Interview with Professor Said Sheikh Samatar at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Washington, D.C.

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AS: I would like to start the conversation by asking you to reflect a bit on the beginnings, that is, where were you born and the context, as much as you can remember.

SS: My birth and upbringing had been somewhat colorful, eventful, and that's because of my old man, Sheikh Samatar. He was a remarkable individual with a rather flamboyant kind of lifestyle and history. He joined the *banda* (the Italian Somali army), and was sent to Libya.

AS: So this would be in the late 1930s and 1940s.

SS: Yes, and the *bandas*, as you know, were later to play a major role in the Italian conquest in 1936. Well, when he discovered that the Libyans were Muslim, he didn't want to fight Muslims, so he defected, and spent some five to ten years incognito somewhere. And we discovered also that the English gunboats were chasing him. What was he mixed up in? Was he a gunrunner? Was he drug smuggler…or even a slave trader?! [Laughter] He had visited the slave ports: Zanzibar, Muscat, and Basra. He was in Basra but he never made the Hajj. Anyway, there was one incident when he was in an Arab town, somewhere in the Indian Ocean, which was also a British naval base. He was chased for some reason. He jumped and struck his shin against the railings so that his flesh was flayed off to the bone! For three days he was in the sea, floating, bleeding. Fortunately for him, he was not eaten by sharks. He was later picked up by an Arab… . Anyway, when he returned he married two wives and instead of keeping us in the town, he invested

in his own livestock to trade. That is, herds of camels, herds of sheep, goats.

AS: So that the family could live off that?

SS: Yeah, we became a pastoral nomadic family, in the Ogaden zone. I don't even know where I was born! Perhaps under a tree! [Laughter] So finally, eventually, my old man made his peace with the British and during the British Administration from 1941 to 1948. The time when all the Somalis were in one administration, the British… . You remember Bevin saying the Somali nomads ought to be given the chance to make a decent living. He was arguing for unification of the Somali peninsula. And so my father was transferred from Mogadishu to Qalafo, and that's when the Ethiopia component comes in. Somewhere when I was about twelve, maybe fourteen, I left the nomadic life and began to look for him and, you know, hitchhiked from one town to another until I eventually ended in Qalafo. The person who brought me to the town said, "There's your father." And he was playing *shax* with other elders and this time he was an Islamic magistrate.

AS: *Shax* is a Somali type of chess.

SS: Exactly.

SS: I stood near him and said to him, "Father." He looked up assuming that I was one who had some legal problem. He said to me, "Son, if you have a legal problem, why don't you come to the office tomorrow?" Well, he doesn't recognize me, I said to myself. The reason I recognized him is that his visage resembled strikingly that of Ismail, my brother. That's the only way I knew it was him.

AS: So his face gave him away?

SS: His face and my brother's face! So then I said, "You are my father." And he said, "Ah, which wife?" I named the wife, my mother, and then he said, "What's your name?" And I said, "Said." He said, "Ah, there was such a child." People in the West will find this very strange. They would say, "That is incredible!"

AS: What did you do? Did you stay in town to go to school?

SS: Yes, yes, the first two years I started to study the Quran, and within a year and a half I memorized the entire Quran. And then I went to an Arabic school, basic stuff you know, a little math, Arabic reading and exercises. Three years later the missionary component of educa-

tion comes in: the Sudan Interior Mission, which despite its name was not limited to one country. It's named for the Sudan belt of Africa. It's very strong in Ethiopia, in the Sudan, and in Chad. Places like that. By Sudan they meant from east to west, playing on the idea of all the Sudanic states of West Africa. They had a mission stationed in Qalafo and I joined it.

AS: This was a Christian Mission, though?

SS: Yes, a Christian Mission.

AS: What denomination?

SS: They were a consortium of Protestant groups so that their personnel would be drawn from Presbyterians, from Mennonites, from Episcopalians. They are not a denomination unto themselves in Africa. They come from this consortium of groups that provided the personnel.

AS: What kind of education did they offer?

SS: Literacy courses were a crucial component. Their other activity was, of course, to evangelize, to proselytize. Yeah, that was their game. So I joined it, and in one year I was taught the English alphabet, and I remember the humiliation, the embarrassment because I was this big boy studying with seven-, eight-year-olds, you know, town boys. It was a humiliation [laughs] but I stuck with it. Then two years later, this would have been 1963 I believe, the Somalis of the Ogaden got into their heads the notion of initiating a struggle, a liberation front against the Ethiopian government. Unfortunately, the Ethiopians retaliated and bombarded the town, destroyed quite a lot of our property and that of other Somalis. My brother was shot and ended up with a withered arm.

AS: They maimed him?

SS: Yeah, they crippled him. And then we dispersed; two brothers, Ismail, the elder, and myself fled to Somalia. When we ended up there in 1963, we knew nobody. And for two years we practically starved!

AS: Where? In Mogadishu?

SS: In Mogadishu, yes. We used to dig a trough in the sand and bury ourselves to sleep as well as to protect ourselves from the cold at night. During the day we used to feed ourselves by going into the rear of the restaurants.

AS: To eat the leftovers?

