Popular Islam is a distinct feature in Sudanese life. The teachings of the Sufis as well as the religious traditions drawn from diverse books of religion and the well known stories of holy man and of ghosts and spirits, all coupled with the surviving traditions of the indigenous religions, exercise a strong influence upon Sudanese society. It is only natural that al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ’s writings, which are a portrayal of Sudanese life, should embody this essential aspect. It is the intent of this paper to explore the nature of popular Islam in Ṣāliḥ’s short story, “The Doum Tree of Wad Ḥāmid,” ¹ his novella The Wedding of Zein,² and his novels The Season of Migration to the North,³ and Bandar Shāb: Daw al-Bayt.⁴

Most of Ṣāliḥ’s works have their setting in Wad Ḥāmid, a village on the bank of the Nile in the northern province of Northern Sudan. The few occasional shifts of scene, with the exception of the description of a journey through a desert in The Season of Migration to the North, occur as flashbacks. The village where almost all the events in Ṣāliḥ’s stories unfold is named after a saint or wali, Wad Ḥāmid, a slave of an infidel. He, fearing his master, had kept his faith to himself and did not practise his worship openly lest his master should kill him. Wad Ḥāmid escaped by putting his prayer mat on the Nile and squatting on it. The mat landed at a place where the village came into being. Apart from Wad Ḥāmid, the village had also witnessed other holy men, like al-Ḥānin of The Wedding of Zein, men whose domed shrines stood in the middle of the village cemetery “like ships

¹ Tayeb Ṣāliḥ, “The Doum Tree of Wad Ḥāmid”, in The Wedding of Zein, trans. by Denys Johnson-Davies (London: Heinemann, 1968) pp. 1-20. The English translation of “The Doum Tree of Wad Ḥāmid” was published in the November 1962 issue of Encounter. Its Arabic original together with the originals of The Wedding of Zein and “A Handful of Dates” were published in Beirut in 1966. The spelling of proper names and Arabic words in the English translation departs from the standard system of transliteration which I have adopted. Al-Zayn, for example, appears as Zein in the English translation. It must be pointed out, however, that many of Ṣāliḥ’s titles contain proper names spelled in accordance with the dialectal pronunciation.
on ocean waves.”  

5 The doum tree of the wali Wad Hāmid, the symbol of mysticism, is described in a way which suggests the strong grip of popular Islam on the village society. The doum tree, with its full sturdy trunk, “holds its head aloft to the skies, its roots strike down into the earth.”  

6 It is like some “mythical eagle spreading its wings over the village and everyone in it.”  

7 The villagers’ religious beliefs are so deeply implanted in their subconscious that they seek refuge and protection from illness and other worldly troubles under the doum tree. Whenever they are in trouble, they dream of the holy Wad Hāmid, who releases them from their troubles.

The kind of life led by the saints has its impact on the people. The pious men lead a simple life, and so do the villagers. “We are people who live on what God sees fit to give us.”  

8 Though they have a simple hard life, the people of the village of Wad Hāmid are content and happy. Šālih seems to equate mysticism with happiness. The image of al-Zayn, the friend of al-Ḥanin who represents mysticism in *The Wedding of Zein*, is connected in the people’s mind with happiness and joy. Whenever al-Zayn appears, there is laughter: for he is a lover of life. Children usually come into this life crying, but not al-Zayn, for “no sooner did he come into this world than he burst out laughing and so it was throughout the rest of his life.”  

9 He would be found at every wedding party, for the thrilling sound of joy attracted him, and once he was there he would fill the place with life and vigour.

In “The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid,” the village with its river, darkness, sand flies, horse flies, donkeys and above all the doum tree (which is believed to be planted by the holy man Wad Hāmid) —is in direct opposition to the city, with its hospitals, electricity, radios, cinemas, newspapers, schools and modern means of transport. The conflict arises when the modern threatens the traditional. The government suggests that the doum tree, the symbol of mysticism, of continuity and of shelter, should be cut down in order to make way for a stopping place for the steamer. The villagers oppose the idea and resist it by violence. The attempt to cut down the tree fails,

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6 *The Season of Migration to the North*, p. 47.
7 “The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid”, p. 3.
8 Ibid., p. 6.
9 *The Wedding of Zein*, p. 33.