
THE ISLAMIC MYSTICAL IMAGINATION (*KHAYĀL*): NAVIGATING THE SPECTRUM OF DIVINE SIGNS (*ĀYĀT*) IN IBN ‘ARABĪ

Andi Herawati¹

ABSTRACT

The concept of the imagination, has been an important area of philosophical and religious inquiry. But this concept is often neglected in connection with the Islamic mystical tradition even though the faculty of the imagination (*khayāl*) plays a central role in mystical experience. This article will address the role imagination in the thought of the famous mystic Ibn ‘Arabī. It will demonstrate how Ibn ‘Arabī’s framework of *khayāl* helps us to more fully appreciate the function of the “spiritual imagination” in the interpretation of signs (*āyāt*). Ibn ‘Arabī’s contribution to the term recognizes the complex role of *khayāl*, not merely in its relationship other faculties, such as reason and the senses, but also its role in hermeneutic interpretation, creating an awareness and sensitivity to the Divine signs in nature and within the self.

Keywords: Ibn ‘Arabi ; Imagination ; *khayāl* ; signs ; *āyāt*

The Imagination

In the Western tradition, the imagination is often considered in the manner in which it serves human thought and experience. There is also a recognition of the ‘material’ imagination’s ability to overcome the material boundaries of self and the world – a boundary created by language – and achieve a knowledge in itself.² But the Islamic mystical tradition takes this further and emphasizes the imagination’s role in crossing material boundaries to gain access to the spiritual unseen.³ This paper will examine how the spiritual imagination described by Ibn ‘Arabī is connected to the very fundamentals of Islamic thought, namely the Quran and the hadith, and how it enriches the literature, the practices, and the personal experiences, of believers from the medieval age to the present day. The question then becomes more compelling since *khayāl* allows us to travel across the borders of merely “simple religion or faith” to the heart of religion and its profound mysteries, and the ascent towards God.

This idea of the imagination (*khayāl*) is the precondition for the perception of the divine signs (*āyāt*). The creative power of the divine realities (also understood as divine names) gives rise to the many divine manifestations (*tajalliyāt*, *mazāhir*). These manifestations, at an ontologically more distant level, appear as signs, and these signs are the vehicles whereby the human mind can return to the divine source through the understanding of their meanings (*ma‘ānī*), which is accomplished through the imagination. In this way, even the various levels of human experience and our relationship to reality are intrinsically linked with the concept of symbols and signs as perceived through the imagination.⁴ So for Ibn ‘Arabī, the imagination is instrumental in symbolic interpretation, semantics, and hermeneutics, and allows for the opening of divine theosophy which involves the deciphering of signs, visions, and inspiration – indeed of every form of meaning.

The human imagination, shapes the way that humans experience and respond to infinite divine messages. That is to say, our movement beyond our awareness of everyday experienced phenomena towards recognizing them as significant “religious signs” is often due to mysterious factors and causes that are spontaneous and unexpected, and not the product of our conscious control or intentions. We need to therefore

understand how Ibn ‘Arabī uses the term *khayāl* to understand different kinds of signs and visions.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s was concerned that rationalist philosophers, jurists, and theologians of his time insisted upon “interpreting” or explaining religion and disregarding everything in revealed religion that did not accord with logic and reason. He considered such intellectuals to be ignorant of the primordial role imagination plays in the world and our perception of its meanings. Chittick observed that imagination is probably the key mode of knowing when one perceives the Self-revelation of God. To support this, he provide the following from Ibn ‘Arabī: “Unveiling... is knowledge that God gives directly to the servants when He lifts the veil, separating Himself from them and ‘opens the door’ to a perception of invisible realities.”⁵ Unveiling, then, is associated with imagination because it typically occurs through the imagination’s access to the deeper symbolic expression of realities and meanings. For Ibn ‘Arabī, this fundamental role of imagination in deciphering the divine Signs is particularly evident in our experiences of Love and Beauty. In other words, things that are ordinarily inaccessible to sense-perception or reason are given form and then perceived in their full significance within the imagination, by those for whom the door to those “unseen” dimensions of reality have been opened. Such unveiling is an everyday occurrence for the prophets, but also potentially for each human being, for who is receptive to the teachings of the prophets.

Another reason for the centrality of imagination Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought is that it is grounded on a more nuanced metaphysical and epistemological schema. As he puts it,

The world is nothing but God’s signs (*āyāt*), but these signs are ranked in degrees, some of them more obvious in their denotation of God than others. And this is only natural, since the signs manifest the Names. And the only reasons for why there are a multiplicity of signs (in the world and in ourselves) are so that we might turn our gaze (*nazar*) toward it with remembrance, faith, knowledge, hearing, sight, understanding, and mind.⁶

The Phenomenology of Divine Signs (*āyāt*)

The relationship between the two domains of the visible and non-visible,⁷ the outward manifestation and the underlying Essence, has long been pondered by Muslim thinkers. The Quran itself indicates that we should seek to understand the divine Signs, such as: *We shall show them Our signs in the horizon and in themselves, until it becomes clear to them that He is al-Haqq.* (Q.41:53) Implicit here is a warning for those who are unaware of or ignore the mysterious, implicitly challenging relationship between sign and signified. For in a task such as this research, one is left with the perennial question of how a study dealing with the core of a human being's very reality can be somehow "objective" or at least move beyond each person's pure subjective experience. Feeling and perceiving reality outwardly is only one initial aspect in our apprehension of the divine "Signs," recognizing that in doing so we are dealing with perceptions and responses, thoughts, and human reactions, all of which fall outside of the rigorously "scientific." By the same token, within the tradition of Islamic thought itself, we cannot avoid the fundamental tension between knowing God in His incorporeality and transcendence (even of "Intellect" as we know it), and the need to apprehend Him in His intimate involvement and manifestation (*tashbīh*) in every dimension of creation and human experience.

