

*A Sacred Covenant: Islamic
Environmentalism in Ibrahim
Al-Koni's 'The Bleeding of
the Stone*

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The Sahara has occupied a major territory in the colonial imagination about the Other. The desert and its nomads have constituted a borderline state of being unequivocally distinguished from urbanized civilizations. The local diversity of the Sahara has been the focal point of Ibrahim Al-Koni, a Libyan writer who foregrounded local rituals and ways of being that are in clash with imperial and colonial practices. Known for being a mas-

ter of magic realism, he demystifies the Sahara and its Bedouins. Al-Knoi asserts that “the novel is the spirit of the secret, the desert its body, and myth its language” (*My Great Desert*, 1998, 122) Al-Koni attempts to resurrect a Bedouin identity untarnished by urban or colonial practices that tend to homogenize the human experience and he values the spirituality preserved in the desert. One of his most known works, *The Bleeding of the Stone* (1990), aligns his understanding of the locality of the desert and its traditions with the spiritual practices of its inhabitants. The novel revolves around the sacred waddan, a type of horned goat, whose flesh has a special value for western hunters since, the novel mentions, the animal has become extinct in Europe in 1627. Asouf, a Bedouin, refuses to aid John Parker, Cain and his helper Massud from hunting more waddans.

Al-Koni comes from a Tuareg tribe in Libya. The Tuaregs are nomad people who live across North Africa and who are considered Berber. Al-Koni, despite living between Moscow and Warsaw for over half a decade of his life, always returned to the Sahara in his writing, producing over 80 works, half of which have been translated to over 35 languages. Al-Koni’s oeuvre has been compared to the works of the Saudi writer Abdul Rahman Munif in which he also situates the Saharah and its Bedouins at the center of narration. *Bleeding of the Stone* works as a model for *Gold Dust*, written in 1992 and translated by Elliott Colla, where the storyline accentuates the intrin-

sis bond between man and beast, and in which the main character isolates himself from his tribe to wander the desert with his only companion, his camel. *The Bleeding of the Stone*, like all of Al-Koni's novels, centers morality in the Sahara against the greed and corruption taking roots in more urban communities.

To focus on the idea of place in the novel, the desert, one should put into perspective the author's and the characters' culture to understand the borderline existence of humans and animals within a postcolonial context. In this paper, I examine how Al-Koni wards off the Eurocentric concept of consumption and desecration of the land and animals through relying on traditions rituals of Islam that honor the relationship between the human and the non-human. While countless scholarship has studied different aspects of this novel, I rely on an Islamic environmentalism framework to highlight the intricacies of the novel from a postcolonial environmental perspective. Islamic rituals are practiced throughout the novel. Al-Koni minimally explains the purpose behind the verses, prayers, ablution, rules of hunting that Asouf and his father converse about. Through these encounters, one finds that there are some rules in Islam dictating the believers to respect and protect nature and animals. This frame of reference recuperates Asouf and his understanding of the land and animals. Sharif S Elmusa has argued that Islamic scholars have relied on the Quran to formulate an eco-theology. However, Elmusa

believes that the shortcoming of such a framework is that it “seldom engages debates in contemporary environmental thought” (2013,12). While Elmusa has a valid point, this does not preclude developing an eco-Islamic analysis of the novel that resists colonial dilapidation of the colonized human and land. Elmusa, nevertheless, still sustains the idea that there is a “‘chain of being’ linking man, other sentient beings, the inanimate domain, all the way to divinity” (2013, 24). Elmusa introduces the “Ecological Bedouin” to postcolonial ecocriticism, a reference which will occur throughout the paper. The argument here will mainly focus on how Al-Koni utilizes Islam to communicate a message about Animal/Human relation. Al-Koni invites his readers to witness the construction of the Other (both humans and animals) in the desert, and how an Islamic counter discourse weakens the Western firm beliefs of the erroneous dismissal of spirituality, faith, and co-being with animals.

