

ARTICLE

## Shadow Performance in Iran

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### Abstract

This study argues, contrary to some opinions, that shadow performance existed in Iran from at least the tenth to the twentieth century. Through a textual analysis of newly discovered ancient texts, two plays specifically, this study shows how shadow performance originated in the Indian subcontinent, was transported from Iran to the historical region now known as Iraq, and then spread to Egypt, developing over time through its historical progression. This study also looks at the reasons for the decline of shadow performance in Iran, including the centuries-old Iranian Sufi criticism of the form and the establishment of the Safavid dynasty, which introduced Shiism as the official religion of Iran in the sixteenth century. Certain Iranian Sufisms considered shadow performance debauched until the fifteenth century. After the sixteenth century, influenced by the Turkish Karagöz, shadow performance was considered a theatrical form associated with Sunni infidels. Consequently, shadow performance was replaced with Muharram mourning rituals, ritualistic forms that reflect Shia identity.

**Key Words:** Shadow performance; Iranian theater; Safavid dynasty; Sufism; Shia Identity

### Introduction

Based on a narrow focus of selected terms found in historical documents—including Iranian poetry, prose, and scholarship—this study aims to prove the existence of shadow performance in Iran between the tenth and twentieth centuries. By examining Iranian, Turkish, and Arabic terms related to shadow performance in ancient Iranian texts, this study seeks to redefine what shadow performance is as well as the terminology surrounding it. Additionally, after examining the elements of shadow performance and its stories, the study explores the reasons for its decline in Iran, including the century-old Sufi criticism of shadow performance and Iran's political-religious relations with other states. Certain Iranian Sufis saw shadow performance as immoral entertainment, an allegory for the corrupt world until the fifteenth century. Afterward, the Safavid dynasty (1501–1736), the first Iranian government to introduce the Shia branch of Islam as the official religion of the state, further soured religious and political relations with its neighboring, predominantly Sunni regions. Shadow performance, though popular among Islamic nations, was now considered inappropriate entertainment designed by Sunni infidels. Indeed, the emergence of the Safavid dynasty caused the gradual fall of shadow performance in Iran.

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## Terminology

When we speak of shadow performance in Iran, the first problem we face is confusion in the associated terminology. Several words are used for shadow play in Persian. Thus, since the traditional form of shadow performance no longer exists in Iran today, it is essential to search for and define terms previously thought of as unrelated to shadow performance in order to further develop our understanding of the tradition. Willem Floor, a Dutch Iranologist, believes: “[t]he Persian terms for the puppet show include *khayal* [imagination], *khayāl bazi* [imaginative play], *bazi-khayāl* [play of imagination], *khass sayeh bazi*.”<sup>2</sup> However, Floor’s use of terms is incomplete and his understanding of the word *khass* is partly erroneous. *Khass* in Persian means “particularly” and, depending on the context, also “to assign.” As Bahram Beyzai, an Iranian theater scholar, points out: “terms including *khayāl*, *khayāl bazi*, *bazi-khayāl* were assigned to shadow play, and terms including *shab bazi* [play at night], *pard-e bazi* [play on curtain], and *lo’bat-bazi* [puppet play] were used interchangeably for both *sayeh bazi* and *kheimeh shab bazi*.”<sup>3</sup> These last two words—the former meaning “shadow play” and the latter meaning “puppetry play”—have many similarities in form and meaning; it is difficult to understand to which theatrical forms ancient writers were referring. However, an obvious distinction between the two is the status of their practice today. While *kheimeh shab bazi* “is a traditional puppet theater of Iran [and] continues to the present,”<sup>4</sup> shadow performance is no longer performed. Therefore, *khayāl*, *khayāl bazi*, *bazi-khayāl*, and *sayeh bazi* are the first terms related to shadow performance in Iran.

Words such as *khayāl*, *khayāl bazi*, *bazi-khayāl* are, in fact, combinations of Persian and Arabic terms. Due to the cultural fusion of Arabs and Iranians, Arabic terms for shadow play—such as *khaydl/khayāl al-Zill*, *zill-e khayal/khaydl*, or *khayal/khaydl/khiydl*—were also abundant in Iranian text. It is noteworthy that although Shmuel Moreh, the late Iraqi-Israeli professor of Arabic language and literature, “tried to show that the terms *khaydl/khiydl* (‘live play’) and *khaydl al-zill* (‘shadow play’) were quite different,”<sup>5</sup> “the distinction was not clear-cut, in that the two terms were used almost synonymously by Ibn Dāniyāl, author of the only three surviving Arabic shadow plays in the pre-Ottoman time.”<sup>6</sup> The aforementioned words are also used synonymously and interchangeably in the Persian language to refer to shadow play. Also important to mention is the fact that most previous research has been based on the search for Persian words in ancient Iranian poems, which were mostly written by Sufi mystics. However, by searching in Sufi moral-religious texts (i.e., prose and non-poetic texts), the research for this article confirms the existence of Arabic terms for shadow play in the Persian language. For example, Fakhr ad-Dīn Iraqī (1213–1289), an Iranian Sufi poet and orator principally known for his mixed prose and poetry work the *Lama’āt* (لمعات, Divine Flashes), described shadow play and a shadow puppeteer using Arabic terms. In a sermon, he delineated how a puppeteer works: “Behind the curtain of *zill-e khaydl*, a master of shadow play [puppeteer] creates assorted images and different figures. Motions, moods, rules, and all things are his acts, and he is hidden behind the curtain.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, this study also looked at Arabic terms such as *zill-e khaydl*, which is also used in Persian to refer to shadow performance, to find more documents about shadow performance in Iran.

Karagöz—a Turkish shadow play common in Iran due to its proximity to Turkey—was another term used for shadow play in Persian texts. “Ottoman Empire Karagöz” (Turkish: “Black Eyes,” or “Gypsy”), a type of Turkish shadow play named for its stock hero,

<sup>2</sup> Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran*, 63.

<sup>3</sup> Beyzai, *A Study on Iranian Theatre*, 85.

<sup>4</sup> Massoudi, “‘Kheimeh Shab Bazi’: Iranian Traditional Marionette Theatre,” 260.

<sup>5</sup> Moreh, “The Shadow Play (‘Khayāl al-Zill’) in the Light of Arabic Literature,” 46.

