Indigenous Peoples: an Islamic Perspective
Hamza Yusuf Hanson

Dyads have been with us since the advent of humanity and our challenge has always been, and continues to be, to balance them to our collective advantage.

In the foundational Abrahamic narrative of our species, we find a binary distinction in the story of Cain and Abel. In the Islamic tradition’s retelling of that story, one was a nomad, the other sedentary, and each brought an offering to God: Abel, the nomad, brought milk and a sheep, while Cain, the farmer, brought grain. According to the Qur’an, God accepted Abel’s offering but not Cain’s. An envious Cain then committed the first sin on earth: the sedentary farmer killed his brother, the nomad.

Other dyads are presented in the 49th chapter of the Qur’an: “We have created you from a male and a female and made you (ja‘alnākum) nations and tribes that you might know one another (and not despise one another). Surely the most dignified among you are the most conscientious of God” (49:13). In this verse, the Qur’an not only presents the gender binary, but more relevant to our discussion here, clearly states that God created another binary, that of two types of social organization—nations and tribes.

Nations (shu‘ūb) or “civilized” societies, are defined by their complex systems of knowledge transmission and governance, by their social systems that facilitate monetary based trade for mutual benefit, and by their civic institutions that promote the rule of law and the commonweal. Tribes (qabā’il), on the other hand, represent the aboriginal peoples, often nomadic, who develop arts and sciences necessary to maintain lives that lack the burdensome complexity of city lives. This Qur’anic sociological binary reveals a divine intention that we “might know one another,” which can foster mutual respect and recognition of the other’s way of being; neither one is superior to the other except in their facilitation of God consciousness, and both may benefit from knowledge of the other’s way of living.

In the absence of sincere mutual respect among nations and tribes, an imbalance of power defines the relationship. This is reflected in the first Abrahamic story of Cain and Abel (Qābil and Hābil in Arabic): the sedentary Cain uses sheer force to destroy the nomadic Abel who due to obedience to divine law refuses to defend himself. The pattern recurs throughout human history: the sedentary or “civilized” people subjugate the “savage” or nomadic people. In modern times, advanced technology, harnessed by more complex civilizations, has enabled them to dominate less sophisticated peoples with impunity, although it must be said that pre-modern people themselves were also often brutal to those outside their tribe. Nevertheless, the traditional peoples have been resilient in the face of the
onslaught of antagonism and chauvinism. Still, a glance across the globe today shows us countless indigenous peoples forcibly removed from their traditional patterns of sustainable living and sequestered in squalid enclosures, rapidly losing the ancestral ways that have sustained them for centuries.

The Qur’an states that God created everything in pairs (36:36), binaries that sustain a balance—the North and South poles that stabilize the rotation of the earth, darkness and light, and night and day, which provide the balance between rest and work for us. Analogously, the two ways of being in the world—sedentary and nomadic—create a binary necessary for balance. Sedentary peoples who respect traditional peoples have a lot to gain; nomadic peoples are a constant spiritual reminder of the fleeting and transient nature of the world: after all, we are all nomads passing through this worldly life.

Islam developed an approach of deference to first peoples, described in the Qur’an as either Bedouin or desert and steppe dwellers. The word Bedouin (badu in Arabic) is derived from a word that means “to appear or to begin.” Hence, the idea of first peoples is embedded in the very meaning of the word. In the Qur’an and in the Arabic language, Bedouin refers to any people who are not urbanized but subsist independently as nomads. The Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) adopted a deferential treatment toward aboriginal Arabs, speaking to them in their native dialects instead of his highly cultured city Arabic; when he entered Mecca, he braided his hair in four braids—normally discouraged by the citified Arabs—because it was the custom of the Bedouin in his army. Historically, Islamic dynasties never imposed settlement programs for nomads: rather, they understood them to be the way they are due to God’s intention based upon the Qur’anic verse about nations and tribes.

Indigenous peoples are considered to be people of fitrah, a Quranic concept found in the thirtieth chapter: “So set thy face steadily and truly to upright faith, the original (fitrah) handiwork of God according to the pattern (faṭara) on which God has made humanity. Do not change this primordial pattern, for that is the upright religion, but most men understand not” (30:30). Fitrah refers to the principal nature of human beings that inclines us naturally toward devotion and first philosophy or the desire to know causes, and then to know the ultimate cause of all things: hence, the profound metaphysical cosmogonies of so-called “primitive” peoples.

The Qur’an emphasizes the need for people to conserve the virtues that make cultures flourish, and to avoid the natural degeneracy of civilizations: “Why were there not, among the generations before you, persons possessed of balance conserving the past and prohibiting men from mischief in the earth—except for a
few among them who We saved from harm. But the oppressors pursued the luxuries and pleasures they were immersed in and persisted in their sin” (11:116).

