



The Owl of Modernity: Creating the Myth of an Absent Homeland

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Abstract

This article explores the interconnection of myth and modernity in African literature with reference to the work of two prominent Sudanese writers, Dr Francis Deng and the late Tayib Salih. Both authors were highly educated intellectuals who lived mostly in the West, but each manifested a close and intimate emotional and intellectual attachment to his part of the country: Salih to the North and Deng to the South. Each expressed this fondness in his fiction, and indirectly reflected the tension between the two halves of the country. Each idealised the rural heartlands, and attempted to bring their myths and cultural traditions into life, advertise them to the world and reconcile them with modernity.

Key Words: Myth; Owl of Modernity; Absent homeland

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INTRODUCTION

One aspect of the challenge which modernity poses for non-western cultures in general, and African writers in particular, is the challenge to identity and pride in one's own traditions. Modernisation was generally introduced by colonial authorities, and had been accompanied by violence and repression. The reaction was a twin track strategy of appropriating the advantages of modernity through learning and education, coupled with a defence of indigenous traditions. In most cases, as we shall see below,

the challenge to local traditions, which were described as "primitive" and mythic, did not come only from the rationalistic thrust of modernity, but also from alternative religious beliefs, such as Christianity or orthodox Islam, which presented themselves as a more "modern" religions. Where it was the indigenous religion, Islam played a dual role: being on the receiving end of the modernist attack on the one side, and a competitor to Christianity on the other. Within Islam, there was also tension between traditional, mythically saturated, Sufi Islam, the more orthodox High Islam of the urban *ulama*.

The description of African beliefs as "mythical" was first applied by early anthropologists who regarded myth as "that which was untrue, a figment of the imagination, that which was dreamed uncultured minds" (Scarborough, 1994, p.15). This perception was, in turn, rooted in the self-perception, propagated since the Enlightenment, of modernity as the realm of reason as knowledge, in contrast to the realm of myth, regarded as "a cipher for all that is false" (Scarborough, 1994, p.13). In this perception,

Myths are thought to be primordial and universal. Modernity, along with its cultural and artistic complement, Modernism, is both urgently present and geopolitically particular. Myth and mythical thinking are what modern culture has gone beyond and, whether willingly or unwillingly, left behind... The point of myth is precisely that it is not modern... Modernity is sometimes identified with the ideal of the Enlightenment... [for which] myth was part of the apparatus of superstition, credulity and ignorance from which reason was attempting to unpick itself (Connor, 2004, p.251).

Romantic writers, however, rebelled against this vision from the 18th century, rejecting this "rationalist" dismissal of myth, and "began to think of myth, not just as foolish or flatulent fables, but as a vital resource for a new age" (Connor, 2004, p.252). They were joined in this by religious people and many others who regarded the "crisis of myth" as a lamentable affair. As a proponent of this view, Philip Wheelwright, puts it:

This loss of myth consciousness I believe to be the most devastating loss that humanity can suffer; for as I have argued, myth consciousness is the bond that unites men both with one another and with the unplumbed mystery from which mankind is sprung and without reference to which the radical significance of things goes to pot. Now a world bereft of radical significance is not long tolerated; it leaves men radically unstable, so that they will seize at any myth or pseudomyth that is offered (quoted in Scarborough, 1994, p.4).

The Modernist movement in culture and literature “retained many aspects of the Romantic effort, not just to retrieve myth, but also to transform it into a “modern myth”. The re-introduction of myth in modern literature by writers such as James Joyce was celebrated by T S Eliot (who himself made recourse to myth in his poetry) as “simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history” (Connor, 2004, pp.254-5). In a related area, Jungian psychoanalysis reintroduced myth into modern discourse as embodying “some kind of ‘unconscious meaning’”, providing “the language of the unconscious” and a repository of a “secret immemorial knowledge.”

Jung’s analyses of myth construe them as nothing less, or more, than allegories of the power of myth itself. The psyche uses myth to tell the story to itself of its own endless quest for integration through, and with, myth (Connor, 2004, pp.258-9).

In psychoanalysis as in art and literature and many areas of modernity, myth has been appropriated as a meaningful, analyzable and useable concept. In this sense, myth is largely the creation of modernity, and its applications feed on each other. Thus art and literature appropriate and employ myth; then psychoanalysis relies on art and literature, among other sources, to deploy myth as a tool of analysis; then literary criticism employs the tools of psychoanalysis to interpret art, and so on. In this case, modernity and myth become deeply intertwined.

Modernity, then, is not mythless, rather, it is under the spell of multiple myths. The crisis of myth is a direct consequence not of the absence of myth but of a surplus myth (Scarborough, 1994, p.71).

1. MYTH IN THE SUDANESE CONTEXT

Nowhere has the modern utilisation of myth been more prevalent or effective than within the context of modern nationalism, which is itself “perhaps the most compelling identity myth of modern times” (Smith, 1991, p.viii). This has led many commentators to argue that

what gives nationalism its power are the myths, memories, traditions, and symbols of ethnic heritages and the ways in which a popular living past has been, and can be, rediscovered and reinterpreted by modern nationalist intelligentsias. It is from these elements of myth, memory, symbol, and tradition that modern national identities are reconstituted in each generation, as the nation becomes more inclusive and as its members cope with new challenges (Smith, 1999, p.9).

