

# Surah al-Shams: Divinity, Material Agency and Human Cognition

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of ontological and epistemological agency of material culture in the Surah al-Shams as regards transforming humans' understanding of the world they inhabit. I particularly analyse the intersection of the notion of materiality and the divine to reconsider its implications for human cognition. I argue that the Surah al-Shams not only validates the agency of material culture in the world by associating it with the divine, but also rebuts the anthropocentric approach and assumed agency of humans over material-cultural phenomena. While foregrounding the mutually constitutive positioning of non-human actants, Surah al-Shams helps us understand how landscapes and other natural and cosmic objects inform, impact on and transform mankind's perception of the world they inhabit. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that this perception or meaning associated with natural symbols can only be unleashed in relation to divinity as its referent. Taking a cue from Beate Pongratz Leisten and Karen Sonik's discussion surrounding "a relationship between an agent operating on behalf of a divinity and the divinity itself as referent – and that enables us to speak of objects or images as agents or even (detachable) parts of the composite divine" (Pongratz-Leisten & Sonik 2015, p. 6) and Lorraine J. Daston's idea of sacral "things that talk" (Daston 2004, p. 21), I will show how the celestial bodies and cosmic phenomena referred to in the Surah allow an understanding of divinity as composite and capable of distributing its agency into a diverse constellation of (culturally/ religion-specific) indexes (Daston 2004, p. 20).

## Keywords

Human-nonhuman actants; material agency of non-human; divinity; cosmic phenomena

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This paper adumbrates the significance of ontological and epistemological agency of material culture in the *Surah alShams* as regards transforming humans' understanding of the world they live in. I particularly analyse the intersection of the notion of materiality and the divine to reconsider its implications for human cognition. In so doing, the *Surah alShams* validates the agency of material culture in the world we inhabit and rebuts the anthropocentric approach to and assumed agency of humans as regards material-cultural phenomena. While foregrounding this idea of decentralised agency, which has gained currency in the last few decades, the *Surah al-Shams* helps us understand how landscapes and other natural and cosmic objects inform, impact on and transform mankind's perception of the world they inhabit. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that this perception or meaning associated with natural symbols can only be unleashed in relation to divinity as its referent. I would like to clarify here that celestial bodies and cosmic phenomena are only used as referents or physical manifestations of the divine; they have no share in divinity. Drawing on the theorisation of Beate Pongratz Leisten and Karen Sonik, who "establish a relationship between an agent operating on behalf of a divinity and the divinity itself as referent – and that enables us to speak of objects or images as agents or even (detachable) parts of the composite divine" (Pongratz- Leisten & Sonik 2015, p. 6) and Lorraine J. Daston's idea of "sacral things that talk" (Daston 2004, p. 21), I will show how the celestial bodies and cosmic phenomena referred to in the Surah allow for an understanding of divinity as composite, capable of distributing its agency into a diverse constellation of (culturally/ religion-specific) indexes.

Every word in the Quran carries a world of meaning within it. A de-anthropocentric study of the Quran shows that it is a self-referential text, written in a language which is highly communicative, albeit challenging in forcing its readers to unveil the secrets embodied in its diverse aspects, from earthly to theological and philosophical considerations. The *Surah al-Shams* is one of those 43 suras of the Qur'an that begins with oaths alluding to some cosmic or natural phenomena. Generally, the suras containing oaths are placed in two distinct categories: a group introduced by *waw al- qasm* and another introduced by *la uqsimu bi-*. The oath clusters related to some cosmological and natural phenomena either form the beginning of suras such as *al- Buruj*, *al-Tariq*, *al-Ala*, *alFajr*, *al-Layl* and *ad-Duha*, or appear within suras such as *adh-Dhariyat* and *at-Tariq*. The *Surah al-Shams* belongs to the first group. In fact, it is on the basis of this structural unity that all the oath cluster suras are grouped together, as Angelika Neuwirth notes:

Structurally speaking, it is based on the anticipation of a solution to the enigma that is aroused in the listener's mind by the amassed metaphorical elements ... It is this dynamization of the entire suras created by the introductory oath clusters that is the main characteristic of this text group (Neuwirth 2006, n.p).

