

Islamic Theatre: Traditions, Forms, Perspectives, and Global Influence

Abstract: This paper will delve into the rich and diverse traditions of Islamic performative arts, exploring their historical, cultural, and societal dimensions. It will examine how poetry, deeply embedded in Arab life before and after Islam, served as a powerful medium of artistic expression, influencing public opinion and cultural norms. The paper will also explore how poetry evolved during the Abbasid era to become central to diplomacy and courtly etiquette. Additionally, it will analyze performative elements present in early Islamic practices, such as the spear play performed in the Prophet Muhammad's mosque, which highlights the integration of entertainment and communal traditions within Islamic contexts.

The study will further examine notable forms of Islamic performative arts, including the *Ta'ziyeh*, a Persian passion play which blends theatrical storytelling with religious devotion. It will investigate the *Karagöz* shadow theatre, developed in the Ottoman Empire, which adapted to Islamic artistic sensibilities while maintaining its humor and vibrancy. Similarly, it will explore the *Ortaoyunu*, a "play in the middle," offering a dynamic and interactive theatrical experience, and *Meddah*, a one-person storytelling act that preserved oral traditions through clever impersonations and moral tales. The paper will also discuss Morocco's *Halqa*, a cornerstone of its cultural heritage, which combines storytelling, music, and communal interaction in iconic public spaces.

The study will address views in opposition to theatre and the arts within Islamic traditions. Critics have often argued that art imitates God's creative act, which is considered a divine prerogative, and that humankind should not attempt to replicate creation. Theatre, in particular, will be explored as a form often criticized for deception and lying, which conflicts with the Islamic emphasis on truthfulness. However, the paper will highlight examples from the *Quran* and early Islamic practices that challenge these later developed norms, revealing a more nuanced relationship between Islamic teachings and artistic expression.

Ultimately, this paper will investigate the norms and frameworks governing art and theatre within Islamic traditions, demonstrating how these have evolved over time.

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While acknowledging some restrictions, the study will reveal how Islamic performative arts have flourished, blending creativity with adherence to religious principles. It will also explore how specific examples, forms, and practices of Islamic theatrical traditions, have pioneered or directly influenced the works of European theatre figures like Bertolt Brecht and Peter Brook. By doing so, the paper will underscore the adaptability and richness of Islamic contributions to global cultural heritage, offering timeless lessons on the power of storytelling, communal engagement, and cultural preservation.

Keywords: Islamic performative arts, poetry, Ta'ziyeh, *Karagöz*, Halqa

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Performative Elements in Islam

Islam is a religion shaped by the diverse religious, cultural, and social contexts of its followers. Central to the faith is the *Quran*, regarded as a collection of divine revelations delivered in Arabic to the Prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel over 23 years in the cities of Mecca and Medina. Alongside the *Quran*, Muslims also rely on the hadith – short sacred narratives about the sayings and actions of Muhammad and his companions – systematically collected in the early centuries of Islam. Together, these texts guide Islamic beliefs and practices (Campo, 2009: XXIII).

Since the *Quran* is the primary source and the hadiths are secondary, we will examine them in this order, aiming to explore Islamic teachings and perspectives on theatre. The first noticeable aspect of the *Quran* is its very name, which means “recitation” (Saeed, 2008: 27, 38). As a recitation, it is still performed today, both privately and publicly, by Muslims – a practice with an inherently strong performative character. This was also the case historically, as the *Quran* was initially transmitted orally among believers, just as the hadiths were. This suggests that oral literature and performativity have been intertwined since the birth of Islam.

When discussing the *Quran* and performance, we find verses that directly reference an event in which the Prophet Moses participated. The *Quran* recounts a festival organized by Pharaoh, featuring a contest between his magicians and Moses. This event took place in front of an audience, and Moses was divinely guided on how to act during the encounter (Asad, 1980, 7: 116, 20: 65–70).