<sup>6</sup> Guo, *Arabic Shadow Theatre, 1300-1900*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Iraqī, *Lama’āt*, 30.



**Figure 1:** Kheimeh shab bazi, late eighteenth to early nineteenth century ca. Kheimeh Shab Bazi Museum, Tehran, Iran.

Karagöz, “was characterized by sexual and political humor.”<sup>8</sup> For example, in Georg Jacob’s *Geschichte des Schattentheaters im Morgen- und Abendland* [History of Shadow Theater in the East and West] (1925), he claims the Karagöz was created/spread by an itinerant dervish “Sheikh Kushtari” from Tabriz, the capital city of East Azerbaijan Province in northwestern Iran, in the fifteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Although such an assertion about the origins of Karagöz is likely a legend without clear attribution, there are also other sources that refer to the performance of Karagöz in Iran. In 1907, Eugène Aubin (1863–1931), a French diplomat who visited Iran, made a speculative observation: before the introduction of the marionette, he asserted, “until the middle of the last century, only shadow puppets and the Turkish Karagöz were known [in Iran].”<sup>10</sup> While this statement is not conclusive evidence, it suggests that shadow performances, including Karagöz, may have been performed in Iran during that period.

### Origins and History

When speaking of shadow performance in Iran, another problem we face is whether such existed in general. Researchers such as Metin And, a Turkish scholar of puppet theater, believe that “Central Asia and Persia do not have shadow theater.”<sup>11</sup> And Theodor Menzel, a German scholar of Asian studies, further argues that “shadow theater probably never existed in Iran.”<sup>12</sup> Despite these claims—although there is no objective material, such as puppet figures, to prove shadow performance had been practiced in Iran—there are many sources confirming the existence of shadow performance in the region. In the following paragraphs, I examine some of these as well as recently discovered sources to prove

<sup>8</sup> Öztürk, “Karagöz Co-Opted: Turkish Shadow Theatre of the Early Republic (1923–1945),” 292.

<sup>9</sup> Jacob, *Geschichte Des Schattentheaters Im Morgen- Und Abendland*.

<sup>10</sup> Aubin, *La perse d’aujourd’hui- Iran, Mésopotamie*, 234.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran*, 64, 65; Menzel, *Meddâh, Schattentheater Und Orta Ojunu*, 13, 33, 35.



**Figure 2:** Karagöz (Old Style), 1920–1940 ca. Courtesy Yapı Kredi Sermet Çifter Research Library, Istanbul, Turkey<sup>13</sup>

the existence of shadow performance in Iran. To this end, I first investigate the origins of Iranian shadow performance and show how this dramatic form came to Iran from the Indian subcontinent, and then from Iran to the historical region now known as Iraq, from Iraq to Egypt, and finally from Egypt to Europe.

Not only is the existence of shadow performance in Iran controversial, but so are its possible origins. Some academics argue, “a significant part of people [living in ancient Iran] were nomadic. They set fire during the night, and perhaps, the idea of shadow play came from motioned shadows resulting from the firelight on their tents.”<sup>14</sup> Another possibility is that shadow performance came to Iran from neighboring areas, such as India, because “[s]hadow theater has most likely existed in India since the first millennium BCE, and [...] it had definitively been performed there by the sixth and tenth centuries.”<sup>15</sup> Several sources point out that Bahram V, the Sasanian King of Kings from 420 to 438, resettled a large group of Indian traveling performers—including pastoralists, dancers, and puppeteers—in Iran. According to Firdausi (940–1019/1025), an Iranian poet and author of the *Shāhnama* (Book of Kings), “ten thousand of the Gipsy-tribe” were resettled.<sup>16</sup> Nizami Ganjavi, a twelfth-century Iranian poet, counts 6000 of these gypsies and migrant performers from the Indian subcontinent in his poem:

Six thousand masters of all arts,  
puppeteers, dancers, minstrel bards,  
He gathered in from everywhere,  
and gave each district its fair share,

<sup>13</sup> And et al., *In Praise of Shadows*, 24.

<sup>14</sup> Beyzai, *A Study on Iranian Theatre*, 85.

<sup>15</sup> Chen, “Shadow Theaters of the World,” 31.

<sup>16</sup> Firdausi, *The Shāhnama of Firdausi: Volume VII*, 149.

That everywhere that they might go  
they'd entertain, be happy too.<sup>17</sup>

However, there is disagreement over the number of these artists based on different historical documents. For example, another source notes that Bahram V “ordered the importation of ten thousand musicians, dancers, and performers from India to Iran during his reign.”<sup>18</sup> In any case, the importation of performers from the Indian subcontinent to Iran in the fifth century was a fact.

Chinese scholars “believe that the shadow theater spread to the West from China via Persia through the agency of the Mongol armies.”<sup>19</sup> The Mongol invasion of Iran and campaigns against Islamic states in the Middle East and Central Asia occurred in the thirteenth century. Nevertheless, the tenth-century biography *Chashīdan-i Ta'm-i Vaqt* (چشیدن طعم وقت, Tasting the Flavor of Time), recently discovered and mentioned for the first time in the present study, proves that shadow performance existed in Iran in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, long before the invasion of Mongols. The biography is about Abu Sa'id Abu'l-Khayr (967–1049), an Iranian Sufi and poet, and was likely written by his followers or Abu Sa'id himself. A part of the book—the oldest existing document about shadow performance in Iran using an Arabic term for the practice—presents a detailed account of shadow performance in which a group of puppeteers played in front of Abu Sa'id Abu'l-Khayr.

One day, Abu Sa'id was passing and saw a group of shadow puppeteers performing a shadow play and playing *daf*.<sup>20</sup> Abu Sa'id told his servant to invite them to *khanqah* tonight.<sup>21</sup> Puppeteers came to *khanqah* that night, set up their curtain, and danced. The show comprised characters of various social classes: bakers, butchers, blacksmiths, scientists, reciters of the Quran, and Sufis. The shadow puppeteers briefly introduced each character. When the puppeteers showed the last characters, who were Sufis, they asked [the audience] to say: Wind breezes in the cage! Wind breezes in the cage! Abu Sa'id was happy to hear this sentence, stood up, [...and] sang: Wind breezes in the cage!<sup>22</sup>

“Wind breezes in the cage!” is a metonymy meaning a Sufi's soul is so great that it passes through every cage like the wind; the prison of the world cannot confine his great soul. The text shows the shadow performance being accompanied by music and narration and ending with a moral lesson. It should be noted that simultaneous to Iran, “the earliest references to shadow puppetry in the Arab world” date back to “the late tenth century.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, Abu Sa'id's historical narrative from the late tenth–early eleventh century alongside the earliest references to shadow puppetry in the Arab world prove that shadow performance existed in the Middle East and Iran before the Mongol invasion.

