

Review of the Bajuni sections of the Report on Minority Groups in Somalia, by a joint British, Danish and Dutch fact-finding mission to Nairobi, Kenya, 17-24 September 2000. Often called the JFFM 2000.

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This report is much cited for what it says about Bajuni language and culture. Further, it is much relied on in other reports, for example, in the UK COI reports, published twice or more a year. These all contain the same basic information about Bajuni culture and language, taken from this 2000 report, and the differences between each COI report do not modify the basic unchanging information but rather deal with specific political events since the previous report, events that have often

little or nothing to do with the Bajunis. Successive web reports (not just the COI ones) feed on each other. This report (and the others) gives a certain profile of the language situation among Somali Bajunis, a profile that is taken up as a template by some immigration services in Europe and applied to those claiming to be Somali Bajunis. This profile is based on inaccurate, outdated, and unreliable information. I am concerned that the current situation leads to incorrect decisions on asylum applications, as a result of which protection is withheld from people who deserve it. So I thought it appropriate to examine this JFFM report more carefully.

The web version I have read is 124 pages long, consisting of 11 sections (56 pages) on various minorities, followed by a list of individuals and organizations consulted, Bibliography, maps, and many annexes (including lists of clans, and letters from various minorities to various authorities (68 pages in all).

Authors. Three are listed (p.4): one government official from each of the UK, Denmark, and the Netherlands. None is a linguist. None, to my knowledge, has any direct knowledge of Bajuni matters nor of the Bajuni area of Somalia. None mentions having been to the Bajuni area on the Somali coast.

A fourth person, a French researcher, M-A Perouse de Montclos, is quoted as having given advice on the Bajunis (section 5.2). He is a Francophone who specializes in, according to the Web, violence and conflict resolution in Africa. Much of his work centres on West Africa. He has worked in Mogadisho and northern Somalia but is not a Bajuni specialist.

Meeting with Bajuni elders. The information in the report comes entirely from a meeting between the three authors and seven Bajuni elders in Nairobi, central Kenya, in September 2000. Nairobi is a long way from the coast of southern Somalia. The elders' names are given in one annex and also in a separate letter to the American Embassy in Nairobi (pp.95-6). All their addresses (section 12) are given not as their home place in Somalia but as the Jomvu refugee camp near Mombasa (...the camp closed in late 1997).

With one exception, all the elders interviewed had fled Somalia in 1991 and not returned (introduction to section 5). The exception had also fled to Kenya, returned briefly, was mistreated, fled a second time to Kenya, so already in 2000 their collective experience was nearly 10 years old, and is now 20+ years old. These are elderly men not speaking first hand of the situation or the

events of the past two decades. The exact age of an ‘elder’ is hard to define but a working definition would be someone 40 years or older. These elders would have been born around 1950 or earlier. Their formative years would be 1950-ish to 1980-ish, a peaceful period far removed from the present. It would be unwise to rely on their testimony about the current state or use of the Bajuni language in Somalia¹.

Clans, maps, letters, Bibliography. There is a brief, one-page, letter from Bajunis in an annex (Annex 6, compared to several longer letters from the Bravanese community), complaining of pressure, abuse, theft, looting, rape, and murder. There is no Bajuni clan list and no map for the Bajuni area. As the JFFM Bibliography has not a single citation for Bajuni or Bajunis, the source for all the alleged facts (below) is unclear.

Section 5. Although the whole report is long, only a small part, Section 5, six pages long, deals with the Bajunis: 5.1 Groups and sub-groups, geographical distribution (1½ pages), 5.2 Language (11 lines), 5.3 Socio-economic situation (2 pages), 5.4 Security and human rights situation (1 page), 5.5 Bajuni refugees in Kenya (1 page). Since this review is language-oriented, I divide my remarks into Language versus Other.

Language in Section 5. Only 11 lines long, this is easy to summarise. It has two paragraphs, one on the use of Somali and of Bajuni, and one on whether Bajuni is related to the “Swahili dialect spoken immediately south of the border with Kenya”.

The elders claimed that Bajuni is very different from the Swahili dialect just south of the border. There must have been a misunderstanding here. Language maps of the area show the Bajuni area stretching from Kismayu in Somalia as far as Dondo, opposite Lamu, in northern Kenya (e.g. Prins 1967, map inside back cover). If one walks south from Ras Kiamboni, the most southerly village on the Somali side, a Bajuni village, into Kenya, a few miles away, the first village is Ishakani, a Bajuni village, and the next ten or so villages on the mainland, and those opposite, on northern Pate Island, are also all Bajuni villages². Kenya and Somali forms of Bajuni are almost indistinguishable. So this claim is not correct (perhaps communication between delegation and elders broke down here, perhaps the elders had some other language in mind?).

