



Animal Agency and Desert Ethics in Ibrahim al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone*

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23100905>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 17-07-2026

Accepted: 16-08-2026

Published: 25-09-2026

Keywords:

animal agency, desert ethics, Ibrahim al-Koni, Indigenous ecological knowledge, ecocriticism, The Bleeding of the Stone

ABSTRACT

Ibrahim al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone* portrays the Libyan Sahara as a world shaped by relationships among humans, animals, water, plants, mountains, and ancestral memory. This article examines the ecological ethic that emerges from the novel's representation of Tuareg knowledge and human-animal relations. Particular attention is given to Asouf's encounters with the waddan and the gazelles, through which the novel presents ecological knowledge as a form of lived experience and inherited practice. Asouf observes animal behaviour, identifies sources of water, recognises the regeneration of plants, and responds to the changing conditions of the desert through knowledge acquired over generations. His relationship with the waddan unsettles the conventional distinction between human and animal, whereas Cain's technologically assisted hunting reduces animals to objects of pursuit and consumption. The article also considers the blood covenant, sacred geography, and desert temporality to examine the novel's emphasis on reciprocity, restraint, and careful engagement with the natural environment. Drawing on studies of Indigenous ecological knowledge and more-than-human

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ecocriticism, the article argues that al-Koni challenges human-centred conceptions of nature and presents the human as part of a wider network of life in the desert.

Introduction

The desert is often represented through the language of absence. Arid landscapes are commonly associated with scarce life, limited resources, and the need for human intervention for survival and development. Ibrahim al-Koni's *The Bleeding of the Stone* challenges such an anthropocentric view of the Sahara. The novel depicts a desert in which human life is closely connected with animals, plants, water, mountains, weather, and ancestral memory. Its ecological significance lies not only in its depiction of the desert environment but also in its questioning of the ways in which people understand and use that environment.

Asouf occupies a central position in this representation of desert life. He acquires his knowledge through observing animal movements, locating water, recognising vegetation, reading the terrain, and responding to changes in weather and other environmental conditions. He does not see the desert simply as a source of resources for human survival. Instead, he learns to recognise its signs and to act according to its conditions. His knowledge comes from experience as well as from the teachings of his father. His understanding of the desert is thus grounded in everyday experience and continued interaction with the environment.

This is particularly evident in Asouf's relationship with the waddan, the sacred mountain sheep. The animal is not merely a target for hunters but is connected with the moral and spiritual order of desert life. Asouf inherits from his father a prohibition against hunting the waddan after the animal saves his father from death. When Asouf later encounters the animal, he asks, "But which of them was the victim, which the executioner? Which of them was human, which animal?" (al-Koni, 2002, p. 77). His question unsettles the distinction between the human as subject and the animal as object. It also suggests that the relationship between human and animal cannot be understood solely in terms of domination and pursuit.

The contrast between Asouf and Cain develops this distinction further. Although both men inhabit the desert, they respond to their surroundings in markedly different ways. Asouf depends on observation, memory, restraint, and experience. Cain, by contrast, increasingly relies on speed and technology in his pursuit of animals. The Land Rover enables Cain "to pursue the lovely creature in earnest" (al-Koni, 2002, p. 118), and the novel describes mechanised hunting as "a betrayal of nature" (p. 119). Their difference



represents two opposing attitudes towards the desert: one grounded in familiarity with the environment and restraint in dealing with it, and the other based on technological control and exploitation.

This article examines the representation of ecological knowledge and animal life in *The Bleeding of the Stone*. It focuses on Asouf's relationship with the waddan, his knowledge of water and plants, Cain's use of technology in hunting, animal suffering, the blood covenant, sacred geography, and desert time. The novel is not treated as direct ethnographic evidence of Tuareg life. Rather, the discussion examines al-Koni's literary representation of desert knowledge and its challenge to human-centred ideas of the natural world. The novel asks how human beings might inhabit the desert without destroying the relationships on which its forms of life depend.

Theoretical Framework

The discussion of *The Bleeding of the Stone* draws on Indigenous ecological knowledge and more-than-human approaches to examine the relationship between knowledge, environment, and human conduct. Fikret Berkes (2018) defines traditional ecological knowledge as knowledge, practice, and belief developed through relationships between living beings and their environments. This understanding corresponds with al-Koni's portrayal of Asouf. His knowledge includes animal behaviour, water sources, vegetation, terrain, and seasonal changes, but these forms of knowledge are inseparable from the ways in which he lives in the desert.

