



Folklore and Cultural Identity in Saud Al-Sanousi's *The Bamboo Stalk*

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the role of folklore in reinforcing an individual's cultural identity during times of personal and social adversity. The study focuses on how Kuwaiti writer Saud Al-Sanousi presents the role of folklore in providing an insight of the cultural identity of different societies in his novel "The Bamboo Stalk" (2012), highlighting the cultural heritage of the Philippines and Kuwait. By examining the interaction between myths, customs, and folktales, this novel highlights the role of folklore as a mechanism for cultural continuity and resilience. The study demonstrates that these folk elements provide a sense of psychological stability and give characters a sense of belonging by dealing with complex issues, such as identity and alienation. The study concludes that folklore represents a personal and collective anchor that enables individuals and groups to confront and overcome frustration, alienation, and dispersion.

* Corresponding Author

Ali Kareem Hussein
Tabarak Sadiq Ali
Dheyaa Hameed Thabet
College of Education for
Human Sciences/ University of
Wasit

Email:

alikha@uowasit.edu.iq
tabaraka@uowasit.edu.iq
Dthabe@uowasit.edu.iq

Keywords: Folklore ;
folktales ; The Bamboo Stalk ;
cultural identity

Article history:

Received: 2025-04-29
Accepted: 2025-06-16
Available online: 2025-08-01



This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0). <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol21.Iss3.1018>

الفولكلور والهوية الثقافية في رواية ساق البامبو لسعود السنوسي

م.م. علي كريم حسين/ كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية/ جامعة واسط
 م.م. تبارك صادق علي/ كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية/ جامعة واسط
 م.م. ضياء حميد ثابت/ كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية/ جامعة واسط

المُستخلص

تُحلل هذه الدراسة دور التراث الشعبي في تعزيز الهوية الثقافية للفرد خلال فترات الشدائد الشخصية والاجتماعية. وتُركز الدراسة على كيفية عرض الكاتب الكويتي سعود السنوسي لدور التراث الشعبي في تقديم رؤية مُعمقة للهوية الثقافية لمختلف المجتمعات في روايته "ساق البامبو" (2012)، مُسلطاً الضوء على التراث الثقافي للفلبين والكويت. ومن خلال دراسة التفاعل بين الأساطير والعادات والحكايات الشعبية، تُسلط هذه الرواية الضوء على دور التراث الشعبي كآلية للاستمرارية الثقافية والمرونة. وتبيّن الدراسة أن هذه العناصر الشعبية تُوفّر شعوراً بالاستقرار النفسي وتُعطي الشخصيات شعوراً بالانتماء من خلال التعامل مع قضايا مُعقدة، كالهوية والاعتراب. وتلخص الدراسة إلى أن التراث الشعبي يُمثّل ركيزةً شخصيةً وجماعيةً تُمكن الأفراد والجماعات من مواجهة الإحباط والاعتراب والتشتت والتغلب عليهما.

الكلمات المفتاحية : التراث الشعبي، الحكاية الشعبية، ساق البامبو، الهوية الثقافية

Introduction:

The term folklore refers to the traditions, stories, religious practices, costumes, beliefs, songs, dances, and practices of a specific group of people that have passed down through generations. Nnolim (1987) argues, " By folklore we mean the unrecorded tradition of a people as they appear in their popular fiction, custom, belief, magic, ritual, superstition, and proverbial sayings"(p.35). In addition, the fundamental element of folklore is the folktale, which is the story that is passed down through generations orally. Nnolim (1987) admits that the folktale is " a popular tale handed down by oral tradition from a more or less remote antiquity and usually told either about animals or the common folk, to draw attention to their plight and to teach a lesson." (p.36)

In similar fascination, Bawa et al. (2023) state that folklore is

the tales, legends, and superstitions of a particular ethnic population. I take, in this sense, 'ethnic' to relate to a group of people having common racial, ancestral, national, religious, or cultural origins as the central root of consciousness and cultural heritage of a given milieu. (p.27)

These practices may be passed down orally or indirectly through weaving into literary texts. Roger Abrahams (1972) argues that in order to be effective, the literary work should not "only communicate with an audience but it must also excite its participation" (p.78). The kind of participation that Abrahams alludes to is deeply connected to the "cultural matrix within the individuals" (p.78). Moreover, folklore distinguishes

a nation or ethnic group of people from other communities and makes it distinctive in its own way to create the cultural identity of this nation or group of people.

