

My Dostoyevsky Syndrome: How I Escaped Being a Self-Hating Somali

Said S. Samatar

The habit of reflection is the most pernicious habit of civilized man.

Joseph Conrad in *Lord Jim*

*Allahayow nin ii daran maxaan daafta hore seexshay
Nin ii daaqsanaayana maxaan daafida u kariyey
Jidhku nin uuna dooneyn maxaan hadalka deeqsiyey
Ma degdegee xaajada maxaan ugu dulqaad yeeshay
Weji debecsan, dayma aan dareen gelin dubaaqiisa
Qosol dibadda yaalloon ka iman dhuunta dacalkeeda
Isagoon digniin qabin maxaan kaga deyaan siiyey*

If any man intended aught of villainy against me
By God, how snug I made the forecourt for his bed-mat, nonetheless!
And if, with aggression in his thoughts
He pastured his horses to get them battle-fit
How in spite of this I made him griddle-cakes of maize to eat!
Amiably I conversed with him for whom my body felt revulsion.
I did not hurry, I was patient in dealing with his tricks.
I showed a relaxed and easy mien,
My looks gave no grounds for suspicion in his mind
Laughter on the surface, not rising from the gullet's depth.
Then, when he was all unknowing and unwarned,
O how I struck him down!

Ugaas Nuur

I. Introduction

This is an essay in self-doubt, and in subsequent strivings of the soul to shake off the legion of private demons clamoring to offer their unbidden company in midnight visitations of the blues. As such, it could be catalogued as a confessional item, as revealing of personality quirks as of political mishaps. A striving confessor, much like a drowning man, must grasp at straws, if only to stave off the looming specter of lost honor. Thus, in the practice of patient soul-exorcism, the handiest

strategy stems—if one is lucky enough to be favored by the capricious agencies that govern the universe or clever enough to outsmart them—from the vagaries of time. As a venerable Jamaican proverb poetically puts it, “Time longer than Rope” cures all things, from the discomforts of the common cold to the more crippling wounds of constricted self-esteem. No doubt this explains why, in the life of nations as of individuals, the measuring devices of time—what we designate as dates—cling to the human conscience as cautionary monuments to the clumsy march of history.

- 3100 B.C.: the Pharaoh Menes unifies the Upper and Lower lands of the Nile to launch the ancient glory that was Egypt.
- 1066 A.D.: the Norman conquest of England ushers in the epoch of Anglo-Saxon ascendancy that was to transform scruffy Britons into a race of world conquering warriors whose empire, at its height, owned a whopping one-fourth of the globe. The sun, bragged British statesmen, never sets on the Union Jack, to which a cynic responded, “And rightly so, because the Almighty does not trust Brits in the dark!”
- Every fourth grader with a good tutor knows the world-shattering impact of 1789.
- December 7, 1941: Pearl Harbor.
- September 11, 2001: America is wounded in ways such that she—and the world—will never be the same.
- Every Somali must surely think—if he thinks at all—of Sunday, October 3, 1993, as the date that sealed Somalia’s destiny in anarchy and misery. On that bloody Sunday, a force of American Rangers was savaged by Somali warlord General Aideed’s militia in Mogadishu, Somalia’s capital. Shortly after this disastrous military reversal, the bloodied Americans took the lead in persuading the world community to discard miserable Somalia and leave it to its own devices as a nation of ingrates that, literally, bites the hand that feeds it.

In the light of hindsight, the Somalia debacle has taught different lessons to different parties, with varying degrees of interest in the unfortunate outcome. For African states, Somalia represents a cautionary tale in where not to go. For the world at large, “the Cassandra of Africa” became a byword for anarchy and gangsterism. For American military planners, the Somalia disaster was dubbed “the Mogadishu

Syndrome." It was a harbinger of a new era of nightmarish urban warfare with no visible enemies to combat and no targets to hit, but only the ghoulish exercise of street fights against ragtag militias that would slink into dark alleys when fired upon, only to reemerge with deadly sniper fire on the hapless Americans in their cumbersome fatigues. The bitter experience taught the Americans to rethink "the science of war," and to adopt new strategies tailored to "alley" gunfights. Thus, it is Somalia's dubious honor to have brought about the rethinking of military doctrine in the 20th century. Presumably, the "near-death experience" of the Pentagon in the attacks of September 11, 2001, can now inspire the Fat Boys who work in that building to proceed ever more cautiously, as they prepare to have their "day of reckoning" with the bearded, be-turbaned mullahs in Kabul.

