

Sacred Activism: Ancient Islamic Practices for Contemporary Crises
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Paintings by Micaela Amateau Amato from
Zazu Dreams: Between the Scarab and the Dung Beetle,
A Cautionary Fable for the Anthropocene Era

Usually the Great Ganges is packed with tremendous activity and hoards of people. But arriving so early in the morning, there was only a calm silence, except for an occasional lammergeyer bird dropping its bones, punctuated by the mesmerizing voice of an apparition of the great poet, Rabindranath Tagore; his spirit hovered between Bengal and India, Islam and Hinduism. After his death in 1941, Tagore's ashes had been scattered over the Ganges in Calcutta. Now through the mist,



we could see his floating body as he meditated and chanted on the bank of the river. To our even greater surprise, he knew my name, and turned to us saying: “Zazu, listen carefully to my words—I want you to remember that the same stream that flows through your veins, flows through the universe in rhythmic measure. In this land of fire and air you are a human estuary. You are a body of water that is connected to the global cycle of water—simultaneously salt and fresh. We are all human estuaries, and must take care of the waters of the world so that we may all thrive. We cannot forget that water supports everything that makes up our lives—humans, animals, insects, plants, the seas, rivers, mountains, the atmosphere, the air. Without water we are nothing at all.”



So begins my cross-cultural tale of Islamic polymaths and hospitality, biophilia and multiplicity. In the tradition of *hakawatis* (Arab storytellers), I offer this tapestry as a strategy to ignite social justice dialogue, ecological consciousness, and collective action. I contend that the alternative to industrial-waste consumer-convenience culture is not inconvenience, nor sacrifice. I suggest we redefine “convenience” by following principles found in Islamic texts and laws that can be antidotes to our consumer-waste culture. I ask: How can we transform habitual behaviors of entitlement and obsessive accumulation, so that we embody the ways we are all interconnected as a model and resource for compassionate living? How can citizen-activists exemplify symbiotic solutions as we transition from our Anthropogenic, petroleum-pharmaceutical-addicted cyber-culture to a biocentric Commons—one that inspires, educates, and mobilizes peoples of diverse cultural backgrounds? How can we hold ourselves and corporations accountable to toxic production / consumption / disposal habits that poison life on earth?

Binary codes dictate our decision-making process and reinforce entanglements of the implicit and explicit forms of corporate coercion and corporeal collusion. These predetermined, prescribed categories of identification generate environmental and humanitarian injustices. Such binary-laden conformity, “the trap of mere opposition,”¹ nullifies creativity and invention, inhibiting deviation from the norm. However, equally potent is our resistance to such hegemonies in the form of collaborative action that ignites personal, collective, cultural, and ecological healing. Reclaiming ancient Middle Eastern spiritual-pharmacopeias, mosaic-based art, the sacred embodied in bioregional agricultural systems, and environmental architectural engineering practices can serve as practical solutions to our pandemic of racism / ethnic cleansing, climate crisis, and COVID-19.

Congruently, Islamic cross-cultural models of symbiosis can counteract the paralysis of climate-anxiety / climate-grief. The Hadith, Islamic oral traditions, and the voice of the trickster that enliven ambiguity, contradiction,² beauty are integral to uprooting intersectional injustices and engage with the sacred world around us *collectively* resisting industrialized convenience-culture and its inherent self-

¹ Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*. New York: North Point Press, 1998: 274).

² The poetic term *qasida*, often associated with nature, translates as austerity / severity juxtaposed with passion / hyperbole, contradictory simultaneous states. As an act of repairing what has been lost or broken, *qasida* attempts the complicated task of merging myth and history with memory.

destructive consequences. This presentation hopes to offer behavioral and infrastructural design shifts that embody Islamic sacred activism.



In answer to the question, how can we revive *spiritual intelligence*—an ever-evolving practice that reinvigorates our most vital relationships, I wrote *Zazu Dreams: Between the Scarab and the Dung Beetle, A Cautionary Fable for the Anthropocene Era*. This quintessential Islamic tale is a call for hospitality and a renewed *Convivencia* (conviviality—referring to the Golden Age of Spain during which Muslim and Jewish literature, science, and arts flourished). *Convivencia* can be framed as the apotheosis of non-binary relationships; historian Americo Castro has said that Spain must acknowledge that Hispanics are historically “½ Muslim, ½ Jewish, and ½ Catholic.”

Understanding historical relationships between the Spanish Inquisition³ and contemporary manifestations of erasing cultural difference and ecosystem diversity, Zazu, the protagonist in *Zazu Dreams*, shares: “I understood more and more that there was so much work to be done; that the only way to heal ethnic and racial divisions and the ecology of our global body is to see how we are all intermeshed. We all have to take care of each other.”⁴ He witnesses how, for hundreds of generations

³ Congruent with the Spanish Inquisition's *morisco*, a term for descendants of Muslims forcibly converted to Christianity, *anusim* (the forced ones), *marranos* (swine), and *chuetas* (pig eaters), the *other-within* simultaneously reifies xenophobia and disrupts cause-and-effect binary codes—the “totalitarian tendency underlying universalism” (Irwin Hall cited in Benay Blend's "Because I Am in All Cultures at the Same Time" 1: Intersections of Gloria Anzaldúa's Concept of *Mestizaje* in the Writings of Latin-American Jewish Women, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/%E2%80%9CBecause-I-Am-in-All-Cultures-at-the-Same-Time-%E2%80%9D-1-Blend/aa8697ce82d466d8aebf905ec650b50f6b8b79d6?p2df>). For example, the island of Majorca's history of “*quinze siglos de racismo*” demonstrates the legacy of the Inquisition continues to infect the lives of the ancestors of those Muslims who converted to Christianity five hundred years ago.

