

The International Dalit Solidarity Network
"Working globally against discrimination by work and descent"

Brief Review of Somali caste systems

STATEMENT TO THE COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION
OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

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Introduction

Caste stratification is a daily component of Somali society. In the smallest nomad village, in towns, in cities, in refugee camps, as well as in the overseas Somali communities, these stratifications are alive and well.

Geneological lines of descent are taught to children from an early age. The family clan history is told and retold throughout life, including its relations with other clans.

Traditionally caste was directly related to occupation, residence, political and civilian opportunities, and status throughout life. This stratification is less important when the nation-state and its institutions function well, and much more important when it is weak, collapsing or non-existent, as in the past few decades. However, caste is important to most Somalis even in communities abroad.

To be a Midgan-Madibhan, or an outcaste person, in Somali society is to suffer life-long indignities, to be deemed impure, unlucky, sinful, polluting, and thus meriting the disdain, avoidance, and abuse of others. Even small children shout insults at both child and adult Midgans. Many Midgans have been denied food, medical treatment, and protection just because of their outcaste status by many other Somalis. The only other groups in Somali treated similarly are the Jareer and Bantu descendants of slaves brought from East Africa over a century ago.

Midgans have been beaten brutally, wounded, raped, kidnapped, and forced into slave and unpaid labor just because of their outcaste status. They have no weapons, allies or lands that they control and can escape to. Most Midgan are attached to “noble” dominant clans as their clients, serfs, or virtual slaves. Should they complain or seek to organize, they face severe reprisals from those “noble” clans dominating them. This is another ongoing case of global caste in the 21st century.

Background

Caste has been an integral part of Somali society for centuries. It persisted throughout the twentieth century and continues today in the 21st century.

This society is divided into patrilineal segmented and ranked clan groups. Those groups are based upon relation to a male progenitor and traditional occupations. As in all caste societies, the elite clans are classified as noble and “pure,” while those at the other end of the ranking are considered outcaste and impure, or “polluted.” Generally speaking, most of the noble clans’ occupations have been herding and trade, while the outcaste clans have engaged in small farming, usually on the land of the other clans, as well as in service or scavenger occupations.

The outcaste clans do not descend from the Arabic-origin ancestors of the noble clans. Some scholars report that the outcaste groups may have descended from the conquered indigenous groups occupying the region prior to its conquest by the Somali tribes. Most Somali elders indicate that the polluted status of these despised groups is due to their ancestors breaking of food taboos without cause or an immediate ritual cleansing. If the latter is the case, this would be another instance of blaming the outcaste victims and their ancestors for their debased, pariah status.

The outcaste groups have been relegated to dirty, polluted areas and occupations, and they are traditionally forbidden to socialize (as equals) with others in Somali society.

Anyone from a noble caste breaking this taboo, much less marrying an outcaste person, faces the danger of being outcaste from his or her own family and clan.

Somali society is based on clan relations, reciprocity, and alliances, especially in times of conflict, when there is a lack of a strong, central government. Indeed, and particularly at such times, the main forms of governance and protection come from one’s clan.

Children, the elderly, the ill, the weak, and the wounded can count only on their clans for

food, care and social support. Thus, even liberal-minded Somalis must carefully weigh these considerations.

In Somalia, the outcaste groups are collectively referred to as “Midgan” or “Madihiban,” the former term being much more disrespectful and insulting than the latter one. However, there are actually many more Somali outcaste groups. Each is connected as clients, former slaves, or servants to a noble clan group. They include the Kuulbeer, Hildid, Khayr, Hubane, Aden, Aarsade, Howie, Afarta Ganbar, Gaakaab, Madaraale, Magtal, Omar, Hussein and others scattered all over the Somali regions, including Ethiopia, Kenya and the broader Somali diaspora. The Midgan constitute the largest Somali outcaste family, and its subclans include the Madhiban, Maxamed Gargaarte, Muuse-Darye, Tumaal, Yibir, Howle, Mahaad-Bare, and, according to SIMA, hidden others.

Each outcaste clan has its own dialect. When the noble tribes’ patrons and rulers engage in conflict, their outcaste Midgans clients are forced to fight for them. However they are neither protected nor defended, nor given any share of the resources. Even the most heroic and accomplished Midgan outcaste fighter cannot dream of socializing as an equal or marrying into the noble clan that he is attached to.

When convenient, the Midgan outcaste clients are counted numerically as part of the noble clan they come under. When the Midgan outcaste oppressed groups try to organize, (as all the noble clans do), they are threatened, abused, and physically attacked. Due to the power and arms of the noble clans, most Midgan outcaste Somali people have been forced to keep silent. Any attempt to protest inequality or gain redress meets brutal reprisals.

The Midgan outcaste groups control no land of their own, they are also not usually allowed to live in villages, to drink or get water from the “pure” wells or to use the plates, cups or utensils of the noble clans people. Their status can be compared to the Dalits, or “untouchables,” of South Asia. Yet, they do not even have the constitutional guarantees (reserved places) Indian Dalits have, at least in theory. Only under the last government of Somali General President Mohamed Siad Barre did Midgans have some rights in their own country. When he was deposed, they suffered reprisals from his noble clan rivals who accused them of supporting him.

Particular Jeopardy Faced by Midgan-Madhiban Small Outcaste Clan Members

The Midgan-Madhiban is the largest of several Somali minority outcaste clans. Thus they are collectively designated as “Midgan- Madhiban.”

