

DOI: 10.31866/2616-759x.2.2.2019.186649  
UDC 792.033.3+28-265.4

## EARLY ARABIC DRAMA

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### Abstract

**The purpose of the article** is to investigate the issue of Arabic or Islamic drama (both of which are not necessarily synonymous), which existed in the pre-modern period: that is, between the birth of Islam in the seventh century and the rise of theater in European models in the nineteenth century. The selected issues determined the broad context of the research. In particular, the author draws attention to the lack of a stable tradition of theater in the Western sense, which has become a problem that has for many years caught the eye of critics and scholars of both the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. **The research methodology** is mainly based on the analytical-comparative-art-scientific approach, which provides a cultural and anthropological study of the evolution of the Arab theater, in particular, the ways of the early Arab drama formation and its development until 1847. **Scientific novelty of the article.** For the first time, with the involvement of extensive research material, early Arabic drama was systematized and scientifically conceived as a milestone component of the evolution of theater in the Muslim world. **Conclusions.** The Arab Theater certainly existed until 1847, but for a variety of reasons, its various manifestations did not grow into high art, as it did in Europe during the Renaissance. Some scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim, Arab and non-Arab, have sought to find the causes of this situation, although most have proven to be speculative and not worthy of scrutiny. It is likely that the drama did not develop beyond embryonic forms for two main reasons: the hypocrisy to which the theater was exposed by religious figures, and the contempt shown by the literature figures. Ibn Danyal's dramatic work could not be fruitfully developed because the genre for which the works were created – the Shadow Theater – was technically restricted, and the so-called "Caliph Trial" remains the only example of Islamic theater that can only be regarded as a development of the art of worship. Later comedies tended to be either rude farcical or gross satire, which usually emphasized the corruptions, cruelty and arrogance of powerful power-holders, and the helplessness of the poor, naive and vulnerable peasant. These short improvised works did not contribute to the plot development or character. However, this does not mean that such plays have disappeared with the development of high European theater; on the contrary, and especially in Egypt, they continued to be popular until the twentieth century, despite the contempt that many educated Arabs felt for them.

**Keywords:** theater; early Arabic drama; Shadow Theater; Ibn Danial; Muslim religion; Arabic literature

### Formulation of the problem

Many questions were either formulated before undertaking the research, or emerged as important during the course of it. Did the Arabs develop a theatre before the impact of European models in the nineteenth century? If so, what kinds of theatre? Could any of its manifestations be called Islamic? And if the Arabs did not develop a theatre, why not – and is this lack of theatre (always excepting the ta'ziyah, which is a unique phenomenon) a severe shortcoming of Arab-Islamic culture? Is the ta'ziyah itself a ritual or a drama or both? How and under what conditions did it develop? Is it capable of being used as a model, or an inspiration, for Arabic theatre generally, even in the Sunni community? Why did it not give rise to other forms of theatre among the Shi'ites? Can it be transported outside its specific religious content without losing its significance? What meanings does it have for its performers and audience? Can Islamic art be easily defined? Is it true that Islam forbids the making of representational art, and if so (or if perceived to be so) did this prohibition affect the development of Arabic theatre? What kind of theatre existed in ancient Athens, and in what ways did ideas about that theatre influence Western pioneers in the twentieth century? How and under what conditions did Arabic theatre develop after its European-influenced forms appeared in the mid-nineteenth century? Has it suffered a decline during the past three decades? If so, why was this, and can the decline be halted or even reversed? Why is scenography the “silent partner” in the Arabic theatre? How can its status be raised?

What can be done in the domain of education? Is it possible to create a serious theatre that will appeal to Arab-Muslim audiences when there is strong evidence that they prefer, and have always preferred, the entertainments provided by the commercial theatre? How can the theatre, which in the Arab world has never enjoyed the high status accorded poetry and the novel, survive and flourish in a world of globalized entertainment? Must it forever be the preserve of a highly educated elite? These questions, and others that flow from them, are addressed by the study. They are not all important to the theater practitioners, but they should be considered by any theatre artist who is responsible for the education of the young, who, if their ambitions lie in the realm of serious theatre, must make their way in an environment that is often indifferent and sometimes hostile.

### Analysis of the previous researches and publications

It is worth noting that at present there is a lack of Arabic sources for many problems in the theory, history and practice of Arab theater. The main source for researchers is works written in English. Among them there are articles in magazines and on the Internet. However, the key source is books, many of which are written by prominent authorities in the industry. Thus, the relationship between ritual and drama is devoted to works: Jamshid Malekpour, *The Islamic Drama* (2004); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (1987); Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (2005); Christopher Innes,

*Holy Theatre: Ritual and the Avant Garde* (1981); Arnold Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History* (2000) and Eric Csapo and Margaret C. Miller (eds.), *The Origins of Theatre in Ancient Greece and Beyond: From Ritual to Drama* (2007). The last of these provides illuminating examples of the latest thinking on the origins of the Athenian drama, and a most valuable discussion of the Cambridge Ritualists and their influence. Ch. Innes, A. Aronson and E. Fischer-Lichte are all informative and thought-provoking, and Nasr is perhaps the most important writer on Islamic spirituality and its expression in art<sup>1</sup>. The fundamental issues of the *ta'ziyah* mission in the development of Arab drama are addressed in the following: Malekpour's *The Islamic Drama* (2004) and a special issue of *The Drama Review* devoted to the *ta'ziyah* (49, 4: Winter 2005). The topic of modern Arabic drama is covered in monographs Badawi's *Early Arabic Drama* (1988) and *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (1993). Publications focus on a wide range of issues related to Arab culture and the arts Roger Allen's *Introduction to Arabic Literature* (2000) and Philip Sadgrove's *Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century: 1799-1882* (1996). It should be noted that all Arabic translations are copyrighted, unless otherwise stated.

The research proposed in this article is based on the following publications: M. M. Badawi's *Modern Arabic Drama in Egypt* (1987) and Mohamed al-Khozai's *The Development of Early Arabic Drama, 1847-1900* (1984). The main source for early Arabic drama, however, is Shmuel Moreh's fascinating and comprehensive study of early Arabic live (as opposed to puppet) theatre: *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arab World* (1992). Also this chapter and others benefited greatly from Albert Hourani's magisterial work *A History of the Arab Peoples* (1991).

The purpose of the article is to investigate the issue of Arabic or Islamic drama (both not necessarily synonymous), which existed in the pre-modern period: that is, between the birth of Islam in the seventh century and the rise of theater in European models in the nineteenth century. The selected issues determined the broad context of the research. In particular, the author draws attention to the lack of a stable tradition of theater in the Western sense, which has become a problem that has for many years caught the eye of critics and scholars of both the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds.

### The scientific novelty of the article

For the first time, with the involvement of extensive research material, early Arabic drama was systematized and scientifically conceived as a milestone component of the theater evolution in the Muslim world. The research methodology is mainly based on the analytical-comparative-art-scientific approach, which provides a cultural and anthropological study of the evolution of the Arab theater, in particular, the ways of formation of early Arab drama and its development until 1847.

<sup>1</sup> The nature of the ritual relationship and theater on the example of the Muslim ceremonial theatrical performance of the *ta'ziyah* – the Shi' and passion play.) See Alhajri, K., 2019. Ritual and drama. *Bulletin of Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts. Series in Stage Art*, 2(1), pp.8-26

### The main material presentation

It is generally agreed that modern Arabic drama began in 1847, when Marun al-Naqqash (1817-55) wrote and produced, in his own house in Beirut, the first modern play in Arabic, *Al-Bakhil* (The Miser), which was influenced by Moliere's *VAvare*. Al-Naqqash felt the need to explain his motivation and ideas to his audience, who were totally unfamiliar with this type of production, by reference to the nature and function of European drama, and to describe the various kinds of theatrical entertainment available in Europe. One of the key points of his famous speech, given on the evening of the first performance, was an emphasis on "the civilizing influence of the theatre, the moral functions of drama and its attempt to promote virtue and discourage vice through the examples shown on the stage" (Badawi, 1987, p.44).

