
Li 'b al- Timsah

The Crocodile Play a
14th Century Shadow
Play

Nidda Ridarelli



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Li 'b al-Timsah “The Crocodile Play” 14th Century Shadow Play

The Piece

“The Crocodile Play” or *Li 'b al-Timsah* is from a large collection of shadow plays called “The Luminous Gardens of the Pinnacle of Joys.” (Allen p. 261) The shadow play, or shadow puppet show, was written after the three Muhammad ibn Daniyal plays from the 13th century but before the beginning of the Ottoman rule in 1517. This play was not written by an artist aiming at high class literature, rather it is folk art written by many hands. (Badawi 1987 p. 3)

Egyptian Shadow Theater

In its simplest form shadow theater is projecting the shadow of an object with a light source onto a screen for an audience. Within the context of 14th century Cairo, we have descriptions of the stage as simply a fine white cloth, some say canvas, others muslin, or linen. (Necipoglu p. 39, Osnes p. 17, Mari p.722) What we do know is that the screen was white and large enough for the puppets used to make the shadows, and big enough for the *muqaddam*, puppet master, to stand behind

unseen. When Metin And speaks of puppet screens in Drama at the Crossroads, he states that the screens were 2.6 meters by 2 meters. This size would accommodate the Mamluk style puppets used in Cairo in the middle ages. They range from 19cm-89cm. One would need a screen that large to manipulate puppets that large.

The puppets used in Egypt in the 14th century are called Mamluk style. The Mamluk Period was 1250-1517. In that time they were made from translucent camel leather. (Mari p. 722) A puppet maker known as a *qassas*, or cutter, would cut out the puppet with special knives and scissors. Then a *megariḡ* would do the pierce work and install the manipulation rod in exactly the right spot for

proper manipulation. (Feeney p. 1) There is a clear description of shadow puppets from 965 CE written by ibn al-Haytham in his writing *Kit al-Manazir*. He was an eye doctor and he described how they were made and what they looked like. “There are holes pierced in the bodies of the shadow play figures so that they can be held against the screen with a stick....The presenter holds another stick in his other hand with this he moves their head, arms, and legs. A light of a candle or lamp placed



Mamluk style shadow puppet 14th century
Ledermuseum

behind them casts colored shadows of the translucent figures on the white screen.”(Necipoglu p. 39) This is the earliest and one of the most complete accounts of shadow-theater in medieval Egypt. The extant puppets that I re-created had translucent, green, and yellow leather sewn to the puppets behind the cut out areas. One can see where translucent leather was attached by the stitching lines on the extant puppets. (See picture, right: Coptic Priest, Boehmer plate 125)



Egyptian shadow plays are listed as early as the 11th century as entertainment disapproved by Jewish leaders for their likely bawdy and near pornographic content. (Goitein p. 44) The earliest complete shadow plays in existence are from the 13th century. Shams-al-Din Muhammad ibn Daniyal, who was also an eye doctor, wrote three plays at the request of a friend because the audiences were getting bored with the stale old shadow plays of the time. An article recently posted, in 2012, written in 2003, states that there are four manuscripts in existence of the ibn Daniyal plays. (Buturovic p.150) Before ibn Daniyal’s plays, and after, no full account of plays exists. The earliest plays are thought to have been religious and moral in nature and the action was directed when puppet was born from a “womb” box on one side of the screen and went into a “tomb” box when their role was completed. (Mari p.722) The plays describe society and life in Islamic Egypt. (Osnes p. 17) After ibn Daniyal, we have only partial plays. These later plays were written in verse or sung so that the puppeteers could more easily remember them. (Badawi 1987 p. 3)

The Play

Of *The Crocodile Play*, I have three descriptions. Two describe how the old play has been adapted by modern troupes in Egypt to give an authentic medieval performance, and the other is a description of how it was recorded from within period. It lists the characters and setting and overall plot, but no prologue or dialog. Many other references talk about the play and its popularity, but do not give a plot description.

The time the play was written is a bit of a mystery. Some resources state that it was written by ibn Daniyal (d.1311), which would place it in the 14th century, which lines up with the extant puppet of a crocodile I have found. Others say it is the later style of shadow play, written in verse and with an overall outline to be improvised by the puppet player. I have not read



the ibn Daniyal plays directly nor have I found the manuscript for of the crocodile play. It is said to have been written no later than the 16th century (CE 1517). The manuscripts have not been completely translated into English yet, but I hope that with the renewed interest in shadow plays, they will be available in the future. Much more information exists now than when I first started researching in 2007.

