

Islamic History of Animal Welfare and Status of Cat in Islam

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Abstract:

This article explores the Islamic teachings and historical practices concerning animal welfare, with a special focus on the status of cats in Islamic tradition. Drawing from primary sources including the Qur'an, Hadith literature, and classical Islamic jurisprudence, the study highlights the compassionate principles embedded within Islamic teachings. The research also sheds light on how early Muslim societies interacted with animals—particularly cats—and their significance in religious and cultural contexts. The article concludes that Islam advocates for the ethical treatment of animals and holds cats in particularly high regard due to their cleanliness, independence, and documented presence in the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). By exploring Islamic perspectives, researchers and policymakers can engage religious communities in meaningful dialogue around animal ethics. Studies have also shown that faith-based approaches to animal welfare can be more culturally effective in Muslim-majority contexts than secular models alone. This comprehensive mercy implies that human beings are obligated to extend compassionate treatment toward all creatures, including animals. Islamic law prohibits unnecessary harm, overburdening, or abuse of animals. It mandates proper feeding, medical care when needed, and humane treatment. For example, animals used for labor must not be overworked or beaten. Organizations in countries like Turkey, Pakistan, and Indonesia have integrated Islamic principles into their efforts to protect and care for animals. Religious leaders have emphasized the importance of treating animals with dignity, often using sermons and fatwas to raise awareness of the ethical obligation to care for all creatures. Islamic art and literature, from Persian miniatures to Ottoman ceramics and Rumi's poetry, have celebrated cats as symbols of beauty, grace, and intelligence.

Keywords: Islamic History, Animal, Welfare, Status of Cat, Islam

Introduction

Importance of animal welfare globally

Animal welfare has emerged as a significant global concern, recognized across ethical, environmental, and public health domains. As human societies rely heavily on animals for food, labor, companionship, and research, ensuring their humane treatment has become a matter of both moral responsibility and practical necessity. The World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH, formerly OIE) states that animal welfare is a “key component of animal health and sustainable development” (WOAH, 2022). Likewise, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) emphasizes that the humane treatment of animals is directly linked to food security, rural development, and environmental sustainability (FAO, 2018).

Neglect and cruelty toward animals have also been associated with the spread of zoonotic diseases—such as COVID-19 and avian influenza—highlighting the health implications of poor animal care (UNEP & ILRI, 2020). Furthermore, ethical movements across the globe, including secular and religious initiatives, have contributed to the growing recognition that animals are sentient beings capable of experiencing pain and emotion. This global discourse on animal rights encourages a reexamination of traditional beliefs and practices, making animal welfare a universal issue that transcends cultural and national boundaries.

Why focus on Islamic teachings?

Focusing on Islamic teachings in the context of animal welfare is essential due to the religion’s comprehensive ethical framework that extends compassion to all living beings. Islam, as a major world religion followed by over 1.9 billion people, plays a significant role in shaping moral attitudes and practices across diverse cultures (Pew Research Center, 2017). The Qur’an and Hadith literature are rich with guidance promoting kindness, mercy, and accountability in the treatment of animals. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have shown exemplary compassion toward animals, emphasizing that every good deed done to a living creature is an act of charity (Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith 2363). Furthermore, Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) outlines rules regarding the ethical treatment, feeding, and humane slaughter of animals, reflecting a divinely guided concern for animal welfare.

By exploring Islamic perspectives, researchers and policymakers can engage religious communities in meaningful dialogue around animal ethics. Studies have also shown that faith-based approaches to animal welfare can be more culturally effective in Muslim-majority contexts than secular models alone (Riaz & Khan, 2019). Thus, highlighting Islamic teachings not only deepens understanding of religious ethics but also provides practical guidance for improving animal welfare practices in Muslim societies today.