The same passage also reveals another theatrical element – dialogue. Yet, this is not limited to this event alone; the *Quran* contains entire sections of dialogue. Surah 20, which describes the confrontation between Moses, the magicians, and Pharaoh, is

a prime example. This chapter consists of 135 verses, more than 60% of which are written in dialogue, featuring conversations between Moses and God, Pharaoh, and the magicians (Asad, 1980, 20: 1–135).

Furthermore, the concept of dialogue is central to Islamic prayer. Muslims believe that during prayer, they engage in a dialogue with God – an idea supported by the *Quran* itself: “And if My servants ask thee about Me – behold, I am near; I respond to the call of him who calls, whenever he calls unto Me: let them, then, respond unto Me, and believe in Me, so that they might follow the right way” (Asad, 1980, 2: 186).

This belief is also reinforced in a hadith about the first chapter of the *Quran*, which is recited in every prayer. The hadith describes prayer as a direct conversation between God and the worshipper. As each verse is recited, God responds, acknowledging praise, confirming devotion, and granting requests. It emphasizes that prayer is not just a ritual but a personal dialogue with God (Muslim, 2007, Vol. 1, Book 4, No. 878).

Turning to the hadiths, we find an instance where Abyssinians [Ethiopians] performed their traditional spear play inside the Prophet’s mosque. This activity served both as entertainment and as a form of training, performed during festive occasions as part of their tradition. The hadiths mention that the Prophet not only encouraged this performance but also invited Aisha, his wife, to watch it. He stood beside her while she leaned on him, observing the performance for as long as she wished (Bukhari, 1997, Vol. 2, Book 15, No. 70; Vol. 4, Book 52, No. 155; Muslim, 2007, Vol. 2, Book 8, Nos. 2064, 2065, 2069).

This suggests that not only did the Prophet and his companions watch a theatrical performance, but it also took place in his mosque. In light of Peter Brook’s idea that theatre occurs whenever “a man walks across [an] empty space whilst someone else is watching him,” (Brook, 1995: 7) this moment can indeed be seen as a quintessential theatrical experience, with the Prophet’s mosque effectively transforming into a theatrical venue.

Extending Brook’s paradigm further, theatrical/performative elements can be identified in various Islamic contexts – not in the core ritual of prayer itself, but notably in the sermon [*khutbah*] that precedes the congregational Friday prayer. In this moment, a designated speaker [*khatib*] takes a specific position, addresses a silent and attentive audience, and delivers a structured discourse – a setting that mirrors the basic conditions Peter Brook identifies for theatre to occur: a space, an action, and an observer.

Moreover, when it comes to storytelling, the *Quran* itself presents narratives and historical events, with the story of Joseph (Yusuf) being particularly emphasized as “the best of stories.” (Khattab, 2015, 12: 3)

Poetry and its performative aspect

In the pre-Islamic period [7th century CE] and beyond, poetry was present everywhere and was an inseparable part of Arab life. During this era, poets competed in large poetry festivals – a tradition that later flourished, especially during the Abbasid period [750–1258 CE], a dynasty that ruled the Islamic world and led a major cultural and intellectual renaissance. During this time, poetry reached unprecedented heights, becoming deeply embedded in courtly life and public discourse. The Arabs were so familiar with poetry that they could identify a poet by a single verse, and individual lines could be attributed back to their authors with remarkable accuracy. Poetry was even used as a decorative element on the walls of houses, curtains, cushions, vessels, clothing, shoes, and musical instruments – even as henna inscriptions on faces and arms, reflecting its integration into daily life (Al-Faruqi, Al-Faruqi, 2018: 402).

Given its deep social and cultural significance, poetry became a powerful medium for influencing public opinion, capable of shaping or even altering it. Some poets used their verses to oppose Islam and the prophetic mission of Muhammad [570–632 CE]. The Prophet was aware of the impact of poets who spread anti-Islamic sentiments, especially those who incited tribal conflicts and challenged his message. As a result, the prophetic period and the Rashidun period [632–661 CE] adopted a cautious approach toward poet (Al-Faruqi, Al-Faruqi, 2018: 400).

