The Temporal World -a shadow play- Court and Urban Shadow Plays of the 11th to 14th Centuries

Geçici Dünya -bir gölge oyunu- 11. ve 14. yüzyıl Saray ve Şehir Gölge Oyunları

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Abstract: This article draws attention, through quotations cited from contemporary figures, to the importance of the shadow plays of the 10th to 14th c. and of the attention drawn to the significance of shadows in the temporal world that is provided by Sura Al-Nahl and Sura Al-Furqan. This is because the key point about the shadow play was and remains its form and the hierarchy of existence that is expressed through its form. The shadow play was and remains a visible expression of tawheed, as “The mover of all was only One”, as stated by al-Qadi al-Fadil to Salahad-Din Eyyub in the 12th century.

Keywords: Shadow of God, Shadow plays, Shadows, Tawheed


Anahtar Sözcükler: Allah’ın gölgesi, Gölge oyunu, Gölge, Tevhid

It seems possible that the spread of the shadow play in the Islamic world was in part due to the important references made to, and thereby the attention drawn to the significance of shadows in the temporal world that is provided by the Sura Al-Nahl and the Sura Al-Furqan in the Holy Koran:

“Do they not see how every object God created casts its shadows right and left, prostrating itself before Him (The Almighty) in all humility? To God bow all the creatures of the heavens and the earth, and the angels too” (Holy Koran Sura Al-Nahl, The Bee, 16:48; as echoed in Jelalad-Din Rumi’s verse, “Thou art the Sun, and all things follow Thee like shadows, sometimes to the left sometimes to the right”, W. C. Chittick, The Sufi Path of Love, The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi, 1983, 22).

and

“Do you not see how your Lord lengthens the shadows? Had it been His will He could have made them constant. But We make the sun their guide: little by little We shorten them” (Holy Koran Sura Al-Furqan, The Criterion, 25:45).

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The shadow indicating not only that the object that casts the shadow was created in the temporal world by the Almighty, the “Sun” that does not set (Holy Koran Sura Al-An’am, Cattle, 6:78-79), but by virtue of the form being cast on the ground as a silhouette, serving to remind of the prostration in prayer to the Almighty, not only of people, but of mountains, trees and plants, insects, animals and birds, as echoed in the poetry of Jelalad-Din Rumi (Arberry, 1977, 215, “Nothing is there that does not proclaim His praise”) and Yunus Emre (Schimmel, 1975, 331-332) amongst others, every temporal form wittingly or unwittingly thereby praises the Almighty.

Any object that casts a shadow from the sun or moon was evidence of temporal reality and it was precisely the absence of the depiction of shadows in Islamic miniature painting which prevented the charge being levelled at the miniature painters of imitating the work of the Almighty, as without shadows the depictions in painted miniatures of figures, people, creatures and landscapes cannot be said to accurately depict the temporal world. Furthermore, the land of pure shadows, “the imaginal world”, alam al-khayal (See for example Nasr 1987, 177 ff) or al-falak al-atlas, located beyond the realm of the visible planets in the spiritual cosmography of figures such as ibn Arabi (Burckhardt, 1977, 14-16), is the region that contains the shadow-less and true forms, the archetypes of those forms which exist in this transient world and the archetypes that exist in the imaginal world are forms which are not lit by the temporal sun but by the Divine Radiance and so are of pure colour without shadows, like those figures that are depicted in painted miniatures. Jelalad-Din Rumi writes of this imaginal world in his Divan Shams-i Tabriz:

“Every form you see has its archetype in the placeless world (al-falak al-atlas);
If the (temporal) form perished, no matter, since its original is everlasting.
Every fair shape you have seen, every deep saying you have heard,
Be not cast down that it perished; for that is not so” (Nicholson, 1977, 47, XII).

As also in his Mathnavi:

Pure (transcendent) is the Builder (the Almighty) who in the unseen world (al-falak al-atlas) constructs castles of speech and beguiling talk. Know that speech is the sound of the door (coming) from the palace of mystery: consider whether it is the sound of opening or shutting. The sound of the door is perceptible, but the door (itself) is beyond perception (Mathnavi, 1982, Bk. VI, v. 3480-83).

The shadow theatre has had a long history in the Islamic world, perhaps beginning in the 10th century in Baghdad (Schimmel, 1975, 278) seat of the Abbasid Caliphate or even earlier, presumably as a result of trade contacts with China and south-east Asia, and it continues today with for example performances of Karagöz and Hacivad in Turkey, with the shadow theatre reintroduced into Ottoman territory following Sultan Selim’s conquest of Mamluke Egypt in 1517 (And, 2004, 15-16) and the subsequent bringing of the shadow theatre and practitioners from Cairo to Istanbul, continuing to the present day with the performance of shadow plays in Turkey, Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere. It seems the shadow theatre died out in Anatolia in the unsettled times of the 14th c., perhaps in part a consequence of the chaos in Anatolia under Mongol rule and the population loss caused by the plague pandemic beginning in Anatolia in 1346-7.

The shadow-play employed black cut out silhouette figures, only later in the 17th century under the Ottomans were the silhouette figures made of coloured camel skin (And, 2004, 24),
Maqamat and Kalila wa Dimna were popular with both the court and the people, and if this suggestion is correct, then the earlier images to Kalila wa Dimna were perhaps already standardized through the figures employed in the shadow theatre several centuries before these 13th c. manuscript illuminations were painted (The Hindu fables of Bidpai, were translated from Persian into Arabic and added to by ‘Abd Allah ibn al-Muqaffā (c.721-c.759) during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur (754-75) as Kalilah wa Dimnah and was widely read by the literate in 13th century Anatolia, stories which reveal a layering of levels of meaning, which was clearly understood, as Jelalad-Din Rumi remarks: “… take the (essential) meaning of the story, O imbecile! Not like him who has heard (some) fables, and like the “sh” stuck to the (literal) shape of them. So that he would say, How should Kalila, having no language, hear words from Dimna who had no power of expression? And (even) if they knew each others’ accents, how should man understand it (their talk), (since it was) without any articulation?). This would explain some of the differences between the miniatures illustrating these two texts and the contemporary 13th century style of manuscript illuminations (Compare these miniatures with, for example the miniature illustrations to the 1228 copy of Dioscorides Materia Medica, Topkapi Saray A.2127 or those in al-Mubashshir b. Fatiq al-Qa’id’s Mukhtar al-Hikam wa Mahasin al-Kalim of 1200-1250, Topkapi Saray A. 3206) that were employed for other texts.

The key point about the shadow play was and remains its form and the hierarchy of existence expressed through its form. It was and remains a visible expression of tawheed, as “The mover of all was only One”, as stated by al-Qadi al-Fadil in the 12th century, regardless of the particular text that is employed and the actions of the individual silhouette figures employed in any particular individual performance (Contra And 2004, 29-31, where the form of the shadow play and its relation to religious-mystical belief is ignored, while the importance of the plays performed as folk drama is emphasized and, with the exception of the ghazels recited at the start of the performance, he writes, “No trace of mysticism has ever been found in any accounts of Karagöz plays”. However, the very form of the shadow theater, when combined with the introductory mystical ghazel, establishes the context within which the individual play is performed. It is also the case that the plays performed were often sexually explicit, but then accounts of the most explicit and perverse sexual exploits have been employed to stress a religious-mystical form, meaning and text, as is made repeatedly evident for example in any reading of the text of Jelalad-Din Rumi’s Mathnavi). The form of the shadow play can further be seen as representing the relationship between the figures of this temporal world, the shadows on the screen, and the true figures, those without a shadow that lie behind the screen of the world, in the imaginal world.
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