

## The Shadow Play in Mamluk Egypt: The Genre and Its Cultural Implications

The growing, albeit still meager, scholarship on Ibn Dāniyāl brings him into focus as one of the wittiest men of letters in medieval Arabo-Islamic culture, and hails his work as a pioneering expression of Arabic drama. Such complimentary proclamations of Ibn Dāniyāl's artistic stature counteract a long-standing textual and contextual marginalization of Ibn Dāniyāl: "textual," due to a habitual scholarly neglect of non-canonical genres, including the shadow play; and "contextual," thanks to an enduring notion that the Mamluks had a rather unimpressive cultural and literary record that does not merit comprehensive analysis.<sup>1</sup> As both areas are now being reassessed and Ibn Dāniyāl has started to attract interest, he emerges as one of the most challenging and exotic authors of medieval times. Even so, the conceptual ambiguity related to the development of dramatic art in medieval Arabo-Islamic culture, the semantic difficulties of his idiom, and a critical apparatus inadequate to tackle the peculiarities of the genre have resulted in the ongoing neglect of Ibn Dāniyāl as a playwright. Instead, when studied, his work is usually compared or related to the mainstream literary heritage of the medieval Arabs at the expense of a more complex assessment of his dramaturgy. Although the merits of such an approach need not be belittled, the main feature of Ibn Dāniyāl's work—namely, its dramaturgy—has been seriously overshadowed by concerns about its textuality.

To be fair, such scholarly tendencies are not surprising. Ibn Dāniyāl's plays come to us as texts, not as performances, and as such, they raise a series of textual questions. For example, the syntactical and lexical intricacies resulting from Ibn Dāniyāl's hopscotch between colloquial and standard Arabic, numerous orthographic and phonetic alterations for the sake of rhythm and rhyme, his parodic references to great men of letters, and his masterful leaps between prose and

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<sup>1</sup>For example, Ibn Dāniyāl is only briefly referred to in studies such as Aḥmad 'Abd al-Rāziq, *La femme au temps des Mamlouks en Égypte* (Cairo, 1973); Boaz Shoshan, "High Culture and Popular Culture in Medieval Islam," *Studia Islamica* 73 (1991): 67–107; Ulrich Haarmann, "Regional Sentiment in Medieval Islamic Egypt," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43 (1980): 55–66; idem, "Arabic in Speech, Turkish in Lineage: Mamluks and Their Sons in the Intellectual Life of Fourteenth Century Egypt and Syria," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 33 (1988): 81–114; Barbara Flemming, "Literary Activities in Mamlūk Halls and Barracks," in *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet*, ed. M. R. Ayalon (Jerusalem, 1977), 16; whereas in Reynold A. Nicholson's *Literary History of the Arabs* (London, 1907) there is no mention of Ibn Dāniyāl at all.



poetry, all make textual analysis a quite formidable task. Moreover, the manuscripts themselves—the Istanbul, the Madrid, and the two Cairo ones—reveal an array of incongruities arising from the copyists' errors in transcribing Ibn Dāniyāl's colloquialisms, puns, and occasional gibberish. In this sense, the literary challenge is profound and the overall findings still incomplete. In short, nobody has managed so far either to edit or translate the texts of Ibn Dāniyāl's plays with full confidence and total satisfaction.

This article, however, aims to transcend strict textual concerns in order to highlight the performative quality of Ibn Dāniyāl's *khayāl al-ẓill*, the shadow play. The article proposes a joint assessment of content and form while both acknowledging the difficulty, and highlighting the necessity, of understanding the shadow play's triangular mode of dramaturgic communication that involves the puppets, the puppeteer, and the audience. Moreover, since Ibn Dāniyāl's trilogy *Ṭayf al-Khayāl* is discussed first and foremost as performance art, its relational qualities are enhanced. This enables us to look at the shadow play as an interactive genre and to shift its analysis from textual to a performative production of meaning. It is my contention, therefore, that a more appropriate understanding of Ibn Dāniyāl's shadow plays must lie in the discussion of the *khayāl al-ẓill* as performance art situated in the larger context of Mamluk society and culture. This, in fact, is the will of the author Ibn Dāniyāl himself. In the prologue to his trilogy, he makes a plea to the commissioner of the plays to suspend any critical judgment of his work until the performance is carried out in full:

You wrote to me, ingenious master, wanton buffoon, may your position still be lofty and your veil inaccessible, mentioning that *khayāl al-ẓill* lost its popularity as its quality slackened due to repetitiveness. You therefore asked me to produce something in this genre with fine and original characters. Modesty overcame me because of the subject of your request—which you would later introduce as mine—but then I realized that my refusal would lead you to assume that either I was not interested or that I lacked ideas and talent, regardless of my ample inspiration and natural gift. So I indulged in the domain of their unruly dominion and decided to comply with your request. I thus composed witty *bābāt* of high, not low, literary quality. *When you sketch the characters, cut out their parts, put them together, and then project them before the audience through a candle-lit screen, you will see that they are an innovative example, surpassing other such plays in truth.*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Ibn Dāniyāl al-Mawṣilī, "Kitāb Ṭayf al-Khayāl," Istanbul, Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi MS 648



**KHAYĀL AL-ZĪLL AS PERFORMANCE ART: THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

Standing above the analysis of Ibn Dāniyāl's *khayāl al-zill* is the question of whether the Arabs ever knew drama. Traditionally answered in the negative, this question is probably as old as the criticism of the Arab intellectual heritage itself.<sup>3</sup> Based on Aristotelian models, scholarly negations are quick in pointing out the medieval Arab lack of both cultural and analytical frameworks to understand Aristotle's terminology associated with this mimetic genre. But sticking to the Aristotelian definition of drama as a representation of life excludes rather sweepingly a whole range of performative genres of the non-Hellenic kind in which form and content are more fluidly, or just differently, engaged than they are in the Greek drama. In fact, a variety of such fluid possibilities exists in the Arab heritage, from the *maqāmah* to the *ḥikāyah*, and even, as Michael Sells suggests, to the *qaṣīdah* improvisations that can be likened to jazz performances where individual renderings dictate the tenor of any given tune.<sup>4</sup> More than these, however, the *khayāl* and its derivatives are the most widespread performative phenomena that speak to the presence and relative ubiquity of dramatic art. To that end, in his study on medieval Arab live theater, Moreh argues that

The term *khayāl/khiyāl* is well established in the sense of "live play" from at least the ninth century; in the tenth century it is employed as a synonym for *ḥikāya*, which it eventually supersedes. The shadow play, on the other hand, receives its first mention only in the eleventh century, in Ibn al-Haytham, and then, specifically as *khayāl al-zill*, in Ibn Ḥazm. The qualification of *khayāl* by *al-zill*, *al-izār*, *al-sitāra*, etc., is reasonably clear evidence for the reference of the simple term to a type of performance from which it was necessary to differentiate this new import from the Far East.<sup>5</sup>

Moreh draws attention to several issues of immediate relevance: first, there is a historical continuity within the dramatic heritage in medieval Islam, in which the shadow theater plays a prominent role; second, Ibn Dāniyāl greatly benefited from

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Ali Paşa Hekimoğlu Collection (henceforth MS<sup>1</sup>); Madrid, El Escorial MS 469 Derenburg Collection (henceforth MS<sup>2</sup>); Cairo, Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣrīyah MS 16 Aḥmad Taymūr (henceforth MS<sup>3</sup>).

<sup>3</sup>Shmuel Moreh, *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arab World* (New York, 1992), Preface.

<sup>4</sup>Michael Sells, *Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabian Odes* (Middletown, CT, 1989); also, for example, Régis Blachère and Pierre Masnou, *Maqāmāt (séances)/al-Hamadāni (Hamadhāni): choisies et traduites de l'arabe avec une étude sur le genre* (Paris, 1957).

<sup>5</sup>Shmuel Moreh, "Live Theatre in Medieval Islam," in *Studies in Islamic History and Civilization: in Honour of Professor David Ayalon*, ed. M. Sharon (Jerusalem, 1986), 60–61.



the continuity of performative genres by deploying the term *khayāl* "in all its shades of meaning for puns and paronomasia"<sup>6</sup>; third, medieval Muslim writers distinguished well among different types of performance arts, which exposes the misconception that their usage of the terms was random because of a general lack of popularity of these genres; and fourth, that there exists a whole series of literary sources indicating the diversity of themes employed by performative artists.

Arguing that *khayāl al-zill* is best understood as a performative genre, this article takes the approach that shadow theater can be assessed from the perspective of theatrical semiotics, which defines dramatic art through the specification of four indispensable elements: (1) the presentation of human relationships (2) organized into a story (3) to an audience (4) by conscious and present agents.<sup>7</sup> The presence of all these necessary elements in the shadow play, though not always in an obvious and linear way, points to its integrity as dramatic art and highlights relational modes in the enactment of text and the assignment of meaning.

