

# Reflections on the 12th SSIA Congress

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Lee Cassanelli

I have been fortunate to attend all but one of the twelve international Congresses which the SSIA has convened, always with essential support from host countries and local organizers, and the experience has allowed me to witness the evolution of the Association over nearly forty years. The 2015 Congress in Helsinki convinced me that the SSIA is alive and well, albeit not without the stresses which accompany any effort to assemble scholars with diverse topical, geographical, and generational interests and perspectives. It has always seemed to me, perhaps because I am trained as an historian, that an Association which seeks to remain vital needs to embrace both continuity and change, in its membership, its intellectual priorities, and its organizational structures. With this in mind, I offer some brief reflections on the Congress from the perspective of an SSIA “elder.”

The Helsinki Congress opened with a brief remembrance of several renowned scholars of Somali Studies who have left us in the past few years. They include Said S. Samatar, distinguished historian and editor of *Horn of Africa* journal; anthropologist I. M. Lewis, whose prolific writings on Somali society and culture provoked both admiration and criticism; Lewis’ former student Virginia Luling, a specialist on the Geledi community of southern Somalia and a long-time advocate for minorities in the Horn of Africa; Martin Hill, researcher and reporter on human rights for more than 30 years with Amnesty International; poet, playwright, and novelist Hussein Sheikh Ahmed Kaddare, also inventor of a script for the Somali language; linguist, literary critic, and diplomat Sharif Salah Mohamed Ali; and the venerable Aw Jama

Omar Issa, compiler and interpreter of Somali oral history and classical poetry. These dedicated scholars worked in many disciplines and published in a variety of languages; Somali, Arabic, English, Italian. They testify to the international character of the Somali Studies enterprise; and while their work sometimes provoked controversy, even their critics do not deny the invaluable contributions they made individually and collectively to the production and dissemination of knowledge about Somalia which was after all the primary purpose behind the founding of the SSIA. In opening the Helsinki Congress with a tribute to these intellectual ancestors, many younger participants were reminded of the legacy upon which current and future scholarship must necessarily build.

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While the Helsinki meeting was one of the smaller Congresses in numbers of registered participants, the keynotes and workshops were lively and well-attended. The 12th Congress may also prove to be a landmark in the ongoing evolution of the SSIA. Most obvious was the presence of a vigorous contingent of younger Somali scholars who challenged the current SSIA leadership to rethink its inclusivity and governing structures, and indeed to acknowledge the “privileged positionality” of senior scholars in setting the research agenda for Somali Studies. The final session at the Congress was devoted to discussion and debate of several issues sparked by the recent Cadaan Studies controversy, which among other things highlighted the need to interrogate the academic processes and hierarchies which have heretofore shaped the production of knowledge about Somalia and Somalis.<sup>1</sup> A recent workshop held at Harvard University, and organized independently of the SSIA by a committee of young Somali diaspora scholars and students, testifies to the commitment of the emerging generation to push forward with a reformist intellectual agenda.<sup>2</sup>

As an historian, I take heart from the SSIA’s record of responding constructively to challenges from new constituencies with new intellectual interests and research agendas. Past Congress programs have tended to mirror the dramatic transformations of Somali life and identities, which have occurred in recent decades both in the Horn and abroad. As I noted in an earlier summary of the SSIA’s history,

while there were no women among the “founding fathers” of the SSIA, and while women are still heavily underrepresented in most associations of Somali scholars outside of Scandinavia, [Somali] women took the initiative in forming their own caucuses at the Berlin (1996) and Toronto (1999) meetings and are currently taking a leading role in the anticipated Congress being planned in Hargeisa for July 2001 (Cassanelli 2001: 5).

Needless to say, women have become even more prominent as scholars and organizers of Somali Studies meetings over the past fifteen years, even while there is still room for women’s leadership in setting the larger research agenda as we move forward. Furthermore,

Certain issues which at the first four international congresses had only been undercurrents came to the surface during the 1990s. At the Fifth Congress in Worcester [1993], for example, one of the best attended panels dealt with Islam’s potential role in a new Somali state. Along with a lively discussion about whether the Islamic principles of human dignity, solidarity, and respect for education and property rights could best be realized in an Islamic state or in a secular one, the implicit question became: should leadership in a renascent Somalia come primarily from those currently being educated in Islamic schools, or from the sons and daughters of those who went abroad to live and study in the West? The 1993 Congress also witnessed the emergence of a vocal group of Somalis who represented themselves as members of the country’s “minorities”... . Panels dealing with these minority groups have now become commonplace at Somali and African Studies conferences, and it seems fair to say that their spokesmen have forced Somali specialists everywhere to recognize that discrimination (and even exploitation) based on color, occupation, and language has been an historical reality for too many of Somalia’s citizens. This realization has constituted a major change in the paradigms which have governed our understanding of Somali society, and scholars can never look at the country in the same way again (Cassanelli 2001: 56).

