Moments in a Life

Identifying
the Educational Components of
Habouba's (Grandmother) Stories

لحظات من حياة حبوبة

دراسة في المكونات التربوية

لحكاوي حبوبة

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Dedication

To the memory of Habouba:

Your long happy life and your prevalent absence are still inspiring, empowering, and heart-easing!

To the memory of little Huwaida:

Short life and light presence, no wonder you loved butterflies!

To my parents Safia and Gurashi:

Your everlasting love and respect are reassuring that life is worth living. I miss you afternoon wanasa!

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Introduction

I will tell you a story. I will tell you the story of my education. I will tell you about my first educator, my grandmother, Habouba.[1] I am telling you this story because I learn that people know each other through sharing their stories. In Northern Sudan when people meet for the first time, they talk to each other. As they talk, they observe each other looking for some sort of shared knowledge; that may be a person, a story, a place they both visited, etc. Such shared knowledge denotes the start of trust and exchange of experience. In my stories, I am hoping you find some sort of knowledge we both share; a knowledge that activates further communication, questioning, and learning. I am a teacher and a student. I am a deep-rooted Sudanese woman and a storm-swept immigrant longing for belonging. I am culturally too heavy to immerse into the Canadian culture in one dive and light enough to try out every aspect of it. This inquiry is a link in the chain of knowing; knowing me and my world and knowing you and our world. This link addresses my educational journey.

My educational journey began with stories told to me by Habouba, my first educator. The idea of writing this inquiry came about as a way to express love and appreciation to her and to introduce myself to you through her stories. I want to release and disseminate some of the love supplies that I am honoured to bear throughout my life. This inquiry is a way of saying that Habouba and other women in her generation mattered. I am honoured to provide them the chance to write their own history. Doing so, I hope to develop deeper understanding and greater relatedness between you and me. I thrive to truly modify a wrongly captured image of women in my culture. Habouba was the first feminist I have known before I learned

[1] Habouba is a Sudanese Arabic word meaning the loving one. It is commonly used in Northern Sudan to refer to the grandmother. I use it here as a name I give to my grandmother in this inquiry.

the meaning of the term ‘feminist’. While I am writing about Habouba, I am also writing about elders in Northern Sudan.

I want to highlight the role of the local knowledge and wisdom passed by elder women in Northern Sudan. Elder women were regarded as the sustainers of the socio-cultural identity of the community. They are spiritually, emotionally, and socially connected with the various customs and ceremonies especially those associated with passage rituals through different life stages such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death (Huraiz, 1991). Elder people were the main educational and entertainment tanks for my community until their role has been recently overshadowed with the modern technological manifestations that know no limits. Habouba conducted her role as an educator through telling stories. Habouba’s generation is almost vanished. We rarely find such story-tellers in Northern Sudan. My mother for example prefers to play cards with her grandchildren rather than telling them stories. By writing this inquiry I try to fill in generational and spatial gaps.

This inquiry makes four chapters. Chapter one discusses the themes that emerged while writing the stories. These are: nostalgia, initiation, and conduct. Chapter two provides a detailed account of the theoretical frameworks and the methodological queries guiding my experience-based, arts-informed narrative inquiry. Chapter three contains the stories debating my educational journey with Habouba. Chapter four discusses Habouba’s perspective and my perspective in making sense of the stories.

Before I dive into the chapters, I start my inquiry with the story ‘Alive Forever’. This story signifies Habouba’s everlasting presence and influence in my learning journey in spite of her physical absence.

Alive Forever

Her henna dyed hair was blowing in the morning breeze adding more charm to her smiling face. Her tiny body was fully covered by her long wide dress. Her sandal wood beads surrounded her thin right wrist. The Morning Prayer ablution water left its wet traces on the ground beneath her bed. Her palm leaf prayer rug was spread out in front of the bed. It was unusual for her to remain in bed until sunrise.

Maha, her granddaughter was stretching her body lazily when she noticed that the sun was shining but she was not awakened by the usual call: Maha, Maha, the sun is shining filling up the courtyard. Get up daughter. Don't sleep until late; Allah distributes the daily blessings early. You will miss your share my daughter. Habouba would chant her morning chant:

The good day starts,
good morning,
the good day starts,
The caller is calling,
Oh Mohamed (peace be upon you) see your lights shed on all valleys

Maha rushed to Habouba's bed. She shook her and called:

"Habouba, Habouba, wake up. The sun is shining already. Habouba, what is wrong with you today?"

"Get up! Get up!" Maha called.

But Habouba would not budge. Maha's heart was bounding soundly in her chest as she begged:

"Habouba, please wake up for me. You wake me every day. Do it once for me, please, by Allah. Listen to me! Please wake up! Wake up! Wake up!" Habouba was not responding. Her smiling face was shining under the bright morning sun.

Soon the big yard was filled with people, women, men, and children. The whole village came into the house within no time. Being the only grandchild attending Habouba's death, Maha had to attend and participate in the major ritual ablution to prepare Habouba's body for burial as quickly as possible. Aunt Batoul called:

"Come on Maha, the deceased person feels respected when buried as quickly as possible."

"I denounced it when women told me that I should attend Habouba's ablution. I thought I could not do it. Women stressed that Habouba would not like for her body to be revealed and washed by strangers. They dragged me into the room where her body was kept. The moment I saw her, I was steadfast. Her body was a little cold and tender, but she absolutely looked much younger than her actual age. She looked content. Her body was quite obedient as I moved it from side to side. One thing is certain. She made death look beautiful!" Maha told me a year after Habouba's passing away.

Maha soon saw Habouba's body carried towards the cemetery:

"That was the most difficult part of it all. Everyone was screaming, waving goodbye and praying for her to join her loved ones in heaven," said Maha.

Men came back from the cemetery with stories of how easy it was to dig Habouba's grave: "The soil was damp. It took us no time and no effort to dig Habouba's grave. In that hot and dry time of the year, that was unusual". Hajj Alhassan shook his head: "Glory be to Allah. When we buried her body and headed back to the village, we saw the clouds racing to gather over us, thunder, lightening and the rain just poured over us as if it was meant to water her grave! She was a good woman. She had a good long life. May Allah have mercy on her virtuous soul."

Habouba died in May 1999. People say she was over 120 years old! I still rush to her room whenever I visit my home village. I rush there believing that I will find her, still as beautiful and shiny as ever. I rush there to greet her and bury my face into her bony bosom. I rush there to smell her sandal beads and mahleb[2] amulets she wore around her wrist and around her neck. But instead I find her prevalent absence, tangible and solid like a doorknob!

[2] It is an aromatic spice that looks like almond but is smaller. Arabic name is, محلب, in Latin letters, e.g., *mahlab*, *mahalab*, *mahleb* or *mahaleb*. In Sudan women used it to perfume homemade hair and skin moisturizers and incenses.

Chapter One

Surfacing Themes in the Stories

In this work I inquire about how it feels to be a part of a story; a story involving myself and my relatives. Yet it remains a fairy tale. I have smelt, felt, and lived in houses where unexplainable things took place. I inquire about what sense or meanings the formal education adds to or takes from these stories. I inquire about love, memories, power, and communal life. I do this through writing stories. Stories told to me by Habouba. Stories about her, or.... *are they about me?* These stories are about education or initiation.

Three themes have emerged while working on this inquiry and writing the stories. These are nostalgia, initiation, and conduct. In the following section I address each of these themes in detail starting with nostalgia as the compelling drive to write this inquiry at this specific time and place and as a motif reoccurring in the stories.

Nostalgia

My stories are provoked by my personal nostalgia of place and people. Old stories brought to life by my sentimental imagination of time, people, and place. A place I used to live in once, now it lives in me and people I lived with once, now they live with me. Nostalgia is defined as a "Sentimental longing for or regretful memory of a period of the past, esp. one in an individual's own lifetime; (also) sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past" (OED).

Personally, when I think about nostalgia, things that come to my mind are by far deeper than the definition mentioned here. It is not merely longing and regretful memories from the past. Nostalgia is the provoker of sweet memories, places, people, and it is the stimulator to link past with present. It is the motivator for conducting this inquiry. I totally

relate to Leggo (2004) when he says writing the past is writing the heart and hope for living in the present.

My longing resembles Habouba's when she spoke about moving away from home and back to home leaving people behind and taking their stories. She told many stories about her life away from home, having new friends, going away from them, communicating with them, losing them, and retaining their traces. I could relate to that sense of loss and gain of people and places before I even experienced it myself. I remember her tears when she told me this story:

"As soon as I got married to your grandfather, I accompanied him to Alwasa."[3] *One evening while your grandfather was covering an afternoon shift, I encountered a thunder storm for the first time in my life. You know we don't have that type of weather here. I was so scared. When I saw the lightening and heard the roar of the thunder, I ran to the street and entered the first hut on my way. In that hut an old woman was sitting on a small seat shaking a dry calabash. That was quite something!"*
Habouba smiled and continued.

"That was the second new experience for me in the same evening! I learned that there was yoghurt in that calabash and the woman was shaking it to extract butter and ghee. That night Hajja Hawa, and that was the woman's name, taught me how to make ghee out of yoghurt, something I enjoy doing until this day. We talked all evening and I forgot about the storm. Hajja Hawa became like a mother to me. She taught me many ways for food processing. We lived in Alwasa' for three years before we were transferred to another place. I still remember how Hajja Hawa wept when we were leaving."

Saying that, Habouba let go of the tiny drops of tears glittering along her lower eyelids.

According to the theories of nostalgia Grumet (1991) discusses, the repudiation of the mother as the first identification, the first love, and the first relation to give to the world and existence meaning, is a loss (p.77). It is said that nostalgia is a way of denying that loss. Grumet finds more functions for nostalgia other than just loss and longing. Nostalgia, or the cultural code or the emblem, as Grumet names it:

[3] A town in the Western Sudan.

> can function simultaneously as rationalization, denial, accommodation, and resistance. Because the emblem stretches between the experience of the individual and the order of the public culture, it contains multiple registers and encodes meanings that are variations of each other, ofttimes contradictory (p. 78).

Here I discuss what denial, resistance, rationalization, and accommodation mean to me. I rearrange the order in what is logical to me. *Denial* appears to be the thickest thread in the web of nostalgia. Denying the existing reality is a defence mechanism to live the now and the here. It is a way of pretending in order to retain my present from being lost into the past. In my indigenous community, we cry over people and places we leave behind. As ways of *resisting* or overcoming the feelings associated with such losses and to avoid crying for life-time, we tend to take part of the person's belongings or traces, or parts of the place with us, or just simply dividing up a sentence between the departing person and the staying ones. لا اله الا الله ..... محمداً رسول الله. Habouba used to take traces of close relatives as she saw them off. The following example illustrates this literally as well as figuratively:

A few days later, Sari carried a small suitcase and headed to the bus stop. A lot of people came to see him off. Mother and Habouba were in a state of heart-break. I just saw tears in their eyes and that made me cry. When Sari took his first steps out of our house, Habouba stopped everyone: "Please don't walk behind him. Stop right there at the gateway. I don't want you to erase his foot traces. Habouba was following Sari and carefully gathering the sand marked by his foot prints and putting it in her handkerchief. She counted to seven steps before they allow the people to follow Sari. As people followed, Habouba petitions followed.

Rationalization: nostalgia is provoked by the feeling of loss. For me the void that is open due to loss is often filled with some sort or another of gain or of hope. For example although I experience some worries of public alienation due to being away from home, and away from things that make home such as language and culture, my desire to learn is strengthened. Ways to discover new meanings are developed. And my language abilities are extended. So nostalgia here consoles and rationalizes the feelings of loss and finds some gains within the losses.

Nostalgia helps in *accommodating* these diverse feelings. Nostalgia is acknowledging and mourning such losses and giving in to them until they complete their life cycle. Nostalgia helps me cope and gain more meanings and experience new norms of life.

Nostalgia is a recurring theme in the Sudanese literature. That may be due to the state failure that marginalizes regions other than Central Sudan. Such marginalization and negligence forced internal and external displacement (Madibo, 2008). The Sudanese poet Hemeid (1980) talks about carrying his mother and her farming tools with him as he travels away from her. I find part of myself in this poem. I feel I am carrying people and places with me. Hemeid says:

> Oh Noura
> I bear you with me wherever I go
> Nothing erases your features from my sights
> Neither the tall buildings
> Nor the foreign names
> Or the velvety nights
> I see you as you come home at sunset
> With your fatigued, dusty face
> And your sharp sickle[4]

This notion of carrying people and places with us is also well expressed by another Sudanese young poet, Khairy (2007) in her poem "Longing":

> I pack the Nile in a bottle
> I bear you with me
> In my alienation
> When I shiver with chilliness
> Two tears flow down
> One says: I love you
> The other unpacks homeland from my suitcase[5]

[4] Hemeid's poem entitled, Nora, written in Arabic, my translation.

[5] Khairy's poem written in Arabic, my translation.

People in general may relate to my stories. Certain groups of people such as first generation immigrants or people living in their exiles may find themselves in these stories. Edward Said speaks for me when he says:

> Exile is predicated in the existence of, love for, or a real bond with one's native place; the universal truth of exile is not that one has lost that love or home but that inherent in each is an unexpected, unwelcome loss. Regard experiences then as if they were about to disappear; what is it about them that anchors or roots them in reality? What would you save of them, what would you give up, what would you recover? To answer such questions you must have independence and detachment of someone whose homeland is 'sweet' but whose actual condition makes it impossible to recapture that sweetness, and even less possible to derive satisfaction from substitutes furnished by illusions and dogma, whether deriving from pride in one's heritage or from certainty of who 'we' are. (p.336)

Exile mentioned by Said is so much connected to nostalgia. As a person living in a voluntary exile, I bear yearning bonds to my homeland. It seems to me that this kind of longing grows and gets stronger the farther I move. Although it is possible to develop new bonds with the new home, that kind of bond is different and it requires much more than the land's beauty and its welcoming inhabitants. It requires time and initiation of gradual inclusion. I think native land 'sweetness' is closely attached to the roots of the person. My own theory says that when a person is uprooted, some tiny particles of her roots are usually cut off or dried up during the process of removing and transferring the person to a new place. Loosing such particles decreases the individual's abilities to re-grow and to develop strong bonds with the new land. Some of the sweet moments I try to recapture are my family returns to my village to spend summer vacations and its association with community actions. Those were moments of happiness that all the community shared. Habouba and some close relatives would meet us at the railway station. Our relatives and neighbours would come to greet and visit us. My family enjoyed that rallying and they returned the favour in form of simple gifts and joyful socialization. Remembering those returns alone makes me happy. I am smiling to

myself now! Our arrival was usually a big event that would keep our neighbourhood busy until we left again.

In this inquiry I mention the term 'sweet practices' a few times. 'Sweet practices' as defined by Habouba: "are activities and actions you do while you are awake. When you play these actions in your mind before you sleep, you sense a sweet taste in your tongue as if you were eating a date!" Habouba meant that when people do the right thing, behave well, and conduct themselves in a good way, they will feel content and happy with their daily performances. For Habouba practices as well as words have taste. She used to tell me to try the taste of my words before I spell them out to people. She used to say: "a sword wound heals but a word's wound never heals." I would say having such kinds of conversation are 'sweet' things to miss and the reality of life makes it impossible to recapture.

My experiences are significant parts of who I am. They are very authentic parts of me. They influence the most recent choices I make. It is not that I am anchored to one place or past experiences, but they are anchored to me. I do not feel 'complete' without my experiences. My experiences are not mere memories. They are continuation for my life just like my breath. What I might save if given a choice are the images and smells of places and people, to be filled with them and to recapture their sweetness. What I might save are the sweet practices that denote the collective power and communal living that I witness as they fade away in front of my eyes. My past is always present like Leggo's (2004): " Perhaps there is no such thing as the past or the future, only the hope and possibility, even fiction, that will be, or might be, or could be, other moment of present (pre/ sent, sent before)" (p. 22). I am a moving community; "many in the one, one in the many" in Neilsen's words (2004, p. 45). I am afraid of feeling uprooted and lonesome.

Although Habouba lived in different places in Sudan she had one place she called home. Habouba insisted on living there until she lost her sight. She used to move freely in her house hiding her sight condition. For me that house is the counter image of the word home. It is the return house. Being a daughter of a railway employee, I lived in many places but Habouba's house is the one that I see in dreams and the one that I draw when I am bored on paper, on the air, or in mind. The most real home for me I would say. I wish I could describe her house, the rooms, the odour, the mythical components, etc. I try to write the descriptions in different stories, which is not an easy task. Bachelard (1964) is right when he writes: "The real houses of memory, the houses to which we return in dreams, the houses that are rich in unalterable oneirism, do not readily lend themselves to description" (p. 13). Oneirism is so much connected with this inquiry. Writing Habouba's stories I feel I have taken steps in realizing the recurring dream of recording Habouba's life as an educator and as a symbol of a lost place. The following segment may give a feel of the place. Although when I read it, I feel I am unjust to the place. As the most insignificant parts of Habouba's room are neither the buildings nor the furniture. I could not describe that crowd of spirits and memories associated with the room. I have no means to describe the mamlouk[6] that woke Habouba up for the dawn prayer. These and other things are in the essence of the place:

I am always fascinated with that particular odour. The one I smell in Habouba's room. I call it antiquity odour for lack of a better word. I wish I could describe that odour. Have you ever poured a pocket of water on dry sand and smelt the sand? The odour is simirent[7] to that scent. The first thing that you perceive when you enter the room is that odour.
To enter the room, you pass through the veranda or baranda, as we call it. There are two doors of green wood framing thin screens. The two doors are located on the north and the south walls of the veranda, facing one another to allow air flow. The doors open on the court yard. The north door takes you to the kitchen and the south one takes you to the men's saloon. When you enter

[6] A spirit Habouba had. It reminded Habouba of prayer times, and helped her with feeding the birds.
[7] Simirent is a new word I coined from the words 'similar' and 'different'.

from the northern door, the way I do, the door of Habouba's room will be on your right. Wait a minute before you dash into the room. Do you see those small zeers?[8] They were there to be at reach for my Grandfather. You see the wooden covers on them? Yes, these are for covering the water from dirt and holding the drinking mugs that are made of aluminum. Habouba fills these zeers every evening so Grandfather has cold water the next day. There are around six day beds on the veranda. This is where the family and visitors spend their day having coffee and chatting. Visitors are expected any time of the day without prior notice. But mostly they come between noon and late afternoon.
As you stand facing the room now, take a minute to look at the big green wooden door. It is decorated with zigzag frames. When you are at the doorway, you see two big beds located on your right and left sides of the room. They are so high that I jump to sit on them. They are covered with palm leaf mattresses. Habouba's mattress is colourful while grandfather's has the natural beige colour of the dry palm leaves. Look straight ahead to see Habouba's cabinet where she displays her china sets and glasses used only for guests. Habouba differentiates between guests and visitors. Visitors are neighbours and relatives who visit her often and are regarded as part of the family; whereas guests are people coming from far away or people who do not visit her often. On the left farther corner you see Habouba's wooden trunk. This is the place where she keeps a lot of interesting things. There you find grandfather's property papers, his school reports, his letter book with its carbon separator, Habouba's jewellery box, her amulets, small bundles of sand taken from Sheikhs' temples wrapped in cloth, and other things. On the wall on your right you see a portrait of Abdulrahman Almahdi.[9] On the right corner there is a tall corner table where grandfather keeps the books and magazines he reads. On this day the book is a historical book entitled Karary .Grandfather has told me that it is about a battle that happened in 1898 between the Sudanese Mahdiya Army led by Khalifa Abdullahi Alta'ayshi and the British Army led by Kitchener. Grandfather also has explained to me that the battle was the start of the official Anglo-Egyptian colonization of Sudan. On the eastern wall on your right you see some prayer rugs and grandfather's black gown that he wears over his white jalabiya.[10] On the same wall on your left side, you see my grandfather's sword, two spears, and a huge palm-leave mat, folded and leaning against the wall. The sandy ground is usually dashed with water. Look at the ceiling. You see intervals of three layers of roofing materials: palm tree branches weaved tightly

[7] A zeer is a clay pot to cool down drinking water.

[8] Abdulrahman Almahdi (1885-1959) is a religious and political leader. He played an important role in the Sudanese national movement against the British colonization. He founded "حضارة السودان" newspaper in 1919 and "النيل" newspaper in 1935. In 1945 he founded Al-Uma Party which was instrumental in gaining Sudan's independence in 1956. He was also a big advocate for religious as well as formal education. His portrait was displayed in Habouba's house because my grandfather was a member in Al-Uma Party (Trans. Arabic Wikipedia).

[10] A long and wide gown men wear in Sudan

together, then there are around twenty cuts of doum[11] *tree trunk used as beams, and a huge doum tree trunk used as a brace, along the ceiling".*

I wish you could read this piece through my eyes so you see the real room. It contains much more than the material contents in it. The peculiarity of that room comes from the memories associated with it rather than the appearance. I concur with Bachelard (1964) when he points out such places do not readily lend themselves to description.

The narrator in Saleh (1991) says about his house after he returns to his home village:

> I looked through the window at the palm tree standing in the courtyard of our house and I knew that all was still well with life. I looked at its strong straight trunk, at its roots that strike down into the ground, at the green branches hanging down loosely over its top, and I felt not like a storm-swept feather but like that palm tree, a being with a background, with roots, with a purpose (p. 2).

Here the palm tree with its strong trunk, its green branches relaxing down in serenity, and its roots penetrating deep down into the ground symbolizes life, belonging, rootedness, and purpose. The palm tree is almost a sacred being in Northern Sudan.

By telling my stories I become aware of what I lose and what I gain as I move place, class, colour, and language. By moving class, I refer to my personal experience as I continue to live in Canada. First I started to look for jobs matching my qualifications and experience until I was faced with the term of 'internationally-educated professionals,' a coded term that I interpret as: professionals who are not good enough to work in their field of expertise in Canada. Here is a similar story about immigrants who entered Canada under the category of skilled workers:

> The 52-year-old was a family physician before coming to Canada. Her husband was an electrical engineer. They lived in a five-bedroom home and had a maid. Atiqa Ilmad, meanwhile, was prepared to go through the medical licensing program until she watched a friend, also a foreign-trained doctor, struggle for 10 years trying to secure a residency placement. So to support her family, she traded her stethoscope and her pride for a

[11] A kind of palm (*Hyphæne Thebaica*), found in Egypt, having a dichotomously divided trunk, and an edible fruit about the size of an apple. Usually doum-palm, (OED).

> receiver and pleasant phone manners, offering banking services late at night to crusty customers, (Song, 2007).

Like a lot of newcomers, I started to settle for menial work that does not require university education or experience and that pays hourly wages little enough to move my social status *down* from the so-called middle class to the so-called lower class.

By moving colour I also take my personal experience to explain what I mean. The first time I noticed that my skin colour was different from the mainstream's was after I moved to Canada, as well. I am acutely noticed and I notice myself in crowds as the other, (Rodiguez, 1982, hooks, 1994). Now I realize that back home, I did not notice myself because, probably, I was busy noticing the colours of other ethnic minorities. Now I carry the label once I glued on 'others' in my country; 'visible minority', a label I carry with a considerable amount of unease.

I also moved back from my seat as an English language teacher to a learner who expects to be understood in spite of her different accent. At this moment I am writing this inquiry in a second language and that is another migration. As Eltoum (2008) states, the writer leaves home when she writes in a second language. Wondering to myself, I ask: How many times have I left home? What is home? Where is home? I need a whole line to situate myself in Canada; I am an internationally educated teacher who has a visible colour and a 'hearable' accent. These terms do not describe me but probably they describe my movements. I realise that I have not only moved place. I also moved class, colour, and language.