SS: The leftovers! We were rummaging, foraging, scrounging through the garbage. That's how we lived for two years. At this time, there was another Protestant denomination in Mogadishu, the Mennonites. So I went to them and stayed with them for a year and eventually got a job as a clerk, timekeeper for what was then called AICA; now it's the United States Aid for International Development (USAID). So, finally, the era of starvation ended with that job and then at the beginning of 1966 the Mennonites gave scholarships to two of us in their group called the Believers Group. [Laughter]

AS: The Believers Group?

SS: And the other one was Hersi Ahmed. He's now in Seattle from what I understand. We were taken to a high school in Nazret, in Amharic Nazret (in Oromo it's Adaama). I spent about two and a half years there. I hadn't had classes from about the fifth grade, which was where I was when I left the Mennonite school in Mogadishu. Consequently, I wasn't prepared in mathematics and other fields. English was the only thing I was prepared in. But, eventually, I managed to graduate in two and a half years. I returned then to Somalia in 1969, exactly the day that Mohamed Siyaad Barre and his cohort staged a coup, and Somalis were rejoicing when the military coup arrived.

AS: Said, you are from a family whose consciousness was imbued with a great deal of Islamic piety and learning to the extent that your father became a magistrate. I assume the basis for that magistracy was, among other things, some kind of a Shariah Islamic law. Given this background, how did you negotiate between that kind of a family context and a mission school, which is, of course, designed to not only educate people but to also spread a Christian spirit. How did you work that?

SS: Well, basically I went from one *kitab* (book) to another. [Laughter] And now I am returning to the original *kitab*.

AS: From one book to another?

SS: Yes! My father was a bit of a coward. In fact, working for the Ethiopian Christian system as a man of great piety and reputation, he used to defend both Haile Selassie and the Ethiopian system. He used to read this *hadith*, which (I kind of forgot the exact words) spoke of

Ethiopia as a land of justice and now, interestingly, a prophetic thing. So, because of that my father cut me a lot of slack.

AS: And he was also, relative to the community, more sophisticated in the sense that he has been engaged with other cultures, as you said, especially during the Second World War.

SS: I remember him saying that with the missionaries I should practice the Shi'ite doctrine of *taqiya*, meaning dissembling, the art of artful deception. That's what he encouraged me to do. Shi'ites, having been dominated by Sunnis for centuries, have developed this so-called art, this artful deception, *taqiya*. So that is basically what I practiced!

AS: What happened after high school?

SS: I returned in 1969 to Mogadishu, very skeptical about what might happen. I had a foreboding. Anyway, I met my wife in Mogadishu in 1970. She was an American of European ethnicity and with the missionaries. She was teaching English to me and I was teaching her Somali, so it kind of became all in the family. We married in 1970. Then I went to run a Mennonite Adult School in Kismayo in 1970 and '71.

AS: Adult school?

SS: Adult school, beginning school. Correct. So I saved enough money to pay my way to the United States, and the Mennonites offered me a scholarship at Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana. A good liberal arts college. I completed that program with a major in English and in History in two years, from '71 to '73, and applied to a number of graduate schools. Northwestern University gave me the best deal because not only did they give me a complete tuition waiver, which in that private school is a lot of money, but also a monthly stipend.

AS: To live on?

SS: To live on and pay for the basic necessities. By this time, my first child, Sophia, was on the way. At Northwestern I did the coursework from 1973 to 1976, three years. And then I was ready to write the dissertation. I went on a Social Science Research Council grant to England for six months, Italy for six months, then back to Mogadishu to do field work.

AS: Why history? Why not some other field?

SS: Well, first of all, the sciences I couldn't do. [Laughter]

AS: The original preparation was not there?

SS: Yes. I don't have a strong math or physics or chemistry or biology base. So the only thing I could do (and probably was mentally disposed to in terms of personality, talent, and flair) was in the humanities. So it became a choice between English and history. And I was always obsessed with news, and history was immediately attractive since I come from a storytelling nomadic background.

AS: You embarked on fieldwork in southern Somalia through England and the archives there. Then you come back to the States to write the doctorate. Why did you choose the topic of Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan and his poetic gifts?

SS: When I was eight or nine years old, I had two experiences that had a great impact on me. First was the fear of lions. One night a lion broke through the fence, seized a baby camel, and then fell on me. I remember the smooth fur of the lion rubbing against me. And the roar and all that…left a mark on me so that I would have nightmares about lions up until about ten years ago. It stayed with me throughout my graduate school days; it stayed with me while I was teaching in Kentucky. It was only about a decade ago that I overcame it. The other thing that made a tremendous impact on my impressionable consciousness was that we had this elder, Abdillahi Ali Seego, God bless his soul. When the camels were brought in every evening, we would have the campfire, sit around, and he was not only a raconteur but practically knew by heart the entire corpus of Sayid Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan's poetry. And he would be chanting that and the flames of the fire would be striking against his visage, giving him a ghostly pale look. The experience left such an impression on me that I could recite large portions of Sayid's poetry from memory. This formed my consciousness.

AS: So your book, *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Sayid Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan*, is published in 1982. It is now one of the most seminal works in Somali Studies, very original. What specific pain and joy came with the production of that first intellectual project?

SS: Well, very kind of you to give such compliments. There were many times when I despaired and tried to give up. I faced two problems: one was identity, for Somalis say that a man's address is in him. This is an issue of kin identity among Somalis. When one is dealing with the poetry of the Sayid, one is compelled to name names, to identify tribal groupings, to get into the ethnicity thing, clanism. And I didn't want to wallow in clanism, so…

AS: Group belonging? Blood ties?

