A CLOSE READING

TURF WARS? In what the Frankfurt Organizing Committee calls a “carefully drafted” “letter of invitation,” they appear to use PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE arguments to hide hostility, which likely will result in sabotaging the ability of Somali indigenous experts on the cultural heritage of Shiid Birood, to obtain visas to attend the 88th Annual Meeting of the Meteoritical Society. The invitation begins with an officious tone, “To whom it may concern.” States that we will be of no “scientific benefit to the meeting,” and closes flatly with “Sincerely.” It is the nightmare of a letter you fear you might expect from an advisor, a reviewer, or a recommender. They claim that “the letter has been carefully drafted and presents all the information that [they] have had at hand.” They ignore readily accessible information already provided to them. Their ignorance is not evidence of due diligence. Apparently, their authority on the subject of Shiid Birood is derived exclusively from the out-of-date, anonymous and self-righteous editors of the Wikipedia page on El Ali. No scholarly journal would admit Wikipedia as an authoritative source. Wikipedia’s abhorrence of experts, resulted in moving the link to our five years of work to the bottom of Wikipedia’s page, to the section on “External Links” where we are listed as “El Ali Status Information: An up-to-date and authoritative archive of professional presentations, reports, videos, and images.” The “El Ali Status Information” link is also in the signature block on every email sent to the committee. The Organizing Committee chose to fully ignore our previous conference sessions in Nairobi and at UCLA as well as a letter and report to METEORITICS AND PLANETARY SCIENCES, a grant from the METEORITICAL SOCIETY, a pending additional grant from the METEORITICAL SOCIETY, and recent editorials in SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN and the UK TELEGRAPH.

A letter of invitation should be addressed to an Embassy and written diplomatically. It was inappropriate to unnecessarily invoke a TURF WAR with PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE arguments.

I have spent many days and sleepless nights over the last few weeks trying to understand why the Frankfurt organizers would write such a “letter of invitation,” and trying to understand why it had such a profoundly negative effect on me personally, leading me to question whether I was even welcome to attend the August conference. It seems their hostility is mirrored in the analysis of PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE argument, to throw ones adversaries off balance. OK, if that’s the game we play in academia, so be it. But let’s not engage in it to belittle the status of indigenous communities.

As much as it greatly disturbs me to think and say so, their behaviors are remarkably consistent to reopening the unfortunate TURF WARS. In the meteoritic context, the TURF WARS (arguments to decide who controls the intellectual (and legal) title to an area or an activity) may be generalized by the conflict between these statements:

1. Meteorites are natural minerals and are the exclusive intellectual and physical property of the natural sciences.

2. Meteorites, as human modified artifacts are a part of cultural heritage and are the shared intellectual and legal property of the indigenous peoples who modified and protected often voiced by the social sciences (ethnology, anthropology, archaeology, history and human rights advocates).

I remember the science wars of the 1990s. They are now often considered to be an organizational pathology. I thought we had grown past those disputes with more multidisciplinary collaboration. But on reflection, we have not. Who gets to own meteorites is disputed by *de facto* practices and *de jur* laws everywhere. Who gets to speak on behalf of meteorites now seems to be the exclusive prerogative of the Frankfurt organizing committee. In their ethical guidelines, the American Museum of Natural History agrees with the Smithsonian, that natural materials modified by man are cultural heritage objects, not simply rocks and minerals. There are even instances where natural features are given the same personhood as corporations. Boards are formed that speak on behalf of those resources. Those resources have many of the same rights as humans.

The entire controversy over ownership of the Shiid Birood / Ceel Cali / El Ali meteorite began as a TURF WAR. It was argued to be a mineral and nothing else, by those who violently unearthed it. It was resisted by the local residents and indigenous people of El Ali who claimed it as their cultural heritage, under local traditions, and contemporary Western law:

https://people.duke.edu/~ng46/El-Ali/#:~:text=Legal%20Theories%20regarding%20the%20Ownership%20of%20Previously%20Unowned%20Property.

The day the worst conflict took place, February 8, 2020, in Hirshabelle State, Al Shabaab took possession of the meteorite by force, resulting in at least one death. They sold it to a group of "investors," who formed the apparent shell company, Kureym Rocks, in Mogadishu, 250 kilometers away. Kureym Rocks, two days later, on February 10, 2020, obtained a prospecting permit with false GPS coordinates, from the previous Ministry of Petroleum and Minerals. One of the owners of Kureym Rocks later passed his fantastic story of prospectors looking for opals on to me to include in the History section of the Meteoritical Bulletin entry for El Ali. In it he claimed, as PROVENANCE, that "a group of four Somali men prospecting precious stones in the Hiiraan region of Central Regions of Somalia found a boulder near the city of Beledweyne" on April 5, 2020. Another partner testified the meteorite was being offered for sale as early as 2019. I knew something wasn't quite right when I learned that "The truck and 'large heavy rock' were taken into custody by national security officers." We now have 16 news video accounts with translations on our website. The "History" portion of the Meteoritical Bulletin needs retraction and revision. We are working on that. Later, Kureym Rocks obtained an export permit from the previous Ministry of Petroleum and Minerals falsely describing the meteorite as

a “sample,” when they had previously signed a letter on letterhead declaring that it was intended “for sale.” To the previous Ministry of Petroleum and Minerals the meteorite was a rock, a mineral, and nothing more. Not realizing that a rock could also be an object of cultural significance, the official policy in both Somalia’s Constitution and in statements of the Ministry of Petroleum and Minerals, clearly declared the importance of conserving objects of heritage significance. Thus, TURF WARS, are not simply intellectual disputes, they influence millions of dollars of investments and result in human lives.