These observations from 2001 seem largely anachronistic today, especially when we look at the number of publications which have appeared since that time on the Somali Bantu, Benaadiri, and Madhiban minority communities; on the “deep” history of Islam in the Somali Peninsula; and on the roles of Somali women in the public life of Somalia from the nationalist era to the current reconstruction period. It seems clear that scholarship, much of it initiated in papers presented at SSIA Congresses over the years, has reflected (albeit sometimes belatedly)

the concerns and priorities of the wider Somali community as it has become more global and more self-aware of its own rich diversity.

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Consistent with the history of SSIA Congresses, the panels and workshops I was able to attend in Helsinki reflected both continuities and changes in scholarly interest. Because host countries have the prerogative of setting certain themes which reflect their own national research priorities, there were several panels and workshops on family life, mental health, entrepreneurship, parenthood and youth culture in Finnish-Somali society, typically with comparative studies from Somali diaspora communities in other countries. On the international and political side, panelists presented on borders, identities, and citizenship claims in the greater Horn of Africa; on the diaspora's role in transnational organizations for peacemaking and economic reconstruction; and on rethinking forms of governance and statehood in all of the Somali regions. Across these two very different fields of inquiry, one could hear a recurrent plea for strategies that could engage Somali men more effectively in discussions of family dynamics and women's leadership, and strategies to include Somali women more fully in discussions of governance and state-building. These issues are on the table, if not yet resolved.

The Helsinki Congress also provided the venue for exploring topics and themes which are staples of the Somali Studies enterprise. While there were fewer history papers than usual for an SSIA Congress, several of those presented challenged conventional narratives: of the history of Somali piracy, of the much-maligned UNOSOM mission, and of the historical development of local Islamic education in Somalia. Italian and Russian linguists continued their admirable in-depth research into the multiple variants of language and dialects in Somalia, not only for classificatory purposes but to the end of improving education and appreciation of the Somali linguistic heritage for coming generations. A panel on literature and poetry, both in Somali and in the adopted languages of Somalis in the diaspora, attracted the usual lively audience. The continued interest of SSIA members in these enduring topics of Somali Studies has provided a certain intellectual continuity over the past twenty-five years. This continuity is important: as Ahmed Samatar reminded us in his Hormuud Lecture at the 2015 African Studies Association Meeting in San Diego, the survival of Somalia will depend not only on the rebuilding of political and economic institu-

tions, but also on the preservation and revitalization of those moral, aesthetic and cultural traditions that have enabled Somalis to cope with crises in the past (Samatar, 2015).

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Several suggestions made by participants at the conclusion of the 12th Congress warrant brief mention. One was to encourage small groups of scholars and students to constitute Somali Studies panels in their own countries at national or regional conferences targeted to particular disciplines, and at meetings of African or Development or Literary or Immigration Studies scholars. This will enable the ongoing exchange of research and ideas in the interim between triennial SSIA Congresses, help build local and national networks, and serve to reduce the insularity of Somali Studies by putting its practitioners in dialogue with scholars in other fields. Another idea was that the working papers from such meetings could be posted on the SSIA website for sharing and vetted commentary, ensuring that those who are unable to attend such conferences can keep up-to-date and have a voice in ongoing scholarly exchanges. If the SSIA is to remain relevant as a vehicle for the promotion of Somali Studies scholarship in all its dimensions, it will necessarily have to embrace these new initiatives and incorporate their advocates into the planning of future Congresses. In this way, both continuity and innovation will be encouraged.

Lee Cassanelli is a Professor of History and African Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, General Editor of *Northeast African Studies*, and an Associate Editor of *Bildhaan*. The author may be contacted at [lcassane@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:lcassane@sas.upenn.edu).

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## Notes

1. For the lively exchange of views, one may Google “CadaanStudies.”
2. *Reimagining Somali Studies: Colonial Pasts, Postcolonial Futures*, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, April 14–15, 2016.

## References

- Cassanelli, Lee (2001) “The Somali Studies International Association: A Brief History,” *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*: Vol. 1, Article 5. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.malester.edu/bildhaan/vol1/iss1/5>.
- Samatar, Ahmed. I. “Development and Culture: Reflections on the Somali Experience.” Hormuud Lecture, African Studies Association Meeting, San Diego, November 20, 2015.