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## Desert ethics, myths of nature and novel form in the narratives of Ibrahim al-Koni

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This broadly comparative essay contrasts environmentalism in the fiction in English translation of the Libyan writer, Ibrahim al-Koni, with dominant trends in contemporary environmentalism. An analysis of three of the most ecocritically pertinent of the novels in English translation suggests that the natural world is viewed through the lens of the mythical, encompassing the religious worlds of both Tuareg animism, as well as monotheism represented by Islam and early Christianity. The novels to be considered are *The Seven Veils of Seth*, *Anubis* and *The Bleeding of the Stone*. Unlike environmental approaches which derive from the European Enlightenment of procedural rational disenchantment, human beings in Al-Koni's work are accorded a place in the sacred order which allows non-parasitic modes of existence within the framework of a sacred law. This conviction is articulated most powerfully through the symbol of the desert which inspires all of Al-Koni's work. The social and sacred desert ethic out of which Al-Koni's fiction is forged, strains at the form of the novel, the genre which constitutes and is constituted by an immanent, individual vision of the world. As a consequence, Al-Koni's narratives tend towards allegorical modes which highlight the radical complexity and simplicity of allegory. **Keywords:** allegory, comparative literature, desert ethics, environmentalism, Ibrahim al-Koni, Libyan literature.

Ibrahim al-Koni needs no introduction in the world of Arabic letters, even though he himself is not an Arab. A Tamasheq speaking Tuareg, born in 1948 in the southern Libyan deserts, he learnt Arabic at the age of twelve and, after a brief career as a journalist in Libya, established himself as an Arabic fiction writer while still a student in Moscow in 1974. In a literary career which has spanned almost four decades, Al-Koni has published more novels and anthologies of stories than one could conveniently list and has garnered virtually all the major Arabic literature awards, as well as a state art award in Libya, the country of his birth, and a number of awards in his adopted homeland of Switzerland where he has lived since 1993. Translation into English of key works in the past few years and, more significantly, Al-Koni's shortlisting on the highly prestigious 2015 Man Booker International Prize suggests a presence in world literature in English which soon will rival his reputation in Arabic letters.<sup>1</sup> Al-Koni's literary imagination has been sparked both by the cultures of his origins and the cultures of his artistic, intellectual, spiritual and actual travels. His writing is informed by Tuareg culture with its roots in ancient Egyptian religion, by the early Christianity

of North Africa, by Arab-Islamic oral and literary tradition and spirituality, the Romanticism of Europe and its offshoots in American Transcendentalism, and Russian literature. While his work has been translated into more than 30 world languages, the first English translations of two of his novels *Anubis* (2002) and *Nazif al-Hajar* (1990) were published only in 2002 as *Anubis: A Desert Novel* and *The Bleeding of the Stone*. Since 2002, four other novels have appeared in English translation, namely, *al-Tibr* (1990, translated as *Gold Dust*, 2008) and *al Bahth 'An al-Makan al-Da'i'* (2003, translated as *The Seven Veils of Seth*, 2008), *al-Dumya* (1998, translated as *The Puppet*, 2010), and *New Waw: Saharan Oasis* in 2014. The study presented here is based only on the novels in English translation and Al-Koni scholarship available in English.

As Al-Koni's work becomes more accessible to a broader English-language readership, the salience of his ideas to continental African and global conversations is becoming apparent. While Al-Koni's network of influences in the world of Arabic letters is often alluded to, the comparison with African novelists writing in other world languages like English and French have not been made. Like most Arabic novelists of his generation, Al-Koni has been influenced by Naguib Mahfouz, the doyen of the novel in Arabic. In the context of the concerns of this essay, which highlight the densely allusive style of Al-Koni's novels, the strongly allegorical and mythical approach of Mahfouz in *The Children of Gebelawi* comes to mind which more than likely was an influence on Al-Koni. But to return to translinguistic comparisons, like most of the other African writers born roughly in the 1930s and 1940s, Al-Koni writes in what is his second language but, given the historical legacy of Libya, his second international language is Arabic, rather than English or French. Like Chinua Achebe, the doyen of the African novel, Al-Koni is concerned with the effects of early 20<sup>th</sup> century colonialism on his culture and the lifeways of his tribe. Like Tayyib Salih (who, unlike the other writers highlighted here, writes in his first language) Al-Koni is concerned with the deeper philosophical impact of modernity on non-modern social forms. Although the motivation and effect of the use of mythology is different, Al-Koni's novels and stories, like those of Wole Soyinka, are saturated with allusions to myth, in this case, however, the mythology of the Tuareg, with its roots in the ancient civilisations of Egypt, and the mythological world of Islam. Like the Somali writer, Nuruddin Farah, Al-Koni's cultural formation is nomadic pastoral, in a continental African context, and itinerant in a contemporary transnational context. In the work of both these writers the ideas of nomadism and exile are tropes which acquire, in the case of Farah, modernist overtones, while in the work of Al-Koni, nomadism exists as a metaphysical concept. Unlike Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Al-Koni writes fairly unselfconsciously in his second language, modern standard Arabic, which offers him a degree of internationalism. Al-Koni also draws on the classical Arabic heritage in respect of genre, style and symbolism, both in oral and textual cultural forms. In some respects, Al-Koni's work is dissimilar from the work of other African

writers of his generation because of a penetrating focus on the natural world and animals, which, in the work of the other writers referred to, forms part of a somewhat transparent background to seemingly more immediate social, political and literary questions. In Al-Koni's fictional world, nature is central. Furthermore, nature in Al-Koni's fiction is not scientifically represented as environment; nor is it the sentimental source of a unique self; nor is it a landscape whose mode of representation betrays the assumptions, the desires and fears of the linguistic subject. Instead, nature is sacralised not as a god or goddess unto itself, but as one dimension of a larger sacred scheme whose laws, if observed by human beings, make people part of rather than parasites in the cosmic order.