Performances in period

The structure of medieval Arabic shadow plays is fairly consistent. They all begin with a prologue in which the presenter, or narrator, gives praises to God, praises the play, and introduces himself and the characters. The presenter directs the action of the play and interacts with the characters and the audience. The dialog is the second part of the play. This is where the jokes, crude humor, and violent fights happen in the shadow play. Dialog may or may not be important to the plot of the play. Finishing the plot and conclusion are the final part of the shadow play. Often there is a finale at the end so the audience knows it is ending. (Senyer, Badawi p. 26)

Audiences in medieval Cairo were an interesting blend of people. There were Muslims, Jews and Christians and they came from all over the Middle East. (Goitien, Nicholle, Haddaway, Buturovic) Shadow plays were popular because there was no live theater allowed during this time. Live actor performances were restricted by religion. (Mari p. 722) So, at night, in a crowded square the shadow players would come out and set up their theaters. Audiences of men would gather together for nightly entertainment of the “shadows”. Shadow players would perform in markets, streets, and they were occasionally hired to play in private residences or in court. They could tailor their performance to the audience. (Badawi 2010 p. 12)

In 1517, shadow-theater was a tool used by performers to ingratiate themselves to the Ottoman conquerors. One example was an enactment of the capture and execution of the last Mamluk Sultan of Cairo. (Banham p. 24) It was so enjoyed that the new ruler took the entire play and players back with him to entertain him.

The Performer and Setting

When Nidda Ridarelli performed this piece it was as a male puppeteer, using her versions of 14th century style puppets. In Cairo, in the middle ages, all the puppet masters were male. She created the setting of playing to a busy marketplace in the evening. It had to be evening for it to be dark enough to do a shadow play.

The Tools

Play was presented on a cloth screen stretched over a wooden frame, back-lit with lamps. Puppets are made from rawhide leather, and wooden dowels. These puppets use the unique style of controlling consistent with Mamluk style. The stick controls the puppet from behind at a 90 degree angle like Turkish puppets, as opposed to controlling them from beneath like in the Indonesian and other Asian traditions. The extant puppets show a single large hole where a stick is was used as a manipulation rod. (Kahle)

Deviations from period practice

1. The material used to make the extant puppets was camel leather. Nidda has made her puppets from rawhide because tanned leather would not be stiff enough and is not translucent.
2. In absence of extant drawings of screens or puppet screens from medieval Egypt, Nidda used descriptions of what the screens generally looked like, for example, a fine white cloth. She used a screen that was made to be portable, like the screens used by puppeteers in medieval Cairo. She did not find a source that states how large Egyptian screens were, but they need to accommodate the size of the puppet and the puppeteer must be hidden behind it. It should be made from seamless piece of cloth. Bleached premium muslin made a workable screen. Linen and silk may have been good choices, but in tests the tightly woven cotton muslin performed well without the added expense. The screen was 1.1 x 0.6 meters. (44"x26") Theater curtains that surround the screen were added to complete the look.

My Process

The first step was to make some sketches of the original puppets and these were all done to 2/3rds scale of the original extant puppets. The math is shown in the table below.

Puppet	Fisherman	Narrator	Magician	Moroccan	Wife	Child	Watchman	Crocodile
Extant size	61 cm	62 cm*	63 cm*	70 cm	45c*	25cm*	51 cm	89 cm
My size	36 cm	35 cm	37 cm	37.5 cm	30	17	37 cm	58.5 cm

* estimated



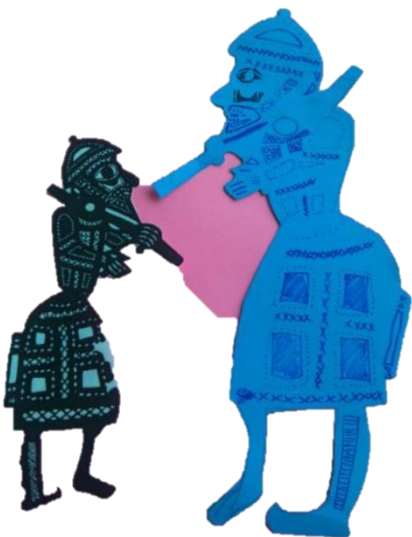
To make the puppets the rawhide was soaked in water in order to make it soft enough to cut. The pattern piece of poster board for each puppet

was used to create a layout on the leather before it was cut. The paper patterns made it possible to practice balancing the weight of the material so it could be determined where to put the holes for the manipulation rods. The extant puppets had evidence of where to start. The pattern pieces also allowed for practicing where the filigree would go. Punching the holes for attaching the pieces into full bodies also happened when the rawhide was wet. The crocodile is one piece as are the narrator, the magician, the wife and the child. The fisherman, watchman and Moroccan are made of pieces that are later sewn together or attached on the manipulation rod. The paper patterns were important, since there is a finite amount of rawhide to work with. After the pieces were cut it was possible to detail each piece. If it got too hard to work it could be soaked again to work it more easily.



They went from this

to this.



