

**Bridges Across the Sahara:
Social, Economic and Cultural Impact
of the Trans-Saharan Trade
during the 19th and 20th Centuries**

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CONCLUSION

IBRAHIM AL-KONI'S ATLAS OF THE SAHARA

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Atlas: [a. L. Atlas, a. Gr. Ἄτλας]; name of one of the older family of gods, who was supposed to hold up the pillars of the universe, and also of the mountain in Libya that was regarded as supporting the heavens...; A collection of maps in a volume... said to be derived from a representation of Atlas supporting the heavens placed as a frontispiece to early works of this kind...

—Oxford English Dictionary.

The novel, wrote Georg Lukács, "is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality."¹ The novel form, in other words, may have emerged from a modern industrial world characterized by social and cultural disintegration, but despite this, it aspires not merely to present parts and pieces, but rather to recuperate the whole of social relations and conditions at the level of representation. More explicitly than other literary forms, the novel addresses a problem that vexes contemporary social thought, namely, how to understand the splintering of a social world when the agents of that disintegration—industrial capitalism, imperialism, and emergence of mass markets—might also be described as the instruments of integration. Importantly, novels do not just address these topics in words, for they are, as material objects, artifacts of these very processes. They are produced on mechanized printing presses and depend on commercial markets of readers with surplus income and leisure. Mass production, mass literacy, and mass consumer culture—all features of industrial society and print capitalism—are the historical prerequisites of this art form.

I begin my discussion of the Libyan writer Ibrahim al-Koni with these points, because they highlight the unlikelihood of his novelistic project. While his novels do present a description of the Sahara as a totality, it is one far removed from this description of industrial modernity. Al-Koni, a

Twareg of the Kel Ajjer of southern Libya, has written dozens of works including novels, collections of short stories and aphorisms, critical studies and cultural histories (see select bibliography).

While only a few of the titles explicitly function in serial, cross-referential fashion, together they form a coherent oeuvre with recurring themes, issues and character types. Much of al-Koni's work pursues a broad set of historical arguments that place the Sahara at the center of civilizational development. For instance, throughout al-Koni's work is an argument that the old world civilizations—from Pharaonic Egypt to Sumer to the Phoenicians—sprang from the Garamantian civilization and its pre-historic predecessors that produced the rock paintings of Tassili and Acacus.² Al-Koni's broader assertions about civilization include other claims as well—for instance, that the cosmologies of the ancient first peoples of the Sahara and the Greeks, the Phoenicians, the Accadians, the Sumerians, the Babylonians, and the ancient Egyptians form a single tradition that survives in the culture of the modern Twareg.³ The emergence of the three monotheisms may have forced these older belief systems to adapt and transform, his fictions assert, but the old mythologies and practices live on in the syncretic blends—animism and Sufism, magic and orthodox Islam—unique to Twareg culture.⁴ The modern Twareg are, in this account, the direct descendents of the most distant Saharan past—among the very first of history's "first peoples."

Al-Koni's novels take place in a world of deep contrasts—desolate rock plateaus, lush oases, and far-flung pastures abounding in mythical flora and fauna, all surrounded by endless wastes traversed solely by camel herders, dervishes, and caravans from distant lands. The focus of his novels is not the Saharan desert itself, but rather the lives of desert dwellers as they struggle against natural, social and spiritual forces beyond their control. In an echo of Ibn Khaldun's great treatise, *The Muqaddima*, time in Alkoni's novels moves in cycles rather than lines. His Sahara is thus a place not so much timeless as it is seasonal—with wet seasons of abundance and flourish, followed by years of drought and hardship. Human time too moves this way in his novels: characters grow and wither, win and lose; caravans come and go, bringing with them holy men and refugees, riches and misery. And always, in the background, there are the winds of empire that buffet the desert world, with violent French and Italian incursions from the north and the fallout and debris of African kingdoms rising and falling somewhere to the south.

Contrary to what one might expect, this world of Saharan nomads is not a familiar one to Arab readers. While the Arabic novel has always been dominated by stories of the city, peasant communities of the settled