The seven consecutive oath verses make the *Surah alShams* unique; nowhere in the Quran does Allah swear in the name of celestial phenomena in seven consecutive verses. This repetition is one of the Quranic rhetorical devices and logics that help in making an appeal to the mind of the listener as well as exciting their imagination and stirring their emotions. Allah SWT does not need to swear and, if He does so, it gestures towards the momentousness and significance given

to the occasion. Most significantly, this act of swearing is emblematic of “external objects or things acting on behalf of the divine and [that] are assigned different scopes (and sometimes, arguably, spheres) of agency”. It is precisely this understanding of the agency of material objects in the cosmic scheme of things that informs the ways in which “one might properly interact with the divine in specific contexts” (Pongratz-Leisten & Sonik 2015, p. 21).

However, it is important to note that the symbols and cosmological phenomena invoked in the *Surah al-Shams* cannot be seen to represent what Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik identify as the divinity in a mimetic way nor be considered equivalent to the entirety of the divinity. In fact, celestial bodies and cosmic phenomena have a “referential quality alluding more to one particular aspect or role of the divinity, so that they represented part of its distributed agency within a specific (and rather sharply delimited) context” (PongratzLeisten & Sonik 2015, p.21). For example, the *Surah alShams* quintessentially features material objects that have referential qualities alluding to a number of aspects or roles of the divinity in the proper functioning of life on earth. The first seven verses of the *Surah al-Shams* are unique in the sense that Allah SWT swears by objects as universal phenomena, which encompass a great truth about the Creator as well as creation. In so doing, this oath pattern, while avouching the unity personified in the Creator and creation, gestures towards peculiar contexts in which these objects possess sacral properties, thereby suggesting the possibility of engaging in familiar modes of interaction and communication with humans. Celestial bodies enable cognitive recognition due to their tactile properties. It is precisely against this backdrop that I argue that the *Surah alShams* draws our attention to an intermingling of agencies, nature and forces that construct “a material ‘mesh’ of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces” (Iovino & Oppermann 2014, p. 2). This interpretive horizon is opened up when Allah SWT swears by the sun, the moon and the day:

بِشَمْسٍ مُّجِيدٍ ۝  
بِقَمَرٍ مُّثَبِّدٍ ۝  
بِالنَّهَارِ إِذَا تَجَافَىٰ ۝

1. By the Sun and his (glorious) splendour;

بِاللَّيْلِ إِذَا يَغْشَىٰ ۝  
بِالنَّجْمِ إِذَا هَجَىٰ ۝

2. By the Moon as she follows him;

بِالسَّجْدِ إِذَا سَجَىٰ ۝  
بِالسُّجُودِ إِذَا سُجِيَ ۝

3. By the Day as it shows up (the Sun’s) glory.

In the first ayah, Allah swears by the sun and its brightness. The word *duha* ( دُحَا ), which stems from *ḍ ā ḍ ḥ ā wāu* and is translated as ‘to appear conspicuously’, simultaneously applies to heat and light during the time between sunrise and meridian, the time when the sun appears

in its full splendour. In other words, the sun is described as perfect and the only source of energy, without which all activities and all processes of nature – biological and cosmological – would come to an end. It would not be wrong to say that references to cosmology situate the human person within the larger context of social and physical realities where the universe is “reflective of and relating to body functions, one sees oneself not as an isolated unit but as part of a greater whole” Chapple 2002, p. 121). No wonder then that the surah begins by *Surah al-Shams*, providing a material counterpoint to human agency. By emphasising the significance of the sun and its light, the surah gestures towards the embeddedness of humans and the material, a situation in which both humans and non-humans enter space to converse and coproduce. It is on the basis of this realization that “the world is a mutual, interdependent, cooperative enterprise . . . [so that] we can build a noble environment” (Chapple 2002, p. xiii), as I will elaborate.

In the second verse, Allah swears by the moon as it follows the sun. This the time when the sun hides and night falls. Allah SWT then takes an oath on the day as it reveals the sun. Although the third verse seems to refer to the sun, it nonetheless gestures towards a discreet illusion to the fact that the purpose of sunlight is to unravel the mysteries surrounding ‘the earth’ and has a great impact on human life. In other words, in the Arabic version of this verse, the pronoun preceding ‘splendour/ or glory’ creates an ambiguity as it not only refers to the sun but also to the earth lit by the sun. This method of changing referents is widely employed in the Qur’an when the change is easily noticeable if the subject matter is familiar. This Qur’anic hint reawakens in us how crucial is this magnificent daily spectacle; for life itself, we are dependent upon the sun, a non-human materiality, the denial of which can be potentially dangerous while considering social, natural and biological aspects of our lives. As Owain Jones and Paul Cloke point out, “it is quite clear that the social aspect is thoroughly dependent on the life – making capacities of a whole range of natural processes which are articulated through various forms, flows and exchanges of energy and matter/ materiality” (Jones, & Cloke 2008, p. 79). Our social life on earth is inextricably linked to intersecting and complex phenomena ranging from

