

# **Revisiting Somali Identities**

## **A special issue based on the 12th Somali Studies International Association Congress**

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Guest Editors: Marja Tiilikainen,  
Outi Fingerroos and Abdirashid A. Ismail

### **Introduction**

The Somali Studies International Association (SSIA) was founded in 1978 by a number of scholars, both Somali and non-Somali, with a particular interest in Somali questions. The objectives, as defined at the time of its founding, are:

- To promote scholarly research, both within and outside Somalia, in all areas and disciplines within the social sciences, natural sciences and humanities;
- To encourage international cooperation and to facilitate the exchange of ideas among scholars engaged in research on Somalia and the Horn of Africa;
- To encourage the publication and dissemination of articles and books on Somali Studies and related topics;
- To organize periodic panels and symposia on Somali Studies at meetings of national and international associations and organizations;
- To provide the general public with information on historical, cultural and contemporary issues in the Horn of Africa.

Specifically, the Somali Studies International Association finds its most concrete expression in organizing regular international congresses and the subsequent publication of its proceedings (about the history of SSIA, see Cassanelli 2001).

The 12th Somali Studies Congress, under the theme of *Revisiting Somali Identities—Addressing Gender, Generation and Belonging*, was organized in Helsinki, Finland from 19–23 August 2015, three years after the previous Congress held in Lillehammer, Norway. The Congress in Helsinki was organized in cooperation with three universities: University of Helsinki, University of Jyväskylä and University of Eastern Finland, as well as the Finnish Youth Research Society and the Finnish Somalia Network. The Congress attracted around 130 participants from at least 20 countries.

The Congress aimed to pay close attention to the complex and multidimensional nature of Somali identity and its presentation both in the Horn of Africa and in the diaspora communities. Thus, the Congress challenged its participants to explore the diverse and often intersecting aspects of Somali identity—or rather, Somali identities—such as gender, generation, culture, ethnicity and religion.

In contrast to most previous Somali Studies Congresses, the presentations will not be published as a special edited volume and, therefore, the available space for publishing is limited. However, we feel that the articles of this special issue of *Bildhaan* capture the central themes of the Congress well. Moreover, some other presentations have already been published in the *Afrikan Sarvi* journal, a web journal published by the Finnish Somalia Network (Afrikan Sarvi 2015) and some other publications may still be on the way.

For this special issue we have selected six articles that not only cover the main themes of the Congress, but also realize the Congress's specific aim of exploring multidimensional Somali identities that are shaped by a number of factors such as migration, family, politics and education both in the Horn and in the diaspora. Three of the articles are based on keynote speeches given during the Congress and three others on workshop presentations. Two of the articles look at the situation in the Horn of Africa, whereas four of them focus on questions of identity in the diaspora. This may also be seen as a reflection of the current situation in the field of international Somali Studies, where many researchers, due to prolonged conflict in Somalia, have not been able to conduct their research in the Horn of Africa. Also, the presence of sizable Somali communities in the West has raised new relevant questions from the point of view of Somali Studies.

**Afyare A. Elmi's** article "Developing an Inclusive Citizenship in Somalia: Challenges and Opportunities" explores the concept of citizenship

and its challenges in the Somali context. He argues that the main challenges to constructing inclusive citizenship in Somalia have been the contestation of the essence of the Somali state, clan claims of ownership of territories, and the all-rights and no-obligations mentality of Somalis. Dr. Elmi was one of the keynote speakers at the Congress.

**Farhia A. Abdi's** article "Behind Barbed Wire Fences: Higher Education and Twenty-first Century Teaching in Dadaab, Kenya" focuses on a teacher education program offered to refugees and local Kenyan nationals. The new postsecondary institution, Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) is a consortium of Canadian and Kenyan universities and NGOs who are working together to deliver university courses, certificates, diplomas and degrees to people living in the Dadaab refugee camps. The article pays attention to how refugee education builds not only the students' skills for employability but also, how these programs prepare the Somali students for new forms of citizenship in Somalia.

**Mulki Al-Sharmani** reflects in her article "Politics and Ethics of Marriage and Family Life among Transnational Somali Diasporas" on some diasporic Somali efforts to reform Somali Muslim subjectivities, marriages, and families. She links these efforts to the politics of navigating transnational Somali family life on the one hand, and on the other hand, to diasporic Somali engagements with Islamic religious traditions, and their revisiting the relationship between the ethical and legal. Dr. Al-Sharmani was one of the invited keynote speakers at the Congress.

**Giulia Liberatore's** article "'For My Mum It Comes with the Culture': Intergenerational Dynamics and Young Somali Women's Interventions within Multicultural Debates in Britain" focuses on the ways in which different generations "seek" different Islamic forms of knowledge available to them across the city, and addresses the younger generation's preference for choosing amongst diverse, multicultural mosques rather than the local "Somali mosques" frequented by their mothers. A cross-generational perspective reveals the ways in which change does not unfold as a linear process, but is fragmentary and recursive in nature.

**Yusuf Sheikh Omar's** article titled "Identity and Sense of Belonging of Young Somali Men in a Western Context: Case Studies from Melbourne and Minneapolis" looks at the experiences and perspectives regarding identity and belonging of young Somali men, most of whom were born in Somalia, who are caught between very different cultures in their countries of settlement. They are forming their own complex identities, which cannot be classified as "pure" Somali, Australian or American. Dr. Omar was one of the invited keynote speakers at the Congress.

**Stephanie R. Bjork** explores in her article "The Politics of Somali Bantu Identity in the United States" how the resettlement of Somali Bantu in the U.S., in total some 15,000 people, has impacted their identity formation. As a case study, she focuses on the identity politics of Somali Bantu associations in a major U.S. city. In this context, identity politics is seen as a tool for enhancing the group's position vis-à-vis Somali associations. She is interested in how the American landscape shapes these politics of identity as well as how such configurations are fraught with ambivalence.

At the end, **Lee Cassanelli**, one of the founding members of the SSIA, provides his concluding remarks on the Congress in his "Reflections on the 12th SSIA Congress." Cassanelli sets the Helsinki meeting into the chain of conferences by the Association, and probes the past, present and future of Somali Studies.

The next Congress is planned to take place in 2018 in Hargeysa. During the 13th Congress, the SSIA will celebrate its fortieth anniversary and thus the organizers of the forthcoming conference, the Redsea Cultural Foundation and its associates/partners, aim to sum up the long journey and 40 years of experience. It will also be high time to take the Congress back to Somali soil: before this the Congress has been organized in the Horn of Africa four times—twice in Mogadishu (1980, 1989), and once in Hargeysa (2001) and in Djibouti (2007). We are looking forward to an exciting event for the whole Somali Studies community!

Marja Tiilikainen is an Academy Research Fellow at the Department of Social Research, University of Helsinki, Finland. The author may be contacted at [marja.tiilikainen@helsinki.fi](mailto:marja.tiilikainen@helsinki.fi).

Outi Fingerroos is a Professor of Ethnology at the Department of History and Ethnology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. The author may be contacted at [oufinger@jyu.fi](mailto:oufinger@jyu.fi).

Abdirashid A. Ismail is a Post-doctoral Researcher at the Department of Social Research, University of Helsinki, Finland. The author may be contacted at [abdirashid.ismail@helsinki.fi](mailto:abdirashid.ismail@helsinki.fi).

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