Another significant point is the structural similarity between the play Abu Sa'id saw and those written by Ibn Dāniyāl in Egypt around the end of the thirteenth century. Ibn Dāniyāl was an outstanding figure in Arab-world shadow play, and the only one whose plays survive. Similar to Iranian shadow play, in Ibn Dāniyāl's *The Amazing Preacher and the Stranger*, a group of people of different professions and social classes, such as a “jurist,” a “poet,” an

<sup>17</sup> Nizami Ganjavi, *The Haft Paykar*, 75.

<sup>18</sup> Beeman, *Iranian Performance Traditions*, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Chen, “Shadow Theaters of the World,” 26.

<sup>20</sup> *Daf* is a frame drum musical instrument used in popular and classical music in many parts of the Middle East, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, many regions of Georgia, and some parts of India, and some regions in Russia.

<sup>21</sup> A *khanqah* is a building designed specifically for gatherings of a Sufi brotherhood and is a place for spiritual retreat and character reformation.

<sup>22</sup> Abu'l-Khayr, *Chashīdan-i Ta'm-i Vaqt*, 174.

<sup>23</sup> Carlson, *Theatre & Islam*, 10.

“herbalist,” a “philosopher,” and so on, are mentioned and their activities briefly discussed.<sup>24</sup> Marvin Carlson, an American theatrologist, compares this structure—i.e., the introduction of different professions—in Ibn Dānīyāl’s play to the contemporary European Procession of Prophets: “the pageant form also called the *Ordo Prophetarum*, a series of speakers foretelling the coming of the Messiah that was usually performed on Christmas Eve.”<sup>25</sup> It can be argued that the European Procession of Prophets is a modified form of Egyptian shadow puppetry theater and Egyptian shadow puppetry theater is a developed form of Iranian-Indian shadow performance. Therefore, a more logical alternative is that shadow performance originated in the Indian subcontinent and made its way to the West and Arab world through Iran. Moreover, through the Mongol invasion, Chinese shadow performance affected the genre’s original form and content.

Based on the similarities between Abu Sa’id and Ibn Dānīyāl’s shadow performance structure, and considering that performers from India were imported to Iran in the fifth century, one can conclude that the shadow performance originated in the Indian subcontinent and was transported from Iran to the historical region now known as Iraq, and from Iraq to Egypt. In *The Amazing Preacher and the Stranger*, as said by one of his characters, Ibn Dānīyāl mentions “the name of some of his fellow gypsies,” one of whom is an Iranian gypsy: “al-Zarandī [the one from Zarand, a city in Iran].”<sup>26</sup> There are several main points in this quote. First, Ibn Dānīyāl usually tells his personal life story through the words of the characters, such as his exile from Mosul to Egypt. So, it is possible that al-Zarandī was a real person. Second, in ancient Persian texts the term “gypsy” was often used interchangeably for pastoralists, dancers, and puppeteers who “play music gratuitously for the poor.”<sup>27</sup> In addition, as previously mentioned, gypsies were artists of Indian origin who were brought to Iran under Bahram V in the fifth century. Thus, it is possible that al-Zarandī was a Iranian gypsy, puppeteer, and possibly a fellow of Ibn Dānīyāl, when the latter was in Iraq. Furthermore, the shadow performance for Abu Sa’id was in the tenth century, long before Ibn Dānīyāl, who was born in 1248 in Mosul, Iraq and then migrated to Egypt.<sup>28</sup> Considering the previous points and structural similarity between the two performances, Iranian shadow performance was likely an early prototype for Egyptian shadow performance. Given all this, it is possible that Ibn Dānīyāl even saw Iranian shadow performances in Iraq. Thus we can conclude the high likelihood that, in its historical development, shadow performance transferred from the Indian subcontinent to Iran, Iran to Iraq, and then Iraq to Egypt.

After the tenth century, many Iranian poetic sources from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries—written primarily by Sufi writers with negative views of the practice—refer to shadow performance in Iran. These sources, terminology, and social-historical analysis have been listed, to some extent, in Bahram Beyzai’s *A Study on Iranian Theatre* and Floor’s *The History of Theater in Iran*. However, Floor thinks shadow performance “probably disappeared in the twelfth century without leaving many traces.”<sup>29</sup> Further, Beyzai said in a conference: “it is very clear that after the fourteenth century, shadow play completely disappeared from the Iranian cultural scene.”<sup>30</sup> In the following paragraphs, I address sources from after the fourteenth century that are either presented here for the first time or have received less attention to prove the existence of shadow performance in Iran after that time.

With the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth century, it appears that shadow performance was gradually declining in Iran, as the number of documents referring

<sup>24</sup> Ibn Dānīyāl, Mahfouz, and Carlson, *Theatre From Medieval Cairo: The Ibn Dānīyāl Trilogy*, 97–98.

<sup>25</sup> Carlson, “Microhistory in the Middle East: The Case of Ibn Dānīyāl,” 90.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn Dānīyāl, Mahfouz, and Carlson, *Theatre From Medieval Cairo: The Ibn Dānīyāl Trilogy*, 94.

<sup>27</sup> Yar-Shater, *Encyclopædia Iranica*, 11: 413.

<sup>28</sup> Badawī, “Medieval Arabic Drama: Ibn Dānīyāl,” 83.

<sup>29</sup> Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran*, 64.