SS: Yes, right, so that gave me a lot of grief. And in fact I almost got in prison because when I was doing the tapes, and a huge collection of tapes it became…

AS: In Mogadishu?

SS: In Mogadishu, the materials of my fieldwork were seized. It's very interesting! One man who was in the power system during the Siyaad Barre era came to my rescue at that time and that was Mohamed Adan Sheikh, the medical doctor who turned into a political figure.

AS: Yes, who was the one-time Minister of Information, among other portfolios.

SS: And who told the censor, "Release those tapes." That's how I got my research material out of the country. So the clanism component in the poetry gave me a lot of agony, a lot of hesitation and heartache. The other item that became a complicated bit for me was that I didn't know anything about book writing! I didn't know how to [laughter] systematically write a book. I would write a portion and then fall into a depression because I would say to myself, "what you did these past two weeks was no good." But I struggled along. I had a supportive wife who not only emotionally sustained me but typed drafts as well as gave me one source that I read that tremendously helped me in how to do research and how to write. This was a book by Jacques Barzun and another author called *The Modern Researcher*. Great book. I recommend it to anyone attempting to enter graduate school. And so, I hemmed and hawed and diddled but eventually something came out of it.

AS: Good. Can you think of the joys that also went with this first serious labor of scholarship?

SS: To see your name in print is an awesome experience! The first time I saw my name in print was like the first date or sexual act. It has an orgasmic quality about it. That was the greatest joy.

AS: Wonderful! Ah, I know the critics and the reviewers have their place and their estimation is on record in the libraries. From your point of view, however, what about the volume do you think is lasting?

SS: I think, one, it filled an important gap in Somali Studies by addressing oral poetry and its role in our national resistance against the colonialism. Poetry is the heart of our culture. We are nothing if not a

nation of poets. I contend that it is our corpus of literary heritage. So, in a sense, I feel that I rescued a slice of our culture in that book. But I also addressed one of the greatest national, anti-colonial movements. Probably with the exception of Algeria and Eritrea, the Somali movement was the longest drawn-out and the bloodiest. This thing was bloody!—claiming the lives of, by some estimates, one million people. This is immense given that Somalis are not a large nation.

AS: That's right, the struggle has lasted for nearly two decades.

SS: Yes, over two decades, it created such mental and life dislocation. Dozens upon dozens of orphaned Somalis, lying all over the place, were picked up by missionaries and, of course, eventually produced some Somali Christian clans.

AS: This is the time of *Xaraamo Cun*… . I think the translation you give is "the time of eating filth."

SS: Precisely, precisely!

AS: Now, Said, on Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan. First, I would like you to comment on the challenge of translating one of the top Somali poets of all time. How difficult was it to move from classical Somali to scholarly English?

SS: That is indeed, as you put it, a huge challenge. You are confronted with doing either a literal translation or a literary translation… . There are advantages and weaknesses in both. The advantage with the literal translation is that you at least produce a sense, a literal sense, of what in this culture this poet was saying and how poetry was attempted in this society. The disadvantage is that one does a huge injustice to the alliteration and metrical systems. It turns into a nonsensical mumbo-jumbo. With the literary translation the advantage, the strength, is that you bring out the real spirit of the poetry but you lose the elemental, the immediacy of that original poem's character. So, it's always, yes, a very interesting dialectic.

AS: What about the quality of Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan's poetry? There have been other great Somali poets, particularly in the last, shall we say, 150 years. I assume he's among the top. You would know better since you have written this major work on him. How would you rate him in terms of the imagination and the quality of the language that comes through, his poetic language, when you compare him to others in the great Somali tradition of poetry-making?

SS: I would say he was one of a half dozen, some were more talented, perhaps…and I will mention them in a minute, but the advantage he had was that not only was he first-rate in the language, but he was also a learned man. He knew the *xeer*. He was reading Euclid, the Greek philosopher, in Arabic. He was a learned man! Unfortunately, on account of the *Wahhabi* influence, the reformist movement that flowed through the Sudanese Muhammad Saleh, whose disciple he eventually became, there was a literalism in his personality, which, I think, affected negatively his learning. But the other advantage he had over the other great poets was that he was a man of the First World War. He saw the War in his travels through Arabia and the Sudan and so on. But I would rate him with half-a-dozen: Salaan Arabay, Ali Dhuuh, Raage Ugaas, Haji Muuse Ismail, and Ugaas Nur. I would put those in the same category.

AS: Of that generation?

SS: Of that generation, in terms of talent.

AS: Is there a particular piece in his poetic production that immediately comes to your mind when you think of him that you would like to recite?

SS: There are a dozen beautiful pieces, but two of them stand out. One is the poem called *Gaala-Leged*, which I translate as "The Scourge of Infidels."[2]

Say: these, my four lines betoken the potency of my poetic ways,
Say: as I let them roll down the hills,
They come to the ear as the boom of heavy guns and the thunder of fired bullets,
Say: they engulf the opponent with darkness as of torrential rains,
Say: they come with the rumble of thunder and the flash of lightning,
Say: they strike with the force of gale winds and the gathering clouds of rain,
Say: they are the fury of the floods and the hurricane sweeping by ever so closely,
Say: they are the quaking sea, the raging waves and the roaring Rapids of Eyle.

