

Impact of Tribal Influence on Djibouti Society

Professor Shaul M. Gabbay (Ph. D.)

Global Research Institute,
Denver, Colorado USA

Abstract: African indigenous tribes have populated the Horn of Africa for at least thirteen centuries. While tribal feuds have dominated multiple eras throughout this vast span of history, the introduction of colonialism, followed by the creation of nation states, propelled those rivalries into new realms heavily influenced by foreign powers. The French and Italian colonizers who exacerbated Horn of Africa ancient clan rivalries by splitting native lands into multiple separate nation states diminished tribes abilities to remain cohesive. Today, many competing tribes clash over government positions, military positions, resources, and favor with foreign powers. The result in Djibouti manifested in a highly stratified society that includes a small contingent of highly educated, powerful, wealthy business and political leaders who lead privileged lives, and a massive poor and uneducated underclass held down by apportionment of resources proffered only by tribal affiliation.

Future development of Djibouti and its ability to successfully prevent terrorism in this geopolitically important location relies on governmental and business leadership fostering a more egalitarian society where education, healthcare, and economic opportunities are afforded all citizens, regardless of their ancient tribal heritage.

Keywords: Tribal, Djibouti, Horn of Africa, Somali, Issa, Afar.

I. INTRODUCTION

As global efforts combine to spur development and slay poverty in the most impoverished and undeveloped nations in the world, one glaring problem continues to hamper success in the Horn of Africa: unrelenting battles and animosities between ancient tribes. This paper explores the historical impetus that drives the ongoing societal stratification that threatens the future of each individuals in every tribe, regardless of its numbers or status in society.

By exploring the genesis of tribal development and eventual dissection in the Horn of Africa, and examining how that historical impact contributes to today's inequities in the country of Djibouti, this paper hypothesizes future development will stall, and the nation will become increasingly vulnerable to terrorism, until and unless significant steps are taken to reduce massive inequities of critical importance such as education and health.

II. REGION AND COUNTRY PROFILE

Djibouti is an East African country situated within a geopolitically important location in the Horn of Africa, a peninsula that lies on the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. The Horn of Africa, hereafter referred to as the HOA, is the easternmost region of Africa and is made up of four countries: Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia.

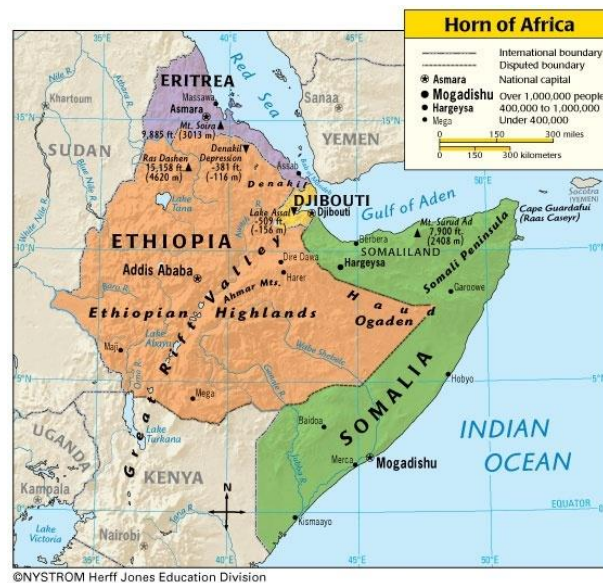


Fig. 1-. Political Map of the Horn of Africa

Tribalism remains the most important influence on daily life in the Horn of Africa. It is impossible to accurately consider the impact of tribalism or other societal and political frameworks in Djibouti without considering its three neighboring countries in the HOA. While each country can claim a unique perspective and reflection of their own national character, the intrinsically shared and overlapping tribal culture and history of all four countries shapes the actions and interactions within each. Though modern-day governmental systems in each country attempt to rise above ancient tribal affiliations, feuds, and pecking orders, those who hold power at the highest echelons of government within each country—from prime ministers and presidents to parliamentarians to military leaders—each country is impacted and influenced by their individual tribal histories and affiliations. It is the very lens through which they view life and one another.

The country of Djibouti is bordered by Eritrea on the north, Ethiopia on the west and south, and by Somalia on its southeast edge. As such, Djibouti ports handle 95% of landlocked neighbor Ethiopia’s trade, most importantly its massive coffee exports which have reached 4 million, 60 kg bags per year. Additionally, Djibouti’s ports handle trade shipments between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Due to its strategic geographic location, France, the United States, Japan, Italy, Germany, Spain, and China all maintain a military presence in the country. It is clear this tiny nation holds an importance beyond its own borders.