Bruce Rosenberg and Mary Brown (1998) assert that the use of folklore in modern literature differs from its previous use. Modern literature is "no longer used to build up an identity based on the past" (p.590) but rather, it is used to "understand the everyday myths of contemporary culture in a present and future perspective" (p.590). Further, folklore is "an ideological base to understand other and self" (Zhang, 2020, p.218). Values, beliefs, and moral lessons are often embodied in the folklore of a nation or ethnic group within society. In addition, folklore represents an essential part of an individual's identity, as it instills different concepts, such as honesty, courage, and respect, which are intertwined to form what is known as cultural identity.

One of the most essential features of folklore is that it preserves people's history, including their migrations, origins, and the important events they face. This intermingling of history and folklore helps people remember their past, and how this history contributes to the formation of their cultural identity. Bawa et al. (2023) assert that "identity is seen as a characteristic of the self that is determined by the social and historical context within which that self operates" (p.26). The history and traditions of a particular group or nation that have not been adequately recorded are usually defined as folklore. Jay Brunvand's assertion about the essence of folklore (as cited in Bawa et al. (2023) is that:

Folklore is the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture. It encompasses all knowledge, understanding, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth or by customary examples. Many of these habits of thought are common to all human beings, but they always interact with and are influenced by the whole cultural context that surrounds them. Folklore manifests itself in many oral and verbal forms (mentifacts), in kinesiological forms (customary behaviour or social facts) and in material forms (artifacts), but folklore itself is the whole traditional complex of thought, content, and process which ultimately can never be fixed or recorded in its entirety; it lives only in performance or communication as people interact with one another. (pp. 2-3)

Muhi (2023) argues that cultural identity represents the sense of belonging and connection an individual or ethnic group feels towards a particular culture. The concept of cultural identity serves as an umbrella under which shared values, traditions, customs, beliefs, history, language, and practices that constitute a unique ethnic community are included. Cultural identity helps people understand themselves and their place in the world and represents their worldview, behavior, and how they interact with others.

In the context of culture, the term identity often refers to the personal and behavioral characteristics that distinguish a group of people and represent collective experiences and integrated cultural behavior. In addition, the term identity is a contradictory term, as it refers to similarity, difference, and distinction simultaneously, as it distinguishes an ethnic group from other ethnic groups while simultaneously representing the unique identity enjoyed by an individual within the same ethnic group. The concept of identity is sometimes flexible, as it is an ongoing process that does not end or stop at a certain point. Stewart Hall (1990) confirms that the unconscious – an irrational part of the psyche that cannot be reached according to the conscious will – plays a central role in shaping cultural identity in the long term. In addition, the psychological aspect of identity formation includes fantasies that contribute to the unity of identity, as it is seen as one of the reasons that drive individuals to search for their identities by linking the divided parts to form imagined unity.

Ali Ammar et al. (2021) argue that with the "development in the study of folklores, the understanding was taken to new levels of comprehension by taking a more symbolic view of performance, a cultural enactment in which the ideologies and the identities of a specific cultural group were expressed" (p.37). Cultural identity and folklore are closely linked, as values, beliefs, and traditions are vividly expressed through folklore. Folklore often reflects the social and cultural values of ethnic groups through myths, songs, and other special practices. These practices teach young children what is acceptable and unacceptable in the society in which they live, as folklore acts as collective memory. Furthermore, folklore gives members of a community or ethnic group a sense of belonging, a shared identity, and the feeling that there are bonds that bind them together. By sharing folktales between generations, individuals connect with their cultural roots, giving them a sense of being part of a larger group.

In addition, folklore reflects how a group of people sees the world, including their understanding of the universe, human nature, and the relationship between the individual and the divine. This shared understanding reinforces the cultural correlation among the members of an ethnic group by giving them the feeling that many things unite them to form this or that ethnic group. Moreover, folklore is used as a tool for cultural resistance and psychological resilience, especially in the face of colonialism, diaspora and globalization – especially in conservative societies – where folklore helps to preserve their cultural identity in addition to the role of folklore in making the culture of an ethnic group distinct from other cultures.