SS: That is a poem which spread from one far corner to the other in the entire Somali peninsula. So many people know that poem. The other one, which is even, in my view, more powerful is *Dardaaran*,[3] or "The Will," composed after his defeat and flight to Imay, where he says:

A beating we took, forced to flee, to swim in haste across the river,
Stripped of stock, we reel, reduced to destitution.
Rejoice, then, you lackeys who remained behind.

And an argument I will return to these people who revel in ceaseless banter,

Oh men, foolery leads to mental deterioration,
Yet some love to indulge in profitless disputation.

I, on my own volition, chose to fight the infidels,
It was I who said to the filthy unbeliever: "This land is not yours."
It was I who sought and found the prophet's guidance.

It was I who rejected again and again the infidel's offer to buy me out,
It was I who refused to sell my faith to gain the gates of hell,
And it was I who desired no status in the first of the two Worlds.

It was I who would not pack transport camels for the expeditions of the heathen,

It was I who would not carry their compass when they go to raid,
And it was I who would not go before the white man as guide and scout.

It was I who would not assist the dirty unbeliever,
I who would not succor the uniformed whites,
I who would not be, like the greedy *Iidoor*, the white man's burden-bearing beast.

It was I who would not enter the house of pigs nor of dogs…

AS: And this is about defeat, colonial occupation, and repression.

SS: Yes! The Sayid says that a European man is going to take your country! Okay, go ahead and gloat, gloat over my defeat. [laughs] You will inherit servitude.

AS: A second work I would like us to talk about is the book, *Somalia in Word and Image* (1986), which is different from the conventional scholarly works. Why did you undertake it and what does it mean for you today?

SS: A thought-provoking question! That book, I think, brings together two components of Somali life, expressed in the very title of the book. Words, we are people of words. All our poetry! Words, words are us! And secondly, the image component, the artistic component. It used to be said that while some other kinds of societies express their genius

in the visual arts, as for example the remarkable 16th-century Benin bronze works.

AS: In West Africa?

SS: In West Africa, right. Somali genius did not shine in the visual arts because basically we are a nomadic society and you can't carry material objects from camp to camp. The way of life simply militates against it. The astonishing thing I discovered while doing that research was, however, that indeed Somalis have significant visual talent.

AS: So this was a way of capturing what the Somalis might have created in a material and artistic sense and then couple that with the Somali talent for the…

SS: The verbal.

AS: We're getting close to the more immediate period of our history. *Somalia: Nation in Search of a State* came out in 1987. Many see the book as an attempt to capture the complexity and the agony of Somali people, which haunts the society to this day. Why did you write that book and how was it received?

SS: Well, the reception was mixed. There were good reviews and then there were the rough kind [laughter]. But that's the nature of the beast!

AS: I think I wrote one of those. [laughs]

SS: Yeah, believe me, you can be very withering, lacerating. [laughter]

AS: What was the impetus for this volume?

SS: I think, as a matter of fact, this is about the only book that Professor David Laitin, now at Stanford University, and I collaborated on. The theme, or the idea of it, was suggested by another person, a publisher, as part of a series of books on Africa. There's one on Senegal, one on Kenya, and so on… . We were asked to author the Somalia book. And that was indeed the beginning of it. David Laitin wrote three chapters: the economy and the politics and so on, and I wrote on the history and the…

AS: Culture?

SS: Culture and then Somalia into the '80s, and I had a foreboding that the collapse was coming. That's when I really, in writing that chapter, seriously looked at the abyss. I stared and I think with that chapter

my despair over the Somali situation began to crystallize. As a result, I became depressive. [laughter] I spilled out my guts!

AS: So, in a way, this underscores one of the assignments for scholars: that is, not to be sooth-sayers but at least bring insight from history, analyze the world around them, and comment wisely on the future. That volume triggered deeper concern in your mind about what was happening to the Somali people and what was coming at them. Then you moved on to write *Somalia: a Nation in Turmoil*. This is a 1991 publication. Is it the case that with this volume you were witnessing a full-fledged crash of Somalia?

SS: Yes, it's agony unleashed. It too was, by the way, suggested by another, a group called…

AS: The Minority Rights Group?

SS: Yes. When the collapse got going, the world community began to pay attention to what was happening in Somalia. It was right in the year of the collapse.

AS: Yes, January 1991 was when Mogadishu imploded.

SS: Imploded is an appropriate word [laughs].

AS: What happened to the Somali people? Does sixteen years of hindsight bring you closer to comprehending the nature of the Somali catastrophe?

SS: If I could answer that question, I should be on another planet! What happened to the Somali people? The Somali people happened to the Somali people. When I address that same question you are asking, when I reflect on it, there are two levels to it. One is the anguish of misrule, misgovernance, which is Africa's agony.

AS: Incompetent, predatory leadership?

SS: An incompetent, predatory leadership. You see, there are two kinds of dictators: nationalist dictators, say, Spain's Franco was a dictator. He imprisoned people but he made up his mind that he was going to develop, to build his nation. And in thirty years of dictatorship, he transformed Spanish society from a rural, largely illiterate society into an industrial nation. What Mohamed Siyaad Barre did with his dictatorship: this man had absolute power for 22 years in which he could indulge in the privileges of power but also could build a nation. Instead, he systematically went out of his way to undermine, to

destroy. He was an evil genius. He knew our weaknesses as a people, you know, our greed, our excitability, and our vanity.