For me, the Somalia collapse served to evoke another syndrome, that of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Russia's pre-Freudian Freud, mad prophet, and writer of hysterical novels. The Dostoyevsky syndrome began to unfold with his arrest in April 1849, "as a member of a clandestine circle" of young idealists who evangelized "utopian socialism and dreamed of freedom."¹ Charged with the crime of subversion, which carried the death penalty, Dostoyevsky and his friends "had to undergo," unbeknownst to them, a "mock execution" wherein:

standing before the firing squad he was so certain of the imminence of death that he felt more dead than alive at the abrupt proclamation of the Czar's clemency; when he finally recovered his senses it was to find himself in irons and on his way to Siberia.²

Three of Dostoyevsky's comrades went insane from the harrowing ordeal. Fortunately for posterity (for the world of letters, in particular), the young man destined to become, in André Gide's judgment, the "greatest novelist" of all time, was spared by some inner resources from cracking up like his fellow cabalists, though the shadow of madness stalked him for the remainder of his life. The four years of incarceration at hard labor and five of exile in Siberia were to transform the "father of demented fiction" from a young pretender to sophistication, playing at pan-European cosmopolitanism and contemptuous of "backward Russia" to an archconservative Russophile, who was to attach great, almost mystical values to the alleged wonders of the "Russian soul."³ The story of his conversion was as improbable as it was bizarre. As the future author of *The Brothers Karamazov* ("the great-

est novel ever" — André Gide again) whiled away prison time with murderers and madmen, he was mercilessly taunted by Polish intellectual fellow inmates who made common cause in mocking Russia as a nation of "scruffy peasants" with a ruling class of "degenerate leeches." No love was lost between the Poles and the Russians. The cruel gloating of these sophisticated, unkind fellow prisoners did much to humiliate the sensitive, tremulous, small-statured man. Dostoyevsky learned shame first hand. His health was permanently impaired as his chronic epilepsy recurred with debilitating frequency. Undoubtedly, self-loathing damages equally the body as well as the soul. And yet, endowed with an inner mettle of steely hardiness, he rebounded to emerge thereafter as a defender of the world's "insulted and injured," to say nothing of becoming the apostle of the "Russian soul," with a nationalistic fervor for "Mother Russia" that bordered on jingoistic dementia. He commenced to see Russia as a pristine, idyllic land, uncontaminated by the sins of godless Western Europe and therefore destined to "save humanity" from its European-led, headlong rush toward nihilistic nightmares. Dostoyevsky turned the act of humiliation into a therapeutic strategy of liberation, personally, politically, and spiritually. The conversion was to unleash his gifts as a novelist of genius with an unparalleled capacity for creating the most memorable character extremes:

Starving students and saintly prostitutes, masochistic maidens and sadistic belies, gambling lovers and scheming adolescents, criminals and epileptics, the pure of heart and nihilists, men from the underground and God-seekers, all form a weird, hag-ridden cavalcade of unforgettable characters.⁴

He also turned out to be something of a Russian national prophet whose funeral was attended by 30,000 mourners. The author of this piece seeks no prophetic pretensions, nor novelistic claims of any sort. And I certainly do not expect 30,000 mourners to turn up at my funeral. I do, however, confess to a Dostoyevskian crisis of the soul. The collapse of the Somali state and the consequent humiliations conspired to precipitate a personal collapse, so gripping in its call to despair as to frustrate the skills of any aspiring shrink. It led me to appreciate Conrad's epigraph in the opening page of *Lord Jim*, abjuring the commemorative power of reflection as the "most pernicious habit of civilized man." By contrast, Ugaas Nur of northwestern Somalia, the

wily chieftain who, by-the-by, was a contemporary of Conrad's, could not afford to abjure memory and reflection. Surrounded on all sides by the enemies of his little patrimony, Ugaas Nur is more inclined to harness memory as a Machiavellian tool to obliterate his foes. His lines, set against Conrad's, say as much.

To reflect is to remember, and memory seduces the mind, naively believing as it does in the notion of the good old days, when in fact there never has been any such thing. Still, Somalis who remember (of whom there may not be many) surely must lament the loss of their nationhood along with their dignity and, consequently, their becoming the world's laughingstock. Statelessness and anarchy have become synonyms of the word "Somali." Although the modern outlook ranks statelessness as the most primitive condition of human existence, who, one could reasonably ask, says a human community must exist in a state in order to have happiness and dignity? Still, the urge to belong to a national community, to have a state, a flag, a passport, and a corner of the earth, remains a universal longing, and those who lack these are invariably the object of universal scorn. Thus, it may be that the yearning for respect and for collective self-esteem must prompt members of the Somali elite to remember the past, the idyllic yesterday, when their nation was counted as a respected member of the community of nations. I doubt it, though for reasons that I shall address shortly.

Here, memory especially hurts when it is recalled. Lest it be forgotten in the current general demoralization of the land, Somalia began life after independence as a model of democracy and political stability. It was hailed by pundits and prognosticators as the pride of Africa, the only country in a continent of coups and counter-coups in which a transfer of power by ballots, rather than by bullets, happily occurred, and in which the defeated head of state stayed home unmolested, to enjoy years of peace and prosperity, rather than being driven into exile, as characteristically happened in adjacent lands.

II. Into the Sand Dunes of the Horn

To reflect is also to introspect, individually and collectively, and to ponder what went so wrong as to sink beautiful Somalia into the sand dunes of the Horn? A rogue's gallery of goons comes to mind. Did Siyaad Barre's two score and two years of brutal dictatorship ruin pastoral Somalia beyond redemption? The General's habitual banter

weighs the verdict of history against his misrule. He used to boast to anyone who would pay attention that “when I am finally forced to relinquish power, there will be no nation left to govern.” He had, that is, decided long beforehand that when the time of his final removal came, he would ensure the ruin of it all. How truly and perfectly did he live up to his word! This philosophy of “rule-or-ruin” is the evil blueprint pursued by nearly all African dictators, the latest being Robert Mugabe, who, in a desperate attempt to hang on to power, has taken to despoiling white Zimbabwean farmers in a scheme to divert the attention of a wounded population from the dehumanizations of his discredited regime. He, too, would ruin Zimbabwe rather than yield power.

