# *Wagar* and Motley "Archaic" Vestiges: A Postmodernist Reading of Contemporary Somali Fiction

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## Abstract

The advent of the modernist dream resulted in the universalisation of culture, which entails deliberate effort to abandon traditional ways of life that foster difference and instead embracing national cultures to bring different communities together. Colonialism in the Horn of Africa, for instance, brought different Cushitic communities under single political entities and most of them adopted Islam to find a common ground. Other communities in East Africa had to convert to Christianity to find a universal cultural bridge. This has resulted in the assumption that most African peoples are homogeneous given that past traditions that elevated difference have been eradicated by unifying factors such as modern states and conventional religions such as Islam and Christianity. A critical reading of some literary texts, however, demonstrates that such claims are partly unfounded because there exist aspects of pre-Islamic Somali religion along with the fundamental beliefs of Islam, which bolster difference. This article is a postmodernist reading of selected contemporary Somali fiction to investigate the influence of pre-Islamic Somali religion on contemporary Somali culture. Using the ideas of Jacques Derrida and Joseph Campbell, the study demonstrates the impact of myth and the ancient traditions on migration and contemporary culture in Nadifa Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* and Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*.

**Keywords:** difference; monomyth; Nurrudin Farah; Nadifa Mohamed; postmodernism; Somali fiction; Wagar

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## Introduction

> The Somalis are overwhelming Muslims, Sunnis, and adhere to Shafite school of thought. (Farah 2001, 3)

The modernist dream of the universalisation of culture has had an influential impact on Somali society through the adoption of Islam at the expense of pre-Islamic Somali culture. According to the *Report on International Religious Freedom* (U.S. Department of State 2021, 2), 99% of Somalia's population is Sunni Muslim. Therefore, aspects of pre-Islamic Somali religion are relegated to the periphery in contemporary Somali society. Similarly, Ahmed Farah (2001, 3), in the above quotation, underscores the homogeneity of Somalia as a result of the deliberate rejection of pre-Islamic religion and adoption of Islam for centralisation of the community.

Emerging voices, however, interrogate the universalisation of cultures as proposed by Farah and other modernists. Critical studies concerned with contemporary Somali society have observed certain aspects that were salient in pre-Islamic Somali tradition. For example, Mire (2015, 94) writes:

> The wagar is made from a sacred tree considered to possess divine power. Cults of fecundity are found all over the Horn of Africa; I suggest that the wagar is rooted in a pre-Islamic fertility cult that has persisted in the Muslim society. The wagar and its rituals are associated with the pre-Islamic religion of the Aw-Barkhadle shrine, part of what I consider a sacred landscape—that is to say, an area used solely for ritual purposes, having natural and cultural features that possess ritual meaning, and seen in the local context as "sacred" due to its religious resonance. I also use the term to convey a sense of its ongoing, active use.

In this passage, Mire attests to the existence of pre-Islamic Somali worship of the sky god alongside Islamic beliefs. She contends that Wagar is prevalent in Muslim societies today, particularly in the Horn of Africa. The Aw-Barkhadle shrine is revered by most Cushitic communities, yet it was a pertinent aspect of the ancient Somali religion. Mire, in the above quotation, interrogates the modernist belief that all Somalis are united by one culture that is guided by pristine Islamic beliefs. This is the same opinion that Derrida proposes when he contends that the centre is constantly moving towards the periphery and the periphery is constantly moving towards the centre. The modernist tendency to privilege the contemporary world religions over ancient Somali religion becomes limited when aspects of pre-Islamic religion find their place in Islam. Giving the example of the Boran of Kenya, Mbiti (1970, 324) contends that while Islam controls some aspects of life such as "ornaments and weapons," pre-Islamic Boran culture pervades the rest of their way of life.

According to Derrida (cited in Best and Kellner 1991, 22), modernism's insistence on absolute truth is a "metaphysics of presence" that underscores binary oppositions, such as subject/object, appearance/reality, speech/writing, to "construct a hierarchy of values

that attempt to not only guarantee truth, but also serve to exclude and devalue inferior terms or positions. This binary serves to positively position reality over appearance, speech over writing, men over women, reason over nature" (22), and in this context Islam over Waaq—traditional Somali religion. Derrida ([1974] 2016, 55) introduces deconstruction as the opposite of the modernist dualism aimed at creating deliberate hierarchies and othering. In the subchapter "The Outside ~~IS~~ the Inside," Derrida observes that the "arbitrariness of the sign" brings to the fore "de-construction of *the greatest totality*—the concept of the *epistémè* and logocentric metaphysics—within which are produced, without ever posing the radical question of writing, all the Western methods of analysis, explication, reading, or interpretation." In other words, the binary existence of modern/tradition or speech/writing poses no fixity; on the contrary, there is a constant shift that enables each essentialist group to influence the other. This is what Derrida means by the "arbitrariness of the sign"—those constant back and forth movements of essentialist groups that demolish the dualism typical of modernism. He postulates a flexible existence in which the centre moves towards the periphery and the periphery to the centre. He writes:

> Now we must think that writing is at the same time more exterior to speech, not being its "image" or its "symbol," and more interior to speech, which is already in itself a writing. Even before it is linked to incision, engraving, drawing, or the letter, to a signifier referring in general to a signifier signified by it, the concept of the *graphie* [unit of a possible graphic system] implies, as the possibility common to all systems of signification, the instance of the *instituted trace*. Our efforts from now on will be directed toward slowly detaching these two concepts from the classical discourse from which we necessarily borrow them. … The instituted trace cannot be thought without thinking the retention of difference within a structure of reference where difference appears *as such* and thus permits a certain liberty of variations among the full terms. ([1974] 2016, 47)

In this passage, Derrida uses speech/writing to invert the modernist essentialising discourse that forms the tradition/modern binary in our contemporary societies. He contends that that which is viewed as the other (exterior), for example writing or tradition, is at the same time vital (interior) to the self (speech or modernity); the "outside is the inside," hence the "arbitrariness" that is underscored by the last part of the passage. He sums up by observing that it is unthinkable to insist on the so-called self, for instance the modern, "instituted trace," without pointing out the vestiges of tradition, the "retention of difference" in "the structure" (for example Somali culture). The "difference" or vestiges result in constant flux or transition that Derrida refers to as the "liberty of variations among the full terms." In other words, pre-Islamic Somali tradition, just like "writing" in Derrida's explication, is paradoxically at the periphery ("exterior") of Somali culture and more "interior" or at the centre of the Islamic culture practised today. It is therefore unthinkable to emphasise modern Somali culture, "the instituted trace," without pointing out the "retention of difference" or vestiges of pre-Islamic Somalia, because the two essentialist groups still coexist through constant flux.

