

INTERNATIONAL MAN BOOKER PRIZE FINALIST

Ibrahim al-Koni

Translated by Nancy Roberts

THE NIGHT WILL HAVE ITS SAY

A NOVEL

"Ibrahim al-Koni is a master architect of contemporary mythologies." —Nadia Wassef

Ibrahim al-Koni was born in the northwest of the Sahara Desert in Libya in 1948 and learned to read and write Arabic at the age of twelve. He has been hailed as a magical realist, a Sufi fabulist, and a poetic novelist, and his more than eighty books contain mythological elements, spiritual quests, and existential questions. His books have been translated into thirty-five languages and include *Gold Dust*, *The Animist*, *The New Oasis*, *The Puppet*, and many more. Among the many literary prizes to his name, he has been awarded the Sheikh Zayed Prize for Literature and was shortlisted for the International Booker Prize. He currently lives in Spain.

Nancy Roberts is an award-winning literary translator. In 2018 she won the prestigious Sheikh Hamad Award for Translation and International Understanding for her translation of *Gaza Weddings* by Ibrahim Nasrallah. She received a commendation from the Saif Ghobash–Banipal Prize for Arabic Translation for her translation of *Time of White Horses*, also by Ibrahim Nasrallah. She has translated Salwa Bakr, Ezzet Kamhawi, and others.

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A novel by Ibrahim al-Koni

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Nancy Roberts



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To the spirit of the intimate friend of existence,
beloved companion of the lost era, the late Fanayit al-Koni.

Woe to you, Libya! Woe to your lands, and to your waters!
Affliction shall overtake you, O daughters of the West!
You will find no escape from the throes of battle,
nor be spared the punishment of the judgment to come.
Indeed, your end will be destruction.
For you desecrated the shrine of the eternal God,
assaulting Him with your incisors of steel.
O Libya, you will see your country turn into an abode of
the dead:
Some will perish in war, and by the will of wretched fate.
Others will be destroyed by famine and plague, consumed
by the flames of hatred.
All of your cities and all of your lands will turn to desert.
However, a star will shine in the West,
a seer who predicts battles, famines, and deaths,
and the passing of heroes who once ruled the people.

A prophecy of the oracles of Delphi
The Sibylline Oracles, Hymn #3, stanzas 320–36

Evil consists of ten parts. Nine of them are in the East, and one is spread among all other nations.

A saying of the Prophet Muhammad
narrated by Sufyan ibn Uyayna

A woman is neither day nor night. Rather, she is dusk.
Therefore, she is a riddle.

José Ortega y Gasset, *El hombre y la gente (Man and People)*

When Hassan entered Kairouan, he rested there for some days. Then he asked its inhabitants which of the greatest kings of Africa remained, so that he could march against him and either exterminate him or see him enter Islam. So they informed him of a woman in the Aurès Mountains known as al-Kahina, or the Priestess, who was feared by all Byzantines in Africa, and obeyed by all Berbers. They said to him, “Should you kill her, all of the Maghreb will pledge you fealty, and no opposition to you will remain.”

Ibn Idhari al-Marrakushi, *al-Bayan al-mughrib fi akhbar al-Andalus wa-l-Maghrib (A History of Andalusia and the Maghreb)*, Book I

Never has day given way to night
Nor the stars orbited the heavens,
But to transfer power from a ruler
whose reign has given way to another.

Abu al-Atahiya (748–828 CE)

Introduction

By Nancy Roberts

SET IN SEVENTH-CENTURY NORTH Africa under the Umayyad caliphate, *The Night Will Have Its Say* is a critique of the Muslim wars of conquest in that region: their materialistic and worldly motives, the contempt shown for conquered peoples' religious beliefs and rights, and the deep-seated corruption of the Umayyad rulers. An omniscient (though not neutral!) narrator recounts events from the perspective of both the Berber peoples who resisted the Muslim invaders, and that of a faithful Muslim critical of his own history.

A number of loosely but lucidly interwoven themes run through the novel, which is interspersed with eloquent reveries whose poignant insights into the human condition imbue the book with a distinctive aura and pathos. These themes include: the blessed dignity of the female (the Berbers' ancient law taught that a woman should be the leader of the people and that the Deity should be recognized as female); the sacredness and power of language (the book commences with a conversation between two people with differing mother tongues, and is peppered throughout with statements in Amazigh and witty commentaries on the valiant efforts being expended by the rusty interpreter, while the theme of the importance of language recurs over the course of the narrative); the futility of war; the fundamental though seldom-recognized unity of all living beings and the oneness of the underlying truth expressed by all religions; the illusory nature of doctrinal certainty; the

folly of clinging to the letter of sacred writ rather than its spirit; the failure of religions one and all to achieve justice on Earth, and the existential questions this raises. The narrator asks: Might the realm we fear, and which we call “death,” actually be the life we seek? Otherwise, why would justice be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve in this earthly realm?