### **Al-Koni's desert in comparative focus**

Al-Koni's *oeuvre* seems to collapse in challenging and complex ways the racial and geographical divide between Africa south of the Sahara and Africa north of the Sahara, revealing the desert to be a zone of continuous and mutually transforming traffic, both between Arab and Tuareg culture, and Tuareg culture and the other cultures of the Sahel. As a geographic feature, the Sahara for the Tuareg does not exist as a single undifferentiated entity. True to the fine discriminations made by those who inhabit and know a space intimately, the Tuareg Sahara does not exist as "The Desert" but is referred to in Tamasheq in the plural as *tinariwen* or "the deserts". For Elliott Colla, the translator of a number of Al-Koni's works, the author forces us to recognise a "radically redrawn map of the world [and of Africa]—one in which the Sahara is a full, rather than empty space; one in which the Tuareg lie not at the edges, but the centre of history" (Colla, "Al-Koni's homes"). In terms of the coordinates of Al-Koni's cartography, the Sahara is the point of contact:

between two sharply opposing world forces. To the South lies a world of myth, magic and superstition. It is a place where the caravans carrying blue cloth, slaves and gold originate. It is a place of cyclical time—the rising and falling of dynasties and the ebb and flow of Islam [...] To the North lie the distant Arab cities of the coast and after that the sea. It is a place associated with mechanized technology and warfare, the direction from which come the ceaseless French and Italian onslaughts. It is a place of permanent habitation, whose calendar is linear. (Colla, "Atlas" 191–2)

Colla suggests that in Al-Koni's fictional world the Saharan abode of the Tuareg comes to be identified with the richly allusive Qur'anic term *al-barzakh*, which is frequently translated as "obstacle or "separation" (Colla, "Atlas" 194). The state of *barzakh* represents an intermediate zone where the deceased is held lying between earthly existence and the resurrection. *Barzakh* is an obstacle since there is no turning back to the physical world; neither can the deceased hasten on the resurrection and judgment, which

brings with it the certainty of heaven or hell. It is also a separation in two senses since in the state of *barzakh* body and soul are split, separated both from each other and from this world and the hereafter (Zaki 204–6). Colla proposes that in Al-Koni's vision, the idea of the interregnum of *barzakh*, which is a wholly Islamic concept (Zaki 207), captures the state of "in betweenness" which is the Tuareg Sahara. The desert in this conception is a threshold zone between nomadism and sedentarism, Islam and animism, the physical and spiritual worlds, and the opposing worldviews of north and south (Colla, "Atlas" 195).

However, I would like to suggest that the Saharan desert as figured in the three novels in English translation being studied here comes to represent an idea rather more challenging than the indeterminacy of a liminal third space which collapses binaries, but which itself remains ethereal and evanescent. The Sahara, by contrast, is the geographical name for the desert as symbol, which is the conscious animating inspiration of Al-Koni's fiction. It is almost impossible to discuss Al-Koni's work without engaging the trope of the desert as the recent articles by Susan McHugh, Sharif S. Elmusa and Jehan Farouk Fouad and Saeed Alwakeel attest. The centrality of the desert in Al-Koni's vision right at the outset of his career is made evident by Stefan Sperl who quotes an early short story which identifies the Sahara as "God's regent on this earth who carries out His edicts and commands in harsh totality" (237). Al-Koni highlights this idea in an interview with Hartmut Fähndrich: "My starting point is the desert. As is inevitable with one's birthplace, the desert buries enigmatic signs in the souls of its natives that slumber deep within and one day must awake. The signs that my Great Desert planted within me have made a poet of me, and a seeker after the truth of this world." Rather than shuttling between binaries, desert symbolism reveals a world in which the polarities of man and nature, body and spirit, linear and cyclical time, human and animal, monotheism and animism, reason and magic disappear in the context of a sacred order. The desert as symbol, furthermore, stands in clear contrast with the related but starkly opposed idea of desertification. The worldviews represented by these differing conceptions create a tension in Al-Koni's fiction which strains at the form of the novel, shifting the problematically and paradoxically "open" form of the novel into the mode of allegory.

Allegorical forms of representation are near universal with allegory often originating in narratives shaped by religious mythologies. Allegory most generally refers to a narrative which operates in parallel at a number of levels. The simple surface story, employing characters and motifs easily recognisable from the quotidian round, opens up, given the interpretative key, to more profound parallel narrative(s) which intimate(s) ultimate truths. The allegorical mode was fundamental in ancient Mediterranean civilisations, variously taken up by Judeo-Christianity and the European cultural and literary tradition (MacQueen). In the Islamic literary tradition, according to Peter Heath in "Allegory in Islamic Literatures", allegory as a "developed

literary practice begins at the turn of the eleventh century" (83). In Heath's analysis, allegory in the Islamic tradition emerges out of five major sources, The Qur'an, anecdotes, the interpretational contexts created by major cultural codes, philosophical allegory and mystical allegory (83–100). In the context of North-Atlantic postmodernity, represented most cogently by Paul de Man's essay, "Pascal's Allegory of Persuasion", the access to ontological truth to which allegory traditionally opens up is understood as hinting at the fundamental abyss of signification which makes language possible. Allegory here does not reveal essential truths, but the aporias upon which signification plays. Al-Koni does not, however, seem to be tapping into allegory as reconceptualised in postmodern thought, but draws on "classical" views of allegory as they emerge in ancient Mediterranean, Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions. Allegory, in these perspectives, is revelatory of fundamental apprehensions of the human being's relationships with the world and cosmos. Al-Koni's use of allegory in the novels under discussion will be analysed in more detail towards the end of the essay.

A broad overview of the significance of deserts to the religious cultures which inform Al-Koni's imagination suggests the ambivalence with which the desert is almost universally regarded, but also the final indispensability of the idea of the desert to a social moral order. The desert features prominently in the mythology of ancient Egypt to which Tuareg animist beliefs are linked. In ancient Egyptian mythology, desert symbolism is embodied in the ambiguous trickster god, Seth, who represents the forces of both creativity and destruction. In Tuareg animism, the desert is the primal home. But the desert is also a space of fear because of the threat of malevolent forces which also find their abode in the desert. Susan Rasmussen, a leading scholar of Tuareg society and culture, notes that the term for those who are possessed by jinn is *kel essuf* which translates literally as "people of solitude or the bush", which, in the case of the nomadic pastoralist Tuareg, refers to the desert (131). In a short story which has not been translated into English, Al-Koni emphasises this idea in the affirmation that "the desert is the motherland of jinn and mystery" (Machut-Mendecka 236).