This proposition lends itself to the question about the ways in which theatrical interaction takes place, especially in the shadow play. Here, the theory of Possible Worlds may give a useful insight. As Darko Suvin explains, "in theatre, dramaturgic story and spacetime induce, by the interaction between the existents, events, and relationships being ostended and the audience for which they are ostended, a specific Possible World."<sup>8</sup> In other words, the audience, positioning itself within the existing system of values, interacts with the dramatized state of affairs by inducing a world in which such relations are possible, not actual. The emphasis on the interaction between the stage and the audience is therefore significant not only to make sense of the text but of its visual representations through the prism of a shared cultural repertoire. While differences among individual spectators will generate a certain level of divergence in this interpretive process, the attempt is to highlight the aspects of the performance that could possibly relate to the actual world. To that end, common cultural denominators are required for the recognition, de-semanticization, and re-semanticization of all theatrical signs. Here a cue can be taken from Umberto Eco's argument that "in the *mise-en-scène* an object, first recognized as a real object, is then assumed as a sign in order to refer back to another object (or to a class of objects) whose constitutive stuff is the same as that of the representing object."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>7</sup>Darko Suvin, "Approaches to Topoanalysis and to the Paradigmatics of Dramaturgic Space," *Poetics Today* 8 (1987): 312.

<sup>8</sup>Darko Suvin, "The Performance Text as Audience-Stage Dialog Inducing a Possible World," *Versus* 42 (1987): 15.

<sup>9</sup>Umberto Eco, "Semiotics of Theatrical Performance," *The Drama Review* 21 (1977): 111.



By analogy, the shadow plays of Ibn Dāniyāl also offer an alternative vision of the actual world through the creation of an imaginary state of affairs represented by shadow figures. Of course, the specificity of the shadow theater calls for further elucidation of the nature of theatrical signification. The most recognizable feature of this genre, from which the name itself derives, is the casting of shadows of flat, leather figures (usually *ashkhāṣ* in Arabic) onto a white screen (usually *sitārah*, *sitr*, or *izārah* in Arabic) by means of a lamp (*fānūs*), candle (*sham‘*) or other source of light. The settings used for this purpose are usually of two kinds: portable and permanent. The portable consists of a box into which the puppeteer (usually *khayālī*, *muqaddim*, or *muḥarrrik* in Arabic) enters and maneuvers the source of light and the figures so as to create a shadow-play effect without being seen himself. In contrast, the permanent (and the more complex) setting involves a large screen as the stage that divides the audience and the puppeteer. A curious deviation from these common methods of casting shadows is a technique described by Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), involving a rapidly revolving wheel onto which the figures are fastened in the order of appearance in the play.<sup>10</sup> As the wheel, interposed between the source of light and the screen, spins, the figures consecutively cast their shadows and thus carry out the performance. Although the human factor cannot be excluded in the realization of the action, it is plausible that such a show was silent and the role of the puppeteer confined to a mere *tahrīk* function. This mode of performance, however, seems to have been rather uncommon.

The absence of human beings as visible dramaturgic agents and their replacement with one-dimensional shadows certainly carries some drawbacks that have to be compensated for at another level of theatrical communication. Here, action happens as the puppeteer animates the figures through a range of audio-visual effects. Because the function of the stage is assumed by a white screen onto which the shadows are projected, the screen determines the boundaries of “a spatio-temporal *elsewhere* represented as though actually present for the audience.”<sup>11</sup> The set of relations on that stage is threefold: the puppeteer, the figures, and the shadows. Their synchronization is not only semiotic but mimetic, since it is the puppeteer’s conscious “acting,” along with the figures’ signification, that ultimately achieves an “elsewhere” which resembles as well as points to the actual world. The usage of props is considerably reduced, and their presence only vaguely marks the space of action (e.g., indoors/outdoors; sea/land; city/countryside, etc.). A more complex communication, because of such limited usage of props, is therefore achieved through the deployment of additional narrative markers.

<sup>10</sup>Alī ibn Aḥmad Ibn Ḥazm, *Kitāb al-Akhlāq wa-al-Siyar* (Beirut, 1985), 30.

<sup>11</sup>Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London, 1980), 99.



Furthermore, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>12</sup> the verisimilitude of stage signs, or what semioticians refer to as "iconic identity,"<sup>13</sup> can hardly be achieved in the shadow play, whereas theater proper allows it often in a rather convincing fashion. Similarly, the subtlety of human relations or psychological processes that can evolve on the stage in theater proper are hardly possible in the shadow play where only clumsy and rudimentary representations of human interaction can take place. Furthermore, the figures representing human beings in the shadow theater often assume grotesque representations or stereotypes based on culturally assumed attributes. The Turkish *Karagöz* is an excellent example of ethnic, gender, or social typifications of various Ottoman subjects. The shortcomings of the shadow play are thus manipulated as modes of strengthening, if problematically, the embedded societal relations. It is therefore very difficult, even impossible, to be experimental or innovative in the shadow theater. The innovation cannot come through spontaneity but through careful rearrangement of the long-term and familiar modes of representation. Thus, the deployment of leather figures as dramaturgic agents evokes playful yet often immediate associations between the shadows and the objects they iconically designate. In the majority of shadow plays, then, it is collectivities or types of people that are represented, not individual characters. The collectivity is given a primordial quality singled out and objectified in the shadow figure's physical trait, the accent, or the costume. The audience is thus placed in servitude to its own beliefs and experiences. This degree of condensation of collective traits into shadow representations takes to an exceptional degree one of the basic principles of theatrical interaction, which Umberto Eco defines as the transposition of stage signs from the rhetorical to the ideological level.<sup>14</sup>

As the one-dimensionality of its bearers of action limits the figures' mobility, gestural communication is often successfully compensated by the puppeteer's persuasive rhetorical and acting skills. In his study of the medieval Arabic shadow play, Ibrāhīm Ḥamādah observed that "the puppeteer has to have good narrative skills; must know the basic principles of verse composition and be able to sing; must feel a special affection towards popular story-telling, riddles, and *zajals*. All in all, he must know what the audience enjoys and loves."<sup>15</sup> With the puppeteer's help, the spectators are reminded that they are already familiar with the possible world of the play, be it through its system of values (as in the *wayang kulit*, or

<sup>12</sup>Amila Buturović, "'Truly, This Land is Triumphant and Its Accomplishments Apparent!': Baybars's Cairo in Ibn Dāniyāl's *Ṭayf al-Khayāl*," in *Writers and Rulers: Perspectives from Abbasid to Safavid Times*, ed. Beatrice Gruendler and Louise Marlow (Wiesbaden, forthcoming).

<sup>13</sup>Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, 23.

<sup>14</sup>Eco, "Semiotics of Theatrical Performance," 116.

<sup>15</sup>Ibrāhīm Ḥamādah, *Khayāl al-Ẓill wa-Tamthīlīyāt Ibn Dāniyāl* (Cairo, 1963), 18.



Indonesian shadow play, for example) or through recognizable contours of animate and inanimate objects. Thus, it is mainly the puppeteer who activates the modes of recognition as he animates the figures, allowing the audience to look at the stage not as an unknown reality but something possibly familiar. For all its limitations and one-dimensionality, then, the shadow theater possesses the capacity of intimating, if not recreating, any number of possible relations. In that process, the puppeteer's role is pivotal.

While at one level, the theatrical frame is meant to be easily recognized, the two worlds—the actual and the possible—are sharply delineated. The audience is thus pulled into the production of meaning first by virtue of visual recognition of the contents in the theatrical frame and, secondarily, by drawing analogies and commentaries between the theatrical frame and the outside world. A full awareness of the theatrical frame and the action that happens within it ascertains the flow of the stage-audience dialogue, even in the case of the portable type where the stage would come to the audience rather than in the fixed theater setting. In fact, other props and markers that inaugurate and assist the production of the play—the lantern, the rhetorical interventions, or the music—help to confirm that “the frame of an activity” is established and the audience's engagement is initiated. As Erving Goffman argues in his study on framing devices in social life, “Given their understanding of what it is that is going on, individuals fit their actions to this understanding and ordinarily find that the ongoing world supports this fitting.”<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, despite the seeming drawbacks and a limited scope of performance of action, “we are,” as Suvin puts it in reference to theater at large, “in final analysis always dealing with human relationships.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, the condensation of human qualities in shadow representations often accelerates rather than hampers this process. Eco's argument that every sign, “after being a mere presence, a figure of speech, becomes an ideological abstraction,”<sup>18</sup> can be demonstrated quite well in the shadow play where only the contours of the figures are visually functional whereby their completeness calls for instantaneous group identifications, or evocation of “types.” In the case of Ibn Dāniyāl's types, the process of association is most readily conducted on ethnic, professional, and gender lines. The assumed power relations in Mamluk society—about which a word will be said shortly—when transferred onto the white screen demand the bracketing off of those group traits that the

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<sup>16</sup>Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (New York, 1974), 247. However, in certain extraordinary mental experiences even this conspicuous framing may not be sufficient. Goffman thus mentions an instance of a drunken spectator who shot a puppet portraying the devil, 363.

<sup>17</sup>Suvin, “The Performance Text,” 4.