Critical studies have been opulent in connecting environment to colonial discourse. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*; *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies*; and *Environment and Empire* are a few examples that shed light on the correlation between environment and imperialistic agendas of expansion. Alfred W. Crosby in 1986 was the first to combine the term “ecological imperialism” forging a historical relationship between the two sides understanding the degradation of the environment in

colonized territories. The tension created between the colonizer and the colonized increased to engulf environmental displacement. Colonizing nature meant rearranging it to look like its European Edenic counterpart. Postcolonial ecocriticism has started the debate that nature has its own means in resisting being hegemonized, Westernized, and domesticated. James Beattie defines “environmental anxiety” to be classified as “concerns generated when environments did not conform to European preconceptions about their natural productivity or when colonization set in motion a series of unintended environmental consequences” (2011, 1). The Empire’s attempt to remodel colonized areas has proven to be not only insufficient but also ecologically disturbing. Thus, a resisting ecology is not merely speculative or mystical, it can express itself in various forms. Crosby posed the following speculation during the nascent stages of colonial environmentalism: “Perhaps European humans have triumphed because of their superiority in arms, organization, and fanaticism, but what in heaven’s name is the reason that the sun never sets on the empire of the dandelion? Perhaps the success of European imperialism has a biological, an ecological, component” (1986, 7). Expansion in this sense is the project to colonize people and, literally, to subdue nature. Ecological discourse was not absent from political discourse. For example, Empire Marketing Board was established in 1926 to produce pictorial representations of wildlife and the benefits of expanding the empire further. Over 700 posters

were introduced in six years highlighting “a positive image of an interdependent empire, in which exotic and beautiful environments, partly tamed, gave forth their riches for the British consumer” (Beinart and Hughes, 2007, 214). The commodification of nature and animals went hand in hand with commodifying colonized subjects. Philip Armstrong's article on “The Postcolonial Animal” extends revolutionary and political endeavors to incorporate resisting animals. Since the core of postcolonial resilience is different and unique from one culture to another, the desert and animals in Al-Koni's novel portray an example of rebellious humans and animals, highlighting the importance of Islamic discourse and modes of interaction over European examples of enlightenment, civilization, and agency.

Thus, in an attempt to write back against colonialism and Western beliefs whether of humans or animals, Al-Koni's novel fulfills this mission. His reliance on local and Islamic embracement of animal rights buttresses his postcolonial project in defending both humans and nonhumans. What gives Islamic environmentalism a plus over Western Environmental viewpoint is the long historical engagement with animal rights since medieval ages. To acknowledge the awareness of animal rights in Islam, the novel adds an important aspect to environmental postcolonial studies, which strongly celebrates aboriginal cultures in maintaining close ties with their natural milieu. Most Muslim environmental scholars

have affirmed that the oneness of creation puts humans and nonhumans on an equal base. Although the natural world was put into service for mankind, this by no means implies the superiority of humans or that this is nature's sole purpose behind its existence. Nature is a sign of God's creational multitudes and varieties. Mawil Y. Izzi Deen cites Ibn Taymiyyah, a theologian and logician in medieval Islam, who was known for defending animal rights and interpreting that God created both men and animals to worship Him. In other words, both of them have this shared responsibility to praise God, thus, emphasizing the intellectual components they both have. Islamic ethical laws put limits to human's trespass on animal's existence, as Deen explains:

Islamic ethical values are based not on human reasoning, as Aristotle claimed values to be, nor on what society imposes on the individual, as Durkheim thought, nor on the interests of a certain class, as Marxists maintain. In each of these claims values are affected by circumstances. In Islam, ethical values are held to be based on an accurate scale which unalterable as to time and place. Islam's values are those without which neither persons nor the natural environment can be sustained. (2004, 161)

Certainly, we can add another faulty dimension that the civilization of the colonizer is not the measuring stick for all humanity and animal world to abide to. Islamic discourse, thus, relies on Quran to regulate the relation-

ship between humans and their environment. The word Earth in the Quran is mentioned 485 times testifying its importance in a worldly religion (Deen, 2004, 162). Muslim scholars were conscious of the importance of animals in their religion well before, for example, the Australian Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975) or Tom Regan who coined the term "animal rights" in *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983).