Al-Naqqash's insistence on the theatre's civilising mission is understandable when we consider the low esteem in which the traditional, popular Arabic theatre was held by those interested in serious literature and by the devout, who regarded its manifestations as trivial and obscene. These short satirical farces were often performed at weddings and other ceremonies, and other popular entertainments included shadow plays and puppet shows, and the gross antics of jesters. Since these were considered beneath contempt by scholars, our sources of information in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are mainly European travellers and residents, who were generally either shocked or bored (Sadgrove, 1996, pp.11-25).

It is not surprising, therefore, that al-Naqqash and many of his contemporaries and successors should have largely, although not completely, ignored or deliberately rejected the indigenous tradition and turned to Europe in order to create a theatre that would seek to win the respect of scholars and the approval of the religious authorities; to create, in al-Naqqash's words, "a literary theatre and a European gold cast in Arab moulds" for "the most intelligent and noble people of this country" (Al-Khozai, 1984, p.33).

It is evident that in the mid-nineteenth century the traditional Arabic theatre could not provide a model for those ambitious to create a "literary theatre". Was this because there had been a theatre in the Arab-Muslim world that had declined from substantial achievement? The answer must be that there was no such model, although certain short-lived manifestations could have been developed; but they were not. Moreover, the only traditional Muslim tragic drama, the *ta'ziyah*, was restricted to Shi'ite communities and, although it was flourishing at exactly this period, had no influence in the majority Sunni society. Nor did it give rise to a secular dramatic tradition among the Shi'ites, since its very being was centred on highly specific religious observances and rituals.

Is it possible to discover, then, why the Arabs, or, more generally, the Muslims of the Middle East, did not develop their drama? It should be emphasized here that by "drama" we mean drama in the western sense. M. M. Badawi (1987, p.3) gives the definition "the imitation on a stage by human actors of a story or situation through action and dialogue in verse or prose" Mohamed al-Khozai offers "a literary *genre* either in poetry or in prose that describes life and characters or narrates a story by means of action and dialogue through acting on a stage" (Al-Khozai, 1984, p.1). It is not our purpose

here to attempt a universal definition, and these are broad enough for our purposes; but we should note that Badawi refers to human actors, thus excluding the *khayal az-zill* or shadow play, and al-Khozai includes the notion of a literary genre, thus ruling out all popular improvised work and even those attempts that aspired to literary status but failed to establish a tradition.

Before considering such manifestations as did exist before 1847, it will be useful to discuss the various reasons advanced by scholars and critics for "the absence of drama from classical Arabic literature", to use Badawi's phrase (1987, p.3). Why were only "embryonic forms", literary genres containing dramatic elements but insufficient "to be recognised as theatrical works" produced before that date? As we shall see, this negative view has been challenged, but for the present we shall assume it to be broadly correct.

First of all it is necessary to recognize that the early Muslims had no knowledge or experience of drama. Pre-Islamic literature was poetic, and although it contained dramatic elements the poetry of the pagan era knew no drama (Badawi, 1987, p.3). With the spread of the Islamic empire and Muslims' contact with the Byzantine and Sasanian (Persian) civilizations, new learning began to make its mark on Islamic culture. In the ninth century particularly, many Greek works were translated, but the translations were mostly made not from Greek but from Syriac; and no ancient Greek dramatic works had been translated into Syriac, because the Syriac scholars, who were mostly Christians, Jews or Zoroastrians, were either uninterested in or hostile to pagan literature. Thus works of philosophy, medicine, the exact sciences, mathematics and astronomy were translated into Arabic, but no drama, poetry, belles-lettres or history. The intense curiosity of Arab scholars such as al-Kindi (801-866) embraced Greek scientific learning and even elements from the Persian and Indian traditions, but did not extend to the imaginative literature of other cultures (Hourani, 1991, p.76; Sadgrove, 1996, p.11).

The early Arab Muslims' lack of experience of drama explains the total absence of references to it in the Qur'an. In Western Europe the theatre had been closed in the sixth century, and in Byzantium nothing seems to have survived of classical tragedy and comedy by the time the new Islamic state established its contacts with the old empire. By al-Kindi's time that relatively primitive Islamic state had been transformed, and had achieved "the self-confidence of an imperial culture resting on worldly power and the conviction of divine support" (Hourani, 1991, p.77). That self-confidence certainly included a conviction that the Arabs had nothing to learn from other cultures when it came to literature. Badawi takes the view that this was due not only to the great achievements of Arabic classical poetry but also to "the extraordinarily high status accorded to the Arabic language, it being the sacred language of the Koran understood by believers to be literally the word of God". Thus the Arabs "seemed to feel no need to translate any foreign literature since in their view the highest degree of human eloquence could only be attained in Arabic. [...] psychologically they were conditioned to feel self-sufficient where literary expression was concerned" (1987, p.3).

It is not certain whether the Arab translators deliberately refrained from rendering Greek drama into Arabic; it is more likely that they were unaware of its existence,

since there was no living Greek dramatic tradition. They were, however, aware of Aristotle's *Poetics*, and since Aristotle was strongly influential on Arab philosophers it was felt that the *Poetics* could not be ignored. But it is clear from the translation by Abu Bishr (840-939) and the commentaries on it by the eminent philosophers al-Farabi (879-950), Avicenna (980-1036) and Averroes (1126-1198) that the Arabs could not make sense of the genres Aristotle was discussing. "Tragedy" and "comedy" were usually rendered as *madih* (panegyric) and *hija* (satire or invective) respectively. These were two recognised genres of Arabian poetry, and their meanings were quite different from the Greek terms (Badawi, 1987, pp.3-4).

By the tenth century the Arabs had developed a popular dramatic art of their own, so why was this misunderstanding not rectified? Shmuel Moreh, whose work on early Arabic popular theatre remains an excellent introduction to this subject, argues that the question was not examined for several reasons. First, as was still the case 800 years later, the religious authorities and serious literary men regarded the theatre as a low art unworthy of attention. It was considered *sukhf* (scurrilous material), *mujtm* (impudence) and *jumtn* (folly). Second, the primary aim of the Muslim commentators was to comprehend Aristotle's method of criticism and apply it to their own poetry, especially that of the pre-Islamic period. One great Arab poet of the ninth century, al-Jahiz (776-868) wrote an "Epistle on the Crafts of the Masters", which may have been influenced by the *Poetics*, and certainly al-Jahiz was known to be an admirer of Aristotle (Moreh, 1992, p.116), but he is not concerned with the dramatic art of the Greeks, only with poetic practice in his own time.

Moreh (1992, p.116) argues that the Arab world was not devoid of theatre "in the two millennia between the spread of Hellenism and the impact of modern Europe. [...] on the contrary, the Muslim world had a well-established tradition of live theatre, if only at a popular level". If this is the true, then why did this popular theatre not develop into a high art? One reason may be that advanced by Moreh: that the popular theatre was despised by the literary and religious elites, who believed that nothing good could come of it. This factor may well have been significant; other explanations, as Badawi (1987, p.4) points out, "belong to the realm of speculation". Badawi and al-Khozai generally agree in their discussion of these speculations, and it will be useful to briefly consider their arguments here, making use of the work of other commentators where appropriate.

Al-Khozai criticises Landau's argument, made in his *Studies in the Arab Theatre and Cinema* (2016) that no Greek classical drama was translated because, first, the Muslim conquerors had no contact with peoples having a well-developed theatre, and second, women, particularly if unveiled, were strictly forbidden to appear on the stage. While the first point is defensible, the second is certainly dubious, since women did not perform either in classical Greek drama or on the Elizabethan stage, and this does not appear to have inhibited the development of drama in either case. Al-Khozai (1984, pp.3-17) goes on to consider five factors related to the Arabs' lack of interest in, or failure to develop, drama as a high art, and we shall discuss these in turn; they are the mental factor, the aesthetic factor, the environmental factor, and the historical factor.