But is a single individual able to bring down an entire nation? If so, this seems to settle in favor of the individual the endless debate among historians as to whether history is made by accumulated forces waiting to be unleashed, the so-called “stored energy” theory of history, or whether individual ambitions and egos seal the fate of nations. The Siyaad Barre syndrome certainly goes far to explain Somalia’s mishap. But does it explain all? Maybe Somalis are, to use V. S. Naipaul’s apt phrase about Third World peoples, a “half-made society,” a nation of bellicose pastoralists, an unskilled and unruly mob of camel herders who know little of co-existing harmoniously as a nation-state, and still less of self-government. History may well have conspired against us. A people grown in the unforgiving climate of the Somalis—sand dunes, baking sun, parched throats, bleak environment—cannot be expected to be noted for their mildness of character. On the contrary, Somalis have shown themselves a characteristic product of the desert-pastoral, acephalous and egalitarian, extremely individualistic, socially unstable and schismatic to a fault, warlike to the point of addiction to perennial feuds and vendettas, to say nothing of interminable freelance looting. When that eccentric, romantic globe-trotting Briton, Sir Richard Burton, showed up on the Somali coast, disguised as a Muslim holy man named Hajj Abdullah, the first observation he makes of the Somalis in *First Footsteps in East Africa* was: “a fierce and turbulent race of republicans.” “Constant in nothing,” he went on, “but inconstancy.”⁵ (Someday, when I grow up, I want to write a work entitled *First Footsteps in America* as a payback to Sir Richard and his spiritual offspring, the once supercilious but now shaken Americans.)

Nearly every Somali yearns passionately for pan-Somali unity, while everything he does, in practice, contravenes his yearning from

coming true. The devil in the details of the Somali social fabric is, to repeat my old mantra, lineage segmentation, the humpty-dumpty of Somali society. Although the segmentary lineage system as a primary principle in state formation was first articulated by the 14th century north African philosopher of history, Ibn Khaldun, within his concept of *casabiya*, the modern study of this rule in social relations has been largely the achievement of British social anthropologists, from A. R. Radcliffe-Brown to the late Evans-Pritchard (known among colleagues as E.P.), to the living I. M. Lewis. And, as it happens, one of the two great classics on lineage segmentation is on the Somalis, notably Dr. Lewis's pioneering work, *A Pastoral Democracy*, still deservedly considered the definitive study of Somali pastoralism.⁶ (The other classic is E. P.'s *The Nuer*.⁷) Stripped of the scientific razzle-dazzle with which it is often presented, segmentation may be expressed in the Arab Bedouin saying "My uterine brother and I against my half-brother, my brother and I against my father, my father's household against my uncle's household, our two households (my father's and uncle's) against the rest of the immediate kin, the immediate kin against non-immediate members of my clan, my clan against other clans and, finally, my nation and I against the world!" In lineage segmentation one literally does not have a permanent enemy or a permanent friend, only a permanent context. Depending on a given context, a man or group of men, or a state, for that matter, may be your friend or foe. Everything is fluid and ever changing. Segmentation, in other words, is a social system that results in, and sanctions, structural precariousness as a norm. The social relations in the community are so arranged — or so arranged themselves, unplanned — as to institutionalize instability as a way of life! No wonder that as a society we have gone off the deep end, institutionally, politically, ethically. The Somali-Canadian poet, Mahmud S. Togane, may well have been inspired to use an apt phrase when he referred to Somalis as "this devil's concoction of clans."⁸ The devil being the ultimate arbitrator in human affairs, no amount of leadership, no matter how wise and well meaning, can undo his work where Somalis are concerned. According to an old-time Somali saying, not much can be expected in the way of succor from the Ironist in the sky, either:

God (says the old native saw) first created the Prophet Muhammad and his family, and was mightily proud of his handiwork, then he created the rest of humankind and was modestly pleased; then he created the

Somalis, whereupon he broke into hysterical laughter at the ludicrousness of what He had just made.⁹

In the grip of Dostoyevskian hallucinations, I myself opined some years ago, that if God created Somalis, He surely possesses a keen sense of black humor, to say nothing of cruel practical jokes. And yet, this is nothing more than a misplaced cynicism. As I will argue shortly, the fault may lie not in the stars of the Somalis that we as a nation have become “underlings,” but in the kind of Somalis to whom I belong in career and class affinity, namely, the Somali elite, who might have been expected, in view of their claim of entry into modernity, to have done better by their nation.

