

Speculative Epistemologies of Resistance in *Hombres de maíz* and *Bandarshah*

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Haifa S. Alfaisal,
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Abstract: In his two-part "The literary history of world-systems" Matthew Eatough utilizes world systems theory to examine literary studies. He makes use of Baucom's "speculative epistemologies" to explore the connection between the global economy speculative financial instruments and the rise of the novel in 18th century. But Eatough is interested in tracing the history of literary studies and world systems theory. In this paper, I use speculative epistemologies to indicate ways of knowing that are speculated in fiction. My starting point is the decolonial critique of world system theory, which I use to formulate border reading; a reading strategy that is attentive to indigenous epistemologies. I apply this reading to two entirely different to two works of fiction that have nothing in common save for their articulation of indigenous epistemologies from two entirely unrelated epistemic terrains, two entirely different colonial experiences, and two separate geocultures within the world literary system. Miguel Ángel Asturias' *Hombres de maíz* (Men of Maize) and Al-Tayyib Salih's *Bandarshah* present viable speculative epistemologies that are profoundly engaged with their respective political contexts Their speculative epistemologies are contextually grounded in the very real experiences of the postcolonial condition in Guatemala (1940s) and Sudan (1960s).

Haifa S. ALFAISAL

Speculative Epistemologies of Resistance in *Hombres de maíz* and *Bandarshah*

Introduction

In his two-part "The literary history of world-systems" Eatough utilizes world systems theory to examine literary studies. In this essay he makes use of Baucom's "speculative epistemologies" to explore "how literary culture may help to dictate the global economy's booms and bust cycles, or how it may help to determine the ultimate form the world-system takes after structural crises" (Eatough 612). Eatough's starting point is the rise of the novel and its relation to world system theory. He traces the genealogy of literary studies back to the anti-rationalist placement of the literary within Snow's two cultures paradigm, which he reads as an "anti-system" gesture. Hence the problematics of placing literary study within world *system* theory. Instead of following this line of inquiry, I would like to propose developing an understanding of the literary as a viable locus for imagining epistemic alternatives to the rationality/coloniality cultural complex of Eurocentric knowledge.¹ In so doing I rely on the decolonial critique of world system theory.

When it comes to the particular conceptualization of the term "speculative epistemologies" Eatough stresses Baucom's ideas regarding the rise of the novel in the 18th century and its connection to the rise of the middle class. When the middle class is placed "within a broader world-system, the novel begins to look more like a response to risk, insecurity, and underdeveloped markets than to socioeconomic strength" (Eatough 607). The novel made possible "in fiction what the middle class could not do in fact: it 'simulated' public sentiments within fiction, providing a way for American merchants to imagine themselves as part of a transatlantic public sphere" and "helped British businessmen to imagine that 'speculative' values, like fictional characters, might possess an existence that was neither tied to a physical referent nor inherently 'false'... Such 'speculative epistemologies' made it possible for British capitalism to discover insurance, a type of 'fictional' capital that monetized insecurity and made it into a positive value, thus protecting investors from loss" (608).²

By the same token, can it not be said that representations of indigenous epistemologies are likewise speculative? What I am essentially proposing is to shift the emphasis in the term "speculative epistemologies" from "speculative" to "epistemologies," instead, as the central signifier, and to relegate to "speculative" a descriptive and functional value, so that speculative epistemologies means epistemologies that are speculated in fiction. Instead of examining speculative epistemologies as signaling the involvement of fiction in the speculative logic of finance capital I use the term to read fiction for what it knows; for its countering of the rationality cultural complex. In other words I would like to "border-read":

Border reading makes reading literary narratives a subversion of Eurocentric differential values, as well as of cultural grammar and its attendant grid of research techniques and ethics. It is a practice that is profoundly invested in the critique of coloniality and is specifically attentive to indigenous knowledge. This is how it resists the co-optative projection of global designs. To avoid reinscribing colonizing forms of knowledge in postcolonial critical practice means to abandon the superior episteme, to accept the confluence of epistemes in the critical practices of reading, to adopt a self-conscious understanding of disciplinary epistemological conditioning, and to apply methods of analysis that do not co-opt the indigenous episteme. (Alfaisal, "Border" 49-50)

Like Eatough, my focus is the world literary system. However, my starting point is the decolonial critique of world systems theory, primarily Mignolo's formulations of the modernity/coloniality rationality cultural complex in *Local Histories/Global Designs*. Decolonial critics have yet to develop ideas about the decolonial potential of the literary. Mignolo all too briefly suggested that "when 'literary narratives' are also taken as theories in their own right, the distinction between the location of theoretical and cultural

¹ The rationality cultural complex underpins Eurocentric constructions of knowledge. This complex operates by fabricating a subject-object relationship in the construction of knowledge wherein the reason-bearing white European male subject knows the, essentially and naturally, reason-deprived object who is also external to the subject. This cultural complex is projected as a universal, but always hierarchical, criterion of legitimacy in knowledge construction. The idea that rationality, reason, and the knowing subject are contextual and relational is not within the purview of this rationality cultural complex. It was first elaborated by Aníbal Quijano (1992) in *Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad*, in which he describes the way in "which the European paradigm of rational knowledge was elaborated" (Quijano 172)

² Here he combines insights from Shapiro, Gallagher and Baucom.

production begins to crumble" (Mignolo 114). This idea emerges from Mignolo's interpretation of Pletsch's distribution of social scientific labor as "an epistemological distribution of labor" (112). He reads postcolonial thinking as an attempt to displace "the locus of theoretical enunciation from the First to the Third World" (112). Elsewhere, I have taken postcolonialism to task for marginalizing indigenous epistemologies, which I read as symptomatic of its own Eurocentric epistemic genealogy (Alfaisal, "Indigenous" 24-40). Postcolonialism maintains the epistemological division of labor wherein third world intellectuals working from first world epistemologies and locating their politics on the peripheries of the colonial world order, participate in the marketing of the margins. Failing the litmus test of indigeneity is a symptom of a Eurocentric way of knowing the other that migrates to the most attentive world reading strategies, as argued in earlier work (Alfaisal, "World" 199-226).