Nationalism, as it emerged in the Sudanese context, largely conformed to this view. Sudan, which was until January this year, when it has decided amicably to split into two parts, North and South, Africa’s largest country. It has also been often described as “a microcosm of Africa,” embodying as it does the continent’s bewildering cultural diversity. Over 400 different ethnic groups lived within united Sudan, speaking 133 different languages. However, the main division continued to be the one between the predominantly Muslim and Arabized North, and the largely non-Muslim and non-Arab south. The great majority of Sudanese “rightly feel that they are Arabs and Africans at the same time to an equal degree and without any sense of tension or contradiction” (Abdelrahim, 1973, p.43). However, the fact that “they are predominantly Muslim and Arab does indeed distinguish the northern Sudanese from their southern compatriots who are mainly pagan and to a much less extent either Christian or Muslim” (Abdelrahim, 1973, p.43).

The dividing line between the two halves of the country was cemented by British colonial policies, where the South continued to be administered as a “closed district”, with no access allowed for northerners to the south, and vice versa, except with special permits. Education in the South was handed exclusively to Christian missionary groups, who insisted that pupils convert in order to study. In line with this policy,

Northern merchants were ‘repatriated’ to the North, intermarriage between southerners and northerners was discouraged, Arab clothing was banned and (when found) was burnt, and a no-man’s-land was created between Bahr el-Ghazal and Darfur provinces so as to discourage cultural contact. (Niblock, 1987, p.155)

These divisions led to the eruption of civil war on the eve of independence, which continued on and off until a peace deal was reached in 2005, which gave the South the right of self-determination. This right was exercised in January this year, and the Southerners voted overwhelmingly for secession. The country will officially break up into two separate states in July 2011.

Part of the contests which fed the conflict which led to this separation revolved around competing concepts of identity. Most of the major tribes in Northern Sudan claim Arab and Arab ancestry, and have carefully outlined genealogies confirming this Arab descent. As a consequence, the modern nationalist movement tended to emphasise Sudan’s Arab-Islamic identity and espouse policies which favour closer ties with the Arab-Islamic world. The majority of Southerners, who are neither Arab nor Muslim, resent this inclination which they regarded as exclusivist.

In the early phases of this conflict, Southern politicians have argued for separation, accepting that the North and South have incompatible and mutually exclusive identities. The second generation of rebels shifted to two inter-related sets of claims, arguing first that the majority of the Sudanese are in fact African, and not Arab, and,

second, even those claiming to be Arab are entertaining an untenable myth of Arab descent, which is at odds with the fact that they are not that different in appearance from their non-Arab compatriots.

In this paper, we focus on the use of myth in the work of two prominent Sudanese writers, one presenting a southern view, the other a northern view. Ironically, both were born in the geographical North. Francis Deng was born in 1938 in Abyei, in the province of Southern Kordofan. He is the son of the paramount chief of the Ngok Dinka. His birth lies in between two worlds, officially part of Northern Sudan which is mainly inhabited jointly by the Misseria Arab tribe and a branch of the Dinka tribe, the largest tribe in the South. This ambiguous position mirrors the status of the Sudan in relation to the rest of the Arab and African world. As Deng himself puts it; "Abyei is to Sudan what the Sudan is to Africa" (Deng, 2009, p.281). This issue of "uncertain identity" continues to shape Deng's work and is a nagging question for most of his protagonists.

Tayeb Salih (1929-2009) was born in the village of Karmakol near the town of Marawi in Northern Sudan. He belonged to the Rikabiyya tribe; known about being 'ulama and religious teachers. They are descendants of a prominent religious teacher who arrived in Sudan from the Arabian Peninsula in the 14th century. A village similar to his birthplace provides the setting for the bulk of his work. The village also symbolizes Northern Sudan as a whole in Salih's work.

The impact of Salih's lineage, his upbringing within a Sufi family and early childhood in Karmakol, deeply influence his depiction of the issues of identity. He does not seem to be feeling any sense of identity crisis or confusion or even the need to acknowledge the fact that there is a serious issue of contested identities in the country. This is largely due to the fact that the setting of his work is a Northern Sudan village typically inhabited by Muslim Arab tribes, the conflicts they experience are ordinary day to day issues that are not directly linked to do with clashes of identity or ideology.

Commenting on the ongoing debate on the bipolarity of Sudanese identity, Salih clearly confirms the cultural identity of Northern Sudan as Arab-Islamic:

We have not entered into the Arab family. We are part of this nation since the beginning of history. The issue of colour, in my belief, poses a problem for the people of Northern Sudan. It could have been a problem in the first stages of encounter between Sudanese and other Arabs, as some wanted to interrogate the Sudanese person on whether he was Arab or not. But we do not draw our Arab identity from others, and do not accept a testimony from others that we are Arabs. We are Arabs and that is that. Even if all the others say that we are not Arabs, we remain Arabs in spite of them, and they are free to say what they like (Jibril, 1993).

This view is diametrically opposed to Deng's, who regards this belief in actual Arab ancestry as a myth.

For Deng, resolving the question of identity is crucial for resolving the ongoing conflict. However, Deng approaches the issue from the perspective of the Dinka, and their "mythical history", which "starts from a conceptualized beginning at the creation, remembered and retold in great detail through creation myth that are linked with the legends of original leadership and early migration" (Deng, 1978, p.XV). Dinka myths, according to Deng, are a clear illustration of the Dinka way of life with its established spiritual and moral conduct. Some of these religious mythologies, such as the reference to man's creation from mud and the woman from a rib, bear a clear resemblance to versions in the Bible and the Quran. This could suggest a strong possibility of south-north contacts and cultural exchange prior to the British colonial time which isolated the tribes of southern Sudan.