<sup>18</sup>Eco, “Semiotics of Theatrical Performance,” 16.



society treats as stereotypical and therefore constant. This gives a more sociological orientation to an argument made already by the Prague School of semiotics, which says that stage semiotization occurs the moment any object is put on the stage, and from then on the audience's assumption is a signifying function of all that they see therein.<sup>19</sup> The significance of such "bracketing" of human form and action within the dramaturgic space, when perceived through the context of the Mamluk audience for which Ibn Dāniyāl wrote, raises an important concern: since we cannot determine the character of the audience for lack of historiographical sources, the best we can do is project the target audience on the basis of the plays and the milieu.

In that sense, while the semiotic definition discloses an internal integrity of the shadow theater, a broader-based, sociocultural perspective demands that the shadow play be treated as a dynamic and rich social phenomenon that creates a sense of collectivity by engaging the audience in decoding the dramaturgic message. As the formal structure of the art demands, any successful shadow performance must evoke a set of associations that are both accessible and shared by the target audience. Unlike our current efforts to address the textual challenges of Ibn Dāniyāl's plays, the actual audience was faced with a task of quite different proportions, namely, of engaging actively and collectively in the production of the three plays. A cue here can be taken from Ward Keeler who in his study on the *wayang kulit*—the Indonesian shadow play—argues the following:

To understand a performance as a relationship does not simply permit investigation to challenge commentary with observed reactions, however. It permits them, much more significantly, to integrate the art form with other kinds of relationships that obtain among the members of that culture. It is here that aesthetics, sociology, and ideology meet: in recurrent patterns in the mediation of self and other.<sup>20</sup>

Keeler's integrative approach suggests that we should not look for a cause-and-effect paradigm in the development of the shadow play as art performance in any given culture; rather, our task is primarily to discern the mechanisms that sustain the relationship between this art form and social life. In a similar vein, the aim here is not to create a causal link between Mamluk culture and the shadow-play tradition but to probe the relations through which Ibn Dāniyāl's text comes to life. To be sure, the challenge of this task is rather daunting: after all, unlike the Indonesian

<sup>19</sup>For elaborate discussion on the theatrical principles set up by this school see Ladislav Matejka and Irwin R. Titunik, *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions* (Cambridge, MA, 1976).

<sup>20</sup>Ward Keeler, *Javanese Shadow Plays, Javanese Selves* (Princeton, 1987), 17.



shadow play, which continues to thrive as performance art—thus remaining accessible to researchers—the Mamluk shadow play is a dead form, surviving only descriptively, through scant historical and literary references, and prescriptively, through the text by Ibn Dāniyāl. Although in the absence of sufficient data about the staging and attending of such performances we can never imagine these events with full confidence, we can nevertheless take up the challenge of “dramatizing” the possible modes of interaction and interpretations of the text. Ultimately, then, the intention is to analytically envision the larger picture of societal relations that are animated as the leather figures communicate, through the agency of the puppeteer, the text of Ibn Dāniyāl’s plays to the Arabic-speaking audience of Mamluk Egypt.

#### **KHAYĀL AL-ZILL IN HISTORY: THE MAMLUKS AND BEYOND**

A historical question comes to mind: is the medieval Arabic shadow play necessarily tied to any particular aesthetic, ideological, or cultural framework? What is its historical function? What are its themes? Unlike the Chinese shadow play, which has a liturgical place in popular Chinese religion,<sup>21</sup> the Indonesian *wayang kulit*, which enacts the stories of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabarata*, or the Ottoman *Karagöz*, which focuses on themes from everyday life through slapstick humor, the medieval Arabic shadow play had a more diverse, yet probably less ubiquitous presence in cultural history. On the one hand, it appears quite difficult to trace chronological and textual connections among different styles of shadow-play performances—and we know that there were several—in the medieval Islamic world. On the other hand, the extant historical evidence demonstrates the flexibility of this genre and its ability to adjust to the specificity of its different sociohistorical contexts.

While not indigenous to Islamic cultures, the shadow play found in *Dār al-Islām* a rather receptive ground. That the Fatimids already knew this theater is inadvertently documented by the ophthalmologist Ibn al-Haytham.<sup>22</sup> It was also known in another corner of the Arab world, as is attested by the Andalusian Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), who also alludes to a type of shadow play that appears to be unknown in the Mashriq. Commonly, the argument is made that the shadow play was a low and popular form of entertainment. For example, Jacob Landau states:

For generations the “Shadow-Play” was nearly the only amusement which even the humblest could enjoy. The Shadow-Theatre, the artistic level of which is not high, could flourish even in a country

<sup>21</sup>Fan Pen Chen, “The Chinese Shadow Theatre: Popular Religion, and Women Warriors,” an unpublished monograph, 10–15.

<sup>22</sup>Ibn al-Haytham, *Kitāb al-Manāẓir*, ed. A. I. Sabra (Kuwait, 1983), 3:6, 408.



orn by internecine wars and strifes, which delayed its cultural development and impoverished its inhabitants. Hence the popular character of the Shadow Theatre in the Arab countries, especially in Egypt and Syria.<sup>23</sup>

However, the themes of the shadow play, as well as extant historical evidence, point to a different situation. The historian Ibrāhīm Ḥamādah is inclined to believe that, at least in Fatimid times, this theater penetrated into both popular and courtly milieux because it explored themes that appealed to both types of audience.<sup>24</sup> This view can certainly find theoretical justification: as Stuart Hall remarks, “popular forms become enhanced in cultural value, go up the cultural escalator—and find themselves on the opposite side. Other things cease to have high cultural value, and are appropriated into the popular, becoming transformed in the process.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, labeling the medieval shadow play as either popular or courtly, rather than both, obscures a whole range of historical evidence that points to the criss-crossings of its social and cultural frameworks. Thus, we know that in Ayyubid Egypt court functionaries had access to the shadow play just as common people did, as is attested by the ambivalence shown towards the shadow play by Saladin and al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil in 567/1171.<sup>26</sup>

In Egypt under the Mamluks, local historiographers treat the shadow play as one of the common forms of entertainment. Ibn al-Dawādārī speaks of Ibn Dāniyāl as one of his friends from literary circles,<sup>27</sup> while Ibn Taghrībirdī speaks offhandedly of the staging of various shadow plays before and in his lifetime.<sup>28</sup> In his chronicle

<sup>23</sup>Jacob Landau, “Shadow Plays in the Near East,” *Edoith (“Communities”)* 3 (1947–48): 23. This view is also shared by ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Yūnus, *Mu’jam al-Fulklūr* (Beirut, 1983), 11–12, 24–25.

<sup>24</sup>Ḥamādah, *Khayāl al-ẓill*, 34.

<sup>25</sup>Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London, 1981), 234.

<sup>26</sup>Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī, *Thamarāt al-Awrāq* (Beirut, 1983), 1:47, writes: “This resembles what al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil said when the sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn brought to his castle a performer of *khayāl*, I mean, *khayāl al-ẓill*, for the qadī to be entertained. But al-Fāḍil stood up to leave when the performer began. Al-Nāṣir said to him: ‘If it was forbidden, we would not attend it.’ Since he had been in al-Nāṣir’s service even before the latter took over the sultanate, the qadī did not want to create trouble so he sat until the end. Al-Malik al-Nāṣir asked him what he thought of the performance and the qadī answered: ‘I thought it was a great lesson. I saw dynasties come and go. And when the curtain went up there was but one mover.’ And so, with the help of his eloquence, he produced something serious out of something so trivial.”

<sup>27</sup>Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Durar al-Tijān wa-Ghurar Tawārīkh al-Zamān*, ed. and trans. Gunhild Graf (Berlin, 1990), 57–58.

<sup>28</sup>Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Ḥawādith al-Zamān*, as quoted by Moreh, *Live Theatre*, 139.



*Badā' i' al-Zuhūr*, Ibn Iyās writes that in the year 779/1375 Sultan Sha'bān took a shadow-play performer as an entertainer during his pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>29</sup> As we learn from the composition of the pilgrimage caravans, various functionaries used to accompany the Mamluk sultans on their way to Mecca. Among them were judges, but also entertainers (*tubūlkhānah*) and professional poets.<sup>30</sup> Manifestly, nothing in the themes of these shadow performances was offensive to the sultan and the religious elite as they made their way to Mecca.