My alienation is so intensified that I need to refer to my past, my roots to feel that I am good enough and probably to tell people that I have a past, a value, belonging and that I want to share my story. I am not the 'other'. If I am the other, who are you?! As Musa (2008) questions and exclaims. Manguel (2007) describes the 'other' as:

> Our double.... the double is human, but not entirely so; of flesh and blood but with an element of unreality because we fail to recognize or identify every one of his actions... He is our neighbour, our equal, but also a foreigner, the one who does things differently, has different colour, or speaks a different language. To better differentiate us from him we exaggerate his superficial characteristics (p. 36).

Could the story-telling, elders often do, be a response to the alienation from their life that can come with old age? By asking this question my supervisor evokes more wonders about alienation of place and time. Which one is more intense, more common? Does moving place give the sense of moving time?

Dealing with nostalgia helps me acknowledge my place as a stranger who is seen as a total 'other' and who deeply believes that she is 'simirent'. Simirent is a new word I coined from the words 'similar' and 'different'. The word means similar first and different last. Here I use it mainly to call for penetrating through the surface of colour, language, place, and social status. This is a call for you to scratch the surface to find similarities first. Once you do that, feel free to see the 'exotic' superficial differences.

As I mention earlier, nostalgia is the stimulator to write my educational story that has taken its shape mainly through Habouba's stories. A reoccurring theme in Habouba's stories is initiation. This theme is discussed below in detail.

Initiation

Initiation is the dominant theme of my work. I argue that initiation and education are very similar concepts. Initiation is defined as:

> 1. The action of beginning, entering upon, or 'starting' something; the fact of being begun; beginning, commencement, origination. 2. Formal introduction by preliminary instruction or initial ceremony into some position, office, or society, or to knowledge of or participation in some principles or observances; hence generally, admission to the knowledge, or instruction in the elements, of any subject or practice (OED).

Education is defined as:

> 1. The process of nourishing or rearing a child or young person, an animal. 2. The process of 'bringing up' (young persons); the manner in which a person has been 'brought up'; with reference to social station, kind of manners and habits acquired, calling or employment prepared for, etc. 3. The systematic instruction, schooling or training given to the young in preparation for the work of life; by extension, similar instruction or training obtained in adult age (OED).

The dictionary definitions above supports an old claim of mine that says initiation and education are similar, and here I use similar because I am shy to say synonymous. Both words celebrate beginning and introducing knowledge to the novice. The meanings of the two words as they appear in the OED, talk about instruction granted to inexperienced persons by experienced persons. In school my attention is directed to important issues that I need to read and learn about. In Habouba's initiation she directed my attention to some worthwhile social practices to master or social values to observe. This notion is consistent with Dewey (1944) who points out that education is the process of leading or bringing up. The outcome of this process is shaping the novice's life to harmonize it with the socio-cultural community in which she lives.

Education has been thought about as initiation into worthwhile practices where the learner is initiated by another into something she has to master, know, or remember. Such practices are usually out of the attention scope of the learner. Peters (1972) points out that:

> the likening of education to a process of initiation is obvious enough. For it is a peculiarly apt description of the essential feature of education which consists in experienced persons turning the eye of others outwards to what is essentially independent of persons (p. 54).

In the story below Habouba showed me that it is essential to spend time asking about people and checking on neighbours, friends, and relatives. A practice that still matters to me:

Habouba put on a beautiful beige toobe.[12] *She wore her sandalwood perfume and told me to get ready for a walk.*
"Are we visiting people?" I asked
"No, we are going for a walk. We will greet people as we meet them."

[11]A toobe is a women's gown. It looks like the Indian sari.

With me holding her hand, Habouba walked on the streets and through the narrow alleys waving her white handkerchief:
"Salaam[13] hoy[14], Khawla and your family. May angels pass my salaam to you."
Habouba did the same whenever we passed by a house. When she saw people in the street, she called to them:
"As-salaam alaikom" (Peace be upon you). She hugged women and shook hands with men. She asked them about their families.

She stood with each one for some time. I watched in impatience.
"Habouba, Let's go." I showed my impatience and wanted to continue walking.
"Why are you in a hurry? What are you after? Don't chase life. You will not catch it; you will end up with just mirage. Enjoy the moment, daughter, enjoy the moment. We are just walking by to meet people and to ask about them. Salaam is Islam Sunna.[15] You should care for people, meet them with a smile, greet them, and ask about them. That will be your gift to them. You know my daughter, if you win people's love, you win an everlasting treasure."

This example illustrates initiation into a practice that promotes good conduct and community involvement. Habouba took walks purposely to meet with people in the street and to ask about them and their families. She did not only greet the people who met her in those walks, but also greeted those whom she did not see as she passed by their houses. She sent her salaam (peace wishes) to them using some sort of spirit "*May angels pass my salaam to you.*"

The process of initiation is further explained by Smeyers and Burbules (2006):

> The learner is initiated into forms of thought and understanding that are part of a critical cultural heritage. These forms are public but beyond a child's understanding; therefore, he or she must be gradually and skilfully initiated into the knowledge, sentiments and valued activities and practices of civilized life (p.439).

Here Smeyers and Burbules point out that initiation is meant to introduce knowledge about certain practices to children. These practices are of social and cultural significance. Such practices are usually publicly known by adults but mostly new to children. Initiation is introducing knowledge, beginning and continuing skill training until children have the

[13] Arabic word meaning peace, used for greeting
[14] Sudanese Arabic word, used for calling Oh…..
[15] The deeds, sayings and unspoken approval of Muhammad as this has been recorded and systemized in Prophet Muhammad's sayings.

required knowledge and skills that enable them to get involved in the socio-cultural life of their community.

Scholars are worried that initiation or teaching certain practices may "reinforce existing disparities" like the unequal distribution of wealth and power (Smeyers and Burbules 2006). That is a legitimate possibility even in my stories when practices are weighed with standards other than the community's. For example in the following story, Habouba seems to limit the image and role of the married woman to pleasing the man and being subservient. This is what you might think at the first glance. Here is a part of the story entitled "Wedding":

"Your body should smell good and those areas need more effort to keep them clean." She showed me how to scrub my body using dilka.[16] *She showed me how to stand over sandal wood incense covering my body with a blanket so that my body and my bed would smell good. Then she added:*
"When your husband comes from outside, you should feed him if he is hungry, give him water if he is thirty, let him rest if he is tired. If you have something to tell him, wait for him to speak first. Listen to him before you talk. Make sure that you make him as comfortable as possible so he makes you comfortable. Don't be like the woman in the proverb:

(You come from the farm
She comes from the neighbourhood
She does not give you food
And does not let your tongue slips go!)

As we notice from this story, Habouba is initiating me into the best wife from her socio-cultural point of view. For her and the community the good woman is the one who is always clean and beautiful and who is ready to give rather than to take and to listen rather than to talk. This could be seen as consistent with the unequal power issue mentioned by Smeyers and Burbules (2006) when you look at the story from the Western lens. However there is another say from Habouba's perspective and that will be discussed in another part of this inquiry.

[16] Dilka is home-made scented body scrub.

With regard to education, Dewey (1944) points out that curriculum should embody both sociological and psychological principles. The former demands that the pupil be initiated into the customs, habits, values, and knowledge that constitute the culture of a community. The psychological principle demands that this should be done with regards to the pupil's individual needs, interests, and problems.

These expectations from school curriculum were simply not possible at the time Habouba was taking care of her children's initiation or education. The main reason for this being unlikely is that there has been an immense separation between formal education and the community. Formal education was represented by the school which was a totally alien institution that used a foreign language as a medium of communication and teaching. The teachers themselves were foreigners with different socio-cultural backgrounds, different language, different religion, and little or no knowledge of the social and cultural characteristics of the area. The ontology and epistemology were misappropriated and repacked by Western orientations to meet the colonial demands (Huraiz 1991, Khalifa et al, 1997, Benham, 2007). Having people like Habouba to tackle the responsibility of social and cultural education was crucial. Sadly, realities about the alien education in Sudan are still intact more than half a century after independence. The Sudanese elite who replaced the colonial authority continued to tailor the educational policies using the same colonial measures (Bola, 2006).

Habouba's presence was a complementary factor to formal education. She was intentionally filling gaps in the school curriculum and trying to produce active and respectable members with strong feelings of belonging and accountability towards their community. In her petitions she used to repeat:

May you be an un-climb-able mountain	تسويكن جبلاً ما ينطلع
May you be an un-pluck-able wedge	و شاية ما تنقلع
May people consult you when you are present	ان حضرتوا يشوروكن و يدوروكن
And wait for you when you are away	و ان غبتوا ينتظروكن

In these petitions Habouba is praying for her children to stand tall and prominent like mountains. She wants them to be valuable members in their community so that people will consult them about important communal decisions if they are present. If they are away she hopes that people will postpone the important decisions until these active members return.

While most of the people living in my community were reluctant to send their children to school in fear of alienating and pushing them away from their community, Habouba encouraged all her children, males and females to attend schools. She acknowledged the importance of formal education yet remained a little anxious about it like the rest of her community. She took the responsibility of planting seeds of local education in her children to complement and counter the formal alien education. Habouba continued to encourage and support formal education, development, change, and transformation of her children, and her grandchildren throughout her long life.

I see initiation and local education as necessities to perceive social and cultural identity where formal education is lacking the sociological factors mentioned by Dewey (1944). Formal education has been separated from the traditional education that concentrates on transmission of local knowledge or content that is fundamental to the development of critical thinking and individual exploration. As Peters (1972) puts it “critical thought is vacuous without anything concrete to be critical about” (pp. 53-54). Here Peters refers to different subjects of knowledge he mentions science, history, and philosophy as examples of modes of thought individuals need to master before they develop critical thoughts. I add to these, local knowledge. Peters goes further to say that: “The procedure of a discipline can

only be mastered by an exploration of its established content under the guidance of one who has already been initiated" (p. 54).

Initiation also, as the term implies, is just the start in a long and required journey into complex processes that leads to achieving that state of mind known as being initiated or educated. Reading Peters (1972, 1973, 1981) and others I learn that a few factors are usually in place to achieve the process of initiation:

The first factor is the character of the initiator: an experienced, respected, and enlightened person who voluntarily takes the responsibility of teaching an inexperienced person. Peters (1972) highlights that there are types of processes leading up to the successful outcomes. Peters states that these processes have in common the minimum requirements of "wittingness and voluntariness". This factor is represented by the character of Habouba in my stories. Habouba was well known and respected. Like many elders in rural communities, she was a social consultant in her village. People sought her advice in various matters such as clashes over land, family conflicts, and so on. Some women took their babies and left them with her to wean. While that practice was very common in the community, I never got to observe it throughout the time I spent in my home village. I am confident to say that it is one of the practices that have already eroded. Women used to help each other with weaning babies when they were around two years old. The baby to wean was brought to live with a family from a week to a month period. Habouba told me the following story several times:

"When Zahra brought me her son Hadi to wean, he was about two years old. He cried every night for the first week he stayed with me. Zahra used to come to visit him every day, spend some time with him, and sneak out so he wouldn't follow her to their house. He was supposed to stay with me for a month or so until he abstained from breast feeding."

Habouba usually laughed before she reached the following part:

"Well, he stayed with me until he became a prominent lawyer!" He never left me. When he wanted to marry that Egyptian woman, it was I who convinced his mother to agree with his choice. She wanted him to marry her niece."

I mention this story here to highlight some characteristics of Habouba as an initiator. To clarify the last part of the story, it is not required to leave the baby until adulthood. However Habouba accepted to have Hadi live with her until adulthood. This tells about the relatedness of the community and how members felt like one connected family.

The second factor is the character of the inexperienced person who consents to 'give in' or cooperate by following rules to let the process of learning happen. Peters (1972) points out that the processes leading to initiation involve some kind of consciousness and consent on the part of the initiated. The social identity of the initiated is generally developed enough to comprehend the practices into which she is to be initiated. It is worth mentioning that the social practices that require initiation are well thought about and they perfectly match the different age stages of the people to be initiated. I remember being ready to let social knowledge come. I was prepared to listen, observe, and follow rules to learn. I did not adopt everything I was taught as we see from the following extract of the story below:

Our last stop was at Alsheik Almajzoub's. Alsheik Almajzoub's temple was located in the centre of the other temples. It was also the biggest. When we arrived there, we found many people holding the curtains surrounding the grave and praying. Habouba pushed us in front of her and prayed: "Oh Alsheik Almajzoub this is your daughter and her husband. They are visiting you today desiring your blessings for good long life together, a life filled with happiness, children, and wealth."
Habouba tore out two strings from the curtains and tied one around my arm and the other around my husband's arm. She asked us not to take them off unless we wanted to wash them. She also took some sand from the sand heaped on the grave. She put it in another piece of cloth and gave it to me. She asked me to take it home with me. We stayed there until sunset. We headed back to the village after the sunset prayer. As soon as we got into our room I tore the pieces of cloth and threw them with the sand into the garbage.

As noticed in this story, I was not so compliant to all practices. That might be due to my exposure to different kinds of education. Also the fact that I was newly married to a person

who received his higher education in Russia during the height of the communist power might have some effect on my action.

The third factor is the type of activities or practices people are taught or initiated into. Such activities are of social value and worthwhile from the community's perspective. According to Smeyers and Burbules (2006) such practices are expected to promote good conduct and social coherence. The Example below illustrates how the whole community is taking part in the naming ceremony of a new born:

The lamb meat was brought to the women and they divided it in two halves. One half was cooked for people attending the naming ceremony and the other half was divided to seven equal piles. Each pile was divided into two halves. Seven packs were offered to poor people living around and the rest was distributed to the closest neighbours. Habouba asked me and my cousin Muna to distribute the neigbours' portion. She gave us precise instructions. We were told to start from the closest neighbour on the right:
"Start with Fatma's bit[17] *Abbas's house, then go to Alne'ma, then to Haleema, then go to Hager. Tell each one of them that today we named the baby girl Naylaa. After you finish all of them go to the neigbours on the left. Start with Toma then Zahra and Afaf. Give them the meat, tell them the same and come back. Don't be late!"*
We ran to the neigbours distributing the meat and telling them the naming news. After we were done with the job, we ran fast to my best friend's house and invited her to have lunch with us.

The individual's identity and character traits are internalized through learning social rules such as honesty, fidelity, bravery, cooperation, etc during the initiation process. As Peters (1972) writes, the "potentialities of the individual can only be developed within the framework of some socially structured pursuit into which he has to be initiated" (p. 56). With this Peters disapproves the notion of the *tabula rasa* mentioned by some scholars or treating a child as a 'washed board' as in Ibrahim's (2008) account on the education policies in Sudan. However, an individual's potentials are changeable throughout the time and the social circumstances under which the individual lives. As stated by Scheffler (1985), "a person's

[17] Arabic word meaning daughter of…

potentials are the seeds of possible changes in his power and attainments" (p. 17). Such changes are mediated by intentions and beliefs, of oneself or others. These statements reinforce my claim that Habouba's initiation has helped in developing my potential by opening my eyes to discover worlds out of my reach through her stories and teachings.

As mentioned earlier, most of Habouba's stories are part of initiation into cultural and social practices. Practice is defined by Maclntyre (1981) as:

> Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partly definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (p. 187).

The aims of social practices range from maintaining cultural and social identity, power relations, to child-rearing, role-modelling and behaviour modification (Maclntyre 1981). As you will notice from my stories, the practices highlighted in the stories are not meant to consolidate conformity and subordination. On the contrary they are meant to help children achieve the best possible social status and prominence. Habouba mentions these very words 'high standards, resilience, strength, success, and other words describing status and prominence in her petitions I heard before sunrise and after sunset twice daily for years:

May your standards be high تعلي مقامكن
May your hand be strong تقوي ضراعكن
May your May your social band be resilient تقوي حزامكن

According to Smeyers and Burbules (2006), the whole area of informal education is more important when we think about engaging people with practices that are given moral weight. I mean practices that nurture the virtues of honesty, bravery, faith, etc. Such practices are regarded as objects of excellence and perfectibility. Smeyers and Burbules (2006) point out that all practices have reasons behind them which give them the stability they have, but such reasons can be questioned. (Smeyers and Burbules, 2006). Most of Habouba's teachings

back Smeyers and Burbules's claim that there are reasons behind the practices to give them stability. In Habouba's teachings the smallest details are attended to and they are given meanings and justifications. For example:

"Here! Take this!" Habouba said stretching out her hand with a bowl of peanuts and dates.
I extended my left hand. Habouba says: "no, no, use your right hand. You should only use your right hand to eat".
Why? I asked.
"Because the evil spirits share your food when you eat with your left hand and you will never feel content!" She answered.

Although the justifications are not always convincing, I have kept most of the practices Habouba taught that do not contradict with my own beliefs and individual traits. I do not hesitate to say that most of the things I have learned as a child and a youth are due to Habouba. Most of her teachings happened simply when I observed how she reacted to different situations and when she explained her behaviour. Habouba's teachings are coherent and complex in the sense that they combine a series of differing yet related practices and they are consistent with her theoretical explanation. There is a sort of symphonic harmony in her teachings. Habouba's teachings start from the moment a baby is born. The first thing to test a child's hearing is by softly calling adhan[18] into both ears in turns. This, at least, serves two purposes; the first one is testing the baby's hearing and the second is introducing a religious and/or language segment of the baby's identity. As a toddler the child is exposed to observing adults as they do their daily activities. Meanwhile she is taught to cooperate by providing simple chores such as preparing washing soap and water and pouring water for adults to wash hands before and after meals. Usually girls are taught to help women while boys are trained to help men. As children get older, they are required to perform more complex rites and cooperative activities. Children feel good about themselves and they feel values when they are

[18] Adhan is the call for Muslim prayer.

involved and given the chance to taste the 'sweet practices'. All practices are socially established and commonly agreed upon. These practices bear moral weight because they enhance the community ethics and they nurture the values of collaboration and communal life.

My personality is the product of my early life's initiation, personal innate traits, as well as education. I agree with Peters (1972) that "a person's character represents his own achievement, his own manner of imposing regulation on his inclinations. But the rules which he imposes are those into which he has been initiated since the dawn of his life as a social being" (p. 57).

To summarize this section I conclude that initiation and formal education complement each other. Cultural initiation is highly required where formal education is alien to the community. I find out that education and initiation, viewed a certain way, can have the same meanings and aims. One of the significant aims of both education and initiation is to make a change in the individual's conduct. In the following part I address conduct as an educational aim and as a mean and end of Habouba's teachings.

Conduct

"Conduct is always shared. It is social" (Dewey, 1922, p.17).

The verb to conduct means: "to direct one's actions, comport oneself, behave oneself". The noun conduct means: "manner of conducting oneself or one's life; behaviour; usually with more or less reference to its moral quality; good or bad" (OED). The moral weight of conduct is given by the society the person lives in. The socio-cultural structure defines what is good and what is bad. This is especially true in a northern Sudanese community where virtues are other determined (Nordenstam, 1968) or assessed mainly by the community.

Seeing ideas about education as ideas that attempt to make a difference in conduct has been pointed to throughout the history of educational theory. This claim is backed by works of Aristotle, Dewey, Peters and others. In Aristotle's accounts on virtues, he points out that are two kinds of virtues: intellectual and moral. Intellectual virtue owes its birth and growth to teaching. For this reason it requires experience and time, while moral virtue is a result of habit. This classification comes as a result of two kinds of wisdom; philosophic and practical. We adapt by nature to receive virtues and make perfect by habit. Aristotle goes on explaining that of all things that come to us by nature, we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity. For virtues, we get them by first exercising them. So we learn them by doing them; i.e., practising virtues in our daily realities. We become just by conducting just acts, brave by doing brave acts and so on. Holding Aristotle's concepts on conduct, Chambliss (1987) points out that conduct is action, and that each example of conduct is a way of educating. He also argues that theories of education must be theories *of* conduct, rather than *about* conduct.

Dewey (1922) and Peters (1972) emphasize that a central aim of education is to make changes in the individual's conduct. They mention that education is meant to regulate the individual's conduct to make it socially acceptable. They both emphasize the social character of conduct. Peters associates self-realization with conduct. He asserts that self-realization of the individual is limited to the development of the self in activities and modes of conduct that are socially desirable. "These activities are almost always social in character" (p. 56, 1972).

Conduct is a central constant feature of Habouba's teachings. The community in which Habouba lived celebrates communal life where people highly weigh social inclusion and acceptance. Individual's conduct is the whole community's business. People are required

to "act rightly and to be good" as stated by Aristotle (Ross, 1952, Trans). In the same line Dewey (1944) mentions that for a person to be capable of living as a social member, he should be able to balance what he gets from the community with what he contributes to it. For Habouba it is the individual's responsibility to behave morally well in order to attain a good life quality and to be socially embraced. Dewey (1922) elaborates the meaning of better conduct gained through education, both for the individual and for the social medium in which and through which education takes place. Habouba saw deviation from socially accepted conduct as a serious danger especially for females. She sometimes expressed her fears that formal education might alter the notions of the socially accepted conduct. A famous phrase she repeated to me and to my mother before me was: "Your body-guard is your heart. Nobody will follow you to protect you. Do not think that just because you are educated, you are allowed to join the Elkashif chorus.[19] These stories are your shields. Do not forget them." Here Habouba means knowledge and respect of socially acceptable behaviour and good conduct enable the person to protect herself and to be perceived as a valuable member of the community. In that community, an individual on her own may be easily singled out if she happens to be 'not minding' her conduct. It important for the individual to conduct herself in an acceptable way so that others will include her the community. For Habouba good conduct is both personal as well as social. It means protection and it merges both personal traits and socially defined virtues. This is consistent with Dewey (1922) who claims that: "a truly humane education consists in an intelligent direction of native activities in the light of the possibilities and necessities of the social situation" (p. 96). Huraiz (1991) writes: "the whole

[19] Elkashif was a well-known Sudanese singer. It was inappropriate, especially for girls, to join the entertainment field.

group [in the Northern part of Sudan] is responsible for the individual and the individual finds her identity through the group"[20] (p.35).

Individuals, in general, require others' approval for their conduct. In order to gain that approval, practices should be enacted in the right way, to meet others' expectations (Smeyers and Burbules, 2006). We see this in one of Habouba's story about her daughter, Amna. As a teenager, Amna appears to acquire her mother's good manners and conduct. A poet noticed this and asks whose daughter she was. When he was told that she was Habouba's daughter, he said:

Gurashi's[21] off-spring is the cream of the cream…
Your teeth are delicately crafted like silver coins…
It is time to strip the emblems off the Commander of Justice[22]
And put them on your shoulders

In this segment we notice that Amna not only masters her mother's teachings, but also surpasses her conduct in a way such that the poet wants to strip the emblems off Habouba shoulders and promote her daughter, Amna, as 'the Commander of Justice'. Here Amna and the poet as socio-cultural beings have a standard of what good conduct is like. They both agree on that standard. For the poet Amna seems to transcend the good conduct standards.

As mentioned earlier, conduct is regarded as an educational aim by many educational scholars such as Aristotle, Dewey 1922, Peters 1972, and Chambliss 1987. Habouba stressed the importance of good conduct by reflecting socially accepted conduct in her daily activities as well as in her teachings. She stood as role-model in her community, a role people in general expect educators and community figures to play.

[20] Arabic text, my translation.
[21] Habouba's family name.
[22] A nick name for Habouba.

Having addressed the three dominant themes of nostalgia, initiation, and conduct, it is time to raise questions about why I am using stories as a vehicle and drive for my inquiry. The following chapter addresses this question and discusses the theoretical framework and the methodology I use in my inquiry.