While the Dinka now form part of modern Sudan, they remain among the least touched by modernization. Their pride and ethnocentrism ways were given as an important factor in their conservatism and resistance to change. Postcolonial trends now indicate that this explanation is a partial truth. Colonial policies kept the tribes in isolation and tried to preserve traditional cultures. The abandonment of these policies has now led to intensive cross-cultural interaction. (Deng, 1972, p.6)

For Salih, the focus is modernity in general, and relations with the West in particular. Both authors use the village as a setting for their fiction. This focus on an isolated rural community underlines the quest for a "pristine" setting where authenticity can be affirmed. However, this choice of setting by necessity emphasizes parochialism, in contrast to urban settings where people from different backgrounds to mix and forge a new identity.

The heroes do, in the context of the narrative, venture out into the wider world, and even travel abroad. In case of Salih's celebrated *Season of Migration to the North*, the hero arrives into the village from the West, with disastrous consequences. In other works, the strangers arrive from the outside in a "mythical" setting, including the saintly founder of the village, who came from an unknown location and in mysterious circumstances.

Both authors have lived most of their lives abroad, and had married western women. Salih left Sudan in the early 1950s to London, where he worked for the BBC Arabic service, and lived in London with his Scottish wife until his death in 2009, apart from a sojourn in Qatar in the 1970s, and a brief stint in Sudan in the mid-1960s. He wrote his novels while living in the UK. Deng travelled to the US in the 1960s for postgraduate studies and then started to work at the UN. He returned to Sudan after the Addis Ababa agreement in the 1970s, and worked as state minister for foreign affairs and then ambassador before going back to the United States, where he still lives. He is currently Advisor to the UN Secretary General on the Prevention of Genocide.

However, in spite of their long stay abroad, each of the two authors continued to be extremely attached to his family and locality. This preoccupation, bordering on obsession, appears to be a compensatory tendency: one reclaims the absent homeland through writing. Salih is explicit on this point, admitting that he has started writing in order to express and overcome his painful sense of longing for his village, which he missed terribly during his first years of expatriate life.

In the case of Deng, attachment to his Dinka tribe dominated his intellectual output. While an outstanding lawyer, intellectual and political activist, Deng was not a prominent literary figure in the same way as Salih. He only wrote two novels, *The Seed of Redemption* (1986), and *Cry of the Owl* (1989). Some would say he wrote one novel in two versions, the second a slightly improved version. However, he tried to use fiction as a way to distill and summarize his political message. Salih, by contrast, was an accomplished and internationally recognized literary figure. He thus delivers a sophisticated and multilayered message, in contrast to Deng's more direct message.

There is a touch of the autobiographical in the fiction of both writers. The villages where the main action takes place bear an uncanny resemblance to the respective birthplaces of the authors. The hero in Deng's novel is the son of a Dinka chief who goes to study in Northern Sudan and then gets involved in national politics, espousing positions identical with those of Deng himself. The autobiographical component in Salih's work is somewhat more nuance, and acquires intense ambiguity in *Season*, where the recurring stranger in the village turns out to be a Western educated economics professor who had left Britain after serving a prison sentence for murdering his English wife, and was pretending to be a rural farmer from another part of the country.

Both writers make liberal recourse to myth in their work, again with Deng making more explicit appeal to specific Dinka myths. For him, the struggle with modernity takes place at more than one level. First, there is the internal struggle between two sets of myths: Traditional, lived Dinka mythology on the one hand, and the hero's acquired Christian faith on the other. The characters struggle to balance the traditional myths, which they regard as central to their identity, with the new religion which despises and rejects those myths. At another level, the struggle is with the "Arabs", a generic label depicting Northern Sudanese, from the adjacent nomadic tribes with whom the Dinka share so much, but are also in constant conflict, to the urban population of far away cities, many of whom were not even Arab. Here, myths of contested identities play themselves out, and form weapons on the ongoing struggle for power and prestige. The colonial set up pales into the background, since the real struggle for the people of the South was less with the colonialists than were their

compatriots, and where the British were regarded as allies.

For Salih, in contrast, we find the familiar anti-colonial and post-colonial themes. Here, the threat to identity and the myths constituting and underpinning it comes from "modernity" as such, the imperatives of economic and social change: through education, economic development, migration, etc., which disrupt the settled village life, undermine social norms and precipitate conflict.

2. THE MYTH OF IDENTITY

In *Cry of the Owl*, we encounter the main protagonist, Elias Bol Malekl, a Dinka man in his twenties, the son of Chief Malengdit of the Mathiang Dinka in North Western Bahr al Ghazal, who is trying to make sense of the complex challenges facing him and his community. He has travelled to the North to study, and later joins the army, travels abroad for further education, and finally becomes a politician and member of parliament. This career path has taken him away from the more usual path which would have seen him inherit the chieftainship from his father. It also takes place against the background of a painful family tragedy, resulting from an "Arab" raid in which his mother and her young twins are kidnapped. One of the twins escapes captivity when he falls off a horse, but suffers permanent injury. A counter-raid saves the mother, but the second twin is never found. On her return from captivity, Elias's mother gives birth to a son, Elias himself, amid rumours that she became pregnant during her captivity with the Arabs. Later, the remaining twin, derided for his disability, and spurned by the girl he loves, runs away never to be found.