In spite of the propensity of most Somalis to imbibe the modernist binary that elevates Sunni Islam over traditional religion, the literary writers in this study suggest that there are aspects of pre-Islamic Somalia that exert a strong influence over their culture. The periphery is therefore constantly moving towards the centre and vice versa. According to Derrida ([1974] 2016, 47), "[t]he 'unmotivatedness' of the sign requires a synthesis in which the completely other announces itself as such—without any simplicity, any identity, any resemblance or continuity—within what is not it." By "synthesis" he means the different cultures constitute different parts of the body of Somali culture without imposing "identity" or similarity and hence difference. The body of Somali culture is given life with the difference within it. The fixity in the modern requires synthesis in which tradition declares its presence.

## The Centre or the Periphery: A Background of African Religion and Islam in Somalia

In spite of many claims that associate Sunni Islam with traditional elements of Somalia, there is convincing evidence that Somalis had their own religion that continues to exert its influence against the torrent of the modernising effects of both Islamic and Western culture. Unlike the centralising attributes of Islam and Western culture, pre-Islamic Somali religion exerts a difference at the very foundation of the different Somali clans. In his emphasis of the dominance of African religions over foreign ones, Mbiti (1970, 3–4) observes, "Christianity and Islam do not seem to remove the sense of frustration and uprootedness. It is not enough to learn and embrace a faith which is active once a week, either on Sunday or Friday, while the rest of the week is virtually empty." According to Mbiti, African religions such as pre-Islamic Somali religion will continue to prevail over Islam because they permeate every aspect of the people's lives. African religions are a lifestyle that influence how people talk, where they go, and prescribe what they should do seven days a week, while Islam and Christianity only find relevance in their lives on Friday and Sunday in the mosque and church respectively. As a way of life, Mbiti postulates that African religion forms the "strongest element" of life and "exerts the strongest influence on thinking" (1) and the life of African peoples. Going by Mbiti's observation, the Somali people are no exception to this belief in African religion.

Scholars of Somali history observe that Somalis practised traditional religion up to the advent of Islam in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Abdullahi (2021, 79) observes:

> Islam and colonialism had reconfigured Somali history since its people's conversion to Islam in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. As a result, Somalis adopted a new identity and culture by embracing a patrilineal genealogy, new customary law (Xeer), consultative governance, and collective leadership. Also, Somali people had established multiple states in the Middle Ages, connected with the Muslim Empires, applied Sharia blended with local customs, defended their territory from foreign invaders, and spread Islam in the Horn of Africa.

In this quotation, Abdullahi underscores the modernising effects of Islam in the Somali community through institutionalising patriarchy, the organisation of governance and attempts at creating a modern state by starting "collective leadership." In this passage, Abdullahi suggests that there is a coexistence of Somali tradition alongside the modernising Islamic religion because Somalis "applied Sharia blended with local customs." In spite of Abdullah's reference to pre-Islamic traditions as the authentic Somali identity, he reverts to Islam as Somali tradition vis-à-vis the advent of Western powers. He contends that the modern state failed in Somalia because it sought to weaken Somali tradition (Islam and clan system). Subsequently, "the deep-rooted Somali tradition resisted resolutely and fought back in violent identity politics and Islamist movements, which ignited even more societal fragmentations" (80). What then is the place of pre-Islamic Somali culture if Islam forms a major component of the Somali tradition? Abdullahi (2021, 80) expounds this when he postulates that Somali tradition comprises "clan particularism and Islamic universalism. Clan particularism often induces communities to prejudice and parochialism, while Islam, unless given an extremist interpretation, calls for peace, brotherhood, and tolerance." This assertion associates pre-Islamic Somali beliefs with pre-colonial clan systems that underscore difference while Islam centralises and unifies modern Somalia. However, pre-Islamic traditions sometimes exhibit dominance over Islam because "the dominant perspective of Somali studies highlights clan particularism and offers a clannish interpretation of history and politics" (80). The notion of the supremacy of Islam does not hold.

This is the same view held by Farah (2001, 38–40) in his acknowledgement of the existence of pre-Islamic religion in Somalia. He observes, "[d]espite the adoption of Islam by the Somali centuries ago, their traditional culture has resiliently survived." Farah singles out Somali traditions such as performing arts that are forbidden in Islam, but "widely acknowledged and even facilitated the quick spread and adoption of Islam in Somalia" (40). The pre-Islamic traditions' complementary role notwithstanding, Farah observes that some of them, for example "dramatized forms" (40) and the "annual celebrations of the clan ancestor among Northern Somalis … and the collective rainmaking ritual (*roobdoon*) performed by sedentary groups mostly in the south" (38), transgress strict Islamic values.

The pre-Islamic and Islamic traditions, as elaborated above, clash and complement each other, creating what Derrida refers to as the "outside ~~is~~ the inside" or the "arbitrariness of the sign." This study seeks to interrogate whether there are instances where Islam shifts to the periphery and ancient traditions shift to the centre as a medium of transmission of Islam and sustenance, because (as Mbiti observes) the traditions control all aspects of life including the politics of Somalis. It also seeks to find out whether there are times when the ancient traditions shift to the periphery to pave way for Islam to promote peace and unity in Farah's *Secrets* (1998) and Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* (2013).