My contribution begins from the intersection of world reading strategies and marginalization of indigenous epistemologies. Reading practices determine many of the formative issues involved in the construction of literary knowledge, in processes of production and circulation, in theories of the literary, in the globalization of literary studies, in the co-optative mechanisms embedded in academic production, in the market logic of literary production, and in the globalizing design of the world literary space, to name a few. Scrutinizing the Eurocentrism of reading practices led to the above mentioned border-reading, as a decolonial reading strategy, which is based on Mignolo's border gnosis, or "knowledge from a subaltern perspective" (Mignolo 11).³ In the current undertaking I apply this strategy to two works of fiction that have nothing in common save for their articulation of indigenous epistemologies from two entirely unrelated epistemic terrains, two entirely different colonial experiences, and two separate geocultures within the world literary system; that is two distinct global literary market spheres, the Latin American Boom market and the North/African/West/African literary markets. As argued elsewhere (Alfaisal, *Religious* 234-260), magic realism, insofar as it is used as a descriptive term for indigenous epistemologies, is a potent disarming and exoticizing label that obscures the value of indigenous ways of knowing. I take the facile labelling of these works as magical realist as symptomatic of the sedimentation of coloniality in literary practices and as a testament to the label's savory cachet that perpetuates its packaging of consumable otherness to a ravenous global literary marketplace. The label has been periodically revisited, much interrogated, but never satisfactorily identified as meaning, mode or methodology. Rather than treat magical realism as a genre, mode, style, or worldview, I read it as a category that is symptomatic of a failure to theorize the literary as a border gnosis, and its endurance as testament to a failure in literary criticism to resist the logic of the world literary market and its globalized, Eurocentric reading strategies. That said, this article will not partake in yet another interrogation of the term, but will instead demonstrate how Miguel Ángel Asturias' *Hombres de maíz* (Men of Maize) and Al-Tayyib Salih's *Bandarshah* present viable speculative epistemologies that are profoundly engaged with their respective political contexts and, indeed, offer a response to the coloniality/modernity complex. Both works undertake a thoughtful critique of the colonial logic from the within a border gnosis. Their speculative epistemologies are contextually grounded in the very real experiences of the postcolonial condition in Guatemala (1940s) and Sudan (1960s). Both novels have virtually nothing in common, save for their strikingly similar articulations of indigenous anti-materialist counter-colonial discourses that echo quite resoundingly with their political environments.

***Hombres de maíz's* Speculative Epistemology⁴**

Miguel Ángel Asturias (1899–1974) completed his *Hombres de maíz* during Guatemala's "ten years of spring"⁵ under the presidencies of Juan José Arévalo (1945–1951) and Jacobo Árbenz (1951–1954). A formidable defense of the Mayan way of knowing, *Hombres* is difficult to understand. The seven chapters of the novel—"Gaspar Ilóm," "Machojón," "The Deer of the Seventh Fire," "Colonel Chalo Godoy," "María Tecún," "Coyote Postman," and an epilogue—seem disconnected, as do the novel's two parts. The first deals with the Ilóm Indian community's rebellion and the tragic demise of its leader, Gaspar Ilóm, at the hand of Colonel Godoy and the *maiceros* (maize growers), and the second concerns the journeys of Goyo Yic—a blind peasant in search of his runaway wife, María Tecún—and Nicho Aquino, a postman who mistakenly believes his wife to have run away as well. The tales are infused with various anecdotes

³ "'Border gnosis' is the subaltern reason striving to bring to the foreground the force and creativity of knowledges subalternized during a long process of colonization of the planet, which was at the same time the process in which modernity and the modern Reason were constructed" (Mignolo 13). It is to think "from dichotomous concepts rather than ordering the world in dichotomies" (85).

⁴ See Eatough (610), for a reading of Baucom's speculative epistemologies and fiction.

⁵ Brought to a premature winter by the U.S.-owned United Fruit Company and CIA's overthrow of Árbenz, followed by a 37-year civil war and brutal dictatorships.

and mythic references that present a scathing critique of materialism.⁶ Although the novel follows a general structure based on modes of production—the tribal phase in chapter one, the feudal-colonial in the middle revenge parts, and capitalist neocolonialism in the last chapters and epilogue—without reading the episteme, the connection between these phases and the novel's continuities with Mayan mythology remain elusive.