As the story progresses, Elias is reunited with his twin brothers under extraordinary circumstances. The long lost twin turns out to be a prominent parliamentarian in the ruling party, who has crossed swords with Elias on numerous occasions from across the aisle. Having been raised by an Arab family, he embraces his Arab identity enthusiastically, and becomes a sworn enemy of Southern dissidents like Elias, railing against "Arab hegemony" and the introduction of religion in politics. The second twin is also found, having also assumed an Arab-Muslim identity and became a wealthy merchant. Elias discovers that he, in fact, was the son of an Arab man, the same man who has adopted his brother. It is a dramatic and extremely significant role reversal.

The title "Cry of the Owl" to Sudanese, and most Arab readers, evokes ominous feelings. In another work, Deng records a popular traditional poem in which these sentiments are echoed.

The owl cries at night in our home
The evil bird of the night
has bedevilled us; The bird cries in the night saying:
"When it dawns, when it dawns O son of Deng,
when it dawns You will bury another man. (Deng, 1972, p.26)

In the novel, the cry of the owl immediately stirs unease and apprehension among the villagers, who relate to myths about the ominous signals the owl sends. People who experienced raids and civil wars try to decipher her message.

Our people consider the owl an evil bird because it functions at night. But for the same reason, it is a wise bird that sees things in the darkness- things others do not see. I felt that its visit might have some significance. (Deng, 1989, p.35)

The cry of the owl is heard by Chief Malengdit and his wife at a crucial point in the narrative, and is immediately followed by the Arab raid which started the tragedy of the twins and their mother. It changes the family's life their lives forever.

Through Elias's quest for personal identity, he reflects on the role of tradition, the specific code of conduct which is adopted through centuries under the watching eyes of the ancestors, the position of the cattle camp as a centre for rites of passage and dignity for Dinka youth.

Though an educated man, an army officer who lives in the north and a Christian convert, Elias's faith and loyalty to traditional Dinka beliefs remain solid. He recounts a strange encounter on his way from Khartoum to his village. He and his Arab driver were intercepted by a pack of killer lions. But when the driver aims his gun at a lion, Elias intervenes. He had remembered that the lion was held a sacred animal by the Dinka community. This has come about following the successful interception of Arab raiders who came to attack the village at night by a pack of lions which forced the raiders to flee.

The elders of the ruling clan, his family, got together and carried out a ritual of affinity with the Lion World. They undertook never to attack lions and ritually committed the lions to a reciprocal undertaking. Whichever side would violate the accord would suffer fatal injury in the ensuing conflict. The elders took out a sacred bull, prayed, and then, according to the legends of the clan, the pact had been observed by both sides. Even in recent years, lions were known to have provided protection to the Dinka against Arab raiders. In gratitude, Elias's clan had honoured the lion kingdom with dedication and sacrifices of cattle... It was a close affinity which a member of the clan could not afford to disregard with impunity. (Deng, 1998, p.15)

Elias insisted on observing this pact by avoiding to shoot the lion, at great risk to himself and his travel companions, including his bodyguard. This respect for the traditions of his forefathers was not totally devoid of self questioning, but Elias was apprehensive that some harm might befall his family, especially his sick father, if he ignored this binding treaty. He undertook to defend his companions, and this put him personally at risk, as the lion jumped onto the truck with him. But his plan was successful, and the lion left them in peace. "One must sometimes act on faith," he told his companions.

The ritual performed by the clan diviner to cure chief Malengdit (Malek) was another check for Elias's true spiritual attachment, especially that Christian missionaries

were against these pagan traditions and dismissed them as work of the devil. The Dinka however, as Deng confirms, are in total rejection to the idea of the hereafter and the possibility of accountability after death. They solidly believe that the dead continue to live in spiritual form and are in constant contact with the world of the living and continue to influence it:

Ancestors are worshipped as demi-gods and those who were tribal chiefs still have great power after death. They are consulted when important decisions are to be made, in judgements or, at traditional ceremonies. It is necessary to respect them or they could punish the living by causing illnesses or accidents. They could cause rain to stop and pastures to dry out, harvests to fail or women to become barren. (Schipper, 1982, p.21)

Hence, a bull was offered as a sacrifice to the forefathers to beg for forgiveness of any wrong doing from the part of the sick person or any of his family which might have angered the dead and resulted in this punishment. The bull has to be a willing party of the ritual and to accept the sacrifice and indicate that by urinating, to the delight of the eagerly anticipating crowd. Then the sacred cucumber is to be cut in half and thrown into the air, if both halves landed upward that is a good omen, if one half landed upside down it will be thrown away and the other half would be used to bless the sick person. If both halves landed upside down, that is an unfavourable outcome of the ritual

You God and you our forefathers, and you our ancestors, who else is left to speak for you in this world? Save Malek and take the bull. That was the way God decreed at creation, that cattle would be man's means to redemption. (Deng, 1989, p.29)

As a sure sign of a total blessing, heavy rains started to pour, in which the elders offered a thanksgiving prayer and scattered sorghum seeds around the compound. Elias's suggestion of a combination treatment of traditional and modern medicine was met by reluctance from his father who was concerned that the ancestors would feel undermined. As a southern politician who works in the North, Elias tried to accommodate both sides.

Father, I trust the wisdom of the ancestral will, but I see no harm in complementing that with the benefit of modern medicine.... in this day and age we cannot continue to believe in a conflict between the ancestral ways and the ways of our advancing world; the conflict must be resolved. (Deng, 1989, pp.40-41).