agricultural lands of the Arab world have had their place as well. The nomadic segment of Arab society was once for Ibn Khaldun so economically and politically significant that it was the motor of history. Yet, aside from the work of novelists such as Abdurrahman Munif and Miral al-Tahawi, nomadic life has been largely absent from the novelistic imagination in the Arab world. As my opening comments suggest, this fact should not be surprising. It is not just that, as we are often told, the proper literary form of nomads has always been poetry rather than prose, and that their "books" are printed on agile tongues instead of heavy pages. In addition to this aspect, we need to recognize another: the historical rise of the novel as an art form was directly linked with the marginalization of nomadic pastoralism as a key component of Arab civilization. The very industrial era that enabled the one made the other obsolete. With industrialization, with labor performed by ever-increasing masses of men interacting with ever more powerful machines, human reliance on laboring beasts dwindled. As in many other parts of the world, nomadic pastoralists—like the Twareg of the Sahara or the Bedouin of Arabia—had long been the ones who supplied sedentary societies with the animal-power that made things run. The plowing of fields, the milling of grain, the shipping of goods across vast continents—these were all ventures undertaken by men and animals laboring together. With the rise of the factory—and with it, the rise of the tractor, the train, and the car—men abandoned the society of animals for engines of their own making. With this, the age-old need for pastoralists came to an end. Ever since, we have only continued to cut our ties with the world of herdsmen. The spread of the printing press—and the novel—was not unrelated to these processes.

It is thus no accident that there are so few tomes of world literature published by nomads. When we search the literary archives of the Sahara, we find a paucity of novels of which few, if any, have been written by people from the region itself. Here, then, is where the rich singularity of al-Koni's literary corpus stands out: his books are not simply compelling aesthetic texts—with crafted prose, epic plotting, complex character psychology and ambitious philosophical reach—but they are also unique documents that attempt to comprehend the Saharan world as a totality.

In this essay, I will consider this last aspect of al-Koni, how his novels form a vast atlas that puts the Twareg regions of the Sahara at the center of the African continent, and at the origin and center of world history. Importantly, al-Koni's Sahara is a cosmography with geographical features that are not merely topographical, and cardinal points that are more than just directional. In this sense, the map of his fictional Sahara is imbued with deep cultural and historical significances, as well as clear

moral and spiritual values. At the heart of al-Koni's geographical imagination are a number of distinctions—between the North and South, place and space, sedentarism and nomadism, body and spirit. These are distinctions that, I will argue, have their roots in Khaldunian and Sufi worldviews. Nonetheless, as I will also argue, al-Koni synthesizes these differences—and in so doing, presents an privileged image of the Sahara as the geography where the historical and spiritual conflicts of Africa find mediation, if not some resolution.

Novels as Maps

Novels are obsessed with mapping.⁵ They explore the interaction of character and event not just within historical time, but also across geographies that are both natural and social. They describe *places*, specific topographical *points* and inhabitations where human characters live their lives. They also describe *spaces*, that is, geographies of relationship, of *lines* that tie characters and environments to one another. In this sense, the conventions of place and space in the novel orient us as readers, they locate us in a world, and give us the same sense of “you are here” that we find in maps.⁶ But the spaces and places described in novels are not mere backdrop—they are a central element giving meaning to character and event. To imagine a novel without its geographic aspect is to imagine a novel in which character and event have no context, no concrete sphere of action. In short, novels offer more than just narrative—they also present atlases of their own worlds.

True, we are speaking of fictional maps created by authorial imagination. But then, there are some phenomena whose maps are, arguably, best rendered by way of fiction. In this regard, we might consider European imperialism, a kind of political and cultural fact whose local effects are apparent but whose aggregate reality is so vast that it is unknowable save in the form of abstractions. Echoing the insights of Lukács, Edward Said contended that it has been literature which has often offered the sharpest images of this phenomenon as a totality.⁷

For instance, it was the novels of Joseph Conrad which sketched in great detail the global networks of commercial, military and maritime lines holding together the British Empire while also connecting them to the individual, situated lives of colonizers and colonized.⁸ To consider Conrad's novels as maps is to recognize the way they orient readers with regard to British imperialism as an arrangement of concrete contexts and abstract connections, particular settings and global networks. In short, they situate readers *vis-à-vis* the various grids, plots and scales of space,

relation, interest and drama that, for Conrad, composed the composite fact of British Empire. And there is little doubt that many of Conrad's readers understood that his novels could be used to navigate—and counter-navigate—the imperial and empirical phenomena they conjured. A later generation of African authors—from Chinua Achebe to Ngugi wa Thiong'o to Tayyib Salih—certainly recognized that Conrad was the master cultural mapmaker of the imperial period, and went on to contest and rewrite the coordinates of Conrad's fictions to other ends, turning some of them upside down in the process.⁹ Another example novelistic mapping can be found in the work of William Faulkner, who also thought about the aftermath of colonialism in geographical terms. In contrast to Conrad, for whom mapping empire was an exercise in charting *global* networks of trade and exchange, Faulkner was more interested in describing colonial and postcolonial relations of domination within a circumscribed *local* site. His fiction sketches a landscape of southern US society where white settlers vanquished native Americans and enslaved Africans only to be in turn vanquished by the industrial North. Faulkner's cartographic impulse became in fact quite literal, and eventually his novels contained a map of his fictional world, Yoknapatawpha County, drawn by the author's own hand. Again, his status as a cartographic novelist would be confirmed years later when a generation of Latin American and Arab authors—including Gabriel García Márquez, Juan Rulfo, Juan Carlos Onetti, and Carlos Fuentes, Kateb Yacine, Naguib Mahfouz, Ghassan Kanafani and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra—read Faulkner's fictional map and transposed its image onto other locales of colonial devastation from Mexico to Colombia, from Algeria to Palestine.¹⁰

