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### The Afar of Djibouti: Maintaining Identity Amidst Conflict

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The Afar of Djibouti: Maintaining Identity Amidst Conflict

By  
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REL 432 World Mission Area Studies

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## **1. Introduction**

While changes in political, economic, and social structures have threatened to uproot the Afar and their way of life, their sense of ethnic identity has remained strong. As a people, the Afar of East Africa are primarily defined by their livelihood as nomads and can be found in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia. Djibouti has been home to the Afar people group even prior to being colonized by France in the late 19th Century. They are deeply woven throughout the land's history, making lasting impacts and helping to shape Djibouti's future as it has progressed from territory to colony to country. Within Djibouti, the Afar share the land with Somali people groups, who are the majority. Tensions between the two groups, specifically the Afar and Issa-Somali, have lasted for centuries, and much of the conflict that the Afar face has its origin in this tension. This conflict has brought to light the Afar people's great sense of ethnic identity, which is also influenced by their adherence to Sunni Islam. This sense of identity will be explored as I provide a historical, geographical, religious, social, and cultural overview of the Afar people.

## **2. Description of Ministry Partner**

The following research was done to assist a mission team's present and future outreach to the Afar people of Djibouti. This team works to reach out by meeting practical needs. One of these major practical needs is English language learning. Those on the team teach English to Somalis in classes taught through an English learning center. It is the hope of the team that they will build relationships through this access ministry that will allow for them to proclaim the gospel, lead Djiboutians into relationships with Christ, and plant churches.

### 3. The History of the Afar

Although there is not much written about the history of the people group, itself, the Afar do claim to be of Arab descent and share a history similar to that of other Cushite peoples around them (Jenkins). Traditionally, the Afar have been divided into sultanates, which are federations of chiefs that primarily mediate conflicts surrounding water and grazing rights (Olson 11). In 1862, the French began to claim the Republic of Djibouti by obtaining the region of Obock from an Afar chief, Ahmad Abu Bakr. This was a strategic move by the French considering that the upcoming opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 would make the region a main waterway (Shehim, Kassim, and Searing 210). However, this was contested by Sultan Dini Mohamed Bourhan, who was Afar. Kadamy writes, “From that point on, the French policy was to negate the existence of the Afars – also called Danakils at the time – who were viewed as an obstacle to further colonial penetration” (Kadamy 512). As time went on, from 1862 to 1865, the French continued to gain control over parts of Djibouti, specifically the Tadjourah and Goba’ad regions, by signing treaties with Afar chiefs. To expand south in 1865, though, the French had to begin signing treaties with Issa-Somali chiefs. The French then moved the center of trade from Obock to Djibouti, a new city that was established across the Gulf of Tadjourah (Shehim, Kassim and Searing 211).

In 1896, Côte Française des Somalis, or French Somaliland, was established with the joining together of Tadjourah, Obock, and Djibouti. The Afar began to resent this name due to its political connotations even though it “is doubtful that the French presence had any significant impact on the life of the nomadic Afars in the early years of the colony” (Shehim, Kassim, and Searing 211). The colonization of Djibouti did affect the Issa-Somali population, who became more exposed to the French rule and more urbanized than the Afar. This created a divide that still

exists to this day. French Somaliland did not see its first indigenous politicians until the 1950s with the emergence of Hassan Gouled and Mahammad Harbi, Issa-Somalis, and Muhammad Kamil, an Afar. In 1960, the Republic of Somalia was established, which resulted in a great sense of Somali nationalism to be refuted by the Afar. Then, in 1963, a reorganization of the representative system took place in French Somaliland. This was done in a way that favored the Afar, who were seen by France as essential in its continued rule over the region. Although the divide between the Issa-Somali and Afar still existed, this reorganization encouraged the previously overlooked rural and nomadic Afar to be more involved in the life of the colony (Shehim, Kassim, and Searing 211-3).