Literature Review

In *A Dismembered Dream: A Critical Study of Alsanousi's The Bamboo Stalk* (2017), Abdulrahman Mokbel Hezam provides a critical analysis of how the novel delves into the portrayal of the fragmented

identity of the protagonist, Jose (Isa). Jose (Isa) suffers an identity crisis in which he feels disconnected from both of his roots, the Kuwaiti and Filipino. Furthermore, the study highlights the novel's critique of the cultural and social hierarchies in Kuwait, especially the mistreatment that migrant workers encounter inside Kuwait, in addition to the rigid class and racial divide that contributes to inequality.

In her article, An Intersectional Study of Saud Al-Sanousi's Novel *The Bamboo Stalk* (2021), Samar Sayed Mohamed adopts an intersectional approach to deal with the protagonist's identity. She further focuses on the importance of showing the forms of oppression and discrimination Jose (or Isa), the protagonist of the novel, suffers from. Intersectionality theory, which encompasses a group of theories, emphasizes the study of systems of discrimination from different perspectives. This theory first appeared in a research paper published by Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics* to study the experiences of a group of black women. Recently, the theory has been used to examine any group's or individual's experiences to show the forms of discrimination and marginalization they suffer.

Maha Yasir Abed in *Portrayal of Women in The Bamboo Stalk by Saud Al-Sanousi (2023)* investigates the representation of women in Saud Al-Sanousi's novel *The Bamboo Stalk* (2012). This article presents women's experiences by delving into themes, including identity, migration, and hybrid culture. Furthermore, the study focuses primarily on women's experiences in a patriarchal society, as both Kuwaiti and Filipino societies are predominantly patriarchal. The study concludes that the roles of women are marginalized; for example, Jose's mother is a woman who migrates to Kuwait for labor and faces racial discrimination and deliberate marginalization. Moreover, this study portrays the role of Kuwaiti women as lacking agency, as they must act according to the expectations and norms of society.

Hussein et al. (2025) explore *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih using postcolonial theory, specifically Edward Said's concept of "contrapuntal reading" The study emphasizes the interaction of voices: the response of the colonized subject and the discourse of the Western colonizer. The research reveals how Salih challenges colonial power structures and recovers African identity and agency by analyzing the characters, particularly Mustafa Sa'eed and the unnamed narrator. In *Exploring Cultural and Personal Trauma in Heather Raffo's Play Noura*, Amer and Al-Gawahari (2025) examine the representation of trauma in Heather Raffo's 2019 play *Noura*, concentrating on the experiences of two Iraqi women, Maryam and Noura, following the invasion of Iraq by ISIS. It looks at how trauma is passed down through generations, especially between mothers and daughters, and how narrative and personal memory can be used to process this pain. Examining how Raffo employs a variety of character viewpoints to highlight the

many effects of the Iraqi conflict, the paper also examines Noura as a mirror of historical and cultural trauma. The study also emphasizes Raffo's own bicultural identity and how it shapes the story, illuminating the wider realities of Iraqi women in America and the ways in which artistic expression is influenced by cultural memory. The current study aims to demonstrate the role of folklore in preserving cultural heritage and strengthening a collective sense of cultural identity, especially in times of adversity where individuals feel alienated.

Folklore and Identity in *The Bamboo Stalk: An Analysis*

The novel begins when Josephine, a Filipino girl, comes to work in Kuwait as a servant, leaving behind her studies and family, who build great expectations for a better future. In the house where she works, Josephine meets Rashid, the spoiled and only son of his father Issa and his mother, Ghanima. After a short period of love between Josephine and Rashid, Rashid decides to marry Josephine—not a fully acknowledged marriage, but a secret one. Unfortunately, things do not go as planned, as Josephine becomes pregnant with a child and Rashid leaves her two months after the birth of the child. The son Jose is sent to the Philippines, where he struggles with extreme poverty and clings to the hope of returning to his father's country when he turns eighteen.