Al-Koni's Geography

The novels of Ibrahim al-Koni are no exception to this rule. Admittedly, the focus of al-Koni's fiction is not the mapping of modern empire but rather something more concrete and more abstract: the Sahara as the heart of Africa. While each of al-Koni's novels has a different focus, they invariably sketch a richly detailed, fully significant local Twareg landscape, located somewhere between Ghadamès and Agadez, Sebha and Tamenrasset. Indeed, it is the Acacus range, al-Koni's birthplace, which forms the geographical center of his fictional universe.

The first thing one notices is that al-Koni's fictional world exists between two sharply opposing world forces. To the South lies a world of myth, magic and superstition. It is the 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, which sometimes advances into the jungles, and sometimes is repelled by deeper animist traditions. 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.

The second thing one notices is that al-Koni's atlas overturns traditional "core-periphery" relations. For ancient geographers like Herodotus and Strabo, while the northern verges of the Sahara formed the boundary of the civilized world, while somewhere in the desert interior lie the edge of the known world. In modern times, the Sahara has been, and continues to be, conceived of as the clear divide between two separate worlds, Black Africa and the Arabo-Berber Maghreb. The peripheral status of the Sahara is even more unambiguous in the imaginary of the post-independent states of North Africa: it serves as the southern economic and political periphery—underdeveloped and beholden to the interests of the north. Critically, in al-Koni's map, this aspect of the geography of the Sahara is reversed—what appears as empty frontierland in traditional geographies of Africa becomes, in al-Koni's novels, a lively region of pastoralism, traffic and commerce. His Sahara that is not an isolated backwater, but rather a crucial articulating link, distinct but adjoining the Arabo-Berber Maghreb with the African Sahel. In this, al-Koni's fictions share much with the image of the Sahara presented in the classical Arab geographies, especially the "Kingdoms and Roads" (*mamalik wa-masalik*) accounts of Abu 'Ubayd al-Bakri (d. 1094) and Ibn Fadlallah al-'Umarī (d. 1349).

Yet, unlike those accounts, it is not the Saharan cities—such as Ghat, Tamanrasset, Ghadamès, or Sabha—that lie at the center of al-Koni's fiction. Rather, it is the open spaces of non-permanent settlement—towering plateaus, rocky flatlands, and sandy plains—where the real action takes place. The hinterlands have become the real homeland here, and the remote is now the metropole. When permanent habitations and cities do appear, they are, with a few notable exceptions, seen from outside, and usually at great distance. As we move outwards from this center, the picture gets even hazier. Places that are further away—the Mediterranean coast, the Sahel or the Niger river system—appear only as little more than fabled names, far-flung origins and outlandish destinations. Tripolitania is the place from which foreign invaders pour into the northern deserts. Fez provides the interior with its learned scholars. Distant Saharan regions—such as Touate, the Aïr Mountains or the Adrar—are associated with magic and treachery. Kano and Timbuktu

figure as the major cities of the world, but also as places from where sorcerers and animist heresies originate. When it comes to such places, we might say that al-Koni's novels simply "don't go there." The clarity of this focus is sharpened by the fact that these geographies—both the Tuareg center and the expanding edges, which remain little more than hazy rumor—are given social and moral significance.

The Concrete and the Abstract, the Fixed and the Mutable

Within al-Koni's corpus is a distinction that we might describe as the difference between place, understood as concrete and locational, and space, understood as abstract and relational. Place, in these works, is presented by way of proper names. In addition to the many names of cities, al-Koni's fiction refers often to specific mountains, valleys or plains: Mutakhandush, Idinan, Hamada Hamra, Ajar, Waw. Whether these places are actual, fictional, or mythical—al-Koni's map includes all three kinds of names and some, such as Waw, connote in all three dimensions at once—the critical issue is that they are concrete and known. In contrast, al-Koni's language employs a wide range of more abstract words that describe his geography in terms of space. Not merely an abstraction, space in al-Koni often describes a lack or void, signaled by words such as *'ara'* (open country), *birriyya* (desert steppe), *fada'* (wide expanse), *fala* (waterless desert), *sahal* (boundless flatland), *tih* and *mutaha* (desolate and trackless desert) and, of course, *sahra* (flat and barren land), which lent the world its name for the entire region.

