A Collective Response to Dr. Markus Hoehne and the Somaliland Journal of African Studies
April 4, 2015

It is with grave concern that we, the undersigned Somali academics, researchers, students, writers, activists, community members and our non-Somali academic and activist allies, write to you today.

We are deeply troubled by the extraordinary omission of Somali academics and researchers from the board of editors, international advisory board, and published authors of the newly launched academic journal Somaliland Journal of African Studies (SJAS). We are further disturbed by comments made publicly on Facebook by advisory board member and social anthropologist Dr. Markus Hoehne in response to and dismissive of the Somali-led critique of academic exclusion and Western dominance in SJAS and the field of Somali Studies more generally.

In its recent inaugural issue, the Somaliland Journal of African Studies described itself as an academic journal “covering African affairs at large, but with a particular focus on East Africa and the Horn.” It also stated that the journal was the product of collaboration “with students and scholars of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies of the University of Hargeisa.” It was brought to our collective attention in late March that the editorial and advisory boards do not reflect this supposed partnership with UofH. Not a single Somali student or scholar from Hargeisa, the broader Somali region, or the vast Somali diaspora is represented in SJAS. Instead, the editorial and advisory board is made up of 9 Europe and US based academics - as well as two graduate student editors - and three Ethiopian academics affiliated with Addis Ababa University.

In response to this exclusion of Somali researchers and scholars from SJAS, there were conversations on Facebook between young Somali academics and activists on how to respond, and the announcement of a Twitter-based discussion on March 26th under the hashtag #CadaanStudies. “Cadaan” is the Somali term for whiteness, and the hashtag was intended to capture important questions of power, authority and knowledge production about the Somali
tories, and how Somalis continue to be marginalized in academic and policy discussions concerning them.

It was in one of these Facebook conversation threads that Dr. Markus Hoehne entered in defense of SJAS and dismissal of this critique. It is necessary to quote his words at length:

I did NOT come across [sic] many younger Somalis who would qualify as serious SCHOLARS - not because they lack access to sources, but because they seem not to value scholarship as such. Sorry to say, but to become a successful political scientist, social anthropologist, sociologist or human geographer, you study many years without an economically promising end in sight. You have to work hard before you get out one piece of text and even then, you often get more criticism than praise. You certainly do not become rich quickly as a social scientist, at least if you have to pay your bills in Europe or Northamerica. Now, where are all the 'marginalised' Somalis who do not get their share in academia? I guess you would have to first find all the young Somalis who are willing to sit on their butt for 8 hours a day and read and write for months to get one piece of text out. Okay, before you 'crucify' me now for my neo-colonial racist male writing, I ADMIT that given the lack of good quality higher education in social sciences INSIDE Somalia, one cannot enter into a fair competition between cadaan iyo madow [black] scholars here. BUT, there are many young Somalis in UK, USA and continental Europe who have a chance to get a degree from a well-established university in social sciences and become master analysts of Somali and other affairs (where are Somali sociologists who work on issues of discrimination or inequality in the USA or Europe, where are Somali religious scholars who engage in the debate about Islam in Europe? Sometimes you have to look beyond your Somali navel). But in my life, I met only very FEW diaspora Somalis who seriously pursued such a career (in social sciences). So, your activism is good, but what you actually would have to do - instead of getting outraged at cadaan scholars, is to sit down and get your analysis out and criticise not cadaan for writing sth, but your own brothers and sisters for not writing better stuff!

He continued to argue back and forth with over 30 educated Somalis, stating “there is not enough good and serious scholarship in the form of articles and books coming from Somali social scientists,” that he “did not see many young Somalis seriously engaging in social sciences,” and demanded they prove their existence to him: “Please send me the references to articles and books written by young Somali social scientists that have been published in well-established journals and with reputable publishers.”

When Hoehne was asked to leave the thread by many who felt patronized and attacked by his comments, he crudely responded in broken Somali translating to: “Fine. I will go. You and your friends can talk about a stupid white man who is colonizing you, but I think that when you are finished talking about colonialism, you will go back to your Somali tribalism.” In subsequent discussions on other Somali Facebook pages following the successful #CadaanStudies Twitter discussion, he continued to comment in incredibly divisive ways, questioning the authenticity of diaspora Somalis who participated in Twitter activism and reducing the critique of knowledge
production and systemic power to one that pitted individual white against black, us (non-Somali Somali Studies scholars) versus them (Somalis, who he viewed as lacking the credentials and discipline to produce academic work and participate in the field). He positioned himself, a German anthropologist, as more in touch with Somali reality than the Somalis who were challenging him online, while continuing to argue that the conversations taking place online was not "real debate":

“You all seem to be in the diaspora. INSIDE Somalia, I have never encountered this type of flat reaction towards me. Some people hated me for certain opinions, many challenged me - but there was a real debate about THE MATTER, not flat accusations of racism and white supremacy. In my subjective opinion, Somalis in Somalia had a much more constructive and interesting way of debating than many of you (whoever ‘you’ exactly is) in the diaspora, who have so many means compared to your brothers and sisters who never left the motherland. Maybe you should get your equation right: If I am a white supremacist, you are a black supremacist compared to your brothers and sisters back in Somalia who have not all the high quality education and economic means you can access.”

We are appalled by the words of Dr. Markus Hoehne, his lack of self-awareness regarding the seriousness and violence of his comments and thinking, and his inability and unwillingness to engage. We are concerned that these words should come from an academic who considers himself an expert on Somalis and has power in both the field of Somali Studies as well as policy about and within the Somali territories, evidenced by the decision to commission him for the project “Community Safety Forums & Community Police Dialogues in Somaliland, Puntland and South Central Somalia” by the Danish Demining Group and funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID).

It is our collective belief that what Dr. Markus Hoehne’s comments and the exclusionary Somaliland Journal of Somali Studies show us is the necessity and urgency of discussing and deconstructing issues of power and authority in Somali Studies, and thinking through how this has shaped academic knowledge production about Somalis historically and into the present. We are keenly aware that Somali Studies emerged alongside the colonization of the Somali territories, and that inextricably linked to the expansion of European power in the Horn of Africa was the production of cultural and historical information about Somalis. In the postcolonial present, the production of knowledge about the Horn of Africa remains largely in the hands of European and American academics and analysts, increasingly linked to the informational needs of neocolonialism and the War on Terror. There is too much at stake for our voices and concerns to be dismissed.

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