The developing tradition of the three monotheisms, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, originates in the arid belt which runs from North Africa through the Arabian Peninsula to the Sinai. In this tradition also the desert ambiguously is the locus for the vision of the transcendent and the space of abandonment and evil. The desert in the monotheisms is a wilderness untouched by human habitation, but which is the dwelling place instead of demons, the devil or jinn. In the Abrahamic monotheisms thus, since the desert is a locus of uncertainty and danger, the desert is the primal space of exclusion, exile and banishment, most prominently of Cain, the agriculturalist, who murdered his nomadic pastoralist brother, Abel. The desert also is a space of trial, most significantly of Hagar, the African slave wife of Abraham, and Ishmael, their son, mythical root of the line of the Arabs. But there are also positive connotations to the desert in the monotheisms. The desert is an environment where the air is considered

to be purer, lighter and healthier and where solitude outside of the city allows self-realisation through connection with the divine. This is a theme strongly developed in the monasticism of the 4<sup>th</sup> century Desert Fathers who withdrew into the deserts around Alexandria in Egypt. It is also a theme continued in the early history of Islam where the Prophet Muhammad's meditations in a cave in the desert outside of the city of Mecca provided the spiritual preparation for the first revelations. The history, metaphors and symbols associated with Islam are the most significant influences in the novels by Al-Koni under consideration. There is, however, a strong undercurrent represented by early Christianity.

Of the three Abrahamic traditions, Islam is also the faith most obdurately viewed as the religion of the desert, even though cities are the location for the major part of its history. In its revelatory expression through the Arabic language, Islam cannot be dissociated from Arab culture more broadly. Sharif S. Elmusa goes so far as to suggest that the desert is to Arab culture what the forest is to European culture, a zone of intimate alterity which allows cultural definition. It is revealing also that even though Islam is considered the religion of the desert, its sacred text, The Qur'an, is replete with references to human community and exchange, especially in the context of markets and trade, rather than desert isolation. Furthermore, the sacred scripture is dominated by imagery of the fruitfulness of the earth rather than desert paucity. Angelika Neuwirth (302) describes this dimension of the Qur'an with the observation that: "the early qur'anic revelations present earthly space as particularly inspiring of confidence. They present it as a locus of pleasure and enjoyment, as a venue for the reception of divine bounty and as a site of ethically charged social interaction."

Among Al-Koni's wide-ranging literary influences are included the 19<sup>th</sup> century North American Romantics/Transcendentalists. While the desert does not figure prominently in the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, the key figures of these related nature movements, deserts are important in the work of some of the twentieth-century heirs of this legacy, most notably Edward Abbey, author of *Desert Solitaire*. In the three novels studied in detail here, the influence of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American nature artists is not clearly apparent, and, I would like to suggest, that the trend of the development of Al-Koni's thought expressed through the desert in fundamental ways is different from North American nature writing as it has evolved into the contemporary period. American desert writing displays a strong anti-humanist strand where Man as God is replaced by Nature as God. Paradoxically the deification of Nature and the forms of religious worship which emerge around it develop out of the humanist philosophical individualism, with its objectification of nature, which "Dark Green" religions superficially reject (Taylor). The differences between Al-Koni's understanding and the implicit assumptions of much contemporary nature writing will emerge more fully in the analysis of the novels. Deserts also feature quite prominently in European and American travel writing from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward.

Desert travel writing picks up on many of the themes identified in the Judeo-Christian tradition and American Romanticism/Transcendentalism and its contemporary permutations, with a tangential interest in Bedouins, in the case of travel in the Arabian Peninsula, who are either idealised or racially denigrated depending on the traveller's attitude vis-à-vis Victorian racial hierarchies (Melman). Since deserts in Anglo-American travel writing do not really inflect Al-Koni's novels, these ideas will not be developed further. However, the religious cultural imaginary identified above in which deserts have significance is extensively developed in the five novels which have been translated into English, three of which are particularly germane to the ideas explored in this essay.

**Pastoral paradoxes: Gardens of Eden and fallen oases in *The Seven Veils of Seth***

In *The Seven Veils of Seth*, in particular, the syncretism of Tuareg animist and ancient Egyptian religion is explored; and, furthermore, the most significant elements of these mythologies are refracted through Christianity and Islam. Al-Koni is gripped by the figure of Seth, a god of Upper Egypt, whose ambiguity as a force of creativity and destruction is embodied in his pictorial representation as a composite human-animal figure where even the animal part is subject to uncertainty. Seth is variously represented with the features of an antelope or a pig or an aardvark or an ass, among other animals (Britannica Online). Seth was the god of the desert and also storms, disorder and warfare. Most notably in the context of the symbolic value of this figure, Seth murdered his brother Osiris, the god associated with the fecundity and abundance of the flooding of the Nile (White 92–105).

*The Seven Veils of Seth* is a densely allusive novel which operates at a number of levels of interpretation. It tells the story of the arrival of a mysterious stranger to an unnamed oasis who stirs the curiosity of the oasis dwellers since he, unusually and quite unacceptably, refuses the traditional hospitality extended to guests. The stranger also provokes the ridicule of the inhabitants since he arrives on the back of a she-ass, rather than the customary camel. The arrival of the stranger, who is variously referred to as "Isan", "the strategist", "the jenny master" and "Wantahet", coincides with a drought in the oasis. Although the stranger ushers in drought, one of the first things he does is to seek out a spring. As the incarnation of Seth, the stranger embodies the paradoxes of the creative-destructive force of the trickster god. Seth, the primordial wanderer of the dry deserts, at the outset and repeatedly throughout the novel is associated with water. Quite outrageously for a Tuareg man, Isan divests himself of his clothes and the accoutrement of his veil where he is seen by six women, the wives of prominent oasis men.