We also learn that the shadow play at least once fell out of grace with the authorities. In the year 855/1451, Sultan Jaqmaq had all figures collected in a pile and incinerated. Per his decree, no performer was to stage either live or shadow-play performances any longer.<sup>31</sup> Although the extent of the damage to the props and possibly written texts is impossible to estimate, it is evident from later accounts that the shadow play outlived Jaqmaq's assault. As we are informed by Ibn Iyās, its popularity continued even on the courtly level: in the year 904/1489, Sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir "sent someone to fetch Abū al-Khayr with his props for a shadow play, the group of Arab singers, and the chief buffoon, Burraywah."<sup>32</sup> Even as the Mamluks were about to fall, the shadow play emerges as a form of cultural activism. In 923/1517, as Sultan Selim was taking over Egypt, his victory was marked by a shadow-play performance. According to Ibn Iyās:

On several evenings [the sultan Selim] attended the shadow performances. When he sat for the entertainment he was told that the performer was going to produce for him the figure of Bāb Zuwaylah and the figure of Ṭūmān Bāy as he was hanged and as the rope was cut twice in this process. This delighted Ibn 'Uthmān. That evening he rewarded the performer with 200 dinars, presented him with a velvet robe embroidered in gold, and said to him: "Travel with us to Istanbul and stay with us to entertain my son with this."<sup>33</sup>

Reflecting on this account, is it possible to argue that the Mamluk shadow play ceased in Egypt in its existing form and became reincarnated as, or at least absorbed into, the Ottoman *Karagöz*? While it is hard to speculate on the historical

<sup>29</sup>Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr fī Waqā' i' al-Duhūr*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafá (Cairo, 1982), 1:174.

<sup>30</sup>Abd Allāh 'Ankawī, "The Pilgrimage to Mecca in Mamlūk Times," *Arabian Studies* 1 (1974): 163–66.

<sup>31</sup>Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr*, 2:33.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 3:401.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 5:192.



journey of the performance art, the above references make it important to acknowledge the shadow play's integration into the cultural fabric of Mamluk Egypt at both popular and courtly levels. Ibn Dāniyāl's plays may be the only surviving testimony to the relative popularity of this genre, but its historical association with different spheres of Mamluk public life requires us to acknowledge its accessibility to both illiterate masses and educated elite both before and during Mamluk times. While the contents of Ibn Dāniyāl's play certainly reveal a rich referential value for reconstructing popular life in Cairo, the awareness of the shadow play by dignitaries and intellectuals—including, somewhat earlier, the great Sufi poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ who mentions in some detail different shadow plays<sup>34</sup>—testifies to its thematic and social diversity.

#### MANY STORIES, ONE SPACE-TIME: IBN DĀNIYĀL'S TRILOGY *ṬAYF AL-KHAYĀL*

*Kitāb Ṭayf al-Khayāl* is composed of three plays reconstructing the exuberant popular culture of Mamluk Cairo. In all available manuscripts, the plays appear in the following order: (1) *Ṭayf al-Khayāl*; (2) *'Ajīb wa-Gharīb*; and (3) *Al-Mutayyam wa-al-Dā'ī al-Yutayyim*. The three plays share several common features; one is the spatial and temporal coordinates of the plays' possible world: Cairo under the rule of Baybars (1260–77). As this space-time coincides with Ibn Dāniyāl's empirical world, it is the plays' theatrical frame that transforms the historical here-and-now into a fictional one. Another common feature relates to the plays' themes: all three revolve around the everyday life of Baybars' Cairo, depicting people and relations that constitute the social and cultural reality of the Mamluk polity. Finally, the three plays are textually linked through the same prologue and executed by the same presenter (*rāyyis*), the puppeteer 'Alī, which suggests that they must have been jointly staged. In that respect, it is important to establish a sense of continuity not just in the inner composition of the plays but in their production as well, since they prove to complement each other in matters of agential relations, dramaturgic style, and the target audience.

At the same time, however, the plays are configured independently in that they are marked by their own beginning and end and focused on unrelated stories and situations. The first play, *Ṭayf al-Khayāl*, bears the name of the entire trilogy. It is the most complex and mature piece with a well-conceived plot, action, and dialogue. It takes its name from a character, a narrator of sorts, Ṭayf al-Khayāl. The character blurs the otherwise clear line between the plays. In fact, he introduces them all by virtue of epitomizing, or embodying, in his shadowy presence, the potency of the genre in framing the reality that surrounds the audience. The

<sup>34</sup>See Ibn al-Fāriḍ's *Nazm al-Sulūk*, vv. 679–714, translated by Th. Emil Homerin in *'Umar ibn al-Fāriḍ: Sufi Verse, Sainly Life* (New York, 2001), 269–79.



paronomastic associations are unmistakable: on the one hand, the world of *khayāl al-zill* is animated as the character of Ṭayf al-Khayāl appears on the scene, showing and telling the framework of the play. On the other, different associations of "khayāl" as an immaterial and deceptive motif in Arab poetic and philosophical tradition are evoked, teasing the imagination of the audience. Yet, although presented as an elusive shadow image—like all other characters in the play—Ṭayf al-Khayāl tells a story of a very visible world: Baybars' Cairo. All around the audience, the reality of Baybars' Cairo is made daunting. The ambiguity and tangibility of everyday life are thus both foregrounded as Ṭayf al-Khayāl, the shadow figure, exclaims: "Inna hādhihi dawlah qāhirah wa āthāruhā zāhirah." Make no mistake, in other words: what you see may or may not be what it is, for it is both concrete and elusive, both visible and invisible. The contrasts established by the framing of the palpable and immediate reality of Mamluk Cairo through the white cloth of the shadow theater are not just an optical challenge but a test in epistemology. As it turns out, the actual and the possible are not oppositional in any ideological or political sense. Rather, they are complementary, coexisting through clear visual boundaries yet blurred through the mimetic depictions of potentially real people as shadow figures. This allows the audience to participate in the critique and commentary about the actual through the mediation of the plays' possible worlds. In that sense, the appearance of Ṭayf al-Khayāl at the beginning of the first play inaugurates the tone of the relationships that Ibn Dāniyāl wishes to establish with his audience: in all three plays, the audience is asked to draw analogies, make comparisons, and create contrasts. In fact, in all three plays this is achieved by positing main characters as pairs that can either evolve into irreconcilable polarities or supplements. I will return to this pairing after a brief story line of each play has been laid out.

In the first play, as the setting is established and connections to the outside world drawn, a humorous story evolves around a friend of Ṭayf al-Khayāl, a *jundī* by the name of Amīr Wiṣāl. It is through his story that the first play develops as an independent and well-rounded unit. Threatened by Baybars' moral standards that clash deeply with his own, Wiṣāl informs the dismayed Ṭayf al-Khayāl that he has decided to abandon his wanton lifestyle—something the two friends have always shared—and settle down. Umm Rashīd, a go-between, is summoned to find Wiṣāl a bride. After much slapstick humor and comic speeches by the clerk in charge of Wiṣāl's finances,<sup>35</sup> Tāj Bābūj, and a court poet Ṣurrah Ba'r, a bride is brought in with her entourage, including a boy—her grandson. Wiṣāl lifts the veil and discovers the ugliest woman staring at him, a nemesis contrived by Umm

<sup>35</sup>The mention of poor finances, according to Muṣṭafā Badawī, must have been the moment in the performance that signaled to the audience to reward the performers with money. See his "Medieval Arabic Drama: Ibn Dāniyāl," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 13 (1982): 97.



Rashīd for her long grudge against male behavior of which Wiṣāl is the worst example. Wiṣāl is furious and, appealing to his military power and authority, demands the punishment of Umm Rashīd and her husband ‘Aflaq. Only the aging and pitiful ‘Aflaq appears, oblivious to the reality around him and suffused in the memories of his youth and sexual vitality. He remarks, rather casually, that Umm Rashīd had just passed away at the inept hands of the local doctor Yaḳṭīnūs. Yaḳṭīnūs is summoned to confirm the news, which he does by adding a sexually suggestive remark that Umm Rashīd has just been buried with full honors, “in the drain of the bath, behind the exit and near the entrance.” Umm Rashīd’s demise inspires Wiṣāl and Ṭayf al-Khayāl to repent and to make the pilgrimage to Mecca.

In contrast, the second play, *‘Ajīb wa-Gharīb*, has no discernible story line. Rather, it is structured as a funfair comprising an episodic succession of different *personae* representing various trades and professions in Mamluk Egypt. Within such a scheme of representation, the audience acts as a crowd gathered to observe the skillful demonstrations of the fair exhibitors.

The title of the play derives from the names of two dramaturgic personalities—one Gharīb and the other one ‘Ajīb—who stand for two disparate societal groups and thus define the play’s social boundaries. A brief authorial note introduces the play as “giving an account of the ways of quaint and fraudulent people . . . who use the language of Banū Sāsān.”<sup>36</sup> A character appears on the stage, identifying himself as Gharīb. His name is a pun, foregrounding thus not only his belonging to the underground classes, but also the stereotypical visions of his kinfolk.<sup>37</sup> In many respects, Gharīb is the mainstay of the actual structure of the play, central to any analysis.

After a brief self-introduction, Gharīb withdraws and his partner, the preacher ‘Ajīb al-Dīn, appears. Opening his sermon with the *basmalah*, he compliments the show by praising God for creating humor, and choosing the Prophet “who knew how to joke yet spoke only the truth.”<sup>38</sup> Though ‘Ajīb stands as the ideological antipode of Gharīb, the two are not in an antagonistic but complementary relationship. In fact, their juxtaposition reconciles social polarities in a way that makes it possible for the audience to see the necessity for social and cultural diversity that is so vibrantly captured in the play.