Tim Ingold's (2000) concept of dwelling is useful in considering this form of knowledge. Ingold questions the separation of human beings from the environments they inhabit and emphasises knowledge gained through movement, habitation, observation, and practical activity. Asouf's knowledge develops in this manner. He observes tracks, recognises environmental signs, remembers sources of water, and relies on knowledge inherited from previous generations. His knowledge is therefore acquired through experience and practice rather than through detached observation of the desert.

David Abram's (1996) discussion of embodied perception further illuminates the novel's treatment of the desert. The environment becomes intelligible through sight, sound, movement, touch, and physical experience. Animal movements, sounds, vegetation, water, and traces on the ground all contribute to Asouf's understanding of his surroundings. Eduardo Kohn's (2013) discussion of signs beyond human language is relevant to the novel's representation of communication between humans and animals. The waddan communicates through its gaze, movement, proximity, and silence, while animal tracks and patterns of movement convey information to those able to recognise them. These theories are used as critical



frameworks for reading the novel; they do not establish it as an ethnographic account of Tuareg ecological knowledge.

Donna Haraway's (2008) concept of "becoming with" emphasises the formation of beings through relationships with other species. In al-Koni's novel, Asouf's knowledge and identity are closely associated with his encounters with the waddan, other animals, the desert landscape, and the knowledge inherited from his father. Val Plumwood's (1993) critique of human mastery of nature provides a contrasting perspective. The logic of mastery places nature in a subordinate position and treats it as available for human use. Cain increasingly reflects this attitude as technology enables him to pursue and kill animals with greater efficiency. These theoretical perspectives allow the novel to be examined in terms of ecological knowledge, embodied experience, relations between species, and the human desire to control the natural environment.

Literary Analysis

The relationship between Asouf and the waddan offers the clearest challenge to the distinction between human and animal in the novel. The relationship begins with the father's encounter with the animal. After the waddan saves him from a chasm, he promises never to hunt it and refuses to teach his children to do so (al-Koni, 2002, p. 52). The encounter between hunter and hunted therefore becomes an obligation that continues across generations. The father's decision is not based on the usefulness of the animal. His responsibility follows from the act of rescue and from the bond established between them.

The covenant becomes part of Asouf's education. He learns not only how animals move and where water may be found but also which relationships should be respected. The waddan becomes part of family memory and inherited practice. Its significance is evident when the animal approaches Asouf and looks at him with "meek, mysterious eyes that conversed in a thousand languages" (al-Koni, 2002, pp. 101–102). The description does not suggest that the waddan communicates through human speech. Rather, the encounter gives significance to forms of communication expressed through gaze, movement, proximity, and silence.

Kohn's (2013) discussion of nonhuman signs is relevant to this representation. Asouf's knowledge depends partly on his ability to interpret signs conveyed through animal behaviour and changes in the environment. The movement of the waddan, the migration of gazelles, and the traces left by animals all provide information to an experienced observer. Haraway's (2008) concept of "becoming with" also helps explain Asouf's relationship with other species. His knowledge and identity develop through continued contact with animals and with the environment in which they live.



The novel also connects the waddan closely with the mountains. The mountains are said to enter the spirit of the animal, which becomes “possessed by the spirit of the mountains” (al-Koni, 2002, p. 29). The waddan is consequently not presented as an isolated creature existing independently of its surroundings. Its identity is associated with the mountains that provide its habitat. Through the animal, the novel brings together species, place, ancestry, and human responsibility.

Reciprocity in the novel is not a straightforward exchange between equal parties. The father does not protect the waddan in expectation of a material return. His response is an obligation arising from the animal’s act of saving his life and is subsequently passed to his children. Mauss’s (1990) discussion of the gift is relevant to this pattern of obligation, although al-Koni gives the relationship a distinct ecological and spiritual significance. The waddan has value because the human community is already bound to it through memory and obligation. Responsibility therefore arises from an existing relationship rather than from ownership or utility.

Asouf’s knowledge of the desert is practical and based on experience. He recognises animal tracks, observes species-specific behaviour, remembers water sources, and notices changes in vegetation and terrain. The distinction between the gazelle and the waddan illustrates the particularity of this knowledge. The gazelle is associated with the plain, whereas the waddan belongs to the mountain; the terrain that provides safety for one may expose the other to danger (al-Koni, 2002, p. 28). Knowledge of the desert therefore depends upon attention to particular species, places, movements, and circumstances.

Asouf does not understand animals through classification alone. He observes them in relation to the landscape they inhabit. A track in the sand records movement; an animal’s behaviour may indicate danger or a change in environmental conditions; and a particular location acquires significance through repeated experience. Ingold’s (2000) concept of dwelling is useful here because it places knowledge within the activity of inhabiting an environment. Asouf walks through the desert, observes its signs, follows tracks, remembers places, and searches for water. His knowledge develops through these activities.