While navigating that tension inevitably involves ambiguity and apparent paradox, this inherent ambiguity gives a much larger role to the imagination, not least in the "prophetological" domain of spiritually revelatory dreams, institutions, and visions, along with the problematic discernment of their meanings and intended applications.⁸ In addition to the problem of understanding God's relation to the world within an Islamic cultural and religious setting – in which a given individual's understanding and expression of such experiences will be shaped by their particular tradition and formation – the broader epistemology of spiritual or "mystical" experience has taken on an important role in the field of Religious Studies today. Therefore, even though that conceptual, ideological aspect of experience in different interpretive schools and traditions requires a detailed discussion of its own, at this initial stage a broad understanding of the spectrum of such experiences is still necessary

for our purposes. The phenomenological approach would be well suited as one way to explore the role of these “Signs” in Islam, based on the pioneering framework developed by Annemarie Schimmel and her teacher, Friedrich Heiler (1892-1967).⁹ Schimmel and Heiler’s approach conforms with an understanding of Islam as a paradigm of a “prophetic” religion which, however, is tempered by a strong strand of legalism on the one hand, and mysticism in its different forms on the other hand. Their perspective strives to get to the heart of religion by first understanding the phenomenal occurrences, then moving on to a deeper layer of human responses to the Divine, and last to what they call the *Numinous*, or religion’s sacred essence. Citing Heiler, Schimmel holds that when the spirit encounters material objects, it awakens:

All the outward manifestations, the different forms of revelations, are signs...the human being can only seize them of His favor and try to find the way to Him through His signs. The plurality of signs is necessary to veil the eternal One who is transcendent and yet “*closer than the neck vein*” (Sura 50:16); the plurality of signs and the Unicity of the Divine belong together. The signs show the way into His presence, where the believer may finally leave the images behind.¹⁰

To put it another way, a sensual object can bring about the highest spiritual experience, since even a sensible object is not a phenomenon that exists on its own.¹¹ From the passage above, the idea of a transcendence which paradoxically “is closer than the jugular vein” is something distinctive to the study of religion and religious experiences. In such a perspective, that puzzling combination may be denied from one point of view, but admitted from another. We want to evaluate the problem in this way. Of course, scholars have frequently been accused of overcomplicating the most basic topics. But the problems surrounding the divine Signs are rooted in everyone’s daily routines, so that the relevant – often startling and deeply moving – phenomena only reveal themselves to closer attention and investigation. So the phenomenologist of religion follows Ibn ‘Arabī

in beginning with our intrinsically personal moments of curiosity and wonder, as keys to opening up those deeper layers of mystery that surround and constitute our everyday life.¹² In the 560 chapters of Ibn ‘Arabī’s immense “*Meccan Inspirations*,” he provides a seemingly encyclopedic analysis of the diverse experiential forms of “spiritual knowing” and awareness (*ma‘rifa*), an exhaustive achievement that carefully suggests the universality of his phenomenological ambitions.

“Signs on the Horizons and Within Ourselves”

For Ibn ‘Arabī, the primordial Quran, the divine “*Mother of the Book*,” is the expression of God’s purpose and intentional speech directed to humanity, to all the different religious communities (*umma*) following their prophetic founders. To mention only a few representative verses indicating this in varied contexts: *We have sent down upon them these Signs, clear indications; and none denies their truth save the transgressors* (Q 2:99). And *These are the signs of the Manifest Book* (Q 12:1-2). The more “personal” divine intentions underlying the infinite Signs is also highlighted through the form of the spiritual journey,¹³ especially as that is recounted in the scriptural stories of each of the prophets and messengers. That is epitomized in the opening verse of the sura of Muhammad’s Night-Journey (*isrā’*): *Glory to Him Who made His servant journey one night from the Sacred Place of Worship to the Furthest Place of Worship, whose surroundings We have blessed, so that We might cause him to see among Our Signs!* (Q 17:1). In addition, other verses indicate Signs that, ethically speaking, serve as a guide for humans in the building a world with justice and equality: “*We sent aforetime Our messengers with Clear Signs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance (of Right and Wrong), that men may stand forth in justice* (Q 57:25). This latter verse has often been used by Islamic scholars to argue for a Quranic foundation for establishing justice and “democracy” in all its forms.¹⁴

From these preliminary explanations, it is safe to say that everything in the cosmos and within our inner experience could serve as Signs – but only insofar as we keep in mind that the intended spiritual meanings of life can be revealed in all those domains of existence. What is it, though, that transforms such initial appearances into a memorable,

inspired, often life-changing “Sign”? Clearly that “signifying *process*” is largely individual, in terms of the pertinent contexts surrounding each case.