III. Gratuitous Indignities

No one finds pleasure in becoming the laughingstock of the world, still less in being cast as a gratuitous object of scorn by friends and foes alike. Scorn humiliates in ways one can never heal and, as such, results inevitably in a malignant outlook of “self-loathing,” as Dostoyevsky knew. The phrase self-hating was applied, in the first half of the century, to persecuted, powerless Jews, whose curious course of history must have compelled them to wonder whether, in light of their harassed and harassing existence, they could justify belief in themselves as a “chosen tribe.” Now that the Jews have grown powerful, both in their state of Israel and in global affairs, their faith in themselves as a “chosen people” can scarcely be denied. Should others like Palestinians and Somalis step forward as the new class of self-haters, my vote decidedly goes, if only for reasons of partisan considerations, to my fellow countrymen! So does the vote of others, to judge by the curious-and-mocking-looks one receives upon admitting to being a Somali.

There is something discouraging about the eyes of others officially designating you as a member of a pitied and despised race. The revelation of this comes painfully in various forms, as when, upon identifying yourself as a Somali, your elegant professorial get-up notwithstanding, the teenage clerk in the department store asks, “What clan do you belong to?” (The query extracts out of you the agonized cry, “Young woman, I am a professor, not a clansman.”) You wince when you overhear, “He cuts a dandy figure here, suits and all, but in his native land he’d no doubt be sunken-eyed, fly-infested, and

starving, if not cannibalized by his kinsmen." You cringe when a food-stamp-collecting welfare recipient at a restaurant responds to the hearty laughter of a group of Somali diners with the words, "They have to laugh so boisterously because they have nothing else to be proud of," or when James Jonah (former U.N. Undersecretary for Political Affairs) from hand-chopping, limb-slicing Sierra Leone dismisses Somalis as "too filthy, too bizarre, and too suicidal to deal with." The indignity continues when, upon arriving in Asmara to help draft the constitution of the new nation of Eritrea, the stately Eritrean lass of Beja ethnicity (close kin of the Somalis) is ashamed to admit to her roots before the teasing eyes of Semitic Eritreans; or when a black American, who looks next-of-kin to Zinjanthropus, or African Ape Man, at a party of whites with few minorities, declares, without shame or embarrassment and to the uproarious guffaws of patronizing Caucasians, "I am a white man," in a bid to distance himself from his African roots, which your presence has reminded him of; or when an expatriate professor casually characterizes Somali society, in a roomful of Somalis, as a bunch of "roaches in a broken jar," with the only response to his remark coming from a fellow panelist who merely assents that "Indeed, we have become roaches," making you wonder what on earth happened to the legendary pride of the Somalis for them to look so sheepish in the face of such undeserved assault.

IV. A Humiliating Career

Africa is the cradle of mankind. It is also the cradle of apes! Apes share 98 percent of the DNA pool with their unkind human cousins. Indeed, some species of chimps have a closer kinship affinity with humans than they do with other species of apes. The bestowal of the human race on the world, as Charles Darwin initially speculated and the Leakeys subsequently proved, goes to the heart of the black man's credit, in the words of Basil Davidson, "as Africa's first."¹⁰ To have originated man, as Africa indisputably has, is to occupy a place of honor among the nations of the earth. And yet, if Africa is the genesis of Man, then the Garden of Eden, as Ali Mazrui put it, is today in serious disrepair. The line of monkeys from whom humans separated goes back, paleontologists tell us, to hominids (man-like creatures that flourished some six million years ago) to *Afarensis Ramidus* (five million years, so named for the Afar people in the Ethiopian section of the Rift Valley) to *Australopithecus Africanus*, or African Ape Man (1.5

million), then to Homo Habilis, Homo Erectus, Homo Sapiens, and Homo Sapiens Sapiens, who more or less follow one another in 200,000-year intervals. A question of some ongoing controversy is: did modern man (Homo Sapiens Sapiens) develop in Africa at all? Or did he merely spring up in Europe and Asia as an off-shoot of Homo Erectus, a species with a limited brain capacity who is known to have diffused from Africa into the latter continents? If so, did Africa miss the advantage of being inhabited by Homo Sapiens Sapiens, the intelligent man who has come to dominate the land masses of Asia and Europe, successfully suppressing the terrors of nature and subduing the earth sufficiently to fashion out of it a comfortable home for himself and posterity? If Homo Sapiens Sapiens is a no-show in Africa (a depressing line of argument to pursue on account of its frightening implications), does this explain what Ali Mazrui, Africa's wizard of words, points to as the baffling phenomenon that "the first habitat of man is the last to be made truly habitable," reminding readers of the puzzling paradox "of a golden continent inhabited by starving peoples." To put it differently, a continent that rightly prides itself on the genesis of man is also a continent that continues to stand as the enduring metaphor of human failure — and not just in Africa. The black man today (and no doubt tomorrow, too) occupies the lowest rungs of every society from India, where the servile, feces-collecting Untouchables are composed almost entirely of blacks, to Latin America and the Caribbean, to the United States. This discouraging picture of Africa and African peoples as a dismal record of history's singular failure, combined with racist put-downs of a thousand varieties, in time accumulate into a crushing weight on the soul, an anguish that can only be justly depicted by the poetic powers of, say, an Ararat Iyob, the rising Eritrean lyricist who wrote in her recent remarkable book of verse, *Blankets of Sand*:

When your greatest ambition is to get out [of Africa]
When you say good-bye forever
When you search tranquility
When the sight of you reminds people
Of the bad side of life.¹¹

When the sight of you reminds people of the bad side of life, it is a frightening prospect, to say nothing of depressing, not just as a Somali/Eritrean experience but, painfully, as an Africa-wide reality. This leads to an existential question of Africanity (Leopold Senghor's

word): whether intelligence is race-specific or equally endowed across humanity? The KKK would certainly offer a definite answer.