The transmission of knowledge is equally important. Asouf’s father teaches him through stories, warnings, observations, and prohibitions rather than through formal instruction. Such teaching includes knowledge of limits. The prohibition against hunting the waddan forms part of the same inherited knowledge that includes information about tracks, water, and terrain. Survival, memory, and obligation are therefore closely connected in the novel.



The statement that “a man in the desert must be sparing with two things: water and bullets” (al-Koni, 2002, p. 38) expresses this understanding of limits. Water is necessary for sustaining life, while bullets make killing possible. Both must be used carefully, although their consequences are fundamentally different. Asouf’s competence does not consist in overcoming every difficulty presented by the desert. It consists in recognising its conditions and acting accordingly.

Asouf’s knowledge remains dependent on continued observation. The conditions of the desert change, and his responses must change with them. This distinguishes his way of living from an attempt to establish complete control over the environment. He survives not by mastering every aspect of the desert but by recognising what its conditions permit and require.

Water is essential to movement, habitation, and survival in the novel. Asouf’s knowledge of water sources is acquired through experience and memory. Remembering where water can be found may determine whether a person can survive a journey through the desert, and such knowledge can be passed from one generation to another. Memory consequently has a practical value in the desert: it preserves knowledge necessary for survival.

The novel also challenges the idea of the Sahara as a permanently barren landscape. Following rainfall, seeds hidden in sand and among rocks respond to moisture and the desert becomes green (al-Koni, 2002, p. 86). The dormant seeds show that the absence of visible vegetation does not necessarily indicate the absence of life. Processes of regeneration continue beneath the apparently barren surface and become visible when environmental conditions change. Understanding the desert therefore requires attention to forms of life that are not always immediately apparent.

Water and vegetation are closely connected in this process. Rain activates seeds already present in the soil and among the rocks, while vegetation provides conditions necessary for other forms of life. Human survival likewise depends on relationships among water, plants, animals, and terrain. Asouf’s knowledge is therefore based on recognising these connections rather than considering each element separately.

This understanding differs from a conservation model based solely on the management of natural resources. The waddan is not important simply because it is a limited species, nor are plants valued only for their usefulness. Their significance is connected with cultural memory, inherited obligations, and the relationships that structure desert life. Berkes’s (2018) emphasis on the connection between knowledge, practice, and belief is particularly relevant to this aspect of the novel. Ecological knowledge has value



because it guides conduct within the environment rather than simply increasing the ability to extract resources from it.

Cain's development as a hunter provides the strongest contrast to Asouf's way of knowing the desert. His hunting initially involves danger, proximity, and physical engagement with the animal. Technological intervention gradually changes this relationship. Parker gives Cain a Land Rover so that he can pursue the animal more effectively, allowing him to cover greater distances and maintain a speed unavailable to the traditional hunter (al-Koni, 2002, pp. 118–119). Rapid-firing weapons further increase the scale of the hunt: "A single round would bring down several beasts," with the gazelles falling "like clusters of dates torn apart in a storm" (p. 120).

The importance of these technologies lies not simply in their capacity to kill but in the change they bring to the relationship between hunter and hunted. Hunting that depends on tracking and close observation exposes the hunter to the movements and responses of the animal. The use of vehicles and firearms reduces this dependence. The hunter can pursue from a distance, while the animal has fewer opportunities to escape. Technology thus removes some of the uncertainty and physical risk that previously limited the act of hunting.

Plumwood's (1993) critique of mastery helps explain this change. The logic of mastery depends upon treating nature as subordinate to human purposes and defining power through control over the nonhuman world. Cain increasingly sees animals as targets and sources of meat. His growing desire for meat accompanies the expansion of his hunting, connecting consumption with the increasing efficiency of technological killing.

The novel does not present technology itself as the problem. Its criticism concerns the use of technology when it serves domination and unrestricted consumption. Technology becomes destructive when it removes the need for close observation and makes killing faster and easier. As Cain acquires greater technical power, his dependence on knowledge of animals for their own sake diminishes.

The contrast between Asouf and Cain is therefore not simply a contrast between traditional and modern hunting. It concerns the purpose for which knowledge is used. Cain may possess considerable information about animals, terrain, and hunting, but this knowledge is directed towards reaching and killing his target as efficiently as possible. Asouf's knowledge, by contrast, remains connected to the animal, its habitat, and the limits governing human action. The difference is consequently both ethical and



epistemological: one form of knowledge supports continued attention to the living environment, while the other turns knowledge into an instrument of control.