As for knowledge of Somali, the elders said “most Bajuni speak some Somali”. They also said that, however, “younger Bajuni who have mainly lived in exile” may have only very limited knowledge of Somali”. The paragraph also states “Bernard Harborne, Chief of the UN Co-ordination Unit for Somalia, also stated that most Bajuni can speak some Somali.”

I consider these three claims to be very wide of the mark. For several centuries before the 1980’s, from at least AD1600, the mainland was mainly Somali-speaking and the Bajuni Islands of Somalia were monolingually Bajuni. A few adult Bajuni males spoke some Swahili and/or Somali as a result of fishing or trading activities. Most islanders were resolutely monolingual – adult Bajuni did not and do not care for Somalis or Somali, did not and do not speak Somali, did not and do not want to speak it, and strongly discouraged their children from speaking it. Relations between Bajuni and ethnic Somalis were frosty, to say the least. This traditional Bajuni aversion to Somalis and their language was based on long memories of dimly remembered events in the past (Nurse 1982, 1991, 1994). Then, when Somalia imploded in 1991, ethnic Somalis flooded on to

¹ This should not be taken to mean I disregard or disrespect other aspects of their knowledge. I have had occasion to hear what one elder said about names and settlements on Chula Island: his knowledge was encyclopedic.

² See Fitzgerald (1898) did exactly this walk, south to north, then north to south, and describes it. .

the island, bringing chaos, violence, rape, and death with them. The events since 1991 have only strengthened the age-old aversion to the invaders and their language.

This impression of language use was initially based on what I was told 30 years ago by elderly Bajuni, both from northern Kenya and southern Somalia. It is confirmed by nearly all the Bajuni refugees I have listened to meanwhile. It is confirmed by most of the 300+ Bajuni refugees interviewed by Brian Allen in the UK. It is confirmed by other specialists, e.g. Prof. Lewis (LSE), giving testimony to an Immigration Appeal Tribunal in 2003 (www.asylumlaw.org/doc...-somalia.minoritygroups.pdf, section 12). He disputed the accuracy of the view expressed in the Fact-Finding Mission report (2000) that all or most Bajuni spoke Somali. He considered that the Bajunis who would speak Somali would be those who had the most interaction with Somalis, in particular those in local political or business roles or elders or leaders of local communities. Prof. Lewis lived and worked in Somalia for 50 years, specialises in Somali affairs, speaks fluent Somali, and is regarded as one of the UK's foremost Somali specialists. The same view of Bajuni general lack of ability in Somali is repeatedly confirmed by the British Home Office COI reports, which over the last few years have all included this sentence: "It was highlighted in the JFFMR 2004 (pp. 37-38) that the island-based populations tended not to be able to speak Somali due to their social isolation from the mainland." Most Bajunis live or lived on the islands.

All these last sources agree that most Bajuni, especially island Bajuni, do not speak Somali.

Finally, there is the claim that "the main language spoken by the Bajuni is KiBajuni". This certainly used to be the case. Up to 1991 ago, we can be sure that at least the islands were almost 100% monolingual Bajuni-speaking, although male traders and fishermen who travelled to Kismayu and Kenya would have had some exposure to Swahili. The language situation on the islands has changed since 1991. In that year the UN advised Bajunis to move to refugee camps in SE Kenya and many/most (the figures are disputed) did. The camps were porous, which was eventually the main reason why the Kenya government asked the UN to close the camps, and while Bajunis passed out and in, Kenyans speaking local Swahili passed in and out. When, 6 years later, the Bajunis returned north, adults spoke Swahili beside Bajuni, and many young people spoke mainly Swahili. The prevalent attitude among young people was that they prefer Swahili, an international language with prestige and utility, whereas Bajuni has neither so they no longer found it useful. However, the elders whose information provided the basis for the report remained in Kenya and were not in touch with this new situation. So in this case, the elders are describing a language use situation that obtained during their lifetime, from 1950-ish and earlier to the 1980's. Since The Troubles began, the Bajuni language use situation, particularly in the islands, has changed out of all recognition.

Other. Sections 3.4, 3.5 and bits of the other sections in the report (see above) treat topics not relevant here. The content of much of the rest is accurate, consisting largely of generic statements that can be found elsewhere. There are however a number of minor factual errors, and two major ones.