Read conventionally—by exploring plot, theme, narrative devices, and so on—*Hombres* is a disjunctive narrative of an Indian community that is destroyed by the *ladino*⁷ *maiceros'* sacrilegious capitalist exploitation of the sacred grain of maize. The resultant transitional Indian community is impotent and dissociated from the tribe's way of life. It is followed by the severely impoverished peasant community of Goyo and his family, who in the epilogue metamorphose into ants. Not surprisingly, critical perspectives have likewise been disjunctive, with some critics preferring to focus on the theme of resistance and struggle, while others have opted for a dizzying analysis of Asturias's use of mythological references.⁸ Nelson González-Ortega's "Amerindian and European Narratives in Interaction," discussed below, is a rare exception, as it explores the use of the Mayan perspective in the narrative.

The argument made here is that only when the novel is read epistemically⁹ for what it "knows"—as Asturias scholar Martin (xxiii), who wrote the vital introductory notes to the novel, fleetingly suggests—does *Hombres* make sense and the narrative fragmentation disappear. Asturias, I show, presents his very own speculative epistemology that is continuous with Mayan prototexts. *Hombres* knows that the *maicero* capitalist logic and ethos need to be rejected because "the maize impoverishes the earth and makes no one rich. . . . Sown to be eaten it is the sacred sustenance of the men who were made of maize. Sown to make money it means famine for the men who were made of maize" (11). The novel also knows that the relationship with the land is vital; it is described as being "umbilical" (7). It knows that the *tecuna* is the emblem of lost identity and that the *nahual*¹⁰ is a highly functional principle. And it knows that *sueño* (sleep/dream) is generative and *is* reality, whereas wakefulness produces stagnation and ruin (8).

Asturias's own mythification is based on emulating the process of mythification in Mayan sacred texts through literal, structural, and cognitive parallels with the originals.¹¹ He then initiates his own textual mythology, whose frame of reference is the novel itself, as in the myth of *tecuna* and ultimately in the inauguration of Goyo and his family as the new ants/men of maize. He employs a modified form of surrealist automatic writing throughout to access and represent indigenous ways of thinking and knowing¹² —not to simply cast a "linguistic spell" as Dorfman would have it (Dorfman 2). This epistemology is then used to resist the *ladino* episteme, wherein maize is cultivated for profit, land is scorched and depleted of its fecundity, and Indian beliefs, such as the *nahual*, are regarded as a "bunch of lies, the work of the devil" (Asturias 166).¹³ The indigenous epistemology is then extended, weblike, throughout the entire narrative.

Read epistemically, the novel begins with the rebellion of Gaspar Ilóm, who harnesses the power of

⁶ Echoes of this anti-materialist response to U.S. imperialism exist in Arévalo's "spiritual socialism"—an unlikely combination of Catholicism, socialism, modernism, and traces of indigenous sacrificial rites (See Handy 23-27 for more on spiritual socialism).

⁷ *Ladino* evolved from signifying Spanish-speaking acculturated Indians, to mixed race, and finally to "all who could not be considered Indian" (Grandin 84), thus making it a signifier of "epistemic and colonial difference" (Arias 2).

⁸ Gerald Martin, René Prieto, and Gordon Brotherston have tended to focus on the mythological aspects dissociating the novel from the very potent theme of war and conflict that animates it. Martin claims that the ritualistic repetition of the phrase "the war goes on" refers to "the cosmic war which is the eternal battle against the cold and the darkness" (Asturias 338). More relevant, however, is the war between the *maiceros* and the Indians. Prieto, who traces the character of María Tecún to the legendary wife of the Quiché leader Tecún Umán—whose actual existence is subject to debate, but who is said to have been defeated in hand-to-hand combat by Pedro de Alvarado—prefers to read *tecuna* in Asturias's novel as a reflection of the author's problematic relationship with women and feminine sexuality (111). Brotherston, too, believes that the mythology and resistance are separate and that the intermingling of "colonial baroque" and Indian perceptions engenders its magic realism (91).

⁹ For more on the theoretical basis of border/epistemic reading, see (Alfaisal, "World" 200-202) and (Alfaisal, "Border" 2017).

¹⁰ An animal double that enables characters to move "from one place to another in a sigh" (Asturias, 57).

¹¹ Asturias compared himself as an artist with the Mayan gods (Alvarez & Asturias 202). Examples of his literal adaptation are abundant in the first chapter describing in great detail preparations for the Indian feast (19–22). His appropriation of Mayan mythology has been extensively explored by Martin and Prieto.

¹² Asturias resorts to a journalistic style of writing when representing *ladinos*. Although much has been made of Asturias's association with surrealism, it has rarely been scrutinized.

¹³ So says Don Deferic, a German magnate and a humanist who although sympathetic to the Indians, cannot abide their "mythomania" (Asturias 244).

the river to wash away the poison he ingested at the hands of the Indian traitors, the Machojóns, who colluded with Colonel Godoy and the *maiceros*. The power of nature and the mythology that sustains it become the prime actors in the formidable seven-year revenge cycle that follows Gaspar's demise. Although Gaspar—upon realizing that his tribe has been massacred and that his wife, along with their son, has abandoned him—commits suicide by drowning in the very waters that gave him life, this is not a defeat. For the source of power in the novel is the indigenous order,¹⁴ not the individuals. This order, through the firefly wizards, is merciless in its revenge, destroying those who, knowingly and unknowingly, participate in Gaspar's end. This order's instruments and principles—the firefly wizards, the yellow rabbits, the *amate* flower, the *tecuna*, the Deer of the Seventh Fire, and the *nahual*—engender the new men of maize, Goyo and his family. Created by and for Asturias's speculative epistemology, the new men of maize are based on a negation of colonial logic and ethos. Capitalist modes of production and their attendant materialist ethos and Christian worldview are now themselves cast as "the work of the devil" (Asturias 166, 297).¹⁵