Fig. 2. Political Map of Djibouti

Due to Djibouti's dearth of natural resources and lack of industry, the economy is based almost entirely on its strategic seaports, which provide international transshipments and refueling services. Imports, exports, and reexports (the latter of which is primarily Ethiopian coffee beans) provides 70% of its port income. Those shipping revenues are not sufficient to support the country, however, and it remains chronically and desperately poor with nearly a quarter of people living in extreme poverty and the majority of its population still highly illiterate. In 1977, the year the country won independence, Djibouti claimed only one high school in the entire country, one street in the capital city, also named Djibouti, and two doctors for the entire country.¹ Just three years ago, in 2017, over 17% of the country lived below the international poverty line of \$1.90 US per day.

In the past 7-8 years, however, the Djibouti government began making massive, debt-financed investments in infrastructure, with an immediate payoff in GDP growth of 3% per year on average, with real GDP growth of 6%. In theory and hopefully in practice, the extreme poverty rate should begin to drop, and the rate of development will rise.² The question as to which tribe(s) will benefit from any rise in the nation's GDP and quality of life remains critically important.

III. DJIBOUTI'S ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION

Ethnicity

The name of a country can speak volumes. Sometimes, the changing names of a country describes its transitional ethnic makeup and history. Colonial France must have thought this observation accurate during their days as colonial overlords. When they first colonized the region now known as Djibouti in 1880's, they gave it the name *French Somaliland*, and the majority population was made up of Somali tribesmen, and a small population of Afar tribespeople. In 1967, French colonialists changed the name from French Somaliland to *The French Territory of the Afars and Issas*, which more accurately represented the prevailing tribal makeup, given that Afars are a significant regional and local clan.

When France finally surrendered to the call for independence, the local population, along with French leadership, chose the name Djibouti, whose original meaning is disputed, just as jurisdiction over all land and resources are disputed. The Issa legend has it the name originated from a ferocious beast called the *Bouti*, which was defeated by Issa tribesmen. The Afar, on the other hand, believe the name comes from the word *Gabod*, meaning plateau, which Arab sailors pronounced Gabouti, which is close to the current name, Djibouti. The etymology of the Djibouti name could not better describe the back and forth battles for control between the Afar and the Somali Issa tribes, one that continues to impact the competition for power, prestige, services, and resources.

Today Djibouti's relatively small population of 988,000 (less than 1% the size of neighboring Ethiopia) is made up of two primary ethnic/tribal groups: Somali Issa, who make up 60% of the populace, and Afars, who make up 35%. The other 5% is comprised of a mixture of several ethnicities, among them French descendants of Djibouti's colonial past. Given that history, French and Arabic are the official languages of Djibouti, with Somali and Afar also prominent.

Before the French colonized the region in 1883, all tribes were traders and nomadic pastoralists.³ They did not have a state orientation, yet the then majority (75%) Afar tribe were highly organized into chiefdoms and four sultanates. Alternately, the minority Issa and Gadabuursi tribes (the latter of whom were originally Somali) were organized in a decentralized manner based entirely on clan loyalty. Those historical societal organization styles contribute to conflicts today, with each group preferring to cling to their historical tribal norms.

While tribal divisions and were discordant long before France colonized Djibouti, French colonialists' governing choices were incendiary, as they alternately supported one tribe, then another, and then another. This external influence created deeper divisions in the society that previously existed, especially as groups vied for favor from the French, and the conflicts continued to widen after independence and remain as such today.

Religious Makeup

While tribal conflicts and infighting cleave Djibouti society, religion plays a cohesive role in the country. 95% of Djibouti's population is Sunni Muslim, the other 5% being nominally Christian expatriates from France and elsewhere in Europe. Muslims adhere to their religious practices and holidays and only recently have begun constructing mosques. However, perhaps with an eye to winning favor and spreading influence in the Djibouti, the nation of Turkey just completed a 6000 person capacity in the capital city in late 2019.

In this tribally-influenced society, religious beliefs have been a cobbled a mix of traditional beliefs and Islamic beliefs. For the majority Somali Issa, as well as the Afar and Gadabuursi tribes, religion consists of a combined systems of folk religion and normative Islamic principles.⁴

As of today, none of the tribal religious beliefs, including Islam, have impinged or deeply influenced political realms. There is no *political Islam* as such that has become dominant the way it has in many Muslim countries from Southeast Asia to the Middle East to parts of Africa. Whether this homespun expression of Islamic beliefs continues to predominate given the recent opening of the Turkey-funded mosque in its capital city center remains to be seen, as does the question of whether religion and politics can remain separate realms.

Non-Muslim Minority

Despite the 95% majority Muslims hold in Djibouti, the constitution mandates equality for persons of all faiths. While norms and customs strongly discourage conversion from Islam to another faith, an act known as apostasy which can result in a death sentence in several Islamic nations, there is no such punishment in Djibouti. Social networks often socially ostracize those who leave Islam, but no punishment is forthcoming.