Chapter Two

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In this part of my qualitative inquiry I discuss the theories and the methodology guiding it. I utilize the general area of narrative inquiry with special reference to arts-informed narrative inquiry. I am writing and retelling several types of stories. One category is retelling some tales told to me by Habouba, my grandmother, when I was a child. These are folk tales widely spread in central and northern Sudan. Two tales in the collection represent this category. These are 'Friendship', and 'Sleeping Luck'. Another category is stories recording family history. I classify this type in two ways: the first type encompasses stories told to me and my siblings by Habouba. These are represented here by 'Siblings' and 'Tale of a Sword'. The second type in family history covers stories reflecting my own observations on Habouba's life and my relation with her. Examples of these stories are 'Farewell' and 'Wedding'. Another category is the one I put under the heading wanasa. The wanasa stories are generally stories discussing current events happening in the community. The wanasa usually takes place during women's gatherings. Although most of the attendants are women, men may attend them if they happened to be at the same place of the gathering. The wanasa tales are represented by 'Mishat'[23] and 'Spell'. The wanasa stories took place during Habouba's gathering with her friends, relatives and neighbours. Each type will be thoroughly explained in the following chapters. All the stories share some common features and these are having explicit or implicit educational significance.

[23] Mishat is hair braiding. It is done by a specialized hairdresser known as mashatah.

Why stories?

When I ask myself this question, words jam up intensely in my mind. Most give more questions than answers. What else can I use for a narrative inquiry? Others start with 'because'. Because I love these stories and I want to disseminate that love. Because I am sharing human experiences and the closest method to do that is art. Because that was the way Habouba had taught me. I wholly relate to Dewey (1934/2005) when he says: "craftsmanship to be artistic in the final sense must be 'loving' (p. 49). Habouba called this "شغل بزمة" which reads: "shughul bizimma" meaning that a task should be done with consciousness and care. Personally, I don't see ways better than telling stories in order to explore people's experiences and relations with one another and with their ecological system. According to Dewey (1934/2005) art is experience. Creating literature and retelling stories is the best way to show experience. I have the backup of Dunlop (2001) as she says: "journeying through books and creating literature is a primary source for speaking about human experiences" (p. 12). Through my stories I am lighting up ways that connect us as people with our roots of the human species

Telling those stories, I hope to provoke memories and thoughts of people across the seas and mountains. I hope to take the reader's imagination to remote areas and 'simirent' people. These stories have been living in my memory and my heart as far as I remember. They have written me a long time ago. They define my life. I am but a continuous thread of stories retelling themselves to me now and then. Mine is a verbal culture and there is a constant dialogue and voices in me to the extent that I sometimes shout to myself: "let me live the here and now for god's sake!" Other times I appeal to them to appear to give me a sense

of rootedness, a weight to ground and support me. As King (2005) puts it; "the truth about stories is that that's all we are" (p. 2). King goes on:

> I tell stories not to play on your sympathies but to suggest how stories can control our lives, for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of me that will be chained to these stories as long as I live (p. 9).

King (2005) starts his stories and ends them in simirent language. I mean he uses similar endings for his stories and suggests that people can use the stories in different ways to learn from them, change them, or acquire other meanings in life. It occurs to me that King is initiating the reader/listener into changing her life after hearing his stories. He makes it seems as if it is up to us to do whatever we want to do with the stories, but again he warns us not to say that we could live our life differently if we heard his stories. It is as if I hear Kings saying: "this is my lesson and now it is your turn to do your homework. Your life will not be the same. Now you are involved. You are no longer innocent!" Kings story ending goes:

> Take Louis's story for instance. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Cry over it. Get angry. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would live your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now (p. 119).

Unlike King, Habouba and I are not only offering our stories to you, you are already a part of our stories. Our stories are yours now and it is your responsibility to pass them on. و انحترت و انبترت في حجركم!'winhatarat winbatarat fii hijirkum' which means our stories ended in your lap.

Leslie Silko (1998) says: "they [stories] aren't just entertainment/ don't be fooled/ they are all we have to fight off illness and death" (p. 93). I relate deeply to Silko's statement that stories are not just for entertainment. I cannot count the times when I used the strength in my stories to conquer my personal rage and to turn my small defeats into big victories. But that's another long story. In the same line Manguel (2007) recognizes the helping hand stories lend us when we are sick, confused, or weak. Manguel goes deeper when he asserts that stories fuel our conscience and awareness about our own being. He writes:

> Under certain conditions, stories can assist us. Sometimes they can heal us, illuminate us, and show us the way. Above all they can remind us of our condition, break through the superficial appearance of things, and make us aware of the underlying currents and depth. Stories can feed our consciousness, which can lead us to the faculty of knowing if not *who* we are at least *that* we are, an essential awareness that develops through the confrontation with another's voice (pp.9-10).

Habouba stories are never written. They are recorded in my memory. I hear them loud, forceful, and ready to join whenever I play them. I remember Habouba's voice, the way she talked, her laughter, the way she tried to hear after she lost her hearing ability. She used to lean forward towards the speaker, with her mouth half open and her head nodding repeatedly. Sometimes I see her in the mirror and a few times I heard her teaching in a classroom with me.

Writing these stories is therapeutic and empowering to me. I believe so on the basis of my own practice and observation. One thing is that I am leaving my protective shell (Luciani 2004), breaking away from it, liberating myself and getting open to battle my own fear and to reveal myself as a woman, a teacher, a researcher, and many 'others'. My stories have done me good service by helping me understand complex personal situations. At the same time I use them to re-experience and bring to life some particular moments of my past, moments laden with complex mythical significance that goes down to the details of my daily life. When approaching my grandmother's house I still turn my head to the left to check if I would ever see 'the man with the thread neck' watching me over the walls. That's just one of many 'doubles' in my life.

My stories may motivate you to turn your attention to your own narratives. They may flicker simirent memories or moments in your lives. I borrow Manguel's words to conclude:

> Stories can offer consolation for suffering and words to name our experience. Stories can tell us who we are and what are these hourglasses through which we sift, and suggest ways of imagining a future that, without calling for comfortable happy ending, may offer us ways of remaining alive, together, on this much-abused earth (2007, p. 146).

In Search for a Methodology

I have spent time shopping around the methodology bazaar for *the theory* that is cut to fit my inquiry. I find a few theories that I like. I decide to buy a bit from each one and assemble them together to make mine. Luckily these theories are neighbours so I do not need to travel long distances to collect them. Dewey (1934, 2005) has a beautiful piece that I use as the base for my structure. That is, the concept of "*experience*". Eisner (1991) has some qualities that help me figure out Dewey's experience and raise my own. Clandinin (2007) maps a beautiful landscape for narrative inquiry. Her materials help me decide where to ground my inquiry. From Neilsen, Cole, Knowles (2001, 2004), and Mello (2007) I get tools that aid me push the boundaries of my construction and open more pathways for multiple perspectives and understandings. Huraiz (1991) and Bola (2006) sell excellent home-made resources to furnish the forms and functions I use to reflect my experiences. Benhan (2007) helps me define my peculiar indigenous perspective and arms me with courage to use it when discussing my stories. Overall (1989) offers me the feminist '*I*' that empowers me to own my inquiry. I use all these picturesque materials to make the working methodology of my *experience-based, arts-informed narrative inquiry*.

Narrative Inquiry

My work is found under the umbrella of narrative inquiry. Clandinin & Rosiek (2007) define narratives as "the form of representation that describes human experience as it folds through time" (p. 40). This definition makes the choice of the narrative inquiry methodology sensible for my work since I am describing Habouba's experiences and reflecting on my experiences within her teachings. I prefer to use the word 'inquiry' rather than research because I relate better with the uncertainty connoted by the word 'inquiry'. The dictionary

meaning for the word 'inquiry' is "the action of seeking, esp. (not always) for truth, knowledge, or information concerning something" (OED). 'Inquiry' suggests raising questions and proposing ways to explore multiple answers, whereas research implies searching with the purpose of finding. Research means "a search or investigation directed to the discovery of some fact by careful consideration or study of a subject" (OED). The word 'inquiry' as defined by Clandinin & Rosiek (2007) widens the scope of my work to include Habouba, me, the time when the stories took place and the environment where they happened as well as the relations generated from and extended through experiences. "Inquiry is an act within a stream of experiences that generates new relations that then become a part of future experiences" (p. 41). Once more these definitions serve my purpose better as they do not only focus on my experiences but they encompass the social, cultural, and political contexts within which these experiences are constituted. Inquiry then helps understand past experiences and links them to present and future. It thus affords to provide continuity of experience.

Experience-based Narrative Inquiry

Dewey's definition of experience is the base and the scaffold for this inquiry. Dewey (1934/ 2005) defines experience as "the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment which, when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication" (p. 22). Dewey's definition suggests that experience is sensing what there is in the environment, owning what our environment gives us, and then transacting that to others, exchanging it with others in a way that motivates others' participation and involvement. So, there is, taking in, understanding, participating, and communicating. This communication yields unity and continuity of human experiences.

I call my inquiry *experience-based* because it is drawn from experiences I have lived, and it makes up the very experience of writing the stories with all the tensions and releases persisting throughout the writing process. Dewey (1934/2005) points out that carrying out an intellectual inquiry and 'keeping it honest' (p.40) is an integral and esthetic event. According to Dewey art unites the relations that make the experience *an experience* (p. 50). In my words, intellectual inquiry is not regarded as an experience unless it is adorned with artistic satisfying qualities. In simpler term, conducting this inquiry is an experience, an artistic one like all human experiences. Experiences chain human actions and pass practices from past to present to future. Through remembering, reflecting, and telling experiences, the unity and continuity of human knowledge are enhanced.

These stories record sparks of family and community history. One viewpoint to explore them would be through historical narrative inquiry. According to Clandinin (2007), through historical narrative inquiry, we attend to wider, more multidimensional and complex stories of history, and our understandings of the past, present, and hopefully future, are increased (p. 78). I believe writing firsthand accounts deepens our understanding of how cultural practices are constructed. That, in turns, will illuminate our paths as to what to change, what to rescue, and what to restore from these practices. As Benham (2007) points out, this type of individualized history will encourage questioning the official history written from top down to serve authoritative agendas.

Freeman (2007) mentions that narrative inquiries give us better understandings of people. "This is because they often emerge from a *true* rather than false, scientific attitude, one that practices fidelity to the whole person, the whole human life in all its ambiguous, messy, beautiful details" (p. 134). The Arabic counterpart of the word fidelity is the word

ikhlas إخلاص. This word encompasses varying yet related meanings simultaneously. The meanings of the word "إخلاص" , as they appear in Baalbaki's English-Arabic-English dictionary (2007), are sincerity, honesty, integrity, probity, candor, loyalty, faithfulness, faith, fidelity, fealty, allegiance, devotion, attachment, truth, constancy, veracity, verity, and validity. Fidelity is involved in the process of writing this inquiry. It is one of the ways that assists me repay the huge debt of Habouba's unconditional love. It is also involved in Habouba's beliefs and faith in the social practices and my late endorsement for those practices as worthy of protection, retention, and continuity.

Indigenous Narratives

Another resource I draw from is Benham (2007) who presents what she calls a methodological conundrum for scholars who employ indigenous narratives to consider. Benham highlights three questions that require consideration. These are: "(a) What is the indigenous perspective? (b) Is this work mythmaking or advocacy or inquiry? (c) How does one explore, interrogate, and retain the sacred of indigenous knowledge?" (p. 513).

In this section I look into these methodological challenges one by one starting from the question "what is the indigenous perspective?" Benham defines the indigenous perspective as: "having the quality of both the physical and the abstract (the metaphysical or spiritual), which have been disrupted by the power of colonialism" (p. 513). So the indigenous perspective is the viewpoint claimed by a given socio-cultural group living in a certain place and sharing the same historical roots and the same ways of theorizing its knowledge. Mentioning the disruption of colonization is significant here as that influences or even distorts the community's structure and knowledge claims. In the case of my native country, the socio-cultural structure of the Sudanese communities has been disrupted through colonization twice

within a short time. Those were the Turkish-Egyptian Colonization in 1821-1885 and the Anglo-Egyptian Colonization 1899-1956. During her long life, Habouba witnessed a lot of structural changes in Sudan. Her experiences encompassed pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras. The region of Northern Sudan where Habouba lived was deeply impacted by both colonial powers due to its geographical location being the gateway from Egypt where colonizing troops entered Sudan. In fact Habouba told many informing stories when the first railway lines were extended from Egypt to facilitate the British troops' and officials' arrival in Sudan. According to Benham (2007), when indigenous practices are distorted by the colonial power, they are usually countered by indigenous collective power redefining and reshaping its practices over time (p. 513). This inquiry may be regarded as an attempt to counter and help dismantle biases, stereotypes, and assumptions about cultural groups like mine.

The second question to address is: "is this work mythmaking or advocacy or inquiry?" I think it is important to address this question because there are some sorts of accusations and pressures scholars addressing indigenous inquiries are under (Benham 2007). This is a big question and in my case such pressures and tensions are emerging from within me. I am a person carrying double identities: indigenous yet distanced by various factors such as being educated within the colonial educational institutions. The more I received formal education, the more I was drawn away from the indigenous knowledge and the more I formed different opinions about indigenous knowledge and local wisdom. I spent a considerable amount of time resisting and closing doors on the face of marvelous educational opportunities to learn more from Habouba and my indigenous community. I remained viewing local knowledge and practices through the colonial point of view for a considerable time during my early youth. I still have some worries about whether my work might be seen as lacking scholarly strength. I

have caught myself several times in a position of advocating for my culture, which puts me in situations of power and political tensions. In short I do have multiple tensions and multiple view stands. To knot my rope even more, Benham (2007) reminds me to be at the same time respectful to my traditional rituals and ceremonies of narratives in my indigenous community (p.513). This includes the ways indigenous people reflect their experiences. Some ways of retaining and showing respect to my indigenous narratives are apparent in the use of several kinds of narratives as educational tools, the same way Habouba did, and in employing Habouba's introductory and ending phrases with certain kinds of narrative. I use these phrases with two categories in my stories: 'family history' and 'hejwas'. For example, Habouba used to tell stories about her family members who passed away starting with a short laugh and the phrase: "صحي و الله، الحديس أطول من العمر". That means it is true that stories live longer than people. That was the usual introduction to say that the audience will hear a realistic story. For the folk tales Habouba started her narratives with "حجيتكم ما بجيتكم" which sounds like "hajeitkum ma bajeitkum" and that means "I will tell you a story". The audience reply " خيراً جانا و جاك أكل عشاك و جرى خلاك" and that is "kheiran jana u jak, akal ashak u jara khallak". That means "we hope it is a story that brings us good." This is a way of preparing the audience saying: "I will tell you a folk tale" and the audience interact by replying: "we hope it is a fine story that brings us good." Although I share Habouba's beliefs in certain practices, I lack her total beliefs in a lot of others such as her belief in the efficiency of local remedies and certain kinds of local foods. Growing up under Habouba's supervision I learned to value her wisdom, and to find balance between my disbeliefs and my respect of her practices. I acknowledge these contradictions to understand my viewpoint and to enhance my own awareness about the

experiences I am reflecting and how I reflect them. To clarify my situation, my work is not myth making. It is an inquiry with some traces of advocacy.

The third quest is "How does one explore, interrogate, and retain the sacred of indigenous knowledge?" This question is another huge knot Benham (2007) prompts me to untie. This is another reminder to avoid falling victim to the Western appropriation of indigenous knowledge. One way to do that is to be respectful of my indigenous wisdom and of the intellectual and cultural rights of my indigenous community while adhering to the rigour of the narrative discipline as Benham emphasizes (p.514). Thinking broadly in the tightness of words, I take Benham's lead in being respectful of my culture and adhering to the rigour of the narrative discipline. I try to retain the same rituals in storytelling and to merge that with the methodological and theoretical requirements of the narrative inquiry. Thus each group of stories will be explained in so far as the form highlights the indigenous knowledge or understandings sought in them.

Benham (2007) introduces some methodological queries through the three themes of sovereignty: indigenization of the narrative; knowledge: illuminating unique worldviews; and analysis and application: pedagogical practice and policy. I will discuss these one by one to comprehend how to go about them.

Sovereignty: indigenization of the narrative. This addresses the questions of who tells or retells, how, for whom, and for what purpose (p. 517, Benham, 2007). From these complex questions I understand that I need to assure myself that my stories are authentically told from that certain place and from Habouba's perspectives. My situation here is so sticky. I am a person who is exposed to different and often contradicting standards of knowledge. So how can I relate the narratives of Habouba through what Benham calls authentic indigenous

perspectives? I whisper to myself that there is no one right answer here. But one way to do that could be by being honest when reflecting native voices, by honouring the indigenous wisdoms and by supporting the indigenous voice and the way it constructs its own knowledge. According to Benham (2007) for the indigenous people: "narratives are evocative accounts of sovereignty and loss, as well as identity and home" (p. 512).

So shall I leave my narratives open to multiple interpretations and diverse representations including those of the readers? But what if the readers jump to precipitating conclusions that enhance biases and cultural stereotyping? Shall I point out some indigenous explanations? Shall I mention, for example, that women's historical leadership roles in my indigenous community could be traced back as far as Kush civilizations around 7000 BC? 'Yes' is the answer to all these questions. I will illuminate the indigenous understandings of the stories and I will have them open to the readers' understandings as well. I do not want to hover over you while you read the stories' chapter. So feel free and enjoy your own attempts of making sense of the stories.

Knowledge: illuminating unique worldviews. Benham (2007) encourages scholars to begin their scholarly work with an emphasis on the use of indigenous, natural taxonomies as theoretical lenses through which they can design, analyze, present, and apply indigenous narrative inquiries (p. 522). Benham here calls for using the indigenous knowledge claims as a methodology. If I am able to do so, my indigenous community is given a rare chance to claim its own indigenous ethos and eidos. OED defines 'ethos' as "the characteristic spirit, prevalent tone of sentiment, of a people or community; the 'genius' of an institution or system." The Arabic counterpart of the word ethos is the collective soul or spirit. And 'eidos' is "the distinctive expression of the cognitive or intellectual character of a culture or social

group." Or, the collective mind using the Arabic meaning of the word. Discussing indigenous knowledge is a complex and often silenced matter in the scholarly works in Sudanese academic institutions (Musa, 2007). However I think documenting these narratives is a step forward on the way to restoring respect and acknowledgement for my indigenous culture and opening its rusty doors so that it can flourish, connect, and start defining its own methodological skeletons.

Analysis and application: pedagogical practice and policy. The question Benham presents here is how traditional narratives are interpreted or explained through indigenous lenses (p.525). How are the indigenous narratives meaningfully analyzed and presented so that respect and consideration are restored to their authentic social, cultural, and political features? This is another complicated matter. In my indigenous culture it is very common to find divergent voices and differing points of view within the same community. However, acknowledging that and initiating in-depth dialogues between such voices may help to develop culturally competent practices and policies. Through this work I hope to contribute to the current calls for breaking free from dominance and subordination that uses education as the main tool for their continuity. Such work may direct educators' attention to the indigenous culture and the wealth of local wisdom. The Sudanese scholar Bola (2006) states that "we should uproot education from the colonial dominance and subordination represented by subordinating elites and plant it in the soil of indigenous social, cultural, and political contexts" (p.15).[24] Extracting indigenous experiences and wisdom such as Habouba's is an essential step towards exploring educational decisions and policies. It is time to reexamine and question the aims of education in Sudan. The Sudanese educational policy makers need to

[24] Bola's article is published in Arabic. I translated different sections from it for this work.

go beyond the narrow horizons of serving the colonial power and its inheriting elites. They need to draw from indigenous experiences and knowledge. It is high time to recognize the role of the vanishing storytellers, such as Habouba. Habouba's absence left a huge void in my local community's educational system. We need to rescue the eroding indigenous knowledge. I make Habouba's stories available for the prudent educational planners to invest in if they genuinely want to produce independent and creative learners.

Arts-informed Inquiry

> I needed words plump and dripping with life juice, compelling and evocative images, representations that drew readers and viewers in to feel and think and to be inspired in some way by their experience. .... Research, like art, could be accessible, evocative, embodied, empathic, provocative (Cole, 2004, p. 16).

In this part I discuss the arts-informed inquiry and why it is appropriate for my purpose. When examining arts in educational research, the prominent scholar most researchers draw from is Elliot Eisner. Eisner paves the way to the arts-informed narrative inquiry throughout his revolutionary writings about education and educational research. In 1991 Eisner specifies certain features for qualitative inquirers to consider. Eisner's feature one:

> Our sensory system is the instrument through which we experience the qualities that constitutes the environment in which we live. For experience to be secured, qualities must be present either in the environment or through an active imagination (p. 21).

Three key words are shown here. These are sensory system, experience, and qualities. Experience for Eisner is the knowledge we get through feeling, touching, seeing, smelling, and tasting. Experience is something bigger and more complete than the mere sensing. It is the knowledge we establish from the interactions between our senses, objects, and actions. Objects and actions are 'qualities' out of us 'in our environment' we use something in us 'our senses' to live through those qualities. Eisner (1991) mentions that we may be able to secure

experience either from the environment or through active imagination. Reading this helps me to constitute more awareness about the stories I am sharing and how to reflect them. My stories are my experiences that I gained from my environment as well as imagination and memory efforts.

Feature two is,

> The ability to experience qualities requires more than their presence. Experience is a form of human achievement, and as such it depends on an act of mind; qualitative experience depends on qualitative forms of inquiry. We *learn* to see, hear, and feel. This process depends on perceptual differentiation, and, in education matters as in other forms of content, the ability to see what is subtle but significant is crucial. Those who are able to do so we often refer to as perceptive (p.21).

Here Eisner talks about experience as a form of human achievement. "To achieve means: To bring to a successful issue, to carry out successfully (an enterprize); to accomplish, perform" (OED). Achievement means "the action of completing, or attaining by exertion; completion, accomplishment, successful performance" (OED). This implies that it takes cognitive and sensual efforts to have an experience. We should be able to distinguish between what is 'looked at' and what is actually 'seen' and how it is seen, what is "touched" and what is "felt" or as Habouba used to repeat: "بشوف القلب", meaning that "it is the heart that sees". Habouba meant that in order to see, one needs to do something more than just look. One needs more than the eyes. She used to recite the following poem. The poem is written by the poet Okeir (n.d.) and in it he addresses or talks to the present life as opposed to the afterlife:

تعصري علي البريدك وتقربي تآنسيه
يترك طاعة الخالق يكون ناسيه
بي توب سحرك البعمي القلب تكسيه
يصبح محتضر في تربته تمسيه

Okeir says: you, present life, seduce the person who loves you until he abandons compliance to the Creator. You dress him with your charming clothes that blind his heart and then you dump him in the grave. I mention this example here to underline describing the heart as being

visual or blind. Eisner's agrees with Habouba and Okeir when he asserts that you need to employ more than the senses and the qualities in the environment so as to have 'an experience'. One needs to see what is subtle yet major in order to live an experience.

In feature three Eisner mentions,

> Qualitative inquiry is not only directed towards those aspects of the world "out there," it is also directed to objects and events that we are able to create. Salads, symphonies, and conversations require the exercise of qualitative thought. Because the selection and organization of qualities demand qualitative judgement, teaching and textbooks, school architecture and classroom layout are all influenced by qualitative considerations. Becoming smart about qualitative matters requires the ability to experience or create qualities worth experiencing. At their best we call such experiences art (pp. 21-22).