To walk into an American classroom with the professed aim of teaching African history, indeed, any field of African studies, except perhaps music (if so, is it too late to pursue a career in music?), is to undergo a frigid blast of humiliation. Can one do a good day's work of teaching when confronted with these sample headlines?: "A New Wave of Child-Hand Amputations Reported in Sierra Leone," "Modern-day Slavery in the Sudan Continues Unabated," "800,000 Tutsis Macheted to Death in Rwanda," "Chief Mongosuthu Buthelezi's Complicity with Apartheid Cost the Lives of 20,000 of his Zulu Kin," "President Robert Mugabe Terrorizes White Farmers to Divert Popular Attention From Zimbabwe's Looming Economic Collapse," "Wholesale Rape of White Women Reported," "Somalia — the East African Nation—has Long been a Byword for Anarchy and Warlordism," etc., *ad nauseam*. (These are my own paraphrases of the grimmer actual quotes.) Or when a right-wing white group, in a cruel, capricious mood to amuse their sense of humor, chooses to rub it in by sending you a videotape of the handcuffed Sergeant Samuel K. Doe, the primitive former butcher of Liberia, with a wooden pole shish-keboded across his hands behind the shoulders, bleeding all over, half his skin flayed off with razors, under interrogation by his captor, the gloating, gorilla-style-grunting, Budweiser-swilling Prince Johnson, as Doe piteously moans utterances to this effect: "Master, I am in great pain. I will tell you everything, master, if you will relieve my pain a little." After witnessing these gold nuggets of headlines, try to walk into a roomful of overfed, complacent, gum-chewing undergraduates, who you know are privy to the same headline horrors you have just seen. Then you will know, if you can know at all, what it means to lead a professional life of unrelenting indignities.

More than a hundred years ago, the world famous philosopher, scholar-intellectual, prolific writer and linguistic polyglot, the only Afro-Caribbean of his generation to have mastered Arabic sufficiently to give first-class philosophical lectures at al-Azhar University, and a founding father of Pan-Africanism, coined the rallying slogan "Africa for Africans!" He wrote this to warn whites to keep off his beloved ancestral homeland. Edward Blyden would turn in his grave if he knew that the most ridiculing phrase a white man can hurl at a black today is none other than "Africa for Africans!" The British pundit-curmudgeon (as British pundits often are) and man of letters, Malcolm

Muggeridge, once opined that the “really terrible thing about life is not that our dreams go unrealized, but that our dreams come true.” In the heady year of 1960, the year of African independence, when two-thirds of the continent became decolonized, could anyone have guessed that the dream of Africa as a Garden of Eden would someday turn into the nightmare of independent Africa? The experience of African independence indeed gives a new meaning to the cry of “Africa for Africans!”

V. A Failed Elite

“Without a Vision, the People Perish” —thus spake the wise Solomon. In politics as in baseball, vision comes from a visionary leadership. No team, whether of sports or political elites, will have earned its place of respect among its peers without imaginative actors at the helm. And it is Somalia’s misfortune to have been let down by her national elite. Messieurs Marx (“Working Men of the World, Unite!”) and John Locke (“the Consent of the Governed”) notwithstanding, few examples can be found in history of “working men” ever being offered the privilege of choosing those who rule over them. Arguably, the American political system, with its enshrinement of open debates and regular elections as a sacred principle in the governance process, comes closest to the ideal of the “consent of the governed.” Even so, what emerged in America as a political culture does not even pretend to be a “direct democracy,” but a mere representative republic. Thus, when the framers of the American constitution declare “We the People,” what they really mean is “We Gentlemen-Yeoman Farmers.” Implicitly, they continue, “We are owners of the land, with our exclusive sway over the indentured labors of women and slaves, and, therefore, We Lords of the Realm hereby sanctify our supremely privileged position in a legal code.” Codified American “freedoms” merely serve to protect the powerful few from stealing from one another and thus bringing down the entire political edifice into ruin. In other words, they created the stability of male dominance, not democracy.

“Mass participation” in the governance process is therefore a myth. It seldom happens in history and when it does, the results can be catastrophic, as Pericles knew. He gave his city-state countrymen “direct democracy,” with the casting of “the blue and white stones in a jar” as votes to run the affairs of the state, and the enlightened Pericles came to regret the generous extension of political liberties to his people when they used the power of those very liberties to banish one another

wholesale, thus paving the way for the emergence of the “Age of the Tyrants.”

The other remarkable example of mass rule in history registers an even grimmer record, notably Hitler’s “National Socialism,” which duly gave the world Nazism. The lesson: mass rule is dangerous. Somalia perhaps represents a third example of the terrors of mass rule.