Nearly all of Djibouti's non-Muslims are foreign-born citizens and expatriates, and many live in close proximity within the main city of Djibouti. They are made up of Shia Muslims, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hindus, Jews, Baha'is, and atheists.⁵

IV. TRIBAL MAKEUP OF DJIBOUTI

As stated, Djibouti is a tribal society populated with 60% Somali Issa clan and 35% Afar clan. Other tribes, such as the Gadabuursi, have numbers too small to represent in percentages, as they make up less than 1% each. These percentages reflect numerical divisions; they do not, however, reflect the ancient histories and world views that are the substrate beneath each clan that contributes to many of Djibouti's modern day rivalries. They also do not reflect fair percentages of available resources. For example, the Gadabuursi are not given free education, nor are they allowed to join the military, an important advantage that pays dividends in one's career.

Somali Issa

The Somali are a sub-tribe of the larger Dir clan which stretches across huge swaths of eastern Africa, including Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Kenya.⁶ Like the majority of other African tribes, the Somali are split among several African countries. They have a long history as nomadic cattle herders, yet today three-quarters Djibouti's Somali Issa clan live in the urbanized center of the country's capital city, also named Djibouti. When the country first gained independence, the Somali Issa fought hard to join their country with Somalia, which would award them an overwhelming majority. Despite the fact they failed to accomplish this mission, they still retained the majority population of Djibouti, and have consistently held positions of powers in all areas of government and military.

The Issa branch of the tribe represents the largest ethnic group in Djibouti. Their violent past has colored their present behavior, as Somali Issa have been characterized as being "constantly involved in blood feuds with other tribes and peoples."⁷ This certainly holds true in Djibouti, where Somali historian I.M. Lewis once referred to the situation as "an almost constant state of enmity between the "Ise" and the Afar."⁸

Afars

The Afar tribespeople are pastoralists whose homeland has been split repeatedly by founders of modern nation states, and whose leaders divided the Afar population unequally between Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Today, approximately 1.8 million Afar live in Ethiopia; 335,000 live in Djibouti, and based on unconfirmed estimates, 105,000, in Eritrea.⁹ (The Eritrean Afar National Congress claims far larger numbers between 600,000 and 800,000¹⁰.) In the three countries where they remain today, the Afar hold the greatest power in Djibouti.

The cross-border region that is home to the Afar tribe is often referred to as the Afar Triangle; many paleontologists refer to the region more grandly as the "cradle of humanity." This perspective is based on the fact that humankind's oldest ancestor fossil, nicknamed "Lucy" and dating back 3.2 million years, was discovered in the Afar Triangle.¹¹

The 40,000 square kilometer Afar Triangle is easily one of the least hospitable environs on the planet, which some claim is the hottest spot as well.¹² And yet, the Djibouti portion of the Afar triangle has the potential to become financially strong given the possibility that the tectonic plates that lie beneath the soil and meet from three separate strata could give

access to a geothermal pool so vast it has the potential to provide renewable clean energy for the entire nation of Djibouti. For the Afars, this may not mean a change in their fortune, as they do not hold power in any country they inhabit. Nevertheless, as a strong clan they have the potential to wrangle benefit from the areas that lay beneath their feet.

Such a discovery could impact the balance of power at least in Djibouti, as Afar have traditionally been marginalized by a Somali Issa led government that has allotted them minimal access to positions of power and have at times limited the most basic services. Afars are highly concentrated in the north of the country and have been politically and military at odds with the Somali-Issa led government at different times, notably so when Afars initiated a civil war that lasted from 1991 to 1994. The Afar are tough and able warriors, and their warrior skills expanded as a result of their many years of fighting with colonial powers, chief among them Italians in Ethiopia, through whom the Issa clan gained access to weapons, military training, and trade. This gave them incredible power to compete with Somali Issa tribes after Djibouti gained independence, as the Afar were ready to step up and rule the country. Though the Afar failed to take political power and have not held high political positions, they hold far greater sway than other, less represented tribes.

Gadabuursi

Like the ruling Somali Issa clan, the Gadabuursi are a sub-clan of the Dir, and they have lineal ties to the Somali Issa. However, their numbers in Djibouti are so small compared to the Issa clan, and numbers mean everything when it comes to power in a tribal society. The vast majority of the Gadabuursi live in Somalia, and a minority live in Djibouti. This creates a major disadvantage to the tribe, and they receive almost no benefit from having lineal ties to the ruling power. On the contrary, Gadabuursi are among the lowest level of society in Djibouti and are treated as such.

This situation leads to numerous horrific scenarios, including an environment where Gadabuursi tribal members receive no protection from police or other authorities. When a conflict arises between tribal groups, their members are at a complete disadvantage. For example, in Balbala, a poor city on the outskirts of Djibouti city, there are [translation] "frequent ethnic clashes" between the two groups with the police 'systematically' taking side with the Issas."¹³ As mentioned earlier, they also are kept out of the free educational system, the military, and other realms.