But even this reconciliation between the mythical and the modern world needed a little help from the diviner who was" modern "enough to accept various approaches, echoing Elias's words that they are all "working for the same end, the well being of man"

Dreams and visions constitute an important element in this traditional community. The ancestors are believed to pay frequent visits in dreams and visions to convey important messages or to warn against future disasters. These messages are taken seriously and often dreaded by the community. In some cases people may seek these visions to get answers or solve puzzling dilemmas. Chief

Malegdit explains to Elias how he used this method to try to make sense of some troubling dreams.

I felt that its visit might have some significance... So, I called a few words of prayer for our ancestors to reveal to me the purpose of the visits by the lion and the owl. Both brought to mind the tragedy our family faced once when the cry of the owl was followed by the Arab attack and the intervention of the lions against them. Anyway, I prayed for the significance of these revelations. Then I went back to sleep and saw an astonishing vision in a dream. Our sacred spears, the symbols of our divine leadership, were blazing with a white flame and lying coiled around them was the snake totem of our clan, the puff adder. He was not at all affected by the heat of the flame. Indeed, there was no heat; it was merely a ring of light.....I got up; I prayed for explanation in front of the spears. (Deng, 1989, pp.35-36)

Mythical narratives are employed to present the author's political views. Through the vision of Elias's father, the grandfather, the late chief, accompanied by the spirit Malengdit after whom chief Malengdit was named, makes a long speech on how things were falling apart in Dinkaland:

We have been watching over the affairs of your world and have been deeply distressed by the changes we have observed. Our people have been transformed by foreign powers. First, the English came and introduced our young people to their religion, their language, and their ways of doing things. But at least they left most of our people under their chiefs to live their lives the way their ancestors had always done. Then the Arabs of the North and the Egyptians sent the English away and said that they wanted the Sudan to become free of foreign rule and that they wanted the Arabs of the North and the black people of the South to be united into one people. This has now turned into a disaster for our people. They have been subjected to the kind of wars that destroyed this country before The English came. And now our people are being turned into Muslims and away from the religion of their forefathers. Our people have been changed twice in your own lifetime, first to adopt the ways of the English and now to adopt the ways of the Arabs. Your power to control things through the ancient ways of your ancestors is being undermined and diminished. (Deng, 1989, p.7)

The appearance of an ancestor whose integrity and moral authority are beyond doubt gives the dream/vision and the message it conveys the status of a royal diktat which the whole community is expected to revere and willingly act upon.

Mythologies may convey the political and moral values of a culture and provide systems of interpreting individual experiences within a universal perspective, which may include the intervention of suprahuman entities as well as aspects of the natural and cultural orders. (Scarborough, 1994, p.28)

In *Cry of the Owl*, Deng seems to be constantly employing a conscious balance between traditional identity as a Dinka and his hero's new adopted identity as a nationalist and a modernist intellectual. As Elias's frequent interior monologues suggest:

The more he adopted Arab ways, the more his pride as a Dinka was reinforced. It was as though accepting Arab ways was a way of validating his inner pride, the roots of which went deep to his

Dinka ancestry and cultural origin. But the issues involved were so complex that he himself was not clear on how he would rate his ethnicity against the sense of submission to Arab superiority (Deng, 1989, p.149).

The problematic context of dual identity of the Sudan within Africa, and the Sudanese within their country, is a constant preoccupation of Deng's. As an intellectual and a politician, he often tries to assert the absurdity of the ongoing self-destruction of the country, which he ascribes to "divisive concepts", and in particular the "myth" of a sharp racial and cultural dichotomy between North and South.

So predominant did the adverse view resulting from the presumed racial and cultural dichotomy become that myth overshadowed reality. The obvious racial and cultural admixture of the North and the similarities between Southern and Northern peoples became blurred by the simplistic vision of the North as racially and culturally Arab and religiously Islam and of the South as Negroid and pagan. A more detached view of the situation would show that, both in color and features, the North contains visible Negroid elements, existing separately or integrated with Arab elements. (Deng, 1978, pp.1-2)

Deng contemplates the complexities and of Sudanese identity and calls for the new generation of Northern Sudanese to embrace their Africanness pointing to the fact that young Northerners when visiting some Arab countries, to their shock, were not considered to be Arab, and were called "black" or even "abid" (slave) (Deng, 1978, p.161).

The mutual destruction which Deng depicts in his novel is a reflection of perceptions prevalent among the Dinka, as revealed in interviews he conducted with the Dinka chiefs and elders. According to chief Giirdit, many Arabs captured in battle were still in Dinkaland, some were very young children when their parents fled during wars, and have been raised as Dinka. Many Dinka are of Arab origin

The Arabs destroyed us but we also destroyed them. They captured our people and we captured their people. This is why there are some Arabs in Dinka land today. We used to capture from one another. His man is with us and our man is with him. (Deng, 1987, p.138).

These episodes provided the raw material for Deng's fiction. The story of Elias's twin brothers illustrates the fact that the ongoing clash of "identities" is in fact a myth that Deng was trying to deploy his fictional tools to dismantle.