In the very first line of the novel, the reader senses that the protagonist Jose or Isa is struggling to determine his true identity. He shows that his name has more than one pronunciation and that his name in Kuwait differs from that in the Philippines. The name is the first thing given to a newborn and the first thing associated with their identity since birth, but the matter is different from the protagonist, as he is from a different ethnic background, born to a Kuwaiti father and Filipino mother. Jose indicates:

My name is José. In the Philippines it's pronounced the English way, with an h sound at the start. In Arabic, rather like in Spanish, it begins with a kh sound. In Portuguese, though it's written the same way, it opens with a j, as in Joseph. All these versions are completely different from my name here in Kuwait, where I'm known as Isa." (Al-Sanousi, 2012, p.3)

Abdu-Alhakam et al. (2015) argue " The person's name reflects part of his or her identity, as it might symbolize the religious and/or social background of his parents"(p.176) Furthermore, parents always expect their children to follow in their footsteps. José is assigned the name Isa by his father, who is a Muslim, indicating that his father wants him to grow up as a Muslim. At the same time, he was given the name Jose,

a common name in the Philippines, by his mother, his " mother called me Jose after the Philippine national hero José Rizal, who was a doctor and writer in the nineteenth century" (Al-Sanousi, 2012, p.3). The two names assigned to the protagonist represent his identity dilemma and the narrow sphere in which he was trapped due to the circumstances of his birth. Al- Mutairi (2016) asserts " Since birth, José has experienced rejection and isolation at the hands of both cultures and so embarks on a pilgrimage to find his authentic self" (p.360)

The various folkloric references within the novel, whether to Kuwaiti or Filipino cultures, play a central role in Jose's quest to preserve a sense of identity. Starting with the title of the novel, the bamboo stalk conveys folkloric connotations, particularly in Asian countries. Usually, the bamboo stalk represents resistance, flexibility, and psychological resilience. Furthermore, the bamboo stalk indicates a connection between the two worlds. In a broader sense, the bamboo tree refers to an individual's ability to adapt to different geographical and cultural regions. Mohamed (2021) argues that the metaphor of bamboo stalk comes from a kind of tree:

grows in any land and it can be cut down and planted in a distant land and then it can re-grow there easily, so the author chose the name The Bamboo Stalk to indicate the resilience of the personality of Isa who has multiple roots (p.2)

Religion and folklore are deeply intertwined. Religion, especially religious practices, plays a central role in shaping an individual's cultural identity or ethnic group. Folklore often encompasses sacred stories or religious myths that attempt to interpret the origin of the world and the source of human existence. Early in the novel, Jose acknowledges the importance of religion in shaping an individual's identity. He started thinking about religion and an individual's identity. He admitted " My father had whispered the Muslim call to prayer in my right ear as soon as he held me in his arms in hospital after I was born" (Al-Sanousi, 2012, p.59). This ritual is closely linked to the Arab Islamic tradition, as the father recites the call to prayer in the child's right ear immediately after his birth to define his Arab Islamic identity.

Jose stated, " my mother ... taking me to the small local church as soon as we arrived in Manila to baptise me in holy water as a Catholic." (p.59). Jose's mother wanted him to be a Christian, so she baptized him after they moved to the Philippines, as baptism is one of the fundamental rituals in the Christian religion. When parents baptize their children, it is a sign of their purification from the original sin that humans inherited from Adam and Eve. In a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, who was a member of the

Jewish ruling council, Jesus indicates " Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5, ESV as cited in Grochowski, 2020, p.639).

In addition to Christian and Islamic rituals, other references to practices from different religions define the cultural identity of those who embrace this or that religion. Jose thinks of a scenario in which his parents are of Chinese descent and are all Buddhists. Jose explains " [if I were]Buddhist of Chinese origin, working with my father in a shop in the Chinese quarter of Manila, burning incense in front of a statue of Buddha every morning because it's good for business" (Al-Sanousi, 2012, p.61). Burning incense near a Buddha statue is a folkloric tradition used by the followers of Buddha, as the smoke from the incense represents the purification of the human mind, and it is a symbol of giving and spiritual purity. Incense is also burned before a Buddha statue to symbolize good luck, fortune, and increased productivity.

Jose knows very well that each ethnic group has different rituals and traditions that distinguish them from others. He believed that Islam and Christianity are two monotheistic religions, and their source of legislation is God, but the rituals of each religion in coping with life affairs are different from the others. He also believed that other non-Abrahamic religions – such as Buddhism – have different rituals that distinguish those who embrace them from other ethnic groups. Jose's problem lies in being trapped between two distinct ethnic groups, each of which is different from the other, and both groups refuse to acknowledge him fully.