On the other hand, the Prophet appreciated and encouraged poetry that promoted wisdom, virtue, and ethical conduct. This is evident in his praise of poets such as Labid ibn Rabi'ah [c. 560–661 CE], one of the celebrated poets of pre-Islamic Arabia, who later embraced Islam, and Umayyah ibn Abi as-Salt [d. 622 CE], a poet known for his monotheistic themes, though he never formally converted to Islam (Al-Faruqi, Al-Faruqi, 2018: 400).

The *Quran* also addressed the role of poetry in a chapter explicitly titled “The Poets”, making a distinction between poets who use their craft responsibly and those who mislead others. Rather than condemning poetry as a whole, it criticizes those who engage in deception, exaggeration, or immoral rhetoric. However, an exception is made for those who are faithful, do righteous deeds, and use their poetry to uphold justice (Asad, 1980, 26: 224–227).

The tradition of reverence for poetry continued after the Prophet's death, most notably in the case of his great-granddaughter Sukayna bint Husayn [c. 671–735 CE]. Known for her sharp intellect and political engagement, Sukayna was a patron of poets and a major figure in Medina's literary and cultural circles. She not only appreciated poetry but also inspired and encouraged poets, demonstrating the enduring influence of poetry in Islamic society (Mernissi, 1991: 192).

During the Abbasid period, another aspect of the performing arts gained prominence. During this era, marked by expanding trade, cultural exchange, and imperial conquests, the number of female war captives noticeably increased. Many of these women, seeking to improve their circumstances, educated themselves – particularly in poetry, music, and singing – to attract the attention of influential men who valued the company of an educated woman. These women often became skilled performers, court entertainers, and literary figures, contributing to the artistic vibrancy of the Abbasid courts (Classen, 2012: 213–215; Mernissi, 1991: 195; Mernissi, 2003: 54).

Later, poetry reached such a refined status that it became an essential part of diplomatic meetings. Poetic exchanges were common in royal courts, where rulers and scholars engaged in verbal duels to display their eloquence and wit. Literary skills were displayed through oratory, rhymed prose [*saj'*, a form of artistic speech often used in sermons and official proclamations], and metered panegyrics, forming a crucial part of courtly etiquette (Davis, 2012: 63).

The performative aspect is central to oral poetry, and even medieval Arabic and Persian poetry, distinguishing these forms from static written texts. In oral traditions, performance brings the poetic text to life, relying on the dynamic interaction between the poet, the audience, and the context. The poem's meaning and artistic essence cannot exist independently of its performance, as the event itself determines the work's realization and significance (Finnegan, 1977: 28–29).

Audience participation plays a vital role in shaping oral poetry performances, where it often engages actively, contributing through rejoinders, clapping, or dancing. Unlike drama, which separates performers from audiences and often emphasizes “play”, rituals are always in earnest, even when they incorporate entertaining or humorous elements (Finnegan, 1977: 122; Rappaport, 1979: 177, 190).

Performance in poetry is inherently transformative. The oral poet's performance transforms their text into a living work of art, deeply influenced by the occasion, audience reactions, and the performer's skill. This transformative nature underscores a special connection between performance and the realization of meaning (Finnegan, 1977: 123–124; Rappaport, 1979: 190, 192).

In the context of medieval Arabic and Persian poetry, the performance aspect is equally prominent. As Julie Meisami notes, the Arabic or Persian poem “is no less a performance than the oration or the drama; and the poet's role, as he confronts patron and audience, seems no less dramatic than that of orator or actor.” She draws on Earl Miner's observation, who in turn cites Vickers's comparison of Roman law courts to theatres and of the orator's art to that of the actor (Meisami, 2002: 142).

The emotional tone of a performance further defines its impact. In oral poetry, delivery may evoke joy, grief, or solemnity, shaping how the audience experiences the text. The audience, too, plays a role in sustaining the emotional resonance of the

performance, whether in poetry or ritual (Finnegan, 1977: 123–124; Rappaport, 1979: 192, 217).