Farah's *Secrets* is the story of Kalaman and his childhood lover, Sholoongo. Born a *Duguun*, a child to be buried, Sholoongo was disposed of in the bush by her mother, but mysteriously adopted and raised by a wolf and a lion (1998, 2). She reappears in the village and her mother, who becomes guilty of her act, resorts to suicide. In her father's custody, she falls in love with the young Kalaman, which worries his mother because Sholoongo has powers to change herself into an animal (13) and invade people's dreams as a ratel, elephant and hippo. Worse still are her sex morals; she has an affair with Kalaman, his father Yagut, and attempts to have sex with the grandfather, Nonno. She also has sex with her half-brother Timir and many others. Sholoongo departs to the Americas where she refines her uncanny personality by training in Shamanism. Kalaman goes to school, trains as a computer programmer, and as he starts wooing Talaado in preparation for marriage, Sholoongo reappears at his apartment with queer demands to have a child with him. Kalaman is tormented by Sholoongo's mysterious reappearance, wondering how she knew where his residence was. Talaado gets hint of her presence and storms the house, but Sholoongo vanishes. Kalaman's mother, who has always detested Sholoongo, vows to shoot her. Kalaman drives to Afgoi, his grandfather's home, to seek his guidance. He is shocked to realise that after leaving her apartment Sholoongo spent time at Kalaman's room in the grandfather's house. Kalaman probes to understand the mystery behind his mother's hatred for Sholoongo and his name. Nonno refuses to unravel the affair between Yagut and Sholoongo, but Damac, Kalaman's mother, in a separate chapter, reveals that desperate for a child, Yagut made love to Sholoongo and she conceived. Damac then forced her to have an abortion. Depressed by the turn of events, Kalaman drives to Arbaco, his mother's friend, and in an ensuing conversation she reveals that Kalaman is not his father's son. His mother, Damac, had fallen prey to a marriage racket that intended to marry her off to a man she neither loved nor knew. The marriage certificate was unscrupulously signed, but she firmly refused to give in. The unscrupulous gang plotted revenge, as a result of which Damac was abducted and raped (231). Pregnant and unsure of the next move, she turned to Arbaco, the "floater," whose networking brought along Yagut. He married Damac unconventionally to save her dignity and that of the child. Devastated by the news that he is the "issue of gang-rape," he goes to ascertain it from Yagut and concludes that although the Somali say that mothers matter most, men like Yaqut matter too (243). He hugs his adoptive father and cries. He makes a resolution to love his parents and marry Talaado. Sholoongo sneaks into Nonno's house, persuades him to make love and flees. The story ends with Nonno's death.

Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* (2013) is the story of Jama Guure, who struggles against the onslaught of Mother Nature to find his dream. Denied the right to a healthy childhood, Jama struggles to survive as a street urchin in Aden, Yemen, after his father abandons them in Hargeisa for lack of sustenance. Her baby sister Kawaharis dies of heat and thirst, which prompts Guure to depart to Sudan in search of a job. Without a husband to care for her, Jama's mother, Ambaro, migrates to Yemen in search of a job, where she catches illness and dies, leaving Jama a helpless orphan. He returns to his ancestral land, Hargeisa, and then sets off from a small village in Hargeisa in the hope

that he will succeed. Jama detests the harsh weather conditions of Hargeisa that have resulted in indigence among his relatives. He therefore journeys to Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt, Palestine and ends up in the United Kingdom. Although he did not find his father, the briefcase he inherits from him becomes a supernatural aid that leads him to self-actualisation. The spirit of his father saves him from the British airpower in Eritrea and leads him to Sudan where he prospers in farming and business. The locusts destroy his crops, and he has to leave for Egypt; his late father guides him to become a sailor.

The choice of texts is justified because the two writers are both Somalis and set the action of their stories in the traditional and modern Somali society, which makes the texts appropriate samples for interrogating postmodernist ideals such as difference. Whereas Farah represents the pioneer Somali writers, Mohamed represents current Somali writers, and the two thus provide ample sample size for analysis.

Some studies and reports have constantly elevated the notion that Somalia is predominantly a Muslim nation and 99% of the populace privileges Sunni Islam above traditional forms of worship. This article seeks to interrogate these claims through a postmodernist reading of selected contemporary Somali fiction. The article offers a postmodernist reading of selected contemporary Somali fiction to investigate the influence of pre-Islamic Somali religion on contemporary Somali culture. Using the ideas of Jacques Derrida and Joseph Campbell, the study demonstrates the impact of myth and the ancient traditions on migration and contemporary culture in Nadifa Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* and Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*. The study is a close textual reading of the primary texts, journal articles and secondary texts.

## *Wagar* and Decentring the Centre: The Influence of the Sky God on Somali Societies in Contemporary Somali Fiction

> Belief in the Sky-God may relate to the myth of the man who was sitting in a tree (perhaps a sacred tree, even an olive). This is a common myth of origin told by Cushitic people of the Horn. […] According to this myth, a little girl discovered a stranger from the sky, a man, sitting on a tree, who would only agree to come down when he was promised that he could marry the local girl who found him. He was allowed to marry her, and the people emerged from their union. Versions of this myth are widespread in the Horn. It seems to indicate a potential link between the notion of trees and ancestral figures, as also exemplified by Konso waga sculptures. (Mire 2015, 106)

For many decades, studies have associated Somali society with the belief in Sunni Islam, which has reserved a peripheral place for traditional Somali religion. Nevertheless, emerging studies attest to the existence of pre-Islamic Somali religion alongside Sunni Islam and sometimes supplanting it. Mire, in the above quotation, suggests that the Somali, like other Cushitic tribes of East Africa, worshipped the sky god who appeared in a tree and was discovered by a girl from a non-Cushitic community. When he alighted, the man insisted that he must be given the girl for marriage. The children from this union comprise the current Cushitic communities in the Horn of Africa. Henceforth,

aspects of the sky and nature such as stars, trees and animals form an essential part of the Somali belief system, in spite of their conversion to Islam, hence decentring the centre and centring the periphery.

In Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy*, there is convincing evidence of the belief in the sky god and myth, two pertinent aspects of African tradition as opposed to universalised modern culture through the Islamic belief. First is the belief in the sky god that stands out when Ambaro, Jama's mother, advises him to have reverence for the stars. She says, "[l]ook at the stars, Goode, they have watched over everything" (Mohamed 2013, 44). The following description by the narrator underscores the sky god: "the sky was as black and luminous as coal, a white hot crescent moon hung over them like a just forged scythe, the stars flying like the wielder's furnace" (44). The careful description of the sky is a deliberate reference to the place it occupies in the pre-Islamic Somali religion. This tradition, just like "writing" in Derrida's explication, is paradoxically at the periphery of Somali culture and more "interior" or at the centre of the Islamic culture practised today (Derrida [1974] 2016, 47). Ambaro's Islamic faith notwithstanding, she virtually relies on the principles of the sky god to guide her son. For example, she makes a direct reference to an element of the sky:

> It's another world above us, each of those stars has power and meaning in our lives. That star tells us when to mate the sheep, if that one does not appear, we expect trouble, that little one leads us to the sea […]. Those stars are our friends, they have watched over our ancestors. They have seen all kinds of suffering but the light in them never goes out, they will watch over you and watch over your grandchildren. (Mohamed 2013, 44)

In this extract, Mohamed reiterates Mbiti's (1970, 1) claims about the centrality of African religion in the laity by demonstrating how the sky god controls every aspect of life in the lives of Somali people. As Ambaro is just about to die, she calls her son Jama and reminds him to look up to the stars for sustenance because they determine the mating seasons of their livestock, when to travel to the sea, and protect the grandchildren. It will be absurd for the reader to take the stars at face value; they represent the sky god that Mire associates with the origin of the Somali people. For instance, the stars have the power to protect the Somali progeny just like the Wagar. According to Mire (2015, 100), "[t]he Wagar is, as established, from a sacred tree, and for this reason is used as a sacred weapon to fight not only abstract enemies. … The current belief is that God protects the person carrying a wagar." Mire's claim recaps Mbiti's observation that the "majority of peoples hold that the spirits dwell in the woods, bush, forest, rivers, mountains" (1970, 104) and therefore Wagar possesses spiritual power. Indeed, before she dies, Ambaro gives Jama an amulet with magical powers. She adjures him to take the "kitab amulet from around [her] neck" (Mohamed 2013, 45). This is the Wagar that will protect Jama on his hero's journey in life. Ambaro adds that Jama would be rich because he was "born with the blessings of the stars" (45). Jama takes the amulet and squeezes it in his palm to signify its ability to protect him from evil. The amulet is the Wagar, the sky god that watches over those in possession of it. This perspective that Ambaro embraces confirms Farah's (2001, 38) view that "Islam

does not differentiate between what is secular and religious" and therefore allows what Derrida describes as the "unmotivatedness" of the sign, requiring a "synthesis in which the completely other announces itself as such—without any simplicity, any identity, any resemblance or continuity—within what is not it" (Derrida [1974] 2016, 47). In other words, Ambaro practises pre-Islamic religion in all its complexity without denouncing her religious faith or proclaiming another faith. She maintains an Islamic identity, yet practises the pre-Islamic religion in detail.

On his way to his destiny after the demise of his mother, it is apparent how the sky god watches over Jama. For example, when he falls in a pit on the way to Djibouti, the goblin of his mother appears in the subsequent sleep and the narrator refers to Wagar thus: "The sky cracked and revealed a blue and white secret kingdom. The high heavens and low earth were joined by a sheet of conquering raindrops" (Mohamed 2013, 74). According to Mbiti (1970, 107), god (in this context the sky god) works with other spirits such as the living-dead, defined as "the departed of up to five generations … the closest link that me have to the spiritual world." Ambaro is the living-dead that the sky god uses to counter Jinnow's curse. Jama, who is given a rare opportunity into the spiritual kingdom of the sky god, "saw drenched jinnis cavorting and dancing as they reclaimed the desert for themselves" (Mohamed 2013, 74). The jinnis in this passage are good spirits that have been sent by the sky god to lead and protect Jama in difficult times. Although Islam upholds the belief in good jinnis (Okasha and Okasha 2012, 74), it is the sky god that prompts the coming of jinnis to save Jama in his current predicament. The sky cracks and by sending the rain orders the spiritual agents to act on behalf of the god. Derrida's observation of the other at the "interior" of the self (Derrida [1974] 2016, 47) is evident because the sky god now controls jinnis, aspects of Islam. The jinnis leave footmarks that assist Jama out of the pit. The narrator says, "Jama placed his feet in large footprints that jinnis has left behind. Left leg, right leg" (Mohamed 2013, 74), till he is able to leave the pit. In the same way, Jama puts his trust in the sky god as he leaves Djibouti where he saw "a woman sitting on a star […] he waved at his mother and she smiled back, blowing shooting star kisses down on him" (95). His journey to destiny is therefore determined by the spiritual direction of Wagar and the living-dead, which bolster Derrida's contention of the pre-eminence of the other. He writes, "[t]he absence of *another* here-and-now, of another transcendental present, of *another* origin of the world appearing as such, presenting itself as irreducible absence within the presence of the trace, is not a metaphysical formula substituted for a scientific concept" (Derrida [1974] 2016, 47). In other words, the pristine absence of "an other," which is pre-Islamic Somali religion itself as missing within the presence of Islamic religion (as held by modernists), does not constitute a credible scientific paradigm.

Literary critics have tended to associate *Black Mamba Boy* with migration literature. Forster (2015, 99) refers to *Black Mamba Boy* as a migritude text because Jama embarks on a journey through a number of nations in search of his father. However, this study views the novel as a mythical narrative typical of traditional forms of knowledge. The novel takes the trajectory of a traditional hero's journey as described by scholars of

myths. According to Campbell (1949, 1), the societal behaviour of each culture is primarily determined by its underlying mythology, and hero myths are expressions of the same story pattern that he called the hero's journey or Monomyth. Campbell expounds that the hero myths of many cultures follow the same basic pattern of Departure, Separation, Initiation and Return (1949, 45–227). Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* evades migratory patterns of modernist novels and takes this hero's journey that involves stages such as a mysterious birth, a call to adventure, meeting the mentor, the helper, crossing the threshold, tests, and the climax or Final Battle (45–227). Mohamed ignores the modernist conventions of story writing and follows this mythical pattern of craft.