The term *aljama* was the Catholic Spanish appellation for identifying both Muslim and Jew. While they encourage an acute awareness of the interconnected web of the ancient past with the present, such realizations are intended to undermine marginalization of the Inquisitional cultural pariah. Believed to be crypto, or secret Muslims practicing crypto-Islam, these *aljama* families continue to be pariahs in their own homeland. “Home” becomes a dangerous and ambiguous zone within the cultural imagination—a space nourished by a fictionalized and demonized mythology and superstition.

⁴ Cara Judea Alhadeff, *Zazu Dreams: Between the Scarab and the Dung Beetle, A Cautionary Fable for the Anthropocene Era*. Berlin: Eifrig Publishing, 2017: 26.

throughout the Middle East, the Caribbean, Africa, and Southeast Asia, symbiosis between humans and nature has been the norm. As a cross-cultural, historical climate justice odyssey, *Zazu Dreams* crosses the border between diasporic identities and environmental action. It gleans from *Qur'ānic* directives that “create a just and decent society where poor and vulnerable people [are] treated with respect.”⁵



Non-binary cultural production is rooted in the fertile ground of ambiguity and contradiction.⁶ “[Contradiction] confuses polarity; it baffles those who were moving in a pure, straight line, it uncovers hidden duplicity.”⁷ Islamic histories are replete with such models—the interplay between aesthetics, functionality, and border-crossings. Through the vast diversity of Islamic sects we can explore the familiar within the unfamiliar —illuminating a recognition of difference—a spiritual, socio-political connection with *the other*, increasingly urgent in our reductive media-saturated, techno-euphoric age.

⁵ Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of our Religious Traditions*. New York: Knopf, 2006: 387.

⁶ In Muslim contexts, the *hamsa* is referred to as the Hand of Fatima, and like other amulets, talismans, and fetishes, it wards off the evil eye—offering good luck, healing, fertility, protection, positive energy, while deflecting destructive emotions, like envy and hatred. Amulets also are used to gain someone’s love. The five fingers of the *hamsa* are supposed to remind its wearer to use their five senses to experience and express gratitude to the spirit of the universe / G-d. In his post-colonial, magical realist novel, *Midnight’s Children*, Salman Rushdie reminds us “the *hamsa* or is the symbol of an ability to live in two worlds—the physical and spiritual world of land and water and the world of air, of flight” (New York: Penguin, 1980: 267). This symbol remains a cross-cultural bridge among many different peoples. In many Muslim and Mizrahi Turkish traditions, water serves as a talisman. When someone is about to embark on a long *rihla* (journey) a glass of water is sprinkled across the road after them, so their migration will “flow like water.”

⁷ Hyde 231.

In contrast, racist legacy survives today in fairy tales taught generation after generation, in children’s songs and rhymes repeated from the cradle to adulthood. Children are taught to recite the sur names of Muslim families from Inquisitional 15th century which subliminally perpetuates this hatred and preserves Spain’s law of *sangre de puro, limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) even today. As with all racial purity and ethnocentrism, the edict of *limpieza de sangre* is horrific—it meant that Moors/Muslims and Jews were systematically eradicated from the global family because of the so-called impurity of their blood.

Witnessing history through storytelling is in itself an act of repair where both horror and even humor⁸ can emerge as strategies for making sense of the ‘unspeakable.’⁹ By engaging this complex web as a process of storytelling in which ambiguity is not a lack of clarity, but offers multiple clarities, we can confront contemporary ecological and humanitarian crises through a comprehensive lens. Living these interrelationships is the foundation for conviviality: compassionate coalition-building and sustainable ecological stewardship. Islam, as a polymath religion, being many things simultaneously represents the extraordinary resiliency and creativity necessary for unity in diversity. Embodying hybrid cultural identities reflects the potency of biodiversity throughout our ecosystems. As Tagore commands, *we are estuaries*¹⁰—dynamic contradictions in balance.¹¹

⁸ “To treat ambivalence with humor is to keep it loose; humor oils the joint where contradictions meets. If humor evaporates, then ambiguity becomes polarized and conflict follows” (Hyde 274).

⁹ One reason we are focusing on trickster folklore (including Coyote in Navajo traditions, Brer Rabbit in African-American stories, the Judaic Biblical Jacob, Maui from Polynesia, Legba in West African traditions, and Loki in Nordic mythology) is because it is integral to the vitality of oral traditions that struggle against cultural forgetting. Colonialism-induced amnesia is rooted in divide-and-conquer/us versus them strategies. Storytelling can disrupt these strategies.