<sup>30</sup> Beyzai, “Jana and Baladoor Workshop.”

to the practice is much fewer than in previous centuries. The historical narrative recently discovered, and expounded here for the first time, is a biography of shadow puppeteer Baba Shams who lived in Isfahan, Iran in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Taqī al-Dīn Awḥadi Balyāni (1565–1640), an Iranian historiographer, gives a short biography of Baba Shams in his book *Arafāt Al-‘āshiqīn Wa-‘araṣāt al-‘ārifīn* (عرفاتالعاشقين و عرصاتالعارفين, Lovers’ Pilgrimages and Mystics’ Arenas). The book contains biographies of eminent people of that era in Iran. As Balyāni states,

At the beginning of his career, Baba Shams was an intern of *marekegirs*<sup>31</sup> in Fars Square. Sometimes, he did wrestling and sometimes magic tricks. Sometimes, he entertained and sometimes set up puppets on the shadow screen. For a long time, he was a spiritual guide for *marekegirs* and was famous for his all-artistic talents.<sup>32</sup>

Baba Shams had many interns and, as Awḥadi Balyāni notes, one gifted intern, Ganji, worked for Shams in 1604. The presence of interns shows that shadow performance continued through the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century.

In addition to the aforementioned biography, seventeenth-century poets such as Mohsen Fayz Kāshani (1598–1680) and Saeedā used elements of shadow performance in their poetry. Fayz Kāshani, a mystic, poet, and philosopher, used shadow performance elements in a mystic conversation with God. The Lord poetically says, “open your eyes and directly watch our shining light. What are you doing behind the shadow’s curtain as an audience?”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, living during the reign of Suleiman I (1648–1694), Saeedā also deployed shadow performance elements in his romantic poems, saying: “love is a shadow puppeteer, and the night sky is a curtain. Who knows what play is performed by love from behind the curtain?”<sup>34</sup> These poems represent the continuing influence of the shadow play genre in the seventeenth-century Iran.

Although there is some evidence of the continued use of shadow play elements in eighteenth-century Iranian art, scholarship on its presence is sparse and inconclusive. Indeed, there is even less evidence of this dramatic art form in the eighteenth century than previous centuries. Hazīn Lāhījī (1691–1767), an eighteenth-century Iranian poet and scholar, conjures an image of “the shadow puppeteer” in one of his poems: “The curtain of the shadow puppeteer, in front of a light, is magical in mind.”<sup>35</sup> Through invoking an element of shadow performance in this long poem, Lāhījī imparts that the practice surprises the audience and the puppeteer is an allegory for the Lord or love. Therefore, taking a historical and developmental perspective, this long poem full of shadow performance elements presents evidence of the existence of shadow performance in Iran in the eighteenth century.

Adolphe Thalasso (1858–1919), a French orientalist who visited Iran in the nineteenth century, also notes:

Puppets in Iran are after those in Turkey, and are of colored goldbeater’s skin and are moved by a large stick through a large hole pierced right in the breast. The play is like that of Karagöz. The same disposition of the puppet, play of lights, same curtain behind which the comical silhouettes are created.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *Marekegir* is a person who entertains with his special powers, such as breaking chains with his arms, breaking stones with his hands, and handling snakes. This is a traditional Iranian public show in which people give money to the *marekegir* to encourage him.

<sup>32</sup> Awḥadi Balyāni, *Arafāt Al-‘āshiqīn Wa-‘araṣāt al-‘ārifīn*, 4: 2267–68.

<sup>33</sup> Fayz Kāshani, *Kolīyāt-e Āṣ‘ār-e Mawlānā Fayz Kāshani*, 410.

<sup>34</sup> Saeedā, *Divān of Saeedā*, 193.

<sup>35</sup> Hazīn Lāhījī, *Divān of Hazīn Lāhījī*, 766.

<sup>36</sup> Thalasso, *Le théâtre persan*, 869; Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran*, 64.

Although “Thalasso visited Iran during Mozaffar ad-Dīn Shah Qajar [(1853–1907), an Iranian king]”<sup>37</sup> and precisely described some traditional performances and a story of the famous *kheimeh shab bazi Pahlavan Kachal* (پهلوان کچال, The Bald Cavalier), Floor believes: “much of what Thalasso writes is suspect, because he did not provide this information based on his own observations.”<sup>38</sup> However, as Thalasso provides descriptive details of different traditional Iranian performances, it is difficult to reject his narration completely. Shadow performance was, without a doubt, sporadically practiced in some cities in the nineteenth century, but it was not as popular as previously.

Some scholarly works even mention the existence of shadow performance in the twentieth century, but they are difficult to confirm. In 1907, as previously noted, Eugène Aubin claimed that only shadow puppets and the Turkish Karagöz existed in Iran. Madjid-Kan Rezvani (1900–1962), another Iranian-French scholar, alleges that shadow performance existed in Iran in the twentieth century, and was even practiced until the 1960s in some places, but provides no evidence or further information.<sup>39</sup> We know Rezvani lived in Iran for a long time before migrating to France. If Rezvani presented this information based on his own observations, some kind of description, photo, or document is needed to prove his claim. Alongside others, William Beeman, an American scholar specialized in the Middle East, writes (without referencing any sources): “the last vestigial performance [was] recorded in 1926.”<sup>40</sup> Considering all this and according to previous research and this article’s newly discovered evidence, shadow performance was clearly practiced in Iran, but was in gradual decline since the fifteenth century. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, shadow performance was practiced only in some locations, and it completely disappeared in the twentieth century. The reasons for this disappearance are elaborated in the next section.

### Sufism and Shadow Performance

Sufism is a mystic body of Islamic religious practice in both Sunni and Shia Islam that focuses on spirituality, ritualism, asceticism, and esotericism. Abdolhossein Zarrinkoub (1923–1999), an Iranian scholar and professor of Iranian literature and history, firmly argues: “The origins of Sufism—as Islamic mysticism is generally called—presents a very controversial problem indeed, but that Iran was the cradle of early Sufism is beyond doubt.”<sup>41</sup> Sufism has been widespread and, to some extent, acceptable among Iranians in some historical time periods. Sufism’s outlook can be fully comprehended through shadow performance, and Sufis have adopted shadow elements to elaborate their views. This connection between Sufism and elements of theatrical form is why much of Iranian Sufi poetry and texts is rich in metaphors and allegories of shadow play. As Marvin Carlson states, “Sufism became increasingly significant during the thirteenth century...[to] the spread of Islam to other areas”—such as India, South Asia, and Southeast Asia—and Sufis used theatrical elements as well as shadow performance “to illustrate Islamic history and religious principles.”<sup>42</sup> Carlson’s idea about the help shadow performance provided to the establishment of Islam in other regions, like Java, is probably reasonable; however, the relationship between Iranian Sufism and shadow performance was more turbulent than simply Sufism using shadow play to spread Islam in Iran.