The arguments brought forward in connection with the first factor are perhaps the least convincing of all, positing as they do the unsuitability of the Arab mentality for the



creation of drama. As Badawi (1987, p.4) points out, this generalisation is "the product of nineteenth-century views on race". There seem to be two main strands to this view: that the Arab mentality is abstract while the European is concrete, and that the Arab mind is atomistic and excessively individualistic. Al-Khozai (1984, p.3) refutes the former by referring to the creative power of the anonymous authors of folk epics such as *"Antara"*, not to mention the *Thousands and One Nights*. As for the latter opinion, it is argued that the Arab mind "was best expressed in the structure of the pre-Islamic ode, *"Qasida"* (Badawi, 1987, p.4.), which was essentially a lyric form dominated by declamation and description. Al-Khozai (1984, p.4) insists that this picture is false, and that dramatic elements are to be found in pre-Islamic poetry, while Badawi cites the large-scale structure of Islamic jurisprudence and architecture in denying that (1987, p.4) the Arabs were incapable of the kind of organised thought necessary to the production of drama. It is important to realise that these disparaging comments have been made not only by Western Orientalists but also by Arab Muslims. For example, in 1933 the eminent Egyptian novelist and playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim (1899-1989) wrote a letter to his friend and compatriot Taha Hussein (1889-1973) in which he accused Arabic literature of being "mosaic-like" and "lacking in structure" (1983, pp.216-220). In the same letter, however, al-Hakim writes of finding "a dialogue similar to dramatic dialogue" in the work of al-Jahiz. He evidently changed his mind later, for in an article written for *The Theatre* magazine in January 1963 he argues that both the Pharaonic and Arab civilisations were built upon highly structured forms of artistic expression and were therefore capable of creating a theatre, but "they had found a more structured and productive form of artistic expression than theatre; and that was poetry" (1982, p.82).

In discussing his "aesthetic factor", al-Khozai addresses the issue of the Arabs' misunderstanding of Greek drama and reaches much the same conclusions as those of Badawi and Sadgrove, discussed above. He emphasises the oppositions of the Orthodox Church in Byzantium to Greek theatre, and the Arab translators' inability to see beyond the categories of the *qasida* when attempting to grasp the meaning of the terms "tragedy" and "comedy": "The translators can hardly be blamed for this misinterpretation since their culture was devoid of dramatic poetry and as a result their language had no equivalents for these completely new terms or expressions of ideas" (1984, pp.5-6).

Al-Khozai's "environmental factor" concerns, not surprisingly, the Arabs' failure to develop a theatre owing to the exigencies of living in an environment which

"is nothing but desert as extensive as the sea, where camels move like ships wandering with their loads from one island to another, these islands being scattered oases [...] everything in this moveable homeland kept itself aloof from the theatre. Because the theatre requires in the first place stability. The Arabs' want of the notion of stability, to my mind, is the real reason for their neglect of dramatic poetry required by the theatre. The amphitheatre revealed by excavations in modern times is a strong firm edifice, an establishment owned by the State [...] He who looks at the hugeness of this construction with its relics and paintings, will immediately judge that a thing like this must need a stable civilisation and a fixed standard of social life" (Al-Hakim, 1977, pp.25-26; Al-Khozai, 1984, pp.6-7).

Al-Khozai points out, citing the Tunisian scholar Mohammed 'Aziza, that such arguments ignore the fact that life in the *Jahiliyya* (time of unenlightenment) was far from universally nomadic and that the nomads constituted only part of the population; the majority were settled in urban centres, such as Mecca, famed for their advanced economic activities (Al-Khozai 1984, p.7; Aziza, 1997, p.11; Badawi, 1987, p.4). The explanation has still less force when we consider that the Muslims, after the diffusion of Islam, lived within a vast empire ruled from Damascus, Baghdad and Cairo. Al-Khozai disagrees with Badawi in asserting that the Arabs and indeed the whole Islamic world suffered from "the absence of the mythology essential for the inception of drama" (1984, p.8). According to al-Khozai, the range of mythology available to the Greeks made possible the achievement of the three great Athenian tragedians, but he thereby ignores Aristophanes; moreover, he neglects the mythic dimension that imparts such great dramatic power to the *ta'ziyah*. Badawi comments drily [...] as if drama of necessity could only grow out of myth" (1987, p.4).

Regarding the religious factor, al-Khozai notes that, unlike the ancient Greeks, the pre-Islamic Arabs were not united by any single religious belief, and that their incoherent and naive paganism hindered the growth and the development of religious rites of the kind from which Greek drama grew. What, then, of the influence of Islam? Al-Khozai asserts that "the quintessence of drama lies in conflict, which was manifest in Greek drama" (1984, p.9), and goes on to examine four types of conflict, each grounded in a belief in human freedom, and each derived from a tragic work by a classical Greek dramatist. These four types comprise a scheme proposed by Muhammad 'Aziza, and are vertical, where human freedom is in conflict with the divine will; horizontal, where the individual revolts against laws imposed by a society; dynamic, where the conflict centres on human instinct and fate; and internal, where there is a conflict of contradictions within the individual (1997, p.21).

We do not need to discuss these types in detail; what is important is that 'Aziza concludes that drama could not possibly have originated in a traditional Arab-Muslim environment. First, no Muslim could conceive of himself as challenging God's will, let alone defying it. Although mankind has freedom of choice, we have no will of our own, since God, the supreme power, determines all that occurs in the universe. According to 'Aziza, the traditional Muslim's view of the problem of free will and predetermination leads him or her to adopt an attitude of complete acceptance of things as they are, an attitude which is incompatible with the type of tragic conflict we find in Greek drama. But as Badawi points out, this explanation represents a simplistic distortion of Islam, and furthermore equates drama with one type of Greek tragedy, ignoring comedy altogether (1987, p.4). Moreover, while the devout Muslim may regard rebellion against the divine will as inconceivable, such a rebellion was undertaken by Satan; and many human beings have rejected the message delivered to Muhammad, or failed to live in accordance with the ideas of Islam. The conflict between human obduracy or weakness and those ideals is surely a fit subject for drama.

'Aziza's "horizontal conflict" is seen when a Muslim rebels against the government or mores of his or her society, but any Muslim engaged in such a rebellion will be branded an unbeliever, and the rebellion itself remains an individual matter unsuitable for dramatic



treatment. This view is surely misguided, since Islam itself was born from conflict within the city of Mecca, and conflict marked the years after the death of the Prophet, culminating in the death of Hussein at Karbala and the beginning of the division of the faithful into Sunnis and Shi'ites. 'Aziza, while accepting that the Shi'ites developed a theatre in the form of the *ta'ziyah*, claims that they would not have done so if they had not deviated from the Islamic religion, separating themselves from the majority community. In his view the Shi'ites were ultimately responsible for the conflicts and schisms that wounded and divided the community of believers, and the *ta'ziyah* is a ritual of expiation of guilt and a means of expressing Persian nationalistic and political agendas (Aziza, 1997, pp.40-50). Here 'Aziza shows his hand as a Sunni apologist and sectarian propagandist. The truth is surely that the history of Islam provides countless examples of conflict among individuals, between individuals and the state, among factions within states, and between states, all of which could provide material suitable for dramatic treatment. 'Aziza's third and fourth types of conflict – the dynamic and internal, relate to the Muslim's perception of history, which, he argues, is not dramatic but inherently conservative and based on an acceptance of a pact between God and the believer, who responds to this dispensation by accepting every occurrence as inevitable because willed by God Himself. Thus the world, and specifically Islamic history, is organised in accordance with a divinely instituted harmony, whether or not this harmony is perceptible to the believer, and thus the right-minded Muslim does not conceive the world in terms of contradictions or conflict (1997, pp.29-31). 'Aziza's view of the pious Muslim as a naive fatalist is a gross oversimplification that is contradicted by the complexities of Islamic theology as well as by the vicissitudes of fourteen centuries of Islamic history. The fourth type of conflict, that between the individual and his or her fate is linked to the third and can be criticized on the same grounds. Moreover, in attempting to forge an absolute distinction between the Muslim and what could be called Promethean man, particularly of the kind that emerged in the European Renaissance (Al-Khozai, 1984, p.10), 'Aziza seems to be in danger of merely putting a positive gloss on the pagan Arabs belief in *dahr*, the power of malignant fate, a belief that persisted well into the Islamic era.