The first stage is the hero's birth. According to Campbell, the mythical hero has a mysterious birth. He writes, "[f]or seven centuries the Water-Mother floated with the child in her womb, unable to give it birth. She prayed to Ukko, the highest god, and he sent a teal to build its nest on her knee" (277). Mohamed describes Jama's birth to show the mystery surrounding the birth of the hero. While carrying Jama's pregnancy, his mother's womb grew so large that the neighbours feared she would not be able to give birth normally. Ambaro admits, "I knew I was expecting someone special" (Mohamed 2013, 12). One day while lying under a tree, she "felt a smooth hand caress […] [her] back and move towards [her] bellybutton" (12). When Ambaro examined it, she saw a huge mamba curling around her belly. The snake "flexed its sinews and slipped down [her] body, massaging [her] womb with its soft underbelly [and] with a flick of its tail it disappeared into the sand" (12). When Jama is born, the mystery of the snake compels Ambaro to name Jama Goode, a Somali word for a black mamba. While Ambaro takes the African perspective that, according to Mbiti (1970, 154), prescribes names depending on seasons or major events to name the child Goode, her husband refers to the Islamic religion and names the child Jama. He therefore signifies Derrida's synthesis of the two essentialist groups.

After his birth, Jama receives a call to adventure. According to Campbell's stages, the hero is called to adventure by some external event or messenger. The hero may accept the call willingly or reluctantly (1949, 45). Jama receives the call to adventure unwillingly after the death of his mother, Ambaro, in Yemen. He returns to his mother's home in Hargeisa, where his grandmother, Jinnow, acts as his surrogate parent. He receives spiritual education, which according to Campbell prepares the hero for the long journey ahead. Jinnow educates him on how life elevates some and puts others down, but those under the "evil influence of red Mars" become feebler (Mohamed 2013, 55). The reference to Mars is the sky god that controls the destiny of the characters in Somali society. After a trial in Hargeisa that is instituted by his aunt Ayan (when she tries to steal his money), Jinnow curses him: "You are cursed by all the saints, may God put you under the ground, you eunuch" (69). Jama leaves Hargeisa through the desert to Sudan. The narrator says, "[t]he desert terrifies him, the silence, the boulders […] the emptiness" (72). Then it begins to rain heavily and as he gropes in the dark, he falls "head first into the stinking pit" (72). According to Campbell, these are tests: "The hero

travels through the dream-like world of adventure where he must undergo a series of tests. They are violent encounters with monsters, sorcerers or warriors or forces of nature. The tests prove the hero's ability and advance the journey towards the climax" (1949, 182). In this test of his life, Jama is prepared to meet his mentor or spirit guide.

Campbell observes that in the early stages of the mythical journey, the hero will receive aid from a protective figure. The helper gives the hero a protective amulet or weapon for the journey (192). This is the stage Campbell refers to as "meeting the mentor." Although Ambaro had earlier given Jama the Wagar or protective amulet (Mohamed 2013, 45), in this early stage of the journey, she appears as the spiritual guide to protect and lead Jama out of danger. The narrator suggests that Jama was in danger of losing his life, but:

> Only when his mother's sleeping body appeared beside him, her ribs rising and falling in peaceful slumber could he finally close his own eyes. At the darkest hour of the night, the sky cracked and revealed the blue and white secret kingdom […] Jama was awoken by a miraculous concert heralding the end of the dry season […] He heard happy laughter echoing around him and saw drenched jinnis cavorting and dancing as they reclaimed the desert for themselves. Jama placed his feet in large footprints the jinnis had left behind. (74)

The heavy rain represents the sky god who comes to protect him against Jinnow's curse. Ambaro's goblin stands out as Jama's mentor to protect him from the curse that Jinnow has levelled against her son. She then commands jinnis to come as spirit guides to lead Jama out of danger. Jama follows in their footsteps, and he is able to climb out of the pit.

Jama meets a number of helpers after meeting his mentor. Helpers, according to Campbell, are persons who assist in the series of tests and serve as loyal companions (1949, 201). After walking for a long distance, he finds a lorry driver who allows him to hitchhike to Djibouti (Mohamed 2013, 78), but he has no relation there. The narrator writes, "Jama sat under a palm tree and scanned around for another lorry; he was at the heart of a shanty town and could see no way out" (82). Jama faints and is rescued by a woman. She says, "[s]weetie, you are burning up, what's wrong?" (83). Jama stays with the woman and her husband in Djibouti. He learns that the woman, Amina, works for the colonial office, while the man, Idea, has resigned from teaching because colonial education is so biased towards African ways (85). Idea tries to convince Jama to stay in Djibouti, but the sky god takes charge and directs Jama to proceed with his journey. The narrator says:

> Jama looked up at the sky, beside the moon was a bright star he had never noticed before, it flickered and winked at him. As Jama squinted, he saw a woman sitting on the star, her small feet swinging under her robe and her arms waving down at him. Jama waved to his mother and she smiled back, blowing shooting star kisses down on him. (95)

The sky god works in conjunction with his mother as "supernatural aids" and spiritual guides towards his destiny. According to Campbell's theory about myths, the hero has to be led towards the final battle before he receives his reward. Jama is led to Sudan in search of his father, which, according to Campbell, is a search for identity. Unfortunately, Jama does not find his father. His father, Guure, died in a road accident and Jama is instead given his belongings (126). Jama journeys to Asmara where he encounters what Campbell refers to as the final battle or supreme ordeal (138). His encounter with Italian soldiers is blood-chilling and a bullet fired by a drunken soldier misses him by a whisker (138). As they order Jama to walk after them, his knees are "weak, the blast of the gun still ricocheting in his skull" (139). With the blessing of the sky god, Jama is given a job in a café by the Italian soldier Lorenzo. The next ordeal starts with the spread of malaria in the barracks and Jama becomes one of the casualties. All the medicines are reserved for Italian soldiers, and he therefore suffers pangs of headache. The narrator says, "[m]alaria pounded on Jama's body and made him feel like he had been attacked by madman" (144). But there is a supernatural aid that appears through the sky god and his mother. The narrator says, "[f]ar above him, his mother realigned the stars, bartered incense and beads with the angels so that they would spare her son, and browbeaten, they reluctantly complied" (144). As much as the angels appear as elements of the Islamic religion, the stars, which are attributes of Wagar, are the true champions of Jama's protection. His mother's amulet is the connection point Jama has with the Wagar. Mohamed again reiterates the claim that the "outside is the inside" or the other is at the interior of the self.