In April, 2013, The Commonwealth Club of San Francisco sent out the following invitation: The urgency of the climate crisis has compelled writers such as Bill McKibben and Antonia Juhasz (both of whom wrote endorsements for *Zazu Dreams*) to cross the line into advocacy. That may cause advocates to cheer but can also turn away readers who discount partisans. Advocates contend that the urgency of climate science requires strong and swift action but that the abundance of facts are not mobilizing people or politicians fast enough. Storytelling is one way to reach people not impressed by complex facts about a topic as confusing as carbon pollution. How can reporting on energy, presented as opportunity or catastrophic risk, compete against grumpy cat memes and economic woes? Is there a secret to breaking through the flood of information to make a meaningful impression on the public? Join us for a discussion with two of the environmental movement’s leading communicators. I attended the Commonwealth Club event that unfortunately did not end up engaging the idea of storytelling. When I asked the organizers why, they said they decided that stories don’t have the political backbone that facts have. This mentality is indicative of our global self-destructive cycle.

¹⁰ Estuaries continually interflow between river and sea, freshwater and salt water.

¹¹ Let us return now to Tagore and the potency of applying his liminal positionality as a climate justice strategy. He believed in the concept of continuous adaptability to change. Tagore never saw himself as belonging exclusively to any country. Nevertheless, in 1950 his poem “Jana Gana Mana” (written in 1911) was adapted as India’s National Anthem. Tagore and his family were Pirali Brahmins. Found throughout Bengal and split between India and Bangladesh, these Brahmins were stigmatized because their families had converted to Islam. The pejorative term ‘Pirali’ came from Pir Ali, a Brahmin Hindu who had converted to Islam. I invite the audience to play at Tagore’s borders—to thrive among the in-between spaces of rapture and alienation, of ecological collapse and biophilia.



By challenging how we internalize binaries and taxonomies, Islamic exegesis, jurisprudence, and philosophies counter transnational-corporate capitalism as it breeds institutionalized racism (including racial profiling). Social, emotional, and spiritual intelligence become primary contemporary pedagogical practices. *Tazakkah*, the virtues of “practical compassion,” charity, and generosity, enliven social, economic, intellectual, and spiritual domains. As Karen Armstrong describes: through *tazakkah*, Muslims “must use their intelligence to cultivate a caring and responsible spirit ...[toward] all God's creatures.”¹² *Tazakkah* galvanizes lived empathy¹³ within a matrix of social ecology—not a unified merging which dissolves into an amorphous normativity (binary reductionism), but the fluid exchange of autonomy and the intricate interconnectedness of the *in-between*. This affinity generates a nonviolent practice that recognizes vast differences and interdependencies. Transitioning from our biocidal Anthropocene Era (human-induced ecological destruction due to advanced capitalism, rampant consumerism, international development, environmental racism) through sacred activism requires embodied diversities.

Through the chiasmic web of the intermedial, Islamic diversity highlights the decolonizing, liberatory *practice* of nourishing relationships among seemingly contradictory socio-psychodynamic forces. Intermedial identities ignite an ethics-of-difference and a politics-of-transformation rooted in the collective dissolution of the tyranny of certainty—that which obliterates the possibility of difference. Tagore’s famous conversation with Einstein titled, “We Think That We Think Clearly, but That’s Only Because We Don’t Think Clearly,” refuted the faulty assumption characteristic of industrialized humans “that the world we see is all there is.” For example, Visage Movement, the Islamic troupe of physically and mentally disabled multigenerational dancers from Tashkent, Central Asia, uses improvisation to break through the grid-lock of habit and expectation: “I’ve had doctors tell me that it was impossible for one of my dancers to extend his arms, but when I told the boy to stretch out his arm and imagine he was blowing on a feather in his hand, he could do it. ...Improvisation made him go

¹² Armstrong 387.

¹³ Converging with Samuel Weber, in my *Viscous Expectations: Justice, Vulnerability, The Ob-scene* (Penn State University Press, 2013), I embed my explorations of the uncanny within an empathic field: “What is at stake in the uncanny is nothing more nor less than the disposition to ‘put ourselves in the place of the other’” (Samuel Weber, *Legend of Freud*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000: 31).

beyond his limitations.”¹⁴ By highlighting the violence of the closed border (binary-based illusions of our separateness from one another and from our natural worlds), we conjure the multiplicity of the imagination:¹⁵ ambiguity, intuition, and improvisation as collective transmutation.¹⁶



This in-between potential rejects the cultural-ideological sway of binary codes. Similarly, the polytropic¹⁷ trickster defies the tyranny of certainty. For example, represented by *hakawatis*, Goha the Trickster¹⁸ and Al-Ghazal are multifaceted characters found throughout the Islamic world. In Islamic oral traditions and folklore, the villain, fool, and wise man, as with tricksters from all cultures, polymorphism is the primary characteristic of narrative folktales. Goha's double face of Janus plays out in the both / and: “History is like Janus; it has two faces. Whether it looks at the past or at the present, it

¹⁴ Richard Covington, “Hearts of the New Silk Roads,” *Saudi Aramco World*, Jan/Feb 2008, Vol. 59, #1.