Somali society is divided into patrilineal kinship-based clans and sub clans . All Somalis can trace their ancestry to a clan or sub clan. The three main large clans (Darood, Hawiye and Isaak), traditionally control large areas of lands, many resources and exercise great political power. Certain smaller clans have respectable status but fewer resources and less political leverage due to their smaller populations. Often those small, respected clans must affiliate with and relate to nearby clans as clients and for protection in case of conflicts.

In 1991, Hawiye forces, many of whom were loyal to General Mohamed Farah Aideed, ousted Barre in a coup, which led to the wide-scale civil war. At first the war was characterized as fighting between clans, but soon, sub clans within the same clan began to fight one another. After the Hawiye toppled Barre, they attacked his government, which was mostly Darood. They also retaliated against Barre supporters, or anyone they believed to be a Barre supporter. That included the Midgan-Madhiban, all of whom they believed to be supporters of Barre, and, also because of longstanding

hatred for that despised group. Some Darood clan-family militia also attacked many minority and outcaste clans.

None of the powerful clans came to the protection of the Midgan-Madhiban.

Consequently, large numbers of them perished. The Midgan-Madhiban were routinely raped, expelled from their homes, kidnapped and killed. Large numbers of Midgan-Madhiban simply disappeared. There is evidence of mass graves, suggesting that they were killed extra judicially. The Midgan-Madhiban were not the only group persecuted in retaliation against Barre, but they stand out for the powerlessness and inability to fight back or gain any compensation for their losses.

A person belonging to the Midgan-Madhiban clan cannot flee to safety in other areas of the country. He/She would be in serious physical danger if found in any part of Somalia in which his family is not a client of the local powerful clan family. Geographically, the country has become extremely segregated by clans and sub clan. The Midgan-Madhiban do not control any territory and are therefore vulnerable in any area of Somalia. In addition they have no recourse against violence because they are politically, socially and militarily powerless.

The last government of Somalia that of General Mohamed Siad Barre, had appointed several Midgan-Madhiban clan members to visible defense positions. Thus when General Barre's government fell in 1991, the Hawiye clan brought about General Barre's defeat and targeted all Midgan-Madhiban clan members for retaliation. This led to even greater and more murderous attacks on the Midgan-Madhiban families. Their homes were attacked and looted, girls and women raped, men tortured and often killed. Many have had to flee and live in hiding to survive this brutality. Very few other Somalis or clans will protect the Midgan-Madhiban either for fear of being targeted and attacked themselves or because they too feel that the Midgan-Madhiban merit no protection (as an outcaste or polluted group). As no clan is permitted to marry the Midgan-Madhiban, they have no kinship ties with other groups to offer them shelter or protection.

Caste in the Somali Diaspora

Somalia was divided into French, British, and Italian colonies at the end of the nineteenth century. After World War II, the former Italian Somalia was divided. Thus, adjacent areas of neighboring Ethiopia and Kenya were actually part of Somalia until several decades ago when parts of the former Italian Somalia were given to the then British government of Kenya and the Imperial Ethiopian government of Haile Selossie. The majority of the population of those regions is ethnic Somali. Large Somali populations are also found in areas of Northern Tanzania and Yemen. Half or more of the population of the adjacent Djibouti – the former French Somaliland – is ethnic Somali. In all of these areas of Somali population, as in Somalia, Puntland, and Somaliland, Midgan-Madhiban and other outcaste groups are the lowest rank of the society's stratification.

For over eleven years Somalia has experienced a breakdown in its central government, as well as suffered from droughts, floods, and war. Moreover, in the south sporadic conflict continues, despite several peace conferences and the appointment of the Provincial National Government (PNG) in the fall of 2000. Thousands of survivors of this horrific situation have fled to the surrounding nations.

The Midgan-Madhiban and other outcaste persons face on going discrimination, abuse and attack in the refugee camps and communities in those adjacent areas where many Somalis still languish. After over a decade, they either await peace in Somalia or acceptance as refugees in developed countries.

Thousands of more fortunate refugees, of all of clans, have been sponsored as refugees by countries as diverse as Canada, the USA, England, Netherlands, Australia, and Scandinavia. In desperation, many others have managed to enter those receiving, developed nations illegally to appeal for political asylum. Thus there is a sizable Somali diaspora in several developing world areas today. Clan and caste continue therein. Ironically, many “noble” clan Somalis seeking refugee or political asylum have falsely claimed outcaste Midgan-Madhiban status. They do this as the receiving developed nations understand the special jeopardy faced by outcaste Midgans, and, therefore usually grant them political asylum. Quite often, when such a false application is granted, the applicant then takes pain to over emphasize, within the Somali community, his or her actual noble status. Somali International Minority Association (SIMA), and other researchers are often called upon to check genealogies, associates and records to assure the validity of such claims. Meanwhile, the Midgan-Madhiban in the diaspora still face caste discrimination within the Somali community. Fortunately, they also have new opportunities in their new countries.

Summary

Midgan-Madhiban, Yibir, Tumul and other outcaste groups are still facing restrictions, prejudice, discrimination, harassment, abuse and attacks. Not only is this treatment a continuation of their historical exploitation, but it is also because they are assumed by some of the large, aggressive, heavily armed, “noble” clans to have been supporters of their rival and hated ruler, the late Somali President Barre. Midgan-Madhiban have never had any secure rights or protection in Somali society. Even in overseas Somali society they still face hatred, harassment, and abuse. Similar caste situations exist throughout the Horn of Africa.

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