In an astonishing instance, Jose mentioned the people of Ifugao, he demonstrated:

If I had been born to Ifugao parents in the north of Luzon island, I would wear nothing but a loin- cloth all day. I would work in the terraced rice paddies in the mountains and sleep at night in a thatched house on stilts, guarded from evil spirits by statues of the anito. (p.61)

The Ifugao people are a group of indigenous Filipinos who have lived in the north of Luzon, a district in the Philippines, and are known for their folkloric practices. Furthermore, they are among the oldest ethnic tribes in the Philippines. Stella McPherron (1957) emphasizes "based on the length of time needed to produce their rice terraces ... the Ifugao must have been in their present habitat for hundreds or thousands of years" (p.6). Saud Al-Sanousi's reference to the Ifugao people is not in vain, as there is a close connection between the Ifugao people and the bamboo stalk. Furthermore, how they dress, their practices, and rituals are restricted to them.

When Jose mentions the Ifugao people, their special rice cultivation ritual, and their special superstition, where they believe that the Aneto statue protects them from evil spirits, it stems from his strong desire to be one of them. The Ifugao people are among the few tribes that have preserved their cultural and folkloric

heritage after the occupation of the Philippines by various countries, among which was the Spanish occupation of the Philippines, which attempted to bring the Catholic Christian religion to the Philippines.

However, this ethnic group preserved their traditions and remained adherent to the ancient beliefs inherited from their ancestors. Moreover, this tribe uses bamboo stalks for digging and planting. McPherron (1957) argues, " the Ifugao who practice irrigation, still retain the digging stick with bamboo clapper but its only use is that of a ceremonial object ... the Ifugao use the bamboo digging stick with clapper for planting" (p.6) As mentioned earlier, the bamboo stalk in folklore symbolizes psychological resilience and the ability to adapt and resist, as if Jose's choice of this group of people over other Philippine tribes was due to their ability to withstand different circumstances and their adherence to their ethnic and cultural identity in the face of adversity, further, they are known for establishing a strong bond between them, a thing which Jose strives to achieve.

Within the fabric of the novel, Al-Sanousi presents another individual, Jose's cousin Merla, who also suffers from a fragmented identity because of her mixed roots. Merla was "slim and relatively tall, with a pale slightly pink complexion. Her hair was brown and wavy. Her eyes were blue, which made her classic mestiza"(p.113). The adjective mestiza which was used by the writer, Al-Sanousi, to describe Merla means a girl of mixed blood and ancestors, and this mixture of ancestors makes Merla hate her identity because it does not give her an authentic identity that " she hated the label. Her beauty reminded her of the unknown European father she hated. Because of him she absolutely detested the way she looked and everything European"(p.113)

At this point, we have two individuals whose physical differences are noticeable because they belong to different ethnic groups. Jose explains that during his time with Merla in Manila, he noticed their differences from the rest of the population. Although they had Filipino ancestors, racial overlap caused by their mixed lineage with other ethnic groups was obvious. Jose states" Merla, her boldness, her rebelliousness, her crazy talk, hanging out on the streets of Manila — the mestiza girl and the Arab boy" (p.116)

On a visit to one of the caves in Biak-no-Bato, Merla told Jose about a folktale associated with the Filipino culture. She narrated the story of the Legend of the Bridge and the River Spirits. She said Jose, " Lots of workers drowned in this river when they were building this bridge" (p.119). This story is deeply related to the cultural identity of the Philippines, as it encompasses superstition, sacrifice, respect for spirits, and themes that are deeply connected to the people of the Philippines. The story concerns a group of workers who tried to build a bridge connecting their village to a neighboring village. Between the two villages was

a sacred river guarded by ancient spirits called Diwatas and Anitos, which are ancient spirits whose primary job was to guard the waters of the sacred river. (Almocera, 2000).