Ibn Khaldūn (d. 805/1403), the polymath scholar of North Africa, writing in his *Prolegomena of History*, introduces a novel theory of the importance aboriginal peoples play in the renewal of civilizations. He presents a primordial division, a social binary that argues that a recurrent pattern in history reveals a tension between the nomadic and the sedentary, between city dwellers and plains peoples. Town dwellers, he argues, driven by a desire for luxury, slide into decadence and replace their earlier ruggedness and their Spartan lifestyles with more and more immoderate and extravagant ones. He discerns five stages of dynastic states which begin with social solidarity and sacrifice and end with their descent into decadence and factionalism. In contrast, indigenous peoples, seasoned by their struggle and subsistence-based survival, have much greater fortitude and grit, as well as greater spiritual power and faith, than their sedentary counterparts, which makes them less susceptible to moral decay. From time to time, these tribal groups overrun the city dwellers and create social renewal after a breakdown. They bring a new sense of spirituality, renew the debauched culture, but alas, they too become corrupted and decadent eventually and the pattern repeats itself.

Ibn Khaldūn’s model reflects the foundational human narrative presented in the Qur’an, the tension between Cain and Abel: Cain symbolizes the sedentary farmer who lives within the diurnal constructs of the passage of time, while Abel symbolizes the hunter-nomad who lives in space.

Anthropologists recognize differences between mono-chronic or time-based cultures and poly-chronic or space-based ones. Sedentary peoples work with linear time, chronos—their projects are dictated by time; hence clocks become essential. First peoples, on the other hand, move through time in space; hence they develop a poly-chronic sense, or kairos: “The hunter stalks a prey, and successfully kills it when an instantaneous identity takes place between the hunter and the prey, as symbolized by the arrow that finds its mark. There is no duration but a perfect moment.”1 Sedentary people develop visual arts, and indigenous people develop oral arts of epic poetry and storytelling that reveal time as a hidden dimension in the nomad’s life. “The murder of Abel by Cain signifies time’s destruction of space.”2

Before the fall, man exists in space (the Garden), and time is eternity (*nunc stans*). With the fall, humans enter into the dimension of change in time and thus corruption and decay. As time dominates space, space is removed: communications are instantaneous without the obstacle of space; movement becomes dwarfed within space, and time is folded up; face-to-face communication
becomes mediated by machines that remove space from life—we no longer visit; we text or call.

Cain brings time (his crops nurtured in time that grow in one place), while Abel brings space (his sheep nurtured by movement through space). God’s blessing is with Abel, while Cain, after he kills Abel, is exiled to the Land of Nod, east of Eden. Josephus writes in Book II of his *Antiquities of the Jews* that after his exile, Cain continues his wicked ways “building a city in the land of Nod.” Josephus continues:

He did not accept his punishment in order to amendment, but to increase his wickedness; for he only aimed to procure everything that was for his own bodily pleasure, though it obliged him to be injurious to his neighbors. He augmented his household substance with much wealth by rapine and violence; he excited his acquaintance to procure pleasure and spoils of robbery, and became a great leader of men into wicked courses. He also introduced a change in that way of simplicity wherein men lived before, and *was the author of measures and weights*. And whereas they lived innocently and generously while they knew nothing of such arts, he changed the world into cunning and craftiness. *He first of all set boundaries about lands*; he built a city and fortified it with walls, and he compelled his family to come together to it.³

Hence, the original man of nature becomes a city dweller eternally at odds with the nomad and compelling him to come to the city. As time passes, movement through space becomes more and more restricted. The indigenous peoples are forced onto reservations, townships, and the urban wastelands and mega-slums; refugees, prohibited from free movement in space, are restricted to suffering time in an unlivable place.

Today, we find nomads, or first peoples, all over the Muslim world—Kurds, Turkomans, Central Asians (such as Kazakhs), Berber, as well as Arab nomads. In the past 50 years, driven by the rapid penetration of electricity and modern technology, many have been settled by the modern Muslim states that emerged out of the colonial European states.

I would like to conclude by sharing some observations from my own personal experience. I lived among indigenous people for over seven years, spending more than a year with a nomadic tribe in the Saharan desert. I benefitted greatly during that time—I learned how to navigate by the stars, how to tell time by the length of shadows, how to milk a camel and a cow, and I derived great pleasure from the most simple rituals, such as a slow tea with soulful company. I learned that all of
life is art that reflects divine beauty. But most of all, I learned that we need very little to not just survive, but thrive. Now, I live in Northern California, in close proximity to Silicon Valley, one of the most technologically advanced places of the “civilized” or sedentary world. I have, indeed, looked at life from both sides, from the simple tribal view and the complex nation’s view, from both the nomadic and the sedentary perspectives and each enriches my life.

There is no doubt that traditional indigenous peoples sought to conform their souls to the natural world (fitrah), and their path was self-discipline, practical knowledge, and virtue. The modern “civilized” people struggle with how to force the world into conformity with human desires—hence the constant pursuit of luxury (from luxuria), one of the seven deadly sins. And the remedy, for them, lies in the pursuit of advanced technology, of trans-humanist projects, and of immortality. It is a Faustian pursuit that is profoundly, yet easily, refuted by a simple believer among indigenous peoples, who would give all he has to his neighbor out of the ancient aboriginal “law of hospitality,” the gift that the tent-dweller Abraham gave to his family: Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