In Islamic history and tradition, many connections of this type can be found. For example, the mysterious black stone¹⁵ placed by Abraham in the Kaaba is considered sacred. Ibn ‘Arabī explains that this stone represents the “right hand of God” (*yadd al-Ḥaqq*). He says:

As for God’s preferring the Black Stone over all the other stones, that is because He sent it down to uphold [i.e., represent] the position of His Right Hand in the divine Covenant. Because among the forms of spiritual awareness (*ma‘ārif*) and acts of worship, there are none greater than that (i.e., stone, or minerals more generally) with respect to its sticking closely to what it knows and to the acts of devotion with which it is worshipping. For the stone/minerals were given an innate nature (*futirat*) already inwardly knowing what they are, and there is never anything at all of that (utter simplicity of devotion) in the human being!”¹⁶

The background or intended “target” of the long list of such divine preferences outlined in chapter 90 of the *Futūḥāt* is set against the apparent fact that all the divine Names and their infinite manifestations in creation seem to involve the dynamic interplay of intrinsically opposing or even contrary qualities. While the interplay of those oppositions might be conceived as simply given or automatic, Ibn ‘Arabī’s explanations of these many divine “preferences” (or “choices”: *ikhtiyār*) cited in chapter 90 emphasizes that human beings – like the Creator – are constantly faced with choices, goals and aims that are meant to guide and orient their actions, choices, and decisions in every domain of life.

It is in itself a kind of miracle that human beings are given the possibility of denying their own Source. But they are given all this and much more in return for freely and lovingly fulfilling that which God wants of them. So here the black stone – with its roots in the complex story of Abraham and the construction of the Kaaba as the “House/Temple of God” – symbolizes the primordial covenant made between human beings

and God. Here we are given to understand that this mere stone, as a Sign, becomes the representation of the experience of and relationship to Reality has either a denotative or a truly representative meaning. Through that, God wants to inform His human creatures about Him and about the real goal of their terrestrial journey. This Abrahamic reminder of the divine covenant is a fundamental aspect of religion and an essential aspect of Islam that is often neglected in the modern world.¹⁷

From this perspective, the word “Sign” can be applied to anything at all in creation, since all things and phenomena are God’s creatures. Especially important for Ibn ‘Arabī, is the insistence in these verses on the key role of imagination (*khayāl*) in making possible the coincidence or parallelism connecting the Signs “*on the horizons*” – referring to the worlds that we perceive and known outside ourselves. It is considered as historical plane,¹⁸ and the Signs “*in ourselves*” or our souls – referring to the vast domain of inner experience, beyond time and space. Already at a more mundane, psychological level, interpreting and understanding natural and earthly signs is the basis of animal intelligence, which they use to guide their practical activities.¹⁹ And we humans engage in similar activities, *qua* animals, doing the same sorts of things in our everyday lives. We obey different kinds of warning signals: we stop the car at a red light and go when it turns green. And since meaning has both logical and psychological aspects, any event meant to be a sign must be capable of conveying meaning. It must also convey that message effectively to the intended receiver of the sign. At a higher level, the spiritual meanings of the Signs shown “within their souls” are normally sought through the spiritual disciplines of contemplation, purification, service, devotion, and prayer, all of which involve an ever-deepening awareness of the intrinsic sublimity of the physical world on our experiences and conduct. The Signs found within are increasingly subtle theophanies which eventually move beyond familiar forms of sensation, thought, and imagination – which in certain situations we may also come to recognize as “miraculous” – to deeper, ineffable experiences of the creative Presence of the Real, here and in higher domains of existence.²⁰ In this connection, a later Persian Sufi, Shabistari reminds us, “Nonbeing is a mirror, the world its image. Man is the eye of this image beholding the hidden Essence,” a concept

which finds close parallels in Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*.²¹

We should note briefly here that Ibn ‘Arabī relies in his *Fuṣūṣ* on the fact that the study of the prophets is a central theme of the Quran, and one of particular importance Islamic spirituality, where from early on the different prophets were seen to correspond to various spiritual types, and consequently to different, but complementary human spiritual potentialities and avenues for approaching God. Ibn ‘Arabī’s approach also presumes that the Quran (like all of creation), in all of its meanings and manifestations, is God’s “Speech,” or the ongoing cosmic manifestation of his Signs (*āyāt*) directed toward all human beings and embodying and illuminating His messages throughout every dimension of life.²² This makes it clear, as we shall see, why he often adduces Quranic verses throughout his works his readers to appreciate how this manifest “Speech of God” in creation repeatedly brings individuals and communities into particular educational “testing” situations requiring them to decipher the deeper intended meanings of their own Signs. That reality is always inseparable from the foundational relationship between them and God, as he points out in many different ways in the famous opening *faṣṣ* of Adam.²³

The importance of our knowledge of the “Signs on the horizons” for Ibn ‘Arabī is particularly emphasized in his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, in which he criticizes a view ascribed to the famous earlier Sufi author, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī. There he says: “Certain sages, among them Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, have asserted that God can be known without any reference to the created Cosmos, but this is mistaken.”²⁴ His discussion in this passage focuses on the nature of the divine Truth as “the Divinity” (*al-ilāh*). For some Sufis and scholars, it was said to be possible to recognize God without involving and paying attention to anything like nature or creation, “what is other than God” (*ma siwā Allāh*). Ibn ‘Arabī here criticizes al-Ghazālī (as well as Ibn Sina) who supposedly claimed that “the Divine” (*al-Ilāh*) could be known and recognized without involving and paying attention to the natural worlds of creation.