Oral poetry exhibits adaptability, blending structured conventions with creative innovation allowing poets to reinterpret or vary their texts across performances. This interplay between adherence to tradition and opportunities for innovation enriches the performative dimension of the form (Finnegan, 1977: 126, 133; Rappaport, 1979: 217).

In conclusion, the performative aspect of poetry, whether oral or written, underscores their communal, transformative, and emotionally resonant nature. Like the orator or actor in classical traditions, the poet or ritual performer engages their audience dynamically, making the event not only a form of artistic expression but also a medium of meaningful social interaction.

Meddah

Throughout history, oral poetry has played a central role in storytelling, shaping cultural memory and entertainment across different societies. While poetry was primarily a literary and performative art, another form of oral storytelling emerged that combined narration, impersonation, and audience engagement.

One such theatrical form was *meddah* [literally, “praise giver” or “panegyrist”], a term primarily known in Turkish but referred to by various other names, including *gouwâl*, *meddah*, and, following common Middle Eastern usage, *hakawati*. It was a one-person performance, where a single speaker – a skilled impersonator – would tell a story by embodying multiple characters using gestures, voice modulations, and accents (Amine, Carlson, 2012: 17–19).

The *meddah*, sometimes described as a narrating actor, relied on only two simple props: a stick and a handkerchief. The stick was used at the beginning of the performance to capture the audience’s attention by striking the ground, as well as to represent different animals. The handkerchief, on the other hand, served to modify the voice during imitations or to cover the face when portraying a female character (Gürchair et al., 2010: 49).

This form of storytelling required no set, special space, or technology. Everything was conveyed through the performer’s skill and imagination. A key aspect of the *meddah* was the performer’s self-awareness, ensuring that the audience never mistook the story for reality (And, 2005: 14)

This approach may have been influenced by Islamic teachings that emphasize truthfulness and the avoidance of deception. Since lying is considered sinful in Islam, the *meddah* maintained a clear distinction between performance and reality, engaging the audience without violating ethical or religious principles.

Centuries later, a similar technique appeared in European theatre, particularly in Bertolt Brecht's methods. However, while the *meddah* tradition stemmed from religious considerations, Brecht employed self-awareness in acting for entirely different reasons –primarily to provoke critical thinking and social reflection rather than to prevent deception.

Additionally, female storytellers played an important role in this tradition. Women *meddahs* performed in private gatherings, much like a modern-day *Scheherazade* from *The Thousand and One Nights*, bringing narratives to life in intimate settings (Amine, Carlson, 2012: 17–19).

Hikaye

While the *meddah* tradition was a highly performative, one-person storytelling art that often took place in public settings, another oral narrative form thrived in a more intimate space. The *Hikaye*, a Palestinian storytelling tradition, is a form of narrative expression primarily practiced by women. Unlike the *meddah*, which relied on impersonation and interaction with a broad audience, the *Hikaye* was a domestic form of storytelling, shared within small circles of women and children.

These fictitious tales, passed down through generations, reflect the evolving concerns of Middle Eastern Arab society, particularly issues related to family and gender roles. The *Hikaye* provides a female perspective on social life, often depicting women navigating the tension between duty and personal desires. Through these stories, women offer a subtle critique of societal expectations, shaping and preserving their collective experiences.

The *Hikaye* is traditionally recited in homes during winter evenings, in spontaneous and convivial gatherings. While women and children are the primary participants, men rarely attend, as their presence is considered inappropriate. The expressive power of the *Hikaye* lies in the artful use of language, speech rhythms, and vocal inflections, which captivate listeners and transport them into a world of imagination. Unlike other folk narratives, the *Hikaye* follows distinct linguistic and literary conventions, primarily using the Palestinian dialect, either rural [*fallahi*] or urban [*madani*].

Despite the modern challenges, the *Hikaye* remains a testament to the enduring role of oral storytelling as a means of cultural preservation, resistance, and communal bonding, much like the *meddah* tradition but uniquely shaped by the voices and perspectives of women (UNESCO n.d.).

