The Somali Studies International Association: A Brief History

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Launching a new international journal devoted to Somali Studies at the turn of the millennium provides an opportune moment for an historian to reminisce. Since one of *Bildhaan's* major objectives is "to deepen historical memory and the search for explanations," it seems appropriate, at this juncture, to take a brief look back at the history of an organization that has played a central role in defining the field of modern Somali Studies. The Somali Studies International Association (SSIA) was founded in 1978. Since that time, it has organized seven international scholarly congresses and helped promote at least half a dozen smaller regional meetings of Somali specialists on three continents. Over the past twenty-two years, its members have written and commented on virtually all aspects of Somali life, including those events and forces of the past decade that drove the country into political chaos and civil war. While academic congresses were certainly not the only places where knowledge about Somalia was produced and disseminated, the Association's work can serve as a useful barometer to measure the condition of Somali scholarship over the past quarter century.

II. Organization and Accomplishments

The first steps toward the formation of a Somali Studies association were taken at an informal meeting of interested scholars who had convened in Chicago in April 1978 for the Fifth International Conference on Ethiopian Studies.[1] It may seem surprising that the seeds for a Somali Studies association were sown at a conference of Ethiopianists, but we have to remember that prior to the mid-1970s, the number of

Somali specialists was very small and Somali Studies was considered by most academics as a peripheral subfield of Ethiopian Studies. Recognizing this situation, those present at the Chicago conference decided to convene a Somali topics panel at the forthcoming annual meeting of the African Studies Association in Baltimore and follow that panel with the inaugural meeting of the new Association.

On Saturday, November 4, 1978, fifteen Somali and foreign scholars and friends officially launched the Somali Studies International Association. After some discussion, the following statement was adopted:

> The major aim of the Somali Studies International Association is to promote interest in and knowledge about Somalia and its neighbors in the Horn of Africa. Specifically, the Association will strive:
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> 1. To promote scholarly research, both within and outside Somalia, in all areas and disciplines within the social sciences, natural sciences, and humanities.
> 2. To encourage international cooperation and to facilitate the exchange of ideas among scholars engaged in research on Somalia and the Horn of Africa.
> 3. To encourage the publication and dissemination of articles and books on Somali Studies and related topics.
> 4. To organize periodic panels and symposia on Somali studies at meetings of national and international associations and organizations, and
> 5. To provide the general public with information on historical, cultural, and contemporary issues in the Horn of Africa.

The group then discussed the composition of and procedures for electing Executive and Advisory Committees, selected a logo (the headrest, *barkin* or *barshin*), and agreed upon a Somali name for the organization (*Ururka Cilmi-Baarista Soomaaliyeed*). The SSIA was subsequently incorporated as a non-profit organization with the legal assistance of Martin Ganzglass, a Washington, D.C. lawyer and former Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia.

I am not certain if any of us present at that charter meeting anticipated how successful the SSIA would become. In 1978, the Somali government had only recently severed its diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union, and many in the political establishment were still suspicious of Western (particularly American and British) scholarship. Only a handful of foreign researchers, mainly Italians, were active inside Somalia

during the period, and Somali intellectuals critical of the regime who had not fled the country were still under careful watch by Siyaad Barre's security forces. Nonetheless, the First Congress of the Somali Studies International Association convened in Mogadishu from 6 – 13 July 1980.[2] The Congress was a major logistical accomplishment for a country only recently emerging from a prolonged period of drought, war, and anti-Western policies. One observer, while noting how limited the scholarly research on Somalia seemed to be, added that the panels on politics and development were lively and controversial, and that "it was a positive sign . . . that the conference identified so many areas as especially fertile areas for further research."[3] Unfortunately, those who hoped that the First Congress would signal the start of an era of intellectual freedom and public debate within Somalia were disappointed. The growth of corruption, cynicism, and neo-clan politics through the 1980s undermined the efforts of local intellectuals to carry through with the research agendas proposed at the first Mogadishu Congress. Those agendas had to be pursued primarily by scholars outside the country.[4]

Perhaps not surprisingly, international interest in Somali Studies continued to grow as political turmoil engulfed the country. With the aid and support of foreign government ministries, universities, and professional groups in the host countries, the SSIA succeeded in organizing six additional international Congresses of Somali Studies at roughly three-year intervals: in Hamburg (1983), Rome (1986), Mogadishu (1989), Worcester and Boston (1993), Berlin (1996), and Toronto (1999). These international meetings were attended by anywhere from 250 to 400 Somali and non-Somali scholars, students, social workers, policymakers, NGO representatives, journalists, and the like, taking up issues ranging from Somali poetic scansion to range land conservation to warlord politics. The meetings in Hamburg and Rome produced substantial published volumes of edited conference papers, as did the Fifth Congress, held at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts in December 1993.[5] In addition, the Association spawned a number of affiliated Somali Studies organizations in various countries in Europe and North America, several of which sponsored smaller regional conferences of their own in the intervals between the SSIA congresses.

