

Ajuran Sultanate

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The Ajuran Sultanate was an imamate or sultanate in southern Somalia which later controlled south-central regions along the Shabelle valley from Qallafo town in the north to the Indian Ocean in the south, and from the Mudugh region in the east to the Juba valley and Kenya frontiers in the southwest. Earliest sources noted the establishment of the Ajuran dynasty from the mid-13th century. The Ajuran Sultanate amalgamated other existing dynasties such as the Muzaffar, of mixed Persian–Somali ancestry, who ruled the Benadir coast from Mogadishu, and created a confederacy of clans particularly from the Hawiye, the Madanle (a mysterious people remembered for their construction of wells and *wars*, “water ponds,” of extreme magnitude found in the inter-riverine region), and the Digil and Mirifle clans.

The origins of Ajuran are unclear. It is reported that the founder of the sultanate was Imam Issa, the son of Bal’ad, an Arab immigrant, and Fatima, the daughter of Jamballe, a local Somali leader. Some sources claim that Ajuran came from overseas via Mogadishu, others that they arrived from Harar through the Shabelle valley led by Abdalla ibn Abdulkarim whose offspring, known today as Gameidle, founded the Ajuran dynasty.

The Ajuran established a theocratic Islamic state based on Sharia law with its headquarters at Marka or Merca on the Indian Ocean, and the royal residence at Mungiye, about 75 miles south of Mogadishu. Marka was

the home of a number of revered sheikhs, including the Afarta Aw Usman (“the four famous sheikhs named Osman”): Aw Usman Markayale, who is not only venerated in Marka, but also has a mosque named after him with a small underground chamber that, according to popular belief, formed part of a corridor that led directly to the Ka’ba in the holy city of Makkah; Aw Usman Garweyne, whose shrine is on the island of Gendershe, 20 miles north of Marka; Aw Usman Makki of Dhanane; and Aw Usman Bauasan of Jazira. Thus, Marka for the Ajuran is a religious sanctuary, and is called even today “Marka Aw Usman” (Marka, home of Osmans). At the top of the Ajuran hierarchy was the imam, a title used only by Shi’ite Islamic administrations. Next to the imam was the na’ib (vicero), and the sultanate was subdivided into regions overseen by amirs (governors).

One of the features of the Ajuran rule was a powerful and well-disciplined army that policed the sultanate and collected taxes, or “tributes,” of cereal and livestock. These tributes were so exorbitant that the sultanate’s name Ajuran is related to or derived from the Arabic *ijara*, “rent” or “tax.” The Ajuran are also remembered for public works: many of the deep stone-lined wells still in use, and many abandoned stone fortifications that remain standing in southern Somalia, are attributed to Ajuran engineering skills. Tombs called *howal amir*, “amir’s tombs,” and other Ajuran ruins that are found in Marka and coastal southern Somali cities are reminders of their engineering technology.

In the 15th century, the Ajuran became increasingly authoritarian and oppressive. Their subjects were forced to dig *kelis* (canals) for irrigation, and *bakars* (storage pits) for

cereals that were collected in tribute. They built fortresses for the imam's soldiers, dug wells and *wars* for the imam's livestock, and shepherded the camels, sheep, and horses of the imam and Ajuran nobility. A well-known incident of Ajuran oppression involved Sheikh Hassan Burale, who rebelled against Imam Umur's command to cut grass and feed the royal herd. The sheikh was arrested and harshly beaten. He repeatedly stated that he was not *addon* (a slave) of the imam, but a slave of God only. Nevertheless, he was humiliated and insulted, and forced to cut the grass. The animals, however, would not eat the grass that was cut by the sheikh, thus revealing the sheikh's *karamah* (secret power). The animals understood that the Ajuran had misused their authority and so the imam learned his lesson and released the sheikh. In addition, reliable sources assert that the imams lived a degenerate lifestyle. They had wives in every district, and remained in each part of their domains for one or two months of every year. Sources of the time indicate that the Ajuran introduced the custom that the ruler spend seven nights with every new bride before she went to bed with her husband. Moreover, the imam collected half of the bride wealth normally given to the father of the bride, which was in those days 100 camels. This custom existed in the pre-Islamic Doi civilization of Somalia, known as the Gedi Babow custom.

Thus, Ajuran authority was challenged in the late 16th century by rebels within the confederacy, first by the pastoral Darandolle, who suffered from harsh taxations, forced labor, and, most importantly, from discriminatory decrees on water rights. The Darandolle were not allowed to water their herds by day, only at night. The Darandolle took over Mogadishu and its hinterlands after assassinating the na'ib

around 1625. Immediately, two other pastoral clans, Galje'el and Badi Adde, attacked the sultanate in the middle Shabelle regions. In the lower Shabelle and the upper Juba valley, a new Digil and Mirifle clan alliance against the Ajuran emerged, led by the Geledi and Gobawin respectively. The victory over Ajuran in the Digil and Mirifle regions is attributed to the fact that their soldiers were equipped with the locally manufactured *marid* (poisonous iron-headed arrows). Similarly, an alliance of El Amir and Biamal drove the Ajuran out of the lower Shabelle region and took over Marka, the headquarters of Ajuran, around 1700. Eventually, the Ajuran were forced to flee Somalia, principally to the territory of modern-day Kenya. The remaining Ajuran were scattered throughout Somalia. According to popular accounts, the Ajuran declined because they abandoned the law of Islam; their tyranny became unbearable and they were excessively arrogant.

SEE ALSO: Islam and empire; Nomads

FURTHER READING

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