It is thus a weighty instruction that the masses do not count in the making of history, except perhaps to burn down buildings, a distinctly negative contribution. On the contrary, all experience shows that they merely exist to be manipulated as “political and economic fodder” by ruling classes. Thus, the “People” have nothing to say about the fate of nations, only established elites do. Since the state exists for their exclusive use, elites jealously guard it against mismanagement and danger, if only to ensure the perpetuation of their entitlements. If this line of thought is defensible, Somalia has been betrayed by my class of Somalis. Why did we fail to preserve, if not protect, what should have been our birthright of privileges in perpetuity? What weird gene permutations went into our making to set us apart from privileged classes elsewhere, making our actions (or lack thereof) puzzlingly at odds with others of similar status? Perhaps the cruel visitations of the environment—a harsh land of overheated sand dunes, thorny bushes, vagrant pastoralism, and blood feuds—go some way to explain our baffling lack of vision or foresight as a group. A culture of wandering and danger may have thwarted the healthy growth of our bodies, making us a “race of stunted brains.” But camels cannot, in fairness, be wholly blamed for our feckless failures, nor did camel herders cause the country’s catastrophe. It is the city boys with the university degrees that wrought Somalia’s ruin. I have a remarkable example to prove this.

Soon after the disintegration of Siyaad Barre’s regime, I undertook, with the help of some American friends, the tom-fool mission of gathering up as many Somali intellectuals as I could find. This group eventually constituted itself as a body of professors and professionals that came to be known as the Ergo, or peacemakers. Expatriate well-wishers provided us with space to meet in, plush hotels to conduct business in, and every conceivable logistical support. Our funding came from Life and Peace, the famous Swedish philanthropic body and our well-wishers (albeit from behind the scenes) included nearly a dozen U. S senators, principally former Senators Paul Simon of Illinois and Nancy Katzenbaum of Kansas, and numerous congressmen. The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), another philanthropic organ, seconded us

the services of John Paul Lederach, a skilled expert in conflict resolution and an experienced hand in peacemaking methods. MCC also lent us Menno Wiebe, a rather brilliant secretary-administrator. Our charge was to devise a governance plan for our wounded nation. The plan would then be taken to the U.N., through the good offices of the Swedish government, for implementation. We were launched, or so I thought, to do our duty for our bleeding land by providing to the world community a visionary agenda for the future governance of our anguished country.

Surprise. If leopards will always have spots, Somalis will always behave like Somalis. Predictably, we forthwith fell into bickering among ourselves, and biting one another rather like a litter of half-starved jackals. We duly discredited ourselves and our cause. At that moment of supreme stakes, not only did we fail to unify around a blueprint of the common good, we brandished our collective immaturity and lack of imagination before the world, plunging into a depth of squabbles that soon disgusted our supporters. Rather than creating a common cause, we gave ourselves—and our cause—a bad name before the eyes of American and U.N. bodies concerned with Somalia, thus prompting James Jonah, B. B. Ghali's special representative to Somalia, to snort his sneering aside, characterizing Somalis as "too bizarre, too filthy and too suicidal to deal with." After two years of inaction and feckless mutual recriminations, MCC and Life chose not to waste any more money on our useless meetings and comical, if tragic, soap-opera-style sound and fury. There is the history of our sadly missed opportunities, which served to offer an existential proof of Somalia as a country bearing the scars of needless wounds inflicted on it by the manifest irresponsibility of her so-called intellectuals. "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods / They kill us for their sport," says King Lear's Duke of Gloucester, a fitting epitaph to a dead country whose destiny has been placed squarely in the hands of wanton boys. Which is to say that there may be something to be said for the thesis of Somalia as a nation of mental midgets.

VI. How I Escaped

All of the above—from a hellish continent to a humiliating career to a hopeless country to a hapless elite—conspired in a nefarious cabal to saddle me with a crushing load of self-doubt. I hit the depths of a spiritual low, and hence the looming nightmare of self-hate in the offing,

