

ISLAM AND THE COLONIAL STAGE IN NORTH AFRICA

Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson

Throughout the brief history of the modern Arabo-Islamic theatre, Islam has often been inaccurately portrayed as a largely negative force. Such misleading scholarship has been sustained by Westerners and Arabs beginning with Jacob Landou (1958)¹ and continuing through John Gassner and Edward Quinn (1969),² Peter J. Chelkowsky (1979),³ and Mustapha M. Badawi (1988),⁴ among others. Oscar Brockett and Franklin Hildy provide a particularly important example. When Brockett's *History of the Theatre* first appeared in 1968 it immediately established itself as the model for world theatre history, and it still retains its influence in the field today, forty years and ten editions later. During the 1970s and 1980s as more and more theatre research was done on non-European theatre, new editions of Brockett and his collaborator Hildy began to include more Asian material and then material from Latin America and Africa, but the Arab world remained totally ignored. True, Brockett and Hildy began their book, as their predecessors had done, with the ritual dramas of the Pharonic period before moving on to Greece, but the assumption, often explicitly stated, was that nothing of any theatrical interest had taken place in Egypt since about 1850 B.C. Islam, they claimed was in large part responsible for this absence: "[Islam] forbade artists to make images of living things because Allah was said to be the only creator of life ... the prohibition extended to the theatre, and consequently in those areas where Islam became dominant, advanced[i.e. European] theatrical forms were stifled."⁵ This stigmatizing generalization, though inaccurate, is still widely accepted.

This view of the incompatibility of Islam with European concepts of these is by no means restricted to Western scholars; one may find many Arab writers on the theatre taking a similar

¹ *Studies in the Arab Theater and Cinema* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1958).

² *The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama* (New York: Crowell, 1969).

³ *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York, NYU Press, 1979).

⁴ *Early Arabic Drama* (New York: Cambridge, 1988).

⁵ Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy, *History of the Theatre (9th ed)*, (Boson: Allyn and Bacon, 2003), 69.

position. The problem is often traced back to the Arabs' first encounter with the Greek heritage through Syriac translations. This took place during the golden age of the Abbasid's dynasty (the second century of Islam). Mohammed Al-khozai, for example, argues that by "this time Arabic poetry was maturing; and because of the new monotheistic faith it was unlikely that Arab scholars would turn to what they considered a pagan art form."⁶ At this time Islam was still struggling to make space among other religions that preceded it. Moreover, Greek drama's celebration of simulacra and conflict constituted a real danger to the newly established monotheistic Arabo-Islamic structure, as well as to the social and political orders. Mohammed Aziza concludes that "It was impossible for drama to originate in a traditional Arabo-Islamic environment."⁷

Much of such scholarship is based on a flawed argument produced by some Muslim orthodox scholars, the so-called guardians of Islamic faith. The Moroccan Ahmed Ben Saddik (1901-1961) was the first to publish a whole book against theatre: *Iqamatu Ad-Dalili 'Alaa Hurmati At-Tamtali*, [Substantiating Evidence Against Acting] published first in Cairo in the 1940s, then edited and re-published as *At-Tankilu Awi Taqtulu liman Abaha Tamtil* [Torturing or killing those who permitted Acting] in Beirut 2002.⁸ Ben Saddik, who studied at *Al-Qarawiyin* and *Al-Azhar*, provided 48 facts against theatrical activity in the edited version, which is based on a manuscript dating back to the 1940s. In his third argument, he even displayed a strong animosity against other enlightened *Fuqaha* who encouraged theatre as a moral institution. Among these is Mustafa al-Maraghi (1885-1945), who was appointed rector of *Al-Azhar* University in 1928 and began a series of reforms, and the enlightened Cheikh Mustapha Abderrazaq (1885-1947), who led *Al-Azhar* between the years 1945 and 1947. Abderrazaq studied in *Al-Azhar* with the renowned Islamic modernist Mohammed Abdu (1849-1905), and taught at the University of

⁶ Mohammed Al-khozai, *The Development of Early Arabic Drama 1847-1900* (London and New York: Longman, 1984), 4.