The word *āyāt* (“Signs”) appears in Ibn ‘Arabī’s work in ways based on Quranic statements where those Signs are designated in very different contexts and narratives, including: a) practical intelligence and active reflection; b) as revelation, and proof of existence of the Divine;

c) useful indications for our intellectual and spiritual journey; and d) as a divine warning (*tanbīh*). In short, the “knowledge of the horizons” in this phenomenology of signs points to the ways of comprehending how God’s deeper intentions for His Self-Manifestation were to provide humanity with as many avenues as possible to discover God, according to their various levels of responsiveness and spiritual aptitudes.

There are two fundamental, essentially complementary modes of *khayāl*: the (divine) creative-existential, and recollective-spiritual. The latter aspect of *khayāl*, which focuses on the human soul and its perfection, requires the ability to move from the outward multiplicity of phenomena to the one, luminous, subtle divine Spirit, a long, subtle transition that human beings alone are able to perfect. This second process also helps illustrate the Quranic view of the cosmos as an endlessly renewed display of the Signs. The cosmos is a panoply of meaningful Signs through which intelligence and contemplation lead us back to the infinite truth of God. In this way, those Signs substantiate the way of return to the Source: in this spiritual-psychological realm, that means deciphering and properly interpreting those Signs leads to ever-deeper levels of self-knowledge.²⁵

In short, imagining at the microcosmic level takes place in the human soul, which is a *barzakh* or intermediate realm connecting this microcosm with the macrocosmic domain of all divine Imaging. The emphasis on this primordial creative-existential relation is strongly highlighted by Ibn ‘Arabī : “the sensory and imaginative faculties demand by their essences to *see* Him who brought them into existence, while rational faculties demand by their essences and their proofs... to *know* Him who brought them into existence.”²⁶ In addition, through these manifestations of divine Imaging come “the (forms of spiritual) knowing and every chastisement; through them are the Signs (of God) and miracles and exemplary lessons.”²⁷ Thus, the Signs enable the self that learns how to read them to come to know God, while it is God Himself that “governs (*tadbīr*) the affair and differentiates (*tafsīl*) the Signs.”²⁸ We live in this world, and thus have no direct, unmediated access to that divine Essence which is infinitely “beyond” this world. We can know only *this* world directly. And although this world is “other than God,” yet the knowledge of this world must have its precise position in the macrocosmic domain

of divine Self-manifestation. And since no knowledge of God can be gained without an intermediary Sign which is itself other than God, so “what is other than God” is as essential for our unfolding knowledge of God as God Himself.²⁹ After all, the purpose of this multiplicity of Signs both in the world and ourselves is so that we might turn our gaze toward their Source with remembrance, reflection, intelligence, faith, knowledge, hearing, sight, understanding, and mind.³⁰

In more specific sense, the Quran refers to its own words as Signs, and that term eventually came to be applied technically to each verse-element of the Arabic text. It is important to keep in mind that a Sign is established for people to read, as a “reminder” (*dhikr*: also one of the particular Quranic names for the Quran itself), since normally people do not set up signs or give indications unless they want to convey a message. The world is, as it were, an immense created Book in which those who have eyes to see and ears to hear³¹ can recognize God’s Signs, and thus be guided by their contemplation to a deeper knowledge of the Creator and His Attributes. Sensible and spiritual levels meet through and in the Signs, just as “body” turns out to be a sign when it meets Spirit. To make that clear, Ibn ‘Arabī uses the “Word of Īsā/Jesus” in his *Fuṣūṣ* to explain the conjoining of the worlds of body and spirit. There he emphasizes first how the presence of Jesus is a living message to people, an active message.³² Second, by understanding and interpreting these Signs, he suggests how we may be able to understand the Divine Wisdom, Power and so on, while we can also move on to understand what the Quran actually proclaims, implies and inspires. Lastly, through the manifest world of multiplicity, God teaches by means of comparisons, stories (*qisas, hikāyāt*), parables, and likenesses (*amthāl*) to draw the human heart beyond the external, peripheral faces of creation.

Within this realm of possibilities, however, human imagining also depends on how and what each soul transmutes. Symbolism and analogy appear to be quite particularly adapted to the needs of human nature. From Ibn ‘Arabī’s perspective, therefore, human language is nothing other than symbolism. It appears to be quite specially adapted to the needs of human nature, which is not a purely intellectual nature, but which requires a sensory base from which to rise to higher levels of

genuine spiritual comprehension.³³ Understanding the divine theophanies (*tajalliyyāt*) accomplishes a similar thing in that it aids each individual in comprehending the Truth represented by those Self-manifestations more or less completely, more or less profoundly, according to the distinctive nature and extent of each individual's intellectual capabilities and spiritual sensitivities.

Now given the central meaning and importance of understanding the divine Signs, we can begin to see that the essential parallelism of these divine Signs (*āyāt*) or "Words" lies in their constituents, including: (a) revealed "scripture" (i.e., the Quran and all the other prophetically revealed "Books," including all the living examples of the prophets and messengers); (b) the elements, events, and levels of manifest creation (the Signs "on the horizons"); (c) the many inner dimensions of the human soul (the Signs "in their souls"); and (d) the wide-ranging influences of those sacred, divine-human "guiding intermediaries." These latter figures, include divine Friends/ prophets/messengers (*awliyā'*, *anbiyā'*, and *rusul*), whom the Quran often refers to as God's "Words" (*kalimāt*). As Ibn 'Arabī's guiding conception of the role of divine Imaging (*khayāl*) in creation or Self-manifestation, the following diagram is designed to summarize the proper places assigned to the different divine Signs, how they relate each other, and what are their intended functions.