Deng hoped to reveal the futility of the strife currently engulfing Sudan over "identity" by dramatically casting light on the thin grounds on which it was based. The man who dedicated his life to struggle for the assertion of Dinka identity was in fact an Arab, while the militant Muslim who opposed minority claims was in fact a Dinka man. (El-Affendi, 2008, p. 413)

Deng brought myth to modernity when he interviewed elders in his community and taped the conversations for his book *Africans of two Worlds*, which deals directly, as the title indicates, with the challenging issues of Sudanese

multiculturalism, and how traditional Dinka viewed their position within that collective identity

What you have said, you Mading, we are very pleased. Things we have told you, you will give them a purpose; you will write them down and that is a big thing. If this machine of yours writes and records what a man really says, and really records well, then if what we have said is bad, it will search for our necks; if it is good then we will say these words have saved the country. (Deng, 1978, p.34)

Educating Dinka boys was the most vital gateway to modernization, a move that transformed the world of the Dinka. The elders were not all in favor of the new tide. In the novel, Chief Malengdit tried to defend his decision to send his son to school instead of grooming him for chieftainship:

Almost all the important Dinka chiefs have sent their children to school. And why do you think they have done that? Do you think that it is because they expect their children to learn from the missionaries more about God and the words of our ancestors than we, their fathers, can teach them? Of course not. They have sent their children to the missionary schools to read, to know more about European medicine, and to prepare themselves for the new world in which the government of the English has incorporated our people. These are the things about which we, their elders, including chiefs, know nothing. We are like people who are blind, deaf and dumb. How can we be effective as leaders in a world we do not understand? Future leadership lies with these small boys who you see being sent to school. (Deng, 1989, pp.93)

The future, according to the elders of Dinkaland, is a different story, involving more realism and less magic, and with the role of the elders, or even the ancestors, is slowly diminishing. This is reflected, in turn, in the rise of new narratives.

Our stories are gone. New stories will now begin with you. The ancient stories you were asking us about have had their run. The time has now come for your own stories to begin. So, instead of us being the story-tellers, it is now for you to be the story-tellers. It is also for you to bear your children for the stories you are now about to tell. (Deng, 1978, p. 209)

The dedication of the novel is a benign defiance of local mythology, yet a powerful and effective use of modern universal techniques. The extremely moving dedication reads:

In memory of my beloved sister Awor, who was the very embodiment of human virtues, but who, with all the promises of a good and happy marriage died in child birth after an otherwise successful delivery of a handsome baby boy. The baby followed his mother a few days later, and both were followed a few months later by Awor's only surviving child, a girl in her third year, whose beauty, charm, and intelligence had already become evident. In the Dinka frame of things, without an offspring to continue her name and "stand her head upright" *-bi koc nhom*-my sister had perished forever- *aci riar*:

May this dedication rekindle their memory and remain a symbol, odest as it is, of their place in our hearts and minds. (Deng, 1989, p. 5)

According to Deng

the Dinka often explain the illness and the death of children whose mothers are dead in terms of the mother's being angered by how the living have mistreated her child and being desirous of taking the child away from them to join her among the dead. She may be appeased and reconciled, or she may be adamant and kill her beloved child. (Deng, 1972, p. 11)

This book is Deng's modern, immortal, offering to his sister in the world of the spirits. Like Elias, Deng embraces the myth but tries to circumvent in by this modern device of worldly immortalization. It is another way of reconciling re-appropriating myth for modernity. In affirming Dinka myths and showing them to be compatible with both Christianity and modern science, Deng is defending and re-affirming Dinka identity. By attacking the very modern "myth" of distinct Arab and African identities through demonstrating how conceivable that the identities in question could be reversed without those espousing them even noticing, he again defends Dinka pride and identity against what he sees to be the condescension of Muslim Arabs from the North. Thus both modernity and myth are enlisted in the defence of authentic African identity.

3. MYTHICALLY MODERNIZING WAD-HAMID

In Salih's first work, the short story "Domat Wad-Hāmid", the doum tree symbolises the struggle of the village people to protect their traditional values against the alien forces of change, which threaten their community's identity and established norms. Here, the sacred tree, which represents the Sufi side of the village tradition, is the weapon which the villagers, use to fight, or at least scare away, the alien influences of modernisation. Like most villages in Northern Sudan, Wad-Hāmid, carried the name of its saint and founder, reputed to have lived a pious life, and to possess the gift of miracle making. No one planted the tree, it just came into being. The people swear by its healing powers and blessings that is no surprise, as under the doum tree, Wad-Hamid, the patron saint of the village was buried. He came from an unknown place.

He was one of God's holy saints...He called upon God to deliver him [from his cruel master] and a voice told him to spread his prayer-mat on the water...the prayer mat put him down at the place where the doum tree is now and which used to be a wasteland. (Salih, 1969, p.14)

Even after his death, he continued to look after his people. Stories about his *karamat* (miracles) are numerous. Sick people see him in their dreams, blessing them, in the morning they would be totally cured. The doum-tree and its patron saint was ever-present in the villagers' dreams. A villager had a terrifying dream in which she was in danger of drowning.

I was filled with terror and called out at the top of my voice “O Wad-Hamid” as I looked I saw a man with a radiant face and a thick white beard flowing down over his chest, dressed in spotless white and holding a string of amber prayer beads. Placing his hand on my brow, he said: “Be not afraid!” And I was calmed...I looked to my left and saw fields of ripe corn, water-wheels turning and cattle grazing, and on the shore stood the doum tree of Wad-Hamid. (Salih, 1969, pp.7-8)

Then she saw Wad-Hamid, who handed her a doum fruit to eat. A learned man told her that she was going to suffer a serious illness, and Wad-Hamid would come to her aid. She was advised to make a sacrifice under the tree. Another woman tells a similar story:

I was under the doum tree, with hardly sufficient strength to stand up, and called up at the top of my voice: “O Wad-Hamid, I have come to you to seek refuge and protection. I shall sleep here at your tomb and under your doum-tree, either you let me die or you restore me to life; I shall not leave here until one of these two things happens. (Salih, 1969, p.11)

As expected of him, the saint delivered. He came to her in a dream; she heard a recitation of the Quran, saw a sharp bright light and the doum-tree prostrating itself in worship. An old man, with a long beard and immaculate white attire approached her, smiling. He struck me on the head with his string of prayer beads and called out ‘Arise!’ And of course, she was cured and lived to tell the tale (Salih, 1969, p.13).