Here is a photocopy of the extant puppet and the enlarged pattern piece. The inspiration from the extant collection lead to each puppet made. The articles that contain the extant collection and the information about them were written in German. The details were translated into English and informed the decisions made on the puppets. For example, one of the man's feet was cut from something else. It is a bit irregular and suggested that they were thrifty with their leather. The description of the piece that has a woman and child inspiration for the wife and child of the fisherman states that the woman had yellow translucent leather in the triangle spaces of her dress

and the child had green translucent leather in the squares of his clothes. This will be a project for another day.



The puppets, even when they were done and dried had to be stored in a flat press. They curl if left out. Cedar boards and clamps to keep them flat. They are very strong and flexible.

Performance of the play

It was a challenge to manipulate eight puppets. Even if they are on screen at different times they have to be organized and not fall or drop and be ready at a moment's notice. Doing that many different voices was also difficult. The use of noisemakers is important to the performance but adds another layer of difficulty. To give the best possible performance is a true challenge.

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Appendix

Li'b al-Timsah script

Al-H: Praise be to God, the beneficent King, the Creator of the world and man. I praise Him the supreme Lord for His guidance and I thank him for his infinite grace.

To proceed, I should like to inform the honorable gentlemen that the purpose of this agreeable and entertaining tale is the instruction of those who hear it.

This story I call, **Li' b al-Timsah**, The Crocodile Play. We are now on the banks of the Nile in Egypt. Our trusty watchman is in place, guarding the safety of those who would seek passage across the perilous river. So we begin our story as al-Zibriqash comes to the bank of the river.

Al-Z: **(DEEP LONG SLOW VOICE)** Oh glorious and wonderful God, I beseech you. I pray you pardon me from my sins. I give thanks to you, oh Mighty God, for your mercy and blessings. I pray you grant me one more blessing. Let my days toiling upon the earth be at an end. I seek a new path to feed my family.

My wish, my wish, my wish,
is to make my living catching fish,
Here the bounty of the Nile
feeds me as I rest a while.

(Al-Zibriqash rests on the banks and is soon swallowed by a crocodile.)

Al-Z: Help me! Oh no ahhh! Save me!

(The Watchman appears and calls al-Haziq to go for help.)

WMan: **(GRAVELY GRANDA VOICE)** Al-Haziq! Please go and find help!

Al-H: I hear and obey.

(leaves screen. The guardsman attempts to pull al-Zibriqash out of the crocodile but gets eaten as well. The wife appears and laments and cries over al-Zibriqash.

Wife: **(MOM VOICE)** Oh no, my husband! Help him! God sent someone to get him out!
(loud crying, and sobbing. The two Moroccans appear)

Magician: **(SLIMY NASAL VOICE)** Al-Haziq has sent us to help you!

Wife: **(MOM)** Please get my husband out of the Crocodile! Hurry! He is stuck in there with the watchman and needs to be rescued.

If you could only save my mate,
God's reward will be truly great.

Magician: **(NASAL)** What do you have to offer, Fishwife, other than God's blessings, which only he can choose to bestow?

Wife: **(MOM)**Let the blessings of God come to you, and save my husband. This is his first day at fishing and it is not going well. His prey has bitten off more than it had been given to chew. Oh, great Magician, I offer you my husband's first catch,

which as you see is great,

as he has used himself for bait.

Magician: **(NASAL)**Sweeten the deal with a dinar and I will take the beast and money and leave you your husband.

Wife: **(MOM)**I have but 4 dirhams.**(WITH CONFIDENCE)** you can collect the dinar from the pocket of the Watchman when he is blessed with the return of his life.

Watchman: **(GRANDPA)**Woman! I am not a loaf of bread to barter over! Yes one dinar for my life, and ten if it is soo..**(SOUNDS OF SWALLOWING)**

Magician: It shall be done.

Wife: **(MOM)**I cannot watch! **(Wife EXITS.)**

Magician: **(NASAL CHANT)**In the name of God, and his prophet Muhammad, Crocodile, set free the captives in your jaws. Release them up from your bowels.

(Play kazoo and music for the smoke!

WATCHMAN flips as he comes out...

Jingle bells as he pays magician.

Al-Zibriqash flips as he comes out.

Magician and companion leave with crocodile.

The wife and al-Zibriqash are happily reunited. (Flip wife and husband and child more of the romantic kazoo music.)

Wife: Oh al-Zibriqash, you are saved. Praise be to God the almighty who has delivered you by the work of his servant! (Exit family)

(Moroccans parade across screen with crocodile)

Al-H: You who wish to interpret allegories and unravel the secrets of the Shadow Play

Here are concealed mysteries, for a man does not say all that he knows.

Thank you, Gentlemen, for being such a wonderful audience, and come back tomorrow, for there is more to see.