Ibn 'Arabī states that if one searches for these diverse Signs and meditates upon them, then one will gradually discover that they are all verses and reminders of subjects and insights relating to one Source – even if most people are unaware of their intended meanings and of the many categories that they involve:

Among the Signs mentioned are the usual, accustomed ones and unusual ones, that people realize their significance from among people, jinn, and angels. And some of these indications are unintelligible to everybody who ignores them, save those with sound thinking. And the significance of the Signs is conditional on those with insight, and they are the wise who look at the heart of things, not at their shells. They are, therefore, the seekers of meanings.³⁴

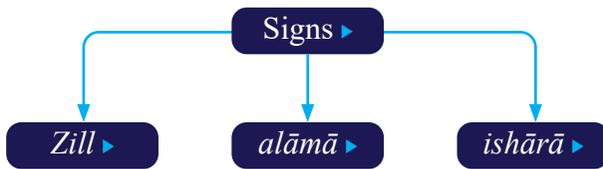
Ibn ‘Arabī, not surprisingly, utilizes these familiar Quranic expressions in a more complex context and with different objectives, so that the single word “*āya*” can have a complicated relational significance with similar terms like *dalāla*, *‘alāma*, *zill*, and *ishāra*. As already noted, the semantic complexity of this spectrum of different types of divine Signs considerably augmented by the fact that same keywords are frequently used for different purposes in several fields and contexts. Hence the meaning and intention of a particular technical term must be carefully established when referring it to a particular Quranic context or hadith, given the intricacy of Ibn ‘Arabī’s language and style. At the same time, all these derived meanings and contexts belong under the category of divine Imagining, which encompasses the various levels and mysteries of creation.

Semantic analysis understands that the word *Sign* as described above is no longer a merely Quranic concept in its original sense. So, although certainly God reveals Himself through “Signs,” individual human beings are only allowed to know their intended meanings insofar as the veil is lifted for them. This kind of bestowed spiritual knowing or mystic awareness is called “*knowledge from behind the veil*.”³⁵ These category distinctions refer to the situational contexts within which friction and change can be both necessary and fruitful. By and large, this hermeneutical approach allows symbolic language and allusion the ability to simultaneously *veil* and *reveal* deep mysteries.

Horizons	Self or Soul
Phenomena of nature	Phenomena of self
Outer social conflict	Inner conflict
Religious preferences and differences	Faith and “belief” (<i>i’tiqādāt</i>)
Polarities and classification	Unity
Activism through grouping and sense of spiritual brotherhood (<i>jalwa</i> in Sufi tradition)	Inner awareness in a meditative condition (<i>khalwa</i> in Sufi tradition)
Distance (<i>bu’da</i>), “throwing” (into the heart)	Approximation (<i>taqrīb</i>), alignment, and bringing closer

Horizons	Self or Soul
External awareness	Internal Awareness
Verbal language	Non-verbal communication
Creating shadows	Eliminating shadows
Manifesting, spreading	Returning, unifying

Now based on what we can extract from Ibn ‘Arabī’s use of language, the two contrasting aspects of Signs in this diagram can be classified into the following three main categories of explanation, with their manifold meanings and forms of understanding. These three basic hermeneutical approaches to the divine Signs are as follows.



Shadows (*zill*) Projection and Personification³⁶

This access of the imagination to the divine light can be illustrated through his discussion of shadows (*zill*). Ibn ‘Arabī’s complex use of this recurrent Quranic term within the broader divine Imagination serves to express three fundamental dimensions of metaphysical relation: 1) creation and multiplicity; 2) the connection between the Creator and creation; 3) the “unicity of divine Action” (*aḥadiyyat al-fi‘l*). These three significations, however, are all described in terms of the divine creative Light, since there would be no explanation of shadow without it. Thus, Souad Hakim quotes a paradoxical saying: “the [spiritually] veiled one is prostrating to other than God, but his shadow prostrates to God.”³⁷

In the chapter of his *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam* on the “Wisdom of Light” (*hikma nūriyya*) in the Word of Joseph,” Ibn ‘Arabī starts with the principle of revelation/creation as Light: “The Light of this luminous Wisdom extends over the place of imagination, which is the first principle of revelation.”³⁸ In the shadow analogy, the reality of this divine “shadow” is seen as the manifest images of the cosmos itself. However, this image can be complicated, for its being is separated from God and detached;

yet paradoxically, the shadow cannot be separated from the Source of the shadow and from the Light that casts the shadow.³⁹ As for the essence of the shadow, there is proverbial expression, “I am the shadow of someone.” The differences in the light that shines from the shadow’s source causes the diversity of the shadows. Thus for Ibn ‘Arabī, the illustration of the essence of the shadow, relates to the understanding of signs of God’s Existence and proofs of His self-manifestation.