Al-Koni, following Tuareg belief, identifies the mouth with shame; hence explaining the necessity of the veil (for men). The women at the spring chastise Isan for exposing

his mouth, in particular, rather than his body. The mouth, it is suggested, is “the weak spot that led to our expulsion from the orchard and turned our world into a desert” (*Seven Veils* 15). After the women, who may also be jinn, vanish as suddenly as they appear, Isan contaminates the water with a mysterious herb which subsequently causes the miscarriages of the pregnant women of the oasis. Isan is even more strongly identified with death since he takes up residence in a burial vault which borders the city. Isan becomes more intimately tied to the women since only he can restore their fertility. He impregnates each one of them with his six amulets which are also his fateful names and his seed. But Seth’s contamination of the water is seen by the oasis fool and—in the tradition of the “wise” fool which is strongly developed in Arab culture—is the only one who suspects that Isan’s cure for the women’s sterility involves carnal rather than herbal/spiritual cure. The woman the fool desires also happens to be one of those who remain barren. Spurred by jealousy, the fool stabs Isan who metamorphoses into a snake and finally into Temarit, the sweetheart of the fool. The fool, it is finally revealed, is also Isan’s son. At the time of the fool’s execution for the murder of his beloved, Seth/Isan, who is also the god of tempests, sends a sandstorm to the oasis which wreaks havoc and causes the fool to disappear in the dust.

The outline of the plot begins to suggest some of the interpretive density of the text. Isan/Seth, the inveterate desert nomad and murderer of his brother, the god of cultivation, is the necessary harbinger of destruction in order to highlight to the oasis dwellers the proclivity towards evil of their sedentary, agricultural and, ultimately, commercial way of life. He poisons the water of the oasis, which causes the miscarriage and barrenness of the oasis women, to highlight the fact that the literal water, which makes the oasis fertile, is metaphorically contaminated since it causes the moral and spiritual infertility or barrenness of the sedentary oasis inhabitants. Isan’s actions cause a group of citizens to abandon the oasis for the desert since the contamination is too threatening. The merchant, who in some ways is the lifeblood of the oasis, comes to report to Isan the people’s motivation for decamping. They feel that, “life in a land without water [that is, the desert] is easier than life in a land where the water’s contaminated” (*Seven Veils* 255). Isan counters that: “[the desert] always bestows water generously. The desert is never stingy with its water for the faithful. The proof is that we have never heard of a nomad dying of thirst unless this thirst was a punishment for an unknown offense or unless a nomad has stopped migrating.” (*Seven Veils* 256) Thus the desert is not parsimonious with life-giving water, provided that the nomad reads its signs and respects its law. Paradoxically, the oasis of virtue is formed around the “water” of the law of the desert.

Furthermore, the novel proposes that the notion that water creates an oasis is illusory. What creates an oasis is not water, but commerce. Commerce is a “stanza” in the “long epic” of the “physical world” which is able to “call forth civilization from a void” (*Seven Veils* 150). Trade creates the sedentary life which brings in its wake physical and moral corruption, decay and, finally, death. Ewar, the oasis chief, is



literally infected with the disease of smallpox which is a clue to his spiritual illness. The disease is a product of the oasis. Over the years, nomads have, “avoid[ed] the manacles of sedentary life within the walls of oases [...] [for] fear of infection associated with house walls, foul air and virulent diseases” (*Seven Veils* 174). Isan brings his antagonist back to life from a slow, painful and repulsive death using a desert remedy which, like fire, burns the infection out of him. Furthermore, the walls which conventionally are considered to protect the oasis or city, in Al-Koni’s novel are exposed as the symbolic site of the fatalistic decay and destruction of the city. In their ignorance, the oasis dwellers think that the raised earth on the outskirts of the oasis is their “wall”. When Isan takes as his home a tomb, the “city wall” is revealed to be the centuries’ long accretion of charnel house upon charnel house and lost city upon lost city. *The Seven Veils of Seth* creates a sharp distinction between the virtues of the metaphorical desert and the vices of the metaphorical oasis.

In Al-Koni’s worldview, contrary to recent conceptualisations which tend to polarise animism and the Abrahamic faiths, the monotheisms productively realign but essentially perpetuate the fundamental relationship with self, other and world created by animism. The complex interrelationship between good and evil, represented by Seth, out of whom the spiritual oasis is created, is foreshadowed in the epigraphs taken from the writings of the North African theologian, St Augustine, and the Italian Dominican priest, Thomas Aquinas. The quotations from Augustine’s *Enchiridion* and Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*, attest the subtle but also clear interplay of the ideas of good and evil in the early Christian tradition. The epigraph from Augustine’s *City of God* identifies the city of Seth, thus the metaphorical desert, as the “city” which brings the lineaments of the heavenly city down to earth and the city of Cain, the oasis of luxury and corruption, as the city which consumes itself in its own materialism. The novel itself overlays and intertwines Islamic symbolism and mythology so comprehensively with Tuareg symbolism and mythology that to tease them apart is an exercise in futility.

*The Seven Veils of Seth* in some ways imitates the quality of sacred scripture which allows literal, allegorical and anagogical interpretations. It is at one and the same time at its different hermeneutic levels the story of the stranger, Isan, who comes to a city and causes havoc among its inhabitants. It is also an exploration of the Ancient Egyptian and Tuareg myths of the desert god, Seth; and at the final level it is a metaphysical intimation of ultimate human destiny. At all these levels, the desert is the interpretive key.

### **Desert lore in *Anubis***

*Anubis* may be considered a companion novel to *The Seven Veils of Seth*. Anubis is the ancient Egyptian, jackal-headed funerary god (Sykes 13), who gets inherited in the

Tuareg pantheon. William Hutchins, who is the translator of this novel also, suggests in the introduction that "In Tuareg lore, Anubi is the archetype for sons of unknown fathers. Anubi's search for his father is legendary among the Tuareg, as is his marriage to Tin Hinan, the founding matriarch of the Tuareg people" (Hutchins citing J. Nicolaisen and I. Nicolaisen vii). In some ways the novel as a whole may be considered a Tuareg epic myth since it accounts for the origins of the Tuareg as a tribe in the lost oasis of Targa, from which the Tuareg also derive their name, and for the origin of many distinctive Tuareg customs. The final section of the novel consists of a series of aphorisms attributed to Anubis, which in some ways represents the philosophical outlook upon which the lost Tuareg Law may be based. In the latter half of the novel, the oasis of Targa is shown to develop around the temple Anubis constructs for himself around the water source which attracts commerce in the form of passing caravans. In this respect, Anubis is an epic hero, much like Odysseus or Aeneas, whose actions and endeavours lead to the foundation of the Tuareg as a "race". The caravans exchange goods, in particular, the "vile" (*Anubis* 100) gold dust for water. Gold, as a commodity, in this novel, as in all the others, is also the ominous portent of the destruction of the oasis owing to greed and corruption.