Minor errors

"Kismayu (Kismayuu or Kismayu, not Kismayo, is the Bajuni form of the word, it is a Bajuni word) was the original home of the Bajuni people... they can trace their origins in Kismayu back to the 13th century." (section 5.1)

Not quite. Wilson (1992), a professional archaeologist familiar with the East African coast, shows a string of settlements, likely to be Bajuni, from Kismayu down to Dondo in northern Kenya. All have the 14th or 15th century as their earliest date. Since all, from north to south, have much the same date, that does not support the claim that the Bajuni spread south from Kismayu nor that they go back to the 13th century.

“Kismayu translates as ‘top of the well’” (section 5.1). It also translate equally well as the ‘well above’, or ‘northern well’, much better, given that Kismayu is the northernmost Bajuni settlement.

The elders are quoted (section 5.1) as giving a number of mainland and island settlements with a Bajuni population. These are largely correct, except for Kudai “island” (it is mainland) and Fuma Tini “island” (mainland). See British War Office maps.

“According to Perouse de Montlos, the Bajuni are locally called *tiku* and are essentially found on the islands Koyama, Ngumi, Chovayi, or Chula” (section 5.1).

Tikuu (*ti* ‘country, land’, plus *kuu* ‘big’) is one of the Bajunis’ names for themselves. The island of Ngumi is deserted and probably has been since the late 17th century (Wilson 1992).

“the Bajuni represent/are a mixture of Arab, Bantu, Somali, and possibly Malay (claimed by Cassanelli).. maybe Indonesian or Yemenite (de Montclos, section 5.3.1)) origins”.

Current evidence from archaeology, language, and bits of oral tradition support the Bantu, Somalia, and Arab/Yemenite part. The claim about Malay and Indonesian has been passed down unchanged from early 20th anthropologists and ethnologists, and is not supported by any evidence. The best evidence would be from (mitochondrial) DNA. That is passed down through females but the people of Indonesian origin in Madagascar were originally sailors, thus men.

“The UNHCR genealogical table of clans show the Bajuni as a Bantu subclan....but the delegation did not receive any other information that this was the case” (section 5.3.1).

Some confusion here. The word ‘Bantu’ has two meanings. If it refers to the ‘Somali Bantu’ = the people of the Somali inland rivers, then the Bajuni are not a Bantu subclan. But ‘Bantu’ is also a linguistic term referring to the many languages spoken by most communities from Nigeria to Somalia to South Africa, which would include the language of the Bajuni. Which is meant? And what is a subclan? Whichever is intended, the Bajuni are nobody’s subclan.

Major errors

Population “The elders estimated that before the civil war the total number of Bajuni was some 11,000, though they were not exactly sure....but... Cassanelli (1993) estimated the number at perhaps 3,000 to 4,000” (section 5.1).

The only official census ever done of island and mainland Bajunis in Somalia was carried out in 1926 by the Italian administration (Grottanelli 1955: 25). It covered Chovai (434 people), Kismayuu (334), Chula (301), and Koyama (172). Grottanelli, based on his own observation in 1953, estimated the population of Bur Kavvo (mainland) at 80, and put the whole Bajuni population in Somalia at at most 2,000. It is unlikely to have increased much meanwhile. The water in all the wells on the major islands is brackish, so fresh water has to be brought in, and the agricultural areas on the mainland on which the Bajuni depended for most of their food other than fish was

increasingly out of control of the Bajuni. So throughout the 20th century, Bajuni individuals and families trickled down into Kenya, long before the civil war of the 1990's. Cassanelli's figure, especially the 3,000, is in line with the earlier 1926 figure. It also fits well enough with the statement that "according to the elders, some 2,500 returned to Somali (in 1998, from the Kenya refugee camps)". A final piece of evidence comes from looking at the Google Earth Somalia map from the early 2000's. It is possible to look down at nearly all the Bajuni settlements and count the buildings: Kismayu, hundreds of buildings: Fuma and adjacent island, perhaps 12: Koyama, 3 villages, some 150 buildings: Chovai, 2 villages, some 100 buildings: Istambuli, 50 buildings: Chula, one village on Chula, 100+ buildings visible on the satellite photo³, plus Mdova off the southern tip (Mdova village is known to be small), so we might guesstimate 130 buildings for Chula/Mdova: Rasini, "a few buildings": Kudai ? but small: Buri Kavo, 100-150 buildings: Kiamboni. 100+ buildings. Kismayu is today a mixed settlement, with a small Bajuni minority. Excluding Kismayu, that makes a total of some 700 buildings, but what does 'building' mean? Are they inhabited or deserted? Inhabited by Bajunis, Somalis, or others? How many are not houses, i.e. mosques or the like? What was, or might have been just before the start of The Troubles, the average number of people per house/family? I assume four, so 4 x 700 = maybe 3000.

There is no basis for any significantly higher figure.