when I proceeded to conceal my national identity as a Somali. Yes, I variously posed as an Eritrean, an Ethiopian, and a Sudanese; but then I lurched back violently when Eritrea plunged into war and misery, the Ethiopian government started killing university students en masse, and the Sudan lapsed into an interminable racial and religious conflict. I began to wonder what country is left that could serve as a creditable camouflage for my concealment; whereupon, I hit upon Kenya as a reasonable comer for self-hiding. So, I began to claim to be a Masai, on the grounds that of all Kenyans, a Masai is easiest for a Somali to impersonate! For one thing, their physical looks and pastoral lifestyle resemble those of the Somalis to a remarkable degree. For another, no Masai sojourned at my university, making the risk of exposure rather low. Quite confident in reinventing myself as a Masai, I pulled off the shelf a couple of works on the Masai and joyously reread the wonders of Masai life and lore. In this endeavor of happy fraud, I particularly feasted on Joseph Thompson's account, in the 1880s, of the Masai's beautifully bucolic life. The only feature of Masai culture that worried me concerned the requirement to confront and kill a lion with a spear single-handedly, as a Masai warrior must in order to earn eligibility for marriage. Still, I relished the description of the life of the last great Laibon, or Prophet-chief and Boss-Universal, with his one hundred adoring wife-lasses, a realization that served to inflame my sexual cupidity! But another thought accompanied and doused with frigid waters my inflamed libido. I remembered that the consumption of cow blood occupies a key place in Masai culinary arts. This cut against the Quranic injunctions against eating blood, causing the Islamic residue in my makeup to rebel. So, I stopped being a Masai and tried Rwanda (the author of this piece truly did sustain these mental lacerations). Though I was not too crazy about getting mixed up in the Hutu/Tutsi bouts of bloody feuds, I could cover up easily as a Tutsi, the Watutsi being lost Somalis, or at any rate, lost Cushites, and therefore bear a striking physical resemblance to Somalis. I stayed comfortable in my new identity as a Tutsi for a season. Then, disaster. The Ebola mystery, an incurable plague, far deadlier than AIDS, broke out in neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo, threatening to engulf western Rwanda. The Congo that boasted the dubious distinction of being the birthplace of AIDS, obliged once again to give the world the new gift of Ebola. This, together with the massacres of 1994, made Rwanda not so attractive an adopted country, after all.

I was stuck—physically, spiritually, emotionally. Then I revisited the story of Dostoyevsky and how that near-mad man unlocked his mind. He turned his inferiority complex about being a Russian into a therapeutic, if militant, Russophilia. Dostoyevsky's inspiring example proves that life allows us second chances. Perhaps no man can forever dwell in the "Slough of Despond" (*Pilgrim's Progress*) without risking the thorough annihilation of the biological itch to survive. Inevitably, one must bounce back up from the black mood (no pun intended). How liberating the study of the Dostoyevsky experience has been. As he had leapt from shame of Russia to a noisily self-affirming Russophilia, I, too, forthwith was transported from the regions of self-doubt to the bliss of a self-embracing Somalophilia. The return to being Somali, after so many futile efforts at becoming something else, turned out to be delicious... and easier on the nerves. Now everything Somali has assumed for me the sweet fragrance of the once- (and again-to-be) beautiful Somalia, from the magnificent oral poetry (witness Ugass Nuur's lines) to the idyllic sweetness of the pastoral world, in which I was born and spent my adolescent years and to which I yearn to return, if only the damn feuds would cease and desist. Anyway, Somalia, with or without feuds, is likely to be my chosen destiny, unless of course I choose, out of some opportunistic future impulse, to play my Ethiopian card once again!

The current signs in Somalia, though not terribly alluring against the standards of others, are alluring enough for a Somali academic used to small things in the way of political and economic progress in his troubled homeland. First, though Somalia as a state may have died, the Somali people have shown themselves to be resilient, born survivors, even thrivers. Consider this seasoned *New York Times* description of life in Mogadishu, the capital long judged as Somalia's Heart of Darkness, a fiefdom of rapacious warlords, cutthroat gangsters, and assorted free lance looters:

There are five competing airlines here; three phone companies, which have some of the cheapest rates in the world; at least two pasta factories, 45 private hospitals; 55 providers of electricity, 1,500 wholesalers for imported goods, and an infinite number of guys with donkeys who will deliver 55 gallons of clean water to your house for 25 cents.¹²

So there are Somalis who drive donkeys, after all! The balance of the country seems to be doing even better. The reason for this happy

developing situation stems from the fact that, though the central government has fallen, Somalia is not without a government — or rather, governments. Everywhere small-scale, more responsive authorities have sprung up to replace the old, dead state. And if one wants a bit more anecdotal evidence in support of the mini-state alternative for Somalia, a proposition that a countryman critic of mine dismissed as a “not particularly attractive Somali version of Apartheid-era Bantustans,” one should reflect that in the capital city of Nairobi in neighboring Kenya, where the phones do not work (or when they do, extortionary fees are charged), members of the large international community in that country have lately taken to going to Somalia to make long distance phone calls.

A second cause for optimism relates to the rising fortunes of the field of Somali Studies, which holds the key to the salvation of the country as the source of educated leadership for a future Somalia. (How can I state the foregoing with the experience of the Ergo before me, the Ergo whose members not only possessed advanced degrees but hailed from the *crème de la crème* of Somali society? Maybe I suffer a case of analytical schizophrenia.) A straw-hat count of mine found fifteen Somali professors at the recent annual convention of the American-based African Studies Association in Nashville, Tennessee, teaching mainly in American universities. With the estimated several hundred thousand Somali settlers in the U.S. and Canada, the numbers of educated Somalis are likely to multiply in the coming years and to reach the critical mass of scholars enlightened enough to constructively engage their country’s predicament; perhaps even with a little crisis of conscience to appreciate that they could fulfill themselves better in tutor-starved Somalia than in educator-satiated America, where professors are a dime a dozen.