Over the years, of course, individual members of SSIA used the occasion of the international meetings to voice objections to human rights abuses, foreign interventions, or restrictions of freedom in

Somalia. Many readers will recall, for example, that SSIA's Fourth International Congress met again in Mogadishu in 1989, amidst growing domestic strife and increasing international criticism of the Siyaad Barre dictatorship. A number of international scholars boycotted the 1989 Mogadishu Congress on the grounds that attending it would prolong the life and legitimacy of a corrupt regime. But others contended that however susceptible such congresses were to propagandistic uses by the authorities, they were important because they provided outside scholars with a chance to hear from insiders, and they gave encouragement and intellectual sustenance to local Somali intellectuals who had few other chances to share ideas with their peers on the outside.

Despite such differences of opinion, and in spite of the political divisions that increasingly beset Somali society after 1980, the Association has stood by its commitment to welcome intellectuals, educators, and activists of all persuasions, to study Somali life and culture beyond any specific state borders, and to refrain as an organization from taking political positions. While many individuals and host-country organizers deserve credit for maintaining this SSIA tradition of lively, open, and nonpartisan debate, perhaps no one is more responsible for the Association's success than Professor Hussein Adam, one of its "founding fathers" and its first president. At the Seventh SSIA Congress in Toronto, several colleagues violated the Somali preference for avoiding praise-poems for individuals in order to recognize Hussein Adam's long commitment to Somali Studies and to the values of tolerance and inclusiveness. There is little doubt that his vision, tenacity, and intellectual generosity set the tone for the many executive committee meetings of SSIA that I attended over the years; and those same qualities could not help but filter down to the Congresses themselves. As Somalis and friends of Somalia take up the issues that confront them in the new millennium, it is good to remember that these values made it possible for the Somali Studies Association to flourish even during the years when some of its members were deeply divided by regional and/or political loyalties.

III. Issues and Agendas

The 1978 Baltimore panel that launched the SSIA included specialists in the fields of history, political science, linguistics, archaeology, and literature. Along with anthropology, these were the disciplines which formed the core of Somali Studies at that time and which continue to

generate much of the published scholarship in the field today. Even when subsequent SSIA Congresses gave priority on their agendas to urgent contemporary issues such as military intervention, health care, relief, and reconciliation, their programs invariably included panels on language and literature, historic preservation, religion and kinship, and social and cultural history. The continued interest of SSIA members in these enduring topics of Somali Studies has provided a certain intellectual continuity over the past twenty-five years. This continuity is important, since many Somalis believe that the survival of their country will depend not only on rebuilding political and economic institutions, but also on the restoration of those moral and cultural traditions that have enabled Somalis to cope with crises in the past.

The Somali Studies intellectual community has also had to face challenges stemming from new constituencies and new interests within its membership. These constituencies themselves reflect the transformations of Somali life that have occurred in many places over the past decade or so. For example, while there were no women among the "founding fathers" of the SSIA, and while women are still heavily underrepresented in most associations of Somali scholars outside of Scandinavia, women took the initiative in forming their own caucuses at the Berlin and Toronto meetings and are currently taking a leading role in the anticipated Congress being planned for Hargeisa in July 2001. Any serious discussion about future development for Somalia cannot ignore the experience and expertise of women who have been on the front lines as teachers, social workers, and peacemakers, both within and outside Somalia during its most difficult trials.

Certain issues, which at the first four international congresses had only been undercurrents, came to the surface during the 1990s. At the Fifth Congress in Worcester, for example, one of the best attended panels dealt with Islam's potential role in a new Somali state. Along with a lively discussion about whether the Islamic principles of human dignity, solidarity, and respect for education and property rights could best be realized in an Islamic state or in a secular one, the implicit question became: should leadership in a renascent Somalia come primarily from those currently being educated in Islamic schools, or from the sons and daughters of those who went abroad to live and study in the West? The 1993 Congress also witnessed the emergence of a vocal group of Somalis who represented themselves as members of the country's "minorities." This term has come to include a wide spectrum of urban and rural Somalis who had long been politically marginalized

and many of whom seemed to be suffering disproportionately from the predatory activities of the armed militias during the civil war of the early 1990s. Panels dealing with these minority groups have now become commonplace at Somali and African Studies conferences, and it seems fair to say that their spokesmen have forced Somali specialists everywhere to recognize that discrimination (and even exploitation) based on color, occupation, and language has been an historical reality for too many of Somalia's citizens. This realization has constituted a major change in the paradigms that have governed our understanding of Somali society,[6] and scholars can never look at the country in the same way again.