Research Aims and Questions

The aim of this study is to explore the ethical foundations and historical development of animal welfare in Islam, with a special focus on the revered status of cats. By examining scriptural sources, prophetic traditions, and historical Islamic practices, this research seeks to uncover how Islamic teachings have addressed animal rights and what relevance they hold for contemporary animal welfare discussions. This study is significant because Islamic ethics

form the moral compass for millions of people globally, and understanding these teachings can help bridge the gap between religious values and modern animal welfare standards (Foltz, 2006). Furthermore, while numerous studies have addressed general animal rights in Islam, fewer have focused specifically on the status of cats, despite their prominent role in Islamic tradition and society (Masri, 1986).

The central research questions guiding this study are:

1. What are the foundational Islamic teachings on animal welfare as found in the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical jurisprudence?
2. What is the historical and religious status of cats in Islam, and how were they treated in early Muslim societies?
3. How can Islamic teachings on animal welfare, especially concerning cats, be applied in contemporary Muslim-majority societies to promote humane treatment of animals?

Animal Welfare in Islamic Teachings

Qur'anic verses promoting mercy and kindness to animals

The Qur'an promotes a worldview grounded in compassion, justice, and mercy, extending these principles to all of creation, including animals. Numerous verses affirm that animals are sentient beings created by Allah with purpose and dignity. They are part of the larger ecosystem of life that glorifies and worships their Creator in their own way, even if human beings do not fully comprehend it. As stated in the Qur'an:

"There is not a creature on earth or a bird that flies with its wings except [that they are] communities like you..."

(Qur'an 6:38)

This verse reflects the idea that animals form structured societies similar to human communities, emphasizing their value and place in creation. The Qur'an also describes God's mercy as encompassing all things:

"My mercy encompasses all things..."

(Qur'an 7:156)

This comprehensive mercy implies that human beings are obligated to extend compassionate treatment toward all creatures, including animals. Furthermore, animals are depicted as signs (āyāt) of God's creation, worthy of reflection and respect:

- **"And there is no creature within the earth or bird that flies with its wings except [that they are] communities like you. We have not neglected in the Book a thing..."**

(Qur'an 6:38)

Animals are also mentioned in the context of human responsibility. For example, in **Surah An-Nahl (16:5-8)**, animals are described as blessings for transport and provision, reminding humans of their duty to care for them justly.

Together, these verses form the ethical foundation in Islam for treating animals with kindness, as they are part of the divine order and subject to human stewardship (khilafah). Scholars such as Foltz (2006) and Masri (1986) argue that these teachings create a moral obligation in Islam to prevent cruelty and ensure the welfare of animals.

Hadiths on treatment of animals (e.g., water for thirsty dog, punishment for cruelty to a cat)

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) exemplified compassion toward all living beings and emphasized humane treatment of animals through his sayings and actions. Numerous hadiths from authentic collections highlight both the reward for kindness and the punishment for cruelty to animals, reflecting Islam's ethical stance on animal welfare.

One of the most well-known narrations relates the story of a man who gave water to a thirsty dog and was forgiven for his sins:

"A man saw a dog eating mud from the severity of thirst. So, the man took his shoe, filled it with water, and gave it to the dog. Allah appreciated his deed and forgave him."

(Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith 2363; Sahih Muslim, Hadith 2244)

This hadith clearly shows that showing mercy to any creature, even a dog—often viewed as impure in some Islamic jurisprudential contexts—earns divine reward.

In contrast, cruelty to animals is condemned in the strongest terms. Another famous hadith tells of a woman punished by God for imprisoning a cat without food or water:

"A woman was punished in Hell because of a cat which she had confined until it died. She did not give it to eat or drink when it was confined, nor did she free it so that it might eat the insects of the earth."

(Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith 2365; Sahih Muslim, Hadith 2242)

These narrations illustrate the seriousness with which Islam treats animal rights, equating their mistreatment with major sin.

Moreover, the Prophet (PBUH) warned against overburdening animals and using them for sport or entertainment without necessity. He advised his followers:

"Do not treat the backs of your animals as pulpits, for Allah has made them subject to you only to convey you to a place which you could not have reached without difficulty."