Eisner (1991) asserts that employing qualitative inquiry is required to have a complete grasp or understanding for objects and events found in our environment as well as the ones we create. From simple tasks we make, such as salads, to more complex activities, such as architecture, qualitative judgment is needed if we want to create qualities that are worth living, owning, and experiencing. For example, in my stories I am re-living, re-experiencing old qualities. Through my writings I create qualities for readers to experience and to live. If my work is well crafted, my texts should exhibit these qualities so that a reader can see them and act upon them to achieve her own experience. My text should invite and enable you to experience the qualities. It should hold your hands through the narrow sandy allies that lead to the green lanes that take you to Habouba's palm tree plantation stretching the way down to the west until it is stopped by the Great Nile River.

Eisner goes on to say:

> One of the most useful forms of qualitative inquiry, for my purpose, is found in literature. Writers display the ability to transform their own experience into a public form called text, which when artfully crafted, allows us to participate in a way of life. Thus, the writer starts with qualities and ends with words. The reader starts with words and ends with qualities (p. 22).

Eisner (1991) spots the interaction between the writer and the reader. This interaction depends on the writer's abilities to transform experiences into a well crafted text. If the writer is able to transfer experiences into texts, the reader will be able to recycle the texts into experiences once more. Since no two experiences are identical (Eisner, 1991), the reader will make her own experiences through the text. Here the writer starts the cycle and the reader completes it. The written material is 'quality' crafted from experience and recycled into another experience only when it is read. It is not a complete experience unless it undergoes the active reader's imagination and senses to transform it into her own experience. This feature is an important mirror against which I see if my stories display art-like qualities. I hope my words will enable you to participate in the moments of Habouba's life. I hope the qualities I am creating facilitate your interaction with my environment well enough, to make my environment feels as if it is yours. This feature serves as a major purpose in writing this inquiry. It completes the cycle from experience to qualities to experience. It serves to connect and to enhance experience continuation and relatedness.

Feature four is:

> Text can take different forms: literally written text can do what the figurative treatment of language cannot; poetry can say what prose cannot convey, and vice versa. Cultures throughout the world have provided their inhabitants with the resources necessary to transform experience into a public form so that it can be experienced by others. Although no two experiences can ever be identical, the kind of text one creates makes the difference, and that difference is epistemic. (p. 22, 1991).

Eisner here asserts that different types of text serve different functions. He also states that cultures provide their people with resources to use to transform their experiences into public forms for other people to experience. My culture is a verbal culture full of tales, lyrics and poetry. Writing stories is more accessible to me than reciting poems or orating tales the way Habouba did. Of course I still enjoy reciting poetry and verbally telling stories. However, I

am using what is possible to me presently and what is reachable from the documentation point of view and that is story writing. As Harrison (2007) states, writing helps. Writing makes knowledge 'sticky'. "Sticky knowledge persists and can be passed on, both across a longer time frame and to a wider audience" (p. 23). I am writing my stories in English so that I can cultivate interaction with more readers. English language is a gateway I open to enter into a wider world and to usher more readers into my world. Eisner (1991) says that no two experiences can ever be identical but the text used makes a difference. I hope my text draws you nearer so that you can see Habouba, smell the sandal wood and mahaleb[25] odour, and taste the freshly roasted peanuts that warmed the windy winter nights in my home village. As you look at words, I hope you see my village, located placidly just beyond the point where the Great Nile embraces its last branch near Atbara[26]. I hope you live your own experiences and write your own stories as they read mine. Dunlop (2001) writes:

> we read our lives as we read books. We read cultures within the multiplicity of text and cultures read us. We write ourselves as we read. Within these perceptions of reading and writing lies an aperture of hope. The lens opens us to the complexities, the richness and the multiplicities of human nature and its possibilities, the infinitely diverse ways of knowing the world (p. 12).

This piece is fascinating. It talks about connection occurring between the writer, the text, and the reader. It talks about closeness and mutual influences that happen when cultures meet. It talks about hope found in variant perspectives. It looks at complexities as a wealth of endless possibilities and ways of knowing one another. I read it this way: both writer and reader take steps towards one another to get closer or خطوة منك و خطوة ليك 'taking steps towards each other' as the Sudanese lyrics writer Salah Sa'eed says. When writer and reader meet, they do not

[25] It is an aromatic spice that looks like almond but is smaller. Arabic name is محلب, in Latin letters, e.g., *mahlab*, *mahalab*, *mahleb* or *mahaleb*. In Sudan women used it to perfume homemade hair and skin moisturizers and incenses.

[26] Atbara is a city in the Northern Sudan, in the Nile River Province

meet as individuals. Along with them, they bring their cultural heritage closer to each other. Both the writer and reader are active media of relatedness and understanding. My job will be done if you participate in my way of life in your own ways. Am I initiating you? Probably, yes. I am stimulating you to widen the aperture of hope for closer connections. I do that in soft resonance. The same way Habouba did it, gently and gradually just like a growing shadow in a nude desert.

Eisner (1991) encourages me to use personal language and I hope I am brave enough to expose more of my life and myself as a second language user. Is that even a choice?! Eisner goes on calling for exploiting language fully in order "to do justice to what has been seen" (p.21). I whisper to myself as fully as my language skills allow me. That makes my mission more challenging, as language stands as a barrier in my way at times. Yet living between two languages allows me to bring new metaphors into English and borrow some for Arabic. I am having fun with that.

From Eisner the next stop in the arts-informed inquiry is Lori Neilsen, Coles, and Knowles. Neilsen (2004) defines inquiry as: "only in/tending knowing" (p. 46). Neilsen goes on explaining that inquiry "is a threshold, a space between, neither here nor there". This definition serves my aims because it dismisses the absolute knowledge claims. A big lesson Neilsen teaches me is that there is no certainty in knowing. Knowing is rather a personal experience that takes different shapes to different learners. My inquiry, as we say in Sudanese Arabic, puts the good intention in its pathway. It intends and attempts to learn, to initiate and to foster human connections. My method starts with the humble assumption that there is no absolute knowledge. Neilsen (2004) states that knowing is an art that requires flexibility and openness to new challenges and ideas. It takes surrendering and opening up for ideas to

"come to us" or "leave us" in whatever shape or condition. I am further encouraged to adopt the scheme of surrendering as I read Thomas (2001). "Art as inquiry requires an openness to shifts in shape, dimensionality, and form, as the artist/researcher surrenders to surfacing creative tensions and allows the threads of meaning to emerge" (p. 274). I am grateful to Neilsen and Thomas for reminding me to learn to 'let go' my fear and resistance as I write and 'take in' emerging ideas. Although I haven't mastered that yet, I am learning and applying my lessons through the process of writing this inquiry.

Elements of Experience-based Arts-informed Inquiry

Cole and Knowles's (2001) work discusses life history or experience-based research that employs arts-informed inquiry. They define this kind of inquiry as:

> research that seeks to understand the complex relationships between individuals' lives and contexts within which their lives are shaped and expressed.... Our perspective on life history research is guided by principles that place self, relationship, and artfulness central in the research process (p. 214).

I brought this quote here because it is in line with my purpose. It joins my calls for understanding using Habouba and myself within the surroundings I have lived in. The use of art in the form of story writing is an essential part in my inquiry as mentioned earlier in this chapter. Cole and Knowles (2001) suggest some elements and features to use as backgrounds for evaluating the arts-informed research. I make use of these elements not to evaluate my work but to have some sort of guide to support my work. These elements are:

Intentionality. Clarifying this element, Cole and Knowles (2001) write: "Good arts-informed research has both a clear intellectual purpose and a moral purpose" (p. 215). I summarize the intellectual purposes of my inquiry in the following points: to document Habouba's stories, to give voice to traditional educators, and to enable them teach their lessons and write their own history. The moral purposes include: initiating communication

and observing transformation in me and maybe in you as active participants, dismantling territories guarded by dogmatic illusions of otherness, and fostering connectedness among all of us: the others, the locals/indigenous, the strangers, the foreigners.

Researcher Presence. Cole and Knowles (2001) point out that a researcher's presence in arts-informed inquiry is apparent explicitly through reflexive self-accounts and implicitly to be sensed throughout the research process (p.215). I should admit that, I have struggled a lot to put myself at "the front of the house" as we say in Northern Sudan. That means in a prominent area in the house where people entering the house would notice me as soon as they enter. I need a lot of courage to reflect my thoughts and to stand with bare chest vulnerable and risking my power. "But you are really giving up your power if you are overly protecting it," I remind myself. "Use it or lose it!" After all, I hope you find of me more than just finger prints.

Methodological commitment. Cole and Knowles (2001) argue that good artful inquiry reflects a methodological commitment evident through a principled process and procedural harmony (p. 216). This feature ensures that arts-informed inquiry abides by certain methodological requirements like other forms of scholarly work. Although artful forms of research enjoy some margins of liberty, these margins remain within the boundaries of the methodology decided by the researcher. My work is led by the methodological theories of narrative inquiry in general and arts-informed inquiry in particular.

Communicability. Cole and Knowles (2001) argue that arts-informed research accounts are revealed with the expressed purpose of connecting in a holistic way, with the hearts, souls, and minds of readers. "They are intended to have an evocative quality and a high level of *resonance* for audience of all kinds" (p. 216). From this I understand that the

communicative force of the arts-informed inquiry is expected to be bigger as it merges both art and research. It uses art and research not only to tell but to show as well. Artful inquiry is expected to reach diverse audiences not only those in academia. Art appeals to wider communities. Art initiates communication and mutual understanding. It provokes interactions, conversations, and connections. These qualities are central interlaced intentions in writing my inquiry. In a similar line Thomas (2001) writes: "Art as inquiry has the power to evoke, to inspire, to spark the emotions, to awaken the visions and imaginings, and to transport others to new world" (p. 274). My inquiry uses the art of story to connect with differing audiences and distinct cultures. It travels through time to speak to the recent generations in my home country and through space to connect with people inhabiting my second homeland, Canada.

Aesthetic Form. Cole and Knowles (2001) state that the way insights about lives are conveyed is as important as what insights are conveyed (p. 216). With regard to my work, this feature addresses the question as to whether my stories follow the conventions of Sudanese folk tales and storytelling. My stories employ the two major classifications: the 'hejwa' and the 'gissa' mentioned by Huraiz (1991) p. 56 to follow. My inquiry follows the same prospects for both 'hejwa' and 'gissa' as used in my indigenous community.

Knowledge Claim. Cole and Knowles (2001) say that: "any knowledge claims made must reflect the multidimensional, complex, dynamic, intersubjective, and contextual nature of the human experience. In so doing, knowledge claims must be made with sufficient *ambiguity* and *humility* to allow for multiple interpretations and reader response" (p. 217). This feature dismisses the notion of knowledge monopoly. The knowledge I claim to have and am ready to share is limited to the particular place and time I lived in as a child and youth, yet, it reflects socio-cultural features of my community and it is open to the readers' voices

and views. I state that having Habouba as a mentor has been crucial to my educational experiences, especially in highlighting the importance of local knowledge. I propose that the educational policy planners in Sudan need to consider building on the local knowledge and indigenous wisdom. I am confident that sharing stories such as Habouba's enhances relatedness and connections among people.

Contribution. Cole and Knowles assert that: "sound and rigorous inquiry has both *theoretical potential* and *transformative potential"* (p. 217). What I perceive from the element of contribution is the question of whether my inquiry is effective in endowing insights into lives of people involved in my work, mainly Habouba's generation and the lives of people living in my community. The theoretical potential addresses whether educators and researchers in Habouba's community or other places consider introducing elders' stories into the educational system. It also addresses the question whether this work arouses the attention of the policy makers so that they may explore the possibilities of rescuing the remains of local knowledge and wisdom in indigenous communities. The transformative potential is reclined in my ambition that you will come out with new transformative understandings and openness to acknowledge closeness and relatedness rather than remoteness and separation. This work has definitely widened my scope of knowledge and enhanced my respect not only for Habouba's wisdom but also for other indigenous narratives.

Another description of arts-informed narrative inquiry is Mello's (2007). Mello says: "The term *arts-informed research* suggests that art has been the way chosen to inform the analysis and meaning made of the field text already existing" (p. 214, 2007). The field in my inquiry is my memory and the collective memory of my family. The field texts are also the experiences and stories I have lived. Both are inseparable.

Mello (2006) mentions Proust's definition of art as: " an instrument, a means through which instead of seeing a single world, we see it multiply until we have before us as many worlds as there are to the original artists (p. 206). The significance of this definition comes from valuing the multiple perspectives of seeing a single world. It observes not only the various expressions of one world but also the multiple impressions about that world. It puts the art appreciators in a status close to the artist. Like Mello and others, I view art as an instrument of promoting reflection and pushing us to go deeper inside our own conflicts and emotions. As expressed by Dewey (1934/2005), Eisner (1991), and Mello (2006) art is not only closer to experience, it constitutes it.

Classification of Sudanese storytelling

In the previous section I explain that I use the arts-informed inquiry as the methodology leading this work. In this part I discuss what type of art I am using. I utilize the art of the Sudanese storytelling with special reference to the story telling practiced by the Ja'aliyeen[27] storytellers. I choose the Ja'aliyeen storytelling art because Habouba belongs to the Ja'aliyeen tribal group. The Sudanese scholar Huraiz (1991) provides an extensive account on the Ja'aliyeen folktales. He explains that the Ja'aliyeen storytellers differentiate between two major types of the popular stories in their area. These are the hejwa and the gissa.

The '*hejwa*': the term is derived from the Arabic word '*hija*' which means smart minds. It implies smart and ambiguous wisdom. This kind of story usually has a specific beginning that immediately tells the listeners that the story they are about to hear is an

[27] The term Ja'aliyeen refers to a Sudanese tribal group inhabiting the Nile River Province in Northern Sudan. It is the group which Habouba belongs to.

imaginary one and prepares them for it. Intelligence and imagination are the most important features of this kind of story (p. 73).[28]

The '*gissa*': the term is derived from the Arabic verb '*qassa*' which means to track or to trace the foot-steps of somebody. This meaning implies that the gissa is a realistic story. The word 'qissa', as pronounced in standard Arabic, also means a story and it is used in the literature broadly to refer to the art of short story writing. For the Ja'aliyeen story tellers the 'gissa' encompasses several kinds of stories. Of these there are (a) historical myths which discuss the tribal history, (b) miracles and those discuss the unusual incidents that happen to religious figures, (c) realistic stories such as love stories, adventure stories or any realistic incidents, and (d) anecdotes that tell jokes and funny stories.

Huraiz (1991) points out that these classifications often interlace with one another. It is common to find a single story compiling two or more types of the classifications mentioned above. Habouba's stories are good examples of this interlace. Some of the stories introduced in this inquiry are historical myths Habouba told about some family members. It is worth mentioning that Habouba's family happened to be descendants of ancient religious Sufi[29] figures. Therefore it is hardly astonishing to notice 'unexplainable' things happening to them. Habouba and many of our family members believed that the incidents actually took place in the past but I am still struggling with my own scepticism.

[28] Arabic text, my translation

[29] Sufism is defined as the Way of the Heart, the Way of the Pure, the Mystical Path of Islam. It is the path which takes the seeker to the Divine Presence. In essence Sufism is a means and a way by which the seeker will move from the gravity of his or her lower self, to ascend, with the assistance of a mystical guide, and through the methods and practices defined by the Way he or she has chosen, to the state wherein the Vision of God is presented to her or him. http://www.islamic-sufism.com

Throughout the writing process of this inquiry I thank Neilsen (2001) for directing my attention to what I regard as writers' 'secret recipe' as revealed by Dillard (1989). That recipe is to spend all the writing as soon as it comes to mind, not to save it for a later place:

> One of the few things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for a better place is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like water well. (p. 79).

Reading this I continue to rush in the middle of the night or half way in a hiking tour to find a place where I lay a piece to my writing's puzzle using my computer, a shopping bill, a piece of paper, a bus schedule or anything that can hold words. I find this practice not only opening up intellectual spaces for more ideas and thoughts, but it is also liberating and heart-lightening. I usually have that sense of removing some sort of weight off my shoulders or paying a part of the love debt to Habouba.

During my literature review I have found many writings that I wish were mine. One of these texts is Overall's when she asks: "why do I continue to deploy personal history and social identity in teaching and research?" And she answers:

> I use it because, as I have tried to show throughout *A feminist I*, it works. Because it moves people, fosters connections, and develops philosophical understanding and imagination…. And because I hope to "reweave the spirit"- not only of my students and my readers but also my own (1998, p.191).

On the same line Leggo (2004) writes:

> In my writings I am writing "who I am," and engaging in a political endeavour to acknowledge that the personal and the public are not only never separate, but are, in fact, as ecologically and organically connected as the two chambers of the heart" (p. 20).

When I read Overall and Leggo's accounts that the personal and political are never separate, I feel as if I were coming home. I have not been able to separate the personal from public because they are inseparable for me. Indeed I get puzzled when people ask me "not to take it personally!" My answer is "then how can I *take* it if not personally?" If I don't take it

personally that means I do not take it at all. For me, personal and political are closely related like 'chambers of the heart' connected together and needing each other to sustain life.

When I tell my experiences I ask you to stop for a while and find relatedness or simirence in my experiences. We need each other to complete our understandings, to function, and to learn from one another how to co-live and merge. Each one of us is a piece in the jigsaw puzzle of life. I use myself as a medium to heat up cross-cultural and cross-generational understandings and relatedness. I use art as a vehicle for communication. This is better said by Springgay & Irwin (2004) "By shifting the boundaries between art and research, we awaken the "political", the act/ art that provoke personal and social change, challenging us to perceive the unknown in new ways, and to bring forth the complexities of aesthetic inquiry" (p. 71).

Thinking in Arabic/ Writing in English

This work is done between languages. Stories told by Habouba and stories happened during her life were all in Arabic. Extensive translation is involved in this inquiry. I translate Habouba's stories and I decode my ideas. I think in a language and write in another. Some of the references used here are Arabic references. I translate these and have a friend read the Arabic texts and my translation. My supervisor also helped me in translating Habouba's petitions.

I am not totally satisfied with translating Habouba's ways of telling and ways of teaching. Habouba's stories bear a great deal of emotional and intimate charges. Most of her teachings laid out not only what to communicate but also how she communicated them. Although the process of writing and rewriting the stories took long hours and a lot of sleepless

nights, I still feel I communicate so little of what I want to say. I find some comfort as I read Rodriguez (1982) talking about how difficult it was to translate his grandmother's words:

> This message of intimacy could never be translated because it was not *in* the words she had used but passed *through* them. So any translation would have seemed wrong; her words would have been stripped of an essential meaning, (p.31).

To sum up this chapter, I conclude that the methodology I am using is experience-based arts-informed narrative inquiry. I am the researcher and the participant. Most of my stories are told from my memory which is a difficult and an emotionally tense task. I am the link between past, present, and future generations in Sudan and I am a link in the bridge over the vast seas between my two diverse cultures. Hiding behind Habouba's back, I am reconstructing experiences to tell you about and reflect on my life as a teacher and a student, as a deep-rooted Sudanese woman and a storm-swept immigrant longing for belonging yet feeling at home or close. What is that? Am I sharing Keefer's (1998) speculations that home is not belonging but longing? Through my stories I realize the multiple-sided life I have been experiencing. That is no joke!

Chapter Three

The Stories

Birth

I am always fascinated with that particular odour. The one I smell in Habouba's room. I call it antiquity odour for lack of a better word. I wish I could describe that odour. Have you ever poured a pocket of water on dry sand and smelt the sand? The odour is simirent to that scent. The first thing that you perceive when you enter the room is that odour.

To enter the room, you pass through the veranda or baranda, as we call it. There are two doors of green wood framing thin screens. The two doors are located on the north and the south walls of the veranda, facing one another to allow air flow. The doors open on the court yard. The north door takes you to the kitchen and the south one takes you to the men's saloon. When you enter from the northern door, the way I do, the door of Habouba's room will be on your right. Wait a minute before you dash into the room. Do you see these small zeers? They were there to be at reach for my Grandfather. You see the wooden covers on them? Yes, these are for covering the water from dirt and holding the drinking mugs that are made of aluminum. Habouba fills these zeers every evening so Grandfather has cold water the next day. There are around six day beds on the veranda. This is where the family and visitors spend their day having coffee and chatting. Visitors are expected any time of the day without prior notice. But mostly they come between noon and late afternoon.

As you stand facing the room now, take a minute to look at the big green wooden door. It is garnished with zigzag frames. When you are at the doorway you see two big beds located on your right and left sides of the room. They are so high that I have to jump to sit on them. They are covered with palm leaf mattresses. Habouba's mattress is colourful while grandfather's has the natural beige colour of the dry palm leaves. Look straight ahead to see Habouba's cabinet where she displays her china sets and glasses used only for guests.

Habouba differentiates between guests and visitors. Visitors are neighbours and relatives who visit her often and are regarded as part of the family; whereas guests are people coming from far away or people who do not visit her often. On the left farther corner you see Habouba's wooden trunk. This is the place where she keeps a lot of interesting things. There you find grandfather's property papers, his school reports, his letter book with its carbon separator, Habouba's jewellery, her amulets, small bundles of sand taken from Sheikhs' temples wrapped in cloth, and other things. On the wall on your right you see a portrait of Abdulrahman Almahdi. On the right corner there is a tall corner table where grandfather keeps the books and magazines he reads. On this day the book is a historical book entitled Karary. Grandfather has told me that it is about a battle that happened in 1898 between the Sudanese Mahdiya Army led by Khalifa Abdullahi Alta'ayshi and the British Army led by Kitchener. Grandfather also has explained to me that the battle was the start of the official Anglo-Egyptian colonization of Sudan. On the eastern wall on your right you see some prayer rugs and grandfather's black gown that he wears over his white jalabiyas. On the same wall on your left side, you see my grandfather's sword, two spears, and a huge palm-leave mat, folded and leaning against the wall. The sandy ground is usually dashed with water. Look at the ceiling. You see intervals of three layers of roofing materials: palm tree branches weaved tightly together, then there are around twenty cuts of doum tree trunk used as beams, and a huge doum tree trunk used as a brace, centring the ceiling".

One day I was lying on my back on Habouba's bed and counting the palm branches on the ceiling when I noticed a thick rope tied on the big trunk.
"What is that Habouba?" I asked pointing to the rope.
"That is a delivery rope." She answered.
I got more interested. "What is the delivery rope?"
"You know, Zeinab just had her baby, in this room."
"So:……"
"This is complicated. Why do you want to know now? It is too early for you to know these things." She resisted.

I insisted: "Please tell me what this rope has to do with Zeinab's delivery."

Habouba gave in to me and she started talking. When she talks, I see things happening in front of my eyes.

I see Zeinab on her short nightgown sitting on her knees. She holds to the rope and screams: "ya Allah, ya Allah". She is sweating all over her body. Her face is wet with a mixture of tears and sweat. I see Habouba at Zeinab's side holding her hand, drying off her face and praying. Sometimes she sings and tells jokes to make Zeinab laugh. As labor interrupts Zeinab laughter, she holds to the rope and follows her body's contractions. She screams: ya Allah! Ya lateef.[30] *Sooner, I hear the baby crying aloud. I see Zeinab laughing, holding to the rope to stand on her feet. Supported by Habouba, Zeinab walks to the colourful bed. Zeinab's smiles are lighting up the dark room. The midwife is busy adding acacia seeds to the boiling water. She gives the baby to Alia to clean. The midwife adds cold water to the boiling acacia seeds. She feels the water to check if it is warm enough to clean Zeinab's body. Then she puts the baby on Zeinab's belly. Zeinab smiles contently as she gently rubs her baby's hair. Alia takes the baby to dress her up. Habouba holds a long string of cotton cloth to wrap Zeinab's belly so as to help make it in shape again. Hot lamb soup is served to Zeinab. Dates, peanuts, and candies are served to all other women and children waiting on the veranda. You are not asked if you want some. You are just offered and you have to take some.*

Are you ready for the excitement of the nefas[31] *days? On the first day of the nefas, Habouba and a few elderly women come into Zeinab's room. They ask if the baby is awake. Zeinab tells them that she is awake. Habouba bends over Zeinab's bed and supports the tiny head and neck on the palm of her left hand and places her right hand on the baby's back. She gently lifts the baby up. She*

[30] One of Allah holy names. It means the Most Kind.