⁷ Mohammed Aziza, *al-islam wal- masrah* [Islam and Theater] (Riyad: Oyoun al-maqalat, 1987), 21-45-211.

⁸ Ahmed Ben Saddik. *Iqamatu Ad-Dalili 'Alaa Hurmati At-Tamtali*, [Substantiating Evidence Against Acting] (Third Edition). (Cairo: The Cairo Library, 2003). The same edition contains the letter of Abdullah Ben Saddik entitled "*Izalat Al-Iltibas 'Ama Akhtaa fihi Kathirun Mina An-Nass*" (Remove the Confusion about What Many People Were Mistaken).

However, there is an extended version of *Iqamatu Ad-Dalili 'Alaa Hurmati At-Tamtali*, yet with a different title, *At-Tankilu Awi Taqtulu liman Abaha Tamtil* [Torturing or killing those who permitted Acting] (Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyah, 2002).

Lyon in France. Ben Saddik goes beyond the limits of scholarly debate to call these moderate Azhari leaders “the most ignorant people of their religion.”⁹

His 39th argument against theatrical activity reveals a great deal of prejudice against women. “Theater leads women to prostitution, for there is no respectful actress since women are irrational beings by nature”¹⁰ and “women actresses are required to unveil right in front of the audiences, which is all together forbidden even by contemporary Azhar scholars.”¹¹ Thus, Ben Saddik completely dismissed all activities related to acting and theatrical representation in the name of Islam. His argument reveals not only his intolerance, but also his gender bias. Such features are often found in the writings of European fathers of the church as well. As to Abdullah Ben Saddik (1910-1995), Ahmed Ben Saddik’s brother, he published a letter in the form of a *fatwà*¹² setting forth many arguments against acting. The *fatwà* of Abdullah Ben Saddik reads in part: “Acting comprises evils that require its prohibition. Among these, acting is a heretical doctrine; it is an innovation and there is nothing in the rules of Islam that evidences it. Acting is borrowed from Europeans, thus it must be repudiated, for we’ve been warned against imitating them. Acting is also idle talk, like cinema among other arts, and all idle talks are false vanities which are utterly prohibited. Acting is based on lies; and all lies are forbidden, and the liar is damned. Acting requires the presence of women (...) and this is a completely forbidden issue.”¹³ Ironically, Ben Saddik’s many *fatwàs* were ineffective even inside their home city, Tangier, which was one of the theatre centers in North Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Often the assertion has been made that Islam does not allow *Taswir*, the representation of either human or divine forms. In fact there is no passage anywhere in the Qu’ran speaking negatively

⁹ Ahmed Ben Saddik. *Iqamatu Ad-Dalili ‘Alaa Hurmati At-Tamtili*, 41.

¹⁰ Ahmed Ben Saddik, in Hassan Bahraoui, “al-Islam wal-masrah,” (Islam and Theatre), revue Culturele *Alamat* N° 4 (1995), 7.

¹¹ Ahmed Ben Saddik. *Iqamatu Ad-Dalili ‘Alaa Hurmati At-Tamtili*, 81.

¹² A *fatwà* is a religious opinion issued by a Muslim authority, namely a *faqih*. It is non-binding in the Sunni tradition.

¹³ Abdullah Ben Saddik, “*Izalatu Al-Itibas ‘Ama Akhtaa fihi Kathirun Mina An-Nass*” (Remove the Confusion about What Many People Were Mistaken), in Ahmed Ben Saddik. *Iqamatu Ad-Dalili ‘Alaa Hurmati At-Tamtili*, Op. Cit., 40-43.