Let’s look closely at this statement in the letter of invitation,

> “The professions of the El Ali delegation demonstrate that most are not trained scientists in the field of meteoritics and will, thus, not contribute to the scientific topics nor will they add scientific benefit to the meeting.”

Aren’t “trained scientists” expected to be civil with practitioners of the other sciences involved with meteorites? What an unprofessional, demeaning, denigrating and disparaging thing to say indirectly to the invitees, in the context of a letter to an Embassy! And is there any logic in these uncompromising false dialectics: The word “most” now slips to “all.” The word “trained” now slips to the “untrained of no benefit.” The invitees are not delegates; they are a coalition of the indigenous families and the clans who have herded camels and livestock in the area for generations and individuals in Somalia as well as many non-Somalis across the world who respect the cultural significance of meteorites, both to indigenous peoples, and to international efforts to explore the origins of our planet and of life. Buchwald’s statement about the “life and fate” of peoples, though focused on indigenous peoples of prehistory and protohistory, if extended to include people making history today, would make that “intimate connection” extend to, and be shared by, an astronomically greater population.

And the Frankfurt committee provides the Embassy with this further reference:

> “For further information and links see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/El_Ali_meteorite.”

Have they not heard the grade school, high school and university level advice, “take Wikipedia with a grain or hundredweight of salt?” Why did they not provide a reference to our own El Ali Status page? https://people.duke.edu/~ng46/El-Ali/ All of our correspondence with the Frankfurt committee contained that link, highlighted in the usual blue, at the bottom in our signature.

We requested a rewrite of the letter of invitation. This is what the committee wrote in their refusal of our request.

> “The letter has been carefully drafted and presents all the information that we have at hand.”

Apparently, the committee's response was so carefully drafted that it conveniently ignored any of the information cited above. The committee then again reminded us that we missed some deadlines, which we acknowledged. And added the demeaning statement,

> "It is a shame that the Somali delegation did not submit an abstract or an request for a special session."

They followed with yet another falsehood,

> "Both of which would have demonstrated their scientific interest and signalized the significance for their participation."

This is a clear example of a *non sequitur*, and GAS-LIGHTING, the fabrication of an irrelevant narrative to justify their refusal to revise their letter of invitation. Yes, we missed presentation deadlines, but there is no deadline for registration. The important deadline that we are now forced to miss, is that which was placed by the European Union on citizens of Somalia on June 25, extending the Schengen Visa processing time from 15 days to 45.

Our scientific interest has been widely circulated. Our coalition's five years of work, and the incredible largely unrecognized work of the indigenous community which has continued for several generations, guarding the meteorite from theft, and integrating it into their cultural traditions continues to be illuminated.

The organizing committee then continued with their denigration:

> "It is at the discretion of the organizers to decide whether or not to write a letter of invitation to potential participants, especially from a different field of science, who do not intend to actively contribute (scientifically) to the meeting with either an oral or poster presentation and who feel it necessary to bring lawyers, reporters and diplomats with them."

The committee's arrogance is astounding. Does being a member of "different fields of science." justify the claim that "we do not intend to actively contribute." Clearly, for five years, we have actively and scientifically contributed, and do intend to actively and scientifically contribute, but the committee's hostility appears to stifel it. And then we read the ridiculous assertion that we "feel necessary to bring lawyers, reporters and diplomats with" us. We are not **bringing** these professions. We **are** of these professions. We include members of the local families and clans who have protected the meteorite, and utilized it and its impact site for generations. Our original request concerning eight invitees consisted of one journalist, one geologist, one information scientist, one indigenous community leader, one human rights attorney, one UN Mission Interpreter and two diplomats. Why does the committee now denigrate these formidable accomplishments? The thought is so preposterous that the word "accomplishment" does not even have an antonym!

If this egregious pattern of argument is not enough to signal an Ethical Violation due to lack of diligence on their part, a lack of logic, and an omission of authoritative sources, consider that it

has taken well over ten days of my time to respond, but more importantly, consider that the indigenous people who have shepherded this meteorite for generations as camel and livestock herders of El Ali, some of whom have reached the heights of the professions the Frankfurt Organizing Committee so deeply disparages. The indigenous community has been so intentionally targeted by these offending phrases that their chances of joining us in Frankfurt are gravely diminished, if not sabotaged completely. There can be no just remedy for this behavior.

Nicholas Gessler
Websmith
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