Saudi Aramco World publishes a journal *AramcoWorld* that includes stories, recipes, book reviews, educational resources that “advance knowledge of the histories, cultures and geography of the Arab and Muslim worlds and their global interconnections.” Again, I must embrace contradictions: Saudi Aramco is one of the world's most powerful oil companies: the Saudi Arabian Oil Company; and, *all* of my personal and professional life confronts the impacts of fossil-fuel addicted industrial civilization. See <https://www.aramco.com/en/campaigns/sustainability/>

¹⁵ *Again a brief interlude from Zazu Dreams: “Remember the Ummah...” She was the same woman from the catacombs in Susa. As she spoke, her face slowly transformed into women I had seen in Ammu's books. Ammu had told me about women who started underground escape networks for persecuted people or who sacrificed their lives for their undying commitment to empathy and the common context of struggle—women like Noor Inayat Khan, who survived WWII as long as she did because of her belief in the **imagination** and her extraordinary commitment to human rights. Khan was an East Indian-American Muslim who became a spy for Britain's covert unit, the Special Operations Executive who supported an underground resistance network in Nazi-occupied Paris. “Khan took her assignment knowing the average survival time for an underground wireless operator in occupied France was six weeks. She lasted 16 weeks. ...Betrayed by a double agent, she was kept prisoner for almost a year until she was executed at Dachau concentration camp.*

¹⁶ Lusterware ceramic pottery was made through a complicated process that was gradually lost from Spain after 1492. Lusterware was a physical manifestation of dialogue with all the elements of the cosmos: oxygen, earth, water, fire, and time. The Arabic concept of *alkimiya* (transmutation) combines earth material with the spirit, the duende, or intuition. Like sand, salt, amber, and water (characters in *Zazu Dreams*) representing the both/and, the *la'am*, lusterware embodies a balance of contradictions and repudiates the tyranny of certainty through the microcosmic-macrocosmic interplay.

¹⁷ Polytropic, meaning turning many ways, includes the “wily,” “versatile,” and “much-traveled” (Hyde 52).

¹⁸ Goha, a hybrid of Muslim, Persian, and Jewish is a multifaceted character found throughout the Sephardic Diaspora, medieval and modern Turkish stories, and the Islamic world. As it traveled, this literary tradition co-mingled with local folktales producing parallel stories referring to Abû Nuwâs on the eastern coast of Africa and in Iraq, and Giufâ in Sicily. Nasr-a-din Hodja and Joha are two renditions that have merged into the modern Turkish character, Nasreddin.

sees the same things.”¹⁹ Whether we hear the voices from the fifteenth century Inquisition or twenty-first century environmental racism, the message of resisting cultural domination²⁰ is the same. The trickster is both victim and victimizer, cheater and cheated, trapping others while falling into traps. The trickster does not differentiate between humans, plants, animals, and objects. Transformation and shifting identities are integral to how the trickster engages with the world around them. The trickster *is* creative collective action.



Re-entering a brief excerpt from *Zazu Dreams*:

I remembered hearing from my Jaddi about the hakim, the philosopher-physician ibn Sina. When I finally caught my breath, we decided to make an alhaju to find this wizard-like doctor. After our nightmare of struggling to free ourselves from ghost nets and the plastic gyre, we needed his help more than ever. When we got to land, we traveled many kilometers with a donkey who chatted with Cocomiso, my malamute husky, sharing many stories. Could this be the trusted donkey of Goha the Trickster?²¹...As we moved deeper into the maze of the mahaleh I felt the folds of time expanding once

¹⁹ *Maxime du Champ*, Paris, vol. 6, 315. The trickster frequently played the role of court jesters during the Inquisition—demonstrating the double face of humor. “By dramatizing the plight of fellow converts, victims of...violent persecution” the court-jester tricksters would publicly flaunt their demeaned heritage and use exaggerated humor to protest abuse (cited in Cara Judea Alhadeff, *Viscous Expectations: Justice, Vulnerability, The Ob-scene*, State College: Penn State University Press, 2013: 60-61). Although this particular citation comes from a Jewish *converso* context, it can be applied to the horrors that Muslim converts also suffered.

²⁰ “Dominant civilizations are characterized by people who don't recognize that their own well-being depends upon the well-being of the communities in which they live. As a result of their sense of alienation, people within those civilizations seek to control and dominate others, usually through social structures that wield power from top to bottom” (Martin Adams, *Land: A New Paradigm for a Thriving World*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015: 77).

²¹ An excerpt from *Zazu Dreams*: *Picking up a dead dung beetle, I heard Goha the trickster laughing—or maybe it was the sound of shifting sand. The shape of the dung beetle's little horns looked so much like gazelle horns. Was Joha in cahootz with Al-Ghazal, the 11th century trickster known as ‘the Gazelle?’ I showed it to Cocomiso, my malamute husky, and right then, right there in my hand, the dead dung beetle transformed into a living iridescent turquoise scarab!*

The scarab is a symbol of mesmerizing diversity and the ability to survive. There are about 30,000 *Scarabadaiae* variations within the beetle family. It is the quintessential both/and. We are making a false division between the scarab and the dung beetle to emphasize how something historically revered has simultaneously been historically reviled. Thriving in waste, while worshipped by all ancient civilizations, the dung scarab beetle represents the *la'am* (simultaneously yes and no in Arabic and Hebrew), the balance of contradictions.