about theatrical or mimetic activity. Abdelkebir Khatibi and Mohammed Sijelmassi discuss this matter extensively in their 1976 book, *The Splendor of Islamic Calligraphy*.¹⁴ The only authority for this injunction they can discover is an unverifiable *hadith* (a saying outside the Qur'an attributed to Mohammed) cited by al-Bukhari which "expresses the prohibition on figurative art straightforwardly: when he makes an image, man sins unless he can breathe life into it." They go on to assert that "the *fuqaha* [Islamic religious scholars] and the orthodox have twisted the allegorical meaning of the Qur'an the better to impose rules and prohibitions." According to these authors, "this alleged prohibition was directed against the surviving forms of totemism which, anathematized by Islam, could conceivably reinfiltrate it in the guise of art. The principle of the hidden face of God could be breached by such an image. In one sense, theology was right to be watchful; it had to keep an eye on its irrepressible enemy – art." Yet in opposition to the widespread view that Islam is opposed to representation, they remind us of an ancient Islamic tradition that the prophet Mohammed "permitted one of his daughters to play with dolls, which are of course derived from the totemic gods. Aicha, the mother of the believers and daughter of Abou Bakr, was married to the prophet "and taken to his house as a bride when she was nine *and her dolls were with her.*"¹⁵ [Our Italics] Moreover, there are numerous examples of drawing both of animals and human, as well as of figurative sculpture, as, we are told, the eight century Caliph al-Mansur had in his palace."¹⁶ Thus, Islam's presumed opposition to totemism was by no means universal, nor should it be taken as implying a generally accepted condemnation of theatre. In fact, during the colonial period, the first flowering of modern Arabic drama, theatre with very close ties to Islamic history and the Islamic community became in some parts of the Arab world a major weapon in the developing struggle against colonialism.

The unrivalled prominence of the historical drama *Salahed-Dine Al-Ayoubi* reveals much about the orientation and concerns of the modern Arabic drama during its formative years. Created in 1898 by the Lebanese writer Najib Al-Haddad, this drama was soon frequently produced throughout the early twentieth century by theatres across the Arab world, from Syria to

¹⁴ Trans. James Hughes (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976).

¹⁵ *Sahih Muslim*, vol. 2. Book 8. Chapter 551, N° 3311, p. 716.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

Morocco. Based on the story of Salah Al-Din al-Ayoubi (Saladin, 1137-1193), the great liberator and defender of *Al-Quds* (Jerusalem) and its *Al-Aqsa* mosque and Dome, it was widely viewed as an condemnation of the Arabo-Islamic colonial predicament and a call for unity from the Gulf to the Atlantic to fight the new crusaders. These two themes, Arab nationalism and the defense of Islam, were inextricably intertwined in the story of Salah al-Din and the ongoing anti-colonial struggle. The growing power of the colonialist project and important internal changes in Islam, especially the Salafi movement, served to bring together in a common concern the Arab world's developing theatre culture and the long established religious culture, so that not only certain forms of the Islamic tradition became adapted to theatrical use, but also central themes and narrative concerns. In this light, the significance of Najib Al-Haddad's dedication at the opening of his published script is quite revealing. He dedicates the play to his uncle Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Yazejie, a religious authority of the time: "This is the first representational story which I have written by myself without recourse to Arabization. I humbly present it to your attention."¹⁷

Central to the drawing together of theatre and Islam in the early twentieth century, especially in North Africa, was a powerful religious movement within Islam, the *salafiyya*, which spread rapidly in this region during the same years in which European style theatre was being introduced. The two cultural and political movements often made common cause, and in some cases even shared a common leadership. The religious movement also contributed importantly, on its own and working through the theatre, to creating and shaping the developing drive toward nationalism. *Salafiyya* was so called because its followers sought a return to the supposed purity of the earliest Islamic tradition, that of the "pious ancestors," (*al-salaf al salih*).¹⁸ An early modern leader of the movement was Abd al-Wahhab in eighteenth century Saudi Arabia. His message of reform and purification gradually spread out through the Sunni Arab world, becoming particularly powerful in the late nineteenth century in the great Islamic university of Al-Azhar in Cairo. It spread out from there across North Africa in the years following the First

¹⁷ Najib Al-Haddad, *op. cit.*, 3.

¹⁸ For a detailed study of the *salafi* movement and of its complex relationship with the FLN in the establishment of modern Algeria, see James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge, 2006).