There is still the problem of recuperating indigenous identity. The inner conflict generated by the defeat of Gaspar must be overcome. In order to do so it is necessary for Indians to believe, against common sense, that the curer and his animal *nahual*, the Deer of the Seventh-Fire are one and the same; it is to drink the rainwater, the bearer of nostalgia, and to "dream of greens they have never seen, journeys they have never made, and paradises they have had and lost" (Asturias 273). In other words, it is necessary to commune with nature, upon which Mayan religion is based. The burden of forging this link falls on the shoulders of Goyo, who has lost the sacred bond between himself and nature. Nature's elements are a burden to him: he will "snap beneath the weight of the sky, air, clouds, stars, birds," and the "clarity of the moon, to him it was heat" (103). His blindness to the fireflies signifies a loss of internal vision and hope.¹⁶ Instead of reconnecting with nature—that is, regaining his inner vision—he undertakes an excruciatingly painful procedure to remove the membrane covering his eyes. However, outer vision is useless in leading him to his runaway wife, emblem of Indian identity.

The connection between the female and Indian identity in *Hombres* is both highly developed and well established.¹⁷ The *tecuna*, who is "every woman who runs away" (154), is the myth that grounds the mythology of the novel itself. It is the central element that connects all of the novel's parts. The archetypal *tecuna* is Piojosa Grande, Gaspar's wife, who, sensing his defeat, abandons him. The myth that is based on the archetype is María Tecún, who abandons the alienated Goyo. Her mythic status is guaranteed when Asturias dedicates the rock of María Tecún to her; an emblem of lost Indian identity (209).¹⁸

In order to fully relate to the indigenous order, Goyo needs the mediation of Nicho, who having completed his journey of initiation into the indigenous order,¹⁹ is the only character who could have physically transported María to her husband. Nicho operates the boat by which María, who has no idea who Nicho is, is about to discover that Goyo is in the very same prison in which her son is incarcerated. This long-awaited reunion with her husband is, thus, orchestrated by the indigenous order that controls the concluding events in the novel. unbeknownst to the three of them, but orchestrated by the indigenous order. As mediator of this order, Nicho, with the help of his animal *nahual*, guarantees the extension of the indigenous epistemology into the lives of the future men of maize. Liberation, Nicho explains, is what connects the *tecuna* and her man (269). In the typology of Asturias's mythology, Goyo is the counterpart to Gaspar and Nicho Aquino takes the place of the firefly wizards, while the notion of dream/sleep as reality is replaced by the concept of internal vision, which in turn becomes the new battleground. What Godoy could not eradicate in Gaspar—the power of his thought—is the last

¹⁴ I use "order" to indicate the set of cognitive and epistemic tools used within a particular worldview.

¹⁵ Goyo uses this phrase to describe his trade fiasco.

¹⁶ "If only Goyo Yic could have seen just one of those small greenish lights, the color of hope" (104).

¹⁷ During Nicho's journey of initiation he descends into the underworld, to the Indian paradise called Painted House. Here Asturias describes the earth as the "most Indian of Indian women" (272). This association between indigeneity and women explains the significance of the prison regulations that declare "IT IS FORBIDDEN TO TALK ABOUT WOMEN" (289).

¹⁸ Martin claims Asturias adapts this concept from Mayan mythology: gods become petrified into stone and can only be accessed through the medium of priests (Asturias 322).

¹⁹ Nicho's guide into the underworld tells him to "stretch the fabric" of his sleep and teaches him that "everything will end up impoverished ... if we keep sowing maize to make a business of it, as though it weren't sacred, highly sacred" (192).

stronghold for the indigenous order.²⁰ The opposing elements in the internal battle are Goyo's mercantilist spirit, acquired from the *ladino* order, and his true Indian identity, represented by his wife. Finally united, the Yics become the new gods: "All became ants after the harvest, to carry home the maize: ants, ants, ants" (306).²¹ They are no longer the "puppets" to whom "all that is left is the outside" (273). Drink, gambling, and domestic strife are effects of the colonial apparatus. Work is the new ethos:

Those that want to clothe their families work: only work clothes, not only families, whole countries. Only idlers go naked. They idle once the maizefield is sown, and they strip the maizefield to eat, to sell, to clothe their families, buy the medicines they need, and even entertainments with music and liquor. If they planted maize, and ate of it, like the forefathers, and worked, it would be a different story. (193)

Goyo and María become the founders of postcolonial Guatemala, and their mythology, the mythology of the text itself, is Asturias's theorization of epistemic resistance.