The malaria works to his advantage because all African servants and his boss, Lorenzo, and Maggiore Leon are killed in the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. The new boss starts maltreating Jama. He gives him a flywhisk to keep flies off him (146) and whips him (147) over trivia, for instance being late for an errand. The worst ordeal comes when he reports late for work and Silvio, the new boss, throws him in jail for three days. When he is released, Jama looks "humiliated," beaten before his "tormentor" (154). As he is scheming the next act of villainy, Jama packs his father's suitcase and leaves Omhajer.

Whereas the appeal to pre-Islamic traditions in Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* manifests through the hero's journey, in Farah's *Secrets* they take the trajectory of Derrida's "arbitrariness of the sign" or "the outside ~~is~~ the inside" ([1974] 2016, 44). Farah's characters practise pre-Islamic traditions intensely, but sometimes turn to the Islamic faith for prayer. This reiterates Derrida's concept of "the outside ~~is~~ the inside," an arbitrariness that postulates that it is unthinkable to insist on the so-called self, for instance the modern, "instituted trace" without pointing out the vestiges of tradition, the "retention of difference" in the structure that is Somali culture. Indeed, most of Farah's characters practise what Mire (2015, 100) singles out as Wagar—the worship of the sky, trees and animals and shapeshifting.

For example, while referring to the griot that visits their home when he is born, Kalaman, the prime mover of the novel, says:

> My grandfather, in homage perhaps to the griot, listened, as if waiting for some kind of intimation of what was to be from Waag, the ancient Somali sky god, imperfectly supplanted by Islam. As if on cue, the feathered creature was back and sitting on the highest branch of the fig tree in the centre of the compound, issuing a squawk which to my grandfather's ears sounded like "Kalaman." (Farah 1998, 161)

In this extract, Kalaman frankly admits that what is happening in his family has little do with the modern religion in Somalia. When Kalaman is born, the griot appears in the home as a messenger of the sky god to name Kalaman. The griot stands on the tree in the same way the patriarch appeared on the tree to be spotted by the girl that he married to bring about the Cushitic tribes (Mire 2015, 100). The assertion that the sky god is "imperfectly supplanted by Islam" reiterates Derrida's observation that "the instituted trace cannot be thought without thinking the retention of difference within a structure of reference where difference appears *as such* and thus permits a certain liberty of variations among the full terms" ([1974] 2016, 47). In short, one cannot think of the centralised ideals of Islam in Somalia without considering vestiges of pre-Islamic traditions that allow for difference and transition. Indeed, literary critics contend that Farah's use of animals in *Secrets* seeks to underscore "the traditional rhetoric" (Bardolph 2000, 117). This implies that the sky god works in league with nature to influence human activity. Most of the characters with an interest in the sky god exhibit mysticism and sorcery through elements of Mother Nature, one aspect of which is shapeshifting. Mohamed observes that there was a nexus between sorcery and shapeshifting among Somali people in the past. She writes of Jama's ancestors: "His ancestors had been crow worshippers and sorcerers before the time of the prophet, and the people still kept tokens of their paganism" (2013, 49). Mohamed's observation reiterates the term "vestiges" in the title of this article, which refers to Derrida's notion of decentring the centre, that is, the impracticability or absurdity of "the absence of *another* here-and-now, of another transcendental present, of *another* origin of the world appearing as such" ([1974] 2016, 47), which is the relegated aspects such as pre-Islamic traditions, "presenting itself as irreducible absence within the presence of the trace," or conspicuously missing in Islamic tradition. The latter can only exist as a "presence of a trace" because it has already been tainted by ancient traditions. Mohamed's phrase, "kept tokens of paganism," does not only bring to the fore modernist prejudices, but reiterates Farah's (2001, 40) observations that pre-Islamic traditions have "resiliently survived."

In spite of modernist attempts to universalise aspects of Somali culture, pre-Islamic attributes of the culture still persist. As Mohamed suggests, Farah demonstrates how shapeshifting and sorcery take on an essential role in Somali society. Although Farah shares a modernist perspective by associating the existence of pre-Islamic and Islamic values in Somali society with "perpetual conflict by itself" (Farah 2001, 40), Farah contradicts this by taking Derrida's notion of "diverse possibilities." For Derrida ([1974] 2016, 47), there is no conflict between the two essentialist groups because "[t]he field of being, before being determined as the field of presence, is structured according

to the diverse possibilities—genetic and structural—of the trace." Farah's characters shift between the two cultural beliefs and hence are in-between identities.

The heroine in Farah's *Secrets* is a shapeshifter and although she employs spiritual strategies to heal spiritual problems of the people, there is a lot about her that suggests that she is a sorcerer. According to Mbiti (1970, 262), sorcerers, evil magicians, witches and medicine men "send death from a distance; they might change into animals in order to attack their victims." First, Sholoongo, the heroine, has the ability to disguise herself as insects and other animals or selves that affect the dreams of those around her. Her half-brother, Timir, says, "[m]y half-sister appeared to me as a maggot in a recent dream. I saw […] you discover that my sister has visited a place only when she's already left the area, reasons undisputed, motive unexplored" (Farah 1998, 55). Timir confirms that Sholoongo is mystic in every sense and tends to affect the psychological and spiritual lives of people. Kalaman, the hero, observes that in one of his dreams, Sholoongo appears as "a species of a rat, type of rodent, with almost mythical qualities" (55). These nightmares are so terrifying that at one point Kalaman's mother detests Sholoongo for appearing in her dreams like "a ratel feeding on carrion" (14). Above all, Kalaman's mother believes in Sholoongo's ability to transform her human nature into an animal of her choosing (14). According to Rémy ([1595] 2003, 112):

> Apart from the external physical shape [...] the witch is also endowed with all the natural qualities and powers of the animal into which she is seemingly changed. For she acquires fleetness of foot; bodily strength; ravenous ferocity; the lust of howling; the faculty of breaking into places, and of silent movement; and other such animal characteristics, which are far beyond human strength and ability.