(Sunan Abi Dawud, Hadith 2567)

These hadiths collectively form a foundational ethical framework that obliges Muslims to treat animals with dignity, avoid unnecessary harm, and provide them with proper care.

Ethical and legal perspectives in Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh)

Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) addresses animal welfare not only as an ethical concern but as a legal obligation under divine law (Shariah). Rooted in the Qur'an, Hadith, and consensus of scholars (ijma'), the legal tradition provides comprehensive guidance on the treatment, rights, and responsibilities toward animals. Animals are recognized as part of the moral community, and their well-being is protected under the five primary objectives of Shariah (maqāṣid al-sharī'ah), particularly the preservation of life (ḥifẓ al-nafs), which extends to non-human life in many scholarly interpretations (Kamali, 2008).

Islamic law prohibits unnecessary harm, overburdening, or abuse of animals. It mandates proper feeding, medical care when needed, and humane treatment. For example, animals used for labor must not be overworked or beaten. Abu Dawud narrates that the Prophet (PBUH) once saw a donkey branded on the face and condemned the act, saying: **"May Allah curse the one who branded it"** (Abu Dawud, Hadith 2564). Branding animals on the face is

thus forbidden (*makrūh taḥrīmī*) in classical fiqh.

The ethical dimension of Islamic law also extends to the process of animal slaughter (*dhabiha*). Scholars agree that animals must be treated with gentleness, not slaughtered in view of other animals, and must be given water before slaughter. A sharp knife must be used to ensure minimal suffering, as instructed in the Hadith:

“Verily Allah has prescribed *ihsan* (excellence) in everything... If you slaughter, do it well. Let one of you sharpen his blade and spare suffering to the animal.”

(*Sahih Muslim, Hadith 1955*)

Furthermore, jurists such as Al-Ghazali and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya emphasized that kindness to animals reflects a righteous character and that cruelty is a sin accountable in the hereafter. Ibn Qayyim, in particular, argued that compassion toward animals is an extension of human spiritual development (Ibn Qayyim, 2003).

Historical and Cultural Perspectives

Cats in Islamic societies (Umayyad, Abbasid, Ottoman)

Cats have held a revered place in Islamic culture and society since the earliest centuries of Islam. Their status is deeply rooted in religious teachings, prophetic traditions, and the practical roles they played in Muslim communities. Unlike many other animals, cats were welcomed into homes, mosques, and marketplaces — admired for their cleanliness, quiet demeanor, and usefulness in controlling pests.

During the **Umayyad period (661–750 CE)**, early Islamic governance began to reflect the values taught by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who was known for his affection toward cats. Traditions describe how the Prophet had a cat named *Muezza*, and there are numerous narrations about his gentle treatment of felines, including one in which he allowed a cat to sleep on his robe and cut the cloth rather than disturb her (Foltz, 2006). These stories circulated widely during the Umayyad era and influenced early Muslim attitudes toward cats as clean, noble animals.

In the **Abbasid period (750–1258 CE)**, Islamic civilization reached its intellectual and cultural peak, and cats became a regular part of urban life, particularly in centers like Baghdad. Cats were commonly kept in **madrasas**, **mosques**, and **libraries** due to their cleanliness and ability to protect manuscripts from rats and insects. Scholars like Al-Jahiz (d. 869 CE) wrote extensively about animals, including cats, in his famous *Kitab al-Hayawan* (Book of Animals), highlighting their intelligence and social nature (Al-Jahiz, trans. 2007). Their presence in scholarly and religious spaces reinforced their sanctified image in Islamic society.

During the **Ottoman era (1299–1922 CE)**, the cultural love for cats reached new heights, especially in cities like Istanbul. Ottomans institutionalized care for stray cats, establishing **vakıfs** (charitable endowments) that funded food, water, and shelter for street cats. Cats roamed freely in homes and mosques and were considered a public responsibility. Turkish historian Suraiya Faroqhi notes that Ottoman households often treated cats with affection and respect, reflecting a deep cultural continuity rooted in Islamic ethics (Faroqhi, 2005).