Last but not least, we have the theme of day and night—reflected in the title and recurring throughout the book—symbolic of the perpetual struggle and interplay between the forces of “light” and “darkness.” As the narrator reminds us, there is an inexorability to the re-emergence of darkness after light, evil after good, defeat after victory. As long as we insist on seeing our fellow creatures as a threatening Other, “the night will have its say.”

The importance of this deeply poetic historical novel derives both from its linguistic beauty and from the fact that its themes are at once timeless and intensely timely. These themes speak to existential questions that human beings have faced for millennia, but which are more urgent at the present moment than ever before. We are confronted with the failure of a materialistic, culturally, and spiritually myopic, if not vacuous, mindset that places profit from fossil fuels and weapons over life itself, and the comfort of an elite few over the dignity and well-being of the many. Today, we are witnessing mass extinctions—of both plant and animal species the world over, and ancient, venerable cultures together with their languages and religions—that impoverish the vital diversity of our planet and threaten its ability to sustain life, including that of *Homo sapiens*, on an unprecedented scale.

The prolific, award-winning Libyan novelist Ibrahim al-Koni has long been passionate to speak out about what he sees as the transgressions committed against the native cultures, languages, and religions of the Berber tribes of North Africa, and the urgent need to prevent further obliteration of the irreplaceable cultural and spiritual treasures over which

the threat of extinction hangs to this day. Through his writings down the decades, al-Koni has borne steady witness to truths he holds dear, seeking to right historical wrongs which, although the damage they have done can hardly be reversed, can at least be recognized and addressed through works such as this that help to set the record straight. And if, as the findings of modern physics, the rapidly accelerating pace of devastating climate change, and the power of global pandemics to bring entire societies across the globe to their knees bear eloquent witness, we are “all in this together,” then to act and speak on behalf of one culture in danger of annihilation is, in a sense, to act and speak on behalf of us all.

1

Scripture

THE AURÈS MOUNTAINS, AH 78/700 CE

The dispute had arisen over Scripture. And if prior experience was any indication of what was to come, the parties to the dispute would be hard pressed to prevent it from ending in bloodshed.

“Akad nakkani anla attahlil!” the woman declared.

“We have our own Scripture!” said the interpreter, addressing himself in Arabic to the Muslim general’s envoy. The messenger sat crouched across from the imposing woman, looking as though he were watching for the chance either to lunge at her or to jump up and flee.

The woman studied her guest quizzically before adding in her lyrical tongue, *“Attahlil kud yajmad ifassan nanagh. Imad sinnin iha awlawan nanagh!”*

Following close on her heels, the interpreter chanted, “Although we may no longer hold the Scripture in our hands, we have preserved it in our hearts!”

The guest scrutinized his hostess with an expression that betrayed an impatience ill befitting of his station as an envoy.

Meanwhile, the woman chanted, *“Bashshan attahlil nanagh yazzar!”*

Hastening to convey the message to the venerable courier, the interpreter intoned, “Besides, our Scripture preceded yours!”

The guest's features trembled.

"That may be so," he said after looking away momentarily. "However, the last word spoken by God dwells in the last religion to be revealed, which means that the last religion revealed abrogates what came before it."

Speaking in his melodic gibberish, the interpreter conveyed the argument to the majestic woman, who leaned toward him lest she miss the slightest point in the troublesome messenger's logic. After all, she was certain that, should they be misunderstood, his words had the potential to exacerbate this fateful conflict, an eventuality that would lead inevitably to bloodshed that might well sweep her people away as had happened in the days of yore with Jugurtha, or in the more recent past with Kusaila.

Her body garbed in black and her soul in mystery, the majestic woman retreated into a prolonged silence. Escaping the confines of the place, she roamed freely in the gracious open spaces that lay beyond the impregnable fortress walls. It was as though she were searching in the desert expanse for a prophecy. At length, she chanted as she was wont to do in her eerie-sounding gibberish, "*Anhi nanagh yanna, Awkasad itasam-maskaland annamusnak sannamus hadn!*"

Rushing to convey the proclamation to the one who himself had come to deliver a proclamation, the interpreter intoned, "Our Scripture commands us, saying, 'Beware of replacing one religion with another!'"

There ensued another long silence during which the interlocutors sat solemnly, wordlessly searching one another's features for clarity.

Putting an end at last to the muffled contest of words, the guest queried, "What harm would it do Her Majesty to recite two confessions¹ which, simple though they are, hold the power to spare both peoples the ravages of war?"