Eugenio (2002) asserts that the ancestors always warned the coming generations not to disturb the waters of this sacred river, but the villagers were eager to keep up with the development and build a bridge connecting them to the neighboring villages. They did not listen to the advice of the older people who lived with them. Strange things started happening when the workers started the construction of the bridge. Their equipment began to disappear, the current of the river became stronger than before, and strange noises were heard at night. The supervisors did not listen to the warnings, ignored the peculiar things that were happening, and forced the workers to complete their work. One night, a strong storm arose, and the river current became very strong and raged. As a result, a group of workers were swallowed by the raging waters of the river, and they could not escape the wrath of the river. The next day, the elders of the village explained that what happened on the previous day was that the spirits who guard the river had taken the workers as sacrifices as a result of disturbing the sacred waters of the river. Merla indicates " They say this bridge couldn't have been built here without some sacrifices" (p.119) and that "The workers who drowned ... were sacrificial offerings to the spirit of the place, to persuade them to let humans build the bridge" (p.120)

Although this folktale is popular in the Philippines and Jose is half Filipino, he does not know anything about this story, which is deeply associated with Filipino culture. Jose stated:

I wasn't thinking about the tragedy of the dead workers when they built the bridge ... My mind wandered. I looked around at the big rocks, the giant trees and the vast caves. I swear I could hear the rocks groaning around me, the leaves rustling, the trickling of the water, everything whispering something in languages I did not understand (p.120)

The idea that he does not understand what is being said stems from the fact that he has not developed his own cultural identity. He is an example of a person who cannot define his identity or what is required of him in the society in which he lives. One of José's problems, which he always laments, is that he does not have an identity of his own, José asserts that " If I were something clearly defined, anything. If if if ... what a puzzle it is" (pp.61-62). He always wonders about his reality and the reality of what he represents, he says on another occasion "What am I? is it my destiny to spend my life looking for a name, a religion and a country?" (p.63)

Apart from the references to Filipino folklore and its close connection to Filipino cultural identity, there are other references to Kuwaiti culture in the novel that reflect the essence of Kuwaiti cultural identity. Jose decides to return to Kuwait. He indicates" "Our Father, I am going back to where I was born, to the land of

the father I have never known, to a destiny known only to You" (p.191). Although Jose does not know anything about Kuwait, the country where he was born, he decides to go there in an attempt to find his true identity, as the long time he spent in the Philippines did not help him to discover his true self, that he looked "into the faces of the people around me and missed them even before I had left them. I wanted to apologise to them all, saying that despite the years I had spent amongst them I did not belong with them" (p.192) Moreover, in Kuwait, he will establish a connection with his dead father's family. This family will provide him with a better life, or at least that is what he thought.

Jose's experience in Kuwait was not easy at all as he was treated as an outsider to Kuwaiti society because of his appearance as well as his Filipino heritage. In Kuwait, he faced racism and classism. Being the son of a servant did not provide him with the respect he yearned for. His father's family accepted him but did not fully acknowledge him; they admitted him reluctantly. In Kuwait Jose and his mother suffered economically. They lived in poverty, using the little support they received from their father's family despite living in a wealthy family. These sufferings add to the sense of alienation that Jose has experienced earlier.

One of the things that caught Jose's attention when he arrived in Kuwait was how men greet each other in the country. Jose explains, "I was particularly struck by the way men kissed each other as a form of greeting ... the man brushed his cheek against the other man's cheek as they shook hands" (p.220). This way of greeting represents one of the traditions of the Kuwaiti people – to put it in a broader context, this way of greeting represents the cultural identity of the Gulf countries. What most excited Jose was to learn that this way of greeting does not only include men, but even women greet each other in the same way Jose indicates, "I heard from Ghassan that it was the traditional form of greeting here, and not just between men. In fact, the women did the same when they greeted each other" (p.220)

Jose notices that the people of Kuwait represent a very diverse fabric in terms of appearance and style of dress. He notices that they wear different or even opposite clothes. He notices that some men wear jeans or shorts while others wear the traditional Arab dress of the headdress and the thobe. Even the headdress differs from one person to another. Some wear a white headdress while others wear red. Jose notices that some men wear the latest fashions while others wear traditional clothes. Also, hairstyles differ radically from one person to another:

People looked and dressed so differently from each other, sometimes the complete opposite ... Some people wore clothes that followed the latest fashions. Others wore traditional clothes. There were people in shorts, in T-shirts or in jeans. There were young men with long hair visible under their headdresses. There were

people in clothes that would be tight even on thin people. There were young people who had bizarre hairstyles (p.221)