Rémy's description in the above passage is a perfect depiction of Sholoongo in Farah's *Secrets*, and she should rightly be described as a sorcerer just as Mohamed describes Jama's relatives in *Black Mamba Boy*. The mystical ability to turn into an animal (as Mbiti observes) and the power to break into places are typical characteristics of the sorcerer that Sholoongo persistently exhibits. For example, after Fidow's long period of poaching, it is suspected that Sholoongo turns into an elephant and attacks him. When he whips out his gun, the elephant "thrusts his tusks into Fidow, whom he throws to the side before trampling the corpse into pulp" (Farah 1998, 95). Besides the callous trampling of the corpse, the elephant makes its way into Fidow's house and emerges with "dozens of tusks" (93). The elephant, like any other persons in Fidow's neighbourhood, is aware of his protracted period of poaching and is desirous of vengeance. Indeed, the press reports of the elephant avenging his kin, and most villagers suspect the ordeal as another mystic act by Sholoongo. Nonno, Kalaman's grandfather, tells him the elephant behaved so much as a person that many people say that Fidow's murderer is not an elephant, but a human disguised as one (100). Timir and Nonno agree that in the United States of America Sholoongo has always practised shapeshifting. Nonno associates shapeshifting with Shamanism and healing (140), and Rios (2002, 1585) avers that "the altered state is used by the Shaman to predict the future, to experience metaphorically a change in his shape and contact spiritual entities … [to]

conquer evil … [to] neutralize witchcraft and restore the client to good health." In Mbiti's perspective, Rios's "Shaman" is a medicine man or diviner who manufactures spiritual charms to counteract evil powers (Mbiti 1949, 265). Indeed, Sholoongo's spiritual mix (as Mbiti postulates, a diviner and sorcerer) is bent towards both good and causing harm. Her return from the United States is geared towards punishing Fidow for his poaching activities and Nonno for rejecting her advances.

Given Sholoongo's preoccupation with sorcery, she practises her own morals that invert the modernist conventions. She transgresses modernist universalisation of sex morals through a number of acts. First, she feeds Kalaman on her monthly period to strengthen the chord of love between them, and this is one major reason why Kalaman's mother detests her. She tells Nonno that Sholoongo bewitched Kalaman through this sordid act and casts aspersions on her shamanism. In her opinion, if Sholoongo had noble intentions, "[w]hy feed Kalaman on her monthlies?" (Farah 1998, 141). In America, she persuades another of her boyfriends to take quantities of her monthly periods by lying that "there are countries whose people called a woman's blood red milk" and drank it with hopes of extending their lifespan (83). The man takes the menses and is initiated into her cult.

Worse is Sholoongo's inability to have boundaries in her sex escapades. As a child, she has sex with very close relatives. She transgresses all modernist conventions with regard to sex to perpetuate her sorcery. Sholoongo has sexual affairs with Yagut, Kalaman's foster father, Kalaman himself, then her half-brother Timir, and later desires to have sex with Kalaman's grandfather, Nonno. In most African societies, incestuous relationships are condemned, but Sholoongo's acts reiterate Derrida's suggestion of decentring the centre. Damac, Kalaman's mother, insists that Sholoongo's foetus has to be aborted when her husband Yagut impregnates her. From the lustful looks Sholoongo and Yagut exchange, Kalaman learns of their affair and asks his grandfather to expound. Nonno admits that she was pregnant with Yagut's child (144), yet he has been having a love relationship with Sholoongo. Referring to his foster father and Sholoongo, Kalaman says, "I suspected they might have shared a secret lust for each other" (115). While she has been having sex with her half-brother Timir in their father's house, she disguises herself as a young girl and appears at the river in the morning when Nonno is swimming. Nonno says, "[t]he morning mist hangs over the river. An old man is enjoying his dip in the water when, quiet as an unrevealed secret, a young girl dives in and grabs the man in the groin. She takes him in her mouth […] I had kicked the assailant in the mouth. And she bled profusely" (139). In this episode, Nonno refuses to have sex with Sholoongo with the full knowledge that she has had a sexual affair with his son and his grandson. When she returns from the United States, she strives to seduce Nonno to have him and then kill him. After sex with him, she says, "I left as quietly as I had come, afraid that the truth of Nonno's erection, not to mention his death, might catch up with me sooner than I was prepared to acknowledge" (279). Earlier on, Nonno admits that Sholoongo is the cause of his spiritual and physical damnation. He says, "[y]ou are the

stirrer of this whirlwind" (278). Indeed, after the lovemaking, Nonno is stricken by blindness and dies (292–93).

Sholoongo's sexual appetite is so intense that Kalaman describes her as an animal; he says, "[s]he is no different from animals with whom a human mates" (143). These animal images underscore the community's attachment to the sky god who appeared through nature (the Wagar trees) and mated with a girl to reproduce the Cushitic tribes (Mire 2015, 100). The community therefore reveres Mother Nature, and male characters constantly have sex with animals. This propensity to commit acts that modernism would otherwise associate with "bestiality" is in tandem with acts of sorcery. Just as Rémy suggests, such characters have "animal characteristics" ([1595] 2003, 112) or singular abilities to commune with animals.

Sholoongo's father, Madoobe, is one of these characters that is so intimate with Mother Nature because he communicates with animals and has sex with them. Kalaman witnesses one incident when Madoobe stands "behind a heifer saying something […] the nearer I got to him and the young cow, the clearer his voice was, only I couldn't decipher his words, maybe because he was speaking to the cow in a coded tongue, comparable to children's private babble. Was he appeasing the cow's beastly instincts by talking to her in a secret language?" (17). Madoobe seduces the heifer in a coded language before having sex with it. Farah's tendency to associate animals with communication echoes Dionne's (2006, iv) contention that animals, particularly whales, have a language of communication in Witi Ihimera's *The Whale Rider*. Whereas Dionne's modernist focus is the "human-cetacean relationship" with reference to *The Whale Rider*, in this postmodernist reading of Farah, he points out sorcery as the root cause of verbal communication between humans and land animals. Kalaman says of Madoobe, "[a]fter a lengthy invocation, he inserted his erection in the heifer still talking, but also breathing hard" (1998, 17). The communication between Madoobe and the heifer is so clear that Kalaman says he thought he was listening to a man and woman making love, "for the cow was muttering something" (17). While some villagers deny that Madoobe's partner is a cow, his daughter Sholoongo insists that it is a cow that Madoobe has taken as his wife, but a couple of days later, Madoobe brings home a young bride (17). This incident recaps Rémy's claims on the connection between sorcery and shapeshifting ([1595] 2003, 112). For Derrida ([1974] 2016, 47), this is the "synthesis in which the completely other announces itself as such—without any simplicity, any identity, any resemblance or continuity—within what is not it," because people in Kalaman's community, in spite of their Islamic identity, use sorcery to disguise themselves without denunciation of the Islamic religion. Madoobe's cow is possibly a female sorcerer who has changed her form. Later on, he is killed by a kick from a donkey, which suggests that the donkey is a rival sorcerer who does not like his character.