Badawi and al-Khozai address the issue of whether Islam itself, or at least Islamic civilisation, is inherently inimical to drama. There is an argument that links theatre with the figurative arts such as painting and sculpture. Even if such an argument was well founded, which it was not, the Islam did not, and does not; interdict such images except in the context of the mosque. As al-Khozai remarks, "the figurative arts were not only tolerated but encouraged when the danger of paganism had disappeared" (Al-Khozai, 1984, p.11; Badawi, 1987, p.4); nevertheless the Muslims did not develop such theatre as they had into a high art, and al-Khozai, in discussing the last of his factors, the historical, advances a number of reasons that, taken together, might explain why "the seeds of drama did not germinate within this monotheistic religion" (1984, p.12). First, the medieval Arabs who were interested in Greek thought were dissuaded by the Christian Syriac translators from developing an interest in pagan literature. Moreover, there was by that time no trace of a living Greek dramatic heritage. Second, the culture of the Islamic empire was built on the basis that the Muslims would dominate the civilisations of the conquered, and that therefore the heirs of the Hellenic heritage in

the East had to convert to Islam and be influenced by Arabic. Third, the Arab world had little contact with, and no interest in, the Christian religious drama that was developing during the European Middle Ages. Thus no tradition of drama could develop within the Muslim world, and even before the Mongol invasion of 1258 a decline in the Abbasid empire's economy had begun so that later the Islamic system was unable to integrate itself with the European Renaissance and be influenced by its drama.

Al-Khozai's arguments are thought-provoking and contain some truth, especially with regard to the early centuries of Islam. They are less convincing, however, when applied to later Islamic, rather than specifically Arab, cultures, since the three great Islamic civilisations that flourished at the time of the European Renaissance – the Ottomans (1281-1922), the Safavids in Iran (1501-1732) and the Mughals in India (1526-1858) were by no means inward looking, and it is not difficult to trace European influences in their visual art and architecture. In the realm of imaginative literature, however, the picture is different, particularly when we consider the later pre-modern period and the condition of Arabic-speaking cultures. As Sadgrove notes, by the sixteenth century Arabic literature had suffered a decline from the glories of its inspirations in the pre-Islamic and medieval periods:

"In the two or three centuries before the nineteenth century, the era of development of the great national dramas of France, Italy and England, the majority of Arab writers of imaginative prose, and poets, demonstrated a distinct lack of imagination and flair in their works; the creative spirit needed to found a literary theatre was lacking. [...] Arabs for centuries had remained conservative in their literary life, sustaining a limited number of literary genres, partly because it was felt the Arabic language was sacrosanct, that it was the sacred language of the Qur'an and should thus be preserved from innovation and foreign influences. Imitation prevailed in what literary works there were. [...] Literary works rarely reflected the true feelings of their author, nor did they mirror the political or social situation of the country" (1996, pp.11-12).

Bearing this in mind, it is important to realize that the conservatism of the Arab literary elite militated against the development of drama in the Arab world, and that that conservatism was reinforced by the political, economic, social and cultural stagnation of the declining Ottoman empire, so that Napoleon's Egyptian campaign of 1798 had an enormous impact, its cultural effects being far more important than its military failure (Al-Khozai, 1984, p.14).

It is not surprising, therefore, that theatre, a genre despised by the guardians of literary correctness and abhorred by the pious, failed to win a respected place in Arab cultural life. This apparent cultural flaw has prompted many writers to explain the alleged absence of drama from Arabic literature before 1847, but as we have seen, some of these attempts have been naive and unconvincing. As Badawi (1987, p.5) points out, they have sometimes been "at best no more than well-intentioned apologetics often inspired by a feeling of inferiority"; but he goes on to affirm that "The absence of drama is in no way an indication of cultural inferiority and the fact is that the Arabs did develop their own dramatic writing as well as their own epics, even though the form that these products took was different from the western form".

What forms of theatre, then, existed in the Arab world before the nineteenth century? Can any connection with Islam be discerned? Leaving the *ta'ziyah* aside for the moment, we shall consider the broad range of popular theatrical manifestations that appeared in the Near and Middle East during the centuries between the birth of Islam and the production of the first modern Arabic drama in 1847. Moreh (1992, p.9) finds examples of live theatre among the pre-Islamic Arabs, both Jews and Christians, but these need not detain us, as they had disappeared by the sixth century, being replaced by "games, mimes and other lowbrow performances". Nevertheless it is worth mentioning that theatrical performances associated with the Coptic festival of Nayrus or Nawruz, and the Persian practice of employing court entertainers – jesters, singers and buffoons – continued into the Islamic era (Moreh, 1992, pp.10-11).

If, as the general opinion has it, modern Arabic drama began in the nineteenth century, why should we be concerned with traditional popular theatre? Badawi argues that

"any account of modern Arabic drama which ignored such activities would suffer from serious deficiencies, not just on grounds of incompleteness but also because it would fail to provide the necessary historical background. More importantly it would not be capable of explaining certain features of modern Arabic drama, both on the structural and dramatic levels, which are clearly the product of some deeply rooted attitudes and tendencies inherited from the past history of indigenous dramatic or semi-dramatic entertainment. The knowledge of such history is essential in order to see the manner in which the imported form was conceived and how it subsequently developed, for the imported form was in several ways determined by the local histrionic or theatrical tradition" (1987, p.7).

Badawi's point is well made, and even in the mid-twentieth century we find a committed modernist like Wannous combining Brechtian elements with features drawn from the indigenous tradition. In this brief discussion, however, we cannot consider every manifestation of that tradition, although we will not neglect its important features.

We have already noted that nothing in the Qur'an prohibits dramatic representation, but the *hadith* (traditions) of the Prophet take a hostile attitude to entertainment, which was considered a distraction from the real business of a Muslim's life: a concentration on religious benefit in this world and the hereafter. The early Muslims would have been familiar with impersonators, clowns and buffoons, musicians and dancers, and there is evidence that Muhammad himself appreciated mimes and musicians on certain occasions (Moreh, 1992, pp.21-22).

Other entertainers were not so well regarded, particularly the *mukhannathun* (having the meaning of "infamous", "effeminate man", "homosexual", and "actor") who often performed astride a *kurraj* or hobby-horse. Moreh notes that little is known about *kurraj* performances, which may have originated in Persian and Central Asian fertility rites and shamanic ceremonies. The second Caliph, "Umar (634-44) "reputedly said that he would have expelled them from Medina if he had not seen comparable entertainment in the time of the Prophet himself" (Moreh, 1992, p.28).

Other performers included the *samaja* or masked actor, who participated in the *nayruz* festivals, among other celebrations, and in customary entertainments dating back to

pre-Islamic times. The masks usually represented animals or demons, and were an integral part of dramatic rituals among many nations besides the Arabs (Moreh, 1992, p.45). In Egypt the *samajat* were associated with licentious behaviour and were sometimes prohibited by the Mamluk sultans. It is interesting that *samaja* in the sense of "comic mask" is found in Avicenna's commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* (Moreh, 1992, p.51). Jesters and buffoons were also enormously popular, and not only among the people; the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs enjoyed their company. For example, al-Mu'tasim (833-842) made a certain Ibn al-Junayd his boon companion because of his "amazing appearance and talk", although the jester's chief accomplishment seems to have been as a *darrat* or fart-maker. We are a long way from serious theatre here, but other jesters seem to have been comedians who gave improvised performances or recited absurd compositions which Moreh compares with Dadaist provocations (1992, p.65-68). Jesters and buffoons of course continued to perform well after the Abbasid period, and Moreh (1992, p.72) cites an account by a British traveler, Alexander Russell, who witnessed such an entertainment in Aleppo in the mid-eighteenth century, finding the mummery insipid and the wit bordering on the obscene.