There are two narratives in the novel: one represents Western Enlightenment ideas of human superiority over colonized people and animals, and Al-Koni's prime narrative of species' oneness relying on religious discourse in general and Islamic discourse in particular. Colonial imaginative narrative of the Other extends to include animals as well. The purpose behind conflating two species together is an attempt to show how pejorative treatments can extend to both species in the Sahara. The novel brings forth an example of animals that refuse to be overpowered. When Asouf's father tries to hunt the waddan, he "saw a rancor and wretchedness together in his [waddan's] eyes" (2002, 19). This spirit of resistance continues when the father explains that he "saw stubbornness and wildness, and many other things I didn't even understand" (2002, 19). The resisting animal in combat with the hunter gives an image of struggle between two equals until the father realizes that he would never defeat the raging animal: "I leaped up and ran to my camel to snatch the rifle hanging from the saddle"

(2002, 19). The intrusion of this man-made instrument ends the fight with the waddan apprehending his weaker situation in front of the rifle. In a suicidal attempt, the waddan “climbed the rocks in a single swift movement, then leaped to the ground and broke his neck. The blood gushed out from his nostrils, and, after he was dead, his eyes were open and that strange look was still there—the mixture of wretchedness and rancor and helplessness” (2002, 20). Asouf’s father comprehends the message behind the suicide as a moment of final defiance; the hunter would not be able to catch his prey alive. This encounter between two species highlights the similarities between the two until the civilized human relies on the power of arms to conquest the Other. Asouf’s father learns to revere the waddan’s spirit, the American John Parker and his miniature Cain, on the other hand, go to extreme measures.

The similarities between the flesh of an animal and that of man are emphasized in the novel, therefore, ideas about consuming them ultimately have the same concept. Asouf, a castaway from civilized and urbanized areas in the desert has also been subjugated, just like the waddan, to fabrications and illusions. Cain, upon meeting Asouf, asks him whether it is true that desert people mingle with jinni women in the caves. On his Land Rover, Cain curses the desert as the cause for his harsh trip to a point where Asouf wonders “What had the desert done to deserve all these insults?” (2002, 75). The des-

ert and the animals have been put through a process of definitions. However, the true essence of the desert is that it stretches peacefully in a state of being “merciful to God’s worshipers” (Al-Koni, 2002, 77). Cain, carrying his gun given by one officer of the American camp in Gharyan, a company searching for oil, disturbs the ecological peacefulness of gazelles in the desert. Convinced of his superiority, Cain continues with his relentless pursuit after flesh, and he remains ignorant of animal’s role in the desert: “He doesn’t see how this devilish machine is a betrayal of nature, breaching the rules of noble conflict and seeking to win the day through the ugliest trickery” (2002, 88). This has always been the backup scenario for imperialism through the complete destruction of a colony’s culture and the subsequent looting of its natural resources.

The most obvious and disturbing imperialistic aspect in the novel is John Parker, who is introduced in chapter, “The Opium” where animals, like humans, suffer the twisted fantasies of a colonial mind. While being captivated by Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Sufism, and Islam at the University of California, Parker’s years of service in the Marine in Tunisia augmented his inventions of tales about desert animals. In what seems to be an orientalist book, Parker speaks of a French philosopher who explained how by consuming the flesh of a gazelle, the person will be closer to God. Parker’s need to hunt and eat gazelles unified him with Cain. In their search after

the waddan, having almost wiped out gazelles in the desert, the reader perceives the process of colonial fabrications of animals, especially when Cain, as devilish as he is, explains Parker's intention and greed:

If I wiped out the gazelles, he said evenly, you helped me do it. You gave me the trucks and the guns, and you ate your fair share of the bag—more than your fair share. You're the one who wiped out the desert gazelles, after hammering my ear with all those fairy tales about the poor beast's meat having divine secrets lurking in it. You're the biggest criminal of the lot. You say how marvelous gazelles are, how innocent they are, then you sink your teeth in their flesh, in search of some secret that doesn't even exist outside your own weird head. You pretend to be kind to animals, and yet you're greedier than me, greedier than all the meat eaters in the desert. The worm tickling your teeth's fiercer than the one in mine. (2002, 110-11)

Unsurprisingly, the same strategies were used to colonize nations under the pretext that the Empire wanted to spread civilization or the word of God, in case of missionaries. Falsifications and stories about the Other only existed in Western books. Preserving human rights in the colonies, or in this case animal rights, is, as Aimé Césaire explains to be only “pseudo-humanistic,” or one can say, pseudo-environmental.

