-profit organization dedicated to providing its knowledge of Somali Bantu to strengthen the resettlement and integration process of this population.

The Somali Bantu Community Leadership Development Project is administered by the Ethiopian Community Development Council, Inc. through funding from the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement.

Occupational Background

Those from rural areas were farmers/agriculturists; those from urban areas were carpenters, drivers, mechanics, tailors, electricians, manual laborers, and landscapers.

Communication Styles

Somali Bantu share some aspects of non-verbal communication in common with the Somali community, such as the following:

- Direct eye contact with authority figures is avoided as a sign of respect, especially among the younger generation and women.
- Muslim men do not shake hands with women if they are preparing to pray.
- Women are expected to behave in a manner that maintains the family's social respectability. For this reason, they may be reluctant to report domestic violence.
- Like other Muslims, the right hand is considered the clean and polite hand to use for eating and shaking hands.
- Bantu are not accustomed to being interviewed and do not answer questions in a linear, sequential way. In order to obtain the information sought, it may be necessary to ask many follow-up questions.

(This information may differ from one group to another. Service providers will need to observe the communication style of those being served.)