AS: He touched every button of weakness of the Somali people?

SS: Of the Somali people, yeah! Inflamed group against group, kin against kin, until we just went ballistic, crazy! That's not all. This debate which we are part of, an ongoing debate among students of society, where one side argues that history is made by accumulated forces waiting to be ignited, the so-called stored energy theory of history. That kind of analysis is authored by the structuralists. Or the other side, which stresses that individual ambitions, individual greed seal the fate of nations. When I look at what Siyaad Barre did to Somalia, I begin to think that maybe the individual is…

AS: More critical?

SS: More critical. He used to boast, you know, "When I am finally forced to relinquish power, there would be no nation left behind to govern." He decided long beforehand that he was going to wreck the country. Siyaad Barre, Mugabe in Zimbabwe and Idi Amin of Uganda belong to a breed that is bent on national destruction. What is it about the African dictator that turns him into an utterly evil, animalistic type of person? But I am also aware of the role of larger forces at work…

AS: The two perspectives reinforce each other: the analysis that is structural and the one that is focused on individual acts…

SS: I see. They do not necessarily need to contradict.

AS: They can be brought together?

SS: Yes!

AS: Why were the Somalis not able to effectively resist Siyaad Barre's rule? Why were the Somalis so incapable to act against their disempowerment for so long?

SS: Several reasons: first, there is the matter of the level of education and sophistication. In terms of being a modern society, we lagged behind other African societies. When independence came, Kenya had something like 200 high schools. We had only four. In other African countries, because of the tremendous impact of missionary education, a core of educated middle-class people were available that could play a role in the development of civil society. Look at the Sudan. A society of trade unions, society of graduates…

AS: Publishing houses.

SS: Publishing houses! We didn't have that. We didn't even have a handful of intellectuals who had a society of their own, which is, by the way, what I'm thinking maybe we should be working on now. I mean this! We should have a civil society of intellectuals.

AS: We will come to that in a minute when we discuss the needs of the future. But your point about the deep backwardness of Somali culture and society with regard to the ways of the modern world is undeniable. Is there anything else you want to add about the paucity of advanced education?

SS: Somali civil society, because of its lack of sophistication, could easily be vulnerable, easily be taken advantage of by the likes of Siyaad Barre. He hoodwinked us! And the moral to me is troubling. The dark side expresses itself in three areas: one is the harshness of a pastoral society. Now I shouldn't call modern Somalia a rural society. There are parts with settled people, but the majority has been pastoral. The primary occupation is how to live day to day. This has created a mentality of every man for himself so that self-interest became a natural-like behavior. Even those of us now in the cities have the pastoral curse in us. Individualism and greed are a dangerous brew.

AS: Almost barbaric?

SS: Barbaric! I will come back to that. The other is excitability, inordinate excitability. Richard Burton in the 19th century saw this first. He observed that Somalis were so inconsistent that, within a second, their mood could change from a state—he says in more elegant words—of amicable joviality to a state of rage capable of murder. He called it a strange transition. Very excitable people, particularly when one feels offended, with little attention to consequences of that act.

AS: We are short on deliberativeness?

SS: Deliberativeness is the word; we don't have that. And third, I think we are also very vain people. Think of Anglo-Saxon pragmatism. A pragmatism expressed in words like, "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." This is crude pragmatism that enabled the Anglo-Saxons to conquer the world. On the other hand, with the Somali even the smallest of a slight will provoke him into violence, even into murder and mayhem. This is most troubling to me, because we being an egalitarian society, egalitarian necessarily means anarchy and with no cultural mechanism that enables us to respect

seniority, talent, or achievement. In other words, a rare Somali can bring another Somali into cooperation unless there is an immediate self-interest in it. For example, I'll tell you this, not that you need to be reminded of it, because you know it well enough, when we talk about warlords—and that's a misnomer in the Somali situation.

AS: Better, a strongman.

SS: Yes, a warlord has a horde of followers and can bring them either to the negotiating table or to the battlefield. Here is an instructional example: when TPLF, Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, was marching triumphantly on the capital, Addis Ababa, one of the Ethiopian generals, fearing total chaos, went to the American ambassador to tell Meles Zenawi, the leader of the TPLF, to come and take the city.

AS: This is an Ethiopian general under the Derg worried about the possible destruction of Addis Ababa?

SS: Yes! He invites the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front and Meles Zenawi to them, "please come and take the city." Meles Zenawi is marching at the head of 30,000 hardened guerillas. He's the leader. If he tells those 30,000 to jump off a cliff, they would. Compare that with the so-called warlords in Somalia. General Aideed, poor guy! I never thought the day would come when I would be so sympathetic to him. But he could not even control his own puny militia. There were rebellions here, rebellions there, so all he could do was to lash out everywhere.

AS: What you are saying, then, is that the effective way to deal with the almost congenital Somali weakness is to not only have discipline, but also a political program that is bigger than any one person, which the collective works towards. Correct?

SS: My despair, Ahmed, is that as far as my understanding and experience are concerned, Somalis have not learned how to create a program greater than themselves that addresses the larger questions. Look, I don't have to like you, you don't have to like me, but our destinies are interwoven. For our own survival, even though we might hate each other—of course, you and I like each other [laughs]—our destiny hangs on the two of us cooperating for a larger cause.

AS: So the two individuals need to not only limit what divides them in terms of self-interest, but they will have to promote what unites them for the sake of collective well-being?