When Ibn ‘Arabī uses the Quranic symbolic analogy of a shadow that is not separated from light, he means it in a more existential framework. It seems that the shadow is itself neither darkness nor light. But the shadow will appear only when there is Light and an object in a place to cast that shadow. When the light shines on an object, of course, the light radiates from only one direction, because if it radiated from all directions, there would certainly be no shadows. When it shines on the object, the object itself will become bright; but at the same time it will block the light beam from reaching the place behind the object. It is this obstruction that paradoxically causes the shadow to appear. Ibn ‘Arabī then relates the shadow with divine Light through the divine Breath.

“Have you not seen how your Lord extends the shadows: if He so willed, He would make it stand still.” (Q 25:45) The Reality does not reveal Himself to the contingent beings before He manifests His shadow, the shadow being as those things that have not yet been manifested in existence. “Then we made the sun as indicated of it” (Q 25:45), which is His Name “the Light”..., for shadows have no separate existence without light.⁴⁰

According to Qāshānī, Ibn ‘Arabī is alluding to a saying of the Prophet that “Indeed the spirit of the Holy One breathes in my soul (*raw’*) that one soul will not die until its sustenance is perfected. Know this, so you beautify in your search!”⁴¹ There is so much in this saying concerning Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of “shadow” in its original Quranic sense. He relies heavily on this ontological metaphor and favors it both intellectually and spiritually, since we often automatically think of the

shadow as its own reality, while in actuality it only exists through being cast by the object. Here he suggests that we first perceive the “shadow” of the divine realities in manifest creation, which leads our minds to identify that “shadow” with the original object that casts it. By nature, the human mind works in this way in many different domains.

A similar idea is found in his *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, in chapter 279 on spiritual vision and insight, where Ibn ‘Arabī alludes to the process of understanding the divine Signs.

“*Did you not see to your Lord how He stretched out the shadow? (27:45)*” Here the (word) “vision” is paired with the preposition “to,” while the One that is seen (i.e. the Lord) is paired with the word “how.” For the veiled one complains, “Why did not we witness the Truth/God?” For it is Lord (as Light) Who situates the extension of the shadow, while it is (the extended shadow/manifestation) that we see, and we do not see Him. We see the shadows extending from the opaque reality (*kathīf*) that blocks the lights from spreading out over all the places where this ‘how’ is witnessed.”⁴²

From this we learn that the vision (*ru’ya*) in this discourse relates to the “*knowledge of the ‘how’ it is witnessed,*” and that that illuminated understanding comes from God. It means that if He wanted a fully opaque individual to be erected, then such (self-subsistent) figures would prevent the light from spreading. So the (shadowy) manifestation of that erected individual is called “shades” (*ḡalālan*).

From here, the operative question “knowledge of how” can be learned from the way we understand the “veiled” Unseen as visible, which is a kind of familiar human self-deception in which our mind blocks or veils itself. The other way to see this situation – i.e., of our taking the imaginal “shadows” of divine manifestations as the reality – is as an internal reminder that we often neglect our predisposition and actual position in this world. From the divine perspective, consequently, different shadows require from us different ways of responding and eventually discerning the underlying spiritual realities actually casting those shadows.

In addition, Ibn ‘Arabī notes that we can expand this metaphysical analogy of shadow in terms of *distance*, since distance distorts the senses and creates an “inverse” state. Hence in shadows, something originally in color looks black, something bigger looks small, and what appeared to be light is actually dark. When humans are far from the Real (*al-Haqq*), all their perceptions seem to be inverse. When humans are far from the divine Reality, their perceptions and conceptions seem to be “inverse.” While they might feel *al-Haqq* is far away, He is actually very close. As long as they are far away (in their imaginal projection), all their perceptions will not be able to recognize *al-Haqq* as He really is. Now, there is an inherent power of manifestation, that is Light, when it comes to the divine Imagination. Its inherent power of manifestation is nothing other than Light. So in Ibn ‘Arabī’s words: “*God made this imagination a Light by which the representation of everything is realized, for its Light penetrates into pure non-existence, thus making the form exist.*”⁴³ This divine Light passes through the absolute nothingness so that He might shape it into the infinite forms of manifestation and being. “Hence the Imagination is more deserving of the (divine) Name ‘the Light’ (*al-Nūr*) than all the created things ordinarily described as ‘luminous,’ since Its Light does not resemble the (created), while through It all the divine Self-manifestations are perceived.”⁴⁴ *Light is not just the cause for existence, it also generates possibility and multiplicity.* When earthly, material light shines on an object, of course, the light radiates from only one direction, because if it radiated from all directions, there would certainly be no shadow. When it shines on the object, that object will become bright, but at the same time it will block the light beam from reaching the space behind the object. It is this obstruction that causes the “shadows” (*zulūmāt*: a recurrent Quranic metaphysical symbol) to appear.

Finally, in this metaphysical “shadow” analogy, the actualizing divine Light is seen as the archetypal image-Source of the cosmos itself. Those infinite divine “shadows” or manifestations are seen as endlessly complicated, if they are deceptively perceived as separated from God, with a “detached” reality of their own. In reality, though, given the absurdity of a being without His Light, the “shadow” or manifestation is not really separated from the ultimate possessor (or “Caster”) of the shadow. When

Ibn ‘Arabī uses the analogy of a shadow or extended shadow that is not separated from Light, he means to relate it to a wider framework. It seems that the shadow is therefore neither pure darkness nor pure light. But the shadow will appear *only when there is Light*, as one object and one place of the divine Self-manifestation.