The novel's treatment of hunting distinguishes between knowledge that develops familiarity with the environment and knowledge directed towards technical control. Cain does not necessarily become less knowledgeable about animals as his hunting progresses. Rather, the purpose of his knowledge changes. His understanding of tracks, terrain, and animal behaviour becomes increasingly directed towards reaching and killing his targets efficiently. The novel therefore suggests that knowledge of the environment does not, by itself, produce an ethical relationship with it. Knowledge becomes destructive when it is separated from the obligations and restrictions that once governed its use. The difference between Cain and Asouf is consequently both moral and epistemological. Asouf's knowledge keeps the animal and its surroundings within his attention, whereas Cain's hunting increasingly reduces the animal to a target.

The effects of Cain's hunting are not limited to the animals he kills. The gazelles are driven towards Tassili, undertaking difficult migrations and leaving blood on the stones (al-Koni, 2002, p. 121). Their movement indicates a disturbance in their accustomed environment. Hunting affects the conditions in which animals feed, move, reproduce, and inhabit familiar territories. The consequences are therefore environmental as well as immediate.

The scale of the killing further changes the relationship between humans and animals. When several animals can be killed with a single round, individual creatures are reduced to targets within a process of mechanical efficiency. Van Dooren's (2014) discussion of extinction in terms of the loss of relationships, histories, and possibilities is relevant here. The displacement or disappearance of animals affects more than animal populations; it also alters the relationships through which communities have known and inhabited their surroundings.

Animal suffering consequently marks a wider change in the moral order of the desert. When animals are regarded primarily as sources of meat or objects of pursuit, their suffering becomes detached from the obligations that previously restricted hunting. Al-Koni thus connects technological hunting with consumption and environmental disturbance rather than presenting violence against animals as merely a matter of individual cruelty.

The blood covenant represents the novel's most direct expression of an ethic based on obligation. The father's vow never to hunt the waddan passes from one generation to another, transforming an individual encounter into inherited memory. The relationship is later described as "the covenant, the



immutable pact and the bond of blood” (al-Koni, 2002, p. 139). The covenant is not a claim of ownership over the animal. Instead, it places a restriction on human action because of the relationship established between the animal and the human community.

This covenant also differs from forms of environmental protection based primarily on institutional or economic value. The waddan is not important because it has been identified as a scarce species or because its protection serves a measurable human interest. Its significance derives from the cultural and spiritual relationship connecting humans, animals, ancestors, and mountains. The novel therefore locates responsibility in an existing relationship rather than in human ownership or utility.

The prophecy that “redemption will be at hand when the sacred waddan bleeds and the blood issues from the stone” (al-Koni, 2002, p. 159) connects the fate of the animal with that of the landscape. The waddan becomes a point at which ecological, spiritual, and human histories meet. The novel consequently brings environmental and moral crisis together: violence against the nonhuman world also threatens the relationships through which human life and memory are sustained.

Asouf’s final resistance to Cain reinforces this understanding of obligation. His body covers the painted image of the waddan while Cain asks where the animals are. By refusing to disclose their location, Asouf prevents Cain from extending his violence to them. His body becomes the final means of protecting the relationship represented by the waddan. The scene is therefore not simply an instance of personal sacrifice; it shows the cost of maintaining an obligation when the surrounding world has come to be governed by pursuit and consumption.

The significance of particular places in the novel also challenges an understanding of the landscape based solely on utility. A mountain associated with the waddan carries memories connected with the animal, while a path associated with hunters recalls earlier practices of human–animal interaction. Place thus preserves knowledge of relationships and past actions. Basso’s (1996) discussion of place and cultural memory is relevant to this aspect of the novel, although al-Koni’s representation belongs to a different geographical and cultural context. In *The Bleeding of the Stone*, knowledge of the desert includes knowledge of the histories attached to particular places.

The names given to places make these connections especially clear. “Wadi of Gazelles,” “Path of the Hunters,” “Waddan Mountain,” and “Herdsmen’s Plain” connect animals, people, movement, and terrain (al-Koni, 2002, p. 7). These names do more than identify geographical locations. They preserve traces of the



activities and relationships associated with them. The landscape consequently carries memories of human and animal life.

Basso's (1996) work on place-names and cultural memory helps explain this connection between geography and remembrance. Places can retain knowledge because their names are associated with particular events, practices, and histories. In al-Koni's novel, the desert is therefore not an undifferentiated physical surface. Its mountains, paths, valleys, and plains acquire meaning through the lives and movements associated with them.