SS: Absolutely! A powerful example, if I may cite this, is the Jewish community. What is the secret of their success? If you bring ten Jews into one room, they will have ten dogmatic ideas. All ten of them would be opinionated and you will say, "well, how can they then get something going?" But as soon as something of their larger concerns appeared, they close ranks, united.

AS: Solidarity, then?

SS: Solidarity! When it comes to the security of the state of Israel, all Jews are unified.

AS: Our conversation has entered the present. Two questions: first, some of the arguments among scholars, you and I for example, concern the role of kinship, of lineage identity in the construction of public life, and solidarity. Some have proposed, including myself, that the kind of lineage identity that is playing havoc with the Somali people now is not the same one that existed as communal identity 200 years or 300 years or 400 years ago. Do you see any modification in kin relations in your analysis or do you think the nature of pre-modern Somali identity has continued into the present?

SS: Ah, this topic's very tricky [laughs] because as you know you have a different take than I do. When one examines a society, one asks oneself, "how do they look at themselves and at the world?" Because of this pastoralism, one is dependent on one's kinsmen and that dictates that one necessarily has an enemy too. Consequently, we haven't adopted any other structure by which to address ourselves and the world at large. For example, look at other African societies by contrast. The Yoruba, for instance, have all kinds of civil groups. The Kikuyus have the institution of oath-taking. If the Kikuyus go out and take an oath, watch out!

AS: They have developed ways to bind people together and accent cross-cutting affinities, right?

SS: It binds everybody together. The only thing we Somalis have got is this lineage business.

AS: But there are some who would suggest that Islam, for example, could be a way of establishing greater identification among the Somalis. And maybe it has been, to a certain extent, the case with Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan's Dervish movement. Do you see Islam as a vehicle

for going beyond agnate divisions and, therefore, creating some kind of a common bond larger than local kinship?

SS: If I may answer that question, and you know, by the way, those of us who do push too much this lineage thing are accused—and you are one of that group [laughter]—to a point where we are said to be arguing that, "This thing is in our genes." So I would answer that question by retelling a simple story. It says, roughly, that there was a time when God and a warrior called Atoush (and I am taking a dig at the Islam idea) had a massive fight over us. We sided with Atoush and against Allah. Well, it is apocryphal but it is very telling.

AS: The implication is that Somalis lost their way long ago?

SS: Yes! Somali Islam, and I have got to be careful here, is frontier Islam, hemmed on two sides by paganism on the Kenya side and Christianity on the Ethiopian side. Frontier Islam, by definition, is bellicose, xenophobic…

AS: Literal?

SS: Literal, thank you! Suspicious of alien influences. It is a negative collective outlook. What it doesn't have is the capacity to create alternative structures for its community. For example, we were talking about our own deficit, compared to other African societies, in terms of education. And I'm not advocating this; it's too late now anyway. Well, maybe it's not. In the societies that are west of us, the European element as businessmen, as missionaries, as colonial officials, massively impacted. The result is that the missionaries built high schools they never built in Somalia. That educated class of people. Now, our Islam on the one hand frightened off the missionaries but it didn't give us the necessary tools with which to face the modernizing world.

AS: Do you, then, see a new kind of Islam on the rise or ought to be on the rise in the country which will be more cosmopolitan, tolerant, wired to the challenges of development, institutions-building (such as schools and universities), and productive economic capacity? Do you see that or you think that might not be possible?

SS: I fear that, given the present conditions, a constructive and worldly Islam is not around the corner, and I say this for two reasons. One is that the clerical establishment, Muslim clerical establishment, such as it was, has been dispersed with no institutional legacies. You know that at one time in the area between Kismayo and Mogadishu, some-

thing very interesting was being born: the kind of Islam that you just cited was developing. You had these sheikhs with their communities, mosques, schools, self-help communities, cooperatives—this was a constructive Islam! Unfortunately, this war of pastoralists, and essentially Somalia is in the midst of such a war, has wrecked that. If you think of it, my friend, there were two communities of Somalis who had this enlightened Islam and knew how to create something rather than just destroy. These communities are the Banaadiris…

AS: In the Benadir region?

SS: Yes! Open, highly thoughtful and very pious people…

AS: Skilled too?

SS: Very skilled.

AS: In the ways of urban life?

SS: Artisans and craftsmen. I never forget that when you challenged me in Cairo, and actually took me to the cleaners because I was talking about Somali societies being capable of…

AS: We were at a conference in Cairo about twenty years ago?

SS: Yes, and I said, as an example, that Somalis can produce fantastic material objects. And then you called me on it by saying, "Do you know the community that produces such cloth? Are they typical Somalis?" [laughs] These fabrics, you said, were not produced by pastoralists, let me tell you! They were produced by an open, tolerant, pious, god-fearing people. And the other community was the agriculturalists, primarily Somalis of Bantu origin. They were the farmers, they were food producers, which means that one community was feeding the nation, the other was developing the nation as our craftsmen, artisans. We wrecked both of them. Both are destroyed. The dimension that makes me discouraged about the Somali future is the hold of regressive *Wahhabi* influence in Somali society. I'll give you one example: Somali women. Somali women were not like Arab women, who have this *hijab* thing, this black thing, this black veil. This notorious thing is not even part of Somali tradition of dress, let alone an aspect of original Islam.