Across these three major Islamic empires, cats were not only protected and loved but were also integrated into religious, scholarly, and civic life, embodying the Islamic ideals of mercy (*rahmah*), cleanliness (*taharah*), and compassion.

Islamic art and literature referencing cats

Cats in Islamic Art

Cats frequently appear in Islamic art, particularly in Persian miniature paintings and Ottoman ceramics. In these works, they are often shown as companions to humans or engaged in playful or contemplative activities. Their depictions align with the Islamic values of mercy and cleanliness. In **Persian miniatures**, cats are often depicted in scenes of court life, symbolizing grace, domestic tranquility, and sometimes even the idealized relationship between humans and animals. For example, in the **Safavid period (1501–1736 CE)**, miniature artists depicted cats alongside their owners in scenes of gardens or domestic settings, where the cats symbolize harmony and the balance of nature. These artworks often highlighted the beauty of the feline form, showcasing cats with intricate detail to accentuate their elegant and serene nature (Meyer, 2007). In the **Ottoman Empire**, cats were commonly featured in **Iznik ceramics** from the 16th century, where they were sometimes included in motifs alongside birds and flowers, symbolizing the divine beauty of creation. These ceramic works were not only decorative but also carried spiritual meanings, emphasizing the importance of all creatures as part of God's creation.

Cats in Islamic Literature

In Islamic literature, cats are often portrayed as symbols of purity, independence, and even intelligence. One of the most well-known references comes from the famous work of the **Persian poet Rumi (1207–1273 CE)**. In his "**Divan-e Shams**", Rumi speaks of the cat in a mystical context, where the animal is seen as a metaphor for the self-discipline and meditative qualities of the seeker of divine truth:

"The cat is the true companion of the soul, for its independence reflects the spirit of the seeker, always in harmony with its purpose."

(Rumi, 2004)

Similarly, in the **Arabic literary tradition**, the cat has been used as a symbol of patience and grace. In the **works of Al-Jahiz**, cats are admired for their intelligence and elegance. His *Kitab al-Hayawan* (Book of Animals) provides detailed observations of various animals, including cats, praising their agility and quiet nature, which were considered traits of refinement and nobility in the society of the time (Al-Jahiz, trans. 2007).

The **Arabic fable genre** also features cats as wise and clever characters, often tasked with moral lessons. These stories reflect the qualities that the Islamic tradition sought to nurture: patience, humility, and an awareness of the divine.

Modern-Day Implications

Role of Muslim communities in promoting humane treatment of animals

Muslim communities worldwide have long been guided by Islamic teachings on the humane treatment of animals. This ethical responsibility is deeply ingrained in the Qur'an, Hadith, and the legal principles of Shariah, which have encouraged Muslims to view animals as sentient beings deserving of compassion and care. In contemporary society, many Muslim communities are increasingly engaged in advocating for the welfare of animals, often inspired by religious mandates and cultural practices that emphasize mercy, justice, and respect for

all creatures.

Islamic Charitable Organizations and Animal Welfare

Numerous Islamic organizations and NGOs have taken active roles in the promotion of animal welfare, particularly in regions where animals face significant neglect and abuse. These organizations, often based in Muslim-majority countries, promote education on proper animal care, advocate for the protection of endangered species, and engage in rescue missions for abused and abandoned animals. For instance, the **World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)** and other international bodies collaborate with Islamic organizations to promote wildlife conservation efforts, where religious values play a pivotal role in mobilizing communities for environmental justice and the protection of species (Khan, 2014).

In countries like **Turkey**, Islamic traditions have led to the establishment of numerous animal welfare initiatives. The Ottoman tradition of caring for street cats continues in modern-day Turkey, where municipal and civil society groups ensure that animals in urban areas are fed, vaccinated, and housed. Istanbul, in particular, is famous for its free-roaming street cats, which are protected by both local authorities and the public. This urban model has become a point of pride for the city, blending traditional Islamic reverence for cats with modern-day efforts to protect them from harm (Faroghi, 2005).