World War, precisely at the time that Egyptian companies were also introducing the modern drama to this region. The Salafi reformist agenda was widely embraced by the anti-colonialist intellectual bourgeoisie, especially in Morocco and Algeria, who found in it a powerful religious foundation for the rising nationalist spirit. In some parts of the Arab world the Salafi movement, with its emphasis on restoring a lost purity to Islam, served to inspire suspicion and in some cases active opposition to theatre, both as an imposed European form and as a potential encouragement to idolatry. However in North Africa Salafi reforms generally worked to support rather than to suppress theatrical activity, due to its alliance there with two other powerful and inter-related cultural phenomena: the rise of anti-colonial nationalism and the growth of the Islamic free school movement.

The so-called free schools were a key part of the Salafi reform agenda, especially in North Africa. There the French colonialists established, in opposition to the old Qur'anic schools of traditional Islam, a system of schools built upon French models to support their program of imposing French cultural values on the population. The Salafi movement in response set up free schools, seeking to recapture the pedagogical initiative from the colonizers, providing an education as rigorous and contemporary as the French, but grounded on national and Islamic practice and values. The desire to purge Islam from the imperfections of many religious brotherhoods (especially those in league with the colonizers), and the emphasis on Arabic language became key principles in the free schools religious and earthly renewal. J. Damis, in his study of the free school movement in Morocco, writes: "By the 1920's Salafi reformers were trying to instill a new critical and questioning spirit in the largely passive learning experience which characterized traditional Moroccan education. This was part of a more general effort to liberate the Moroccan mentality from its state of lethargy by propagating, through their writings and discussions, a spirit of examination and verification. In the free schools which they created, the reformers introduced a more modern, stimulating range of subjects and discussed the ideas of Salafiya with the older students." Salafi reformists played a central role in molding a national consciousness and mentoring the emerging generation of nationalists in the years following the first World War.

Theatre activity was strongly encouraged by these schools, and indeed in Morocco it was the free schools more than any other venue or organization which launched the modern Arabic drama. The staging of al-Haddad's *Salah El-Din Al-Ayoubi* in 1927 was a project of one of the first of the Moroccan free schools, the Moulay Idriss School of Fes, and although it lacked the political freedom of Tangier or Tétouan, the importance of Fes as an educational center made it a third important center for the early Moroccan theatre. The location in Fes of Al-Qarawiyin, the most prestigious mosque and University in the Maghreb, made this city also a center for the new free school movement. Mohamed Al-Ghazi was an important, perhaps the outstanding example of the blending of patriotism, religious and educational reform and theatre. He was well known as a teacher at the Naciriya Free School in Fes, head of its militant student association, and an active director of drama. Eventually his political activities caused him to be sent into exile by the French.

One of the most prominent of the early Salafi activists was the leading educator and political reformer Abdelkhalak Torres (1910-1970), who was educated at one of the first free schools of Morocco, Al-ahliya, established in 1924 in Tétouan. He carried the new ideas with him to Al-Qarawiyin in Fes and in 1935 founded in Tétouan the first modern Arabic high school in Morocco, the Free Institute.¹⁹ According to the general practice of the Salafi reformers of the time, he made theatrical performance a central part of the curriculum. Their production of his play *Intissar Al-Haq* (the Victory of Right) in 1936 at the largest theatre in the city was one of the major events of the early years of the Moroccan theatre. It was also a work that so fully illustrated the basic concerns of the Salafi reformers that it might almost be considered an Islamic morality play. The three act comedy, written in classical Arabic rather than the local dialect, pursued the basic Salafi program of seeking to revitalize Islamic culture in tune with the colonial situation, by extrapolating the universal truths in the Qur'an and applying them to contemporary contexts. The specific subject matter of the play concerned one of the most pressing social issues of the time: should parents allow the younger generations immigrate to acquire modern sciences?

¹⁹ J. Damis, "The Origin and Significance of the Free Schools Movement in Morocco, 1919-1931", in *Revue de L'Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée*, Année 1975, Volume 19, Numéro 1, (75-99), 81.