When representatives of the government visit the village and choose a site for a much needed water pump and a port for the steamer under the doum-tree, the usually docile villagers revolt. Their shouts of protest were echoed throughout the country, “perhaps because in every village in the country there is some monument like the doum tree of Wad Hamid which people see in their dreams.” The protests caused the government to fall. The villagers did not only win their fight to keep their sacred tree, but they change the country as a whole. “The doum tree of Wad-Hamid has become the symbol of the nation’s awakening” (Salih, 1969, p.18).

The story affirms the tradition as the foundation for national identity, with the components and healing powers of Sufism, group solidarity and mythical traditions of the people. Modernization is not totally rejected, but it has to take second place and accept the terms of the community. According to Salih, modernization would be embraced by those with “alien souls”, the generation which would be less attached to the village tradition

When the narrator was asked when the village community would change its traditional ways he replied: “When people go to sleep and don’t see the doum tree in their dreams.”

My son is in the town studying at school. It wasn’t I who put him there; he ran away and went there on his own...When my son’s son passes out of school and the number of young men with souls foreign to our own increases, then perhaps the water-pump will be set up and the agricultural scheme brought into

being- may be then the steamer will stop at our village – under the doum-tree of Wad-Hamid. (Salih, 1969, p.19)

The reconciliation between tradition and modernity in Northern Sudan, as in Dinka land, according to both Salih and Deng starts with schools and a degree of distancing but not total uprootedness from tradition.

In Salih’s first novel, *The Wedding of Zein*, modernisation is depicted as having won without upsetting the traditional ways. Sheikh al-Hanīn who frequents the village, dispensing wisdom and performing miracles, was a revered saint, reputed to have been present in two places at the same time, and whose prayers for the people of Wad-Hamid were always answered. He befriended Zein the village fool, who he called *almabrook* (the blessed one). His prophecy for Zein to marry the “best girl in the village” came true, and he married the enigmatic and assertive Ni’ma, to the surprise of the whole village, especially the many prominent men who tried to win her over but failed. The village came to prosper in the “year of al-Hanīn” as a result of a long prayer for them, the last one the sheikh made before his death, reminiscent of that of Prophet Abraham’s prayer for the people of Mecca.

Here the route for modernity came through mythical tradition and as a direct outcome of it. Following al-Hanīn’s final prayer, an exceptional harvest signalled unprecedented prosperity, and many modern comforts and installations came to the village, including a big modern hospital and a secondary school in the village. The steamer port was finally built, and a modern agricultural scheme was also established. An army camp was set up near the village, creating job opportunities for the villagers and providing a market for the village produce. Taking modernity a step further, the people of Wad-Hamid joined the international economy as cotton traders, and continued to prosper beyond their wildest dreams. And all that was a result of al-Hanīn’s invocations. They were lucky to be able to keep their values intact, celebrate their cultural identity and as an added bonus, step into modernity in big leaps. Salih seems to have found a new way of incorporating modernization without sacrificing authenticity and true identity, without the need to become “alien in soul”. However, as Salih told an interviewer, there is always a price to pay for modernization.

We live in a rapidly changing world, and by hanging on to civilise ways of life we benefit a lot, but we also lose a lot. This is the dilemma the Sudan faces when confronted by all these ideas of civilisation and change. Of course we need the material side of things, but we often pay a very high price for it. (Al-Shūsh, 1973, p.43)

Salih’s use of the village rural community as the main stage of his work is a conscious endeavour to celebrate the Northern Sudanese identity and experience, and gradually introduce encroachment of modernization to the peaceful village by the Nile. For Salih, modernity can only find its legitimization through myth. He believes

this myth is a fundamental reality, and modernity is only sought as an enhancement. Sufism with its mythical narrative of *karamat* (miracles) and *barakat* (blessings) holds the fabric of the society together, and is ultimately an endless source of happiness. He acknowledges that change is inevitable in societies but he warns against the chaos which might result of alien influences which modernization is sure to introduce

Like Deng, Salih is preoccupied with the broader theme of the disruption of traditional ways of life by the forces of modernisation, and the fight for cultural survival by traditional communities threatened by forces beyond their control. We find this in his treatment of the response of traditional society to change, the power struggle within the village community and around it and the role of women in traditional society. These themes had been, and continue to be, a major preoccupation of most modern Arab and African writers. Issues about colonialism and its effect on traditional communities, cultural identity and social values dominate the literature of the region. The work of Salih echoes this wave in contemporary literature, treating themes that have dominated modern Arabic fiction and literature, and also postcolonial literature in general. Waging the equivalent of the liberation struggle in literature, postcolonial writers have laboured to counter the “orientalist-hegemonistic” perceptions promoted within and by dominant imperial cultures which tend to treat peripheral communities as if they had no history or culture, but were an addendum of the dominant metropole and the object of its cultural hegemony (Parker & Starkey, 1995; Boehmer, 1998; Said, 1993).