Anubi's search for the father is represented in the novel at many different levels. It represents the search for the biological father, the search for self-realisation and the search for God. In respect of the search at all these different levels, the desert is vital. The protagonist of the novel, given the name "Wa" by his mother, but who remains for most of the novel a nameless hero, like Anubi, whom he seems simultaneously to embody, is obsessed with the search for his father or "Ba" as his mother refers to the "ghostly apparition" of the protagonist's infancy (*Anubis* 13). The protagonist is drawn in his childhood anxieties regarding paternity to the solitude of the desert. Despite the warnings of his mother couched in a metaphysically coded message and the more explicit caution of an elderly shepherd, both of whom articulate the inherited wisdom of tribal law, Anubi sets off on a journey into the desert to find his father. This journey is one of three desert quests on which the protagonist sets off, the next two of which are undertaken in response to a traumatic discovery. Anubi is lured into the most arid desert wastes by a hare which leads him to drink gazelle urine to quell his thirst. As a consequence, he metamorphoses into a hybrid creature which crosses the species boundary—he retains his human head, but he now has the body of a gazelle. This is one of two occasions where he enters a primal mythological time which is also a pre-linguistic, pre-rational state where human and animal have not yet become distinctly different.

He is brought back to the human world by a priest who also burdens him with the guilty knowledge that his mother committed suicide in horror at his fate, indirectly making him a matricide. This version of events is challenged by a girl who reveals that the mother's life was the price the priest demanded for the restoration of the

hero. His mother's sacrifice and the priest's deceit spur Anubi on to search for the villain in the oasis of Targa. He finds the priest and slays him. To his most profound and devastating confusion, the girl then says to him that he has murdered his father. Since the priest is the real embodiment of the absent presence of the Father through the prophetic function required by his religious office, in killing the priest, Anubi has killed the Father both in a biological and divine sense. Anubi thus is both a parricide and deicide.

For a second time Anubi flees into the desert which becomes a bounteous garden where he metamorphoses, this time into a creature with the head of a Barbary ram and the body of a gazelle. His edenic existence, whose life principles reflect in many ways the Doctrines of Pythagoras, is destroyed indirectly by Seth, the trickster desert god who is also the god of storms. When an electric storm kills a ewe whose body is also roasted by the lightning, his gluttony leads him to feast on her remains. This act of betrayal of the animal world leads him to regain his human form and simultaneously lose Eden. At the end of this second life journey, close to death, he is visited by another emissary who enlightens him thus: "You should not search for anything you do not find in your heart. You are beauty. You are your father. You are prophecy. You are the treasure" (*Anubis* 79). In his semi-conscious state, the last words the emissary is heard to utter are "I'm you!" (*Anubis* 81). Reconciled, to his fate, Anubi then founds the oasis which, somewhat ambivalently, may be the legendary Targa. Anubi marries, fathers a child and establishes himself as leader of the oasis.

Later betrayed by his wife and by the nobles of Targa, he is exiled to the desert, forced to live apart from his son. From various sources he hears about the waning fortunes of Targa, of the political intrigue, corruption and wars which destroy the oasis. He also hears that his son is his heir in the sense that he too is a seeker after the father. He is summoned back by the people but prefers the solitude of the desert. Finally, he is visited by a young man to whom he reveals himself as his father. The young man, thinking him a duplicitous charlatan, stabs him, just as Anubi stabbed his father. The father's dying act is to trace on a piece of leather the wisdom which constitutes the aphorisms of Anubis.

The plot outline above indicates some of the deeper philosophical ideas associated by the novel with the motif of the search for the father. At the end of each of his desert quests, Anubi in one form or another meets his father. He meets his father in the priest, the master of prophecy, but his reunion with the father also is the catalyst for the death of the father. Similarly, when he meets the god-like emissary at the end of his second desert journey, he locates and again loses the father in the recognition that the father is within—"I'm you!" At the end of his third desert hermitage, Anubi, who in this case is the father, is found and then lost by his own son who stabs him. Clearly, the search for the father is the search for ultimate truth and the search for God, whose value lies in striving rather than achieving. Anubi's mystical unions, described above,

which transform the desert into an oasis exist in the necessary and fateful knowledge that Eden contains the serpent of its opposite, namely hell. So too, the father can exist only in his material non-existence. The existence of the father is not subject to empirical proof, but is the precondition for empiricism. As with *The Seven Veils of Seth*, this novel also overlays animism with the symbolism and mythology of the monotheisms in presenting the worldview to which the desert is central. There are epigraphs from the books of Genesis and Ecclesiastes, as well as other allusions to Christianity. Allusions to Islam are mainly related to the similarity between the divine father figure presented in the novel with Islamic conceptions of God, as embodied especially in the sufi concept of *fanâ*, the “I am you motif” or metaphorical union with or annihilation in God (McGinn 6334–41) and the significance of the heart as the seat of spiritual knowledge.

The trend in this novel also, as in *The Seven Veils of Seth*, is a form of representation which leads to myth and allegory, rather than realism and the various reactions to realism in (post)modernism and magic realism. Anubis, as has been stated earlier, may be read as an epic myth, explaining the origins of the Tuareg world and Tuareg customs. But *Anubis* may also be read as a form of scripture whose exegesis reveals literal, allegorical and anagogical interpretations. The novel is at one and the same time the account of an ordinary Tuareg man’s hopeless search for his father, the story of the mythical Anubis’s futile search for his desert god father, Seth, and, finally, the quest of all human beings for the truth of their existence in a world where they are not the only forms of life on an earth out of which they are both constituted and to which they are fated to return. The key to the novel (and to life) again is the Law which originates in the desert. Like the father who has disappeared, the fact that the body of the sacred Law of the Tuareg is lost in both oral and textual traditions, does not mean that the Law does not continue to be normatively applied and embodied in the practice of Tuareg lifeways. The fact that custom or the Law cannot be known and applied with the monologic rigor of a strict procedural rationalism, does not mean that it does not inspire and direct Tuareg self-formation.