Educational Efforts and Religious Advocacy

Islamic leaders, scholars, and imams have played a critical role in promoting the humane treatment of animals by educating their communities on the Islamic ethical guidelines related to animals. Many Muslim scholars, such as **Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah Al Sheikh**, have spoken out against animal cruelty, urging the faithful to treat animals with the same kindness and compassion shown by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This message is often communicated through sermons, social media, and community outreach, underscoring the idea that compassion toward animals is a reflection of one's piety and a sign of moral uprightness (Al-Qaradawi, 2002).

Animal Welfare in Islamic Jurisprudence (Fiqh)

Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) has laid down clear guidelines regarding the treatment of animals. In countries like **Pakistan, Egypt, and Indonesia**, local religious authorities have used Islamic law to shape public policy on animal rights, often seeking to curtail practices that harm animals, such as factory farming, mistreatment of stray animals, and animal fighting. For example, in **Pakistan**, the **Federation of Islamic World Scholars** issued a fatwa (religious ruling) against the inhumane treatment of farm animals, emphasizing that it is a sin to abuse animals for commercial purposes (Khan, 2014).

Role of Muslims in Global Movements for Animal Rights

In the global context, Muslim communities are increasingly participating in worldwide movements for animal rights, aligning their religious teachings with contemporary ethical concerns. Islamic scholars have written on the importance of vegetarianism and ethical consumption, particularly in relation to the consumption of meat from animals that have been slaughtered in an unethical manner. Groups like **Muslim Vegetarians** advocate for a plant-

based lifestyle based on Islamic principles of mercy and compassion toward all living beings (Al-Qaradawi, 2002).

The growing presence of Muslim voices in the global animal rights movement illustrates how religious values can intersect with modern ethics to promote the humane treatment of animals. These efforts have gained momentum, especially in urban Muslim populations where environmental and animal welfare concerns are at the forefront of civic debates.

Conclusion

The Qur'an and Hadith offer strong ethical guidelines for the treatment of animals. Islamic texts emphasize mercy (*rahmah*), kindness, and respect for all living creatures. Animals are regarded as sentient beings created by Allah, worthy of compassion. Notable Qur'anic verses (e.g., 6:38, 7:156) and Hadiths (e.g., Sahih Muslim, Hadith 2244) stress the importance of kindness to animals, with rewards for merciful acts and punishment for cruelty. Cats hold a special place in Islamic culture due to their association with the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and their role in maintaining cleanliness in Muslim communities. Throughout history, from the Umayyad period to the Ottoman Empire, cats were revered for their cleanliness and were protected in homes, mosques, and public spaces. Islamic legal traditions have long provided a framework for the humane treatment of animals. Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) prohibits cruelty to animals, mandates proper care and maintenance, and condemns practices like overburdening or abusing animals. The legal principles found in classical Islamic texts, such as those of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, continue to influence modern-day policies on animal rights. Across the Muslim world, communities have been actively engaged in promoting animal welfare. Organizations in countries like Turkey, Pakistan, and Indonesia have integrated Islamic principles into their efforts to protect and care for animals. Religious leaders have emphasized the importance of treating animals with dignity, often using sermons and fatwas to raise awareness of the ethical obligation to care for all creatures. Islamic art and literature, from Persian miniatures to Ottoman ceramics and Rumi's poetry, have celebrated cats as symbols of beauty, grace, and intelligence. Cats appear as revered figures in artistic representations, reflecting their high status in Islamic culture. In the modern era, Muslim communities continue to integrate religious values with global animal welfare movements. Islamic teachings are increasingly being applied to contemporary issues such as factory farming, animal testing, and vegetarianism, showing a growing awareness of ethical consumption and environmental justice among Muslims.

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