

Nations, like the human beings who constitute them, experience times of extraordinary bliss as well as periods of concentrated agony. Such is particularly the case for societies in the early stages of the cycle of civic and institutional (re)development. The causes, tapestry, and duration of each spell depend on, among others, the nature of inheritance, the vicissitudes of the present, and the character of the dominant social forces and their conception of the future.

For the better part of a decade, Somalia has been, stereotypically, associated with shipwreck politics. Heaving with multiple crises (or, more aptly, a catastrophe) that include war, predatory elites, hopeless pauperism, cultural deracination, environmental loss, and international disfavor, the multiple deaths of the Somali national state underscore the degree to which a label can capture the central truth about a given condition. Numerous efforts to pick up the pieces notwithstanding, colliding subjectivities continue to give rise to pathologies, some inherent in the conduct of common tasks of life, that neuter atonement and rebirth. As a result, if in an earlier history a small number of Somalis adventurously took to the oceans, *tacabbir*, to discover, earn a little money, and return triumphantly, for hundreds of thousands of their contemporary kin this is the age of *qaxootin* or exodus. Consequently, there is hardly any continent in the world where Somalis are not found as refugees and asylum seekers. For the first time in modern Somali history, then, there are at least two distinct Somali types—the majority, in the millions, who remain inside the fragmented reality, and the diaspora in the making. The implications of this new difference are bound to be numerous and complicated. Nonetheless, one thing seems for sure: both the return to interiority as a result of the shrinking sense of belonging and the extreme geographical dispersion seem to portend greater contradictory paradigms and varied serendipities.¹ Be that as it may, and given the mutative nature of the situation, there could be a silver lining to the extent that both the Somali people and Somali Studies are at a crossroads.

For the Somali society, the challenges include what to remember and forget of the past; how to organize and live this confounding present; and how to imagine and service a better future. In addition, effective participation in this globalizing world requires the collective propagation of *Paideia*—that is, the cultivation of intelligent, ethical, and, most of all, mannered sensibilities. Such is the only posture effica-

cious enough for a “world-time” that offers a choice between creative synthesis and a sentence to utmost wretchedness. In the case of Somali Studies, as primarily an intellectual enterprise, these are some of the most critical questions at hand:

- If the past could *never* be laid to rest, how is one to revisit such a living hinterland? Or, put another way, how might one conduct the unavoidable conversation between history and our moment so that, in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s pithy remark, “. . . the hour should be instructed by the ages, and the ages explained by the hours.”²
- If the present is *never* just another version of a repetitively abiding past, what is the peculiar nature of this conjuncture of discontinuities and how might one study it?
- If the future is *never* out there waiting to be discovered, but has to be met through on-rushing and remorseless realities, what appropriate questions and scenarios could bring reason and hope together?

For both spheres (i.e., Somali society and Somali Studies), then, there seems to be at least one common and most fundamental concern: how to get free from the paralyzing grip of unthinking truisms that hinder scholarly progress and practical solutions?

To interrogate the weight of history and, simultaneously, take the measure of currently unfolding complexities call for an open intellectual stage, where delicate themes and difficult questions are probed. The birth of *Bildhaan* is intended to be one such site. In one rendering of Somali language, *Bildhaan* means, literally, a faint and distant light in the midst of thick darkness. While this international and transdisciplinary journal will be governed by the codes of scholarly probity and *adab*,³ a moral behind the initiative is to add to the intellectual capital of the Somali people. More immediately, however, these four objectives define *Bildhaan*:

- To pose critical questions that open up Somali experiences. A correlate credo is that both freedom and respect are not only necessary for a mutual enlightenment but a prerequisite for the voluntary formation of a community of letters.

- To deepen memory and the search for explanations, by accenting the companionship of history and theory. Here, we will be well served to heed the wise words of R.H. Tawney:

One who studies the development of social theory can hardly hope to avoid the criticism which is brought against those who disturb the dust in forgotten lumber-rooms. If he [she] seeks an excuse beyond his own curiosity, he [she] may find it, perhaps, in the reflection that the past reveals to the present, what the present is capable of seeing, and that the face which to one age is a blank may to another be pregnant with meaning.⁴

- To conceive of new concepts and discourses that are at once specific and universal. Put differently, given this epoch of globalization, a socketing of Somali peculiarities into relevant knowledge of other human beings, and inversely, seem a *sine qua non* for an innovative thinking.
- To inspire a new generation of Somalists to imagine a hermeneutic that upholds discernment and righteousness. To be sure, some familiar aporias will continue to resist scholarly and activist unlocking, and new ones are bound to appear. *Bildhaan* is committed to both the enlargement of the circle of conversation and the reign of rectitude and reason — in the best sense of the heritage of Islamic/Somali humanism and the Enlightenment.