[31] Nefas period is the forty days following the birth day. The new mom stays at home for forty days. Relatives and neighbours serve her and her new born infant. They also help around the house with cooking, cleaning and taking care of her other children. Many rituals happened during the nefas days. Every single day is different from the other.

brings the baby's ears very close to her mouth and softly recites the adhan[32] *into the baby's ears starting with the right ear. I watch the baby moving her head and I hear the women cheering:*

"Alhamdu llilah,[33] *her hearing is good! She listens to adhan".*

On the seventh day of the nefas, men slaughter a lamb. The baby's father comes to announce the official name given to the baby:

"Hey women, this baby girl is named Naylaa". Then he raises his voice and seems amused:

"Do you know what Naylaa means?" The women raise their questioning eyes. And he answers: "Naylaa means a killingly beautiful look! Yes, a look that penetrates and kills in one hit like a sharp sword!"

Women trill three times:

"Ayouya! Ayouya! Ayouououya!"[34]

I hear a lot of voices uttering words like, "Congratulations!" "May the baby own her name!" "May she be a virtuous girl!"

The lamb meat is brought to the women and they divid it in two halves. One half is cooked for people attending the naming ceremony and the other half is divided to seven equal piles. Then each pile is divided into two halves. Seven packs are offered to poor people living around and the rest is distributed to the closest neighbours. Habouba asks me and my cousin Muna to distribute the neigbours' portion. She gives us precise instructions. We are told to start from the closest neighbour on the right:

"Start with Fatma bit[35] *Abbas's house, then go to Alne'ma, then to Haleema, then go to Hager. Tell each one of them that today we named the baby girl Naylaa. After you finish all of them go to the neigbours on the left. Start with Toma then Zahra and Afaf. Give them the meat, tell them the same and come back. Don't be late!"*

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[32] Muslim prayer call.

[33] Arabic expression meaning praise be to Allah.

[34] Cheering screams uttered by women during happy occasions such as marriage, birth, or any accusation that require cheering up or enthusing people, such as competitions.

[35] Arabic word meaning daughter of…

We run to the neighbours distributing the meat and telling them the naming news. After we are done with the job, we run fast to my best friend's house and invite her to have lunch with us.

On the fifteenth day, Habouba calls me around sunset and said:

"Najlaa's umbilical stump fell off. Come with me to bury it."

I follow Habouba to bury the umbilical stump. I thought we are going outside the house to do that when Habouba makes an unexpected turn.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Behind the kitchen, so the baby will be a good mother; a woman who enjoys cooking and raising her children to be good mannered men and women! She will be rooted with pride like a palm tree. She will attract her husband to seek refuge under her cool shadow after a long working day."

"What if the baby had been a boy?" I asked.

"If a boy, the stump would be buried near the mosque, so the boy will be a good man; a one who leaves home for either work or worship."

Habouba prepared a piece of white cloth, she puts the stump in it and puts seven date seeds and some black caraway with it. She wraps it carefully. She digs a hole and gently places the bundle inside the hole and buries it. Then she prayes:

May you be a virtuous girl.

May you be the delight for your parents.

May Allah protect you, as she[36] *protected the water in the well and the milk in the udder.*

[36] Habouba used the feminine pronoun to refer to Allah.

In/sight

Inside her room the electric fan was blowing hot wind just like simoom[37]*. Habouba asked me to switch off the fan and follow her to the veranda. On the veranda the situation was not much better although I splattered two buckets of water on the sandy ground to help decrease the heat. I brought to Habouba her palm leaf hand fan. That effort helped for a short time before the ground got desert dry again and we started sweating all fluids out of our bodies.*

I sat facing Habouba following a drop of sweat as it emerged from her hair and took its way down Habouba's face. It hid for a moment behind her right ear before it appeared again moving along her jawbone, down to the tip of her chin. It was held there for a moment before it sloped down to her wrinkled neck to disappear into her chest. Clean transparent drops of sweat were forming crystal beads on Habouba's skin. She was dewing as we say in Sudanese Arabic. As I was following her dews, Habouba interrupted me: "Ya bitti[38]*, it is still hot here, walk me to the sisir*[39] *tree to escape this scorching heat, ya lateef aleina*[40]*."*

There we went. We sat on the rope woven beds under the tree. Finding some ease, Habouba started undoing her braided hair. I was mesmerized by her quick hand movement as she undid her tiny braids. Her hair was glittering in the sun-shade-sun-shade rhythm when the tree branches danced over us.

I was still quite upset with what the doctor told us about her visual condition. She was so good at hiding her blindness from us. She continued denying that she became totally blind. She was so efficient that nobody noticed her stumbles before she corrected them.

I asked, "Habouba, why didn't you tell us that you can no longer see?"

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[37] Simoom is hot, dry, suffocating sand-wind which sweeps across the African and Asiatic deserts at intervals during the spring and summer (OED).

[38] My daughter!

[39] Leguminous trees of the genus *Albizzia*, native to tropical Asia and Africa (OED).

[40] May Allah have mercy on us.

"What are you going to do about it? Even doctors couldn't help me. Only Allah helps me see with my heart. If you have insight, don't worry too much about the sight. I pray for Allah in secret to help me. I also called my grandfather Alsheikh Almajzoub to support me and to pray for me."

Her face flashed with a smile as she said:

"You know what? They both did help me. Allah helped me find my way without falling and Alsheikh Almajzoub sent me a mamlouk[41] *to remind me of the daily prayers' times and to help me with some chores."*

"What?!"

"Yes, some of our righteous ancestors own some mamlouks to help with various tasks. Who do you think supplies water and grain to my birds?"

I looked at the birds' basins near the tree where we were resting. The basins were half filled with water and grains. A few birds were picking grains and drinking water.

"Have you ever found my water zeers dry?" She asked. I shook my head signalling no.

Habouba continued: "The mamlouk also fills them every day so thirty passersby find water to drink as they always do."

As she said that I looked at the water zeers in the trellis and I saw a man on a donkey back stepping down to drink some water.

This is the first time I hear about the mamlouk but I see his work for sure.

"Do you see him? What is he like?" I asked.

"No, I don't see him." She laughed. "Now you know I am blind. But I hear him and feel his soft hand on my shoulder as he wakes me for alsubuh[42] *prayer every morning. His hand is small and soft and he has a kind voice as he calls me: "Habouba, Habouba, wake up! It is prayer time! " He calls me at dawn time each morning. He is just a soft hand, a kind voice to me. What more do I want?"*

[41] A spirit servant Habouba had.

[42] Alsubuh is an Arabic word meaning morning time. Here Habouba used it to refer to the Morning Prayer.

Farewell

Habouba put on a beautiful beige toobe.[43] *She wore her sandalwood perfume and told me to get dresses.*

"Are we visiting people?" I asked

"No, we are going for a walk. We will greet people as we meet them of course," Said Habouba.

With me holding to her hand, Habouba walked on the streets and through the narrow alleys waving her white handkerchief:

"Salaam[44] *hoy*[45]*, Khawla and your family. May angels pass my salaam to you."*

Habouba did the same whenever we passed by a house. When she saw people in the street, she called them:

"As-salaam alaikom."[46] *She hugged women and shook hands with men. She asked them about their families.*

She stood with each one for some time. I watched in impatience.

"Habouba, Let's go." I expressed my impatience.

"Why are you in a hurry? What are you after? Don't chase life. You will not catch it. You will end up with just mirage. Enjoy the moment, daughter, enjoy the moment. We are just walking by to meet people and to ask about them. Salaam is Islam Sunna.[47] *You should care for people, meet them with a smile, greet them, and ask about them. That will be your gift to them. You know, ya bitti? If you win people's love, you win an everlasting treasure."*

While we were talking, my older brother Sami came to call us to come back home. Habouba's slow steps were changed into a trot. When I saw that I ran in front of her towards home.

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[43] A Sudanese body cover for women. It looks like the Indian sari.

[44] Arabic word meaning peace, used for greeting.

[45] Sudanese Arabic word, used for calling Oh…..

[46] Peace be upon you

[47] The deeds, sayings and unspoken approval of Muhammad as this has been recorded and systemized in Prophet Muhammad's sayings. The sunna of Muhammad has generally become considered obligatory by most Muslims.

When I arrived there I found my mother in Sari's room. Sari is my oldest brother. My mother was sitting beside him on the bed, patting his back. I noticed traces of tears in her eyes and her cheeks. My brother was lying on his bed facing the wall. He folded his right arm under his head like a pillow. My father was sitting on a chair in Sari's room and he was talking aloud. I understood that he didn't want Sari to travel abroad. He wanted him to study university in Sudan. He was telling Sari that it was time for him to share with him his siblings' responsibility and to remember that he was the oldest of ten children.

At that point Habouba arrived and she interrupted my father:

"Listen Gari, you didn't raise Sari. I raised him. Sari has never been your responsibility since has was born. Leave him alone. Sari will study wherever he wants and I will support him until he finishes all his education. Get up Sari and fellow me to my room."

My father shook his head saying:

"You spoiled this boy, Habouba. He will never be a responsible man."

Saying that, my father shook his head and left the room.

Sari, my mother, and I followed Habouba to her room. She opened her big trunk and took out her jewellery box. She opened the box and took out a few small bundles of gold. She opened each bundle gently and separated the contents on her bed. She asked Sari to come and pick as much as he wanted to secure his airfare and his first year's educational fees. Sari, with mother's help, took some of the gold. Habouba told him not to worry about father and assured him that father was a kind-hearted person and that he shouldn't worry about the subsequent years.

"As long as you achieve good marks, your father will support you," Habouba said. "I am sure that he will start sending you money starting next month." And she was right about that.

A few days later, Sari carried a small suitcase and headed to the bus stop. A lot of people came to see Sari off. Mother and Habouba were in a state of heart-break. I just saw tears in their eyes and that made me cry. When Sari took

his first steps out of our house, Habouba stopped every one: "Please don't walk behind him. Stop right there at the gateway. I don't want you to erase his footprints. Habouba was following Sari and carefully gathering the sand marked by his foot-traces and putting it in her handkerchief. She counted to seven steps before they allow the people to follow Sari. As people followed, Habouba started her prayer:

I leave you in Allah's hands, eyes and ears
Allah is with you wherever you go, my son
May your pen write right
May your brain work smart
May you succeed in your studies
May Allah blind the evil eye from seeing you

May you come back safe and be ranked up by your education and knowledge

Habouba was praying, crying and trying to reach Sari who hastened in front of the crowd of people who were there to see him off. I remained by Habouba's side, crying and repeating "amen, amen" as she prayed. When we arrived at the bus stop, Sari hugged Habouba and broke down in tears and sobs. When he got on the bus, Habouba shouted: "No god but Allah."

Sari replied back: "and Mohamed is his messenger."

Sari did not look back as the bus slowly moved away towards Atbara town where he caught the train heading to Khartoum and from where he would board the plane to Europe.

Wedding

Two weeks before my wedding day, Habouba had me take leave from work to get prepared for the wedding.

"You should look different on your wedding day. A good thing about you is that you never wear makeup. When you do on your big day, you will look beautiful and different. You should surprise your groom so he knows what he has."

I stayed in my room for two weeks. Habouba was always with me to make sure that I don't leave the room to face the glowing sun. She was the one to bring me whatever I needed from outside. Like most of the Sudanese brides I had to smoke my body with acacia wood for a few weeks, to make it smooth and give it golden colour.

The henna ceremony, was one day before the wedding. Habouba was the one to open the ceremony by putting some henna paste on my finger. Then a henna artist began painting my hands, arms, legs and feet with henna. Meanwhile female friends and relatives were singing and dancing. That same night after guests and friends left Habouba had a long meeting with me:

"You know daughter all men are alike. The one who is highly educated and the farmer who doesn't know how to write his name are all alike when it comes to their relation with their wives. I don't know your husband. You know him and you said he is a good man. But let me tell you this. Whatever happens, don't let him smell bad odour in you, never. You should take a bath as soon as you finish cooking or cleaning."

She showed me how to clean my armpits and my private parts as if I was a little girl. She gave me a small bottle of liquid musk and told me to apply it deep into my vagina before having sex. She added:

"Your body should smell good and those areas need more effort to keep them clean." She showed me how to scrub my body using dilka[48] *and how to stand over sandal wood incense covering my body with my blanket so that my body and my bed would smell good. Then she added:*

[48] Dilka is home-made scented body scrub.

"When your husband comes from outside, you should feed him if he is hungry, give him water if he is thirty, let him rest if he is tired. If you have something to tell him, wait for him to speak first. Listen to him before you talk. Make sure that you make him as comfortable as possible so he makes you comfortable. Don't be like the woman in the proverb:

(The man comes from the farm
She comes from the neighbourhood
She does not give you food
And does not let your tongue slips go!)

Hearing Habouba talking I thought I could be coming from work tired and hungry as well. I might need someone to comfort and soothe my physical and emotional weariness. I wondered if my groom was taught to treat me right. I told myself: "He does not need that. He is a highly educated man. He respects women and advocates for women rights."

Three days after the wedding, Habouba came to my room at night. She sat on a chair facing my husband:

"Son, you are so lucky. Your mother must be praying for you all your life to have a good wife. You married our dearest daughter. Please protect her and carry her in your eyes. Let me tell you this, our daughter could also be very nervous at times, but she is warm-hearted and she returns back to herself quickly. Bear with her when she gets nervous."

My husband smiled and nodded as he assured Habouba that he would take good care of me.

Then Habouba announced the next day's schedule saying:

"Tomorrow morning I am taking both of you to visit our great grandfather Alsheikh Almajzoub's temple in Aldamer. We are taking a lamb with us to slaughter there. We will spend the whole day. Some of our neighbors and relatives are going with us. Wake up early and get prepared," Habouba said that and left.

When we woke up in the morning we found a car and a bus waiting for us. We had a light breakfast and took the car with Habouba and the other people took

the bus. We could hear the people in the bus singing aloud as we moved towards Aldamer.

When we arrived the Majazeeb fire[49] *could not be missed. It was lit in the middle of the courtyard leading to the Majazeeb temples. The flames were dancing with the late morning breeze. Two students were attending the fire to make sure that it would not go off. We were welcome by Alsheik Almajzoub's custodians who prepared cold water and juice for us. Then they took us for a tour around Alsheik Almajzoub's and some other temples. First they showed us the other graves and temples of our ancestors buried with Alsheik Almajzoub. When they came to the temple of Musa, the Bachelor*[50]*, the old custodian asked Habouba:*

"Habouba, do you remember the day you came here to ask Musa, the Bachelor, to support you and to show you a sign that he did?"

"How can I forget that day Sheikh Yaseen?! I remember it as if it happened yesterday. My body still shudders when I think about that day." I heard that story many times. So Habouba turned to my husband:

"Son, one day I came here. I had a big dispute with one of my relatives. She mistreated me and that made me really angry. So I came to Musa, the Bachelor, and asked him to support me and to stand by my side until I passed that time. I was crying badly. I was so angry, so I addressed Musa, the Bachelor: show me that you support me. I know you hear me. Show me a sign that you are with me."

"You know what happened?" Habouba continued: "The small stones and sand covering Musa, the Bachelor's grave started to scatter around me and Sheikh Yaseen. We heard Musa, the Bachelor's voice coming out of the grave. He was about to come out to show me that he supported me and that he was mad at the woman who treated me badly!"

[49] Majazeeb are religious teachers. Students come from different areas to study Quran and Hadeeth with them. The fire was originally meant to be like a landmark for students coming from other areas. The tradition of the fire lit 24/7 continues until now.

[50] Musa was a religious leader. He died young and nicknamed the Bachelor because he was not married.

The old custodian who was nodding his head in confirmation said: "At that point I had to rush to the grave and called Musa, the Bachelor: "We saw your sign Sheikh Musa. Rest back, rest back. I kept repeating that until the stones and the sand covered the grave back."
Habouba eyes were wet: "yes, I felt as light as a bird after that visit. All my anger evaporated immediately." I was watching my husband and I could notice the signs of disbelief in his look. Then we moved from one temple to another. Habouba prayed at each temple. She knew by heart all of our relatives buried under them.

Our last stop was at Alsheik Almajzoub's. Alsheik Almajzoub's temple was located in the centre of the temples. It was also the biggest. When we arrived there, we found many people holding the curtains surrounding the grave and praying. Habouba pushed us in front of her and prayed: "Oh Alsheik Almajzoub this is your daughter and her husband. They are visiting you today desiring your blessing for good long life together, a life filled with happiness, children, and wealth."

Habouba tore out two strings from the curtains and tied one around my arm and the other around my husband's arm. She asked us never to take them off. She also took some sand from the sand heaped on the grave. She put it in another piece of cloth and gave it to me. She asked me to take it home with me. We stayed there until sunset. We headed back to the village after the sunset's prayer. As soon as we got into our room I tore the pieces of cloth and threw them with the sand into the garbage!

Divorce

My cousin Fayza told me that she asked her husband for divorce fourteen times, but he refused. She conveyed to me she was ready to have some elders mediate to grant her divorce. I was so overwhelmed because I knew how much Fayza and her husband Usama loved each other. I asked Habouba to go with me to Fayza and Usama to see what the story was all about.

When we arrived we found Fayza all alone. She told us that although Usama loved her, he took her for granted. In Fayza's words:

"Usama is doing nothing to keep the tree of our love watered and cared for. He just married me. He leaves me home, distant from him. And he is always out pursuing his own old interests, his books, his friends, his extended family. He is not including me in any of these interests."

Fayza went on: "I am always at the end of his list. Everything comes before me. I just can't live with him anymore. I am simply not interested in him any longer. I have been trapped in this cycle for three years now. That's more than enough. I gave him chances after chances. He is not changing."

"I want to talk with him," Habouba requested.

Fayza sent her neighbors' son to call Usama from the men's club nearby. Usama came. He brought some pastries with him and he asked Fayza to make tea.

I went to the kitchen with Fayza to prepare the tea. We took time to give Habouba and Usama some privacy. When we came back Habouba's and Usama's eyes were wet with tears. I poured the tea into the cups and passed the cups around. As we were having the tea nobody talked. Then Usama stood up and broke the silence:

"Fayza! You are divorced!"

Fayza looked at Usama and said: "Thank you." I broke into tears and sobs seeing a relationship ending just like that. Usama turned away and left the house. Habouba asked me to help Fayza prepare some clothes and things she

might need as she would be staying with us for a few days before she travelled to her family in another region.

I thought Habouba was going for conciliation not separation. I was so angry. I asked her: "Why did you do that?" Habouba smiled and answered: "Because their marriage has died but they are still alive! No need to bury them with it. It is better to free them so each one can have a chance to resume life!"

When we arrived home, Habouba said: "Fayza, you remind me of your grandmother Nafeesa." I knew that had to be an opening for another story. I was right. Habouba went on:

"Your grandmother Nafeesa married your grandfather Awad. 'May Allah have mercy on their souls. Nafeesa and Awad had one child who is your mother Asha. When Asha was about a year old, Nafeesa abandoned Awad and refused to have any relationship with him. She refused to cook for him or to care for his affairs. Elders intervened but Nafeesa would never change her mind. Awad refused to divorce Nafeesa and he married another woman thinking that Nafeesa might get jealous and return back to him. But that was in vain. Awad continued loving Nafeesa and reciting poems about her:

The gold wishes to have your colour	اتمنى الدهب لو لونه يشبه لونك
The pearls wish to be your teeth	و اشتهت الدرر لو هي تبقى سنونك
Majnun Layla[51] is in better shape	مجنون ليلى حاله أقل من مجنونك
Because Layla is not as beautiful as you are	مادام ليلى كانت في المحاسن دونك

Nothing seemed to help Awad regain Nafeesa's love. Nafeesa became friends with his second wife and apparently she had no interest in Awad. When Awad lost all hopes of restoring her love, he divorced her. Nafeesa continued living with Awad and his family after they made some adjustments in the house so Nafeesa and her daughter could have their own space. After divorce Nafeesa became Awad's best friend and the safe well of his secrets. Awad used to have his

[51] *Majnun-Layla,* is a classical Arabain love story. It is based on the real story of a young man called Qays ibn al-Mulawwah from the Arabian Peninsula, during the 7th century. Qays and Layla spent their childhood and youth together as they were cousins. Qays loved Layla so much and started writing poetry about her. He went mad when her father prevented him from marrying her; for that reason he came to be called Majnun Layla, which means driven mad by Layla, (Wikipedia). The referral to Majnun-Layla is common in the Arabic literature, especially poetry.

morning coffee with her and he continued doing that daily until he died. I think Fayza inherited that mixture of pride and determination from Nafeesa، الحديس أطول من العمر. "

Winter Nights

We could hear the dry cold air as it blew through the wooden windows of our clay room. It was so cold that I had to close the tiny gaps between the windows and the walls using old sheets and a screwdriver to force the pieces of cloth into the openings.

As soon as I finished, Habouba asked me and my sister to bring the things needed for preparing our favourite evening snack. That was peanuts and dates. As we ran to the kitchen, the cold wind was pushing us back. We brought a charcoal stove, a box of matches, some charcoal, small pieces of wood to help light the fire, a palm leaf hand fan to blow the fire, a pan, some sand, some salt, and some peanuts from that year's harvest. Habouba sat in a short-legged seat known as a banbar and lit the fire. My younger sisters and I extended our hands over the fire to get some warmth. Then we rubbed both hands together and distributed the heat over our bodies. Habouba put raw shelled peanuts in a pan. She added some sand, salt and she took some ash from underneath the stove and sprinkled it on the peanuts. Soon the delicious smell filled the room, so inviting and fresh. When we saw smoke ascending from the pan, we knew that the peanuts were almost ready. I ran to the storage room and brought a big bowl of crunchy dried dates. My sisters and I broke the dates into halves to prepare them for peanut filling. Then we took the warm peanuts and filled the dates. Oh that was yummy and warming! Before we started eating the dates and nuts, Habouba asked my sister to call the neighbours over the wall and give them a bowl of dates filled with peanuts:

"You should share your food with your neighbours especially when they smell what you are cooking," Habouba said. My sister nodded as a sign of 'I got the lesson.' Then she took the bowl and gave it to our neighbours.

"Here! Take this!" Habouba said stretching out her hand with a bowl of peanuts and dates. I extended my left hand. Habouba says: "no, no, use your right hand. You should only use your right hand to eat".

Why? I asked.

"Because the evil spirits share your food when you eat with your left hand and you will never feel content!" she answered.

After we enjoyed the treats and cleaned the place, Habouba asked us to brush our teeth. Then she rubbed her body with sesame oil and asked me to help her massage her back with the oil. Habouba liked moisturizing her body especially in winter when the skin might crack if not moisturized enough. Habouba asked me to bring a mixture of body cream for me and my sisters to use. We all moisturized our bodies with the cream and went to bed.

As I put the light out, my sister Maha, who was always in a state of pondering, said:

"We are here in this room with all these blankets to cover our bodies yet we are still cold. What about the nomads living in shacks outside with fewer covers? How could they live in such chilliness?"