### **Carnivory and consumption in *The Bleeding of the Stone***

In the next novel to be analysed, namely, *The Bleeding of the Stone*, the Laws are broken with devastating effect. The tensions between sedentarism and the nomadism of the desert are explored through the myth of Cain and Abel, which forms part of the imaginative history of all three of the Abrahamic faiths. Cain and Abel, the offspring of the former denizens of the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, are the monotheistic counterparts of the ancient Egyptian and Tuareg Osiris and Seth, with a significant difference. In this story, Cain, the brother who tills the soil, kills Abel, the shepherd. Villain and victim are far more clearly delineated in this myth as opposed to the

animist myth where it is the god of the desert, Seth, who murders Osiris, the god of fertility and the soil. Seth, as we have seen, is a far more ambiguous figure than his monotheistic counterpart, the nomadic pastoralist, Abel. Cain, the cultivator, is exiled by God to the wilderness to become himself an unhappy wanderer: "When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shall thou be in the earth." (Genesis 4:8–12) This quotation forms part of a larger extract which is one of the epigraphs which introduce *The Bleeding of the Stone*.

Abel and Cain are represented in the novel by the two characters Asouf and Cain Adam, who in this case are not brothers. Asouf is the shepherd who is identified with the desert which in this story is differentiated into sandy desert and mountain desert. In the novel, Asouf's father relates to him the myth of origin in which the incessant enmity and war between the sandy desert and mountain desert led the gods to descend from on high to freeze the opponents in their tracks. Somehow the spirit of the sandy desert entered the gazelle, which henceforth was identified with this terrain, and the spirit of the mountain desert entered the Barbary ram, variously referred to as the *moufflon* or *waddan*; and the disturbances to the gods continued unabated in the clashes of the two species of animals. The gods then decided to punish the enemies by creating "a devil called man" (*Bleeding* 11), who as enemy of both the gazelle and the *waddan* ensured the peace of the gods. Both these animals are highly symbolic in Al-Koni's vision and never more so than in *The Bleeding of the Stone*.

The epigraph to Chapter 6 of the novel is taken from Herodotus's *Histories* in which an account is given of a southern Libyan tribe whose territory is "rich with beasts", who use no weapons and who "have no knowledge of how to defend themselves." They are also "a people who shun others, fearing to speak with them" (*Bleeding* 27). Asouf and his father appear to be descendants of this tribe. The father avoids the social intercourse of the towns, believing people to be the source of evil and hangs onto the solitude and the serenity of soul offered by the sandy and mountain deserts. The father and later the son draw consolation from the poem of the sufi *shaykhs* extolling the virtues of wilderness retreat: "The desert is a true treasure / for him who seeks refuge / from men and the evil of men. / In it is contentment, / in it is death and all you seek." (*Bleeding* 18) In the son, Asouf, the fear of the threat of human civilisation is so pronounced that he is unable even to barter with a trade caravan when sent by his mother. Instead, he ties a little bag of barley and a little bag of wheat around the necks of two goats which he tethers in the path of the caravan. The members of the caravan clearly are amused by the fearful young man hiding behind the rocks, but leave sacks of grain in lieu of the goats nevertheless.

Both the father and the son in *The Bleeding of the Stone* have sacred relationships with the animals of the deserts. In this novel, the closeness between humans and animals is revealed. But more significantly in this context, the ways are traced whereby

animals seem to lead human beings to return to the desert ethic. In *The Bleeding of the Stone* the links are clear. The souls of the father and the son appear finally to be incarnated in the highly symbolic figure of the *waddan* which itself embodies the spirit of the desert. It is the image of the *waddan* also which is inscribed in the prehistoric rock paintings which are the focal point of Asouf's existence. Asouf's father once hunted a *waddan* with which he finally had to enter into a kind of hand-to-hand combat. Aware that he stood no chance against the fury of the *waddan*, concentrated in the butting of its horns, the father resorts to the use of his rifle. The *waddan*, possessed of a preternatural intelligence, prefers suicide to the injustice of unequal competition. The creature flees to a rocky hilltop from which it plunges to its death. As if in an act of divine retribution, Asouf's father shortly thereafter is pursued to his death off a mountaintop by the possessed *waddan*. Despite the warning contained in the circumstances of his father's death, Asouf, in a moment of recklessness, attempts to lasso a *waddan*. He is dragged by the animal until he plummets off the side of a mountain, fortunately still tied to the rope he had used. After a trial by hanging, as it were, which could also be interpreted as a mystical journey of self-realisation which follows the stations of spiritual development as charted in sufi practice, Asouf finally is saved by being hoisted to safety by the same *waddan* he had tried to kill. In the *waddan*, Asouf sees the spirit of his biological father, and the Father in the sense of God. After this incident, Asouf is nauseated and repulsed by meat. He becomes a vegetarian, which, in the context of his desert existence, presents a number of problems, as will be identified later.

The first epigraph to the novel is a quotation from the Qur'an: "There are no animals on land or birds flying on their wings, but are communities like your own." (6: 38) The fundamental similarity between humans and animals is that they are all God's creations and that they are all social beings who, as the sacred scripture indicates elsewhere, all worship God. This creates a divine order in which humans and animals have their place. The only thing which distinguishes human beings in this conception is a limited free will which gives humans certain rights over but also certain obligations in respect of animals within the framework of a revealed law. The divine order is an order which human beings betray at their peril.