As for women in Kuwait, Jose notices that everything is different. Some women wear the headscarf and some wear the niqab while many women have different hairstyles:

There were lots of girls, with different hairstyles, nice clothes, some short skirts and some long, and bright colours. Some of them covered their hair with headscarves of various kinds ... scarves that covered all the hair and others that also covered part of the chin. Black thobes, some of them so tight that they showed details of the woman's body, others loose. There were young women who looked like Hollywood stars, others with so much powder on their faces that they looked like geishas. Sharp noses, unnaturally full lips. There were women who covered their faces with pieces of black cloth that only showed the eyes. Black hair, blonde hair. Brown people, white people, black people. (p.221)

Jose sees this vast diversity in appearances among people in Kuwait as a strength in his quest for his own identity, as people there are different in their appearances. As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons Jose came to Kuwait was that he did not feel a sense of belonging to the Filipinos because of his father's Arab roots. His apparent difference in the Philippines was obvious, so he wanted to leave the Philippines to have a new experience " with so many differences, I found reason to hope. You'll be invisible among all these people, I told myself" (p.222) that Jose " looked into people's faces, examining them closely. There must surely be a place for me in this mixture, which blended together well despite the diversity" (p.223)

Religious superstitions represent another aspect of Kuwaiti religious folklore fabricated within Al-Sanousi's novel. Ghanima, Jose's grandmother, places her hand on Khawla's forehead and recites verses from the Quran every night. Jose noticed:

Khawla was Grandmother's precious darling. Grandmother was anxious to protect her from both other people and from the djinn. Ghassan said that every night Grandmother put her hand on Khawla's forehead and recited verses from the Qur'an. She prayed to God to protect Khawla and keep her safe from envious people. In the morning she gave her holy water to drink — water over which she had recited Qur'anic verses. (p.232)

The grandmother performs this spiritual practice to protect Khawla from demonic forces and Jinn and to protect her from envious people. This practice also represents a deep belief in the power of spiritual words in Kuwaiti and Islamic tradition to protect loved ones from spiritual harm. The grandmother also recites verses from the Quran over water and gives it to Khawla to drink in the morning as a form of physical and spiritual protection, as the spiritual properties of the Quranic verses are transferred to the water. This

traditional practice is common in Islamic culture. Furthermore, these practices combine cultural traditions and spiritual beliefs, which best reflect the Kuwaiti cultural identity

Conclusion:

The Bamboo Stalk (2012), written by Saud Al-Sanousi, highlights the role of folklore in effectively shaping cultural identity, especially in times of alienation and adversity. Through an in-depth analysis of the novel, this study has demonstrated how folkloric elements—such as traditions, religious rituals, and superstitions—serve as essential tools for individuals to establish a sense of belonging and psychological stability. The novel follows the life of Jose/Isa, a young boy born from a secret marriage between Rashid, the spoiled son of a Kuwaiti family, and Josephine, a Filipino servant who worked for them. Jose's dilemma lies in that his two families' roots belong to two completely different cultures, each of which stands in stark opposition to the other. Moreover, Jose's problem lies in the fact that he did not receive the recognition he demanded in both countries to which he belongs. In the Philippines, Jose was viewed as an outsider or intruder, while in Kuwait, he was viewed with contempt due to the nature of his mother's work and his Filipino origins. By providing an in-depth analysis of Jose's personality and the difficulties he faces in his quest to discover himself, the study touches upon folktales, religious traditions, and some superstitions associated with Filipino and Kuwaiti society. By presenting these aspects closely related to folklore, the writer Saud Al-Sanousi attempts to show their role in shaping a collective cultural identity that unites an ethnic group. In addition, the cultural identity of an individual or a group of individuals is determined by various aspects, including their cultural heritage and what they receive from their ancestors and previous generations. Many rituals associated with Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism have been addressed in the study to demonstrate their role in creating a cultural identity that represent those who embrace them. In addition, there are superstitions and traditions associated with the Filipino and Kuwaiti societies that have been analyzed in the study, and all share one goal: to give a sense of belonging to the individuals of this or that society. The study concludes that the folkloric aspects associated with different people provide the individual with a sense of belonging, that he belongs to a larger group.