For instance, in Medieval Christianity, the dung beetle symbolized the sinner and was associated with “foulness and wickedness” (Arthur Evans and Charles Bellamy, *An Inordinate Fondness for Beetles*. 2000: 141)—quite the opposite

again. I understood we were traveling back in time to meet ibn Sina. We were simultaneously in both the 10th and 21st centuries. We found a girl who led us to the restaurant that looked like a shimmering cave. It was made of salt! She put her hand on my chest and told us how the powers of salt could heal my sore lungs damaged from the plastic.

The Salt Restaurant was designed to look like the local salt mines. Using powder, rock, and compact layers of salt along with natural tree resins and gums, Emitaz Designing Group built the Gaudiesque Salt Restaurant in Shiraz, Iran in 2011. The local Marharloo salt lake and the beauty of natural salt



mines inspired the architects who used locally sourced, affordable salt.²² Ibn Sina had heard about our encounter. To prevent infections from being caught in the ghost nets, he gave us ground beetles to eat,

of its actual role in our ecosystem. In contrast, ancient Egyptians deified the dung beetle, their most significant religious symbol. Its persistence and repetition represented both highly rational behavior, and was thought to be governed by the supernatural, symbolizing “the invisible forces that move the sun across the sky in a geocentric universe” (Ibid., 9). Symbolizing the Sun’s rays and Moon’s cycle, the shape of its head and body reinforced the scarab’s intimate relationship with the heavenly bodies. Simultaneously, its daily actions—the rolling of the poop, paralleled Ra, the Sun God, rolling the sun across the sky. It represents life itself: hieroglyphic inscriptions from ancient Egypt designate the scarab with the syllable *kheperi*, ‘to be,’ ‘to exist.’

Gazelles are symbols of the beloved in both Arabic and Hebraic love-poetry. The traveler-trickster of 11th century Al-Andalus, Yahya ibn Hakam Al-Ghazal, was known as ‘the Gazelle.’ Like Joha, he was a knowing fool who practiced his satire in royal courts and “knew how to cross [through] all doors” (Translated from Ibn Dihya who wrote about Al-Majus, from which English gets the word magician) (Jesús Cano and Louis Werner, Art by Belén Esturla, “Al-Ghazal: From Constantinople to the Land of the Vikings,” *Saudi Aramco World*. July/Aug. 2015.) In Urdu, *ghazal* means poem. The gazelle (*ghazaal* in Arabic and Persian) is an integral part of ghazal symbolism—the gazelle’s temperament overflows with contradictions. Because it is elusive, it foils its beloved and at the same time represents a human soul’s mystical quest for union with God. The Saudi Gazelle from the Arabian peninsula is now an extinct species. Our story observes God as this interconnectedness between humans and nature. The root of both of the word economics and ecology is “home”—*eco*. Again we revisit the paradoxical *qasida*—this time invoked by the 10th century polymath ibn Sina. Like Zazu, ibn Sina’s *Qasidat al-nafs*, (Poem on the Soul) “depicts the human soul as a strayed dove, which can only return home after retrieving awareness of its celestial origin.” Once again, we witness the Gazelle. See Mehr Afshan Farooqi, www.dawn.com/news/1190816/column-ghazal-ghazaal-and-gazelle.

²² In addition to its cross-cultural spiritual and mystical significance, salt is one of the strongest and safest natural elements. When salt isn’t refined and ground down, it is an extremely hard substance; it is a perfect energy efficient building material. The chemical reaction between salt and natural gums creates a strong material that does not dissolve. Salt is a natural air purifier that removes irritants and bacterial or fungal pathogens. It disinfects allergens like pollen and smoke from the air. By diffusing Cl₂ and oxygen ions, natural salt filters and purifies the urban polluted air. As climate crises accelerate, we need to strategize creative uses of salt.

and instructed me to go to the hammam. He gave me amber to rub on my wounds caused by the toxic plastic, and explained how amber is part of his spiritual-pharmacopeia. He told me that resin is the result of a tree attempting to heal itself. Amber is fossilized resin. Because trees all over the planet were dying from industrial civilization—like deforestation and desertification, amber’s healing properties had become even more powerful.



Ibn Sina²³ was the world-renowned ‘Prince of Physicians.’ Because the Shah, the sultan of Bukhara, supported the arts and sciences, ibn Sina was appointed court physician. Ibn Sina was first and foremost a *hakim*, a healer who did not treat disease; rather, he treated people who had diseases. His philosophy was rooted in lived interrelationships; harmony and resonance. Through a combination of philosophy and the natural sciences, he intended to heal the ‘disease of ignorance.’ Ibn Sina was a pioneer also in psychology—exploring the connections between emotional and physical states. Recognizing how our environments directly impact our well-being, he may have been the first scientist physician to understand the contagious nature of certain diseases and how disease may spread through contaminated water and soil. Ibn Sina represents spiritual intelligence as sacred activism. His historical contributions are another model from which contemporary activists could learn—in this case, intersectionality as a strategy to face climate crisis—a continual interplay between health of human bodies in junction with health of our environments. Like the metabolism of the human body and the earth’s tendency towards homeostasis, the metabolism of our global culture must be scrutinized as a relational organism.