Sufism is a diverse and complex phenomenon that has taken many forms across different regions and time periods; it is not monolithic. However, most extant texts about shadow performance relate to Sufi poets with negative views of this form of drama. Aside from Abu

<sup>37</sup> Sattari, *The Social Background of Ta’ziyeh and Theater in Iran*, 28.

<sup>38</sup> Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran*, 64.

<sup>39</sup> Rezvani, *Le théâtre et la danse en Iran*, 123.

<sup>40</sup> Beeman, *Iranian Performance Traditions*, 28.

<sup>41</sup> Zarrinkoob, “Persian Sufism in Its Historical Perspective,” 139.

<sup>42</sup> Carlson, *Theatre & Islam*, 13.



Sa'id, who enjoyed watching the aforementioned shadow performance, most other Sufis were skeptical of this theatrical form. Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest Sufis had a generally positive view of the practice, and their negative view can be seen as evocative of the Platonic allegory of the cave. In Plato's cave, people watch shadows moving on the wall cast by objects passing in front of a fire behind them. In this cave, Plato argues, these people are prisoners who "see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave."<sup>43</sup> Reality, however, is behind them. Sufism takes the same idea. Sufis believe that truth is behind the shadow curtain, where we see the puppeteer and objects creating the shadows. For example, an eleventh-century poem recited by Asadi Tusi (999–1072/73) in his long heroic epic *Garshasp-nama* (گرشاسپنامه), Book of Garshasp, 1066) speaks metaphorically of God as a dexterous puppeteer creating this world of shadow:

How dexterous is the player  
 In putting images on the screen  
 He hands on this Lapis Dome  
 Two screens, now black and now yellow  
 And as a play on these screens  
 Of various creatures He brings images.<sup>44</sup>

The same view emerges from a Sufi poem by Khaqani (1120–1190), a twelfth-century Iranian poet, who employs shadow performance elements when describing God:

O glorious sun of mine, whenever  
 you are rising up every  
 shadow moves with every movement  
 or consequence  
 of You.<sup>45</sup>

Here, God is described as a puppet player who shines like the sun, and we as humans are nothing but shadows of his greatness. In the Sufi worldview, one must become one with God and melt in Him. The sky and cosmos prevent one from seeing God's essence. The idea of melting into God is easily conveyed through shadow performance analogies because the curtain is an allegory for the sky and the puppeteer is an allegory for God. Khaqani presents this idea of becoming one with God by saying, "His strutting shadow illuminates on my heart's curtain. Upon joining him in a scene, my soul becomes a shadow puppeteer."<sup>46</sup> In Sufism's view, true believers unify with God through asceticism. According to Sultanova, "ultimately, the individual human personality passes away and the Sufi feels his soul absorbed into God."<sup>47</sup> So, in the final act, after losing his human personality, Khaqani visits the Lord and is absorbed into Him, the great puppeteer.

Such an allegorical view has two major consequences, as it implies: first, that shadow performance is an immoral theatrical form of debauchery that distracts us from seeing God; and second, that the shadow curtain and its motioning shadows must be destroyed in order to see God. For a Sufi, world and worldly phenomena are seen as a curtain veiling the radiant beauty of the divine countenance. Another poet, Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209), in almost all his Sufi texts, conveys this idea by adopting shadow performance allegories. For instance, "The reason why seven firmaments are setting up a curtain on stage is to make shadow

<sup>43</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 177.

<sup>44</sup> Tusi, *Garshasp-Nāma*, 6; Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran*, 63.

<sup>45</sup> Khaqani, *Divān of Khaqani (A Short Collection of Poems)*, 64.

<sup>46</sup> Khaqani, *Divān of Khaqani-e Shirvani*, 232.

<sup>47</sup> Sultanova, *From Shamanism to Sufism: Women, Islam and Culture in Central Asia*, 31.

puppetry.”<sup>48</sup> In this poem, the seven firmaments mean the world and worldly phenomena that block Sufis’ eyes from seeing the truth. Nizami’s poems prove that shadow performance was performed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; however, Sufis viewed it with pessimism.

After Nizami, this negative view of shadow performance intensified. Attār (1146–1221), an Iranian Sufi theoretician, more directly criticizes shadow performance in his poems. For example, in one poem he states: “On thought’s curtain, everything in infinity, looks like a shadow and play except for my love for thee.”<sup>49</sup> He deems the world fun and games, something absurd and debaucherous, comparing it to shadow performance to show the similarities and absurdities of our existence. Everything is absurd and looks like a shadow play, purposeless entertainment, except for God, who stands behind the curtain. In another poem, Attār points out, “Since life is debaucherous, shadow play has drawn breath.”<sup>50</sup> For him, all we see and understand in both worlds is nothing but absurd shadows moving on a curtain, an absurd entertainment, and “If God unmasks for a second, both worlds would be [an absurd] shadow puppetry.”<sup>51</sup> In another verse, he affirms that this debaucherous entertainment must be abandoned: “For the sake of faithfulness, don’t tell like it is, leave this shadow and puppetry play, [please!].”<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, it is interesting that even Sufis such as Rumi and Shams, who were influential in Turkey, criticize shadow performance in their writings. For instance, Shams Tabrīzī (1185–1248)—a Sufi poet and spiritual instructor of Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Rumi—says:

I do not replace threadbare shoes of a true lover with [fake] lovers and sheiks’ knowledge, those who look like shadow puppeteers presenting [strange] shadows from behind the curtain because they admit they are playing. And playing is admitted to be void.<sup>53</sup>

For him, shadow play puppeteers are charlatans deceiving people in order to make money; a view also seen in the writings of his pupil, Rumi. As Rumi enunciates,

The playful sky looks like a puppeteer who performs a play from behind the curtain of stars and puppet-like planets. When we are suddenly obsessed with this play, we are about to end our life like a night. The morning of death is coming. [...] Oh Lord! Before the morning of death, discourage us from this game.<sup>54</sup>

Overall, it can be argued that Sufi condemnation of shadow performance became more explicit over time and was one of the main reasons for this art form’s disappearance of in Iran.

