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Recommended Citation

Ibrahim al-Koni, a prolific and celebrated author of Arabic literature, grew up among the Tuareg people in the desert of Libya and credits the oral tradition of his culture as a major source of inspiration for his writing. Therefore, it is unsurprising that in the novel *The Night Will Have Its Say* (2022), al-Koni retells the seventh-century Islamic conquest of North Africa under the Umayyad Caliphate. Originally published in 2019 as *Kalimat al-layl fi haqq al-nahar*, the novel focuses on the episode following the death of Amazigh leader Kusaila in 688 in which Dahiya, or al-Kahina, succeeds as head of the Amazigh resistance and temporarily defeats Hassan ibn al-Nu’man’s troops before her eventual death around 703. This story has been preserved in oral tradition and in historical sources written in Arabic, such as the work of Ibn Idhari al-Marrakushi, Ibn Khaldoun, whose account references the orality of this story, and Al-Nuwayrī. As the novel and the historical work upon which it is built both demonstrate, Dahiya’s death opens the door for the spread of Islam in North Africa through both conversion and military force. However, despite her defeat, as a legendary figure, Dahiya is situated among the most important Amazigh figures of resistance, like Massinissa and Jugurtha. Similarly, she is often associated with modern resistance figures like Lalla Fatma N’Soumer.

Contemporary novels retelling Dahiya’s story vary in their representation of her, sometimes imagining her problematically. This is especially true in literature written in French, in which interpretations range from a sexualized North African Joan of Arc as in Magali Boisnard’s *Le roman de la Kahena: d’après les anciens textes arabes* (1925), a Romanized Jewish heroine wishing to avoid a forced marriage as in Berthe Bénichou-Aboulker’s *La Kahena, reine berbère* (1933), a feminist figure taking charge of her sexuality as well as her military career as in Gisèle Halimi’s *La Kahina* (2002), or simply a mythical force inhabiting a villa named after her as in Salim Bachi’s *La Kahêna* (2003). Al-Koni focuses more on this figure as a military leader and thus places the story of Dahiya in its wider historical and religious context. This does not take away from the strong female warrior character, however. The story is grounded in Dahiya’s strength as a woman, and there is a background understanding of the importance of women in the Amazigh tradition before the Arab invasions of North Africa. This can be seen in the novel’s frequent evocation of the goddess Tanit or its explanation of the importance of matrilineal descent and the relative unimportance of the father in traditional genealogy. For example, in a passage where Dahiya has just finished overseeing a ritual ceremony performed by young women to Tanit, what begins as a reflection on her sons turns into a reflection on the importance of women as “sacred vessels,” mothers as the “sole individuals qualified to merge bloodlines” and “the importance of tracing one’s lineage through the mother alone” (46). Additionally, the reader learns a great deal about Dahiya’s qualities, including the use of her many names like Dahiya (the Cunning One), al-Kahina, the Seer, the Seer of the Generation, the Priestess, the Soothsayer, Tidhit (the Lioness), and Tahert (sandy earth). All of these suggest Dahiya’s power, strength, intellect, and connection with nature, and these names highlight multiple aspects of her personality.

Al-Koni thoughtfully captures the multi-confessional dimension of North Africa in the seventh century. The demise of Dahiya underscores the inception of the Islamization of North Africa, and in this conversation, Islam is often set in opposition to Judaism and Christianity. However, in this novel, Amazigh ancestral and religious traditions are central. Dahiya’s spirituality and the characters close to her revolve around ancestral traditions and the goddess Tanit rather than one of the Abrahamic religions. In al-Koni’s novel, even the religious practices of Imazighen...
who professed Judaism or Christianity or who have already converted to Islam are represented in their syncretic nature. While Islam’s call to monotheism is the main conflict in the story, the narrative seems to be grounded in peace and respect, and the narrator repeatedly reflects on the futility and destruction of war for religion.

Spreading Islam is a major motivation for the conquest of North Africa, and the novel reflects that objective, but it is written in such a way that it is not anti-Islamic. In fact, the novel absorbs this episode into the bigger picture of Islamic history, in keeping with the account written by Ibn Idhari in *al-Bayan al-maghrib fi akhbar al-Andalus wa-l-Magrib*, which the author quotes in the novel’s preface. Indeed, the account of Dihya’s sons – biological and adopted – who seek favor with the Caliph after their mother’s death and, according to her wishes, is detailed by Ibn Idhari, Ibn Khaldoun, and Al-Nuwayrī, and al-Koni interacts with aspects of these works of historiography in his novel. In these writings, Dihya’s sons become part of the military force spreading Islam throughout North Africa and into al-Andalus. This is construed as the novel's eventual and unavoidable aspect of Islamic history.

*The Night Will Have Its Say* draws on both written historical narrative and oral tradition, and the interaction between written and oral literature is one of the common points among North African novels retelling Dihya’s story. Though al-Koni utilizes written sources, he highlights the importance of orality in understanding this story and Amazigh culture more broadly. References to the Amazigh language subtly appear throughout the novel, such as mentions of “the Forgotten Language” or in more direct ways through conversations mediated by an interpreter. Another nod to the significance of oral tradition in the novel comes through the character of the Poet, who is responsible for moving the narrative forward and describes or reflects on the protagonist’s character, appearance, and actions. Finally, in a 2023 interview published in AramcoWorld, al-Koni recounts a spiritual meeting in the desert with Dihya/al-Kahina as the warrior Mother and associates this experience with his call to become a writer, showing the connection between orality, writing, and Dihya again.

Ibrahim al-Koni’s *The Night Will Have Its Say* makes Dihya’s story accessible to an English-speaking readership, whereas many prior novels about this figure have been written in French. The story may be hard to follow for readers unfamiliar with the events described, but the translator’s introduction and glossary of terms and historical characters provide a good background. In addition, much of the novel reads like a spiritual reflection on themes relevant in every context, such as the consequences of political corruption, greed, and war and the preservation of the earth and our human connection to it. Given the significance of Dihya’s story in its historical context, her continued importance as a resistance figure in North Africa, and the themes and lessons present in her story, this novel will surely incite reflection and provide fertile ground for conversation for the reader of world literature in translation.

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