Torres' career itself provided a clear answer to this question, as he pursued his studies not only in his native Morocco but also at al-Azhar in Cairo, then one of the citadels of Salafi thought, and at the Sorbonne in Paris. Later he built upon this solid and varied education to become one of the leading political figures of the country, president of *Hizb Al-Islah Al-Watani* (the National Reform Party) in 1937, Moroccan ambassador to Spain and Egypt, and minister of Justice after Independence in 1956.

Mohammed El-Qurri (1900-1937), Torres' contemporary at Qarawiyyin University, was a poet, public preacher, journalist, and dramatist as well as a prominent member of the Salafi movement. His theatre embodied the spirit of modernist Islamic social morality. As a disciple of the first generation of Qarawiyyin Salafi reformists, El-Qurri like Torres favored moralistic dramas. His first and most significant piece, called *Al-Ilm Wa Nata-aijuhu* (Knowledge and its Results), was presented in April 1928 by Firqat Achabiba Al-Fassiya (The Fes Youth Company) and was directed by Abdelouahed Ben Mohammed Chaoui (1911-1968), and awarded the prize of the best dramatic text in 1929. Like Torres' *Intissar Al-Haq* it uses a rather sentimental comedic plot to embody a moral lesson, indeed much the same lesson as the play by Torres. The El-Qurri play, loosely based on a popular traditional French melodrama, recounts the adventures of two orphans separated by the force of circumstance who are reunited at last after each one of them has made his way successfully by means of good will and a good education. Like that of Torres, this play underlines the theme of gaining knowledge both at home and abroad, since El-Qurri's generation had already started traveling to France and Cairo for study. El-Qurri was a powerful and popular speaker for the cause of independence, and when he was banned from public speaking or travel by the French authorities he disguised himself as a veiled woman. In this way he was able to move from one mosque to another in order to explain the political situation to a largely illiterate public. Unfortunately, he was discovered and captured by the French. Sentenced at first to two years imprisonment, he was then taken to a prison in Gulmima, where he died under torture in November of 1937.

In Algeria, the Salafi movement only became a significant force after 1930. In 1931 shaykh Abd al-Hamid Ben Badis (1889-1940) and others established in Algiers the Association of Algerian Muslims (AUMA) which numbered among its members many of the leading intellectuals of the country and which was devoted to developing a field of cultural practice and production outside the growing hegemony of French culture and rival claimants for indigenous practice such as the Andalusian movement.²⁰

Like the Moroccan groups with similar concerns, the AUMA was strongly committed to educational and moral improvement, and regarded theatre as an important means of furthering these goals. In this Ben Badis was a pioneer. He established a reformed Islamic school in his native Constantine, where he himself taught some sixty students, male and female. In December of 1937 these students presented a play to an audience of some eight hundred. The play, by shaykh Muhammad ibn al-Abid al-Jalali, opened with a song by boy and girl pupils extolling education for both sexes. It seems most likely that this work was specifically inspired by the free school dramas of Torres and El-Qurri in Morocco a decade earlier, since the argument is almost identical. The first scene showed children sent abroad “to learn the ways of other peoples and to improve themselves.” There still being no major seat of higher Islamic learning in Algeria, the AUMA encouraged study in nearby Fes or in more remote Cairo, Damascus, or Baghdad. In the second scene, a messenger reported on the journey of the enlightened children to Egypt and Syria. In the third, the children themselves return, reciting their thanks in verse to the benefactors who had sponsored their education. After an interval, the scene changed to present a sketch in which poor Algerian children, impoverished by family gambling, are arrested and brought to court, where they are acquitted on the grounds of “acting without discernment.” Presumably the (unstated) moral was that they needed the inspiration of foreign study to overcome their circumstances. Ben Badis himself concluded the performance by thanking the audience and calling upon them to provide good education for their children, to contribute to the eventual prosperity of Algeria.²¹

²⁰ Just as the French attempted to diminish nationalist sentiments in Morocco by attempting to develop Berber culture as a system competing with that of the Arab/Islamic population, they championed throughout the Maghreb “Andalusian” culture as a “European” alternative to native “African” expression.

²¹ McDougall, *History*, 56.