### Religious-Political Conflicts

In the seventh century, the territory of Iran was conquered by Islam, and some believe that shadow play’s disappearance from Iran was due to religious reasons. For example, Beeman argues that “orthodox Islam tended to view the dramatic presentation as suspect, since it involved the depiction of personages who were imaginary or deceased.”<sup>55</sup> Beeman contends that the most conservative religious authorities viewed such artistic forms as idolatry, an illegitimate attempt to form a reality alternative to that created by God. Some scholars believe the same is true of Iranian miniature paintings, which avoid realistic representations of objects and do not have shadows. For example, believing that Iranian paintings reached their peak and stabilized their form in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Arthur Upham Pope, an American art historian, states: “the figures are encompassed by no

<sup>48</sup> Nizami Ganjavi, *Layli and Majnun*, 30.

<sup>49</sup> Attār, *Divān of Attār*, 198.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 341.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>52</sup> Attār, *Asrar-Nāma*, 126.

<sup>53</sup> Tabrīzī, *The Maqalat-e Shams-e Tabrīzī*, 91.

<sup>54</sup> Rumi, *Majāl Sabāe*, 108.

<sup>55</sup> Beeman, *Iranian Performance Traditions*, 24.

atmosphere and cast no shadows [in Iranian miniatures].”<sup>56</sup> Henry Corbin, a French theologian, reasons that “[t]he art of Persian miniatures, without atmosphere, without perspective, without shadows, and without modeling” were highly affected by the views of Sufism, because Sufis’ “entire effort tends to free them from a matter which would be foreign to their action and in which they are sometimes captive.”<sup>57</sup> Or, another interpretation of the Quranic verse posits that, since “God is the light of the heavens and the earth,”<sup>58</sup> a light shining from all corners and dimensions of existence, shadows do not exist in Iranian art. Such interpretations do provide a religious reason for the disappearance of shadow performance in Iran.



**Figure 3:** A miniature from the book *Shahnameh* of Shah Tahmasp, attributed to Aqa Mirak, circa 1525–35, kept in Agha Khan Museum, Ontario, Canada [Public Domain]<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Pope, *An Introduction to Persian Art Since the Seventh Century A.D.*, 107.

<sup>57</sup> Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, 101–38.

<sup>58</sup> Böwering, “The Light Verse: Qur’anic Text and Sūfī Interpretation,” 114.

<sup>59</sup> Aqa Mirak, *Faridun Tests His Sons*.

However, some researchers believe that artists found ways to bypass such objections and religious barriers. For example, William Beeman argues: “[s]hadow puppet makers were able to circumvent [orthodox Islamic] objections by pointing out that since the figures were perforated with holes, they no longer represented animate beings.”<sup>60</sup> But, if this astute method worked to preserve the tradition of Turkish Karagöz, why it did not work for Iranian shadow puppetry? Why does Turkish Karagöz survive but Iranian shadow puppetry disappear, while Sufis like Rumi, known both in Iran and Turkey, criticize shadow performance? Indeed, the reason for shadow performance’s disappearance in Iran and survival in Turkey has nothing to do with Sufis and circumventing religious objections; instead, it is related to Iran’s political and religious behavioral change with its neighbors, particularly Turkey, after the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

The Safavid dynasty, which ruled Iran from 1501–1736, “adopted the doctrine of Imami/Twelve Shi‘ism as the state religion.”<sup>61</sup> The Safavid Empire, which encompassed a complex mix of ethnic and linguistic groups, is often regarded as the first government to establish a distinct Iranian cultural and political identity, despite its diverse composition. In the face of diverse lingua-ethnic cultures, they unified different groups under their rule. The establishment of Shi‘ism as the state religion was a major factor in the emergence of a unified national consciousness among Iran’s various ethnic and linguistic elements. With the rise of the Safavids, not only was the path of Iranian Sufism separated from that of Turkey, but also religion and politics in Iran changed completely. Although the Safavids were not the first Shia empire in the world, Melissa L. Rossi suggests that “[f]orced conversion in the Safavid Empire made Iran for the first time dominantly Shia and left a lasting mark.”<sup>62</sup> Aside from uniting Iran, another of the Safavids’ lasting marks, which vastly extended Shia belief, was its turbulent religious and political relationships with its neighbors, the Uzbeks in the west and the Ottomans in the east of Iran.

At the beginning of Safavid rule, in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Muhammad Shîbânî Khan was the Uzbek leader, consolidating various Sunni Uzbek tribes. Based on historical narratives, “Muhammad Shîbânî Khan was an ally of the Ottomans, his fellow Sunni Muslims, against the Safavid Shi‘ites in Iran.”<sup>63</sup> Apart from religious differences, many wars were fought between the Uzbeks and Iranians over territory. It has been argued that “the relations of the Safavids and the Uzbeks appear to have been largely influenced by their desire for domination over Khurasan [a historical eastern region in the Iranian Plateau]. Khurasan had considerable economic and commercial significance.”<sup>64</sup> Therefore, there was a kind of political and religious competition ongoing between Iranians and Uzbeks.

Iran’s other neighboring state, the Ottoman Empire, was created by Turkish tribes in Asia Minor and grew to be one of the most powerful states in the world in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. “At the close of the fifteenth century, the Ottomans prevailed in Anatolia, Greece and the Aegean.”<sup>65</sup> The confrontation between Iranians and Turks persisted throughout all the centuries they reigned. Jean de Thévenot, a French traveler who visited both the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Empire in the seventeenth century, presented the relations between Iranians and Ottoman Turks as hostile, saying:

The Religion of the Persians is in substance the same with that of the Turks, though, nevertheless, no Nations in the World hate one another so much upon the account of Religion as those two do: they look upon one another as Hereticks[.]<sup>66</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Beeman, *Iranian Performance Traditions*, 25.

<sup>61</sup> Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Şafavid Conflict*, 31.

<sup>62</sup> Rossi, *What Every American Should Know about the Middle East*, 61.

<sup>63</sup> Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, 108.

<sup>64</sup> Naqvi, “The Relations of Shah Abbas with the Uzbeks (1588–1629),” 510.

<sup>65</sup> Allouche, *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Şafavid Conflict*, 26.