"Allah gives everybody chillness equal to their cover," Habouba said. "So if you have a warm blanket, you have more chilliness and if you have a thin blanket, you have less chilliness!"

.الله بيدي كل زول برداً قدر غطاه!

As I stretched under my cozy blanket, I was thinking about this phrase until I fell asleep. ! الله بيدي كل زول برداً قدر غطاه!

Mishat[52]

Habouba had a hairdresser coming over to do her hair into small braids. Habouba invited her neighbours and friends to help her and the hairdresser pass the time. The hairdresser sat on a high seat and Habouba sat on a low seat known as a banbar. To manage the hair the hairdresser prepared some steeped tea to smooth the hair down, a palm thorn for dividing the hair into small bits, and homemade hair cream to make the hair shiny.

The first wanasa topic was about an unmarried girl who got pregnant. "What a pity! She is such a beautiful girl. It was stupid of her to fall easy prey for bad men. She ruined herself and her future. How can her poor father and brother face other people afterwards?" said Safia.

"Hey women, how come you are so sure that she is pregnant? asked Zahra.

"Yes, she is pregnant! On Friday I meant to sit near her at the Batoul's gathering. I touched her belly with my elbow. Her belly was hard just as a pregnant woman's belly," said Fatima.

Habouba said: "Yes, my heart goes to her mother, Halima. She became very thin from shame. I saw her the other day in the street. She avoided me. Time is different now. In our days nothing of such kind would happen. We did not even wear as many clothes as girls do these days. We wore a short cloth that we wrapped around the waist. But no man dared to look at us in a bad way. We were used to socializing with boys and young men for long hours. Every evening we cooked karama[53] from sunset until the time of Isha (evening) prayer. Sometimes boys brought us firewood for the karama and they sang with us until the sorghum was well cooked. Then we gave them their share and had ours. After we put out the fire and ate our karama, we used to ask them to take us to our houses. They did that with respect. They were just like brothers to us. But

[52] Mishat is hair braiding. It is done by a specialized hairdresser known as mashatah.

[53] A meal of boiled sorghum usually made by a group of girls and young women. Some girls gather the firewood, other bring the sorghum, water, etc. The cooking is usually outside houses. Girls stand in circles singing around the fire as the sorghum cooks.

nowadays, you can't even trust your next door neighbour. You should tell your daughters to be very careful with men, because if such a thing happens and the girl gets pregnant all the community blames the girl and she and her family will be stigmatized forever. The boy can easily deny having a relationship with the girl. Even if he acknowledges he does that to brag about it and nobody blames him."

"Yes, Habouba." Hajja Batoul agreed. "We used to sing to our male friends:

The moon is shining
Take me to my house
My parents are waiting for you
They trust you
You are a generous, noble man

The hairdresser took a break as the coffee was served. Habouba called me: "Come here, ya bitti. Serve your aunts cold water before the coffee." I rushed to the water zeers and brought a big jug of cold water. As I started distributing the water, Habouba stopped me: "Start from the right." I went to the right end of the veranda and continued pouring the water into a cup, gave it to a woman and waited until she had enough. I used the same cup for all women. I moved from a woman to another until they all had enough water. Meanwhile my older sister prepared the clay coffee pot and a number of small Chinese ceramic cups. Layla, my cousin, put some charcoal fire and sandal wood in the censor and we soon smelled sandal wood scent. Habouba called: "Daughter, go to my room and bring me some of the olibanum[54] that Sheik Alja'ali blessed to protect us from the evil eye. You will find it in my trunk." All women agreed with that request and I heard a lot of voices repeating: "Yes, yes; go bring Sheik Alja'ali's olibanum. May he bless all of us". I brought the blessed olibanum, put it on the censor and moved around the women. I started from the right this time without a reminder. Women used their hands to blow the scented smoke towards their bodies praying for Sheik Alja'ali to protect them. At last I brought the censor to Habouba who took it by her right hand. She held the sensor close to her chest.

[54] An aromatic gum resin obtained from trees of the North African genus *Boswellia* (family Burseraceae), esp. *Boswellia sacra*, formerly used as a medicine but now chiefly as incense; frankincense (OED).

She took her toobe and covered her body and the sensor under her toobe. She prayed for a while before she asked me to take the censor:
"Put out the fire and throw the remaining coals away. Be sure to throw them away so that no body uses them again!"
Why, don't you want other people to use the charcoals again?" I asked.
Habouba laughed: "You don't miss a chance to ask why! Because it will hurt you if you use it after burning the Sheik Alja'ali's olibanum in it!"
That didn't make sense to me but it is not the right time to continue questioning! "May be later," I whispered to myself.

Women started to drink the coffee with dates. They drank three times starting with the most concentrated coffee to the lightest. We girls waited for our turn until all women had enough coffee. Girls and unmarried women should drink only light coffee. The answer to an earlier 'why' was because coffee reduces women's fertility!
The hair braiding was resumed after the coffee break.

My father came from the neibouring town, Atbara, where he used to work. He greeted the women one by one shaking hands with each woman and asking her about her family. The women asked him to join them for coffee and he agreed. My father sat and broke the news of the arrest of a serial killer that horrified the nights of Atbara for months. To the women's astonishment the person who turned out to be the serial killer was a very well-known community person. Mohamed was his name and 'the Naive' was his nickname. 'The Idiot' was the nick name I used for him. My father and the women went on talking about the series of crimes that broke the monotonous quiet nights of Atbara. The killer murdered three victims within a few months. The first victim was a young man in his early twenties. The second was a woman around the same age. Atbara was turned upside down when Ustaz Abbas was killed. Ustaz Abbas was a very well known and loved person in Atbara and the neibouring villages. Ustaz Abbas was in his mid thirties. He was a high school teacher and he was killed the same way as the other two victims on one of Atbara's summer nights. He was found strangled with a bicycle chain while he was sleeping in the

courtyard of his house with his wife and children around him. Like other victims nobody heard or felt any thing the night he was killed. Then investigations showed that the killer drugged his victims before killing them

Atbara people gathered in the mosques, the market place, clubs, schools, and work place. They decided to organize evening and overnight watching shifts. Volunteers took turns to watch over the city throughout the nights. Atbara communities announced a state of emergency. You would rarely see any one moving in the streets after sunset expect for the guarding volunteers. Mohamed the Idiot participated in the guarding shifts. Foot trackers came from neighbouring villages to help the people of Atbara. It was a time of much collaboration as well as rumours and speculations. Some people say the killer was a spirit of a man who was drowned in the Atbara River. Others drew conclusions from the tools used in the crimes. The killer was a doctor, a nurse, a bicycle maintenance worker. People became suspicious and mistrusting of each other, but Mohamed the Idiot was simply above all suspicions. He was a source of joy to the Atbara community. Children saw him at schools performing his magic tricks, swallowing razors and taking them out of his mouth threaded together in a long string. People saw him in the market helping women venders by carrying their goods to and from the market. Everybody knew Mohamed the Idiot, joked with him, teased him about his favourite soccer team or tried to snatch his magic bracelet which he said was given him by an Indian magician.

My father went on telling us about the police detective who came from Khartoum especially for that case. That man participated in all of Atbara's social events. He mixed with people in the market and at the streets. He prayed in Atbara's mosques and drank local alcohol in its bars. He attended soccer matches and mingled with athletes and coaches. He visited high schools and joined the students' and teachers' societies. He had times at Atbara's hospital with the doctors, nurses, patients and guards. He did not forget about the cinema, the weddings and the funerals. He went to the Nile and swam with the fishermen. He shared food in the restaurants and smoked narghile at Atbara

outdoor bars. One day, that detective took off alone and headed towards Mohamed the Idiot's house. He knocked on the door. Mohamed was not there. His mother opened the door and the detective entered the house and went straight to Mohamed's room. There he found the bicycle chain soiled with blood, some bottles of anesthesia, and some cotton roles. The detective waited there with handcuffs and a gun. He waited until Mohamed the Idiot came and he arrested him without any struggle.

I saw women shaking their heads in disbelief and I heard their sighs of relief. That night Atbara went to bed sad but it could drift into night-long sleep after seven long months.

All the women waited until Habouba's hair was done. They showed their admiration of the hairdresser's skills. They wished Habouba good health and to have her hair done again for her next Hajj[55] *journey. When the women were about to leave, mother and Habouba insisted that they stay with us for dinner:*
"Please stay for dinner, by Allah and his messenger, by Sheik Alja'ali. Please stay" Habouba insisted.
Different voices and different words were heard:
"No Safia, no Habouba".
"Please don't implore us, please. Allah and his messenger are precious."
"May Sheik Alja'ali protect us by his blessings."
Under Habouba's insistence, the women went into the kitchen to taste the dinner. Each one took one bite[56] *to show their respect to their hosts and to show their glorifying of Allah, his prophet and Sheik Alja'ali. Then they left to their houses.*

[55] Hajj is one of the pillars of Islam. It is a journey to Makkah and Madina that Muslims are required to take once in their lives if they are physically and financially able.
[56] Usually when people are not expecting to have a meal with somebody, they show respect to them by just tasting the food and leaving before the meal is served, a way of showing sensibility and courtesy.

Spell

What happened to Osman wad Abdullateef happened around twenty five years ago. No, no, what happened to Osman happened before he and Shama got married and had their children, Taha who is twenty seven years old and who graduated from Khartoum University and is a civil engineer in Khartoum now and Mariam who is twenty five years old and is a teacher in the elementary school in this village. Shama and Osman's youngest child is Hamad, who is twenty-two years old. He is working as a soldier after he dropped out of school. To be certain what happened to Osman happened more than twenty- seven years ago.

More than twenty-seven years ago and in the very spot of the Sun Bazaar, a merchant caravan of around seven camels knelt down to fill up with water and to rest for a short time. The camels knelt and their riders scattered in the village. It was the rainy season in the village. The village was bragging with its green lawns, thick trees, and the colourful seasonal birds singing and leaping from tree to tree. On that very day, it rained lightly just before the caravan arrived. The rainbow was stretching across the eastern horizon. That was one of the reasons the caravan men could not resist the seduction of nature before they continued their journey.

The caravan men scattered toward the local bazaar where they bought some food and yoghurt from the women venders on that beautiful afternoon. One of the caravan men, Osman, bought a bowl of yoghurt. He drank it drawing a white line under his black moustache that just came into existence that year. At that moment and that place Shama Mahmoud and her sister Hala passed by. Shama passed by Osman and his gaze followed her. Shama walked by and Osman felt as if she was walking on his heart and on his breath. Shama passed by with her colourful dress and her small black head cover. Osman was shaken inside and out. Osman stood up suddenly as if he had been bitten by a snake. First his gaze went with Shama. Then his feet followed. He heard the yoghurt seller calling him: "Give me the money, my son." Osman turned back to pay for the yoghurt and hurriedly resumed his walk. He was

under a spell. He followed Shama and Hala. He heard their giggles and felt indescribable charm. He was just carried away by Shama's voice and her strut. Shama knew that there was a young admirer following her. She changed her walk intentionally to capture the remainings of his attention and the rest of his breath.

Shama surged the rays of her glances around Osman. She used her laughter, her talk, and her walk to intensify her entrapment of Osman. Shama and Hala entered their house which consisted of two huts and a fence of reeds around them. Osman managed to make eye contact and a confused smile with Shama before she disappeared into the house. Osman circled the house and his emotions also went in circles. Then he stood in front of the door, right there. Shama who knew it all, threw the door open and said:

"I don't know you."

"I …..am…….. not ……..from here."

"Welcome to our village. Do you want water?"

"Y y y yes."

"Okay, come on in and I will give you some water."

Osman entered the house and that was it. He entered a new life. As he sat in the courtyard, Shama examined him. She thought he was handsome, young, strong, and loveable. She brought him some water and stood looking at him as he was drinking. Then she dashed into the hut, grabbed a razor, and came out. Hala purposely started a conversation with Osman to distract him. Shama suddenly stood up, removed the cap from Osman's head and cut a little hair. She ran back into the hut. Shama opened an old iron trunk and took a calabash. She poked a hole in the calabash, forced the hair into the calabash and put it back. At that moment Osman felt bond with her as if he was at home. Meanwhile the caravan was getting ready to continue its journey. They looked for Osman all over the village. At last they found him with Shama and Hala. They came after him but he persistently refused to accompany them. The caravan left Osman with Shama. Osman and Shama soon got married and they had three children, Taha, Mariam, and Hamad.

Osman and Shama lived happily with their children until Shama became very sick. When Shama felt that she was going to die, she called her sister Hala and she said:

"Hala, I am dying. My will is to bury the calabash, where I put Osman's hair, close to my grave."

Shama died. Hala buried the calabash just under Shama's gravestone. Osman became very sad. He used to close his store earlier than usual and spend the rest of the day by Shama's grave until his children came and took him home every evening. Osman continued doing that for months. One day there were some goats grazing on the grass in the grave yard. One of the goats was grazing close to Shama's grave. The goat dug out the calabash and broke it with its hoof. Osman's hair flew in all directions.

Osman, who was in his store helping customers, suddenly dropped the money from his hand and ran as fast as he could to the place where the merchant caravan knelt more than ten years before. When he arrived, he screamed: "Hey people where is the caravan? Where is my camel? Where is my group?" Osman was lifted a few metres above the ground before he collapsed into a coma. Hala rushed to the grave yard. She saw the shattered calabash and she understood Osman's coma but she could not do anything about it.

A Tale of a Sword

"Habouba, tell us the hijwa of Fatima, the Beautiful."

"You know it is not good to tell hijwas in day time. Hijwas should be told in the evenings only. I will tell you a story. A real story! I will tell you a story about your great grandfather, Gari, my father after whom your father was named."

I sat by her side and started playing with the wrinkled skin covering her bones. Her skin was so soft, so clean, and so stretchy. I held part of her wrist skin in my hand and stretched it until I almost saw her bones. I dug my fingers into her arm and wrist bones. Habouba laughed and asked: "what are you doing my daughter? Do you like this ancient wrinkled skin?" I answered with a smile. "Now let's listen to this story," Habouba said: "الحديس أطول من العمر!" Stories live longer than age!"

"You know that your grandfather was a brave warrior. He lost his left arm and his right leg in the Mahadiyya[57] wars against the Turkish invaders. When the war was over, your grandfather came back to the village and resumed his life as a farmer. He used to spend the whole day in his farm from sunrise to sunset. You know where his farm is, don't you?

"Yes, I know. It is far away," I answered.

"Yes", said Habouba, "it is in the far valley, way beyond the cemetery." She pointed to the direction of the cemetery.

"How could he go to his farm and work there if he had one arm and one leg?" my sister Maha interrupted.

Habouba answered: "He used a cane to help him walk. He did everything with one hand. He used to hang the seed bag on his left shoulder and used his right hand for sowing the seeds. You know the way the farmers dug the soil using the salouqa[58]? You know how the farmers step on the Salouqa to make small holes and sow the seeds in them. Your grandfather needed a helper to do that for

[57] The Sudanese national movement against the Turkish-Egyptian colonization 1881-1899.

[58] A T shaped stick used for digging small holes in wet soil to sow seeds.

him. Usually he sowed the seeds himself. His wives and children used to help him with various farm work as well. Now listen to the story."

One evening when your grandfather was coming home from his farm with my older sister Asia, he was stopped by some road robbers. Those robbers had masks on their faces. They came closer to my father and they were encouraged to attack when they found that my father was old and had some physical disabilities. The stupid robbers did not even think to take into account my sister who was known to be fearless. One of the men shouted:

"Hey old man, give us this horse and whatever you carry in that bag!"

Although your grandfather was a brave man, he was also very kind and he always avoided getting into fights with people. So, he begged the robbers:

"My sons please leave us alone. I am an old man with one arm and one leg. And this is my daughter. As you see we are coming from the valley and we can't walk all the way to the village."

At that point the robbers became more daring. They started to shout. They pinched Asia and pushed your grandfather from the horse back. Your grandfather could not take it anymore. He said:

"Asia trill[59] *!*

Asia trilled three times: Ayouya, Ayouya, ayouyouyooooya!

Your grandfather unsheathed his sword and danced with his horse around the robbers.

At that point the men knew it. That was not the right person to attack. They tried to escape throwing what they robbed from other people, but your grandfather didn't give them that chance. He captured them and tied both of them together.

"Now you coward thieves, you should take the stolen things to where you stole them!" your grandfather said.

"Okay! Okay! Please don't tell people about us".

"Fine!" said your grandfather. "But you should return the things now. Now show me from where you stole these things and I will take you to return them!"

[59] A cheering sound women make to express happiness or to encourage other people.

Your grandfather agreed to conceal the robbers' identities on one condition: to promise him and to repent from robbing people!

"Did you know that your grandfather had eaten the lion's liver?"

My sisters and I looked at each other and asked "what?!"

"Yes, he ate the lion's liver and it stayed in his stomach. If he wasn't so brave, the lion's liver would cause him diarrhea and it would come down immediately. Only brave men could tolerate lion's liver," Habouba said.

"Where did he find the lion's liver?" I asked.

"When he was working in the South, your grandfather and some friends killed a lion and they ate its liver. He told us that most of the men who ate the liver with him had diarrhea the moment they swallowed the liver. But he didn't have anything after he ate the liver. That was the proof that his heart did not sense fear."

"Now, let's go to have a look at your grandfather's sword," Habouba said.

We followed Habouba to her room. We stood in front of the wall where the sword was hung and started looking at the sword with renewed interest. The sword was centring the wall with two spears on the sides and some arm-knives[60] inside their leather sheaths. Habouba held the sword. The sword glittered as Habouba unsheathed it. She showed us its silver handle and the star carvings on the hard metal. The blades weren't too sharp then. Habouba made us carry the sword. The sword was so heavy. My heart was light as I carried the sword and danced with it around the room. I experienced many feelings of pride, belonging, and rootedness.

[60] An arm-knife is a knife kept in a leather sheath. The sheath has a small round handle to be wore around the left arm, under the clothes.

Siblings

One day as we are walking along the Nile River, my grandmother said: "The Nile reminds me of my older brother." صحي و الله، الحديس أطول من العمر
It was the first time I learned that she had a brother.
I exclaimed: "I didn't know that you had a brother!"
"Yes, I did. I had two brothers. But one died when he was as tall as a sword. We did not have birth certificates those days. He would have been around seven or eight years old. His name was Nour. And the other died when he was a few months old. His name was Gasim."

Habouba took a short pause before she said: "Both my brothers were not normal human beings! They were a mixture of people, angels, and animals!"
I opened my eyes wide to hear such a description. "What do you mean, Habouba?!"
"Well, wait until you hear their stories." She meant it when she asked me to wait. She paused for quite some time before she continued:

"My brother Nour was so smart, so strong, and good looking. One day he was helping my father in his land by the Nile. They used to go there from sunrise to sunset. One day around noon time, Nour told my father:
"There were some people coming to our house, father."
My father always believed Nour. He had foresight. He foresaw a lot of incidents before they happened. "What do you mean?" I asked.
"Well, I will tell you a story to explain what I meant by foresight. One evening we went to our uncle's house. Our cousins were having fateer[61] with milk for supper. They were sitting on the ground around a big dish and eating the fateer. Nour used to love the fateer. He wanted to eat with our cousins, but they refused to share their food with them. Nour threatened them that if they didn't let him eat with them a big scorpion would come and circle around the dish until they moved away leaving the whole dish for him alone! My cousins laughed at him and continued eating. A few moments later we saw a scorpion

[61] Fateer is a kind of home-made bread. It is very thin and it is made of wheat.

as big as a rat. It had black hair on its yellowish back. It was raising its stingy tail high and ready to sting. Cousins were astonished. As they ran away from the dish, Nour sat in front of the dish and started eating. The scorpion stayed with him while he was eating. It was watch-guarding him. When he had enough, the scorpion retreated back to its hiding hole. Then he called the cousins to come finish their supper."

"This is just an example of Nour's extraordinary gifts. Now let's go back to the story. I said my father believed Nour. So he said to him:

"Okay son, go tell your mother to prepare enough food."

"No, father. They don't need food. They are coming to take me!" said Nour.

Father held Nour's hand and raced to the house:

"I think you are leaving us today, son! I want you to be courageous. Allah will have mercy on your soul. You will be a swallow in heaven. You will be the intercessor for seventy people of our relatives. May Allah inspire your mother with patience and consolation."

"When they arrived home, Nour went to the bathroom, had a shower and changed into clean white clothes. I remember him resting in bed, covering his body with a white sheet and drifting away from us. Father was holding Hawa, Nour's mother who started to weep quietly. He gave her a chain of beads to pray. I remember that as if it were yesterday," Habouba said.

I saw flashing tears in Habouba's eyes. Her tears made my cry. At this point we were passing by Habouba's palm plantation. Usually I would run to climb a palm tree and pick some ripe dates, but I didn't do that.

My throat was blocked with tears. I found my voice to ask:

"What about Gasim?"

"Gasim was also Hawa's son. Hawa was the only woman of my father's wives who gave birth to male children. Gasim looked just like any other infant. However, Hawa told my father that when she was alone with him, he used to stretch his body until he became as tall and as big as she was. She used to be fearful when she stayed alone with him. My father told Hawa not to tell anybody about that

story. But the man with the thread neck[62] *overheard them talking. Rumours spread about the strange baby. Flocks of people started to make excuses to visit Hawa and the baby. Hawa noticed a falcon hanging on the door way of the veranda where she and the baby used to spend the day. She called me several times to come and see that falcon, but it flew away when it heard Hawa calling. Hawa described the falcon's look and the way it spread its wings covering the sunlight. After seven days of the falcon's appearance at the gateway, it dared to pounce down into the veranda. Hawa was breast-feeding the baby. As soon as the baby was aware of the falcon's presence, he stopped eating and jumped out of his mother's lap. When he reached the floor, he turned into a falcon very similar to the one that was already there. The two falcons began to fight fiercely with their feathers scattering all over the hallway. One of them had a hole on its head yet it continued to fight until it got very weak. The other falcon flew away. The wounded falcon managed to jump back in Hawa's lap. He turned back into a baby. He closed his eyes and died in his mother's lap. When we heard Hawa's screaming, my mother and I rushed to her. We found feathers all over the ground. Hawa was cuddling a baby with his soft spot open!"*

[62] The man with the thread neck was an evil spirit my family believed in. It lived under the northern side of my grandfather's compound. That spirit was known to spread rumours about the family. So people living there were warned not to talk aloud when they were at that part of the compound.

Summer Nights

I love summer nights. All the family used to sleep in the courtyard. All beds were brought out in the late afternoon. My parents used to sleep in a separate area on the eastern part of the house. My older brothers used to sleep in the same courtyard with us but each one preferred a certain area closer to his room. They used to go to bed late or after the men's club was closed. I used to wait anxiously for Habouba to finish her evening prayers and her petitions. As soon as she turned right and left saying assalaam alaikum, assalaam alaikum, I jumped in front of her:

"Yallah hajeena! Now tell us a hejwa" I demanded.

"Okay, but before that, the moon is full today. Look at it and sing for it to bring us your brother Sari:

Oh Moon, Oh Moon	يا القمرة يا القمرة
Do your geomancy	صبي السنسنة الحمراء
See when my brother Sari is coming home	شوفي ساري أخوي ما جاء

I lied down on my back, looked at the moon and started chanting:

Oh Moon, Oh Moon	يا القمرة يا القمرة
Do your geomancy	صبي السنسنة الحمراء
See when my brother Sari is coming home	شوفي ساري أخوي ما جاء

Soon my sisters joined in the chant. Habouba told us that we were calling our brother to come for a vacation from Europe. It was more than two years since he left. After finishing the chant, I started to set the scene for the hijwa. I dashed into the storage room and brought the big palm leaf mat. I unfolded it and sat on it. My sisters joined. Habouba, whose joints were preventing her from squatting down on the mat, sat on her banbar and started telling us the hejwa of the sleeping luck.