“biosphere systems of atmospheric regulation”, the force of gravity and “magnetic fields of the earth”, to billions of microbes in the bodies of humans and non-humans, as these not only “co-constitute the contexts of life, but they also frequently reconstitute the fabrics of day-to-day life and the places and spaces in which it is lived” (Jones, & Cloke 2008, p. 79). These verses in the *Surah al-Shams* rebut any “dichotomous patterns of thinking” that conveniently present inhuman forms of living as mute forces, “passive, inert, unable to convey any independent expression of meaning” (Iovino & Opperman 2014, p. 2). This is evident from the ways in which the sun is invoked in the surah as having influence on gravity and the solar system at the quantum level, which is a clear reference to the idea of quantum entanglement. Then Allah swears by the night. This is the opposite of what happens during the day.

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4. By the Night as it conceals it;

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5. By the Firmament and its (wonderful) structure;

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6. By the Earth and its (wide) expanse.

Nighttime is described as a screen that covers and hides everything. The sky is a magnificent spectacle, a strong protective covering adorned with stars and planets. The oath then includes the earth and its spreading as preparatory to the emergence of life. Indeed, human and animal life would not have been possible had the earth not been spread out. Verses 5 and 6, while drawing our attention to the great designer and architect of the flawless sky and earth, also explicates the way Allah communicates with humanity, as Noman Haq writes: Nature, then, is an emblem of God; it is a means through which God communicates with humanity. One may legitimately say that insofar as the Islamic tradition allows for God's entry into the flow of history at all—that is, in the realm bounded by space and time—nature embodies one of the two modes of this entry, the other mode being God's Word, namely, the Qur'ān itself. Most significantly, the verses of the Qur'ān are also called āyāt, signs, and in the same emblematic vein—and this means that the objects of the natural world and the Qur'ānic verses are metaphysically on a par with each other (Haq 2001, p. 146).

Through conversations between the sun, moon, sky, night, day and humans, the Quran not only avows the sacrality associated with natural and cosmic phenomena but also foregrounds the allegorical properties associated with celestial bodies which render the divine visible in the world of senses and cosmological phenomena. My reading of the surah in this context corroborates Copeland and Struck's idea of an interpretive process in relation to rendering the abstract visible. Cosmic bodies as referents or symbols of divinity seek to "express imagistically what is otherwise abstract or invisible" (Copeland & Struck 2010, p. 6). The rhetorical energy that these six verses expend on the notion of distributive divine agency via celestial bodies also shows that these are also highly allegorical in nature, thereby turning "nature into the *presencing* of the divine" (Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik 2015, p. 138). The sun may be taken as a symbol of truth, a source of energy; and the moon may represent the reflection of that energy. Allegorically, this may be interpreted as:

The sun of knowledge of our path is the Prophet Muhammad. Those of us who follow in his footsteps on this path are like the moon in that, at best, we reflect part of that prophetic light from our garden surface. Reflections follow that light of day and echoes follow sound. This is the relationship between Allah, the Creator, and man (Haeri 1993 p. 198).

The same principle works in the next four verses as well where day and night, sky and earth, are also placed sidebyside, in parallel and with rhythmic structures. Interestingly, things referred to in the first six verses are opposite in reality but are necessary complements of each other, which is quintessentially represented through the use of repetition and parallelism, both of which actually highlight the balance and harmony maintained by the Creator in this world of binary opposition in such a way that there is no room for disturbance and transgression in this system of the universe. Neither can the sun set nor the moon appear before it is time. This idea is also expressed in Surah Yasin (36:40):

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"It is not allowable [i.e. possible] for the sun to reach the moon, nor does the night overtake the day, but each, in an [falak] orbit, is [yasbahoon] swimming".

The words "*falak*" and "*yasbahoon*", translated as "sphere or orbit" and "swimming", respectively, refer to the movement of the sun, the moon and the planets in perfect harmony due to ripple-like gravitational waves. This harmony in the working of the objects within their own spheres also applies to day and night, sky and earth. As Stephen Hawking points out in his book *A Brief History of Time*,

The laws of science, as we know them at present, contain many fundamental numbers, like the size of the electric charge of the electron and the ratio of the masses of the proton and the electron ... the remarkable fact is that the values of the numbers seem to have been very finely adjusted to make possible the development of life (Hawking 1988, p. 125).