<sup>66</sup> Thévenot, *The Travels of Monsieur de Thevenot into the Levant. In Three Parts Viz. Into. I. Turkey. II. Persia. III. The East-Indies*, 106.

Both called each other infidels, as the Safavids followed Shia Islam and the Ottomans followed Sunni theology. In addition to religious conflicts, the first Safavid-Ottoman war was initiated by territorial controversies between the two empires and ended with a peace treaty, the Treaty of Amasya. Although “[t]he Treaty of Amasya remained the cornerstone for resolution of territorial conflicts between the Ottomans and Persians until 1823,”<sup>67</sup> quarrels over the territory continued, from time to time, after the Treaty of Amasya and even after the Safavid era. Thus, it cannot be said that conflict between the Safavids and neighboring powers was just due to religious differences between Shias and Sunnis, political conflicts over territory between the Safavids and Ottomans, as well as between the Safavids and Uzbeks, must also be considered.

According to American historian Peter B. Golden, “[i]n the early sixteenth century, Central Asians found themselves increasingly wedged between competing empires on their borders.”<sup>68</sup> The kings of the above-mentioned governments competed with each other in all aspects, even art, but the competition between the Ottomans and Safavids differed from that of the Uzbeks. With the rise of the Safavids in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the process of Persianization accelerated. In addition, early Uzbek Shaybanids were also a “Persianized” Turko-Persian dynasty—and Turko-Mongol—and “[t]he intellectual elite remained bilingual in Persian and Turkic.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore, the Uzbeks were more likely to absorb and combine different cultures and less involved in cultural competition, even though they had their own artistic cultural forms that influenced those of both the Safavids and Ottomans. Under the rule of Uzbek Shaybanids and their successors, the Khanate of Bukhara, an Uzbek state,

[T]heir capital, Bukhara, and also Balkh became centers of cultural and social life. The Shaybanid khans [...] were regarded as ideal rulers in the spirit of Muslim piety. This was also true of the Astrakhanids (or Janids), another Changizid dynasty that succeeded the Shaybanids in the seventeenth century. They were great builders and protectors of the art and literature[.]<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, the Uzbeks—composed of diasporic tribes—confirmed their culture, literature, and multicultural identity with such a cultural fusion.

However, regarding the cultural and artistic relationship between the Ottoman and Safavid empires, the situation was completely different. As Beeman articulates, “[f]or the most part the shahs of Iran and the sultans of the Ottoman Empire were interested in patronizing the arts.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, Ottoman Turks and Safavid Iranians were the main competitors in culture and art—although both governments, undoubtedly, looked at and were influenced and inspired by each other’s culture. In the introduction to his book *Theater in the Middle East: Between Performance and Politics*, Babak Rahimi, a professor of Iranian and Islamic studies, writes:

Shadow plays (*karagoz*), performed under the patronage of the Ottoman Sultans, grew in popularity in their imperial domains, especially in the Levant and North Africa, while puppet shows (*kheimeh-shab-bāzi*) appear to have flourished on the street and market levels in Safavid Iran and Arab Ottoman regions.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Shaw and Demy, *War and Religion: An Encyclopedia of Faith and Conflict*, 629.

<sup>68</sup> Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, 105.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>70</sup> Jenkins, *The Muslim Diaspora (Volume 2, 1500-1799): A Comprehensive Chronology of the Spread of Islam in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas*, 2:29.

<sup>71</sup> Beeman, *Iranian Performance Traditions*, 28.

<sup>72</sup> Rahimi, *Theater in the Middle East: Between Performance and Politics*, 5.

This quote shows that the rulers of the two empires took different approaches to puppet art: while shadow performance was backed by kings in Turkey, puppetry theater was supported by ordinary people in Iran.

Nevertheless, unlike the Turkish rulers who supported Karagöz, *kheimeh shab bazi* was not an art that could seek the Safavid rulers' full support. For the Ottomans, Karagöz, in both form and content, was full of unifying elements and Sunni-Turkish identity; Karagöz could easily be transformed into the Ottoman national performing art. In Karagöz, nearly all shadow performances revolve around stories of two friends, the cocksure but poor Karagöz, who always yearns to become prosperous or attract pretty women, and the erudite Hacivat, who always tries to lead Karagöz to the path of right. Every play pursues a typical format: a prologue, a poem recited by Sunni Sufi poets, a blessing for the Ottoman sultans, and then a dialogue between Karagöz and Hacivat, whose conversation inaugurates an absurd situation shaping the play's main plot and proceeding until Karagöz beats Hacivat in the final act, followed by an epilogue. The puppets' appearance and the name Karagöz, meaning "black eyes," reflect the appearance of the Ottoman Turks of that period. The combination of poor, clever, literate, Sufi, and Sunni characters and their desires to get rich and catch elegant women, alongside prayers for the sultans, all reflect the social and political identity of Turks under the rule of the Sunni Ottoman Empire. According to James Smith, Turks used Karagöz to negotiate and define cultural boundaries and senses of communal identity, and as a result, "[a] powerful sense of community emerged from behind the white screen populated by shadows that made up the Karagöz performance."<sup>73</sup> Therefore, it seems that national unity and the reflection of Sunni Ottoman Turkish identity were the reasons the Ottoman emperors supported Karagöz shadow performance, a theatrical form that should be completely different from that of the infidel Safavid Shias.

Furthermore, both forms of shadow performance and puppet theater—affected by Turkish Karagöz—have been performed in Arabic-speaking regions. Li Guo, a professor of Arabic and Middle Eastern studies, argues: "[Syrian and Levantine plays] strictly followed the winning formula of the Turkish Karagöz in all the basic ingredients: the cast, the structure, and the dramaturgy. Only this was an Arabized version, in language, culture, and social settings."<sup>74</sup> Thus, in order to be different also from Arabs, Iranians needed another dramatic form. Any reference to Turkish and Arab shadow performance would position them alongside the Turkic-Sunni identity of the Karagöz, the great Ottoman Empire, and Arab nations.