In spite of some ambivalence towards modernity, Salih usually comes out more strongly on the side of tradition. In his treatment, he demonstrates the resilience of traditional society in the face of the challenge of modernisation. At the same time the imbalance of the few individuals who have succumbed to the temptation of the west is examined against the background of the dignity and relative stability of the traditional village (Muhammadiya, 1984, pp.129-30).

4. COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Both writers seem to be on a quest of self discovery and identity affirmation. Each of them tries in his work to depict, examine and shape the identity of the land according to a different perspective. The tools they used for this quest of identity affirmation, however, are almost identical.

Deng’s mission in *Cry of the Owl* was to prove wrong the established myth about the collective Sudanese identity. He sees the acceptance and celebration of cultural diversity as a source of enrichment for the concept of nation building. As Salih did, Deng utilized local myths to assert the personal and collective identity of his people. Elaborating on mythical practices and rituals, he points to

their effectiveness in treating many physical and spiritual ailments of the society.

For Salih, however, the task was not as challenging. He was not fighting the same identity battles on several fronts; on the contrary, he was in total harmony with the perception of identity he always maintained, as an Arab Muslim from Northern Sudan. What he wanted to assert was the mythical, Sufi element as a unique and most valid component of that identity. This view is clearly evident in his choice of Sufi religious myth as an arbiter in conflict resolution within the local and national community. In *Wedding of Zein*, Salih’s dream for a harmonious, tolerant, and accommodating Sudan was made possible through the prayer and blessings of sheikh al-Hanin. All the people of Wad-Hamid and neighbouring villages came together in a carnival-like celebration, young and old, rich and poor, even the imam, who represented institutionalized religion and did not fit well in the community, the ex-slaves of the *waha* (oasis) quarter on the periphery of the village and rarely mixed with its inhabitants...they all came on a mission of love, tolerance and celebration.

Both Deng and Salih seem to be in agreement that modernization comes at a price, and they are warning against sacrificing tradition to gain modernity. In the meantime, they both belong to the generation of Sudanese who received western education and are living and working in the west and being part of its modern culture and society. Among the two, however, it is Salih who is more suspicious of the West and modernity. This attitude manifests itself most graphically in *Season*, where the main character, Mustafa Saeed, has travelled to the West at a young age, sponsored by a Christian missionary and his wife. He excels in his studies and becomes a renowned economist, teaching at Oxford. However, he was a cynical person who lacked compassion or ethical commitment, in both his profession and private life. He was a reckless womanizer who drove many of his lovers to suicide, and eventually murdered Jean Morris, the only woman who proved his match, and became his wife, but never surrendered to him. After serving his jail term, he comes to Wad Hamid disguised as a traditional farmer, marries a local woman who bears for his two children.

One his cover is blown, he tells his story to the unnamed narrator, himself a graduate of British universities, but a more balanced and integrated person, and then disappears presumed dead. His widow commits suicide after killing the man she was forced to marry. The “modernized” man who caused havoc in the West also brings death and destruction to the peaceful sleepy village by the Nile. Modernity suddenly does not look so attractive.

CONCLUSION

The presumed contrast between myth and modernity is problematic for the very fact that the concept of “myth”

is itself a creation of modernity, and given that there is a strong sense in which “the very idea of the modern might itself be a willed illusion_ or a myth.”

Modernity has always understood itself either as an effort to live without or after myth, or as an effort to recover the lost wholeness of myth... The larger truth may be that there is no myth before modernity, since modernity always invents myth, and in the process of inventing its relation to myth, invents itself. There must be myth in order for there to be the modernity that spurns or mourns it. (Connor, 2004, p. 267)

In the work of our two authors, this intense interaction between myth and modernity takes a very conscious form. Both authors are thoroughly modern and fully integrated in the West where they had chosen to live. But both have been infected with the “myth” of nationalism and had been engaged in a struggle to recover what they regarded as a “lost homeland” and threatened identity.

Each of the two authors has been engaged in almost identical projects of immortalizing this fictional homeland, imagined as a pristine village, with deep roots in an authentic cultural heritage which had stood its ground against successive assaults from hostile external sources. The myth of this distinctive and authentic identity is bolstered by appeal to, and reconstruction of ancient and modern myths which underpin this identity. In this context, myth manifests itself as ideology in almost explicit form, as it is consciously deployed within the context of an ideological struggle. Bell, 1997: 226). We also encounter here the Modernist tendency where myth is “often invoked to signify the mythic power of invocation” and “to evoke the power of myth itself to form and persist amid change” (Connor, 2004: 259). But if nations, as Benedict Anderson has famously argued, are imagined communities, in his whose creation fiction and myth play a central role (Anderson, 1991), then it is fair that the endeavours of our two authors show the limit of imagination. They also highlight the limits of modernity.

If to be modern is to be cut off from, or to yearn to be, mythical or mythopoetic, then perhaps, as Bruno Latour suggests, we can never really have been modern... The loss and regaining of myth is the great founding, tragic, reparative myth of the modern. For the same reason that we never were truly modern, we have never been, nor ever could be, ‘mythic’. Perhaps we can only ever be, as we have always been (but differently), between worlds, between times. (Connor, 2004, p. 267)

Our two authors, like the communities they claim to speak for, continue to thus hover between imagined

worlds, and to collide and then part ways in the mythical, as well in the actual, space.

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