Moreh (1992, pp.76-77) notes that another way of representing everyday life in a quasi-theatrical form was through pageantry. Spectacular entertainments were mounted to celebrate the weddings and circumcisions of sons of caliphs, sultans and other grandees and even those of ordinary citizens. The spectacles were mainly provided by artisans demonstrating their trades on floats drawn by horses, and it seems that plays both comic and serious were sometimes performed on specially built structures. The theatre historian Ali al-Ra'i describes the procession of the caliph Harun al-Rashid (786-809) on his way to the Friday congregational prayer:

"The procession is led by a group of men on foot carrying banners, followed by groups of musicians and strong men carrying bows and brandishing their swords. Then the Caliph appears wearing a black cloak, riding an Arab stallion of fine pedigree; behind him is a group of ministers and government officials mounted on horses decked in lavishly decorated cloths, and following them come government men and guards. This procession is essentially a theatrical performance organized with great precision. The streets of Baghdad are its stage, and the performance moves from the Caliph's palace to the mosque. Its principal hero is the caliph, the public crowds are its audience; its aim is to impress and awe the public and to show them the strength and wealth of the government" (Al-Ra'i, 1980, p.40).

Al-Ra'i (1980, p.44) goes on to describe an even more magnificent pageant which the Caliph al-Muqtadir (908-32) organised in honour of the Byzantine diplomatic mission that had been sent to negotiate a truce with the Abbasid Empire. The reception of the visitors was surely designed to impress, involving as it did over 160,000 mailed horsemen, 7,700 armed eunuchs, a fleet of superbly equipped and decorated warships on the Tigris, and, within the palace, fountains and a tree made of silver and gold whose branches held golden and silver birds. But most pageants were more modest, and many involved some kind of theatrical performance, which might consist of a play, or a display of horsemanship. In the eighteenth century it was not unusual to see riders

simulating battles among the Bedouin. Other guild pageants might include jugglers, acrobats, strolling players, conjurers and snake-charmers (Moreh, 1992, pp.77-78).

What of theatrical performances that come closer to our idea of drama? Is there evidence of entertainment that went beyond buffoonery or pageantry and was created in a more literary style, or perhaps with a religious purpose, to provoke thought as well as laughter? In order to understand some later developments we should first consider the art of the storyteller. In the pre-Islamic era the storyteller would narrate "the battles of the Arabs" (Ali Uglā Orsan, 1981, p.105) but with the advent of Islam his role became that of admonisher of the faithful. Some scholars argue that the practice of admonition began with the encouragement of the second caliph, "Umar, while others hold that it did not begin until the early years of the Umayyad dynasty (Ali Uglā Orsan, 1981, p.108; Rikabi, 1955, p.123). The early storytellers were often scholars or jurists and delivered their admonitions in the mosque, but later practiced outside the mosque without changing the character or purpose of their performance. During the Umayyad period the style was that of a lecture combined with a sermon, and was usually elegant and rhetorical (Rikabi, 1955, p.443). In the Abbasid period, however, a new type of storyteller appeared. He was not a *wa'iz* or admonisher but a *haki* or imitator.

A well-known account of a *hakiyya* (impersonation) is given in al-Jahiz's *Bayan*:

"We find that the impersonator is able to imitate precisely the pronunciation of the natives of Yemen with all the special accents of that area. [...] when he imitates the speech of the stammerer, it seems that he has become the ultimate stammerer, as if all the peculiarities of every stammerer ever born have been rolled into one. When he imitates the blind man, copying the distinctive features of his face, eyes and limbs, [...] it is as if he has synthesised the peculiar features of all blind men in one complete character" (Al-Jahiz, 1969, p.87).

"This performer is clearly a professional, but his impersonation does not seem to have been combined with any kind of plot or dialogue with other performers. Moreh, however, provides evidence that *hikayat* (imitations) were sometimes incorporated into short satirical sketches, and that some of these were based on written texts. Judges and scholars were among those subjected to ridicule" (1992, pp.87-91).

The most important surviving text written to be performed by live actors (as opposed to the puppets of the *khayal az-zill*) in the Abbasid period is, however, not a satirical sketch involving imitation but a monologue intended to admonish, and having a similar purpose to the sermons of the *wa'iz*. But it is not a lecture; its form is dramatic, as its subject is a trial, and it clearly formed the nucleus of al-Jahiz's later *Risala Fi Bani Umayya* (*Treatise on the Umayyads*). Moreh (1991, p.91) argues that plays formed the nuclei of several works of this period.

The play was performed in the reign of the third Abbasid caliph, Al-Mahdi (755-785) by a Sufi mystic who pretended to be a fool (or mad) in order to fulfil the Qur'anic command to enjoin what is right and prohibit what is disapproved. It took the form of a trial of the caliphs of Islam, who are called before the "judge" – that is, the Sufi – and consigned to Paradise or Hell. The caliphs were played by young men, who had no dialogue

and were brought before the judge by members of the audience. The performance took place on a hilltop, and was, to put it mildly, critical of the Abbasid caliphs; hence the need for a possible defence of insanity, were the Sufi to be apprehended by the authorities. A few excerpts will give the flavour of this piece. After asking the audience "What have the prophets and messengers done? Are they not in the highest Heaven?" and receiving an affirmative response, the judge would ask for each caliph in turn to be brought before him, beginning with Abu Bakr, the Prophet's first successor. The first four caliphs, known as the *Rashidun* or Rightly Guided, are to be taken to the highest heaven. This is the Sufi's judgment on the fourth caliph, Ali bin Abi Talib, the father of Hussein, the martyr of Karbala:

"May God reward you for your services to the *Umma* [community of the faithful], abu'l-Hassan, for you are the legatee and friend of the Prophet. You spread justice and were abstemious in this world, withdrawing from the spoils of war instead of fighting for them with tooth and nail. You are the father of blessed progeny and the husband of a pure and upright woman. Take him to the highest Heaven of Paradise" (Moreh, 1992, p.92).

Most of the subsequent caliphs are condemned, with special vituperation being reserved for Yazid, who ordered the killing of Hussein:

"[...] you are the one who killed the people of the Harra and laid Medina open to the troops for three days, thereby violating the sanctuary of the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace. [...] You killed Hussein and carried off the daughters of the Prophet as captives on the camel-bags Take him to the lowest Hell!"

Upon finally reaching the Abbasids the judge would fall silent. He would then be told, probably by another actor placed among the audience, "This is al-Abbas, the Commander of the Faithful" and would reply "We have got to the Abbasids; do their reckoning collectively and throw all of them into Hell" (Moreh, 1992, pp.92-93). It is obvious that the Sufi, unlike the jesters and buffoons at the Abbasid court, "played the fool in order to fulfil a religious injunction, [...] and [engaged] in the despised activity of play-acting in order to humiliate himself (though there was nothing humble about the role he took in the play itself)" (Moreh, 1992, p.93).

The Sufi's play is unusual in being truly Islamic in both its purpose and subject-matter. Another and very different play, whose text has survived in full, is *Hikayat Abi'l-Qasim al-Baghdadi* (*The Impersonations of Abi'l-Qasim al-Baghdadi*), which is a repertoire of theatrical scenes played in tenth-century Baghdad, assembled by Muhammad al-Asadi to mock Shi'ite piety and depict everyday life in the city. Abi'l-Qasim, pretending to be a pious man, gatecrashes the party of a person of rank and unleashes a tirade of obscene and scatological remarks directed at the guests. The play is composed for recitation by a live actor or actors, and the text takes the form of a continuous dialogue between Abi'l-Qasim and his guests, although Abi'l-Qasim does most of the talking. In his respect the play resembles the *Trial of the Caliphs*. Moreh also argues that the play "was not only meant to depict the repertoire of buffoons and mimes, or to give a realistic representation of Baghdadi society, but also to provide material for dramatic performance. Bits of it were certainly used by



later dramatists" (1992, p.99). Among these dramatists was Ibn Danyal, the foremost author of shadow plays.