Another significant point, looking at the first reports of *kheimeh shab bazi* in Iran, is that this form of puppetry theater had supporters among the people, not in the court. "More tangible evidence of *kheimeh shab bazi* is from the Safavid period [...] They perform in open for the public."<sup>75</sup> In addition, during the Qajar era (1794–1925), another Shia dynasty in Iran, *Shah Salim* was one of the puppet theaters most favored among the public. As Shiva Massoudi, an Iranian theater scholar, stipulates:

[T]he name comes from Shah Salim I (r. 1512–1520), sultan of the Ottoman Empire. During the reign of Shah Salim, the king extended the Ottoman borders and murdered the Shiites; as a result, in theater, he connotes a ruthless king.<sup>76</sup>

So, this play represents the influence of Turkish content on the heart of *kheimeh shab bazi*; as a result—although *kheimeh shab bazi* was partly practiced in public, for Iranian rulers—puppet theater could neither be a representation of Shia Iranian identity nor a national theatrical form for Iranians.

<sup>73</sup> Smith, "Karagöz and Hacivat: Projections of Subversion and Conformance," 192.

<sup>74</sup> Guo, *Arabic Shadow Theatre, 1300–1900*, 197.

<sup>75</sup> Massoudi, "'Kheimeh Shab Bazi': Iranian Traditional Marionette Theatre," 263.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

Inevitably, as Iran was surrounded by Ottoman Turkish, Arab, and Uzbek Sunnis, the Safavids needed a dramatic form revolving entirely around Shia identity in order to create a unified Shia identity in the region of Iran and survive against their infidel Sunni neighbors. They required ritualistic-theatrical forms not found elsewhere, neither in shadow performance nor in puppet theater. And these dramatic forms were none other than the Muharram mourning rituals, which have developed over time to take on a more theatrical and ritualistic form known as *Shabih'khani*. In fact, the Safavids laid the foundations for a ritual-theatrical form of mourning with Shia elements, as "Safavid officials supported Shi'ite mourning processions and encouraged the development of this new form of performative expression to advance their political goals and bolster their legitimacy."<sup>77</sup> Thus, *Shabih'khani* became a suitable alternative to both shadow performance and puppet theater in Iran, as its content is deeply connected to Shia beliefs. The main story of *Shabih'khani* revolves around Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and the third Imam, or leader of the faith, of Shia Islam. Hence, *Shabih'khani* could represent Shia identity through performance and free Iranians from infidel Sunni theatrical forms. Furthermore, since the majority of post-Safavid states were also Shiite, they also supported Muharram rituals as a means to establish their power base within the Shiite community in Iran.

However, since *Shabih'khani* was performed ritually, at a certain time each year, it took time for it to replace shadow performance and *kheimeh shab bazi's* popularity. Shadow performance, which had previously ranked below puppet shows due to Sufi criticism, was demoted further under the Safavids due to the importance of Muharram rituals. In the days of mourning, rituals had an identity-giving function, while at other times of the year, more puppet theater and less shadow performance were performed for entertainment. After the end of Safavid rule, *Shabih'khani* reached its peak in the Qajar period thanks to the fundamental changes made by *Shabih'khani* directors such as Mirza Mohammad Taqi Ta'ziyehgardan (?–1872 CE) and Mirza Mohammad Bagher Mo'in-ol-Boka (?–1914 CE).<sup>78</sup> During its development, *Shabih'khani* became more versatile and could be performed with different Shiite and Iranian themes on days other than Muharram. Thus, *Shabih'khani* was no longer limited to mourning days, but could be held on any day of the year using various stories, serving not only the function of Shia identity but also entertainment.<sup>79</sup> Over the centuries, *Shabih'khani* gradually became an alternative to different forms of puppetry performance, rendering shadow performance unnecessary in Iran. It had no place among the Sufi intellectuals, Shia religious leaders, kings, or the people: Goodbye, dear traditional shadow performance!

## Conclusion

While shadow performance is performed in many nations, and every nation, from China to Egypt, has its own theatrical tradition in this genre, this theatrical form does not exist in Iran. Although many believe this form of drama has never existed in Iran, this article proves the opposite through its investigation of ancient, newly discovered texts. Indeed, from these we learn that shadow performance was practiced in Iran from at least the tenth to twentieth centuries. By examining the structure of Ibn Dāniyāl's play and the play seen by Abu Sa'id, the role of gypsies, the presence of an Iranian gypsy character in Ibn Dāniyāl's play, and considering the fact that Ibn Dāniyāl narrated his personal life story through his characters, we can conclude that shadow performance was transferred from the Indian subcontinent to Iran, from Iran to Iraq, and from Iraq to Egypt.

<sup>77</sup> Kouček-zadeh and Azarm, "Investigating Early Dramaturgy and Theatre Directing in the *Shabih'khani* of the Qajar Era," 11.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>79</sup> For a detailed analysis of the development of *Shabih'khani*, see Reza Kouček-zadeh and Milad Azarm, "Investigating Early Dramaturgy and Theatre Directing in the *Shabih'khani* of the Qajar Era," *TDR: The Drama Review* 66, no. 1 (2022): 7–36, doi:10.1017/S1054204321000745.

Sufis, however, particularly those in the tenth to the fifteenth centuries, viewed shadow performance negatively, considering it immoral entertainment that seduces people and distracts them from worship. For these Sufis, shadow performance was an allegory for the evil world and the puppeteer was an allegory for God. To see God, one must destroy the curtain to reveal the great shadow puppeteer. Most Iranian Sufi intellectuals and poets wrote of this negative view, which undoubtedly, considering Sufis' widespread influence in Iran, was one of the main reasons for shadow performance's gradual demise.

Another factor that accelerated the demise of Iranian shadow performance was the emergence of Iran's first Shia government, the Safavid Empire. The Safavids, who were surrounded by Sunni Uzbek tribes and the Ottoman Empire, were constantly involved in political and religious wars to stabilize their territory. The Uzbek, Ottoman Turkish, and Iranian governments all called each other infidels and competed in religion, politics, territory, and even culture. Iran's shadow performance—highly influenced by the Turkish Karagöz—was a representation of Sunni Ottoman Turkish identity and that of Arab-speaking nations. The new faith of Shiism in Iran required the rejection of Turkish shadow performance and the creation of a completely new form that showed Shia Iranians' national identity. In this way, shadow performance in Iran was not supported by the Sufis, the people, or the rulers, and puppet arts were replaced by *Shabih'khani*, a theatrical form uniting Iranian and Shia elements to form a unified Shiite identity.

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