Asouf's intimate knowledge of the land and of the prehistoric rock art makes him a highly suitable guardian of the desert and its treasures. A representative of the Archeological Department of the Italian colonial government of the 1930s appoints Asouf as a tour guide:

"From now on," the department official told him, "you're the guardian of the Wadi Matkhandoush. You'll be our eyes here. A lot of people will come from all races and religions, to look at these ancient things. You must watch them. Don't let them steal the stones. See they don't spoil the rocks. These rocks are a great treasure and these paintings are our country's pride. Keep your eyes open. People are greedy,

ready to grab anything. If they can, they'll steal our rocks to sell them in their own country, for thousands or millions even. Keep your eyes peeled! You're the guardian."  
(*Bleeding* 8)

The novel presciently foreshadows the dynamic which would be expanded and institutionalised generally in the Saharan region by postcolonial national governments. Keenan, in the *Lesser Gods of the Sahara*, tracks the development of the tourism industry in the Tuareg territories from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The pressures and gradual collapse of nomadic pastoralism through the mapping of national boundaries, enforced schooling of nomadic children and other policies of postcolonial governments has led to the breakdown of the Tuareg way of life. Paradoxically, the very forces which have destroyed nomadic pastoralism, presently extend its only lifeline. Many Tuareg have entered the cash economy through being appointed guardians of national parks, and act as tour guides for 4x4 desert treks. Keenan captures the Tuareg awareness of their dagger tip political powerlessness and power in the saying among the people that "without tourism there is no nomadism; and without nomadism there is no tourism" (Keenan 230). Keenan also outlines what has been termed *tourisme sauvage* where European, mainly German tourists, enter the desert regions entirely independently with no benefit whatsoever to the desert dwellers. Mass destruction of prehistoric sites and looting has been associated with this form of tourism (Keenan 242).

Asouf in the novel resists entrapment in the money economy since he rejects the 10 pound salary offered him by the official. He does, however, accept the tinned food which is given to him. An irony which the novel does not explore is the fact that Asouf's vegetarianism in the context of a desert habitat means that increasingly Asouf has to rely on the products of "oasis" cultivation and commerce, in the form of tinned foods, and the products of cultivation in the sacks of barley and wheat traded by the caravans from Kano in present day northern Nigeria.

Asouf's "brother" and alter ego, Cain Adam, arrives ominously at twilight, a time at which the menace of the jinn is at its most threatening. But, while the veil, amulets of the soothsayers of Kano, the verses of the Qur'an and the incantations of sages may offer some protection from the jinn, they appear to be no defence to the danger Cain Adam represents. Cain was thought to be cursed since both his parents die at around the time of his birth, as do his uncle and aunt, who act as his guardians, later in life. Cain is adopted by a caravan leader who has no inkling of the disaster he will bring upon himself. He loses his caravan to robbers and suspects the malediction brought by the child when he finds the boy "eating raw meat from a plate, the blood dripping from his teeth" (*Bleeding* 82). A Hausa soothsayer reveals to him that: "The one weaned on gazelle blood will never know the straight path until, as a man, he has his fill of the flesh of Adam." (*Bleeding* 82) Cain's carnivory (and what it represents) results in the

destruction of all of the gazelle herds of the sandy deserts. The Barbary ram, extinct in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, is also faced with destruction.

Cain lights upon Asouf to track for him the last of the *waddan* since, having once tasted its flesh, he becomes addicted to its meat. Cain's hunting of these animals which embody the spirits of the two deserts is quantitatively and qualitatively different from earlier forms of hunting. The effect of the symbols of modernity in the novel, namely the automobile, but also the rapid firing gun and the helicopter, are what allow the destruction of desert life embodied in these two desert creatures. Van Leeuwen, cited above, expresses eloquently and succinctly the threat posed by these forces:

It is the car which enables Kâyn to overthrow the age-old pact between man and nature, a pact inscribed in the space of the desert and in the souls of the animals and nomads, and to eradicate the bonds which have preserved the balance of survival. All previous breaches of these pacts have been punished by death, but Kâyn is able to execute his fateful schemes without being harmed. The car is a monstrosity, which violates the integrity and serenity of the desert, which symbolizes man's treachery to nature and the neglect of the natural laws for a dignified struggle to survive. (Van Leeuwen 64)

Cain thus symbolises the limitless consumption associated with modern forms of life in which land and animals are conceptualised as infinite resources whose exploitation finally is curtailed only rationally under threat of depletion, but cannot be bounded or controlled by a mythical and traditional order. Cain represents the unlimited consumption of the "affluent society" so memorably described by John Kenneth Galbraith, which in its arrogant sense of mastery of the world and its creatures, has bumped up against the limits of the world as resource. When Asouf refuses to betray the *waddan*, Cain tortures and kills Asouf, in a manner which recollects the crucifixion. Although Cain's cannibalism is not portrayed, it is implied at the end of the novel.

The drama of the two "brothers" is set against the backdrop of the Italian invasion of coastal Libya in the 1930s. The period of the Italian invasion also ushers in unprecedented flooding and drought. A flash flood takes the desert dwellers by surprise and also takes the life of Asouf's mother, whose body is quite literally torn apart and washed up on the desert plains. The nature of the mother's death, in particular, symbolises the tearing apart of the Tuareg ways of life given that the Tuareg trace descent matrilineally. Her memorial stones are like signposts, "condemning the unknown transgressor" (*Bleeding* 68). Without his mother, Asouf lives the life of a hermit for some time at ease since water turns the desert into an oasis for a short while. Thereafter a drought sets in, which is unlike other droughts in living memory. "Drought" in desert parlance refers to seasonal water shortages in response to which the Bedouin move to other water sources. The drought after the flood which kills



Asouf's mother lasts 3 years and results in the death of all his goats. With nothing to barter with the passing caravans, Asouf is forced to abandon the desert for the oasis where he is seized and incarcerated by the Italian army, along with other Bedouin in a similar position, to be trained for the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. In an ambiguously narrated episode which leaves the details of events cloudy, Asouf appears to transform into a *waddan* to escape Italian captivity. Again, Al-Koni's novel foreshadows the way in which changing weather patterns in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century have led to the collapse of modes of existence which have survived millennia. The 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen the increased sedentarisation of the Algerian Tuareg in response to, among other causes, increased periods of drought. The apocalyptic vision which has shaped the discourse of environmentalists is echoed by the desert dwellers in the novel. Around their cups of green tea they surmise that "Surely the end of time has come" and the narrator reinforces the accuracy of this idea with the observation that, "[n]o one sees into things as desert people do" since desert dwellers more than any other people need to read the signs in their world in order to survive (*Bleeding* 91).