The difference between these two descriptions of geography is that of points, on the one hand, and lines of movement on the other. But the full significance of this distinction only becomes apparent in light of another, namely that of the tensions between sedentary and nomadic ways of life as described by Ibn Khaldun. For the world described by al-Koni belongs, on the one hand, to caravans moving between distant points on their travels between the great sedentary civilizations, and on the other, to nomads who move cyclically within richly described spaces, inhabiting them—turning them into places—only ever in temporary encampments. The difference, it should be admitted, is not that sedentarism is uniquely associated with places, whereas nomadism is tied mainly to spaces. Rather, it is that the distinction between place and space helps to articulate the dynamics particular to each form of existence. For sedentarism, place is full while space is empty; for nomadism, it is the converse. For sedentarism, then, space is that which must be traversed so as to move from place to place;

for nomadism, the mutable and cyclical inhabitation of space invariably creates strong senses of place, though these are only fleeting.

These distinctions are underscored by al-Koni's binding of this difference between sedentarism and nomadism with Sufi distinctions between the body and the spirit. Throughout al-Koni's work, permanent habitation is always associated with the body, whereas nomadism is associated with the spirit. Thus, in his atlas, whereas cities, towns, and hamlets are sites of luxury, appetite and bondage, remote mountains and valleys are places of asceticism, tranquility and freedom. Sedentarism is associated with language, understood to be meaningless chatter, while nomadism is characterized by a silence, understood to be significant and eloquent. Whereas the former is conceptualized as feminine, the latter appears as masculine. In other moments, however, the former is closely identified with *eros* and mortality, while the latter is linked to *thanatos* and the soul's transcendence of the body by way of its confrontation with death.

It would be a mistake to think that in presenting his world in such terms that al-Koni prizes one term over the other. On the contrary, like Ibn Khaldun, al-Koni understands that culture and history are not the products of one aspect or the other, but rather it is the conflict between the two ways of life and world views that drives civilization. It is on this point that we can begin to make sense of how his novels stage many such antagonisms whose resolutions are always temporary and fragile—for real synthesis would mean stagnation.

Al-Koni's Sahara is, then, a region poised between multiple geographical, political and moral forces. This aspect is emphasized by the central role played the many go-betweens and mediators who populate his novels. Indeed, each caravan bringing its cargo of gold or slaves is led by an emissary from the South. In the same fashion, each trader from the Fezzan or Tripolitania is a messenger of Islamic orthodoxy or Arab political dominance. Besides these figures, there are the many prophets, sorcerers, itinerant travelers, and refugees who move into and through the Twareg center of his Sahara—each serving as agent and representative of the place and world-system from which he comes. In this sense, we can understand one especially freighted word in al-Koni's register, *al-barzakh*. While commonly translated as "obstacle," or "separation," this Quranic word has rich resonances—referring, according to exegetes, to the space separating this world and the Hereafter, or Heaven and Hell. For Sufis, its meaning is broader, referring to a space between light and darkness, spirit and matter, the animate and the inanimate.

This space is not Purgatory in the Christian sense, but rather the realm the spirit passes through as it transcends bodily form. In al-Koni's map, the word connotes both a liminal state of "in-betweenness" and also an impermeable border between separate realms of existence. For the Saharan world al-Koni has created lies precisely *in between*—between the Arabo-Berber North and the African South, between Islam and animism, between nomadism and sedentarism, between material and spiritual life.

Notes

¹ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 56.

² This is strongly suggested in many works, including his earlier, shorter novels such as *Nazif al-hajar* and *al-Tibr*. For a concise survey of sources on the classical Saharan past, and the problem of discontinuities across historical eras, see: Richard L. Smith, "What Happened to the Ancient Libyans? Chasing Sources Across the Sahara from Herodotus to Ibn Khaldun," *Journal of World History* 14:4 (December 2003), 459-500.

³ This is the subject of al-Koni's encyclopedic study, *Bayan fi-lughat al-lahut*.

⁴ This is a central theme of al-Koni's most ambitious novel, *al-Majus*.

⁵ The critical corpus on the representation of spatial relations in literature is well-established and growing. Classics include: Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* (New York: Verso Press, 1999); Semah Selim, *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880-1985* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

⁶ Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 347-357; and Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960).

⁷ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993).

⁸ Edward Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966).

⁹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 196-204.

¹⁰ See: Hosam Aboul-Ela, *Other South: Faulkner, Coloniality and the Mariategui Tradition* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007); Sabri Hafiz, "Tanazir al-tajarub al-hadariyya wa-tafa'ul al-ru'a al-iba'iyya: dirasa fi-ta'thir *al-Sakhab wa-l-'unf 'ala al-riwaya al-'arabiyya*," *Fusul* 3:4, (July-September 1983); Tawfiq Yousef, "The Reception of William Faulkner in the Arab World," *American Studies International* (October 1995).