After this restructuring, from 1963 to 1976, the colony entered into a period of Afar dominance, which caused further strife between the Afar and Issa-Somali. Because of the fear of Issa-Somali nationalism, the majority of Afar continued to vote for the French presence to remain in the region. The main political figure during this period was Ali Aref Bourhan, an Afar president who worked alongside the French from 1967 to 1976. During his presidency, Ali Aref changed the name of the colony from Côte Française des Somalis to Territoire Français des Afars et des Issas, and worked to reconcile the colony's relationship with Ethiopia. Somali nationalists attempted to assassinate him on two occasions. Despite an Afar being in power during this time, the Afar remained the least socially developed people in the colony due to their neglected state prior to this rise to power. When talks of independence began in 1976, the Afar felt further alienated and saw that the French were becoming more sympathetic to the Issa-Somali. Throughout 1975 and 1976, it appeared as if the French looked to reach a settlement that would favor the Afar and Ali Aref, but in 1977, they granted independence to Djibouti in a way that favored the Issa-Somali (Shehim, Kassim, and Searing 213-9). Since then, Djibouti's

political life “has been marked by periodic crises which reflect the growing dissatisfaction of the Afar community with the organization of the new state,” and its most serious problem seems to be “the lack of loyalty towards it from its two ethnic communities” (Shehim, Kassim, and Searing 221; 225).

#### **4. Geography, Population, Language, and Other Ethnic Groups**

As a people, the Afar are primarily located in what is called the Afar Triangle. This 55,000 square mile territory stretches across Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti and is formed by the towns of Awash Station, Massawa, and Djibouti. Although their nomadism allows them to wander, this wandering is confined to the existing water supplies in the mostly arid region, of which the Awash River is an important one (Olson 10; Flood 5). Eritrea and Ethiopia remain the main territories of the Afar, but Djibouti is also home to a substantial population of approximately 290,000 Afar. The Afar comprise 28% of Djibouti’s entire population, and the economic pressures within Djibouti are causing them to become more and more urbanized (Mandryk 304-5). This has been the case since 1967 when Ali Aref encouraged his fellow Afar to move to the city in order to become more involved in the economy of the colony (Shehim, Kassim, and Searing 218).

Although the official languages of Djibouti are French and Arabic, the main language of the Afar is Afar, which is one of the major trade languages of Djibouti (Mandryk 304). On the Afar language, Olson writes that the Afar people “remain faithful to their eastern Cushitic language” (10-11). The maintenance of their language is an important aspect of their identity, which, itself, continues to fight for dominance among the other ethnic groups within Djibouti. Djibouti’s other primary ethnic groups are the Somali, which comprise 61% of the population,

and the Arab, which only comprise 8% (Mandryk 304). The tension between the Somali and Afar peoples remains high, and this will be discussed further in later sections.

### **5. Religious Context of the Afar**

Although they still retain some of their traditional animistic practices, the Afar are Sunni Muslims who claim to descend from Ham, the son of Noah (Olson 10; Jenkins; Hestenes 50). As Sunni Muslims, the Afar focus “on the collective will of the group, emphasizing consensus on religious, social, political, legal, and doctrinal issues” (Waugh 389). Sunni Muslims also emphasize the true Islamic life and seek to guide Muslims towards it. Doing so assists in turning the society, at large, into a “normative Muslim community” (Waugh 392). These emphases on group consensus and community also speak to the Afar identity and the importance in maintaining it. Doctrinally, Sunni Muslims tend to focus on a balance of free will and predestination, which allows them to recognize their need to live a life in accordance with Allah’s will while also recognizing that their final destination is in Allah’s hands. They also classify actions into five categories rather than the typical two of Islam. These categories include acts which are neutral, recommended, reprehensible, haram, and halal, with haram acts referring to those that are forbidden by Islam and halal referring to those that are permitted (Waugh 392-3). Out of the four schools of Islamic law within Sunni Islam, the Afar adhere to the Shafi’i (Heine and Spielhaus 113). Because of their strict adherence to Islam, there is no known Christian church among the Afar (Mandryk 305).