As we all know, the recent conflict in Somalia generated a Somali diaspora of unprecedented scale. While Somalis have a long history of overseas trade and travel, the 1990s flood of political refugees and asylum seekers to Kenya, Djibouti, the Gulf States, Europe, and North America has generated new social and psychological problems for Somali emigré communities. The programs of SSIA congresses since 1993 have reflected these new realities of the diaspora: papers discussing issues of Somali unemployment, alienation, generational and gender conflicts, and tensions with citizens of host communities have become as common as those on poetry and politics. This suggests that contemporary Somali Studies is clearly moving along two tracks, the one focusing on conditions in the Horn and the other on conditions overseas. Indeed, the two most recent international meetings of Somali Studies — the Seventh SSIA Congress in Toronto in 1999, and the Somali Diaspora conference held in Turku, Finland in 1998 — focused predominantly on problems and prospects of Somalis outside Somalia. In all likelihood, new notions of Somali family, culture, and identity will emerge from these diasporic studies, as well as from their dialogue with the established categories of Somali Studies scholarship.

One can already see some of the potential outlines for a future Somali Studies agenda in the challenges posed by a younger generation of Somalis who have been educated (if not born) in Europe or North America. Somali students who have attended the most recent SSIA congresses — perhaps to satisfy their curiosity about who these "famous" scholars were — spoke of their dismay at their elders' continuing commitment to the idea of "clans," at the seeming absence of any constructive philosophy for the next generation, and at the antisocial behavior they were beginning to see among some of their frustrated peers. Some young Somalis have begun to reject their Somali heritage

and turn to Islamic or black solidarity as a more meaningful alternative. Their views on the increasing irrelevance of Somali traditions to their lives seem to be posing an implicit challenge not only to many of their elders but also to scholars and intellectuals whose past work has focused more on cultural change in Somalia than on changing Somali culture abroad.

IV. Limitations and Possibilities

While the agendas of successive SSIA congresses clearly mirror changes in the collective Somali condition as well as shifts of consciousness with regard to what the priorities ought to be, we should hold no illusions about the ability of scholarship alone to shape events. Intellectual critiques of Somalia's dictatorship during the 1980s swayed few policymakers in the West, who continued to tolerate the brutal regime of Siyaad Barre until the end of the Cold War made him dispensable. Though experts know that Somalis typically rally around leaders under attack by foreigners, that knowledge did not prevent U.S. and UN soldiers from pursuing Mohamed Farah Aidid in the late summer of 1993; only the debacle of the special forces assault of October and the outcry of American public opinion forced a reconsideration of U.S. objectives. Nor, I suspect, would the growing attention paid by Somali Studies scholars to the country's minority clans have had much impact on the balance of power inside Somalia had not the Reewiin Resistance Army and Digil Salvation Front won for themselves some major victories on the ground. For academic Somali Studies to have an impact, its practitioners must engage with those in a position to mobilize human and material resources for change.

In a 1979 review of the state of scholarship on Somalia, I wrote that "with the possible exceptions of anthropology and political science, social science research on Somalia has been . . . the most underdeveloped component of Somali Studies."[7] As the accompanying article by Lidwien Kapteijns suggests, the situation has changed for the better over the past decade. But there is still a need for the SSIA to encourage research on critical subjects that have been underrepresented in past congresses. Some of those subjects have been widely researched by scholars in other parts of Africa, and Somali specialists would do well to draw on some of this comparative work. I have often argued that Somali Studies as a collective enterprise has been too insular, too unwilling to view Somalia as a variant of other societies. This sense of

"Somali exceptionalism" can prevent us from seeing that many rural Somali communities resemble the mixed agro-pastoral societies found throughout much of East Africa; that urban Somalia has evolved through processes of growth and differentiation typical of most African cities; that Islamic Somalia shares with many Islamic countries the tensions between religious identity and local or regional loyalties; that geopolitical Somalia is only one example in a panoply of Cold War and post-Cold War case studies; and that the new Somali diaspora reflects patterns of dislocation and transnationalism that have been experienced by many peoples around the world in recent decades.