Therefore, one way of interpreting this cosmic divine “imaging” is by looking at the course of creation as a field of possibilities. The usual human conception of creation here – as being a fixed, self-subsistent, time-bound reality – is likened to an illusion that we normally project on our perceptions, because of our ignorance of God/Light as the true underlying Reality (*al-Haqq*). That every day, literally “un-enlightened” understanding of a world of self-subsistent realities constantly creates a deceptive, imagined multiplicity in our perceptions and in the way people approach and conceive of God. But when the Reality is more directly known and perceived, the apparent multiplicity of this world recedes in significance, and indeed can even seem to disappear (i.e., in the mystical experience of “absorption in God,” *fanā’ fi al-Haqq*). In other words, when the Reality is perceived, the language of transcendence is emphasized, while all this world’s possible things (or “contingent beings,” *mumkināt*) are hidden and “veiled” – just as with the symbolic role of the shadow-theater’s translucent screen. But, when our enlightened perception of the Real (*al-Haqq*) is veiled, the familiar world of constantly shifting possibilities and manifestations re-appears.

Spiritual experience and its symbolization and representation, is always reliant on some form of imagination (*khayāl*). As Ibn ‘Arabī stated, our imagination is the only faculty that has the right to receive “light” – namely, divine Light – which can give meaning to the sensory forms in the soul’s capacity to experience reality, whether in this world or in the many higher, intermediate realms of the *barzakh*. It also means allowing us to see the “Signs” in the light of their potential meanings, adding new and ever-deeper levels of meaning to them. As a result, the imagination combines sensual qualities, emotions, and meanings in an experience that has the potential to transform our perspective on the world.

Conclusion

The investigation reveals that *khayal* operates on two fundamental, complementary levels: as a divine-creative faculty through which God's infinite possibilities are manifested into the forms of the cosmos, and as a human-recollective faculty that allows the seeker to perceive and interpret these manifestations as meaningful signs. Through this dual function, the imagination enables the transition from the outward multiplicity of phenomena to an understanding of the underlying divine unity. It is the instrument of "unveiling" (*kashf*), granting access to knowledge that transcends mere reason or sensory perception.

Central to this process is the interpretation of *ayat*, which are shown to be omnipresent—inscribed "on the horizons" of the external world and "within the souls" of human beings. Ibn 'Arabi's hermeneutics teaches that everything in existence, from Quranic verses to natural phenomena to inner spiritual states, is a sign pointing back to the Divine Source. The human task, therefore, is to cultivate the spiritual imagination to read this cosmic text correctly. This involves moving beyond the "shells" of literal appearances to apprehend the "meanings" (*ma'ani*) they embody.

The exploration of the "shadow" (*zill*) analogy further crystallizes Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysics. The world of creation is likened to a shadow—utterly dependent on, and inseparable from, the divine Light that casts it, yet often mistaken for an independent reality. This metaphor underscores the paradoxical nature of existence: simultaneously a veil and a revelation.

By restoring *khayal* to its central place in Islamic mysticism, this paper highlights a vital path for navigating the divine signs—a path that begins with the wonders of the seen world and within the self, and through the transformative power of the spiritual imagination, leads the seeker back to the encounter with the Real.

ENDNOTES

¹ Andi Herawati, is a Ph. D candidate at the Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures, Indiana University Bloomington. This paper is part of her dissertation chapter 2, titled Hermeneutics And Imagination: Navigating The Spectrum of Divine Signs, 70-95.

² Maria Danae Koukouti and Lambros Malafouris, “Material Imagination: An Anthropological Perspective,” in *Cambridge Handbook of the Imagination*, ed. Anna Abraham (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

³ James Walter, “Introduction,” in *Religious Imaginations: How Narratives of Faith Are Shaping Today’s World* (London: Gingko Library, 2018), 6.

⁴ See, Arthur Goldhammer, “Religious Symbolism and Iconography”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/religious-symbolism>.

⁵ Ibn ‘Arabī , quoted in William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God : Principles of Ibn al-Arabī’s Cosmology (Islam)* (New York : New York University Press, 1997), xxi.

⁶ William Chittick, “God’s Signs: Chapter 372,” in *The Meccan Revelations : Ibn ‘Arabi*, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz, vol. 1 (New York: Pir Press, 2005), 182.

⁷ In the Qur’an and hadith (and hence in Ibn ‘Arabi), the “visible” often refers to everything that is manifest, whether sensible (including the imaginal) or intelligible, while the “unseen” (*ghayb*) refers to much deeper, spiritual or divine dimensions of reality.

⁸ See Michelle Karnes, “Marvels in the Medieval Imagination,” *Speculum* 90, no. 2 (2015): 336.

⁹ See Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), viii. Heiler was a pioneering ecumenical theologian known particularly for his phenomenology of prayer.

¹⁰ Schimmel, *ibid.*, xv.

¹¹ Schimmel, *ibid.*, 74.

¹² See for example in the introduction of studying religion in Russell T. McCutcheon, *Studying Religion : An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London&New York: Routledge, 2019).

¹³ See in particular Ibn ‘Arabi’s detailed accounts of his own spiritual journey (*isrā’*) in his highly symbolic, early *Kitāb al-Isrā’*, and in chapter 367 of the *Futūhāt* III, p. 340-353 in Muhyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī, *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*, 4 volumes. Bulaq edition (Beirut: Dar Sadr, 1968).