AS: My mother, Professor Said Samatar, my mother, who, well into her eighties and died recently, had gone to the Hajj twice. Very pious. For fifty years and more she never missed the daily prayer. She was not

educated, yet was deeply knowledgeable about Somali culture. And, in her late years, she asked, with utmost bewilderment, the question, "We Somali women never wore this outfit, in the rural areas or urban life. What's happening to us?"

SS: I wish there were many others like her. Saudi Wahhabis with their big money and primitive social ways have invaded our society. You know, friends were telling me that in Hargeisa, these guys with the beards, you know, and the *jalabiyas* are from another country. We never used to wear *jalabiyas*. Our women never used to wear black veils. Where has this come from?

AS: And in that heat and those tough working conditions.

SS: [laughs] In the heat. It is an alarming trend! What are we going to do?

AS: The moral of your analysis, then, is this: since we are and will be Muslims for the rest of time, and we're proud of that, we have to ask the question as to what kind of society we want to build that is capable of participating in the ways of the hyper-modern and globalizing world.

SS: Absolutely. You put it more articulately than I could. You're right. Look at Western societies: they talk about the separation of Church and State. That's a fallacy. Religion is intimately involved in the political as well as personal processes. But the genius of the West is that they gave religion a space in the debate, but they also gave Reason a space in the debate. So the two are in this creative…

AS: Dialogue.

SS: Dialogue.

AS: All the time.

SS: Yes. What I want, what I aspire for Somalia—in fact it is our intellectual responsibility—is to create that space in which you can bring the faith into dialogue with reason so that before the day is over ignorant Mullahs will be run out of town.

AS: I have seen this in the Islamic world; Malaysia and Turkey, for example. I took a group of scholars to both countries. I saw the coexistence at the universities of science and religion in a productive engagement.

SS: Yeah, each has a space.

AS: Transition in Somalia. There is a Transitional Federal Government cooked up in Nairobi. What's your reading of this? What is your sense of the transitional period, these coming three or four years?

SS: I wish I could be optimistic, but I'm not. Speaking of something being programmed into your genes, I think pessimism has gotten imprinted into my genes, you know. I don't see much coming out of the TFG. The reason is simple: there are people, elements in Somalia, in southern Somalia, who have grown powerful, rich in the midst of chaos, and have no interest in seeing a reconstructed Somali state with a central authority. People go out of their way, as they are doing now, to wreck any attempt at reconciliation because they have it too good. One of them, I do not want to name names, bluntly said, "Look, battle-wagons of militias are ahead of me, they are behind me, they are on my flanks. I trade in every conceivable business. I plant marijuana in the banana fields of Somalia. I earn something to the tune of $500,000 every two weeks. Why would I want to change this?" We need to get an outside force, Ahmed, which breaks heads, something like the French Foreign Legion. If I had my way, I would have said, you know, in Somalia we should give a free hand to a force like the French Foreign Legion, surround the whole bloody place, and kill these goons. But that's not going to happen, as we know, in the real world.

AS: Because there's nobody interested?

SS: There's nobody interested. Possibly the only thing that I think would bring in world attention is that a genuine Al-Qaida camp develops in Somalia. If that happens, the West will change their minds. But absent that…

AS: Or the Somalis speak with a different voice that is mature and, therefore, can convince the rest of the world that they are ready to help themselves. But that has to be an organic voice, one capable of envisioning a different kind of a future and willing to fight for that future—but needs help.

SS: You know, one of the tragedies during this period of our loss and dislocation is the failure of intellectuals. Because we belong to kin-groups, though we don't care and don't see it ourselves. But the reality is otherwise with the masses. They all see us as belonging to a blood-group and promoting their agenda. That's how the common man sees us. As a result, the intellectual, the Somali intellectual class has been discredited. Then there is the European involvement. Huge mistakes

that could have been avoided! Like how the entire United Nations Pakistani troops massacre was handled. If only the international community was taking advice from Somali intellectuals. But because we have discredited one another, the world community stopped paying any attention to us. So one of the challenges for the future, we're talking about the future role of the intellectuals, is first of all to prevail upon the international community to stop insulting us by ignoring us. It is our land. For better or worse, we are the national brain trust of this country. We are, therefore, key actors. Before they initiate any kind of activity in Somalia, we want them to speak to us first. But in order to prevail in that argument, we have to have our civil society of intellectuals.

AS: One other question on the transition. Leadership, it seems to me both from your reflection now and the works that you have done, is something you deem important in the construction of a viable life for a community. Is Colonel Abdullahi Yusuf different from Siyaad Barre or other strongmen? Can he deliver the goods of peace, unity, and rebuilding?

SS: Generically, he is more of the same. I don't know the man, but people say he lacks the presidential component or the leadership component. Is this true or is it the Somali curse of not giving one his/her due? You know, if I may go back, we were in Nashville a few years ago, and the Arta Djibouti Process was in motion. I remember one time, whether you were at that meeting or not I don't know, when I made an appeal because already people were tearing down Abdiqasim Salad and Ali Khalif.

AS: I recall that.

SS: And I said, "Look, they just got started. For better or for worse, it is what we have now. Why don't we give them a chance at least for six months, two years, and so on, and see what happens, no?" Both of them were immediately attacked by powerful interests who had no interest in seeing a reconstructed Somalia. They began to wage wars, the same people who are waging war on Abdullahi Yusuf and his government now are the ones who attacked and destroyed Abdiqasim Salad. Again I don't want to name names. But even if Abdullahi Yusuf had leadership qualities, does he have a constituency that can be led or have we turned into a bunch of jackals? I mean wolves!