The art of the individual storyteller survived into the twentieth century, and both Wannous and al-Hakim incorporated the *hakiyya* (or its modern form *hakaxvati*) into their dramas to give them a more authentically Arab character and to appeal more directly to the Arab audience. The reciters of the popular medieval romances, such as those describing the exploits of Baybars or "Antara, were known as *Sha'ir* (rhapsodies), and we have an account of such a performance by the early Victorian scholar Edward Lane. While he dismissed the satirical farces he witnessed as "low and ridiculous" he thought the public recitation of romances "attractive and rational entertainments". Composed in a mixture of prose and verse, the romances were "half narrative and half dramatic" (Lane, 2005, pp.397-398) and were chanted from memory in a "lively and dramatic manner" (Badawi, 1987, p.8).

According to Moreh (1992, p.104), the *hikaya* was well developed before the emergence of the shadow play, and even before the appearance of the *maqama* and *risala*, and had a great influence on those genres, both of which made extensive use of dialogue. But since the *maqama* had particularly strong links with the shadow play, we shall ignore the *risala* in this discussion. The *maqama* ("assembly") was, as al-Khozai (1984, p.19) points out, a genre unique to Arab culture, and while it did not lack the dramatic elements of character and dialogue, it depended "more on linguistic sophistication than on the relatively thin plot". It was elaborated by al-Hamadhani (968-1110) and further developed by al-Hariri (1054-1122), and the genre remained popular in Arab literary circles until the twentieth century (Hourani, 1991, p.53). Moreh describes the *maqama* as "a short and ornate "picaresque" work in rhymed prose, couched in the first person singular. It usually contains a narrative element consisting of an amusing or surprising, real or true to life scene, and it is formulated in the present tense. In every *maqama* there is a narrator [...] called "Isa Ibn Hisham, and a hero, Abu'l-Fath al-Iskandari, who generally appears as disguised beggar [...] trying to earn a living by his wits, his linguistic virtuosity and talent" (1992, p.105).

Moreh cites the scholars Yunis and al-Ra'i in arguing that the *maqama* was "a written composition imitating the dialogue and structure of the *hikaya*". It was "composed for mimetic declamation and used a harangue style with a prodigious store of sophisticated rhetoric and eloquent turn of phrase". These features endowed it "with the seriousness Muslims sought and admired in Arabic literature" (Moreh, 1992, pp.107-108). Moreh argues that live drama was used as a model for the *maqama*, but what is more certain is that the *maqama* influenced the art of the *khayal az-zill*, of which a very few texts have survived, most notably three outstanding examples, the earliest we have, by the Mosul-born Egyptian oculist, poet and wit Shams al-Din Ibn Danyal (1248-1311).

The shadow theatre is thought to have been imported into the Arab world from the Far East, but by Ibn Danyal's time the entertainment had been thoroughly assimilated and was an accepted part of Muslim society. The *khayal az-zill* should not be confused with the short comic dialogues of the Turkish *karagoz* (black eyes), although the method of presentation could be similar. The *karagoz*, which was very popular in Egypt until the

mid-twentieth century, was a Middle Eastern equivalent of the Punch and Judy show, and was characterised by "uproar, violence and sexual innuendo" (Sadgrove, 1996, p.14). Nineteenth-century travellers were sometimes scandalised by these performances: Lane called them "extremely indecent" while Sir Gardner Wilkinson observed that "the licentiousness [...] was so gross, that it would have shocked an ancient Greek audience, though accustomed to the plays of Aristophanes" (Sadgrove, 1996, p.14, 16).

While obscene passages permeate Ibn Danyal's plays, his purpose was to create "a mirror that reflected the social reality of the time" (Al-Khozai, 1984, p.22; Al-Ra'i, 1980, p.45). Before briefly discussing his work, we should explain how the shadow plays were performed. In Badawi's words,

"the action was represented by shadows cast upon a large screen by flat, coloured leather puppets, held in front of a torch, while the hidden puppet master, *al-Rayyis* or *al-Miqaddim*, delivered the dialogue and songs, helped in this by associates, sometimes as many as five persons including a youth who imitated the voice of women" (1987, p.12).

Ibn Danyal attempted to revivify this genre, which had flourished in the Egypt of the Fatimids (909-1171). At that time it probably presented moral, religious or historical themes and had an admonitory or educative purpose. Many saw in such performances an analogy between the shadow theatre and human life in this world. The earliest such comment is the remark attributed to the Egyptian Imam al-Shafi'i (767-820), an eminent religious scholar and jurist: "I see the shadow play as the greatest admonition to those who are advanced in the knowledge of Ultimate Reality. I see figures and spirits passing by departing, all perishing while the Mover remains" (Nua'man, 1973, p.80). Later, the Egyptian mystic Umar Ibn al-Farid (1182-1235) wrote a major poem in which he found mystical significance in the shadow theatre (Badawi, 1987, p.13). Besides giving a detailed account of the themes of the shadow play, Ibn al-Farid describes the audience's deeply emotional reaction, which would not have been evoked by stereotyped mechanical conventions.

Ibn Danyal's introductions to all three plays make clear that the shadow play's convention of buffoonery was being used by him as a means to an end: the production of good literature, not cheap and vulgar writing. The plays were addressed to men of breeding and literary taste, and were a mixture of seriousness and levity. The characters are drawn from the lowest strata of society, but the aim is not crude mockery, for as the Presenter (*al-Rayyis*) says, "Underlying every shadow [character] a truth is to be found". The plays, Badawi notes, "are a rich source of information for the social historian" (1987, p.15) since, although they focus on certain aspects of medieval Egyptian society, they are more deeply rooted in social reality than the *maqama* literature that influenced them (Ibn Danyal was especially indebted to al-Hariri's rhetorical interpolations of poetry within the dialogues) (Al-Khozai, 1984, p.22). Ibn Danyal's is a sophisticated art rich in vividly portrayed characters, who are so concretely realized that, Badawi claims, their types could be readily seen in Cairo until the early twentieth century (1987, p.15).

Unfortunately we cannot go into details of the plays here, but a full discussion can be found in Badawi (1987, pp.14-24); some idea of their content and style can be

attempted, however. The first, *Tayf al-Khayal* (The Shadow Spirit) is the longest and the most developed with regard to plot and characterization. It centres on the character of Prince Wisal, a clownish soldier who speaks in a mock-heroic style, reminiscing about his youthful erotic adventures with both sexes in the most uninhibited language. He is attended by a mock secretary and a mock poet of panegyrics, and thus seems to be an Arabic Lord of Misrule presiding over a topsy-turvy court. The plot, which concerns Wisal's failed attempt to turn over a new leaf and find himself a wife, is much less important than the emphasis on characterisation – especially in the creation of the matchmaker, Umm Rashid – on description and on satirical observation of Cairo life. Despite its rudimentary dramatic technique, farcical elements and obscene passages, *The Shadow Spirit* is much more than a crude example of popular entertainment, not least because of Ibn Danyal's mastery and sensitive handling of the Arabic language. The play ends with Wisal's decision to make a pilgrimage to Mecca as a penitent seeking to purify himself of all his past sins (Badawi, 1987, pp.15-19).