Finally, Nonno is the one character who exhibits Derrida's concept of "diverse possibilities" between the two essentialist groups. According to Derrida ([1974] 2016,

47), "[t]he 'theological' is a determined moment in the total movement of the trace. The field of entity, before being determined as the field of presence, is structured according to the diverse possibilities—genetic and structural—of the trace." In other words, the character takes an in-between identity between essentialist groups (pre-Islamic and Islamic traditions) where he or she is in a state of flux, transitioning from the centre to the periphery and vice versa. This in-between space for Derrida is the "diverse possibilities" that Nonno chooses to survive in the cosmopolitan Somalia.

At one point, he is so engrossed in the Islamic tradition that he enrols to train as a Muslim scholar. He informs Kalaman, "[w]e go back to my teens when I was growing up in the city of Berbera in the North and learning to be a Koranic scholar" (Farah 1998, 276). Given his love for pre-Islamic traditions, Nonno transgresses Islamic norms and has to "flee a communal rage" (276). Thereafter, he catches an eye disease and has to take new vows not to repeat the mistake or suffer blindness. He strives to maintain integrity to avoid further punishment by Allah. For example, when Sholoongo makes advances at him at the river early in the morning, he kicks her in the mouth (139), and she has to flee. However, sometimes Nonno appeals to pre-Islamic traditions to uphold the place of mystic persons in his community. When Kalaman's mother, Damac, accuses Sholoongo of sorcery, Nonno defends her saying that as a shapeshifter, "shamans heal, they do not harm" (141). Rios (2002, 1585) associates shamans with the ability to alter states, contact spiritual entities and conquer evil. According to Farah (2001, 37), Islam is essentially monotheistic; the belief in other spirits that require a cleric, Wadaado, to exorcise is basically pre-Islamic.

In spite of his religious commitment to Islam, particularly through prayer (Farah 1998, 287), Nonno has a knack for aspects of pre-Islamic traditions. For example, when Kalaman is born, he prompts the crow to visit the home. Kalaman observes that the crow's behaviour in the home is quite similar to that of a person with the ability to think and communicate. It has come to celebrate the birth of Kalaman and name him. This episode reiterates Mbiti's (1970, 1) view that African religion permeates every aspect of life including birth and naming. When Nonno arrives home, the crow alights and is excited to see the baby (Farah 1998, 159). Kalaman avers that the crow's conduct at home is a mystery attached to the "pre-Islamic Somalia, a mythical creature elevated to the status of a deity" (159). According to Islamic teaching, Nonno's action of welcoming the crow is *shirk* (Al-Sheha 2020, 3), the worst contravention of the conventional religion in Mogadicio. The crow makes a loud squawk that sounds like "kalaman," and Nonno, out of reverence for, it names the baby Kalaman (Farah 1998, 161). As Yaqut, the adoptive father, celebrates, griots arrive in large numbers to chant blessings. The crow is the clan totem that is revered as an alternative deity in Nonno's clan (162), yet this is the very person who studied Islamic scrawls and ended up tampering with them (292). According to Mbiti (1970, 325), aspects of polytheism such as clan totems in African religion affect Islam along with "magic, sorcery and witchcraft" and there is "a clear mingling of Islamic ideas with those of traditional religion," which reiterate Derrida's synthesis of the two essentialist groups.

As the novel comes to a close, Nonno on the one hand underscores the need for taboos as laid down in Islam (202) and then violates them by having sex with Sholoongo (Farah 1998, 294). At the former episode he is the last Muslim standing by the Quranic teaching, but just before he has sex with Sholoongo he is the "kaffir" whining "is it worth my while to remain true to my moral sense, when no one is?" (294). This is the characteristic instability of in-between identities or what Derrida refers to as "diverse possibilities" ([1974] 2016, 47).

## Conclusion

This study set out to interrogate pre-Islamic aspects of Somali religion, particularly myths and Wagar—the sky god—with reference to Nadifa Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* and Nuruddin Farah's *Secrets*. A postmodernist reading of the two texts disrupts the conventional claim that 99% of Somalia subscribes to Sunni Islam and confirms that a substantial aspect of the culture of the populace (as represented by characters) upholds attributes of the Waaq and myth. Instead of Jama in Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* taking the trajectory of contemporary migrations, the novel appeals to the mythical paradigm by adopting Campbell's hero's journey that manifests through the stages of Departure, Separation, Initiation and Return. Mohamed also appeals to tradition through the references to the sky god to offer supernatural protection and guidance to the hero. The amulets, the stars and the rain are elements of Wagar that control Jama's life in place of conventional Islam that fails to universalise the Somali society in Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy*. In Farah's *Secrets*, emphasis on pre-Islamic cultural practices stands out through sorcery (shapeshifting) and bestiality. Most characters such as Sholoongo, Fidow and Madoobe practise pre-Islamic acts of sorcery that diminish the influence of modernist religions. Some sexual acts in *Secrets* would in the modernist perspective be described as immoral. It is, however, the contention of this article that Farah and Mohamed agree with Derrida's argument that the centre always moves towards the periphery and the periphery moves towards the centre. In some cases, Wagar and the myths of the pre-Islamic society have a significant impact on the contemporary communities in the Horn of Africa.

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