Following the introduction, the parade of figures starts as a parade of different professions. The name of each *persona* is a salient pun on her/his trade, referring thus to a whole system of values culturally associated with any given profession.

<sup>36</sup>MS<sup>1</sup>, fol. 86a; MS<sup>2</sup>, fol. 30; MS<sup>3</sup>, fol. 67.

<sup>37</sup>For a thorough discussion on the Banū Sāsān, see Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *The Medieval Islamic Underworld* (Leiden, 1976).

<sup>38</sup>MS<sup>1</sup>, fol. 95; MS<sup>2</sup>, fol. 32a; MS<sup>3</sup>, fol. 74.



From the dramaturgic perspective, we are here clearly dealing not with characters, but types. We are thus introduced to a snake charmer, a quack doctor, an herbalist, a surgeon, an artist, a magician, an astrologer, a fortuneteller, an animal tamer, and many other entertainers and professionals who disclose secrets of their skill and trade and tell us about their successes and failures. The atmosphere is fully carnivalesque, bringing to the fore what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as “an ancient connection between the forms of medicine and folk art which explains the combination in one person of actor and druggist, [whereby] medicine and theater are displayed side by side in the marketplace.”<sup>39</sup> Given the lack of narrative progression, the ending of the play is neither a resolution nor otherwise. The play simply ceases as the last exhibitor withdraws and Gharīb reappears, announcing in verses composed in *mutaqārib* that “Gharīb is strange and ‘Ajīb is odd.”<sup>40</sup>

Finally, the third play of the trilogy, “*Al-Mutayyam wa-al-Dā’ī al-Yutayyim*,” like the first one, has an organized story-line. The third play, in fact, is a burlesque portrayal of amorous conventions in Arabic literary discourse, yet with overwhelming sociological value related to popular practices in Mamluk Egypt. In the words of Ibn Dāniyāl himself: “This is a play entitled ‘The Enthralled One and the Enthraling Wretch.’ It speaks partly of the condition of lovers, partly of dalliance that is a certain kind of bewitchment, partly of playing games, and partly of wondrous and odd buffoonery that is not disgraceful.”<sup>41</sup>

The play begins with the appearance of “a *shakhṣ* visibly distressed by ardent love,” whose name—Mutayyam—betrays his pathos. Similar to the names of many other characters in Ibn Dāniyāl’s plays, the name Mutayyam is associated with a whole set of values that both belong to and transcend the immediate context. As in earlier plays where binaries are created as a framing device, Mutayyam’s role is related to Yutayyim, who, as his name implies, is the reason of Mutayyam’s distress.

Mutayyam opens his speech with a poem lamenting the condition of *ahl al-gharām*—love-stricken people—which mocks the amatory themes in classical Arabic poetry. He then turns to the audience and, having introduced himself, reveals the sorrowful story of his unrequited love towards a beautiful young man—Yutayyim—whom he had seen in a public bath in all his seductive nakedness.

Mutayyam then composes a *muwashshahah* exalting the young man’s beautiful features that supersede any woman’s and cause all men to fall in love with him.

<sup>39</sup>Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN, 1984), 159.

<sup>40</sup>MS<sup>1</sup>, fol. 138; MS<sup>3</sup>, fol. 109. Here, the word *gharīb* is repeated 4 times, while in MS<sup>2</sup>, fol. 47a, the first two are *gharīb* and the last two, ‘*ajīb*’.

<sup>41</sup>MS<sup>1</sup>, fol. 138a; MS<sup>2</sup>, fol. 48; MS<sup>3</sup>, fol. 110.



As he completes his eulogy, a deformed person comes in, introducing himself as Mutayyam's former lover. He is devastated that Mutayyam has dumped him for a younger and taller man, having thus "replaced with jasmine the thorns of tragacanth." From their conversation, we learn that Mutayyam had spotted Yutayyim in a public bath, where he managed to steal a kiss. He also confesses that he is now busy trying to seduce Yutayyim through the latter's servant Bayram, who seems to exercise a great control over his master. Indeed, Bayram appears, explaining that he has taken matters into his own hands. A typical story of unrequited love and quest for the beloved unfolds, with Bayram assuming the role of the go-between, in a way similar to Umm Rashīd in the first play. Here too, "little people" are given prominence as agents of action and change.

Bayram organizes a fight between Yutayyim and Mutayyam's pet animals. Three matches follow, arbitrated by one and the same judge, Zayhūn, and attended by many. The build-up of tension carries strong comic and erotic effects: as the tension increases, so does the size of the animals in the fight: first roosters, then rams, and, finally, bulls. Mutayyam's ascension to victory is toned down by a desire to appease his lover whose animals do not perform well. The game is about class as much as it is about erotic gain.

Each match is preceded by a formulaic speech by the judge Zayhūn, starting with a pious eulogy and ending with an explanation of the importance of such noble sports.<sup>42</sup> Finally, Yutayyim's bull wins, which temporarily throws Mutayyam into despair but gives him a chance to sacrifice the bull and throw a feast. As the feast goes on, unknown people pour in, introducing themselves to the host Mutayyam through peculiar stories of their lives, satisfying their hunger—both physiological and erotic—and eventually falling asleep. As in the second play, the succession of people is the succession of particular trends, and in this case, these trends relate to clandestine erotic interests and sexual practices. At the end of the play, amidst the pile of drunken and unconscious bodies, Mutayyam is visited by another, the Angel of Death. In a tragicomic confrontation with his departure from this world, Mutayyam rushes to repent, uttering all necessary formulaic expressions of piety and submission to God and the Prophet.

#### INDUCING A POSSIBLE WORLD: RECOGNITION AND CRITIQUE

As indicated by the contents of the plays, it is the heterogeneity of the Mamluk milieu that comes to life in Ibn Dāniyāl's work. Individual plays, then, are not cast as singular events that stand apart from the real world. Rather, teasing out the audience's common perception and attitudes, Ibn Dāniyāl expropriates common

<sup>42</sup>Curious is his remark before their beginnings that the fights are carried out "as the custom of the play requires" (*'alā 'ādat al-khayāl*).



knowledge to explore some of the possible relations in the surrounding world. In that sense, Ibn Dāniyāl appeals to issues and relations that already belong to the audience but assigns to them unconventional values and humorous overtones.

Among the most prominent and recurrent issues in all three plays of *Ṭayf al-Khayāl*, for example, are the ambiguous relationship between the military and religious elite, the ethnic composition of Mamluk Cairo, and the criss-crossings between high and low cultures. As suggested earlier, these issues are problematized rather humorously through repetitive pairings of characters that belong to different walks of life. Political rivalries are presented as correlative rivalries. In real life, the Arabs and the Turkic-speaking Mamluks kept a distance and each nurtured a sense of superiority over the other. The local ulama looked down on Mamluks as soldiers with no skill in matters of culture and often blamed them for the decline of Arabic literature and arts.<sup>43</sup> In turn, Mamluks resented the ulama's sense of superiority for it seemed unrealistic in the face of their lack of political power. The Mamluks thus nurtured their own sense of cultural authenticity by insisting on using Turkish in oral communication and often requiring it from all state employees.<sup>44</sup> In the early period of their rule in particular, the local religious elite was biased against the pagan origins of the Mamluks, which almost automatically dismissed them as unsuitable for the traditional Arabo-Islamic cultural circles: "‘*Ulamā*’ continued to write about ‘*ulamā*’ and for ‘*ulamā*’ paying little or no attention in their works to all those who stood outside their own circles."<sup>45</sup> Despite this attitude of entrenched cultural stereotyping, the ties of the religious elite with the Mamluk aristocracy increased. Gradually, a partial integration of the ulama into the political apparatus occurred through the appointments of the chief qadi, army judges, market inspectors, official preachers, administrators of schools and hospitals, and so on.<sup>46</sup> In the domain of culture, however, the Mamluks' interest and contributions were perceived as motivated purely by political gain.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup>Haarmann, "Arabic in Speech, Turkish in Lineage," 82.

<sup>44</sup>Flemming, "Literary Activities," 250, 259.

<sup>45</sup>Haarmann, "Arabic in Speech, Turkish in Lineage," 84. This attitude was not shared by the masses, who saw the Mamluks as their protectors. Ulrich Haarmann, "Ideology and History, Identity and Alterity: The Arab Image of the Turk from the ‘Abbasids to Modern Egypt,'" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20 (1988): 183–84.