References:

- Abdu-Alhakam, A. M., Elshingeety, M. E., & Sherif, W. Y. (2020). Religious dilemma and identity crisis in Saud Alsanousi's *The Bamboo Stalk* (2015). *International Journal of Linguistic Literature & Translation*, 3(6), 172–185. <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijlt.2020.3.6.18>
- Abed, M. Y. (2023). Portrayal of Women in "The Bamboo Stalk" by Saud Al-Sanousi. *Iraq Journal of Humanitarian, Social and Scientific Research*, 3(11A) <https://www.iraqoj.net/iasj/download/132b6dfd8a901117>

- Abrahams, R. (1972). Folklore and Literature as Performance. *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 9(2/3), 75-94. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3814159>
- Al-Mutairi, R. F. (2016). Reconciling two opposing cultures: the bamboo stalk and the Arab Bildungsroman. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/Delivery.cfm/SSRN_ID2814808_code2548594.pdf?abstractid=2814808&mirid=1
- Almocera, R. (2000). Popular Filipino Spirit-World Beliefs, With a Proposed Theologic Response. *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary*, 3(1), 3-23.
- Amer, A. P. E. S., & Al-Gawahari, R. E. J. J. (2025). Exploring cultural and personal trauma: Heather Raffo's play Noura. *Wasit Journal for Human Sciences*, 21(1/Pt1), 1041-1022. <https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.vol21.iss1/pt1.816>
- Ammar, N. A., Tahir, N. T. B., & Channa, N. R. (2021). Identity Construction through Cultural Heritage of Folklore. *Progressive Research Journal of Arts & Humanities (PRJAH)*, 3(1), 36-48. <https://doi.org/10.51872/prjah.vol3.iss1.81>
- Bawa, K., Essobiyou, S., & Likambantién, K. (2023). Folklore and Cultural Identity: A Study of Chunua Achebe Things Fall Apart. *European Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistic Studies*, 7(2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.46827/ejll.v7i2.451>
- Eugenio, D. L. (2002). Philippine folk literature: The legends. UP Press
- Grochowski, Z. T. (2020). Nicodemus. A Disciple Liberated by the Cross of the Christ from the Darkness of Fear and Disbelief. *The Biblical Annals*, 10(4), 637-676. <https://doi.org/10.31743/biban.8985>
- Hezam, A. M. (2017). A Dismembered Dream: A Critical Study of Bamboo Stalk. *Int. J. En Lang. Lit & Trans. Studies (ISSN: 2349-9451/2395-2628) Vol, 4*. Available SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3186003>
- Hussein, H. A., Hussain, A. L. A. K., & Abdulazeez, A. L. M. S. (2025). Contrapuntal Voices of Empire: A Postcolonial Analysis of Colonial and Indigenous Narratives in Tayeb Salih's Season of Migration to the North. *Lark*, 17(2/Pt1), 1112-1090. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31185/lark.4119>
- McPherron, S. P. (1957). *A Comparison of Two Philippine Groups with Emphasis on Religion and Folklore* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago).
- Mohamed, S. S. (2021). An intersectional study of Saud Al-Sanousi's novel *The Bamboo Stalk*. *Journal of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Suez Canal University*, 4(39), 1-3 DOI: [10.21608/jfhsc.2021.287762](https://doi.org/10.21608/jfhsc.2021.287762)
- Muhi, M. T. (2023). Caught in a Cross-Fire: Cultural Identity and Diaspora in Wajahat Ali's *The Domestic Crusaders* and Ayad Akhtar's *The Who and the What*. *Larq Journal for Philosophy, Linguistics & Social Sciences*, 3(51). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31185/lark.Vol3.Iss51.3242>
- Nnolim, C. (1987). "Mythology and the unhappy woman in Nigeria fiction" Critical theory and African literature. Ed. Ernest Emenyonu: Ibanda: Heinemann Publishers.
- Rosenberg, B. A., & Brown, M. E. (1998). Encyclopedia of folklore and literature. [Bloomsbury Academic](https://www.bloomsbury.com/academic/).
- Zhang, J. (2020). The Folkloric Identity is the Thing. *Western Folklore*, 79(2/3), 215-250. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27032531>