The relationship between the waddan and the mountains strengthens this connection between animal and place. The animal is described as becoming "possessed by the spirit of the mountains" (al-Koni, 2002, p. 29). Its identity is consequently inseparable from the landscape it inhabits. The mountain is at once a physical habitat, a sacred presence, and a site of cultural memory. Through the waddan, al-Koni connects animal existence with place and shows why the destruction of one cannot be separated from damage to the relationships surrounding it.

Cain's mobility presents a different way of experiencing the desert. His vehicle allows him to move quickly across the landscape, making distance an obstacle to be overcome in pursuit of an animal. Asouf, in contrast, understands the desert through places, movements, and relationships accumulated through experience. The difference between the two men is therefore not simply one of movement and stillness. They attach different meanings to the landscape: Cain treats space as something to be crossed in pursuit of a target, while Asouf understands particular places through the knowledge and experience associated with them.

The novel also contrasts Cain's accelerated hunting with the slower rhythms of desert life. Water may remain hidden, vegetation may remain dormant, and animals move in response to conditions that cannot be controlled by humans. Asouf tells the young men, "Use patience and cunning, they're the secrets of the desert" (al-Koni, 2002, p. 72). In this context, waiting is a practical part of survival. It allows the observer to recognise changes in the environment and act at the appropriate moment.

Asouf later states, "you must be patient even when you've lost hope. That's the law of the desert" (al-Koni, 2002, p. 75). The statement places human activity within conditions that cannot always be predicted or controlled. The desert does not yield its resources according to human expectation. Water, vegetation, and animal movement depend on circumstances that may take time to develop. The regeneration of seeds



after rainfall illustrates this process: what appears lifeless may remain capable of renewal (al-Koni, 2002, p. 86).

Cain's use of technology introduces a contrasting sense of time. Vehicles and firearms shorten the distance between pursuit and killing and reduce the need for prolonged tracking and observation. The hunter no longer has to depend to the same extent on the animal's movements or on the uncertainties of the terrain. Asouf responds to environmental rhythms, whereas Cain uses technology to reduce the effect of those rhythms on his actions.

Desert life, however, should not be presented as peaceful or uncomplicated. It involves scarcity, danger, and uncertainty. What matters is the kind of knowledge required to live under such conditions. Asouf must recognise when to act, when to wait, and when changing circumstances require a different response. His understanding of time is therefore closely connected with his understanding of the environment. This temporal dimension also shows that Asouf's inherited knowledge is not a fixed set of rules. The desert changes, and knowledge must respond to those changes. What is passed down through generations provides a basis for understanding the environment, but experience determines how that knowledge is applied. Knowing the location of water is not sufficient if environmental conditions have changed; knowing an animal's usual behaviour does not eliminate the need to observe its present movement. Knowledge remains useful because memory is combined with continued observation. In this respect, the novel presents ecological knowledge as something practised in the present rather than simply preserved from the past.

Conclusion

The Bleeding of the Stone presents the Sahara as an environment in which human life is closely connected with animals, plants, water, mountains, and inherited knowledge. Through Asouf, the novel shows that knowledge of the desert is acquired through experience, observation, memory, and continued engagement with the environment. His understanding of animal behaviour, water sources, vegetation, and ecological change is inseparable from the obligations that govern his conduct. The waddan is particularly important to this understanding because its relationship with Asouf's family challenges the conventional separation between human and animal. Its connection with the mountains further links animal life with place, memory, and spiritual belief. Cain's hunting provides a marked contrast. The Land Rover and rapid-firing weapons increase the speed and scale of killing, while the displacement and suffering of the gazelles demonstrate the wider effects of such practices. The novel's criticism, however, is not directed against technology in itself. It is directed against the use of technology to increase human control over animals and



to facilitate consumption without regard for ecological limits. The blood covenant, sacred geography, and the different experiences of time in the desert extend this argument beyond hunting. They show that human conduct is shaped by memory, obligation, observation, and limits. Al-Koni's fiction should not be read as a direct ethnographic account of Tuareg ecological practices. Rather, the novel creates a literary representation of desert knowledge through which established ideas about human authority over nature are questioned.

Al-Koni therefore presents human survival as dependent upon a careful relationship with the surrounding environment. Water cannot be treated simply as a resource, animals cannot be reduced to targets, and mountains cannot be separated from the histories and beliefs associated with them. The novel does not call for human withdrawal from the natural world. Instead, it suggests that inhabiting the desert requires restraint and recognition of human dependence on other forms of life. In this sense, *The Bleeding of the Stone* replaces the idea of mastery with an ethic of coexistence in which survival depends upon maintaining the relationships that sustain life.

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