...integrity and intelligence go hand in hand to ensure against laziness, false analysis, pleaded connections, and sleight of word. Integrity demands of intelligence that it forge true connection on the page. Intelligence calls for integrity for the challenge of it...and for its capacity to mean.⁵

Despite the lofty goals, *Bildhaan* is still a very modest step. With this maiden issue begins the production of one annual volume for a trial period of three years. We plan on a maximum of about a hundred pages per edition. After 2003, Allah willing, we will take stock and decide where to go from there. In the meantime, expressions of utmost gratitude to a number of institutions and key individuals are in order.

Together, they are directly responsible for this dream of many years to finally see the light of day.

At the front is my own institution, Macalester College. Into my eighth year as Dean of International Studies and Programming, I am blessed to be part of a splendid academic institution that for over sixty years has taken public pride in its resolute cultivation of an internationalist identity, one that distinctly separates the College from recent aspirants. President Michael McPherson and Provost Daniel Hornbach reaffirmed, yet again, Macalester's universalist attachments by offering the major and foundational investment in *Bildhaan*. An important element of this support is the tireless and precise labor of Margaret Beegle, ISP's coordinator and assistant editor of *Bildhaan*. Here, also, I would like to mention Paula Leonhart and Kim David of the Office of College Relations for their skill in design, efficient management of the production process, and good cheer.

Second, I acknowledge the early endorsements by Wellesley College and Professor Lidwien Kapteijns. Wellesley coupled its positive reaction with a substantial commitment. As for Kapteijns, there is so much to comment on regarding her unique and fine scholarly contribution to Somali Studies (see the essay in this volume) and humane, but no nonsense, solidarity with the Somali people that one has to wait for another opportunity to do justice to her efforts. Suffice it, for this occasion, to say that *Bildhaan* would not have appeared without her initial enthusiasm and subsequent energy—including exacting editorship of manuscripts.

Third, I recognize California State University, Chico, and Professor Charles Gesheker. CSU, Chico accepted our invitation to join with delight and generosity. Gesheker's intimate and career-long association with Somali Studies is known to all of us. However, a hardly publicized act of his serves as an unparalleled illustration: He is the only practitioner to have donated an endowment for an annual cash prize for the best scholarly paper on any aspect of Somali society. Gesheker gives back! Furthermore, and for this volume, he went to great lengths to secure the extensive interview with Professor I.M. Lewis, conducted in London.

Fourth, our appreciation is extended to the College of the Holy Cross and Professor Hussein M. Adam. Holy Cross's support for Somali Studies goes back to the hosting, at that beautiful campus, of the Fifth International Congress in 1993. Through Adam, we were able to convince the leadership of the College to partake of this venture,

too. For nearly a quarter of a century, Hussein Adam has been the main and consistent force behind the Somali Studies International Association (SSIA). In an era marked by mutual suspicion and meanness, we are fortunate to have among us someone with a record of public dedication and inexhaustible patience.

Fifth, I salute the University of Pennsylvania and Professor Lee Cassanelli. Through Dr. Cassanelli's good offices, we secured the collaboration of one of America's greatest universities. As a founding member of SSIA, Cassanelli remains very vibrant and a source of positive influence. When the idea of *Bildhaan* was first put forth, his voice was amongst the most encouraging, to be followed by a willingness to successfully commit his institution.

Sixth, a note of thanks to the members of the International Advisory Board is in order. We hope to draw on their talents so as to make *Bildhaan* into a worthy publication—one that will serve Somalists to productively engage each other, generate exciting new ideas and intellectual activities, and, most of all, add to a lenitive image of the Somalis against the current and demoralizing stereotypes. Indubitably, this is a tall order. Nonetheless, we go forward with a sobering awareness that:

... in a world where principles and conduct are unequally mated, men [and women] are to be judged by their reach as well as by their grasp—by the ends at which they aim as well as by the success with which they attain them.⁶

I urge you to subscribe to *Bildhaan* as well as spread the word. Finally, this launching issue is dedicated to the late Professor B.W. Andrzejewski. He was a scholar of inordinate command of the Somali language and literature who taught many of us. Moreover, for those Somalis who were fortunate enough to meet him, he always exuded an unmatched mixture of respect, sympathy, and a conscious effort to accent what was good about Somali culture. Goosh left us an uplifting legacy.

Notes

1. Those who have decided to flee or made a choice to live outside of Somalia, yet actively preoccupied with the happenings inside, will do well to listen to the voice of another honorable exile. These are the words of Breyten Breytenbach, the essayist, poet, and painter from South Africa:

Exiles talking about the plight of their situation and of the suffering back home, you must know, are like fish learning to breathe on dry land—there will be much gasping and heaving, but ultimately we are only that: fish on dry land.

—Breyten Breytenbach, *The Memory of Birds in Times of Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996), p. 101.

2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 4

3. For more on this mode of self-lucidity, see Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Vol. I, *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), chapters 4 and 5.

4. R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2000 [1926]), p. 3.

5. Annie Dillard, *Living by Fiction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 35.

6. R.H. Tawney, p. 285.