The Sleeping Luck

Hajeitkun ma bajeitkun حجيتكن ما بجيتكن

Kheiran jana u jak خيرن جانا و جاك

akal ashak u jara khallak أكل عشاك و جرى خلاك

Once upon a time, there were two brothers. One of them was so active and courageous, whereas the other was so sluggish and spiritless. The sluggish brother never worked. He used to complain and nag a lot saying that he had no luck. He used to compare himself with his brother and the opportunities that were open to his brother and shut at his face. He attributed them to luck. Let's call this man Zedan.

One day Zedan met a wise man. He told the wise man his old nagging story about his unlucky life. The wise man thought and thought deliberately. Then he told Zedan that the obstacles in his life were due to the fact that his luck was sleeping. The wise man told him that the only way to achieve change in his situation was by journeying to where his luck was sleeping and awakening that luck. Zedan was so fed up with his life and he was determined to do whatever it might take to change his life.

Zedan set off and started the journey to the place where his luck was sleeping. As soon as he started his first steps, his soundly sleeping luck started to move and to slightly turn from side to side. While Zedan was walking and walking, the luck was moving and turning from side to side. It was opening and closing its eyes. The luck was awakening slowly, slowly until it sat up totally and widely awakened.

Zedan continued his journey until he came across a group of road robbers. The robbers were attacking a merchant caravan. They were snatching money and goods from the merchants. Zedan immediately unsheathed his sword and attacked the robbers. He showed exceptional courage defeating the robber who fled away. The merchants were so happy and the caravan chief offered Zedan a big bundle full of gold pounds, jewellery, and diamonds. "Guess what happened?" Habouba asked.

"What?!" we asked.

"Zedan refused to take the bundle saying no thank you! I am on my way to my luck where I will find more and more fortune and riches." On the other end the luck started yawning and stretching. It got sleepy again.

Zedan continued his journey. He walked and walked for a long distant. As he was passing by a small village, he saw a group of invaders attacking the people. He soon joined the villagers. He fought the invaders fiercely until they were vanquished. The villagers were so happy with him. They cheered his name and they praised his courage. In fact they asked him to stay with them and be their chief.

"Guess what happened?"

"What?!" We asked.

Habouba continued: "he refused saying no thank you! I am on my way to my luck where I will find more and more fortune and riches." On the other end the luck felt so sleepy. It rested its head on its arm and slumbered.

Zedan continued his walk. He walked and walked until he heard a woman calling for help. He wasted no time. He rushed following the direction of the sound. There he found a young woman abducted by a gang of robbers. Counting the number of the robbers, Zedan knew that the robbers would defeat him. So he decided to hide until it became dark. At night, after he made sure that the robbers were asleep, he made his move. Zedan, covered by the darkness, sneaked into the robbers den where the woman was kept. The woman saw him, he signalled to her to hush and not to make any noise. He untied her fetters and carried her away from the robbers. When they were safe, he asked her about her story. She told him that she was a princess and she asked him to take her to her father's palace. She showed him the way and there he took her.

When they arrived, her father, the King, was so happy. The King wanted to reward Zedan. He offered him the position of Crown Prince. He also asked him to marry the Princess.

"Guess what happened?"

"What?!" we asked.

Habouba went on: "our man refused all those generous offers and he said no thank you! I am on my way to my luck where I will find more and more fortune and riches."

The King and the Princess thanked Zedan and they gave him some food for his journey. As soon as Zedan left the palace, his luck stretched its body along the ground and went into deep everlasting sleep.

و انحترت و انبترت في حجر الصغير فينا!

Friendship

Hajeitkun ma bajeitkun حجيتكن ما بجيتكن

Kheiran jana u jak خيرن جانا و جاك

akal ashak u jara khallak أكل عشاك و جرى خلاك

Once upon a time there was a sultan "no sultan but Allah[63]". The sultan had a very beautiful boy, very beautiful like a moon in its fourteenth night. The boy was called Salim. Salim's mother was a wise woman. One day she said to Salim:

"You know that your father is a sultan. I wish your father long life, but one day he will die and you will become a sultan. I want to warn you about people. A lot of people will like to be your friends. You should know that most people will be friends with you because of your status and your wealth. It will be very difficult for you to find true friends. People who want to be friends with you for who you are, are very very few. Most people will be friends with you for what you have."

"What shall I do then? How can I know if my friends are true or false ones?" Salim asked.

"Here is an idea," said Salim's mother. "Invite each acquaintance of yours for lunch. Have three boiled eggs for food. Wait until you and your acquaintance are very hungry. Then bring the three eggs and wait for the acquaintance to eat. If the acquaintance eats one egg and leave two for you, don't be friends with him. That means he is a liar and a cheater. He wants to show you that he loves you more than himself. If the acquaintance eats two eggs and leaves one for you, don't be friends with him. That means he is a selfish person and he has no courtesy. Be friends with the person who will be fair in sharing the eggs with you."

Salim became acquainted with the minister's son. He liked him so much. It was time to test his relationship truth. Salim invited the minister's son for

[63] No sultan but Allah. This phrase is commonly used in northern Sudan folktales. It usually comes after words like Sultan which means a person with ultimate authority. The story teller is saying that only Allah has the ultimate power.

lunch. He brought the three eggs. The new acquaintance ate an egg and Salim ate another egg. Salim pointed to the third egg and said:
"Eat this egg!"
The friend said: "No, you should eat it. I have had enough! I am stuffed!"
Salim ate the third egg and knew that the fellow was not a good friend.

Then Salim became acquaintance with the judge's son. He invited him for the three egg lunch. The new acquaintance ate all the eggs. Salim learned that that person would not make a good friend for he loved himself too much.

Then he found a new acquaintance. That was the merchant's son. And he put him under the friendship test. He brought the eggs. When the new acquaintance saw the eggs, he exclaimed: "Is this your lunch?! What kind of lunch is this?! I better go home to eat real food, bread, meat, vegetables and fruit." And he left. Salim learned that the merchant's son was arrogant and greedy. He would not make a good friend.

Salim felt so lonesome. One day he was just wondering all alone when he saw a boy around his age. Salim went to the boy and asked him:
"Can you be my friend? I am so lonely."
The boy said: "Come on. Look at my worn out clothes. I am so poor. I can't be your friend. Your father is the sultan while my father is a woodman." Salim begged the boy to accompany him for hunting, at least. The boy agreed and he taught Salim how to hunt different kinds of animals, how to use different kinds of weapons to defend himself. Salim was enjoying his time with the woodman's son. He started to return home with his clothes dirty. A few times he came home with cuts over his body or thorns in his feet. The woodman's son started to take Salim to his hut for dinner. There they ate bread sparged with water and salt. Sometimes they just ate grilled corn for their dinner.

Salim decided to perform the friendship test on his new companion. He invited his companion to the three egg lunch. The woodman's son peeled the eggs. Then he took a knife and cut one of the eggs into two halves saying:
"Now you take an egg and a half and I take an egg and a half."

Salim became very happy with his companion. He told his mother about what the woodman's son had done. His mother said: "Now you have a real friend. Be good to him." Salim and the woodman's son became best friends. When they grew up, Salim became the Sultan and appointed his best friend to be his minister.

و انحترت و انبترت في حجر الصغير فينا!

Chapter Four

Making Meanings

In this chapter I take further steps towards knowing you and introducing myself. I introduce myself as a granddaughter in remote settings of time and place. I introduce myself by sharing with you some details of my learning journey. I want you to cooperate with me by giving in to what you read now. I want you to dismiss all the preconceived biases and stereotypes as you read this account about me, Habouba, and about my education.

I mediate between you and the stories to, gently, guide you through place, people, and events. I discuss the meanings extracted from the situations apparent in the stories. I discuss the learning opportunities available to me in the contexts of the stories. I also point out the dominant themes of nostalgia, initiation, and conduct as they appear in the stories. I want you to explore meanings through Habouba's and my perspectives, before you delve into your own meaning making thoughts.

In this chapter I develop a better awareness of my own perspective. I do not see myself as a representative of my indigenous community due to my early exposure to different knowledge systems. I choose not to step into shoes too big for me to fill if I have such a choice. However introducing my stories to a Western audience may make the issue of representation inevitable. Mine is such a sticky situation to which I have no solution.

Classifying the Stories

In this part I present my classification to the stories. It worth mentioning that it is not easy to position a story within one given category. There are no clear-cut features that aid assigning the stories to the categories. Some stories may fit into more than one category at the

same time. I classify my stories into four categories. These are: reflection, wanasa, family history, and hejwas. I adopt Huraiz's (1991) classification for the category of hejwas.

Reflection

I call the first category 'reflection' because it encompasses stories generated from my own observations and memories about Habouba's life and my relationship with her. Stories falling in this category are: 'Birth', 'Alive Forever', 'In/Sight', 'Farewell', 'Wedding' 'Divorce' and 'Winter Nights'.

In the first story, Birth, I start with describing part of Habouba's house; her room. Habouba's room remained as a significant part of my childhood and youth. For me it represents settlement and groundedness. In that room, the building and the furniture are in harmony with each other and with the ecosystem. The main components of the ceiling is wood and palm branches which make the room cool in summer days and warm in winter nights. The ground is bare sand without any flooring materials put on it. That bare sand helps surviving the cool winter nights as well as the dry summer days. Sand is definitely harmonizes with the environment better than the ceramic tiles in my parents' house. In summer all we need to do in order to have soothing coolness is splashing some water on the ground. The room is also easy to clean after the common sandstorms expected to blow any time of the year. In short the building and the furniture are just the right combination in the right place. They are authentic and real. They resemble the place and the inhabitants.

Most of the important cultural passage initiations from birth to death happened in Habouba's room. In this story a baby is born. Giving birth or nefas is the start of the passage rituals. Nefas days are the forty days following the birth day. The important stages during the nefas days are many. During the birth procedure one or two elderly women attend. Their role

is to provide support and guidance to the woman giving birth. Neighbours and relatives come shortly after the birth. Close relatives or neighbours spend days with the new mother to help her around the house and with baby. The naming ceremony is on the seventh day of the birth. Men's role appears to the surface when the new father, his male relatives, and friends participate in the naming ceremony by slaughtering one or more lambs and announcing the name given to the baby. The family picks a name before the naming day. Picking a name is quite a responsibility. My community is particular about the names they give to their children. Some people visit the Nile River to wash the baby and the new mother. Some scholars attribute the tradition to the Kushite civilisation[64] while others compare it to the Christian baptism (Ibrahim, 2008). During the naming ceremony children are sent to distribute the lamb's meat and to spread the news of the naming. As a child I appreciated the joy of learning to share and to involve the people who did not attend the naming ceremony. My attention is turned to the virtue of generousity.

In the story 'Birth' the dominant theme is initiation. Initiation is apparent first as Habouba and other women introduced a segment of the community language and religious identity to the baby by reciting adhan into her ears. Language is an important component in initiation. According to Peters (1972) the ideas and expectations of an individual centre of consciousness are products of the initiation into public tradition enshrined in the language, beliefs, and rules of a society (pp. 48-49). That simple practice, which appears as a mere hearing test, is much more than that. It is initiation into cultural beliefs and values. It is also believed that hearing the adhan which is the call for prayer, will protect the new born from evil eye:

[64] The civilization of Kush centered in the confluence of the Blue Nile and the White Nile, and the confluence of the River Atbara and Nile in Sudan. It was one of the earliest civilizations to develop in the Nile River Valley (Arkamani)

Habouba bends over Zeinab's bed and supports the tiny head and neck on the palm of her left hand and places her right hand on the baby's back. Habouba gently lifts the baby up. She brings the baby's ears very close to her mouth and softly recites the adhan[65] *into the baby's ears starting with the right ear. I watch the baby moving her head and I hear the women cheering:*

"Alhamdu llilah[66]*, her hearing is good! She listens to adhan".*

The theme of initiation is also obvious when I participated in the umbilical stump burial. The role of women and men as defined by Habouba started to take shape in my mind. The lesson introduced to me was a woman was expected to 'govern' her family. This notion harmonizes with Grumet's (1991) discussion on the cult of motherhood that justifies the domestic isolation of women. From the community's perspective the woman is expected to stay home and practice her authority as the head of the house while the man is responsible of the earning a living to support the family. 'Home is the woman's kingdom!' That was one of Habouba's famous phrases. But for me my kingdom knows no territories. I also learned about the major differentiation in men and women roles in the community:

"I followed Habouba to bury the umbilical stump. I thought we would be going outside the house to do that when Habouba made an unexpected turn.
"Where are we going" I asked.
"Behind the kitchen, so the baby will be a good mother; a woman who enjoys cooking and raising her children to be good mannered men and women! She will be rooted with pride like a palm tree. She will attract her husband to seek refuge under her cool shadow after a long working day."
"What if the baby had been a boy?" I asked.
"If a boy, the stump would be buried near the mosque, so the boy will be a good man; a one who leaves home for either work or worship".

Writing my account above draws me back to Benham (2007) as she writes: "because native scholars employ narratives to subject mainstream institutions and policies to interrogation through the eyes of people who historically have been oppressed, we are

[65] Muslim prayer call.

[66] Arabic expression meaning praise be to Allah.

labelled as advocates and not scholars" (p.513). I have asked myself several times and changed a few word choices to sound less of advocate and probably more of a scholar. I come to peace with myself since it is not possible to sound less political when the issue of power imbalances is dominant in my inquiry.

During Habouba's life, I learned that wisdom and insight were crucial to manoeuvre life. I illustrate that by the story 'In/Sight'. The main theme in the story is conduct. Habouba countered her blindness and her physical weakness by insight, acceptance, and strong beliefs in some sort of an almighty power. A power that helped her maintain control over her life and run it the way she wanted. In the story she talks about other strengths she has. She says: *"If you have insight, don't worry too much about the sight"*. Habouba was using her insight and her wisdom by accepting the unchangeable and finding other ways to deal with it. According to Almond (2005): "Wisdom involves accepting the stabilizing constrains of reason and rationality, but it is a richer concept than these, involving feeling as well as intellectual judgment," (p. 4). Habouba here used her wisdom to accept the fact that her sight was failing her. She also used her smart and calculated judgement to move around her house without tripling over the furniture. She employed some sort of spiritual power to help her with her daily chores. In the story Habouba says: *"Yes, some of our righteous ancestors own some mamlouks to help with various tasks. Who do you think supplies water and grain to my birds?"* The theme of conduct is persistent in the whole story. Habouba was being kind to both people and animals around her. She continued providing seeds and water to the birds and she continued filling her zeers to people passing by her place. In the arid hot desert Habouba lived in, finding a jug of cold water on the way from and to the farming lands would make a difference for farmers and other people:

"Have you ever found my water zeers dry?" She asked. I shook my head signalling no.
Habouba continued: "The mamlouk also fills them every day so thirty passersby find water to drink as they always do."
As she said that I looked at the water zeers in the trellis and I saw a man on a donkey back stepping down to drink some water.

The story ended with Habouba asking: *"What more do I want?"* The implied answer to this question is: "nothing." That contentment was one of the main ways Habouba and some elderly people in my family conducted themselves. They even had a name for this contentment. They called it "richness of soul". They were demanding not more than what they actually needed from life: good health. That might be the reason they could extract good living circumstances, by their standards, and extended life in the forbidding nature of the region they lived in. They remained in harmony with the environment. They did not exhaust it and it returned the favour back. In the same line the Sudanese author Tayeb Saleh (1991) describes his grandfather's life:

> By the standards of the European industrial world we are poor peasants, but when I embrace my grandfather I experience a sense of richness as though I am a note in the heart-beats of the very universe. He is not towering oak tree with luxuriant branches growing in a land on which nature has bestowed water and fertility. Rather is he like the sayal[67] bushes in the desert of Sudan, thick of bark and sharp of thorn, defeating death because they ask so little of life (p.73).

From Habouba I learn to slow down to greet people in the community and ask about their affairs. This is illustrated by the story 'Farewell'.

"As-salaam alaikom." She hugged women and shook hands with men. She asked them about their families.
She stood with each one for some time. I watched in impatience.
"Habouba, Let's go." I showed my impatience.
"Why are you in a hurry? What are you after? Don't chase life. You will not catch it; you will end up with just a mirage. Enjoy the moment, daughter, enjoy the moment. We are just walking by to meet people and to ask about them. Salaam is Islam Sunna. You should care for people, meet them with a smile, greet them, and ask about them. That will be your gift to them. You know, ya bitti, if you win people's love that means you win an everlasting treasure."

[67] Sayal tree is a thorny tree found in North Africa.

Unlike Habouba, I did not leave home specially to go mingle with people. But whenever I left home for business I kept in mind the possibility of being stopped by people on the road for a short chat. For that purpose I kept a little uncalculated time for 'just in case' I found people on the road.

In this story I learned something about the value of following one's dream. I learned that from my brother Sari and from Habouba supporting him to pursue his dreams. I saw Habouba giving her life's savings for the education of her grandson. In the same story I record the moment of nostalgia that remained in my memory when Habouba was trying to retain the traces of her departing grandson. *"Habouba was following Sari and carefully gathering the sand marked by his foot-traces and putting it in her handkerchief. She counted to seven steps before she allowed the people follow Sari."* In my family this practice ended by Habouba's passing away. I remember her doing it around the mid nineteen nineties when I was leaving my village after having a vacation there. She was blind. I was walking slowly to give her a better feel of my traces. Her hand was touching my heels as she gathered the sand containing my traces. Now as I replay this scene, condensed feelings of poignancy take control me. I learn that poignancy is related to nostalgia yet it is simirent. Ersner-Hershfield, Mikle, Sulivian, and Carstensen (2008) assert that "poignancy seems to be particular to experience of endings, of no longer having something that one once had" (p. 159). Mixed and intense feelings are associated with both nostalgia and poignancy. Apparently nostalgia is longing whereas poignancy is mourning.

The story 'Wedding' was about initiating me into another stage in my life as a newly married woman. There were direct instructions about how to be a good wife. At that time I already graduated from university and I started my career as a teacher. But Habouba

continued teaching her lessons to me. She was the watch guard for the rites associated with wedding and she wanted to make sure that I, as a bride, did what she had done when she was in my situation. At that stage of my life my interest in women's rights was well developed and I clearly did not agree with her in many of her beliefs. Yet she maintained the same power she had over me when I was younger. That might be due to the fact that I respected and loved her so much that I did not wish to disturb that love by being confrontational with her.

The story 'Wedding', portrayed different perspectives. These are Habouba's perspective and my perspective. I take Benham's (2007) lead in being respectful to the indigenous perspective. To be respectful to the indigenous perspective is to acknowledge the value of multiple voices without crowning a certain perspective as superior. Documenting these narratives and generating intergenerational and intercultural dialogues about them are some ways to empower and to give voice to the indigenous communities:

"When your husband comes from outside, you should feed him if he is hungry, give him water if he is thirty, let him rest if he is tired. If you have something to tell him, wait for him to speak first. Listen to him before you talk. Make sure that you make him as comfortable as possible so he makes you comfortable. Don't be like the woman in the proverb:

(You come from the farm
She comes from the neighbourhood
She does not give you food
And does not let your tongue slips go!)"

Like many of my close friends who read the story, I agree that, in one glimpse, the story reflected a subservient role for women. However Habouba's perspective was different. Habouba believed that the woman had the ultimate power in the family. She believed that the only person in the family who had the skills and the means to keep the family together was the woman. Although Habouba certainly had her distinct ways to experiencing power, she remained the first feminist I knew. She had massive control over her life, her family, her farming business, and properties. That was hardly surprising. The Sudanese women

leadership could be traced back as far as 7000 B. C. and beyond (Alnour, 2001). Available data on the situation of women prove that women in Sudan enjoyed a relatively high status before the contact with the near East and Europe. According to Duany (1996) much f the current imbalance in women status seems to have developed with colonialism. I am an eye witness on the degrading status of women during the recent years from 1989 until now. El-Ahmadi (1994) argues that the politics of ‘‘authenticity’’ (read political Islam) and the politics of identity in the current Islamist state in Sudan manipulated the participation of women in cultural and economic practices that the state views as not suitable for the ‘‘ideal’’ Muslim Sudanese woman. During the recent regime in Sudan women movement activists have been interrogated, arrested, and fired from their jobs (Abdel Halim, 2003).

The same story ‘Wedding’ also uncovers some of the contradicting educational systems I was under. In the story, I accepted to go in a pilgrimage trip. I spent the whole day there and listened to all kinds of stories. But when I returned home, I torn and threw away the pieces of cloth and the sand that was given to me as amulets. I myself was torn between two kinds of knowledge: the traditional and the formal where the last had little or no respect for the first (Ibrahim 2008). Looking back, I think I failed to find a balance between these two kinds of knowledge. Now I do not see any harm in, at least, keeping the amulets. I believe that merging Habouba’s educational system with the formal education might bring good to both systems and might provide a sort of ‘common ground’ between them.

Habouba tore out two strings from the curtains and tied one around my arm and the other around my husband’s arm. She asked us not to take them off unless we wanted to wash them. She also took some sand from the sand heaped on the grave. She put it in another piece of cloth and gave it to me. She asked me to take it home with me. We stayed there until sunset. We headed back to the village after the sunset prayer. As soon as we got into our room I tore the pieces of cloth and threw them with the sand into the garbage.

In the story 'Divorce', Habouba appeared as women's rights advocate. She did not only support Fayza in retaining her freedom and life, but also she went on telling us a story of another woman in our family who demanded divorce. Her husband's love claims did not stop her from gaining her freedom. In the story I learned that I was from a long line of strong women; women who stood up for themselves and who were able to decide on their lives. That was very assuring and that was a rock to lean on when I was faced with some personal troubles. Unfortunately current formal education and media in Sudan teaches girls just the opposite (Abdel Halim, 2003).

Wanasa

I entitle the second category *wanasa*. The wanasa stories are generally stories discussing current events happening in the community. The wanasa usually takes place during women's gatherings. Although most of the attendants are women, men may attend if they happened to be at the same place of the gathering. The wanasa stories in this collection took place during Habouba's gathering with friends, relatives, and neighbours. The wanasa gatherings were important venues for my learning. In the rural community where my extended family lived, wanasa was the main source of entertainment. Wanasa gatherings were also the main grounds where discussions around community values and news exchange take place. My mother had a stroke a few years ago and due to severe limitations of her mobility, she regards wanasa as an important source of entertainment and therapy for her. She calls it ' دلك نفسي ' or 'psychological massage'. In the stories under the wanasa category my attention is caught into the communal or collective power that characterized my indigenous community. The stories themselves are actually authored by a collective power. The wanasa stories are stories about initiation and conduct. The stories are owned by the community and they are

meant to bring change to the collective power rather than to certain individuals. In this I relate to what Benham (2007) says: "indigenous narrative is not solely personal but is deeply communal" (p. 520).