In this novel also animism, Islam and Christianity again are layered and interwoven. Asouf in one of his five daily prayers inadvertently orients himself in the direction of the great stone with its paintings of the priest and the *waddan* rather than in the direction of the Kaaba, as Muslims are required to do. The epigraphs are drawn from both Islamic and Christian scriptural sources. Asouf notices in his role as guardian of the rock art that Christians also "prostrate" themselves like Muslims in holy awe at the paintings as the desert dwellers do. The break in the order of things, signalled by transformations in the world view of human beings and cataclysmic changes to climate patterns which have endured for countless generations, seems to come with Cain Adam and what he represents. The novel acknowledges prehistoric environmental shifts in the course of which the Sahara may once have been more fertile. But while these climate changes were caused by supra-human alterations in cosmic patterns, the climate shifts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are suggested to be the consequence of human intervention.

### **Sacred environmentalism**

Al-Koni's "environmentalism" thus is an appreciation of animals and the natural world which expresses itself through the desert as symbol, drawing on all the sacred traditions which have shaped the interlinked North African, Mediterranean and Saharan regions. Al-Koni's fiction confirms in narrative form the insights of scholars of these traditions. Seyyid Hossein Nasr in *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (1997), highlights the fundamentally similar approaches of ancient Greek cosmologies, early and non-Occidental Christianity and Islam to the inherent sacredness of nature and the inter-connectedness of human beings, the non-human

world and the divine. Exploring Christianity in more detail, Susan P. Bratton shows through an analysis of particular Biblical narratives, among them the stories of the Garden of Eden, the Egyptian exodus and Jonah and the whale, the theocentric linking and significance of wilderness and animals to the development of a Christian ethic. Ernst Conradie, by contrast, surveys typologies of approaches to nature-human relationships in contemporary Western Christianity. Conradie identifies an environmental ethic in core Christian ideas like “the classic Christian virtue of voluntary poverty that finds joy in the simple life” (33), stewardship (81) and sacramentalism which highlights “communion within the earth community” (95). The retrieval of these ideas he proposes will absolve the “burden of guilt” created by the ways in which the “dominion of nature” interpretation of scripture has reinforced Enlightenment utilitarianism. The connection between Latin Christendom and Enlightenment disenchantment of nature is a point made by Nasr above also. Although no scholarship exists which considers the specific place of nature in Tuareg animism, one may extrapolate from the insights of Al-Koni’s novels and studies of animism more generally. Tuareg animism is closer to ancient North Egyptian animism than Sub-Saharan African animisms where spirit quite literally resides in the non-human form of existence—the river or rock or mountain. In Tuareg animism, like ancient Egyptian animism, deities are strongly linked with elements of nature, for example, Seth’s link with the desert in the analysis of Al-Koni’s novels above, but are not embodied in the elements of nature.

The overview of Al-Koni’s novels translated into English reveal some of the significances of the desert in Al-Koni’s worldview and the deeper philosophical substratum suggested by the ways desert symbolism operates. As in the Christian, Muslim and animist cultural and religious traditions upon which Al-Koni draws, the desert is shown to be a highly ambivalent locale which paradoxically collapses the oppositions which constitute human beings as parasites in a disenchanted world. The desert is destructive in its dangers, its harshness and the rigours it imposes upon the body, but it is also creative in the productive liberation of the soul it seems to engender. The desert in this regard may be contrasted with the oasis, which cossets the body but corrupts the soul. In Al-Koni’s terms, the desert is the “motherland” of “mystery”, but the desert sun is also the fatherland of the most lucid vision of truth. The nomad is the being who incessantly searches for the lost father or the truth of existence in the desert. The novels reveal that to find truth in oneself, or more correctly, the self, is to kill the father. Simultaneously, it is only in literal death that the seeker may find the father, the one exception being in the union represented by the epiphany or *fanâ’* of the mystics. This is the life-giving truth which the desert offers. The desert thus is the space of both life and death. The desert is both wilderness to which a number of characters are exiled, but it is a wilderness which reveals itself as a homeland when the character accurately reads its signs and finds his place in the desert order. At

this point, the human melds with the non-human and the desert becomes the oasis or paradise. But, in every case, the paradise is lost and may be glimpsed only through the code represented by the Law of the desert. Paradoxically, the solitude of the desert, anti-society, opens up alternative relations across species and across zones of reality. The desert thus represents a curious pastoral which promises not a life of ease and plenty, a lifestyle of abundance, a society of affluence, but the rather more challenging pastoral of a life lived by the precepts of the moral Law of the desert which is both lost, but also intimately known in the social codes within which one is formed.

Violating the Law of the desert which prescribes the terms of ethical relationships thus opened up between the human and non-human world produces not desert, but desertification. In terms of the processes which subject the world to desertification, the human being is first lord and then parasite. As lord, the human being constructs a law of his/her own; as parasite, the human being is subject to no law. The anti-humanist trend in much recent ecocritical writing is subsumed in Al-Koni's vision of a sacred order in which human beings have a place if they live by desert Law.

Al-Koni's vision strains at the form of the novel, a tension which becomes more evident in English translation, given the networks of circulation into which the texts enter. A number of the English titles are given the subtitle, "a novel", as if to persuade the reader against her/his literary instinct. The generic affiliation of all of the translations except *The Bleeding of the Stone* is indicated in the form of a subtitle: *Gold Dust: An Arabia Books Novel from Libya*, *The Seven Veils of Seth: A Modern Arabic Novel from Libya*, *The Puppet: A Novel*, *Anubis: A Desert Novel*. In the original Arabic titles, no such anxiety seems to be displayed. The novel, as the form born with modernity and simultaneous with modernity's liberation from traditional and transcendental orders locates its "oasis", if you will, in the apparent openness of irony and metatextuality. Glimpses of the "oasis" in Al-Koni's narratives derive not so much from irony and the formal freedom of metatextuality as they do from the fluid layering of allegorical modes which allow epiphanic moments to pierce through the narrative levels. The trend towards allegory in Al-Koni's work where surface narratives illuminate deeper understandings is an effect specifically of the desert ethic which locates the vanishing oasis in the idea of a sacred order. As such, Al-Koni's intervention is a salutary African voice in the global environmental conversation about a threat which may not have been globally caused, but is global in its consequences.

#### Note

1. The 2015 Man Booker International Prize finally went to the Hungarian writer, László Krasznahorkai.

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