Karagöz Theatre

Karagöz is a well-known Turkish shadow theatre that traces its roots to the Far East, including Chinese shadow theatre (Oral, 2011: 12) and Indian traditions. (And, 2005: 21–22) Religion played a crucial role in its development, with Islam significantly influencing its evolution. After the Turks embraced Islam, they believed that animating the image of a person contradicted Islamic law, as it was seen as violating the belief in the singularity of God. Yet, shadow theatre did not fade into obscurity. On the contrary, these beliefs provided an impetus for its survival. Shadow theatre continued to thrive in Islamic countries, where it was tolerated for centuries and even gained a form of immunity.

To defend this art form, evidence was presented to argue that the images in shadow theatre were lifeless. One piece of evidence was the presence of the puppeteer behind the canvas, which demonstrated that the figures were manipulated and not alive. Another was the existence of holes in the puppets, used to attach strings or rods; since no living creature could survive with such holes, the figures were considered lifeless (Karagöz.net n.d.).

Karagöz performances could be staged almost anywhere, as they required minimal equipment. The plays were performed on a white canvas, initially measuring 2 metres by 2.5 metres, later reduced to 1 metre by 0.6 metres. Behind the canvas, which acted as a screen, an oil lamp was placed to cast shadows of the puppets positioned between the lamp and the canvas. These shadows were not gray but vividly colourful, achieved by the way the puppets were made. The puppets were crafted from pressed and painted leather, resulting in a transparent, colourful material that allowed the shadows to appear in various hues.

The puppets were manipulated by a single puppeteer using horizontal rods designed to minimize their shadows. These rods, typically 50 to 60 centimetres long, were affixed at a point on the puppet, usually at the shoulder or arm. The puppets were interconnected with gut strings and articulated at the neck, waist, or legs, with some – like female dancers and *Karagöz*, the eponymous hero – also articulated at the arms. Puppet sizes ranged from 24 to 40 centimetres, depending on their role, importance, or perceived strength.

Using the same techniques, additional objects for the stage were created. These included representations of various locations [houses, gardens, fountains, ships, etc.], animals [horses, camels, fish, snakes, etc.], and mythical, legendary, and religious creatures [djinn, witches, dragons, etc.], as well as props. The dimensions of these elements varied, ranging from 7 to 45 centimetres (And, 2005: 42–67; WEPA, n.d.).

Karagöz was a comedic form of theatre that became immensely popular throughout the Ottoman Empire and remained vibrant until the 20th century, when technological advancements such as television led to its decline. In Greece and Cyprus, it evolved into a localized version called *Karaghiozis*, reflecting adaptations of the original art form (Oral, 2011: 41–44).

Ortaoyunu

During the same period, in the Balkans under Ottoman rule, alongside *Meddah* and *Karagöz* theatre, another theatrical form emerged: *Ortaoyunu*. Often referred to as a kind of “*Turkish commedia dell’arte*,” *ortaoyunu* literally means “play in the middle”. This theatre form was very similar to *Karagöz*, with the main difference that one medium used puppets and the other one, live actors. *Ortaoyunu* was performed everywhere, the performers did not need any special condition, even the raised platform was never used for the stage, prior to the western influences. So, talking about the stage, we can understand a lot about how they used the space, even from its name. It was a play that was held in the street, courtyards, inns, squares and so, whenever there was a potential audience. Since they did not use a raised platform, people would have gathered around them in a circle and the play would be played in the middle, thus it was called *ortaoyunu* (play in the middle).

There was no fourth wall and a clear distinction between the stage and the audience, and on that playground there was hardly any scenery, and just as in the *meddah* and *hikaye*, actors were again self-aware (And, 2005: 11–13).

Halqa

Very similar to *Ortaoyunu*, or probably something in between *Ortaoyunu* and *Meddah*, is *Halqa*, which is a cornerstone of Morocco’s cultural heritage and its oldest form of traditional theatre, thriving for centuries as an open-air performance art. Deeply embedded in Moroccan public life, particularly in iconic spaces like Marrakech’s Jamaâ El Fna square, *halqa* showcases a unique blend of storytelling, music, poetry, and drama (Amine, 2001: 55–60).