Dichotomizing the Episteme

Once the connection between mythification and anti-colonial resistance in Asturias's act of epistemic recovery is dichotomized into real and magical, the entire narrative is depoliticized and his incorporation of Indian myths rendered nothing more than a token gesture toward a precolonial past. González-Ortega avoids dichotomizing Asturias's novel, because he realizes that Asturias "imposes in his novel the perspective of the Mayans" (González-Ortega 67). But he argues that this is because Asturias refers "intertextually in his novel's title (*Hombres de maíz*) to a central theme of *Popol Vuh*," gives "Mayan Indians central roles as protagonists," and allows "the indigenous beliefs to occupy most of the narration" (67). He does not consider this an epistemological act but a textual one. What he reads as intertextuality, according to my reading, is in essence an epistemic continuity. Similarly Asturias's use of *nahual* "from the ancient Mayan myths" is more than "a topic and a narrative device" utilized in order to recreate "the perception of magic articulated in *Popol Vuh*" (74). It is also not how Asturias "invented *realismo mágico*, both as a modernist literary technique and as a style of literary resistance to Western cultural hegemony" (74). As the border reading shows, what González-Ortega presents as a logical transition from *nahualismo* to resistance via magical realism is not accurate. The *nahual* actually operates as part and parcel of an epistemic arsenal unleashed against the colonial apparatus. It is operative in terms of plot development and is presented as factual.

The significance of Asturias's speculative epistemology becomes apparent when placed in its geocultural context. During Asturias' life there were several political discourses vying for power in Guatemala; the positivist philosophy of the liberal regime, communist ideology, and perhaps most relevant for this study, the anti-materialism of Arévalo's spiritual socialism. What Asturias imagines as a viable anti-colonial indigenous alternative political order, is based on an epistemology that is developed from Mayan ways of knowing, is a native anti-materialism, and presents a perspective on land cultivation that is fundamentally at odds with that of U.S. imperialism.

Exploitation of land and labor fueled U.S. imperialism²² in Guatemala and lined the pockets of the ruling ladino elites and their native accomplices. This was the case during the era of the liberal positivism of Justo Rufino Barrios (1873–85), and of his successor Jorge Ubico (1931–44). In practical terms this entailed the replacement of maize cultivation with that of coffee. The Verapazes, a region with a substantial history of Indian resistance and where Asturias first came into contact with Indians, was one of the first to suffer the most immediate effects of these changes (Grandin 112). There were significant contradictions between the concessions granted to U.S. businesses and the brutal labor regulations²³ which Cardoso calls the "great contradiction of Central American liberalism" (216), but which is in essence a function of the coloniality of modernity. Indian elites resisted the threat of the privatization of land by developing relying "on new ideologies surrounding land relations—including new forest codes—to regulate land use" (Grandin 154). Outright rebellion ensued in 1877 against land reforms. The leader of the rebellion, Gaspar Hijom (Gaspar Ilóm's prototype), fought against the ladinos who were acting on the liberal land reforms that granted private ownership to what were previously Indian communal lands (Brotherston, "Gaspar Ilóm" 593). That Asturias should, half a century later, use this

²⁰ The colonel says that to defeat Gaspar he had to "put out" his thoughts, the power of which he witnessed when "once I saw him uproot a hog-plum tree, just by standing and looking at it, the work of his thought of his strength, and take hold of it like a broom to sweep all my men away" (74).

²¹ The ant, Martin notes, is a Mayan symbol (Asturias 382).

²² The case of the U.S.-owned United Fruit Company (UFCO) is infamous in Guatemalan history due to the company's instrumentality in the U.S. Imperial program

²³ I refer in particular to forced labor instruments such as the *mandamientos*.

act of rebellion as the foundation for his narrative, and that he should use it to construct his own mythology speaks to the political import of his speculative epistemology. Asturias unearths another emblem of resistance when he uses the concept of the *tecuna*, whose probable historical prototype is the wife of Quiché leader Tecún Umán whose legendary resistance to the advances of Spanish conquistador, Pedro de Alvarado, is subject to debate.²⁴ Perhaps most striking, however, is how Asturias's speculative epistemology resonates with the 1995 "Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples" between the Guatemalan Government and the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity), of which Asturias's son—who adopted the name Gaspar Ilóm—was a member (See Brotherston 305). The agreement stipulates respect for and recognition of the Mayan identity defined by ancestry, language, and a worldview that is based on "the harmonious relationship of all elements of the universe, in which the human being is only one additional element, in which the earth is the mother who gives life and maize is a sacred symbol around which Mayan culture revolves" (United Nations).²⁵ Naturally, it is difficult to prove an irrevocable link between the novel and this agreement, but the coincidences are also impossible to ignore.

Asturias' speculative epistemology, which he drew from indigenous ways of knowing, also needs to be situated within the context of the program for the national integration of the Indians which continued to pose challenges to the political order in Guatemala. The Revolution of 1944 saw the institutionalization of Indian integration in national life, or *indigenismo*; a program that resonates strongly with Asturias's novel. Furthermore, that Asturias should emphasize the anti-materialist aspect of indigenous ways of knowing is very much in line with Arévalo's response to the excesses of the liberal era in Guatemala; his "spiritual socialism."²⁶ Arévalo, who came to power on the heels of what is referred to as the students' revolution, demanded egalitarianism, modernization, support for labor and peasant movements, and *indigenismo* (Woodward 228). His spiritual socialism although obscure was essentially an attack on materialism and an appeal to what he believed was the inherent socialism of Guatemalan culture. However, unlike Asturias, Arévalo did not use Indian culture. Guatemalan national culture was, for him, Creole: "Nationalism is the same as saying: customs barriers, independent industry, protection of the native citizens, exaltation of Creole life; and, also just prices for raw materials produced inside the country, insistence on commercial equality, defense of our money, reciprocity, respect, dignity" (91–92). Asturias' appeal to indigenous knowledge as a border gnosis has no actual political equivalent; it was a speculative epistemology.