This fine-tuning of the universe is known as the "Anthropic Principle", according to which, seemingly "arbitrary and unrelated constants" have one thing in common, namely, the values needed for the universe to "be capable of producing and supporting life". This means that if any of these finely tuned "anthropic coincidences" were even slightly different, we would not exist" (Hemler 2014 p. 48). This realisation makes us consider two important questions: First, does this

fine-tuning happen randomly? And second, what does it tell us about human and non-human entanglement?

As far as the first question is concerned, interestingly, the evidence of anthropic coincidences and fine-tuning is too powerful to be considered a matter of chance. Even scientists such as Sir Fred Hoyle and Patrick Glynn had to reconsider their assumptions that the universe is accidental. Hoyle had even gone to the extent of questioning his own atheism by saying that "...a common-sense interpretation of the facts suggests that a superintellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as with chemistry and biology, and that there are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature. The numbers one calculates from the facts seem to me so overwhelming as to put this conclusion almost beyond question (Hoyle 1982, p. 16).

Similarly, Glynn also questions those scientists who cleave to an atheistic world view: "But they are increasingly pressed to almost absurd lengths to defend it. Today the concrete data point strongly in the direction of the God hypothesis. It is the simplest and most obvious solution to the anthropic puzzle" (Glynn 1999, p. 53). The existence of such profound cosmological parameters gestures towards one undeniable truth: it is only God, the Creator, who can make the universe habitable for living beings. This anthropic puzzle cannot be resolved without a Creator. It is precisely in this context that I refer to Daston's idea of sacral "things that talk" (Daston 2004, p.21) to show how the celestial bodies and cosmic phenomena referred to in the Surah allow for an understanding of divinity as composite, capable of distributing its agency into a diverse constellation of indexes, which in turn enables us to speak of objects or images as agents or even (detachable) parts of the composite divine.

This brings us to the second question I raised pertaining to human and non-human entanglement which makes it "quite arduous for humans to declare their agentic independence in a hybrid, vibrant, and living world" (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, p. 3). Rebutting any forms of dichotomous patterns of thinking, cosmic phenomena's power of creating configurations of meanings and substances for human lives is further foregrounded in the next two verses in which Allah alludes to *nafs* (the self) and its intricate balance and infinite possibilities:

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7. By the Soul and the proportion and order Given to it;

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8. And its enlightenment as to its wrong and its right.

By making sense of the cosmos philosophy through symbolic juxtapositioning of the human self (*rüh*) and the cosmic phenomenon in verse 7, Allah first invites man to contemplate the evident physical realities which will then enable him to comprehend the same contradictory phenomena going on within him – the battle of *nafs* against good and evil, which

are inherent in oneself. Since the word *nafs* refers to every single person in the universe as well as mankind's capacity to understand God, the Creator, it is quite intriguing to note how the human spiritual self is juxtaposed with material spiritualism, not only to lay bare the agentic capacity that resides beyond the human, but also to connect human and non-human by virtue of quantum entanglement. The self (soul) in these verses is compared to the light of celestial luminous bodies because the self can only be understood in relation to these things, something which Sayyid Rami Al Rifai describes as "the subatomic nature of Man and its deeper connection with the subatomic fields that exist in the Universe". According to Al Rifai, some translators have translated this verse as "By the Soul, and the proportion and order given to it" (Al Rifai 2016, p. 22-23), which suggests the ways in which the subatomic world influences the human character through the soul because "the spirit is descended from a celestial origin that it is composed of luminous, translucent bodies. The spirit, being an extract of the heavens/ celestial worlds that are penetrated by God's light, derives its quiddity, or attributes of indissolubility and unity, from that luminous substance." Similarly, Tariq Jaffar, drawing on al-Razi's oeuvre, points out that the soul can be imagined as consisting of "subtle, celestial, luminous bodies from the substance of the nature of the sun's light, and that they are not receptive of dissolution or alteration, and that they do not admit of separation or breaking apart" (Jaffar 2014, p. 109-111). Therefore, *nafs*, which is one of the most significant concepts in the Quran in terms of understanding the divine message and the relation between man and God, is described in terms of fuzzy boundaries of the actions of light and subatomic particles. Moreover, the way the entire universe and cosmic phenomena work successfully on the principle of proportion, a similar pattern or principle of proportion defines human *nafs*. The two contrasting and contradictory characteristics in oneself/ one's being are highlighted thus: "That man is equally liable to rise to great spiritual heights as to fall into utter immorality is an essential characteristic of human nature itself" (Asad 1980, p. 94). Here, the word *ilham* derives from *lahm* which means to "swallow", though the very basic meaning of the word *ilham* is Allah inspiring man with some ideas unconsciously. The word conveys both meanings. Allah has endowed man with consciousness of good and evil and at the same time with an ability to distinguish between the two naturally. This sense of discrimination should help him to shun and devour evil in the turmoil of his earthly existence and follow what is good. This concept of pairing of contradictory things is not unique in this surah. *Surah al Balad* (90:10) also refers to this paradox:

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Similarly, in surah Dahr Allah says: (7:36)

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In fact, the purpose of placing these binary oppositions side-by-side in a harmonious and musical structure is to illustrate how perfection has been granted to the self so as to balance its opposite tendencies. The idea of verse 7 can now be related to the previous six verses. Though the sun and the moon, sky and earth, day and night are serving the same universe, they are contrary in their effects and results. And this difference is so evident that “even a most foolish person cannot possibly say that the day’s being day or the night’s being night does not make any difference” (Abul A’La Maududi 1999 p. 378). Likewise, *fujur* and *taqwa* cannot be regarded as the same despite the fact that they are inhabitants of the same abode.

However, surprisingly, man is thrust into a paradoxical situation where he is asked to “increase his higher *nafs* [self] by reducing the energy and gratification of the lower *nafs*” (Haeri 1993, p.201). The verse is quintessential in its brevity but the meaning embedded in it is evident: to increase fearful awareness by reducing transgression. The next two verses are again interesting from a structural and thematic point of view. The structure is pronouncedly balanced and parallel, but the theme is paradoxical:

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9. He who purifies it will prosper;

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10. And he who suppresses it will be ruined.

At this point we are compelled to contemplate the reason for drawing a parallel between *nafs* and the story of Thamud, as is evident in the following verses:

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11 The Thamud (people) rejected (their prophet) through their inordinate wrong-doing;

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12 Behold the most wicked Man among them was deputed (for impiety);

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13. But the apostle of Allah said to them: “It is a Shecamel of Allah! and (bar her not from) having her drink!”;

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14 Then they rejected him (as a false prophet) and they hamstrung her. So their Lord on account of their crime obliterated their traces and made them equal (in destruction high and low)!

This human-animal entanglement in the last three verses is important for two reasons: First, the verse juxtaposes *nafs* with the story of Thamud because of the way Allah has balanced and evened out the *nafs*, and the creation of the *nafs* in balance and harmony brings harmony in the society. It is precisely the disregard and rebellion (*tughyaan*) inside their *nafs* which compelled them to deny Allah’s message; this is arguably considered the worst example of *nafs* (for creating disorder in the society), which led to the destruction of the people of Thamud. Second, it is interesting to see how *Surah al Shams* heralded what Patricia Cox Miller now calls “a rhetoric of cosmic resemblance, connection, harmony, and affinity that does not debase animals but includes them . . . in the material and spiritual enchainments that are the created order” (Miller 2018, 1994). Miller’s point corroborates my stance in this paper in that, by using animals, in this case a she-camel, this allows an understanding of divinity as composite, capable of distributing its agency into a diverse constellation of (culturally/ religion-specific) indexes. In so doing, the *Surah al-Shams* validates the agency of animals in the world we inhabit and rebuts the anthropocentric approach to and assumed agency of humans to non-human-cultural phenomena. While emphasising this idea of decentralised agency, the *Surah al-Shams* helps us understand how animals, landscapes and other natural and cosmic objects inform, impact on and transform mankind’s perception of the world they live in.

Therefore, the *Surah al-Shams* quintessentially frames the notion of distributive agency by featuring material objects and animals that are shown to have referential qualities alluding to a number of aspects or roles of the divinity in the proper functioning of life and the spirit/ soul on earth. The first seven verses of *al-Shams* refer to objects in universal phenomena which encompass a great truth about the Creator as well as creation. The celestial bodies enable cognitive recognition by drawing our attention to an intermingling of agencies, nature and forces that construct a material ‘mesh’ of meanings, properties and processes, in which the human and more than human are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces, which are then foregrounded through these bodies’ link with the *nafs* and the story of Thamud

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