The word “*halqa*” derived from the Arabic word for “circle,” aptly describes the physical and symbolic formation of spectators around a storyteller or performer, the *hlaiqya*. This intimate setup fosters communal interaction, with audiences not only listening but actively engaging with the narrative. Performances are open and dynamic, taking place without barriers or curtains, creating a deeply immersive experience (Billetteries.ma, n.d.; OpenEdition, n.d.).

Halqa is characterized by a wide array of narratives, encompassing Berber legends, religious tales, historical epics, and moral parables. The stories often begin with the evocative phrase, “*Qanya ma qan...*” [“There was, and there was not” – similar to “once upon a time...”], drawing listeners into a timeless, imaginative space. Themes address love, morality, politics, religion, and death, often accompanied by musical instruments for added dramatic effect. Key narratives include Berber legends – rich in mythical creatures and nature imagery, these stories reflect the heritage of Morocco’s Amazigh (Berber) culture – and moral tales – highlighting virtues like loyalty, perseverance, and generosity, these stories educate and inspire (Amine, 2001: 55–60).

Beyond its entertainment value, *halqa* has played a vital role in cultural preservation and political expression. The storytelling art form also encompasses *lbsat*, a satirical and moralizing theatre used historically to address grievances and social injustices. Supported by Alawite sultans in the 18th century, this form of theatre was a medium for presenting societal issues to authorities, showcasing the broader political potential of Moroccan popular performance arts (OpenEdition, n.d.).

The props of *hlayqi/ya* [halqa male/female performer] typically include a small carpet, symbolizing the enchantment of storytelling, a book such as *A Thousand and One Nights* or *Syrat Bani Hilal*, and occasionally a magical stick used to trace the boundary of their mesmerizing circle (Amine, Carlson, 2012: 30).

Ta'ziyeh

The *Ta'ziyeh*, or Persian passion play, represents a significant and enduring tradition in Islamic religious drama. Originating from earlier cultural activities that included pre-Islamic rituals of death and resurrection, its evolution was particularly influenced by the martyrdom of Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD. This pivotal event, central to Shia Islam, is commemorated annually through rituals of mourning, which over time incorporated theatrical elements (Carlson, 2019: 11).

By the seventeenth century, travelers in Persia documented performative observances commemorating Hussein’s [Muhammad’s grandson] martyrdom, including storytelling supplemented by painted screens and mime performances. By the eighteenth century, these observances had transformed into full dramatic performances. The plays, traditionally performed during the first ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram, culminate in the Ashura commemoration of Hussein’s death. They typically include around 30 dramatic pieces portraying events leading to and surrounding the Karbala tragedy (Carlson, 2019: 12–13).

The performances were held in temporary or permanent structures called *takiyehs*, built specifically for these events. One of the most famous venues, the *Takiyeh-ye Dowlat* in Tehran, was a grand structure that could accommodate thousands and was decorated with luxurious details. This theatre, built under the Qajar dynasty, exemplified the peak of *Ta'ziyeh's* popularity during the 18th and 19th centuries (Carlson, 2019: 16–18).

The *Ta'ziyeh* is unique in its use of symbolic and performative elements, such as its reliance on a central figure, the *mu'in al buka* [director – literally translated as *he who brings tears*], who guides the actors and interacts with the audience to amplify the emotional impact. The plays have historically been dynamic, constantly rewritten and adjusted to reflect contemporary events and resonate with audiences, extending beyond Karbala's story to include historical, religious, and even mythical narratives (Carlson, 2019: 14).

While the *Ta'ziyeh* has faced challenges over the years, including a temporary decline during Reza Shah's secular reforms, it has experienced a revival in rural areas and on international stages. Its ability to convey themes of sacrifice, resistance, and justice has allowed it to be appreciated beyond its religious origins, recognized as a vital contribution to global theatre (Carlson, 2019: 17).