There are two stories under the category wanasa: 'Mishat'[68] and 'Spell'. In the story 'Mishat' many events were discussed which is typical in mishat gatherings. Mishat is braiding hair in very tiny braids and it usually takes a lot of time. Habouba called her neighbours and friends to come and have coffee with her as her hair was done to help pass the time. In the story 'Mishat' the women discussed two major topics: the woman who got pregnant and the arrest of Mohamed the Idiot. Usually women used to send children away when they discuss some mature matters. I do not remember why I was allowed to stay when the women told the story of the young woman who got pregnant. That was regarded a mature subject. That story introduced to me the community's ethical beliefs. It also stimulated my questioning nature on why the community counted on the women's conduct for its grace or disgrace as if men had no responsibilities in that matter. I noticed that no blame was put on the man who impregnated the woman. It took me some time and a lot of questioning to figure out why the attendants were criticising the pregnant woman while a woman in that wanasa gathering was pregnant. In the same story it was clear that watching the way a person conduct herself was central in Habouba's teachings and in the community. The three main themes of nostalgia, initiation, and conduct are obvious in this story. There is initiation into the good conduct as defined by the community. Conduct is always defined by the community. It is social as Dewey (1922) states. The expectations from a girl are explicit and implicit in the story:

You should tell your daughters to be very careful with men, because if such a thing happens and the girl gets pregnant all the community blames the girl

[68] Mishat is hair braiding. It is done by a specialized hairdresser known as mashatah.

and she will be stigmatized forever. The boy can easily deny having a relationship with the girl. And even if he acknowledges that nobody blames him."

Habouba and some elder women were nostalgic to their old times when they were young women and men from their community treated them with respect and brotherhood:

Time is different now. In our time nothing of such a kind would happen. We did not even wear as many clothes as girls do these days. We wore a short cloth that we wrapped around the waist.
But nowadays, you can't even trust your next door neighbour.

In the same story, there was the news of arresting Mohamed the Idiot, a serial killer who lived in Atbara three decades ago. That story was quite a stimulus for my imagination and thinking. The characters of Mohamed the Idiot and the detective who arrested him were very different from the community's pace and events. Both characters were comparable to two characters I read stories about in some international literature translated into Arabic.

There were many interesting similarities between Mohamed the Idiot and Prince Lyov Myshkin in Dostoevsky's novel 'The Idiot'. Mohamed, like Prince Lyov Myshkin returned to the town of Atbara after spending some time aboard. It was said that he was in India studying to be a magician. When he returned home, people noticed that he had some episodes of blackouts in Atbara's bars and in its bazaar which was similar to Prince Myshkin's epilepsy blackouts. Also Mohamed's family line ended with him as he was the only child whose father died when he was a baby. As a child Mohamed enjoyed some sort of treatment similar to royal treatment. He led his childhood enjoying his mother's and he maternal uncles' spoiling treatment as the only child in the family. He was also associated with a local prostitute in Atbara. Unlike most of the men in his community, he treated that prostitute with respect and he was open about his relationship with her. People called him Mohamed the Naive but he reminded me of Dostoevsky's novel 'The Idiot'. However there was a huge difference

between him and Prince Myshkin. Mohamed the Idiot committed murder crimes while Prince Myshkin remains a righteous person in Dostoevesky's novel.

Another interesting thing about that story was having the name Mohamed followed by the adjective idiot or naive. While I was writing this story I wondered if Mohamed the Idiot lived during the recent years how he would be nick-named. The recent time in Sudan is defined by the religious sensitivity or religious hypomania if we want to call it by its 'real' name (Bola, 2005). I wonder whether people would fear associating the words idiot or naive when describing a person whose name happened to be Mohamed. That culture of fear was not a concern a few decades ago.

The character of the detective, who investigated the crimes, shared some similarities with Agatha Christie's detective Hercule Poirot:

"That man participated in all of Atbara's social events. He mixed with people in the market and at the streets. He prayed in Atbara's mosques and got drunk in its bars. He attended soccer matches and mingled with athletes and coaches. He visited high schools and joined its students' and teachers' societies. He had times at Atbara's hospital with the doctors, nurses, patients and guards. He did not forget about the cinema, the weddings and the funerals. He went to the Nile and swam with the fishermen. He shared food in the restaurants and smoked narghile at Atbara outdoor bars. One day, that detective took off alone and headed to Mohamed the Idiot's house. He knocked on the door. Mohamed was not there. His mother opened the door and the detective entered the house and went straight to Mohamed's room. There he found the bicycle chain soiled with blood, some bottles of anesthesia, and some cotton roles."

The other story under the wanasa category is the story entitled 'Spell'. I heard that story in one of Habouba's gathering in the Western Sudan far away from my home region. My father was working in a rural railway station in Western Sudan. Habouba was visiting my family. Neighbours, who were mostly the wives of the railway station workers, used to come to our house to pass the time together while their children were at school and their spouses at work. That story addressed some cultural biases people from Northern Sudan or the main

stream Sudanese were and still are having against people living in other areas of Sudan. Specifically speaking, people in the Northern Sudan claim that some tribal groups in the Western Sudan have some sort of magic power that helps them realize certain wishes such as having rain, attracting other people to have relationship with them, etc. In that story the women attending the wanasa were saying that Shama casted spell on Osman to make him follow her even after she died. According to the story, Shama used Osman's hair to cast her spell. She kept Osman's hair in calabash as we see in the story.

Osman entered that house and that was it. He entered a new life. As he sat in the courtyard, Shama examined Osman. She thought he was handsome, young, strong, and loveable. She brought him some water and stood looking at him as he was drinking. Then she dashed into the hut and came out with a razor. Hala purposely started a conversation with Osman to distract him. Shama suddenly stood up, removed the cap from Osman's head and cut a little hair. She entered the hut. She opened an old iron trunk and took a calabash. She poked a hole in the calabash, forced the hair into the calabash and put it back. At that moment Osman felt bond with her as if he was at home.

Shama asked her sister to bury the calabash near her grave so that Osman would continue following her even after she died. Osman remained under the spell until the calabash was broken by a goat and the wind blew away his hair. When that happened, Osman came to his senses but for a very short time before he went into his everlasting coma. When the women were having that wanasa, I was taken by the beauty of the story. For me it was a romantic love story. But Habouba disagreed with me. She thought that the story was about deceit and evil and that Osman was not himself when he followed Shama even after her death, 'ما براه'. My imagination was stimulated and questioning nature was growing. It is so interesting how people make different meanings from the same story. That story introduced to me how people used different strategies to exclude other ethnic groups. The fear of otherness and the worries of being spelled or in other words, the fear of losing power had negatively influenced our life in Western Sudan. My family lived there for many years but they remained

very careful in mingling with the locals in that area. Thinking back about this story I do not have an answer why Habouba took other women's side when talking about Shama using magic to gain Osman's heart. I am positive that Habouba used to treat all people equally regardless of who they were. She lived in Western Sudan before my family did and she established good relations with them. She told me various stories about her life there. She used to repeat: "we are all children of nine months." That means all people were born equally. However the trick of exclusion aided by formal education seemed to work on her that time.

In a discussion with my advisor she asked me this question: "Is initiation a type of spell?" My answer is both initiation and education may be seen as types of spell. The verb to spell means: To discourse or preach; to talk, converse, or speak. Spell means a discourse or sermon; a narrative or tale; also, a subject of discourse (OED). Peters (1972) differentiates between education and initiating in that education requires something worthwhile to be transmitted while initiation can be into things that are not worthwhile and he gives gambling and devil-worship as examples. I disagree with Peters in this part as initiation usually involves worthwhile social practices (Smeyers and Burbules, 2006). Although I admire Peters' account on education as initiation and finding what he called 'the common ground' or the shared knowledge base between the teacher and the taught. I do not see any rules to ban misusing or abusing both concepts. In my opinion both education and initiation are vastly misused and misinterpreted.

Family History

The third category includes stories told by Habouba about her family. I call this category family history. There are two stories under this heading: 'A Tale of a Sword' and 'Siblings'. Stories depicting family history were about nostalgia, initiation, and conduct. They

played important roles in defining identity and family values which were a source of a lot of pride for Habouba.

Habouba's stories about her family remained in mind. In my view that was because they represented people I knew and who were like me. They symbolize places I lived in, furniture I used and clothes I wore. Those stories were connected to the essence and the values of the community and they communicated and transcended human experiences intergenerational. Lively ideas were passed on. That is totally lacking in the formal educational system in Sudan where 'inert ideas' are injected (Al-Tayeb, 1990).

The inheritance and communication of values appear in the story entitled "A Tale of Sword". In this story Habouba used tangible examples to teach the virtues of courage, modesty, integrity, and hard work. All these conduct examples are taught and shown in action throughout Habouba's life. As Chambliss (1987) points out that conduct is action, and that each example of conduct is a way of educating. Habouba used her father and her sister to illustrate the meanings of her lesson:

We followed Habouba to her room. We stood in front of the wall where the sword was hung and started looking at the sword with renewed interest. The sword was in the centre of the wall with two spears on the sides and some arm-knives[69] *inside their leather sheaths. Habouba removed the sword from the wall. The sword glittered as Habouba unsheathed it. She showed us its silver handle and the star carvings on the hard metal. The blades weren't too sharp then. Habouba made us carry the sword. The sword was so heavy. My heart was light as I carried the sword and danced with it around the room. I experienced feelings of pride, belonging, and rootedness.*

In the story 'Siblings', Habouba shared with me her feelings of loss and longing. She was missing her brothers who both died mysteriously during their childhood. What strikes me as I remember this story is the fact that sadness was always fresh for Habouba. Whenever she

[69] An arm-knife is a knife kept in a leather sheath. The sheath has a small round handle to be wore around the left arm, under the clothes.

remembered one of her relatives who passed away, her tears easily joined her voice as she told the story. Yet she remained a happy and content woman. She seemed to handle the dichotomy of happiness and sadness very well. Through this story and many others I learned the value of recognizing and honouring family affairs and other people's issues and secrets. As a child Habouba taught me what sort of family affairs to disclose to other people and what to keep in my safe well[70] of secrets. She used some sort of a spirit known in our family as 'the man with the thread neck': "*My father told Hawa not to tell anybody about that story. But the man with the thread neck overheard them talking. Rumours spread about the strange baby.*" Habouba and other members of the family believed that 'the man with the thread neck' did exist and that he lived in a certain place in the house. Some said that they saw him. Although I have never seen him, 'the man with the thread neck' exists everywhere. For me 'the man with the thread neck' is being cautious when talking about people. It means that when I talk about people I say in their absence only what I can say in their presence. The man with the thread neck is the person I am talking about looking me in the eyes as I speak.

Hejwas

The fourth category encompasses hejwas or folktales told to me by Habouba when I was a child. As Huraiz (1991) asserts, the term 'hejwa' is derived from the Arabic word 'hija' which means smart minds. It implies smart and ambiguous wisdom. This kind of story usually has a specific beginning that immediately tells the listeners that the story they are about to hear is an imaginary one and prepares them for it. Intelligence and imagination are the most

[70] "Dig your well of secret deep and put a cement cover on it." This an expression Habouba used to repeat.

important features of this kind of story (Huraiz, 1991). The tales representing this category are ‘Summer Nights’, ‘Sleeping Luck’ and ‘Friendship’.

The story ‘Summer Nights’ is included in this category because it sets the scene for telling hejwas. Hejwas were more common in summer when my family members slept in a bigger place where we found enough room to distribute our beds on the courtyard. The moon light was another catalyst as children went to bed later than the usual time.

The distinct opening and closing phrases were noticed in the folktales. A typical folktale in Northern Sudan started with a short dialogue between the story teller and the audiences.

The story teller: Hajeitkun ma bajeitkun	حجيتكن ما بجيتكن
The audiences: Kheiran jana u jak	خيرن جانا و جاك
akal ashak u jara khallak	أكل عشاك و جرى خلاك

Habouba set the scene by saying the first phrase: “حجيتكن ما بجيتكن”, which means: “I will tell you a hejwa”. My sisters and I as audiences answered all together: “خيرن جانا و جاك أكل عشاك و جرى خلاك”. That means: we hope it is a story that brings goodness to all of us. The hejwas ended with the phrase: “و انحترت و انبترت في حجر الصغير فينا”. This literary means the tale ended at the lap of the youngest one among us. That indicated passing the story to the youngest attendant so that she could pass it to the following generation or extending the experience further. The ceremony of the hejwas celebrated old and young people having entertaining and educational time together. In such relationship even the youngest children taught and learned. Habouba once told me that her children were her psychologists. She went on saying that they helped her stay healthy and happy when they innocently shared their smart wits and thoughts.

In the first story ‘The Sleeping Luck’, I learn that luck is stimulated by hard work. The wise man in the story does not argue with Zedan who is nagging about his bad luck. He tells him that his luck is sleeping and what he needs to do is to journey to wake up that luck. Zedan

perceives his sleeping luck in the literal meaning and he wants to reach where his luck is sleeping to awaken it. Zedan wastes all opportunities he has to awaken up his sleeping luck by his hard work.

Zedan continued his journey. He walked and walked for a long distant. As he was passing by a small village, he saw a group of invaders attacking the people. He soon joined the villagers. He fought the invaders fiercely until they were vanquished. The villagers were so happy with him. They cheered his name and they praised his courage. In fact they asked him to stay with them and be their chief.
"Guess what happened?"
"What?!" We asked.
Habouba continued: "he refused saying: no thank you. I am on my way to my luck where I will find more and more fortune and riches." On the other end the luck felt so sleepy. It rested its head on its arm and slumbered."

Other readings are possible for this hejwa and of course for all other stories. My advisor comments that Zedan's luck may be resting in his continuous help to people. This is the power of narratives; multiple readings and diverse perspectives.

The second story 'friendship' taught me a few lessons about how to choose friends and what to expect from good friends. This is a story about the virtues of accountability and responsibility. Consistent with Aristotle account on virtues, Salim is learning to make friends by exercising making friends. In this hejwa Salim is practising virtues in his daily realities. This hejwa taught me that time and situations would tell if the person made good friends' choice. From this story I learned to triumph over challenges through determination and resilience. I learned that different contexts could test the authenticity of friendship. Another thing the story taught me was how to treat my friends and to how to have a balanced give and take relationship with them:

Salim became very happy with his companion. He told his mother about what the woodman's son had done. His mother said: "Now you have a real friend. Be good to him." Salim and the woodman's son became best friends. When they grew up, Salim became the Sultan and appointed his best friend to be his minister.

Hejwas are meant to entertain and initiate. For me they do more than that. They stimulate my imagination, and they have strengthened my extended family's relations. Habouba was not under the pressure to discipline and she had more patience and age wisdom to share with me as a grandchild. She was regarded as a role model for women in the community and she stood for integrity, responsibility, and hard work.

Indigenizing my Inquiry

Benham (2007) introduces some methodological queries through the three themes of: sovereignty, knowledge, and analysis and application. In the following section I discuss my narratives holding Benham's methodological queries as constant.

The *first* query of sovereignty or indigenization of the narrative addresses the questions of who tells, how, for whom, and for what purpose (2007, p. 517). In this inquiry as I point out a few times earlier, most of the stories presented here are parts of collective properties or "sacred whole". They belong to my indigenous community. All of them have never been written as far as I know. I write these stories for two main reasons: because I want to save the lore knowledge from being forgotten (documentation) and because I use them to initiate intergenerational and international connections. As Benham writes: "stories, whether they are myth/legend or recollections of daily activities or events, are told and retold to ensure that the ontology, the life of native/indigenous people, does not diminish; hence the story is sacred" (p. 517).

A constant worry for me is the misappropriation of my indigenous culture. I mean using a Western standard to assess and interpret my stories. Benham (2007) calls this repacking by modern orientations to meet Western standards. Local knowledge is usually viewed as a sort of out of date reaction. Although I have fallen in this trap a few times, I

persistently focus on Habouba's perspective throughout the stories and my comments on them. I do not view having differing yet respectful perspective as "harming" to my indigenous communities. The harmful perspective is the one that monopolizes knowledge and discard what indigenous culture gives. This inquiry is about acknowledging multiple realities and opening up spaces for multiple voices and diverse audiences. The stories themselves uncover this dualism as discussed earlier in the stories 'Birth', 'Wedding'.

I thoroughly relate to what Benham mentions about the tensions experienced by indigenous scholars. "As native/indigenous indigenous researchers, positioning ourselves somewhere within and between the contrasting worldviews of the indigenous and the discipline is an itchy proposition" (p. 519). In my situation as a multicultural person I am aware of biases created by overlooking indigenous views or passing hastened judgments about the 'other'. This awareness puts me in a position to correct images and misleading conceptions created by the dominant colonial cultures and sometimes even by my indigenous culture. This "itch" is a daily reality to me as I continue living here in Canada.

Benham also asserts that an indigenous scholar is required to stretch her use of narrative strategies to observe and document indigenous social world (p. 520). This is what I am doing in this inquiry. I have used a lot of resources to aid writing my stories. Among these are my personal observations, my communal memory, and mainly Habouba's stories. Every single story can serve as an example of this. In the stories under the heading wanasa the whole group, attending the wanasa, participate and guide the process of meaning making.

Benham encourages the use of academic markers such as headings, subheading, APA formatting besides the creative literary devices in presenting indigenous narratives. She explains that "these markers are needed to avoid falling into the romantic-tale trap keeping the

reader mindful of the intellectual purposefulness of indigenous narratives" (p. 521). Of course I abide by these stylistic requirements and I educate myself about different theoretical and methodological frameworks but I remain confident that the theory I am using is implicit in my stories and I am referring to simirent documented theories to frame my work. It is quite a find to read Benham's comment that "in indigenous story, theory is embedded in metaphor and in story" (p. 521). This holds me accountable to Habouba and to my indigenous community. It is important for me and my indigenous community to know that I am honestly telling our stories. I am telling these stories with the purposes of exploring important social, cultural, and educational matters and increasing human understanding and relatedness and certainly not for selling the stories as cultural souvenirs.

The *second* query of indigenous knowledge follows "a thorny path" as Benham mentions (p. 522). The marginalization of indigenous knowledge is well documented. This work is an effort to counter that marginalization. In my inquiry I join Benham's call for using the indigenous lenses in designing, analyzing, and presenting indigenous narratives. As an author of this work, I refer to the unique knowledge and community wisdom in different sections of this inquiry. My inquiry also points out the power tensions and collisions between community-based knowledge and external imposed claims.

Another concern about indigenous knowledge mentioned by Benham is what to tell and for whom. In my case I am telling my indigenous stories to a Western audience. Benham (2007) says that, "it is essential that the native/indigenous author takes care to present only that which she or he is authorized to share" (p. 524). This is an ethical concern. "The man with the thread neck" is at my shoulder to ensure that I share what I am permitted to share. This inquiry is the main topic of contacts between me and my family members in Sudan. They

want to know what I am sharing about Habouba and our family history. They approve my stories. I consult my mother, my aunt, and my siblings on the stories I am sharing and I referred to them a few times to get details of some stories.

With regard to the *third* query of analysis and application. My work seeks to transform the educational policy and practice in my indigenous community. I watch a wealth of knowledge and way of life as it vanishes. I document some of Habouba's educational stories to make them accessible in case my indigenous country comes to its senses and decides to develop culturally relevant educational experiences.

Conclusion

Formal education in Sudan has fallen short in making use of communities' knowledge and local teachings. Altayeb (1990) states that school system in Sudan uses lifeless examples to teach. He illustrates for that with the sentence: لمس حمد الأسد read 'Hamad touched the lion'. That example is taught to grade one students in the Arabic language curriculum. That sentence and others similar examples are taught in the desert areas in Northern Sudan where most of the children have never seen a lion. In most areas of Sudan, there are no zoos, and little or no access to children picture books. Such sentence is simply wrong and misleading. How can Hamad touch a lion? The point I want to make is that there is huge gap between traditional and formal education and that the formal education has always been injected on students not emerging from their communities or from their prior knowledge. School curriculum was usually hastily designed with little or no revisions (Altayeb, 1990). Whereas formal education is *a stranger*, Habouba' stories are relatives. They pay attention to the socio-cultural and moral realities of the community and they initiate children into worthy social practices. Habouba's stories have taught me a lot in spite of the competitions from Cinderella and Shahrazad.[71]

Education is supposed to build on community knowledge and to extend it further. It is supposed to be in harmony with the community. But the situation in Sudan has been the opposite. Throughout Sudan's modern history education has been disconnected from the community's knowledge. Children loose ties with 'real' people they know. Efforts of illiterate-ing take over once a child goes to school. A new (read inert) kind of knowledge is introduced. Knowledge is meant to serve a top down agenda. Tracing educational policy from

[71] Shahrazad (Arabic شهرزاد), is a legendary Persian queen and the storyteller of 'One Thousand and One Nights' (wikepedia).

pre-independence until now proves my point. Home experiences are brutally cut off. According to Ibrahim (2008):

> It is clear that the school curricula assume that the moment a student enters the school, she becomes a 'washed board'[72], clean from any kind of previous knowledge learned from the community. Depending on that assumption, schools go on injecting the student with different kind of knowledge. Apparently the school system has not seen anything that is worthwhile to be included in the school curricula. Local knowledge is, in the eyes of the colonial authority and its followers, a sort of primitive totems and myths (Ibrahim 2008, Trans).

Ibrahim talks about the stranger curricula the Sudanese educational system has. He says that the curriculum is imposed and artificially forced on students. Experience continuation is rare to find in the case of Sudan. Instead of starting from where our ancestors reached, the educational policy makers tend to introduce alien incomplete and untested experiences often imported from elsewhere and meant to serve some sort of authority rather than the students or the community.

People in my community noticed the educational system failure. They have many sayings criticizing it. Habouba used to repeat: .القلم ما بزيل بلم. This saying means the pen may literate but it does not educate. Formal education for Habouba and the majority of the community appeared to be the mere practice of introducing only the two instrumental skills of reading and writing. Peters (1972) says "If anything in education is purely instrumental, the basic skills of reading and writing are. They give access to make participation possible; but they have no content built into them. Everything depends on what is read or written" (p. 53).

This inquiry is the start of an old continuous interest of mine to document the lives and experiences that represents traditional educators. The role of the traditional educators in Sudan has been under-represented in the academic work of educational scholars and

[72] Here Ibrahim means the wooden board students use to write on in traditional religious schools known as khalwas. Usually students write on the board and when they are done with the lesson, they wash it clean for the next lesson.

educational planners in Sudan. In the limited literature available for this study the traditional educators' contribution has been recognized in scattered papers here and there. Those recognize only the religious khalwas[73] which are usually run by religious figures (Khalifa, Erdos, & Ashria, 1997). No study ever made the narratives, voices, histories, and experiences of Sudanese traditional educators especially women.

While tracing the Sudanese educational system, I found a lot of black holes requiring further research. I intend to conduct another research to find out what went wrong in the Sudanese educational policies. My nieces and nephews for example are not exposed to these kinds of hejwas. Story tellers such as Habouba have been substituted by TV sets and electronic gaming sets. There is an immense cultural disrupt between the recent generations, their current entertainment, and educational system on one side and their grandparents' generations. Through this work I am Habouba for the generations that follow me. I am making Habouba's stories 'sticky' so that they live longer. As Habouba used to say: الحديس أطول من العمر. This work is a living example for her so-true phrase: stories live longer. Habouba lives longer through her stories and through her ever-present loss.

Grumet (1991) mentions that repudiation of the mother- the first identification, the first love, and the first relation to give the world and existence meaning- is loss. That sense of loss and all the contradictory feelings associated with it have generated this complex work that aspires to disseminate the mother's love which remains alive forever. This inquiry hopes to extend Habouba's ways of education and co-existence with people and with Mother Nature. And, as it opened this inquiry, Habouba's image closes it:

Her henna dyed hair was blowing in the morning breeze adding more charm to her smiling face. Her tiny body was fully covered by her long wide dress. Her

[73] Khalwa is a Sudanese Arabic word. It means religious school.

sandal wood beads surrounded her thin right wrist. The Morning Prayer ablution water left its wet traces on the ground beneath her bed. Her palm leaf prayer rug was spread out in front of the bed. It was unusual for her to remain in bed until sunrise……

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