²³ Ibn Sina (980-1037AD) was also known as Avicenna, or the Hebrew version, Aven Sina. A forerunner of preventative medicine, ibn Sina advocated good sleep habits, exercise, and even music to maintain healthy bodies. He also focused on pre- and post-natal medical care for mothers and babies. Although he did not know about ‘germs’ or microorganisms (the microscope had yet to be invented), Ibn Sina understood how people could catch measles, smallpox, and tuberculosis from other people, and he introduced quarantine as a means of containing infectious diseases. If Western societies had effectively learned from ibn Sina 800 years ago, possibly better sanitation and nutrition would have developed, instead of pharmaceutical tyranny. Furthermore, he strongly disagreed with medical testing on animals: “The experimentation must be done with the human body, for testing a drug on a lion or a horse might not prove anything about its effect on man” (Ibn Sina’s Rules of Clinical Trials, cited in David W. Tschanz, “The Islamic Roots of Modern Pharmacy,” *Saudi Aramco World*. May, June 2016: 21).



In our magical realist tale, Zazu learns from polymaths like ibn Sina as he searches for possibilities for a more compassionate world in the least expected places where you would think the opposite would be the case: amber,²⁴ sand,²⁵ salt,²⁶ microbes, and even human waste as alternatives to coal, oil, and

²⁴ The most ancient stone used for personal adornment, amber from the Arabic *anbar* عنبر, also has many medicinal properties. It is used for general cell regeneration, detoxification, and overall illness prevention. It helps to heal the central nervous system, including brain trauma and memory loss, and protects against radiation. It is helpful in ailments of the endocrine system, spleen, and heart. Wearing amber can help ease sore throat, earache, headache, digestive troubles, and babies' teething-pain, in addition to asthma, arthritis, and rheumatism. Holding a piece of amber helps overcome heat exhaustion. Given our intensifying global temperatures and exponential increase in autoimmune disorders, amber is an element we must consider. Amber can be between 50 to 135 million years old. Such amber houses complex ecosystems—many of which are destroyed when their forest habitat is destroyed. It is also used as fuel (<https://www.amberfuels.com/> and <https://amberresources.com/products/>). *Electrum*, meaning Sun, is another name for amber. It has been described as 'hardened rays of the sun.' Iranians use the Pahlavi word *kah-ruba* for amber—referring to its electrical properties; in Arabic the word for electricity is كهرباء *kahrabā*. The Greeks named amber *elektron*, from which the English word 'electricity' is derived.

And from the narrative of *Zazu Dreams: I remember my tia Zafira's story*: "Amber protected us when we were first in exile as captives under Nebuchadnezzar, just as it protected us from radiation during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. They say amber is hardened rays of sun. I burned powdered amber during your primo Zaman's childbirth because it helps in labor and prevents excessive bleeding. We have used it in our rituals to remember the ancient knowledge of our ancestors and to help reconnect with our many past lives. Tfu, Tfu, Tfu! Amber brings balance back because it helps us remember our relationship with the earth" (37).

²⁵ Sand rejects any stationary state; rather, it is "a world where existence was a series of states" (Kobe Abé, *Woman in the Dunes*. New York: Random House, 1962: 182). Sand is neither solid nor liquid, although it tends to behave like a liquid or gas, and can chemically transform into a solid and a liquid. Both sand and salt are dry liquids—again we see contradiction in action! "Dry sand itself behaves eerily like a liquid, but wet sand behaves more like a solid—as long as it's not too wet" (Michael Welland, *Sand: The Never Ending Story*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009: 51).

As the bookseller in Jorge Luis Borges' *El libro de arena* (*The Book of Sand*) tells Borges, "If space is infinite, we may be at any point in space. If time is infinite, we may be at any point in time" (Madrid: Emecé, 1975: 119). The book he sells him has Arabic page numbers, and is "called the *Book of Sand* because neither the book nor the sand has any beginning or end" (ibid.). Like salt and amber, the interstitial characteristic of sand represents *unity in diversity* while defying the tyranny certainty in which competition arises because one tries to cling to a fixed position: "If one were to give up a fixed position and abandon oneself to the movement of the sands, competition would soon stop. Actually, in the deserts flowers bloomed and insects and other animals lived their lives. These creatures were able to escape competition through their great ability to adjust—for example the man's beetle family" (Abé 15).

²⁶ Khalil Gibran wrote: "There must be something sacred in salt. It is in our tears and in the ocean." Salt offers a vivid

plastic. These “resources”-as-guides refute the tyranny of certainty; they are *contradiction in action*. When we combine ancestral healing traditions that include medico-magical properties with a deep investigation of modern civilization's addiction to “resources” we can ignite a radical commitment to creative alternatives through non-binary transmutation. We can collectively defy the “poverty of imagination.”²⁷ that dictates our current states of emergency (climate crisis, institutionalized racism, global poverty, Covid-19 pandemic). We ignite the vital interplay between cultural diversity and biodiversity.