<sup>46</sup>Ira Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1984), 130–41.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 191; Haarmann, "Arabic in Speech, Turkish in Lineage," 83. This prejudice, however, seems to have been a two-way street. Ibn al-Dawādārī, for example, who cultivated both Turkish and Islamic sentiments, contemptuously speaks about how superstitious the Arabs were. See Ulrich Haarmann, "Turkish Legends in the Popular Historiography of Medieval Egypt," in *Proceedings of the VIth Congress of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, ed. Frithiof Rundgren (Leiden, 1975), 105. Also, the Mamluks were often criticized for not caring about the names of the Prophet



The ongoing tension between the Mamluk military aristocracy and the Arab religious notables was complicated by the presence of other minorities that were disadvantaged by such precarious internal relations, so it is generally argued that this period witnessed a significant decrease in the Coptic population.<sup>48</sup> While on the one hand the Mamluks established important political and economic relations with a number of non-Muslim countries extending from the Kingdoms of Aragon and Castile in the west to South India in the east, they carefully monitored potential ties between their own non-Muslim communities and external ones.<sup>49</sup> However, both Jews and Christians frequently occupied important positions in the Mamluk bureaucratic apparatus, mainly as scribes and tax collectors. In spite of that practice, the *dhimmi*s were obliged to observe certain rules of conduct that clearly defined them as second-class citizens. Thus, they had to bow their heads when passing Muslims, were not allowed to crowd Muslims in public places, were allowed to use their temples for quiet religious services only, had to display emblems on their turbans in a clear manner, and had to preserve the color of their garments by regular dyeing.<sup>50</sup> We also know of occasional public outbursts: during the reign of al-Ashraf al-Khalīl, for example, Muslim dissatisfaction with Coptic influence on public affairs resulted in a series of assaults on Coptic houses and churches. When the sultan eventually yielded to public demand and ordered the hanging of a number of Christian scribes, he was cautioned by an amir that these scribes were indispensable, as they ran all financial affairs.<sup>51</sup>

This strained yet functional state of affairs was contingent on the sense of political stability, though many rules and habits were often bent in the name of that stability. Principles often gave in under the pressures of practical concerns. For example, common folk negotiated such tensions with much more fluidity and openness to compromise. As Haarmann points out: "The people in the street did not share this feeling of suffocation and threat of selfishness and dishonesty. They declared, 'Rather the injustice (or tyranny) of the Turks than the righteousness (or

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and his Companions, and maintaining their Turkish names as first names. See David Ayalon, "The Muslim City and the Mamluk Military Aristocracy," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 2 (1968): 322.

<sup>48</sup> Clifford Bosworth, "Christian and Jewish Religious Dignitaries in Mamlūk Egypt and Syria," *IJMES* 3 (1972): 59–74 and 199–216; Donald P. Little, "Coptic Conversion to Islam under the Bahārī Mamlūks, 629–755/1293–1354," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 39 (1976): 552–54.

<sup>49</sup> Bosworth, "Christian and Jewish Religious Dignitaries," 64.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>51</sup> Little, "Conversion to Islam," 554.



self-righteousness) of the Arabs (*ẓulm al-turk wa-lā ‘adl al-‘arab*).<sup>52</sup> For Ibn Dāniyāl, Arab but not Egyptian born, black-and-white choices and unbending allegiances were never a serious option, and his biographical data reveal an unfettered freedom of action and movement through different circles.<sup>53</sup> Accordingly, in the possible worlds of his plays, the social and cultural boundaries are not fixed but porous, despite the squad of distinct and seemingly incompatible shadow figures that perpetually mock and trick each other, undermine each other’s authority, and explicitly care only for their own self-interest. The representation of their mutual dissociation is tackled in a dramaturgic process which in carnivalesque festivities correspond to travesty, defined by Michael Bristol, in a different context, as “code switching” and “grotesque exaggerations” whereby “identity is made questionable by mixing attributes.”<sup>54</sup> For Ibn Dāniyāl, visual stereotypes remain as the figures cast their shadows with recognizable traits—attire, physical features, demeanor, and so on. The world of seemingly polar oppositions is turned into a world of complementary attributes—the mutable is at once immutable, the sacred is profane, the moral is immoral. Code switching happens in the matters of language as well, as the characters move randomly and with ease from prose to poetry, from eschatology to scatology, from grammatical sophistication to colloquial simplification, even gibberish. The overall effect becomes intentionally humorous, and it is through laughter that the audience participates in a critique of its own perceptions and representations of group identities.

To enhance this process, dramaturgic agents are constructed around paronomasia. It has been pointed out that in the second play almost all agential names appear as metaphoric constructs built directly around the types of represented trades: Ḥunaysh al-Ḥuwāh (Little Snake Charmer), Maymūn al-Qarrād (Monkey the Ape Trainer), Hilāl al-Munajjim (Astrologer’s Crescent), and so on. Similarly, when removed from the dramatic frame and placed back into the frame of actual historic circumstances, most of the names of other of Ibn Dāniyāl’s *personae* reveal a number of cultural allusions: in the first play, these are, for example, the names of Amīr Wiṣāl (The Prince of Sexual Union), Ṭayf al-Khayāl (the Spirit of Imagination—the leitmotif of early Arabic poetry), Ḍabbah bint Miftāḥ (Latch Daughter of Key), Tāj Bābūj (Crown of Slippers), Ṣurrah Ba‘r (Pile of Dung, also an allusion to the poet Sarrah Ḍurrah). In the third play, the names of the

<sup>52</sup>Ulrich Haarmann, “Ideology and History,” 183.

<sup>53</sup>See, for example, Khalīl Ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī, *Al-Wāfi bi-al-Wafayāt*, ed. Sven Dederling (Wiesbaden, 1981), 3:51–52; Muḥammad ibn Shākir al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-Wafayāt*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo, 1951), 2:384–85; Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Durar al-Tijān*, 57–58.

<sup>54</sup>Michael Bristol, *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England* (New York, 1985), 65.



protagonists—Mutayyam and al-Dā'ī Yutayyim—stand in opposition vis-à-vis each other. The other appearing *personae*, such as Abū Sahl (Father of the Easy One), Baddāl (Substitute), Dā'ūd al-Qabbāḍ (Dā'ūd the Gripper), and Jallād 'Umayrah (lit., the one who skins his member, i.e., Masturbator), are all associated with specific sexual practices and lifestyles.

Groupings of characters are also done on ethno-professional lines: Amīr Wiṣāl is a Mamluk prince; Nātū is a Sudanese slave boy; al-Tāj Bābūj is a Coptic secretary; Ṣurrah Ba'r is an Arab court poet; Yaḳḳīnūs is a Greek doctor; Ṣāni'ah is a Gypsy tattooing woman; Bayram is a Turkish servant. There are also vocational groupings, such as the trade exhibitors in the second play, 'Ajīb the preacher, or Umm Rashīd as a go-between; the lines of social lifestyle, such as Gharīb, 'Ajīb, 'Aflaq, and different *personae* appearing as sybaritic guests at Mutayyam's party; or gender lines, such as Umm Rashīd as a cunning marriage broker, Ḍabbah bint Miḳḳāh as a victim of imbalance in sexual politics, 'Aflaq as a bamboozled husband, Yutayyim as an accessible aesthetic ideal. These groupings are not rigidly separated and their complicated interaction reinforces the overall effect of such puns. Given that all three plays explicitly share the historical frame with Ibn Dāniyāl's own life, it appears worthwhile to reflect on Ibn Dāniyāl's articulation of that frame through such paronomastic appellation.

As proposed above, the main carriers of action in all three plays come in pairs, complementing each other in a dialectic interplay.<sup>55</sup> Although the function of other agents should by no means be underestimated, it seems that the skeletal function of the leading pair supports Ibn Dāniyāl's interpretive axis. These pairs do not necessarily function in the protagonist/antagonist constructs, but they do tend to articulate their concerns through conceptually different frames, allowing the viewers to observe polarities through the grey area of mutual dependence rather than as fixed and isolated entities. In the first play, the pair is Amīr Wiṣāl and Umm Rashīd; in the second, as the title itself indicates, Gharīb and 'Ajīb; and in the third, again as the title suggests, Mutayyam and Yutayyim. Let us consider them all on their own terms.

Amīr Wiṣāl and Umm Rashīd reflect the most visible polarities: Wiṣāl is a Mamluk soldier, that is, a man of the sword. He wears a *sharbūsh*, the headgear reflecting his status with Mamluk chivalry; here he displays an impressive knowledge of different breeds of horses.<sup>56</sup> He carries a mace (*dabbūs*) and wears a bristling mustache. The physical features of a Mamluk soldier are condensed on a leather

<sup>55</sup>This is also the case with the Ottoman *gölge oyunu*, which is built around the characters of Karagöz and Hacivat.

<sup>56</sup>MS<sup>1</sup>, fols. 48a–51; MS<sup>2</sup>, fols. 18–21; MS<sup>3</sup>, fols. 38–41.



figure, bringing Wiṣāl to the forefront of social stereotyping. As a personality, he embodies power and has no pardon for anything or anyone:

I am a boxer and a slanderer, a thug and a caviler, a rebuker and a sneaker, a quarreler and a menacer, a believer and a murderer. I've been rubbed and stroked. I am a pimp and a shoveler.<sup>57</sup> I dress well and socialize, I turn into a gentleman, I juggle, I dye my hair, I limp, I dance, I report, and I tell stories. So don't disregard my value, now that I've disclosed my secrets to you.<sup>58</sup>

His mainstream Mamluk upbringing is reflected in the social circles of his childhood: he has grown up "among Dākūsh and Diqlāsh, and Qāmūz and Zamlaksh."<sup>59</sup> The juxtaposition of the opposites—power on the one hand and its total mismanagement on the other—creates a fierce yet comic character in Wiṣāl. His secretary ridicules his courtly and financial affairs.<sup>60</sup> The courtly poet praises Wiṣāl for turning "waste land into an earthly paradise governed by justice."<sup>61</sup> Wiṣāl takes his power for granted, expecting it to help him reach a quick marriage settlement in order to avoid political repercussions and demonstrate his common sense. Taking a shortcut to morality is his privilege as a fearsome *jundī*. Although mocked by his servants and inferiors, Wiṣāl is never challenged by them: after all, they are part of the same system, and they do not step out of their designated roles. The challenge can only come from outside that sociological space, and who better to offer it than Umm Rashīd?