The opening of the novel starts with a verse from the Quran: “There are no animals on land or birds flying on their wings but are communities like your own” (2002, 1). This line is one of the most quoted proofs by environmental Muslim scholars. Al-Koni, like other defenders of green Islam, sets the tone of the novel stating that it is about the sameness of species emphasized by God. These other communities, which have often been ignored by literary texts will be examined as a community sharing similarities with mankind. The sole purpose of animals is to worship their Creator, just like humans are supposed to. These verses testify against the common condemnation of world religions that are believed to be anthropocentric. In *Animals in the Quran*, Sarra Tlili addresses some scholars’ views which ascertain that Islam has helped to build a hierarchical relationship between humans and nonhumans. Against these affirmations, Tlili resorts to Quran and how the “linear- atomistic” interpretation of it proves to be fallible (2012, 49). Quran, she asserts, cannot be read like a Western text and cannot, therefore, be held responsible for misreading it through applying Western interpretations, theories and science on it. 7 out of 114 chapters in the Quran are named after different animals. The longest chapter in the whole book is called “The Cow.” Moreover, Tlili writes that the word most often used to refer to animals (*dabba*) is sometimes used to all living creatures, including mankind (2012, 71). Tlili also summarizes viewpoints on animals saying that

The depiction of some nonhuman animals represents them as moral beings, capable of facing and making moral choices. According to many interpretations of the Quran, nonhuman animals will be resurrected. Even if their existence, unlike that of humans, is perhaps not everlasting, they will still receive compensation for undeserved suffering and retributions for the deeds they have performed in this life, which points to their accountability. (2012, 72)

Certainly, examples of accountability are evident in the novel where sometimes animals seem to have some human sins. In other words, Al-Koni is not humanizing animals since they are both accountable in front of their Creator, hence, they both have their own deeds without saying that animals are acting like humans. While Asouf is preparing to pray at the beginning of the novel, he notices how “Satan entered the goats, who took evident pleasure in butting at the very moment he says, ‘God is great’ and began murmuring the Fatiha, as if they were proud of their horns or wanted to show him their skills” (2002, 4). This passage shouldn’t be interpreted that Al-Koni is anthropomorphizing the goats, but that they are also prone to be tempted by Satan to disobey God, much like how humans would be. The statue which has an image of a priest and the waddan shows an example of animal’s connection with a deity: “The majestic waddan, crowned with its two curved horns, was in harmony with its god; the prayer had, it appeared been accepted, and the waddan had found favor with the deity of the

shrine” (2002, 7). Whether the shrine is of a Muslim deity or not, the concern here is that animals, like humans, are expected by their God to show praise and gratitude.

Another example where Al-Koni treats animals in his novel according to Islamic teachings is hunting. The prophet Muhammad, to begin with, prohibits hunting for sport, and it is only permitted if the need for food is necessary. This explains why Asouf’s father clarifies to his son that “never to hunt more than one gazelle each trip” (2002, 37). Moreover, his father instructs him to never hunt a pregnant animal. Elmusa clarifies hunting rituals where “the Ecological Bedouin herds animals, but also hunts them. Ironically, empathy with the animals is often manifested during the hunt, in the very act of killing them” (2013, 22). Certainly, Al-Koni’s critics have noticed his attempt to generalize the concept of religion including Islam and some other indigenous African rituals in the Sahara. By making human beings accountable in life and the afterlife for their maltreatment of animals, this puts limit to human’s cruelty over animals. When Asouf’s father kills the waddan to feed his starving family, “he wept before he did it” manifesting a relationship that not only ruled by God’s regulations, but also a striking example of flow of emotions and responsibility between humans and animals.