V. TRIBALISM'S DETERRENT TO PROGRESS IN DJIBOUTI

Tribalism refers to a cultural term, a way of thinking or behaving in which people are more loyal to their tribes than to their friends, countries or social groups. Tribes hold unique cultural values, beliefs and attitudes that guide their living in the society. Each tribe holds its own set of ethics, and base decisions and actions on that unique guidance. As a Nigerian professor, Dr. J. O. Okogu describes it: "They [tribes] act on ethics among the tribal groups; it is their way of existence as they see their members as relations and blood ties, ready to sacrifice whatever it takes to cater and protect them. In Africa, tribal groups are highly respected by their members as they regard their groups as priority in crossing their daily activities."¹⁴

The effects of tribalism on society and nation-building are severely detrimental to society at large, and lead to situations where minority tribespeople purchase the identity of a ruling class Issa tribe member in order to have any semblance of a normal life, including governmental benefits that should be available to all such as the right to physical protection, the right to schooling, to healthcare, to conduct business, and the like.¹⁵

As Dr. Dr. J. O. Okogu wrote:

...tribalism is a negative concept that is foiling the progress agitated by Africans towards the nation-building of Africa. African leaders are known to be tribally discriminative in addition to [sic] possess attitudes due to their urge for wealth, power and fame that have made them to neglect personnel's of great qualities that would have contributed immensely to the growth and progress of Africa nations and as a such install their tribal members, family allies and close- associates or long-term pals whom are mostly not qualified personnel's, because of easy access to infinite wealth power and fame despising the adverse consequences that may arise, thereby foiling the progress of Africa nation- building.

Djibouti's economic growth, while improving, remains hampered by its "heavily personalized, patronage-based polity"¹⁶ that reflects the countries social divisions. A small, highly educated— and equally highly paid—elite class of civil servants made up largely of Somali Issa tribespeople rules the country. Combined with an elite business class also mostly comprised of Somali Issa, creates a society of extreme inequality. The situation has improved as GDP rises and unemployment has dropped precipitously in the past decade. Nevertheless, indices of absolute and relative poverty are among the worst in Africa, ¹⁷ a problem that continues to be stoked and maintained by intertribal conflict.

VI. THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF TRIBAL VIOLENCE AND REVENGE

While economic realities remain heavily impacted by tribal rivalries and resultant power hoarding, the tribal impact on society is, while directly related, even more egregious. One of the most visible signs of this can be witnessed in Djibouti's legal system.

Djibouti's penal code is a mixed legal system made up of French civil code, Islamic religious law, and customary law. And yet, the actual day-to-day legal practice used is tribal law, which maintains a presence throughout Africa and the Middle East, and where concepts like "eye-for-an-eye" are common in dealing with individual-to-individual conflicts. This system of tribal law pertains to all facets of life, including issues involving property, murder, as well as moral transgressions.

At the heart it, this system provides a means for maintaining order within social networks as well as a means to secure justice for any wronged individual or family. If a Somali Issa tribe member, or an Afar tribe member, or a number of smaller tribes initiates an argument or physical fight for any reason, be it a minor misunderstanding, theft, rage, indiscretion, or any number of common conflicts, the incident can become the basis for a tribal feud that may last for generations, sometimes continuing up to seven generations or more. Multiple levels of feuds and retaliation can overlap, even accidents and misidentification of targets continue to blur the original event, and the situation becomes an overarching blind hatred that results in intergenerational danger for the families and for innocent bystanders.

Naturally, the intertribal conflicts are reflected throughout society and create the greatest havoc in development and security in a region where terrorism could emerge as a growing threat to the economic development of the country as well as to its security. The deep concern over communal disaffection continues to revolve around patronage in Somali sub-clans, as increasingly in the Afar clan as well, leaving the *Gadabuursi* and other minor tribes in desperately poor and disenfranchised positions that weaken the health and security of the entire country.

VII. CONCLUSION

As Africa accelerates its push and progress toward higher levels of development, many countries continue to hamper their progress based solely on tribal rivalries. While the short-term benefit to those in power has given an illusion of progress, those same benefits will disappear if the gap between rich and poor does not lessen and even disappear soon.

Due to its enviable geographic position, Djibouti boasts advantages many other African nations lack. That prime location also comes with dangers, however, and the influx of terror groups is prime among them. If large segments of the society, in fact the vast majority, continue to lack access to basic needs, the opening for conflict is wide. With Djibouti's economic development on the rise, and its future bright, efforts undertaken now to provide stability and equality to the vast underserved, underfed, and undereducated population will serve the entire population and bring an end to the impact and legacy of tribal infighting that poses a threat to future stability.

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