French censorship continued to increase during the late 1930s and early 1940s causing a serious reduction of the available repertoire. Even so, the free schools, less vulnerable than public theatres, continued to utilize theatre in their program of study, apparently with little government interference. One of the most active such groups in the years just before the second World War was the Firqat An-Najm Al-Maghrebi Lit-Tamthil Al-Arabiyy (The Maghreb Star for Arabic Acting Company) created by students of Al-Qarawiyin and offering to the citizens of Fes patriotic historical dramas like *Haroun Ar-Rachid*. One of the most striking examples of the convergence at this time of religion and theatre in the Maghreb occurred in Tunisia. Here one of the first significant regional theatres in the country was created in what might at first seem the most unlikely of all locations, the city of Kairouan, Tunisia's holiest site. There a local photographer, Ibrahim al-Qadidi, formed in 1932 a group called as-Sabab al Qayrawanti (Kairouanian Youth), which presented *El Cid* and al-Qabbani's own *Ins al-Jalis* before disbanding and being replaced by al-Aghaliba, named for the 8th century Aglabite dynasty whose capital, al-Abbasiyya, was located near Kairouan.

The new company struggled for a time to find a practical middle ground between European liberalism and religious orthodoxy, until in 1942, clearly under the influence of the rapidly expanding Salafi movement, the society voted to purge its repertoire of all immoral pieces and emphasize Islamic traditions and values. That same year the author Khalifa Stambuli (1919-1948), an artist and intellectual strongly committed to this program, settled in Kairouan and assumed artistic direction of the company. Although the company lasted only until 1948, when its theatre was destroyed during the Second World War, the nearly twenty plays that Stambuli created for them gave this venture an important place in Tunisian theatrical history. The orientation toward moral improvement and social uplift was central to Stambuli's work, and links him closely to such contemporaries as Torres in Morocco and Ben Bada in Algeria. His plays were by no means restricted to his period, however, and many of them, thanks to their careful plotting, engaging language, and complex characters, maintained their popularity throughout the rest of the century. Among the most performed were *Ana al-Jani* (I am the Guilty One), *Aquibat al-Kas* (The Consequences of Drinking Wine), *Asdiqa wal-Hiyanaou Araf askun*

Ithalit (You Must Know with Whom You Associate) and *Al-Flusi* (Oh, My Money). His historical dramas, such as *Zyadat Allah al-Aghlabi* and *al-Muizz li-Din Allah al-Fatimi*, gained less wide circulation, but still made an important contribution to the Tunisian stage.

With the exception of the family of Ben Saddik, the enlightened *ulama* (Muslim legal scholars) of the Maghreb all advocated theatre as a moral institution. Among these were Thami El-Wazzani (1903-1973) and Mohammed Dawoud (1901-1984), who used to serve as linguistic advisers for Free Schools' actors. Abdellah Guenoun (1989-1908), who used to attend performances at Teatro Cervantes in Tangier, even wrote the introduction for Abou Bakr Lamtouni's poetic drama entitled *Baqitu Wahdi* (I Was Left Alone), published by the Moroccan Ministry of Islamic Affairs in 1962. Allal Al-Fassi (1910-1974), founder of the nationalist Istiqlal party in Morocco, the leading party in the struggle for Independence, acted when he was young and composed poetry in praise of the theatre of resistance.

The major contribution of the North African free schools and their interest in theatre was in bringing an acquaintance with this art form to a wider and often more conservative public than the contemporary emerging professional theatre companies. Almost none of the free school students went on to careers in the developing North African theatre, although many of them, like Al-Fassi, became high officials and distinguished political personalities of the nationalist movement. Their work collectively clearly demonstrated, however, at a critical period in the development of the modern Arabic theatre, that theatre and religion were not incompatible within the context of Islamic thought and practice. In fact they could be productively and effectively united, in this case not only to serve religious and artistic ends, but equally important at this time, to encourage the development of rise of an independent anti-colonial and nationalist consciousness. Nor was theatre employed during the colonial struggle by certain religious leaders and then abandoned after Independence.

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