Bandarshah's Speculative Epistemology

Although Salih believed it to be his crowning achievement (Badawi 145), *Bandarshah* is the least celebrated of his novels.²⁷ His translator, Denys Johnson-Davies, found *Bandarshah* difficult to understand and translate (Johnson-Davies 1366–68). These two points are related and speak to the politics undergirding the reading strategies.²⁸

Written in two parts, *Bandarshah* relates the story of the village of Wad Hamid, Salih's microcosm of postcolonial northern Sudan. The first part, "Dau el-Beit," named after the mysterious stranger who suddenly appears in Wad Hamid, presents the village through the panoply of characters that populate it. They personify the different ideological trends and social groupings that colored the political canvas of northern Sudan: the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan), the *effendis*,²⁹ the traditionalists, and the Sufi saints.³⁰ The second part, "Meryoud"—named after Bandarshah's grandson—focuses on the narrator, Meheimeed's ultimately unsuccessful journey of return and re-integration into Wad Hamid society. Exactly who and what Bandarshah is remains uncertain throughout the novel, but his influence is destructive, nonetheless. Meheimeed, a retired *effendi*, returns to the village in search of truth. But conflict rages on all levels: intracommunal strife, Meheimeed's inner struggle to belong, and Bandarshah

²⁴ See FN 12. Tecún Uman's actual existence is subject to debate. The point here is that Asturias must have considered the legend noteworthy to have based the central character of María Tecún on its figure of resistance to the Spanish colonizers.

²⁵ On Mayan identity formations and resistance consult Wilson, Arias and Warren.

²⁶ "Catholicism, socialism, modernism, and even traces of indigenous sacrificial rites are uncomfortably gelled together in Arévalo's discourse" (Alfaisal, *Religious* 124)

²⁷ For an analysis of the different receptions given to *Season* and *Bandarshah* in terms of literary status see (Alfaisal, "World" 201-202)

²⁸ See Elizabeth Holt's exploration of the controversy surrounding authors who published in CIA-funded magazines, such as *Hiwar* (Dialog), whose September/December 1966 first published Salih's *Season*.

²⁹ Colonial government employees whose integration into the indigenous social fabric was disruptive. *Effendi* generally indicates a modern educated middle class Egyptian man.

³⁰ Elad-Bouskila's essay provides an analysis of the Salih's use of characters.

and Meryoud's legendary battle with Bandarshah's eleven, perhaps twelve, sons. These layers of conflict seem disconnected, offering little more than a series of vignettes of village life, unless read through the prism of local Sufi knowledge, which Salih uses as his reservoir of indigeneity and as the epistemic foundation for his own speculative epistemology.

Sufism is the mystical dimension of Islam; it is the inner spiritual theory and practice of Islam. Sufism has a long and varied history but in essence it is based on the principle that man is meant to return to the divine source through *dhikr*—making God present through repeated remembrance of him and utterance of His name. Various Sufi paths undertake different rites to conduct the greater jihad against the individualistic ego (*nafs*) to achieve its annihilation (*fanā'*) and a subsequent union with the divine. Salih uses a particular local hue of Sufism that emphasizes hagiography and saint worship and is vehemently opposed to the *ikhwānī* emphasis on the performance of religious rites to the detriment of the inner mystical meaning and purpose of religious practice. The measure of value is the well-being and harmony of the village community. The only time in the novel where this community is at peace is during the collective and mystical dawn prayers, to which they are all mysteriously called by dream or inspiration. This state of harmony is unsustainable because there is a demonic presence constantly enticing members of the community into greed, selfishness, and desire for worldly power. Bandarshah is that presence, and his power as an inverted divinity, a sufic antichrist, is such that he is able to exercise it in absentia, following the massacre that was inflicted upon him, his grandson and their entire retinue by his sons. For Salih, Bandarshah—literally king (*shah*) of the city (*bandar*)—is a paragon of worldly power that is always at odds with the otherworldly nature of an indigenous Sufi-based rural identity.³¹ Anyone who seeks worldly power becomes a "Bandarshah" (Salih 26). Salih's use of the Sufi episteme to represent Wad Hamid allows him to theorize, diagnose, and then offer a solution to the sectarianism that has plagued northern Sudan.³²

Salih's main problem is with the "homegrown rulers," Franz Fanon's national bourgeoisie; they are a "tough bunch," worse than the English because "the English he'd tell you off and say 'Get out.' Now the homegrown one gives you a kick up the backside" (Salih 52). The homegrowns have instigated several levels of conflict: between the *falāh* (farmer) and the *effendi*, between scripturalism (*shari'a*) and indigenous Sufism, and between the generations. Wad Hamid needs to be purged of this conflict; its inhabitants need to be dead to the call of the world, and this means being deaf to the call of Bandarshah. Meheimeed needs to return to his pre-*effendi* self, to the person he was before he succumbed to the will of his grandfather and left his beloved Maryam behind. The "truth" that he wants is the life of the *falāh*,³³ his indigenous self, not the self that desires power: "What a difference there is between searching for power and searching for truth," as Salih's mouthpiece, Meheimeed says (51). It is against the power-hungry Ikhwan, those of "the piety trade," who use the authority of religious dogma to impose their will (33), that Salih is most vitriolic. They are worse than the *effendis*, who are primarily interested in obtaining the highest bureaucratic position, and the communists whose socialist ideology Salih disparagingly dismisses as having created "an age of talk" (99). All, however, are the enemy within whose purging requires a greater jihad, one that is conducted against the individualistic, materialistic, and egoistic self of the power-hungry homegrowns.