### **6. Major Social Needs and Challenges**

Because the Afar are a nomadic people group, many of the major problems they face center around overgrazing, drought, famine, and war (Olson 11). War and conflict is often a result of the scarcity of water (Jenkins). Because the Afar of Djibouti have been an under-

resourced group for many years, poverty and lack of healthcare also pose major problems. In fact, less than “one in four [Afar] have access to health care. In 1992 just 10 percent of [Afar] children were enrolled in primary school, and fewer than 3 percent of eligible students were in secondary school” (Hestenes 51). Although these numbers may have improved since Hestenes’ article was written in 2000, poverty and a lack of healthcare are still major concerns.

One of the key social challenges that the Afar continue to face is their relationship with the Issa-Somali. “Djibouti’s most serious problem is the troubled relations of the Afars and the Issas. Neither group is deeply committed to the preservation of the state they inherited from the French” (Shehim, Kassim, and Searing 209). These two ethnic groups continue to struggle for complete political control over the entire territory of Djibouti. The tension is thickened by the expansion campaigns of the Issa-dominated government within Djibouti, which seeks to expand into the Afar territory of Ethiopia. Because of their wide and expanding social relations and kinship networks, the Issa-Somali are able to have great influence across borders. This influence allows them to traffic arms, gain assistance from Somali-dominated governments, set up training camps, and transport fugitives, things the Afar are not able to do (Yasin 86-94). This ongoing conflict has produced a heightened sense of ethnic pride on both sides.

Another major social challenge faced by the Afar is the Ethiopian-Somali conflict in the Ogaden of eastern Ethiopia. This conflict began with the war between Somalia and Ethiopia in 1977, which took place in the Ogaden and caused the tensions in Djibouti to peak. Although Somalia was defeated, the Afar were unable to gain the political advantages they sought after (Shehim, Kassim, and Searing 209-10; 222). Since the end of the war, the conflict has continued, and “the Afars in Djibouti have been forced to reconsider their relations with the Afar population of Ethiopia and their attitude toward the possible creation of an Afar ‘entity’ in Ethiopia”



(Shehim, Kassim, and Searing 210). The Ethiopian-Somali conflict, combined with the ongoing Issa-Afar tension, have caused a sense of Afar nationalism to arise as a fear response to the persistent Issa-Somali nationalism and pressure.

## **7. Important Cultural Values**

The primary cultural value of the Afar people is their livelihood, or their nomadic lifestyle. While some Afar live along the coast and are fisherman, the majority are “pastoral nomads who work herds of sheep, cattle, goats, and camels” (Olson 10). As pastoral nomads, the Afar live in clans of up to 1,000 people, adding to their already emphasized sense of community (Hestenes 50). They often trade their produce with surrounding peoples, which explains why Afar is one of the trade languages of Djibouti (Jenkins). Although their nomadism is an important part of their identity and they have traditionally wandered as part of this lifestyle, the changing social structures and economy are bringing changes. While they have traditionally carried their homes with them as temporary settlements, over the past two decades “Afar pastoralists have adopted a more sedentary way of life and engaged in a kind of mixed economy where agricultural production and land enclosing are increasingly practiced” (Jenkins; Lenaerts, Lutgart, et al. 28). As discussed earlier, these changing dynamics are causing many of the Afar to become more urbanized and abandon the nomadic lifestyle. Because their occupation as nomads is inextricably linked to their identity as Afar, abandoning it will weaken this sense of identity and potentially cause the Afar to become more vulnerable to the oppressive rule and agenda of other ethnic groups, specifically the Issa-Somali.

## **8. Conclusion**

The Afar of Djibouti, a minority people, have a complex history of political involvement and ethnic tensions that have centered around the maintenance of their ethnolinguistic identity.

Many of the conflicts that the Afar face, especially those involving the Issa-Somali population, involve defensive moves out of fear that the Afar land will be overtaken by others or the Afar identity will be pushed aside as Issa-Somali nationalism takes over. These tensions have their origins in the French occupation of Djibouti, where France positioned the two peoples against one another politically, taking advantage of the ethnic pride of both for its gain. This ongoing ethnic battle requires the Afar to work together as a community, which is a core value of their religion and lifestyle. In order to preserve their nomadic way of life and remain true to their identity, the Afar must continue to withstand the pressures of the changing economy, biased government, continuously rising Issa-Somali nationalism, and hardships of the land they occupy.

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