Finally, as well as looking outward to colleagues in other areas of African Studies, Somali scholars ought not to forget that their own country once had a promising social science agenda. I refer to the period when the Somali government attempted to resettle nomads in farming and fishing villages following the devastating drought of 1974 – 75, and then sought to promote rural literacy and health care delivery throughout the country. These experiments might have provided exciting laboratories for ongoing social science research had not the Ogaden war altered the trajectory of economic change and national discourse in Somalia. Indeed, an international seminar held in Mogadishu in November 1975 had already begun a lively debate on many of these development issues. The seminar was jointly sponsored by the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning (IDEP) and the Somali Institute for Development Administration and Management (SIDAM), and the proceedings were published in a valuable volume entitled *Somalia in Transition*.[8] Cast in a theoretical framework of underdevelopment theory, which may seem a bit dated to us today, the proceedings nevertheless provided a stimulating series of observations and commentaries on the actual economic, sociological, and psychological changes rural Somalis were undergoing. As Somalis take up the challenge of resuming public debate on national development priorities, it is helpful to recall that only a generation ago, intellectuals, government planners, and policymakers within Somalia were engaging in lively scientific discussions over the direction and implications of economic and social change.

I also remember, during visits to Somalia in 1977 and 1979, that a number of research centers had been set up for Somali scholars and the occasional foreign visitor. A division of social sciences had been started within the Faculty of Education at the National University; and the National Academy of Somali Studies and the National Research

Institute had been reorganized within the Ministry of Higher Education and Culture. Once again, unfortunately, these centers were never given sufficient resources to do their job. Funds for the acquisition of books and periodicals were rarely available, and the State Printing Office did not have the capacity to publish many of the scientific, historical, and literary manuscripts prepared by local scholars. Even without these incentives, Somali educators and researchers continued to gather oral histories and folklore. If they are still recoverable, these materials could be a treasure trove for a new generation of Somali students and scholars.

The point here is that Somali Studies in the past has not only been an enterprise of foreign-educated academics. Prior to the total politicization of higher education and research, the Barre regime (like its predecessors in the 1960s) had recognized, if never fully supported, the role of scientific research within the country. In their efforts to build a democratic society with an informed citizenry, future leaders of Somalia need to resurrect the national research institutes that enabled Somalis to investigate, reflect upon, and debate their cultural and historical heritage. It is especially important that those of us who may return to Somalia in the coming years — including educated Somalis who have lived and worked abroad for a decade or more — not forget the contributions of those Somalis who continued to labor inside the country through the dark years of the civil war. Somali Studies needs their knowledge, experience, and wisdom more than ever. ◉

Notes

1. Among those present at this initial gathering were Charles Geshekter, B.W. Andrzejewski, Said Sheikh Samatar, J. Joseph Pia, Richard Greenfield, and Lee Cassanelli.

2. In October 1979, a smaller gathering of Somali and international scholars had been invited to Mogadishu to present papers at the symposium *Somalia and the World: International Symposium on the Tenth Anniversary of the Somali Revolution*. Despite the Somali government's obvious political motives in inviting international scholars to Somalia at a time when it was seeking to increase its support from Western countries, many intellectuals felt that this symposium was a promising start to what they hoped would be a new era of academic freedom in the country.

3. John Gartley, "A Note about the First International Congress on Somali Studies, Mogadishu, 6–13 July 1980," *Northeast African Studies* 2, no. 1 (1980): 77–78.

4. Thanks to the dedicated efforts of editors Hussein M. Adam and Charles Geshekter, the *Proceedings of the First International Congress of Somali Studies* was finally published in

1992 by Scholars Press of Chico, California. It is instructive to see the range of interests and the research priorities of Somali Studies scholars in 1980.

5. Thomas Labahn, ed., *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Somali Studies, University of Hamburg, August 1–6*, 1983, 4 vols. (Hamburg: H. Buske, 1984) and *Proceedings of the Third International Congress of Somali Studies, 1986 Rome, Italy* (Rome: Pensiero scientifico editore, 1988). The proceedings of the Fifth Congress were published under the title *Mending Rips in the Sky: Options for Somali Communities in the 21st Century*, edited by Hussein M. Adam and Richard Ford (Lawrenceville, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1997).

6. As further evidence of this new "subfield" of Somali Studies, an Interriverine Studies Association (ISA) was launched in Toronto in 1994 to bring together scholars pursuing research on the peoples and cultures of southern Somalia.

7. Lee V. Cassanelli, "Recent Developments in Somali Studies," *Horn of Africa* 2, no. 1 (January–March 1979): 36–41.

8. Published by what was then the Somali Institute of Development Administration and Management, Mogadishu, 1975.