Umm Rashīd belongs to a world that Wiṣāl tries to infiltrate without any respect for its internal workings. The trade that Umm Rashīd personifies—that of go-betweens—is an anathema to Wiṣāl's lifestyle. Her description in the play is in fact a subtle description of that underground world that functions through strict codes of behavior that are inaccessible to and spurned by Wiṣāl:

Summon Umm Rashīd, the marriage agent, even though she is one who goes out by night into the bush. But she knows every honorable woman and every adulteress and every beauty in Miṣr and al-Qāhirah. For she lets them go out from the baths, disguised in servant's clothes, and guarantees the prostitutes for whom the police are looking in secret places, providing them with clothes and jewelry

<sup>57</sup>*Karuk*, probably from Turkish *körek*, shovel.

<sup>58</sup>MS<sup>1</sup>, fols. 12a–14; MS<sup>2</sup>, fols. 5–5a; MS<sup>3</sup>, fols. 10–11.

<sup>59</sup>MS<sup>1</sup>, fol. 13; MS<sup>2</sup>, fol. 5a; MS<sup>3</sup>, fol. 11.

<sup>60</sup>MS<sup>1</sup>, fols. 22–26; MS<sup>2</sup>, fols. 8–10; MS<sup>3</sup>, fols. 18–21.

<sup>61</sup>MS<sup>1</sup>, fol. 26; MS<sup>2</sup>, fol. 10a; MS<sup>3</sup>, fol. 24.



without fee. . . . She also knows how to deal in a friendly way with the hearts of lovers, and she sells the enjoyment of love only on the condition of trial. She does not break her promise, she does not haggle over a price. She does not visit a drinking bout in order to appropriate what drips down from the candles, nor does she ransack the clothes of the guests for money. And she does not take the fragrant flowers around the bottles, pretending it is to decorate the clothes of the sinning women. And she does not filch the pieces of meat from the plates, nor does she pour together what has cleared from the dregs of the wine. She does not exchange old slippers for new ones, and she does not criticize the clothes of customers, as a housewife would do. Mostly she goes round to the houses of the women of rank and sells balls of material, raw and unbleached, and all kinds of spices and incense. She sells on credit and makes appointments for Thursdays and Mondays. And she does not haggle over price. And she keeps her appointments even if it is the Night of Fate (*laylat al-qadr*). So it is, and her pocket is never empty of chewing-gum and mirrors and rouge and powder and Maghribine nutmeg and powder for coloring the eyebrows and a lime preparation for the armpits and perfumed wool, and skin cream and "Beauty of Joseph" and pomade and Barmakide scent and hair-dyes and violet scent. The devil kisses the ground before her daily, and he alone wakes from her slumbers.<sup>62</sup>

Gradually, we learn that the two have a long history: Umm Rashīd remembers little Wiṣāl as a stubborn and dirty boy, and bitterly adds that he managed to get seduced even by her own husband. In fact, Wiṣāl seems to be a true menace, intruding into her affairs for a long time. She takes revenge by offering him in marriage a very ugly and aged bride. Outraged, he tries to gain the upper hand by responding with force—the only weapon he truly knows. However, she dies before he sets his *dabbūs* on her and her husband. Her death, ironically, is not her punishment but his. Her trade is reborn—and so is she—as her mantle is passed on to her disciple just before Umm Rashīd passes away. Finally, her death is a cause for repentance—Amīr Wiṣāl submits his powers to God by virtue of having lost his military vanity to Umm Rashīd. But neither Umm Rashīd's triumph and

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<sup>62</sup>Based on the translation by Paul Kahle in "The Arabic Shadow Play in Egypt," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, n.s., 4 (1940): 32–33. For an interesting study on the character of Umm Rashīd, see Maria Kotzamanidou, "The Spanish and Arabic Characterization of the Go-Between in the Light of Popular Performance," *Hispanic Review* 48 (1980): 91–109.



death nor Wiṣāl's repentance belong to them as individuals. On the contrary, both roles are developed as part of the same death and rebirth cycle through which two collective bodies are reconciled after mutual endangerment: the underworld that Umm Rashīd jealously guards, and the political authority of Amīr Wiṣāl.

A similar binary structure exists in the second play as well, here even more explicitly: Gharīb, who personifies the underworld, and 'Ajīb al-Dīn, who represents the religious discourse. The common people's allegiances stay in between, revolving around both layers, much in the same way as the common people congregate around the stalls of exhibitors throughout the play. Though linear, the arrangement of the play is such that its beginning and end eventually join, enclosing the folk spirit in a jovial, if tension-filled, way.

Gharīb's name reveals his social alienation. Literally meaning "strange, quaint, foreign, etc.," this name draws attention to the undefined social status of its bearer and his kinfolk. Gharīb is one of the Banū Sāsān, which is a collective reference to the various groups of people who made up the medieval Islamic underworld:

The underworld classes of which we have information include the fully criminal ones, like skilful thieves and burglars, footpads and brigands, and also those in the no-man's land between criminality and conventional behaviour, like entertainers and mountebanks of diverse types, beggars of differing degrees of ingenuity, quack doctors, dentists and herbalists, and so forth.<sup>63</sup>

Gharīb's alienation is rooted in a somewhat accommodating yet hostile political milieu which created out of the Banū Sāsān perpetual wanderers who claim all lands, disregarding the political and social boundaries: "The whole world is ours, and whatever is in it, the lands of Islam and unbelief alike."<sup>64</sup> Gharīb reveals the secrets of a conniving and trouble-making lifestyle on his numerous journeys through Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. We learn what it means to be one of the Banū Sāsān: sleeping outdoors by the fire with one's head laid on the *kashkūl* instead of a pillow; visiting prostitutes; indulging in various sexual practices; making a living by faking knowledge of religion, philosophy, chemistry, medicine, and herbalism; training animals for fights; and undertaking many other cryptic practices "during numerous travels around the revolving heavens so as to find a homeland and fulfill wishes."<sup>65</sup> Ideologically, as Gharīb himself confesses, his attitude has been prompted by loss of faith in people:

<sup>63</sup>Bosworth, *The Medieval Islamic Underworld*, ix.

<sup>64</sup>Abū Dulāf, as quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>65</sup>MS<sup>1</sup>, fol. 90; MS<sup>2</sup>, fol. 31; MS<sup>3</sup>, fols. 69–70.



When there was nobody left whose generosity could be desired and no one whose gain would be hoped for, we started to trick you having no need for you, we surrendered ourselves to leisure and idleness, became unique in manipulation and dispersed in many bands. No danger and no institution could divert us. . . .<sup>66</sup>

Gharīb thus openly declares war on political and religious institutions and seeks refuge in trickery, admitting that his success in effect depends on these institutions. The Banū Sāsān are thus part of the cycle in which political power and moral values meet in the institutions that both impose rules and accentuate social problems. The articulation of this standpoint comes not from Gharīb but as a roundabout communicate in the speech of his partner, ‘Ajīb al-Dīn the preacher, and is then exemplified through episodic models. Gharīb thus posits himself as both the vehicle and the tenor of the narrative.

In contrast to Gharīb, the preacher ‘Ajīb al-Dīn—the wonder of religion—represents the very same institutions Gharīb rejects. Though a popular preacher, ‘Ajīb is a sociopolitical antipode to Gharīb. Yet, like Gharīb who admits the necessity for religious institutions for the Banū Sāsān to exist, ‘Ajīb too reveals tolerance for the values he tries to uproot through his preaching. As a bearer of official religious values, he explores venues for the accommodation of the Banū Sāsān’s underworld without endangering the dignity of the authorities in whose service he is employed. A theological justification of the Banū Sāsān’s practices follows, and so does the need to bring closer together the official and unofficial systems of values:

May God have mercy on the one who seeks to heal his sorrows with the beauty of the character that embellishes him, and transforms his grief with something that amuses him. Wherever there is amusement, melancholy is driven away. . . . Gaiety is beautiful if it is not excessive, so give yourselves to hope and be engaged in this matter. You are the troops of strangers and others among the Banū Sāsān. Be kind in asking and beg for generosity. Take advantage of union because separation will happen, and get united with humankind before what must happen happens. . . . Travel through the countryside and con people, for strangers evoke pity, and man moves about while his livelihood is determined for him. You should know, may God be with you, that small coins attract gold coins. . . . Pretend to

<sup>66</sup>MS<sup>1</sup>, fols. 90a–91; MS<sup>2</sup>, fols. 31–31a; MS<sup>3</sup>, fol. 71.



be blind while seeing, and deaf while hearing. Pretend to be lame because a lame person wins favors. Wear your worn-out leather gowns and drink some fig juice so that your faces may turn yellow and your stomachs inflate. Find your rows in the mosques and harass the dumb by begging in the streets. Let rags be your most precious garment and the collection of goods your greatest worry. Go around with both of them and feel safe from bankruptcy and debt. The health of the eye is in the human being, and the health of the human being is in the eye.<sup>67</sup>

A full awareness of their trickery yet a surprising justification, even outright encouragement, of it makes ‘Ajīb al-Dīn an odd preacher—yet nevertheless a preacher. In many respects, the complementary functions of the two members of society are projected in their being ‘*ajīb* and *gharīb*. In blending the metaphoric themes of societal outcasts and religious guardians, the happy ending is imminent, allowing all exhibitors to rally around the mutual approval of the two seeming antagonists.