A smile of derision flickered across the stately woman's features. From the lofty height of her throne, ensconced

within her magnificent stronghold, she stalked the scattered remnants of a mirage still roaming the desert expanse.

Then, speaking out of her transcendent Realm, she rejoined, “*Aydagh addubigh itatnannagh annar wajjigh ihitajim awajjum ay middan wizzaranin!*”

Relaying the content of her words, the interpreter declared, “I would not hesitate to utter confessions that would so easily roll off the tongue were it not for my certainty that if such words truly spared people the ravages of war, they would have spared the heroes who went before me!”

The envoy sought clarification with a gesture. Receiving no reply from the interpreter, however, he had no choice but to replace the gesture with speech: “Of which heroes does the revered monarch speak, might I ask?”

The interpreter warbled the import of the query, whereupon the venerable dame warbled in reply, “*Tattawim awajjum ay Aksayila? Migh tattawim awajjum ay mghar in jarmat awkalammannit?*”

“Have you forgotten what you did to Kusaila?” chimed in the interpreter without delay. “Have you forgotten what you did to the ill-fated leader of the Garamantes?”

The envoy’s face was darkened by a cloud of melancholy. However, he countered the anguish with a question.

“What did we do to the leader of the Garamantes?” he asked.

The interpreter took a deep breath before commencing his sing-song, and when he had finished, he drew several more breaths, then proceeded to hold them in as if he were saving them up for the next round. Meanwhile, the august dame veiled herself in speechless indignation. At last, after returning from her flight into the wilderness, she threw down the gauntlet.

“*Awadum wa sharran, yusiyawn imannit us darannit, yarmast mghar nawan walayassan, yankadas timazzujin stakuba asasinna mghar an jarmat ‘mas awa’? Yannahas mghar nun: Awagh annin warit-namanaghghid daraban atakkid taddarad!*”

A stillness descended over the castle courtyard as the interpreter caught his breath again in preparation for the next feverish leg of the race.

“After coming to you as an old man of his own accord, the leader of the Garamantes suffered a treacherous assault by your leader, who cut off his ears with the edge of the sword. When he cried out in protest, your leader retorted, ‘This is to ensure that never again will you dare take up the sword against the Arabs!’”

The mountain chain to the north exhaled chill winds, driving before them somber clouds. At which the unyielding woman’s features brightened. In these clouds she saw an answer to her tireless supplications in the temple after a drought that had lingered over the region for years on end.

Smiling inscrutably, she replied with a question: “*Anta akuniniyusan yayaway takuba, migh kunid attinyusan tiwayim tikubawayn?*”

The interpreter closed his eyes like someone inviting slumber. Then he reeled, imploring the words for the sought-after inspiration before intoning, “Was it he who came upon you brandishing a sword, or was it you and your company who came upon him with swords unsheathed?”

The envoy simpered, biting his lips with half-rotten teeth before murmuring, “It would be difficult to explain to you, O leader of your people, the kinds of acts that might be committed by those obsessed with what we term religious duty.”

The interpreter warbled the narrative, whereupon the leader of the people sought clarification with a censorious gesture. The envoy shifted uncomfortably, the edge of his turban slipping to reveal his left temple.

Stating his intent more clearly, he said, “It was you who forced us to draw the sword in your faces by refusing to go to God’s holy precinct of your own accord.”

The wind whistled noisily through the trees as the interpreter intoned the translation in a melodious voice.

“Massinagh iyan, bashshan ibraqqatan wayttakkanin ijatan!”
Her Majesty cried.

“The Deity is one,” crooned the interpreter, “but the ways leading to Him are many.”

Then, without giving her interlocutor a chance to respond, the woman added, *“Akkat massinagh sabaraqqa nawan, tanyamanagh nakkani itanak sabaraqqa nanagh!”*

As the mad autumn winds sent leaves falling liberally about the castle courtyard, the interpreter stammered, “You take your path to the Deity, and allow us to take ours!”

After a momentary silence, the envoy declared, “I fear we will not be able to do that, since God has authorized us to bring the likes of you into His religion in droves. Otherwise, He would not have sent people messengers!”

A slight tremor passed over his sun-drenched face, causing his mustache to twitch visibly. He felt himself reeling once again as if he were struggling valiantly to master some suppressed emotion. The contagion spread to the bare, brawny forearms that he had wrapped around his knees.