The Global Influence of Islamic Theatrical Traditions

Theatrical expressions rooted in Islamic traditions, from oral poetry and storytelling to shadow theatre and religious drama, have shaped and enriched the broader landscape of performance arts. These traditions, whether in the form of the *meddah*, *hikaye*, *Karagöz*, *ortaoyunu*, *halqa*, or *ta'ziyeh*, demonstrate the deeply performative nature of Islamic cultural expression, where storytelling, improvisation, and audience engagement play central roles. While these forms evolved within specific historical, religious, and social contexts, their influence has transcended cultural and geographic boundaries, inspiring some of the most significant figures in modern theatre.

The global recognition of Islamic theatrical traditions gained momentum in the 20th century, particularly with the acknowledgment of *ta'ziyeh* as a major contribution to world theatre. The international exposure of *ta'ziyeh* at the Shiraz Arts Festival marked a turning point, introducing the Western theatre community to its unique structure, symbolism, and emotional depth. Notably, theatre innovators such as Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski – both dominant figures in experimental performance – praised *ta'ziyeh* as a major discovery. Their engagement with Islamic performance traditions underscores a broader dialogue between Eastern and Western theatrical philosophies (Carlson, 2019: 32, 34).

The structure and expressive force of *ta'ziyeh* resonate strongly with Peter Brook's pursuit of a universal theatrical language – one that transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries through pure dramatic expression. Likewise, the emphasis on ritual, physical presence, and audience engagement in *ta'ziyeh* parallels Jerzy Grotowski's concept of “poor theatre,” where the focus shifts from elaborate staging to raw, emotionally charged performance. These affinities suggest that Islamic performative traditions, such as *ta'ziyeh*, hold a significant position within the broader discourse of experimental theatre, demonstrating the capacity of religiously rooted storytelling to inspire and align with some of the most innovative theatrical methodologies of the 20th century.

Similarly, Bertolt Brecht's concept of the “alienation effect” [*Verfremdungseffekt*] (Brecht, 1966: 91–99), which sought to prevent audience immersion in fiction by maintaining a critical distance, shares surprising parallels with the self-awareness of performers in Islamic theatre. While the motivations differed – Islamic traditions aimed to avoid deception in performance, whereas Brecht sought to provoke critical reflection – the techniques of breaking the illusion and engaging the audience directly resonate across these traditions.

Beyond *ta'ziyeh*, another significant example of cultural exchange can be found in the connections between Ottoman theatrical traditions and Italian *Commedia dell'arte*. The Turkish *Karagöz* shadow theatre and the improvised comedic form of *ortaoyunu* share remarkable similarities with *Commedia dell'arte*, particularly in their use of stock characters, slapstick humour, improvisation, and the direct interaction between actors and the audience (And 2005, 12). Both traditions relied on archetypal figures representing different social classes and ethnic groups, exaggerated gestures, and humorous dialogues that resonated with the everyday experiences of their audiences. This cultural exchange contributed to the evolution of theatrical forms on both sides, with shared influences seen in character types such as *Karagöz* and *Hacivat* mirroring the dynamic of *Arlecchino* and *Pantalone*, or the similarities between *ortaoyunu's Kavuklu* and *Pişekâr* and *Commedia dell'arte's Zanni* figures.

The global circulation of Islamic performance traditions continued with the introduction of *ta'ziyeh* to non-Muslim audiences, most notably at the 1991 Festival d'Avignon in France. For the first time, traditional Iranian Shi'a passion plays were performed in a Western cultural setting, presented not as religious rituals but as aesthetic theatrical experiences (Carlson, 2019: 34). The performances took place at the Cloître des Célestins, a historic open-air venue, and were directed by Iranian artist Hashem Fayaz with a troupe of performers from Iran (Festival d'Avignon 1991). The event was curated by Alain Crombecque, then director of the festival, who emphasized *ta'ziyeh's* theatrical and emotional power rather than its religious origin. This deliberate reframing sought to make the performances accessible to a broader audience, emphasizing universal

themes such as sacrifice, mourning, and justice. Crombecque noted that the *ta'ziyeh* “proved that its theatricality and drama could overcome religious, linguistic and cultural differences” (Carlson, 2019: 34). This shift in perspective highlights the adaptability of Islamic performance forms and their capacity to engage with contemporary audiences in new cultural contexts.