The second play, *'Ajib wa Gharib* (*The Amazing Preacher and the Stranger*), is very different in structure from the first and has an obvious relationship with the *maqama* literature, as it consists of a series of vivid sketches of the various roles adopted by the Banu Sasan or Confraternity of Tricksters, who have been forced to lead a wandering life, "living by their wits and resorting to trickery and deception in order to survive (Badawi, 1987, p.20). The Stranger speaks of the trickster's life and introduces the professions he has assumed. An extensive gallery of these characters is then presented, each using the appropriate language; these include the "amazing preacher", a snake-charmer, an ophthalmic surgeon, an astrologer, a lion-tamer, a rope dancer and a conjuror. There is no plot, and no interaction between the characters, who are almost all aspects of the Stranger. Badawi (1987, p.21) remarks that "the whole show has many of the qualities of a *danse macabre* with the ending underlining the need for repentance and purification from the sins of this world".

The third play, *Al-Mutayyam* (*The Love-Stricken One*) has a story and a plot. It deals comically with homoerotic infatuation, being concerned with Mutayyam's obsession with a beautiful young man whom he has seen at the baths. The play contains a parody of the conventions of Arabic love poetry, and examples of the medieval debate form in passages comparing the charms of different men and the fighting abilities of cocks, rams and bulls. The play ends with a party given by Mutayyam during which every type of homoerotic activity and excessive behaviour is presented and explained by its practitioner, and which is then interrupted by the awe-inspiring figure of the Angel of Death. He rouses the drunken guests from their stupor; Mutayyam has time enough to repent and humbly asks God's forgiveness before he dies. The play ends with his funeral (Badawi, 1987, pp.21-23).

Badawi (1987, p.23) argues that Ibn Danyal's use of Arabic in these plays is remarkably flexible, "ranging from the classical to the colloquial with an admixture of obscure jargon and even gibberish when the need arises", and that their value resides in their literary achievement, and particularly in the delineation of individual characters through the skilful employment of the registers and even the rhythm appropriate to each. They are related to the *maqama* tradition in several ways, mainly because they are concerned

with the lowest strata of society and people who live by their wits; and because each ends with a final act of repentance which characters make after a lifetime of devotion to worldly pleasures. This, Badawi (1987, pp.23-24) argues, places Ibn Danyal's work in the category of Fool literature, which emphasises that the pleasures of the flesh are transient and that all holidays must come to an end.

No texts of shadow plays between Ibn Danyal and the seventeenth century have survived, and later examples show a decline from Ibn Danyal's achievement. His work seems to have had little influence on subsequent development, and the opportunity to develop a live theatre from the tradition of the *khayal az-zill* was missed (Badawi, 1987, p.25; Al-Khozai, 1984, p.23). Nevertheless the shadow theatre in general served a useful purpose; according to Landau

"the great service of the shadow theatre to the Arabic history of civilisation is in its having preserved, for the future, precious information about little-recorded ideas and customs of past generations. Artistically, it prepared the ground, along with the storytellers' mimicry and the Passion players' performances (being more important, in this respect, than either of them), for the arrival and acceptance of the Europeanized amusements – the theatre and the cinema" (1958, p.47).

The question remains, why did Ibn Danyal, with his literary ability and gift for characterisation, choose to devote his talents to the crude and limited form of the shadow theatre, a genre that was in decline, rather than to the live theatre? No scholar seems to have addressed this question, probably because any attempt to answer it would be speculative, but one possible reason may be that, as we noted earlier, whereas the shadow theatre had once been respectable, and had been admired by poets and scholars, the live theatre was associated with immorality and indecency and made no pretensions to literary merit. So, even though it is evident from Ibn Danyal's poems that he was very familiar with the world of the actor, and indeed he is the only author to have left us a first-hand description of the environment in which actors lived (Moreh, 1992, pp.138-139), he probably felt that his work would be better presented in a form that he must have known could not be developed.

In the final part of this discussion we shall briefly consider some examples of live theatre, or quasi-theatrical presentations, of the seventeenth century and later, a few of which survived until recently. In Morocco theatre in the round is still popular: an audience gathers around a group of actors who present folk tales and legends in the open air, and sometimes members of the audience are invited to participate (Jom'ah, 2001, p.225). Other performances might take the form of a domestic quarrel, or a debate on social, political and economic issues which is made comical by the "chairman's" use of a harmless whip on the team that goes beyond what he deems appropriate (Al-Ra'i, 1980, p.226, 230). These performances were witnessed in the 1960s.

The *talabah* (students') drama first appeared in Morocco in the seventeenth century. University students helped Sultan Rachid to regain the throne from his brother, and in return he organised a small victory celebration on the banks of the Fez River, which developed into a theatrical celebration involving the crowning of a student "sultan", who "rules" for seven days over his student "court"; finally he meets the real sultan or

his deputy, to whom he relinquishes his authority. If he refuses to renounce the throne, the students of his court beat him and throw him in the river as a sign that his authority is at an end (Qajah, 2001, p.236).

Another example from the Maghrib is the *bissat* drama, which was performed in Morocco and was first described in the eighteenth century. The *bissat* actors were supported by the sultan, who would sometimes participate in the performance, in which they would present the people's grievances to him by acting them out. The leading role of al-Bissat, who represented strength, courage and adventure, was taken by an actor who was masked so that he could criticize the sultan's administration in an impersonal way. Supporting characters included al-Yahu, a greedy hypocrite, and Hadidan, who embodied purity and self-sacrifice. The performance relied on al-Bissat's eloquence and acrobatic skills. During the Eid festival (held after performing the rites of pilgrimage) the actors would prepare by gathering donations and support for their performances. They would go in groups to the sultan's palace, where they would present their serio-comic performance, which would end with prayers and blessings upon the Prophet, prayers for the sultan, and requests for a financial reward (Al-Ra'i, 1980, p.233, 243; Qajah, 2001, p.227).

We conclude our discussion of popular Arabic theatre by considering the kinds of farcical entertainments witnessed by European visitors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Moreh, 1992, p.152). These were performed by *muhabbazun* or strolling players; the word seems to date to before the sixteenth century. We have already noted Lane's reaction to one of these farces, and he provides a lengthy description of the action, despite commenting that the performances "are scarcely worthy of description: it is chiefly by vulgar jests, and indecent actions, that they amuse and obtain applause". Lane saw this farce in about 1834; it concerned the abuse of a poor peasant, who, it is alleged, owes the *na'zir* or district governor one thousand piastres. Since he cannot pay, he is beaten (with an inflated piece of intestine), all the while making absurd appeals for mercy such as "by the honour of thy wife's trousers, O Bey!". The peasant's wife then bribes a local sheikh and gives herself to the *na'zir* to obtain her husband's release. (It should be remembered that the players of such farces would have been all male.) Lane comments "the farce was played before the Ba'sha (²) with the view of opening his eyes to the conduct of those persons to whom was committed the office of collecting the taxes" (Lane, 2005, pp.395-397; Moreh, 1992, pp.156-157; Sadgrove, 1996, pp.19-20; Badawi, 1987, pp.11-12).

The earliest account of such farces by a European is that by Alexander Russell, who saw one in Aleppo in about 1750, as we have already mentioned. In 1763 (the date is uncertain) a Danish traveller, Carsten Niebuhr witnessed a farce performed by a company composed of Muslims, Christians and Jews. At that time, and up to the 1900s, the Egyptian farce player was often known as Ibn Rabiya, and the group as Awlad Rabiya (the Sons of Rabiya); they were also called *arbab al-mala'ib* (actors), and it is their performance Niebuhr describes. They performed in the open air, in the courtyard of a private house, changing their costumes behind a screen. The Europeans were not amused, as the play was long, stereotyped and tiresome, involving a string of identical robberies of travellers by a woman (the actor had difficulties in concealing "her" beard).

² Lane is referring to Muhammad `Ali, the viceroy of Egypt.

The audience eventually tired of this "insipid repetition" and the play was stopped in the middle (Moreh, 1992, p.164; Shmuel, 1992, p.154; Sadgrove, 1996, pp.17-18; Najim, 1980, p.19; Badawi, 1987, p.11).