AS: To tear into each other immediately.

SS: Yes!

AS: Influence. In terms of your own intellectual development and growth, what work had most effect on you?

SS: Two history books and one literature book. The first is that of Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, those seven volumes. I spent one entire summer doing nothing else but reading. The sharp eye, the cascading sentences, and the flash of insights. If I may give you a minor example, his descriptions of Arabia. (I mean this one was written about the fall of Rome but of course several legions got lost in the Arabian sands.) When he's describing the prophet Mohammed and his ways and his genius and how he created something special, there is one line from him. He was addressing the issue of Islamic theology and eschatology and goes on to address the carnal nature of Islamic heaven…

AS: Heaven?

SS: Heaven, yes. Paradise. Gibbon says, "And our own clergy," meaning the Christian clergy, "are incensed…this image of a carnal paradise incenses our own clergy either out of shame," and the flash comes in, "or out of envy." [laughs]

AS: So Gibbon's work, those volumes…

SS: And then a contemporary historian that died about a few years ago, and I'm sorry I didn't hear, or attend a lecture of his in person: A. J. P. Taylor, British historian. In him you find a mind that is in total control of the material. His description of German history, of Bismarck is astonishing. And he, like Gibbon, was seductive. I have a weakness for beautiful language. If I see beautiful English or Somali, you'll have me. Then the literary work is, of course, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a magnificent book. These are my favorite books.

AS: On Somali Studies: did you meet the late Professor Goosh Andrzejewski? How do you remember him? What kind of a person was he?

SS: Yes, I did meet him on many occasions. I remember him as an extraordinary individual by his background as a refugee from the Nazi conquest of Poland.

AS: You wrote an article with him, didn't you?

SS: The hardship he went through was something else. But he had genius for language. There are two foreigners, one of them is still alive,

who really know how to handle Somali language. One was Andrzejewski and the other is the Russian, Professor Georgi Kapchits. Those two individuals stand out when it comes to the command of the Somali language. Now, Andrzejewski, because he himself was a poet, a poet in the Polish language, had already the poetic sensibility so he was able to bring out the fact that poetry for us invokes a sensation, the collective sensation of sharing memory and what that art form does for us. And he recorded and translated it, and that's his contribution.

AS: I. M. Lewis is still alive. All of us have been influenced, one way or another, by his work. Comments on I. M. Lewis?

SS: Yes, I think the insight I learned from I. M. Lewis and what he in turn learned from Enrico Giruli.

AS: Giruli, the Italian Somalist?

SS: Yes, he wrote three volumes called *Somalia*, 1955, '59, and '60, which underscored the centrality of kin identity among the Somali. [laughs]

AS: Clan identity as a cultural gene?

SS: Yeah, but Lewis gave me an insight into how Somali society works and "unworks." I learned from him that lineage segmentation, which forms the humpty-dumpty of Somali politics, is a system that institutionalizes instability. It has both centripetal and centrifugal dimensions, but the latter is most potent.

AS: The present condition and the future of Somali Studies as an intellectual enterprise. How would you characterize it, where do you think it ought to go?

SS: Now, here is where I'm optimistic. I think that Somali Studies has mushroomed from a cottage industry to a mass-consumer production. There is now a good crop of Somali professors. Scholars are popping up everywhere. I was astonished recently when I was in France…

AS: In Paris?

SS: In Paris, the number of scholars I didn't even know, some in upstate New York, some from other parts of the world. Scholars are everywhere and are getting better. Intellectuals like you, let's face it, have set a kind of an example of a culture of serious scholarship. One may not like a person, but the value of his/her work ought not be denied. This is one of your major contributions to a maturing intellectual culture

among the Somali intelligentsia. For instance, when I had my incident in Somalia and the strongman General Aideed, thinking that I was a front for an American invasion of Somali society…

AS: You went with a major news medium (ABC News) to help them understand the history and the culture and the context as an expert.

SS: Yeah, correct. But he, General Aideed, not being educated in a system with separation between the press and the government, was immediately suspicious. He had no conception at all that in the West, most of the time, the press is indeed critical of what the government does. He thought that when he saw the press and the cameras, I was being installed as…

AS: An American man in Mogadishu.

SS: Correct. As a result, he threatened my life and I was rather quickly and unceremoniously…

AS: Rescued?

SS: Rescued by Americans. Now I will not name names, but a number of Somali intellectuals rejoiced: "Ah, finally Said Sheikh Samatar had been humiliated! He had it coming." [laughs] You know the one dissenting voice? That was you! And we were not necessarily on good terms at that time. In a nutshell, you said (and this I learned from reliable sources), "This is disgraceful! A Somali intellectual is driven out of his country and we are rejoicing in it. No, I don't want to be part of that, this is a shame." That's what you said.

AS: Well, if that is happening to Said, it'll happen to the rest of us too, I thought.

SS: Thank you!

Notes

1. The initial transcription of this interview was done by Erin Gullikson '07. I am grateful for Ms. Gullikson's contributions.

2. Said S. Samatar, *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationlism: The Case of Sayid Mahammad 'Abdille Hasan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 190.

3. Ibid., p. 179.