A harmonious village exists in the collective memory; the Wad Hamid of Dau's days. Dau emerges from the Nile, and tests the convictions held by the indigenous inhabitants when he eventually asks for the hand of one of their daughters in marriage. Dau could not have been more different: he was clearly a Turkish subject, of an entirely different ethnicity; he was of unknown parentage; and he was a new convert. But his significance emerges when reading him as an incarnate of *fiṭra*, or primordial being—virtually sinless and devoid of egoism, and an amnesiac who is, nonetheless, filled with the memory of divine presence.³⁴ The villagers are depicted as living a life "of toil and austerity," but content with "the share that God has given" them. They "perform[ed] their prayers," safeguarded their honor, and stood "up to the vicissitudes of time and the batterings of fate." In short, they were "peaceful people in times of peace, angry people in times of anger" (66). Most importantly, they were "not fanatical on the question of religion" (67). This Sufi-tempered rural community exhibits no tribal or racial prejudices, but instead declares: "Brotherhood is one, not two, just as religion is one, not two" (70). Jubilations

³¹ According to Salih: "I believe that in the Arab world we suffer from two basic problems; the founding of the city and the establishment of its central authority" (Jibril 117).

³² Sidahmed provides a comprehensive analysis of sectarianism.

³³ See Meheimeed and Maryam's conversation regarding the differences between *falāh* and *effendi* life (Salih 114-116).

³⁴ This reading is supported by such details as when Dau is taught the Qur'an, it is found that he "memorizes quickly, as though remembering things he'd known long ago" (75).

akin to "a Sufi gathering for the invocation of the Lord's name" with Dau at the center, follow this declaration of brotherhood (71). Thus, worldly standards of judgment are replaced with spiritual ones: brotherhood instead of race and tribe. As a result, they reap the economic rewards of their non-worldliness when the community prospers as a result of Dau's agricultural talents. Similarly, Bilal, the novel's saint, and his shaykh, or master, contribute to the well-being of the rural community because they are selfless. Meheimeed, on the other hand, is useless in this respect.

Wad Hamid is, in effect, Meheimeed's truth from which he is barred. The novel ends on a pessimistic note, with Maryam posthumously appearing in Meheimeed's vision to declare: "You are nothing. You are no one. . . . You have chosen your grandfather . . . the two of you are most weighty in the scales of the people of the world. And your father is greater than both of you in the scales of Justice" because ultimately when "he was tempted by glory" he "restrained himself, and when life called him—when life called him," the narrative suggests, he said yes (Salih 122). The "exorbitant price" that Meheimeed pays so that "the truth about himself and things may be made clear to him" is that he loses both Maryam and himself and forgets the way back (87); he remains an *effendi*, living in the village in a state of perpetual displacement.³⁵ Wad Hamid as the locus of indigenous identity, and as product of what Salih describes as the "mythology of place" (Jibril 76), it is re-membered through his speculative epistemology.

Dichotomising the Episteme

To see *Bandarshah* as a fragmented narrative, possessing no "gripping story," "human density," "complexity of structure," or "wealth of meaning" (Badawi, "review" 339), is to maintain a problematic distinction between "realism" and "magic," which creates the impression that "the themes of . . . conflict between town and country, tradition and modernity . . . are now overshadowed by mysticism and popular Islam" even though the "political and social issues" remain perceptible (339). In fact, Salih examines these issues from the vantage point of mysticism and popular Islam, which informs his speculative epistemology, which is, in turn, engaged with its historical context. The wellspring of Salih's epistemology is al-Dabba, where he grew up. Very near to the actual Wad Hamid in the Shandi District, al-Dabba was a center for the Khatmiyya tariqa, a Sufi order famed for its tolerance (Karrar 134). Both villages lie in the heart of Funj territory, where rural areas remained isolated from the measures imposed by the Anglo-Egyptian condominium³⁶ to control religious and social life (Sidahmed 16). This meant that "at the local level, the religious life in the Sudan continued to be much the same as it had been during the Funj period [1700s through 1821]" (Karrar 3)—that is to say, it was Sufi in orientation and inimical to the rigors of the shari'a scholars who, at the end of the seventeenth century, arrived at the behest of a rising indigenous, urban-based middle class, who in turn "needed the stabilizing influence of the *shari'a*" following the "the opening up of commercial connections with the Mediterranean and the Red Sea" (Spaulding 10). Thus the association that Salih forges in *Bandarshah* between local Islam and the rural community, and between shari'a advocates and urban society is accurate. However, unlike the unworldly saints who populate Salih's novel, Funj Sufi shaykhs were a dominant class and held considerable power over the vast majority of the population through educational spaces called *khalwāt*. They were also exempt "from taxation," and had "rights of geographical mobility and personal security," which "distinguished them from the class of subject commoner" (121). Regardless, it seems as though Salih's measure is rural indigeneity. He treats the ulama (the Islamic religious clergy), the *effendis*, the communists, and the *Ikhwan* as foreign elements that were introduced at different times into the Sudanese political arena; an arena animated by the democracies of the various republican governments, communist/socialist ideologies, the Anglo-Egyptian colonial apparatus, Islamism, and the Southern problem.³⁷