¹⁴ See for example in, Raymond William Baker, *One Muslim, Many Muslim Worlds : Spirituality, Identity, and Resistance Across Islamic Lands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 203–5.

¹⁵ In Arabic, *al-Hajar al-Aswad*, a Muslim object of veneration, built into the eastern wall of the Kaaba.

¹⁶ *FM* II, 171. 17-20. Ch. 90 .

¹⁷ See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1966), 26.

¹⁸ Sebastian Günther and Todd Lawson, eds., *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, vol. 1 (Boston, United States: Brill, 2017), 1.

¹⁹ Susanne K. Langer, "The Logic of Signs and Symbols," in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, ed. Michael Lambek (USA: B. Blackwell, 2002), 140.

²⁰ It is safe to say that most of Ibn 'Arabi's own *Futūḥāt* is devoted to an incomparably rich and detailed phenomenology of these Signs.

²¹ Mahmud Shabistari, *Garden of Mystery: The Gulshani-i Raz of Shabistari*, trans. Robert Abdul Hayy Darr (Archetype, 2007), 48. Shabistari (1288-1340) was one of the most lastingly influential Persian writers in the later "Akbarī" school of interpreters of Ibn 'Arabi; his work is still widely read by popular audiences today, often printed with later commentators explicitly based on writings of Ibn 'Arabi.

²² For example, "We shall show them Our Signs on the horizons and in their souls/themselves, so that it becomes clear to them that He is the Reality." (41:53).

²³ For analysis of several chapters of the *Fuṣūṣ* with regarding self-knowledge (as the key to our knowledge of God), see our MA thesis: Andi Herawati, "Knowing God through Knowing the Self: The Understanding of *Ma'rifa* in Ibn al- 'Arabi's *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*" (Jakarta, ICAS-Paramadina University, 2013).

²⁴ Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabi, *Fuṣūṣ Al-Ḥikam* (Beirut: Dar al Kutub al-'Arabi, 1946), 81.

²⁵ For a more detailed exposition of this relation between the divine Signs and self-knowledge, see the study by Andi Herawati, "Concerning Ibn 'Arabi's Account of Knowledge of God (*Ma'rifat al-Ḥaqq*)," in *Kanz Philosophia* 3, no. 2 (2013): 219–42; also http://kanz.sadra.ac.id/article_4352.html.

²⁶ For a helpful introductory survey on the idea of *barzakh*, see J. W. Morris, "Divine 'Imagination' and the Intermediate World": Ibn 'Arabi on the *barzakh* (Postdata University Libraries, Boston College, 1995), <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/2208>.

²⁷ *FM* II, 307.21. Ch.177 on spiritual awareness, *ma'rifa*.

²⁸ *FM*, I, 260.18; referring to Qur'anic verse 13:2.

²⁹ *FM*, I, 260.18; referring to Qur'anic verse 13:2.

³⁰ William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 147.

³¹ Here it is important to keep in mind that the recurrent Qur'anic imagery of creation as God's direct "Speech" (*kalām*) and its focus on His spoken "Words" strongly emphasizes the spoken, aural (*samā'*) imagery of the universe as a kind of "divine Concert."

³² See Souad Hakim, “Jesus According to Ibn Arabi,” from *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society*, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://ibnarabisociety.org/jesus-according-to-ibn-arabi-souad-hakim/>. See also Maurice Gloton, *Jesus Son of Mary in the Qur’ān and According to the Teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2006), 330–42.

³³ This emphasis on the spiritual necessity of *tashbīh* (manifest symbolic “likening” of divine realities), especially in prophetic revelations aimed at all of humanity, is one of the most central, recurrent themes throughout the *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*.

³⁴ *FM I*, 206. 20-23. Ch. 32, “On those who truly understand all the Signs”.

³⁵ Qur’an 42:51. This sort of “knowledge from behind the veil” will be elaborated in the following section.

³⁶ The hermeneutical categories of *‘alāma* (definitive sign/mark) and *ishāra* (subtle allusion) are central to Ibn ‘Arabī’s spiritual hermeneutics. However, given the spatial limits of this paper, their elaboration falls beyond its present scope

³⁷ Su’ad al-Hakim, *Al-Mu’jam al-Ṣūfī : Al-Ḥikmat Fi Ḥudūd al-Kalimat* (Bayrūt: al-Mu’assasah al-Jāmi’īyah lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī, 1981), 745.

³⁸ Ibn-Al-Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.W.J Austin (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1980) 120.

³⁹ See Austin’s introduction to the *Fass of Joseph, in the Bezels of Wisdom*, 120.

⁴⁰ Ibn-Al-Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 124.

⁴¹ Muḥammad Dāwūd Qayṣarī, *Sharh Fusus Al-Hikam* (Tehran: Sharikat-i Intishārāt-i ‘Ilmī va Farhangī, 1375), 413.

⁴² *FM II*, 607.13. Ch.279

⁴³ *FM II*, 306. 21-24.

⁴⁴ J. W. Morris, “Divine ‘Imagination’ and the Intermediate World: Ibn ‘Arabī on the ‘Barzakh,’” (translation quoted here from chapter 63 of the *Futūḥāt*), *Postdata 2*. vol. 15 (1995): 108..

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