By understanding the interconnections between our homogenized cultures, impoverished soils, and resulting malnutrition, we can collaboratively create alternatives to the Anthropocene in our everyday lives. This fertile territory that recognizes the intersections between ethnic identities and our natural environment can become a basis for global justice. It offers the possibility of transforming reductive binaries into consciously embracing the labyrinthine interconnectedness of a collective healing process. Islamic philosophies resonate with this enfoldment of our material, spiritual, and social bodies.

model of Tagore’s philosophical insight that the same stream that flows through your veins, flows through the universe in rhythmic measure. Tagore parallels human blood and water moving throughout nature. This relationship is both beautiful and painful in the Inquisitional context. Blood, sweat, and tears all contain salt; both the skin and the eyes are protected from infectious germs by the antibacterial effect of salt. Salt has astonishing detoxification healing powers—from within our own bodies, as well as salt from the earth. Salt water (manufactured as saline solution) has the same fluid quality as blood plasma.

²⁷ Matthew Schneide-Mayerson, Brent Ryan Bellamy, and Kim Stanley Robinson, *An Ecotopian Lexicon* Introduction. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019: 5.



Seyyed Hossein Nasr, professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University shares: “In the Islamic point of view, nature is alive. It’s conscious. It follows God’s laws. And what we’re doing is breaking those laws in the name of our own earthly welfare, and now we’re destroying the very habitat that God created for us.” For example, Algerian-born Pierre Rabhi is the founder of agroecology, the field of organic biodynamic agriculture that combines scientific knowledge with traditional wisdom. His concept *oasis en tous lieux* (oasis in any place) is becoming increasingly critical as a form of resistance not only to resist the desertification of our planet, but the desertification of our minds. It is also a pivotal, practical metaphor for those diasporic peoples who have been subject to relentless persecution (ranging from racial profiling of Islamic-Americans to Uighers to the Rohingya to the Ma'dan, Marsh People—all of whom are characters in *Zazu Dreams*). Our commitment to caring for our environment, is a form of hospitality, and both a personal and social commitment to nonviolence. “*They are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, and then he strengthens it so that it grows stout, and in the end stands firm upon its stem, delighting the sowers*” (*Qur'ān* 48:29). The *Qur'ān* that asserts *tazakkah* (acts of righteousness, charity, justice), of hospitality, is one way to honor God, and is as important as *Qur'ānic* study. Hospitality as spiritual intelligence teaches us compassion and empathy.



I argue that we work toward a modern *convivencia*²⁸ that could manifest as a collective-creative response to climate chaos. The Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change is a call to action for the 1.6 billion Muslims around the world: “God – whom we know as Allah – has created the universe in all its diversity, richness and vitality: the stars, the sun and moon, the earth and all its communities of living beings.” Consciousness-in-action—a spiritual intelligence—is represented in Islamic art, architecture, and engineering. These dynamic intersubjectivities implicit in conviviality are the lived social construct of mosaic-mentality. Non-binary traditions that reflect both social justice and oral storytelling histories include: *zelligs* (mosaics decorating Moroccan buildings), *kelim* carpets (made by Ghashghai women),²⁹ *giri*h (knot) designs,³⁰ and *qanats* (Medieval Iraqi aquifers). *Ibn Sina reminds*

²⁸ *Ummah* refers to the co-existence of Muslims and Jews as a community of believers. Under Medieval Islam, over 90% of Jews flourished throughout the Islamic world—a *convivencia*. In 2005, prompted by the efforts of a Jewish Ugandan farmer named J.J. Kei, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian Ugandan coffee farmers formed a fair-trade cooperative to build peace and economic prosperity—a form of modern economic *convivencia*. Their cooperative that they called Mirembe Kawomera translates as ‘delicious peace.’ See also: the documentary film “Delicious Peace Grows: In a Ugandan Coffee Bean,” www.deliciouspeacethemovie.com and www.mirembekawomera.com/farmers?farmer=1 This remarkable collaboration in Uganda is a contemporary example of Spain’s 14th century *Convivencia* during which various communities of Moors (Ibadis, Shi’is and Sunnis), Jews, and Christians lived and worked together in relative harmony.

Other convivial fair trade examples include: the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies and their Jordan-Israel Center for Community, Environment & Research and *Salam Shalom*, a mix of Jewish and Palestinian olive oil; *Sindyanna* of Galilee, combining olive oil from Galilee Arab and Jewish farmers for use in Peace Oil and providing Palestinian and Jewish women an opportunity to work together to promote land preservation, environmental quality, and women’s and labor rights. In 2015 at a community health fair, the first of its kind in the United States, the New York-based Foundation for Ethnic Understanding participated in a collaboration between Muslim and Jewish doctors to provide free medical screenings to low-income and uninsured residents of Houston, Texas (www.jpupdates.com/2014/11/16/vision-utopia-muslim-jewishdoctorsjoin-forces-treat-houston-residents/).