The reason why Salih appeals to the Sufism of the indigenous rural areas is because he imagines it as extremely tolerant. For instance, he posits the quality of "acceptance" as the source of harmony in Wad Hamid—and, by extension, in Sudan (Salih 27). This is represented by Wad Hamid's acceptance of Dau into the community. Salih's imagined tolerant indigenous Sufi Islam needs to be situated within the context of pressing problems of national identity. As a postcolonial nation, northern Sudan identified

³⁵ "The extent of this alienation is epitomized by the fact that, through a series of misplacements, Meheimeed ends up teaching schoolgirls the geography of Europe instead of Africa (Salih 51). Hence, becoming an *effendi* is tantamount to submitting to Eurocentrism" (Alfaisal, *Religious* 164)

³⁶ Joint British and Egyptian governance of Sudan from 1899 to 1955.

³⁷ This refers to the problem of integrating non-Arab ethnicities—mostly located in the South of Sudan as a result of British colonial policies of segregation—into the Sudanese national identity. The ethnic map of Sudan consists of, by demographic majority: Arab, Dinka, Beja, Nuer, Nuba, Nubian, Fur, Bari, Azande, Moru, and Shilluk peoples.

itself with the Arab and Islamic world at large. It is an identity that exacerbated its southern problem, which ultimately led to the civil war of 1955–72. This war is strikingly absent from *Bandarshah*. This may indicate Salih's avoidance of the issue. If the acceptance of Dau were taken as the litmus test of tolerance, then it should be remembered that he was a green-eyed, fair-skinned visitor from the north who converted, and not a black skinned, dark eyed visitor from the south. If Salih imagined the need to be sensitive to the plight of the south, it may have been through the Sufi-generated tolerance that his speculative epistemology advocates, because it confronts a difficult national choice between an alienating secularism and an Islamism that indiscriminately applies shari'a laws.

The drive to apply shari'a laws in Sudan is the locus of conflict. Insistence on applying them buttresses Sudan's Islamist credentials, but it alienates non-Muslims. In 1983 President Numayri's (1969-85) disastrous implementation shari'a penal code meant that non-Muslims were being penalized according to the dictates of a religion not their own. Salih's recourse to the Islam of the rural community is due to the long-standing reputation of tolerance that Sufism gained in the Sudan. The cure Salih imagines in the novel is a sufism that is based on the rural understanding of it. This recourse to a more spiritual and less rigorously scriptural understanding of the role of Islam in Northern Sudanese identity, is not unique. In 1985 Mahmud Muhammad Taha (1910–85), leader of the Republican Brothers, was executed for a similar recourse to Sufi based Islam,³⁸ in opposition to Numayri's penal code. Initially, the Brothers supported the Numayri government "as long as the regime maintained policies of national unity and refrained from applying shari'a to the detriment of women and non-Muslim Sudanese" (An-Na'im 8), which, eventually, was not the case.

To understand the significance of Salih's speculative epistemology it is important to recall the age-old conflict between the esoteric and exoteric perspectives in Islam; or what is known as the *tariqa/shari'ah* dichotomy. Followers of the Sufi path tended to place less emphasis on the strict adherence to rites, practices and laws of Islam than did the adherents of the more strictly literal interpretation of it. That is of course a very general distinction but it is one that is very much present in Salih's novel. Salih's Sufi based analysis of the problem of Islam in the construction of Sudanese national identity is addressed from the vantage point of Sufi epistemology. His diagnosis is that the desire for worldly power is at the root of all evil, and the archetype of this desire is of course Bandarshah. To defeat this demon, Salih presents his Sufi based speculative epistemology which treats the denigration of worldly power as the key to success in life, as Maryam tells Muheimeed.

Conclusion

Hombres' and *Bandarshah's* articulation of speculative epistemology imagine anti-materialist value from the perspective of subaltern knowledge (Mayan and rural Sudanese indigenous epistemologies) with a logic that runs counter to the coloniality/modernity dyad. To reduce them to forms of magical realism is nothing short of epistemicide. This is why both authors have frequently insisted that what is termed magical realism actually existed in their local environments.³⁹ To use the border reading method, that is to read epistemically, is to be cognitive of the interconnectedness of the process of mythification and epistemic resistance. The fact that this kind of reading resonates with political co-texts, Arévalo's and Taha's, is no accident. It is further indication of the value of border reading as a contextualizing methodology that avoids, insofar as that is possible, the coloniality of reading strategies that are inattentive to formulations of speculative epistemologies.

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³⁸ Ṭāhā's *The Second Message of Islam*, is strikingly similar to Arévalo's. Equally unorthodox, he preached tolerance, demoted the shari'a to secondary status, argued that Islam was fundamentally democratic and socialist (Ṭāhā 153), and claimed that the Prophet Muhammad "experienced ultimate communism" (Ṭāhā 156).

³⁹ "Es decir que no puede hablarse de este realismo mágico sin pensar en la mentalidad primitiva del indio, en su manera de apreciar las cosas de la naturaleza y en sus profundas creencias ancestrales" (Asturias and Alvarez 166). Salih similarly states that "Today they speak of magic realism, etc., [...] whereas I had been treading that route for a long time. For, in all honesty, I did not invent magic realism because it exists in our environment" (Jibril 118-119 my translation)/

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