The last example of an account provided by a European traveller is that by the Italian archaeologist Giovanni Belzoni (1778-1823), who described two comedies performed at wedding feasts near Cairo in 1815. The first concerned the deception of a man wishing to go on the *hajj* (the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca performed by Muslims). A crafty camel-driver deceives both the pilgrim and the beast's original owner by selling a sickly beast at a high price. The pilgrim discovers the trick when he tries to mount the camel (represented, as in European pantomime, by two actors concealed under a cloth "skin" and carrying a wooden camel head); he beats the driver, who runs off. According to Belzoni the audience was greatly diverted by this simple drama, as it taught them to be on their guard against dealers in camels (Moreh, 1992, p.164; Sadgrove, 1996, p.18). The other play described by Belzoni was a short comedy poking fun at Europeans. Here the European traveller serves as a sort of clown; he is tricked by a poor Arab and his wife, who pretend to be rich but eventually serve him only sour milk and dhourra (sorghum) bread, the only provision in the house (Moreh, 1992, p.164; Sadgrove, 1996, pp.18-19; Badawi, 1987, p.11).

### Conclusions

We have seen that the Arabic theatre certainly existed before 1847, but it is clear that for a number of reasons the various manifestations were never developed into a high art, as happened in Europe during the Renaissance. Certain scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim, Arab and non-Arab, have attempted to find reasons for this perceived cultural failing, most of which are speculative and do not bear close examination. It is probable that drama did not develop beyond embryonic forms for two main reasons: the opprobrium heaped upon the theatre by the men of religion, and the contempt shown it by the men of literature. Ibn Danyal's work could not develop because the genre for which it was written was limited technically, and the *Trial of the Caliphs* remains an isolated example of Islamic theatre, which can be seen as merely a development of the art of the admonisher. The later comedies tended to be either crude farces, or rough satires usually emphasizing the corruption, cruelty and arrogance of the powerful and the helplessness of the poor, naïve and vulnerable peasant. These short impromptu pieces gave little scope for plot or character development. This does not mean, however, that such plays disappeared with the rise of European-inspired theatre; on the contrary, and especially in Egypt, they continued to be popular until well into the twentieth century, despite the disdain felt for them by many educated Arabs (Moreh, 1992, p.157; Sadgrove, 1996, pp.23-24; Badawi, 1987, pp.28-29).

There is one Islamic drama that we have not yet considered. It remains controversial in the majority Sunni community, and some critics see it as a religious ritual rather than a theatrical performance. But these controversies are not driven by the contention that Islam is inherently hostile to drama; we have shown that this is not the case. As Moreh (1992, p.163) points out, "There is nothing in Islam as such to preclude dramatic development of intrinsically Islamic themes". He further argues that there is nothing in



Islam as such "to preclude dramatic development of non-Islamic, un-Islamic or even anti-Islamic themes". Yet the *ta'ziyah* never developed into secular drama. But it remains the only form of tragic drama created by Islamic civilization without external stimulus.

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## РАННЯ АРАБСЬКА ДРАМА

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#### Анотація

**Мета статті** – дослідити питання арабської чи ісламської драми (обидві не обов'язково є синонімами), якою вона була в домодерний період, тобто у період від зародження ісламу в VII ст. до піднесення театру за європейськими моделями у XIX ст. Обрана проблематика обумовила широкий контекст дослідження. Зокрема, автор звертає увагу на відсутність сталої традиції театру в розумінні Заходу, що стало проблемою, яка протягом багатьох років привертала увагу критиків та науковців, як мусульманського, так і немусульманського світу. **Методологія дослідження** переважно базується на аналітично-, компаративістсько-мистецтвознавчому підході, що передбачає культурно-антропологічне вивчення еволюції арабського театру, зокрема шляхів становлення ранньої арабської драми та розвитку до 1847 року. **Наукова новизна**. Уперше комплексно із залученням широкого дослідницького матеріалу систематизовано та науково осмислено ранню арабську драму як важливу складову еволюції театрального мистецтва в мусульманському світі. **Висновки**. Арабський театр, безумовно, існував до 1847 року, але через низку причин різні його прояви не переростали у високе мистецтво, як це було в Європі в епоху Відродження. Деякі науковці як мусульманські, так і немусульманські, арабські та неарабські намагалися з'ясувати причини цього, хоча більшість з них виявилася спекулятивною і не вартою пильного розгляду. Цілком ймовірно, що драма не розвивалася поза ембріональними формами з двох основних причин: осорома, якій піддавався театр з боку релігійних діячів, і презирство до драми, яке демонстрували діячі літератури. Драматургічна творчість Ібн Даняля не могла плідно розвиватися, оскільки жанр, для якого створювалися твори (театр тіней), був технічно обмежений, а так званий «Судовий процес над халіфами» залишається поодиноким прикладом ісламського театру, який можна розглядати лише як розвиток мистецтва шанувальників. Пізніші комедії мали тенденцію бути або грубими фарсами, або грубими сатирами, які зазвичай підкреслювали розбещення, жорстокість і зухвалість могутніх можновладців та безпорадність бідного, наївного і вразливого селянина. Ці короткі імпровізовані твори не сприяли розвитку сюжетів чи характерів. Однак це не означає, що такі п'єси зникли із розвитком високого європейського театру; навпаки, особливо в Єгипті вони мали популярність аж до XX століття, незважаючи на презирство, яке відчували до них багато освічених арабів.

**Ключові слова:** театр; рання арабська драма; театр тіней; Ібн Даняля; мусульманська релігія; арабська література

## РАННЯЯ АРАБСКАЯ ДРАМА

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#### Аннотация

**Цель статьи** – исследовать вопросы арабской или исламской драмы (обе не обязательно синонимичны), которой она была в домодерный период, то есть в период от зарождения ислама в VII в. до подъема театра по европейским моделям в XIX в. Выбранная проблематика обусловила широкий контекст исследования. В частности, автор обращает внимание на отсутствие установившейся традиции театра в западном понимании, что стало проблемой, которая в течение многих лет занимает умы критиков и ученых, как мусульманского, так и немусульманского мира. **Методология исследования** преимущественно базируется на аналитическо-, компаративистско-искусствоведческом подходе, который предусматривает культурно-антропологическое изучение эволюции арабского театра, в частности пути становления ранней арабской драмы и ее развития до 1847 года. **Научная новизна.** Впервые, с привлечением обширного исследовательского материала ранняя арабская драма была систематизирована и с научной точки зрения воспринята как важная составляющая эволюции театрального искусства в мусульманском мире. **Выводы.** Арабский театр, безусловно, существовал до 1847 года, но по разным причинам его различные проявления не переросли в высокое искусство, как это было в Европе во времена Ренессанса. Некоторые ученые как мусульманские, так и немусульманские, арабские и неарабские пытались найти причины сложившейся ситуации, хотя большинство из них оказались спекулятивными и не стоящими пристального рассмотрения. Вполне вероятно, что драма не развивалась вне эмбриональных форм по двум основным причинам: посрамление, которому подвергался театр со стороны религиозных деятелей, и презрение к драме, которое демонстрировали деятели литературы. Драматургическое творчество Ибн Даняля не могло плодотворно развиваться, поскольку жанр, для которого создавались произведения (театр теней), был технически ограничен, а так называемый «Судебный процесс над халифами» остается единичным примером исламского театра, который можно рассматривать только как развитие искусства поклонников. Более поздние комедии имели тенденцию быть или грубыми фарсами, или грубой сатирой, которые обычно подчеркивали разврат, жестокость и дерзость сильных чиновников и беспомощность бедного, наивного и впечатлительного крестьянина. Эти короткие импровизированные произведения не способствовали развитию сюжетов или характеров. Однако это не означает, что такие пьесы исчезли с развитием высокого европейского театра; наоборот, особенно в Египте они продолжали пользоваться популярностью вплоть до XX века, несмотря на презрение, которое испытывали к ним много образованных арабов.

**Ключевые слова:** театр; ранняя арабская драма; театр теней; Ибн Даняля; мусульманская религия; арабская литература



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