²⁹ Because of their commitment as guardians of their communities, Ghashghai women are known as maternal warriors. Ghashghai pastoral nomads primarily live near Shiraz, Iran—migrating with their flocks, about seven million head, twice a year between the Persian Gulf and the Zagros mountains. Their annual migration is the largest of any Persian tribe. The majority of Ghashghai tribe are Shi’ite Muslims and speak a Turkish dialect. The Ghashghai women are known for their geometric-patterned *Kelim* carpets made from sheep wool, goat, and horsehair. Ghashghai is also spelled Qashqai, Qeshqay, Ghashghai, Ghashghay, Gashgai, Gashgay, Kashkai, Qashqay, Qashqa’i.

³⁰ Trickster disturbs the illusory purity of “the almost unlimited number of knots that hold...a web [of signification] together” (Hyde 205).

Like Persian mosaics in Isfahan and the Ottoman tessellations in Istanbul, walls of interlocking magical patterns echo the Moorish tiles of infinity. Cross-cultural collaborating scholars in arts and sciences explore abstract, mystical thought in the study of *giri*h (knot) designs that “inspire contemplation and make a statement about the imponderable

Zazu: “Your alruwh, your soul, is like an intricately knotted Persian carpet, weaving all who you will meet along your journey. You have the capacity to question and listen and act without fear.”³¹

Similarly, Hoda El Shakry asks: In Maghrebi³² literature, “how do ethical concerns translate into an aesthetic or literary lexicon?”³³ Accretions of the intertwined past converge with the present and future to form elliptical stories that can guide us through climate chaos. Islamic architecture and engineering offers visions of possibility for social and environmental justice.



For example, *qanats*³⁴ are domestic and agricultural irrigation technologies, aquifers that were developed over two thousand years ago. Today, Iran relies on 50,000 *qanats*. Unlike massive modern electrical-powered water pumps, pipelines, and dams that deplete stores of underground water and dry out oases, the ingenious, practical, and sustainable *qanat*-method of harnessing limited water supplies is perfectly adapted to its arid environment. The use of *qanats* included farmers rationing and conserving their water consumption. As for a similar environmentally-conscious infrastructure, non-polluting architecture (without air-conditioning units) is used to mitigate the desert heat. Buildings include tall wind towers (absolutely not wind turbines!) with angles that catch the air currents and circulate them inside the walls.

Other architectural possibilities for radical environmental justice include the work of humanitarian

harmonies of a divinely ordered universe” (Robert Irwin, “Islamic Art in Context” cited in *Saudi Aramco World*, Sept./Oct. 2014: 31). *Girih* patterns are tessellations—embodying “spiritual cogitation and emotion through geometry. ... Mathematics is the only universal language, and has shown itself consistently capable of connecting people through time and space” (Sebastian Prange, “The Tiles of Infinity,” cited in *Saudi Aramco World*, Sept/Oct 2009, Vol. 60, #5). In *Zazu Dreams*, we are witnessing mathematics in the context of cosmology; and, we include *love* in this universal language.

³¹ (15).

³² The Maghreb refers to the Leon²⁷⁹

³³ Pennsylvania State U November, 2015.

³⁴ The extensive water Turpan, which lies below the fields. *Qanats* have different names in North Africa



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Nader Khalili who focused on housing structures for refugees, disaster victims, and the colonized poor. He taught them how to use the earth beneath their feet. Like cosmologist Stephen Hawking who professed that everything we need to know is already with us, Khalil believes that “Everything we need to build is in us, and in the place.” Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy, the Middle East’s “Father of Sustainable Architecture” using appropriate technology, also pioneered architecture for the poor. New Gourna Village is a housing project that evolved out of tomb raiding and is based on the ancient Nubian vault technique.³⁵ Again, intuition and transmutation rooted in traditional techniques are at the forefront of a vital lexicon that can uproot the foundations of the Anthropocene—leading to a modern *convivencia*.

The Islamic-Arabic moral construct of *adab* (creatively living one’s deepest values),³⁶ offers both individual and social behavioral ideals for which to strive to live an ethical life. *Adab* requires that one embodies interspecies decency. As Sarah Jawaid, director of the group Green Muslims affirms: “In the *Qur’ān*, God identifies nature as a tapestry of signs (*ayat*) for man to reflect upon his existence.” Chapters on specific non-human animals and how human animals can learn from them are disseminated throughout the *Qur’ān’s* holy scripture. Including “The Bees,” “The Cow,” “The Elephant,” “The Ant,” these stories invoke interspecies’ ancestral memories. They present models for symbiotic relationships and lessons in biomimicry.³⁷ Rhizomatic creativity generates a personal-political imperative rooted in the Commons in which intellectual and aesthetic risk-taking give vision and voice to social justice. This sacred activism manifests the interconnections within community regenerative movements—yet again demonstrating that we are inseparable from one another and from planet earth.

³⁵ See <https://architectureindevelopment.org/project.php?id=30>

³⁶ Similarly, the *Zohar* (the foundation of Jewish Kabbalistic thought) and the *yamas* and *niyamas* of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* in the Hindu tradition reflect this integration of the personal and the political.

³⁷ Conversation with Sahar Alsahlani, 2021. Additionally, see *Wild Solutions: How Biodiversity is Money in the Bank*, Andrew Beattie and Paul R. Ehrlich, New Haven, CT., Yale University Press, 2001.