By examining these diverse Islamic theatrical forms, it becomes clear that they are not isolated historical artifacts but living traditions that continue to inspire and shape global theatre. From the ritualistic passion plays of *ta'ziyeh* to the comedic exchanges of *ortaoyunu* and the improvisational brilliance of *meddah* storytelling, these traditions have left a profound mark on world theatre. Their influence extends beyond their origins, offering rich insights into the relationship between ritual, storytelling, and audience interaction. As theatre practitioners continue to explore new forms of expression, the legacy of Islamic theatrical traditions remains a vital part of the evolving narrative of world theatre.

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Islamsko pozorište: Tradicije, forme, perspektive i globalni uticaj

Apstrakt: Ovaj rad istražuje bogate i raznolike tradicije islamskih izvođačkih umetnosti, osvetljavajući njihove istorijske, kulturne i društvene dimenzije. Posebna pažnja posvećuje se poeziji, duboko ukorenjenoj u arapskom životu pre i posle pojave islama, kao snažnom izražajnom sredstvu koje je oblikovalo javno mnjenje i kulturne norme. U radu je prikazano i kako je poezija u doba Abasida igrala važnu ulogu u diplomatiji i pravilima ponašanja na dvoru. Rad takođe analizira izvođačke elemente prisutne u ranim islamskim praksama, poput igre kopljima koja se izvodila u džamiji proroka Muhameda, ukazujući na spoj zabave i zajedničkih običaja unutar islamskog konteksta.

Dalje će se razmatrati značajni oblici islamske izvođačke umetnosti, uključujući Taziju, persijsku ritualnu dramu koja spaja pozorišno pripovedanje i religioznu posvećenost. Istražuje se Karadžoz, pozorište senki razvijeno u Osmanskom carstvu, koje je oblikovalo islamski estetički senzibilitet, a istovremeno zadržalo humor i živost.

Proučava se i Ortaojunu („igra na otvorenom”) kao dinamičan, interaktivan oblik teatra, kao i Medah, teatar jednog čoveka, forma koja je kroz imitacije i poučne priče očuvala usmenu tradiciju. Rad takođe prikazuje marokansku Halku, stub kulturnog nasleđa koji kombinuje pripovedanje, muziku i zajedničku interakciju u prepoznatljivim javnim prostorima.

Rad će se osvrnuti i na kritičke poglede prema pozorištu i umetnosti unutar islamske tradicije. Kritičari su često tvrdili da umetnost oponaša Božiji čin stvaranja, koji se smatra isključivim božanskim pravom, te da čovek ne bi trebalo da pokušava da replicira stvaranje. Pozorište je, naročito, često optuživano za obmanu i laganje, što se protivi islamskom naglasku na istinitost. Ipak, rad ukazuje na primere iz Kur’ana i ranih islamskih praksi koji dovode u pitanje te naknadno uspostavljene norme, otkrivajući složeniji odnos između islamskog učenja i umetničkog izraza.

Na kraju, ovaj rad istražuje norme i okvire koji su oblikovali umetnost i pozorište u islamskim tradicijama, pokazujući kako su se menjali kroz vreme. Uz uvažavanje određenih ograničenja, rad otkriva kako su islamske izvođačke umetnosti ipak uspevale da procvetaju, spajajući kreativnost i vernost religijskim principima. Biće prikazano i kako su konkretni primeri i forme islamske pozorišne tradicije uticali, pa čak i prethodili radovima evropskih pozorišnih stvaralaca poput Bertolta Brehta i Pitera Bruka. Time se ističe prilagodljivost i bogatstvo islamskog doprinosa globalnoj kulturnoj baštini, kao i bezvremene pouke o snazi pripovedanja, zajedničkog angažovanja i očuvanja kulture.

Ključne reči: islamske izvođačke umetnosti, poezija, Tazija, Karadžoz, Halka