VII. “We are All Lewisites”

What, in Somali Studies, started as a humble cottage industry forty years back has now mushroomed into a growth industry of manifold consumers, producing seminal works of scholarship in all fields of Somali culture and history. The credit for beginning this remarkable metamorphosis in quantity and quality of the study of Somalia goes primarily to Emeritus Professor I. M. Lewis, formerly of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Lewis’s ground-breaking research into Somali life and lore revolutionized Somali Studies on

both sides of the Atlantic, leaving the rest of us forever in his debt. Before Lewis's arrival as a Somalist scholar, Somali-studying students, indigenous and expatriate, had little grasp of Somali heritage and less of the scholarly method. (The late and erudite Muuse Galaal was a singular exception.) By the example of his seminal research and prolific writing, Lewis taught all Somali-studying academics how to do a good day's work, to say nothing of how to go about their trade as a whole. Few ever thanked I. M. Lewis for showing the way to the study of Somali heritage, but he does not ask for compliments. By contrast, he always acknowledges his debt to that other expatriate olympian Somalist, the Italian Enrico Cerulli.

VIII. A University Is Born

The third reason for my late-blooming buoyancy concerns the establishment of Amoud University in northwestern Somalia, and its subsequent growth into an institution of higher learning with a dozen faculties from English to the sciences to Somali literature, and with a body of students and educators that make Amoud a quiet center of learning. Altogether a place to be proud of by the good-willed, who have the interest of the Somali people at heart. Anyone who genuinely cares about Somalia should come forth to salute Amoud and to pay tribute to the visionaries who conceived the idea of a university, the plan to implement it, and the energy and resources to bring this center of hope into a welcome fruition. More than this, Amoud has led the way to the development of more schools of higher learning in other regions. Thanks to Amoud's inspiring example, universities have now sprung up in Hargeisa, Boosaaso, and even god-forsaken Mogadishu. This turn of events gives the good-hearted a cause for rejoicing.

IX. A *Bildhaan* and Two Brothers

If bad news served to set off my blues, then good news must induce a measure of inspiration, and nothing does so more than the launching of a new international journal of Somali Studies entitled *Bildhaan*. I am pleased to have received the first volume and even more pleased to contribute to the second issue these disjointed musings. The editor-in-chief is my namesake, the very able Ahmed I. Samatar (no relation), whose command of English compels envy in others and his reach of

scholarship is unparalleled in native academic circles. No less impressive is Ahmed's younger brother, Abdi, who serves on the advisory board of *Bildhaan* and whose proven record of scholarship has recently ramified into a first-rate book on Botswana. Ahmed and Abdi have now emerged as leading Somali scholars, the one in probings of the arcana of political economy and social thought, and the other in development studies. Some brothers! If these utterances make me sound rather like an improbable praise singer of my namesakes, so be it. Those who are tempted to think of me as a spinner of panegyrics should only bear in mind that the Samatars and I possess a past of spirited, academic sparring! When I punched with them in bygone days, I found them worthy adversaries. I now welcome them as talented colleagues of whom the Somali race should be proud. A word of caution: given our temperaments and varying methods of looking at scholastic phenomena, no one should rule out the possibility of the outbreak of academic feuding between us in the future. This, far from hurting the cause of Somali scholarship, should extend the range of our common academic and nationalistic interests. In any case, as managing editor myself of the *Horn of Africa* journal, I expect to be given a run for my money in coming days with the unleashing of *Bildhaan*. It is also curious, if insignificant to the general point, that I have an older brother, Ismail, a doctorate holder in child psychology and a teacher in higher education. Even more curious is the fact that, although Samatar as a Somali name is rather uncommon, there should be two sets of Ph.D.-holding brothers Samatar floating around as educators in cold North America!

In addition to the Samatars, the journal boasts a solid team of editorial staff whose various abilities should redound to the good of this welcome organ. Finally, a word about the word *Bildhaan* itself: it is a term of resonating evocative associations in Somali, and it figures a great deal in Somali classical poetry. A line attributed to me in my nomadic days, when I nourished infantile aspirations as a pastoral poet, runs thus: "*Bildhaantaan ku fiid socon jiraa / Bilic leh meel dheer e*" (Behold, the leading light by which I was wont to night-journey / flickers in the distance). The nearest equivalent might be rendered as a "star-like light in the distance" that points the way to better pastures for weary, lost, pastoral night trekkers. It is a fitting metaphor of touching relevance to the lost Somali nation. Right on, *Bildhaan*! This pastoral deponent saith no further. ●

Notes

1. Marc Slonim, Introduction, *Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p. vi.
2. Ibid.
3. André Gide, *Dostoevsky* (New York: New Directions Paperback Book, 1925), passim.
4. Slonim, p. viii.
5. Set as an epigraph in I. M. Lewis's *A Pastoral Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).
6. See Lewis, *A Pastoral Democracy*.
7. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1940).
8. Mahmuud Siad Togane. This is the title of a forthcoming volume of verse.
9. David Laitin and Said S. Samatar, *Somalia: A Nation in Search of a State* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1987), p. 29.
10. Basil Davidson, *Africa in History* (New York: Collier Books, 1968), pp. 4–10.
11. Ararat Iyob, *Blankets of Sand* (Trenton, N.J.: The Red Sea Press, 2000).
12. *New York Times* (10 August 2000): A-4.