Tlili quotes Ibn Kathir, Sunni/ Sufi historian when he devalues the assumptions that humans have dominance over animals; just because they seem to be using the

latter for travel or food, this doesn't indicate animal's subjugating status. God puts both animals and humans at the service of each other: "Humans [have the ability to] subdue these animals while the latter remain docile and do not resist them, to a point that a small child would ride a camel, make it kneel down or stand up as he wishes, while the camel remains compliant" (qtd. in Tlili, 2012, 78). Muslim scholars have explained that this doesn't mean that the child has power over the camel, but it rather shows the "amenability of the camel" and not the child's attempt to coerce the camel into doing something. The contrast here is maintained that although camels can be extremely powerful creatures, they are affable with mankind. In the novel, Asouf's father compliments the gracefulness of camels: "Did you ever, in the whole desert, see a more beautiful camel? One that was more obedient, braver and more patient? Did you ever see one that was more intelligent and sensible?" (2002, 43). And the praise continues about this noble camel to typify an exemplary model of camels, again not to merely anthropomorphize them. Asouf's father's usual advice is that "Animals are more faithful than people" (2002, 44). The father's lamentation doesn't stop at praising the camels only, but he continues to melancholically weep over the status of gazelles and human cruelty to them in the desert: "I just don't understand. Why should this wicked creature man chase such an angel? . . . Maybe that's why God punishes us, refuses to let us catch it alive" (2002, 45).

Probably the most famous chapter in the novel is “The Covenant” where gazelles are given agency to explain to the reader why they put themselves, sometimes, at the service of human beings. This glimpse into their world affirms that they do have a community, a language, and motivations. This kind of stories is not unheard of in Islam. In “The Ant” chapter in the Quran, the section tells the story of Solomon and the ants. As he was marching with his army, made of jinn, men and birds, an ant announces that they should all rush toward their dwellings for fear of being crushed by Solomon and his soldiers. Not surprisingly then that Al-Koni follows an example from the Quran of a talking animal proving that they have access to language and communication, not in a sense of a human language per se. Most importantly, these stories in the Quran are not to be regarded fables, but they are considered real. In the novel, the gazelle recounts to her young calf the migratory journey of going to Algeria and then back to Libya. The animal conversation in the novel is a didactic piece. From the wise gazelle, we hear a reiteration of Islamic beliefs that “God, honored all creatures and gave them life . . . He who sacrifices himself to save another’s life sees into that secret and wins immortality” (2002, 102). In the mother’s explanation to the dissenting gazelle, she comments on the equality of all creatures, and perhaps, her superiority since she is about to win God’s favor. The female gazelle seems to be in-tuned with God’s decrees by sacrificing herself. Tlili also explains how in the Quran, those who

are superior, whether of men, animals or jinn, are those who worship God the most.

The grotesque and horrifying image of Cain in his life pursuit after animals is painted in a clear contrast to the permissibility of consuming animals in Islam. While we see Asouf's father strictly following the role of killing animals for necessity, and also Asouf's vegetarian habits are mentioned, we have Cain on the opposite side killing animals to feed an insatiable hunger for flesh. The prophet was reported saying that Muslims should "avoid obnoxious things: polytheism; magic; the killing of breathing beings, which God has forbidden except for rightful reason" (qtd in Islam and Islam, 2015, 107). Having a deadly sin on his back, Cain ends up wiping off entire herds: "She dropped to the ground and lay on her right side, craning her head toward the qibla," the gazelle prepares herself to die in an Islamic way facing the direction to Mecca following burial rituals in Islam where the head of the dead person should be directed to the qibla. We can then safely conclude that Al-Koni has an Islamic subtext in his novel to narrate a story of human-animal relationship showing the shared destiny and the same treatment they endure at the hand of imperialist projects.

As an institution, Islam as a religion might not be the direct route for environmentalists to turn to since atrocities have been committed in its name. This is not a pa-

per to defend how some extremists have reshaped Islam, but this is rather an attempt to enlarge ecocritical postcolonial discourse on animal rights. Orientalism, an institution in itself, is changing its face but the core goals are fundamental. Excluding certain religions and beliefs from today's academic discourse on animal rights is an indication of a hierarchical system of knowledge. Al-Koni, took the responsibility as a writer to write off mainstream allegations of Islam and the nomads of the desert, freeing both humans and animals from the shackles of colonial imagination. The novel contextualizes all these conflicting sides, systems of oppressions and attempts of resistance between human and nonhuman relationships. Al-Koni addresses issues of agency and who has the right to defend animal rights, ending with the vindication that Western environmentalism has no right to exclude religious discourses from environmental postcolonial studies.

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