The queenly figure intoned, *“Awasasaligh iyannin wattusimad tijmayam danagh massinagh, bashshan tusamad ful ayyattajarawam ammahatan!”*

The interpreter bowed his head so low that his veil touched his lap as he struggled mightily to recover his store of a language whose fields he had once roamed with ease. After joining Kusaila’s ranks, he had fallen into the hands of the invading army and had lived among them for years. Yet now he found himself straining over every word and breaking his spirit at every turn. In order to pick up that subtle, magical tone, bathed in the breaths of the Unknown, he now had to go against the grain. This tone, which had been mastered by those who chanted their poignant, mournful hymns in the vastness of sacred places of worship, was one the interpreter felt helpless to master himself. However, when the spirit of chivalry is quickened in the lowly muscle to which we refer as

the tongue, then conveyed to those of another tongue without losing its innocence, it is transformed by the lords of verse into an ode through which generation upon generation can embrace the legacy of its timeless precepts.

At last he crooned, “I have been told that you come to our lands, not in search of the One worthy of worship but rather in search of the trifles of this decaying realm.”

Then, without waiting for her guest’s response, Dahiya added at once, “*Urgh!*”

“Gold!” cried the interpreter, repeating the word enthusiastically after her, like a pupil reciting a lesson.

“*Innar attajmim danagh hawanatnakaf bannan, idid yaru najmay itiyawayan dagh kallan nanagh, idid tittirat tshadat aymus!*”

“If you had requested it of us, we would have brought it to you free of charge. We have long been in search of a way to be rid of its evil, since according to our way of thinking, it brings bad luck!”

“*Idid innar tassanam sawayn, waritagarim aysikilan atawadimad ikallan nanagh ful hanaghtanaghim!*”

“If you had only told us, you could have spared yourselves the hardships of the journey rather than coming to kill us for it!” echoed the interpreter.

She fell silent, lost in pursuit of the final remains of the mirage as it wandered across the plain, immersing the flora in its resplendence, breathing into every plant so that out of its humble dimensions there emerged a gauzy apparition that grew larger and lengthier, writhing as if in outpourings of agony. Then she gave an ambiguous smile.

“*Amghar nawan wasajannin hassan, ma yamus dagh middan ma turadin?*”

As the interpreter made ready to speak, he felt his throat tighten with grief. Without knowing why, he felt overwhelmed with pity for this messenger, and for all messengers. Perhaps it was because they belonged to a class of people who were

meant to come bearing sacred tomes but instead had been destined for ceaseless interrogation. Worse still, they had sometimes paid with their lives for the whims and caprices of those in power when they failed to come up with the right argument under questioning.

Realizing that his pity for this messenger was actually pity for himself, the interpreter labored to shake off the feeling of distress. After all, the two men shared equally in the ordeal of delivering a message that each of them was obliged to bring safely to shore. Even after reaching land, they were both surrounded by perils at every turn. Yet there was no escaping the burden to be borne, no matter the cost. It was their unborn child, and what is an unborn child but the meaning of the existence of all who travel the path of this ephemeral realm?

“Your leader known as Hassan: What kind of a person do you think him to be?”

The envoy hesitated. Appearing distraught, he pursed his lips for a time, scratching his scrawny beard with his forefinger. Responding at last, he offered, “Suffice it to say that he is an individual who fears God!”

The interpreter likewise hesitated before passing on the message. He then exhaled liberally as though heaving a sigh of relief after a long race.

As if she were noticing the interpreter for the first time, the venerable ruler cast him a curious glance. Then, directing her gaze into the distance, she intoned, “*Ghurangh tara namassinagh tuf tukasda an massinagh!*”

Lagging once more, the interpreter swallowed his saliva with difficulty before speaking: “In our belief, the Deity is to be loved, not feared!”

A pallor came over the envoy’s features. He stroked his sparse beard with a right hand rendered rough and dry by the harsh desert air. Appearing comical, he fidgeted as though to fight off a sense of embarrassment until his tongue came to his rescue.

“May Her Majesty forgive me if I should blaspheme in her presence. Being only a courier with a proclamation to deliver, I am not authorized to issue formal opinions on religious matters.”

As the interpreter conveyed his message to her ears, the awe-inspiring woman kept her eyes fixed on the courier, as though attempting to discern in his facial expression what his tongue had withheld. Then she grew so still it was as though she had absented herself.

Meanwhile, the frigid north winds morphed into a barbaric storm whose ominous clouds began pelting the place with heavy, profuse drops as violent and hostile as slaps to the face. Rather than yielding to Nature’s will, however, the majestic ruler budged not from where she sat.

Unperturbed, she said, “*Ariqqi ihitsasalad awayjanna attahlil nawan ful . . . ful tunti!*”

After fighting back a violent coughing spell, the interpreter rasped, “I want you to tell me what your Scripture says about . . . about women!”

She followed her request with a mischievous if muffled laugh, at which her ample bosom shook.