In the third set of binary relations, the thematic focus revolves around the concept of profane love. Al-Mutayyam, the enthralled one, and his counterpart Yutayyim, the enthralling one, personify the common poetic amatory trends and translate them into sociological concerns of Baybars’ Egypt. The play evolves against two discourses: one poetic and the other religious. Each of Ibn Dāniyāl’s heroes carefully reflects both of these trends. Mutayyam, the enthralled party, introduces himself through typical ‘*udhrī* imagery, occasionally infusing it with pre-Islamic *ghazal* style:

O people of passion, gather, beseech, and implore.  
 Knock at the door for response with prayers, and listen,  
 Die and live in longing, burst open, get torn apart,  
 Consider Mutayyam’s story about his captor, or discard it.  
 Lover is the one whose sky of tears never dries up.  
 Nothing is left of him but bones clattering from affliction.  
 From a gorge under his eyelids tears gush forth.  
 O you who blame me, there is no place in my heart for blame.  
 I have no consolation, and no expectation to unite with my love.  
 Mutayyam is the one who, even if he appeases his thirst, will not  
 sleep peacefully.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>67</sup>MS<sup>1</sup>, fols. 95a–97; MS<sup>2</sup>, fols. 32a–33a; MS<sup>3</sup>, fols. 74–76.

<sup>68</sup>MS<sup>1</sup>, fols. 110–111; MS<sup>2</sup>, fol. 48; MS<sup>3</sup>, fols. 139–139a.



The progression of the play, however, brings about change. As Mutayyam grows impatient with his "poetic" self, he plots a breakaway from it. The emotional surrender to unrequited passion that makes him feel as if he were "slain with no knife" gradually gravitates towards a carefully choreographed sensual fulfillment. The movement from *agape* to *eros* is comically developed through an erotic dance with Yutayyim.

Yutayyim, the object of Mutayyam's passion, stands at the opposite pole. His formidable physical beauty, exposed in all its distinctiveness during "the bathroom scene," evokes an emotional reaction, bringing Mutayyam into existence. In other words, Mutayyam is a consequence. If there were no Yutayyim, Mutayyam would not be. This causal relationship becomes significantly polarized as their meanings begin to expand. Mutayyam appears as a metaphor for excessive sentimentality. He is governed by desire. Yutayyim, on the other hand, signifies cool reason. His presence in the first part of the play is more distant than palpable. We know of him indirectly, after Mutayyam's appearance on the stage. Gradually, the knowledge of him, though still second-hand (mainly via Mutayyam but also via Bayram), becomes vaguely personalized, as his looks, his style, his tastes and his strengths and weaknesses are told. As the knowledge of Yutayyim becomes more particular, Mutayyam's passion grows more carnal. It solicits recognition and reciprocation, breaking away from the debilitating causal dependence on Yutayyim. Mutayyam takes his life into his own hands, develops independence, rejects submission that keeps him apart and unable to act. This shift in the relation between the two men is masterfully achieved in a poetic dialogue which, on the one hand, questions the polarity between love and passion, ideals and reality, sacred and profane, and reason and emotion.

With each party articulating quite opposite views of love, we are left to think that they are not engaged in dialogue but unrelated sermons that reflect abstract concepts rather than thoughts, principles rather than feelings. The burlesque reflection on poetic amatory trends is replied to in a detailed yet dispassionate pontification on sexual mores. The final stanza, however, brings comic relief. The whole imagery is uncrowned through a literal and metaphoric demystification when Mutayyam, in a suggestive description, gives an account of the pathetic condition of his pet cock. In a grotesque inversion, formulaic speech and concepts give in to the object of shared passion: cock fights. On the one hand, this inversion spirals the abstraction of love into its carnal fulfillment; on the other, it returns emotions to human kind in all its manifestations and practices. When, upon the celebration of the union between the two protagonists a feast is thrown and many lecherous guests welcomed, a new space is opened to integrate many different understandings and practices of love. As in the previous plays, the meaningfulness



of the play lies primarily in allowing the different relations to be established, rather than in the verity of the relations themselves.

### CONCLUSION

Because of a lack of relevant historical evidence, questions have been raised as to whether the trilogy was in fact ever staged, or whether indeed it was intended for performance.<sup>69</sup> It seems, however, that nothing in the dramaturgic organization of the trilogy Ṭayf al-Khayāl suggests the contrary, namely, that the plays were only intended to be read as texts. Besides, as Ibn Dāniyāl's own statement makes clear, the plays' value was to be assessed first and foremost in relation to their performance. Their eclectic style and linguistic vitality, as well as some pointers to the interaction between the stage and audience, all suggest that the plays' meaning was to evolve *in the course* of their performance. Part of that process, as this article has tried to argue, has to do with the fact that Ibn Dāniyāl's protagonists embody some of the common stereotypes about different collectives—ethnic, religious, professional—that are readily recognized by the audience. As such, they are often paronomastically defined, emphasizing collective social expectations rather than individualistic traits. While their representation as leather figures betrays both the shortcomings and advantages of the genre, Ibn Dāniyāl skillfully singles out the physical traits associated with certain types of people, then shuffles them through grotesque representations of cultural and social interactions at large. The goal of such dramaturgic strategy is a narrative and visual immediacy that allows different relations and situations to be realized through the audience's interactive response: laughter, tipping, and/or cheering in approval or disapproval. This leads to the collectivization of the aesthetic experience of the plays. The assignment of meaning is unmediated in that it is constructed as a stage-audience dialogue, rather than as an individual endeavor.<sup>70</sup> Individual reflection is relevant insofar as the shadow performances strike a chord regarding one's own attitudes toward the relations in the actual world.

To that end, it is important to acknowledge that the depth of any representation resides not in its inner but its outer value. Psychological dramas are not Ibn Dāniyāl's cup of tea: on the contrary, all experiences are exteriorized and all situations presented as belonging to a collective domain. This is a typical carnivalesque mode, which, as Bakhtin suggests, centers around the body and its

<sup>69</sup>See Everett K. Rowson, "Two Homoerotic Narratives from Mamlūk Literature: al-Ṣafadī's *Lawāt al-Shākī* and Ibn Dāniyāl's *al-Mutayyam*," in *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, ed. J. W. Wright and Everett K. Rowson (New York, 1997), 173–74.

<sup>70</sup>In a similar vein, Keeler argues that meaning in the *wayang kulit* performances need not develop out of or after the event, because a performance of *wayang* need not be mulled over in exegetical rumination to yield up its significance, *Javanese Shadow Plays, Javanese Selves*, 266.



liberation "from the oppression of such gloomy categories as 'eternal,' 'immovable,' 'absolute,' 'unchangeable,'" emphasizing instead "the gay and free laughing aspect of the world, with its unfinished and open character, with the joy of change and renewal."<sup>71</sup> Laughter, as Bakhtin further explains, creates an atmosphere in which nothing is taboo or static but everything is fluid and changeable. Laughter "purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naivete and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. . . . It restores this ambivalent wholeness."<sup>72</sup>

The body in the shadow plays, of course, is reduced to shadow silhouettes that reflect a whole array of common attitudes, and laughter is embedded in the very process of audio-visual associations. As people and places are represented by one-dimensional leather figures, the puppeteer translates the written text into a live performance with incomplete clues, forcing the audience to make its own associations between the projected shadows and real life. Since all three plays by Ibn Dāniyāl are set in Baybars' Cairo, the challenge of relating the shadow images to actual people and events has satirical implications. Within such a scheme of relations, the aesthetic and interpretive contribution of the plays' possible worlds is an attempt to "play with" the contradictions and polarities generated by political culture yet without attempting to offer either explanations or resolutions. The line between individual authority and collective participation is again erased, both in form and in content. Ibn Dāniyāl thus subversively displaces the authorial "I" in the production of meaning in favor of a more interactive and clamorous link between the stage and the audience.

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<sup>71</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 123.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