Subgroups/clans "The Bajuni elders described the Bajuni as a united people not divided into subgroups" (section 5.3.1). If by 'united....not divided into subgroups' the elders had in mind that they were not divided into warring factions, as the mainland Somali, they were correct. If by subgroups, they meant 'clans', they misspoke. The three major sources (Grottanelli 1955, Prins 1967, Nurse 1982) describe the Bajuni as a *kabila* or *uchand'u* 'tribe (branch)', divided into the following clans (*ukoo*, *uchumbo*, or *kamasi*), nearly 50 in total: al-Ausi(i), al-Kindi, al-Khadheraji(i) Nofali, Abimali, Abugado, Amshiri, Avutila, Vyangove, Birkao (some equate Birkao/Buri Gavo with Shungwaya), il-Barawi, Chand'aa/Tendaa, Chithindani, Chovai, Chula, Chund'fa, Daile, Dili, al-Famaui, Firado/Ferado, Garre, Gede, Hartikawa, Kachwa, Kava, (Na)Kilio. Kismayu(u), Kiunga, Kiwayuu, Koyama, Kudai, Ngumi, Omwe/Vumwe/Vumbe, Rasini (there are two Rasini, one in Somali, one in Kenya), Rasmali, Simambaya/Shimambaya, Shiradhi, Shungwaya, Tak(w)a, Uero, Umbuyi, Upembo, Utanuni, Uwani, Veku, Vekwaa, Vumbu, Dhitingoni, Dhitindini,

These clans have or had minor and somewhat different functions from those in Somali clans – mainly in matters of marriage and land.

Misinterpretation

Links with Kismayu The report contains this (section 5.1): "The elders described how the communities on the islands maintained close links with each other and with Bajuni communities along the coast and in Kismayu. Bajuni from the islands would usually have spent a part of the year in Kismayu, where it was essential to travel for trading fish, purchasing essential commodities, medical treatment and any official business with government bodies."

³ A cloud obscures the southern part of Chula Island, including the southern part of the village, and all Mdova Island and village.

In several legal judgements I have read this has been interpreted as meaning that significant numbers of Bajuni travelled regularly from island to island and from the island to Kismayu and back. The elders do not say that. They say ‘the communities maintained close links with each other and in Kismayo’, and ‘Bajuni from the islands would usually have spent a part of the year in Kismayu’. That last statement is exactly equivalent to something like “People from the UK would usually have spent a part of the year in Spain”. Just as this does not mean that all people in the UK spent part of the year in Spain, it does not mean that all Bajunis spent part of the year in Kismayu.

Adjacent islands are fairly close to each other (Fuma to Koyama, Koyama to Ngumi, Ngumi to Chovai, Chovai to Chula) and interisland travel could be made in small boats, so was more frequent. But from the islands to Kismayu involved longer distances: Koyama to Kismayu is 25 miles, Chula to Kismayu is over 60 miles. For such travel larger dhows are needed and larger dhows are in constant use for fishing. Trading fish, purchasing essential commodities, and official business was largely the province of older men. As for medical treatment, mostly small ailments were treated locally (see Grottanelli 1955), women gave birth locally, and people only went to Kismayu for major medical intervention. So while travel between the islands was fairly frequent, only a fairly small number of males travelled regularly to Kismayu, and only for short periods for defined purposes.

There is a difference between then and now. The elders are describing a situation that obtained during their lifetime, from 1950-ish to the 1980’s. Since The Troubles began, the situation has changed out of all recognition. I have listened to many refugee claimants in the last few years. Most were genuine Bajunis, in my judgement, and all agreed on many issues. One is travel to the mainland. While the few older claimants used to travel there, few young applicants have ever been to the mainland. They see it as a dangerous place, full of wayward and armed militias, not well disposed to Bajunis. Some had even been forced to go to Kismayu, to work in labour camps. Kismayu is now regarded as dangerous, to be avoided if possible.

Summary

Local knowledge. Much of what is said in the report about Somali Bajunis is reliable, but should be used carefully because, as just illustrated, there is incorrect or unsubstantiated material mixed in with the correct statements.

Language Three claims are made. All are incorrect, largely because the elders are describing a different epoch, or because communication between elders and delegation seems imperfect. Most obviously incorrect is the claim that the main language now used in the islands is Bajuni.

In my opinion, it would be ill-advised to base any judgements or decisions on the linguistic claims in this report.

It is not clear where the delegation got their objective information as their Bibliography contains not a single item on Bajuni.

Selected Bibliography

Documentary sources for the Bajuni, their language, and culture are poor. Grottanelli is the best single general source.

Bajuni.com

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The War Office maps are the best for the area.

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This review was originally written in June 2010. It was slightly modified in 2013.