

Book Reviews

Il Kwang Sung, *Mamluks in the Modern Egyptian Mind: Changing the Memory of the Mamluks, 1919–1952* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). Pp. viii, 239.

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Il Kwang Sung wrote a fascinating work. Written in a lucid and accessible style, and grounded in a rich and interdisciplinary archive, Sung's work explores the ways in which modern Egyptians imagined the Mamluk past before the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser (Jamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir) to power. The book convincingly argues that there was no one, stable, memory of the Mamluk Sultanate and the Mamluks in Ottoman Egypt. Rather, different groups of politicians, intellectuals, and writers presented their own versions of the Mamluks in Egypt.

Sung accentuates the need to move beyond binary notions of Egyptian historiography which assumes that Egyptian historians normally praised Arab rulers who governed Egypt and Arabized rulers like Saladin, while denouncing most non-Arab rulers as responsible for Egypt's decline before the modern era. Sung acknowledges that both intellectuals who were nostalgic for Ottoman imperial unity, and their rivals, writers affiliated with the Egyptian royal household, for whom modern Egyptian history started with Muḥammad 'Alī, downplayed Egypt's Mamluk past. And yet, Sung demonstrates persuasively that many Egyptian historians and intellectuals wrote works of fiction and nonfiction in which the Mamluk rulers featured as national icons and as men (and one woman) whose histories conveyed important historical lessons for modern Egyptians.

The work is theoretically sophisticated, as Sung seeks to intervene in conversations about history-writing and memory formation. In the Egyptian context, the book is a useful addition to the thoughtful works by Yoav Di-Capua, J. A. Crabbs, Marilyn Booth, and Stephen Sheehi that examined the ways in which historians and writers of historical fiction appropriated the Egyptian past in relation to such modern themes as nationalism, abolition of slavery and the harem system, racial theories, forms of political governance, and modern forms of knowledge. Sung likewise pays much heed to works in the field of memory studies and collective memory formation (Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and in the Egyptian context, Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski). These theoreticians underlined the ways in which nations and nationalists construct notions of shared memories through printed materials, like history textbooks, and physical objects, like public monuments.

Sung's complex theoretical framing allows him to explore various memory sites (to use Nora's expression); his book takes us to national projects, such as



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projects sponsored by the royal place aimed at producing books exploring Egypt's history, and state-produced history textbooks, in which the history of the Mamluks was mediated to educated individuals and high-school students. However, Sung also believes in the ability of subjects to produce their own vernacular memories, and for this reason he is interested also in readings of the Mamluk past in newspapers, plays, and historical novels. He illustrates how these Egyptian authors both challenged and adopted national narratives current in the state production. Furthermore, his analysis explains how knowledge produced by professional historians like François Charles-Roux, Gabriel Hanotaux, and Gaston Wiet, whose works were published in Egypt, finds its way to school textbooks and newspaper articles.

Sung is interested in understanding what motivated modern nationalists to write about, and, at times, celebrate, a period when Egypt was controlled by individuals who arrived from other lands and who spoke a different language than Arabic. Within this context, he identifies different forms of Egyptian nationalism. A dominant national Egyptian ideology at the time accentuated territoriality, and highlighted Egypt's unique historical, sociological, and cultural features, from the days of the Pharaohs to the present; such writes coined concepts like "Egyptian literature" (*al-adab al-miṣri*) which referred to Egyptian history-writing, fiction, and other forms of narrative prose within this national framework. This national view was increasingly challenged by Pan-Arab and Pan-Islamic nationalism[s] which linked Egypt's past to larger Arab and Muslim imperial frameworks and underscored the significance of transregional and transnational political structures. Consequently, each nationalist camp appropriated Mamluk history to tell different tales about the past in order to serve their goals in the present. Thus, for the territorial nationalist camp the Mamluk era represented a time when the Egyptian state flourished, continuing its glory from antiquity, while their rivals saw it as a manifestation of the glorious Islamic past in which Muslim rulers defeated Mongols and Crusaders and in which Islamic culture thrived. Sung, nonetheless, also identifies some common narratives which shift between camps. All writers were somewhat obsessed with Shajarat al-Durr, Baybars, and the fall of the sultanate. The stories of the first female sultana, of a brave warrior who defeated the Mongols, and of a host of tragic historical characters facing their inevitable demise in the years 1516–17, were too rich to give up, and therefore authors of different political views retold their stories in varying shapes and forms.

A wonderful aspect of the book is its exploration of historical novels. Sung discovered a wide range of Egyptian novels dedicated to the Mamluk era, and he presents interesting close readings of several. Those include: Muḥammad Sa'īd al-'Aryān's *Alá Bāb Zuwaylah* ("On Zuwaylah Gate") and his *Shajarat al-Durr*; Jūrjī Zaydān's *Shajarat al-Durr* and *Istibdād al-Mamālīk* ("The Tyranny of the Mam-



luks”); Muḥammad Farīd Abū Ḥadīd’s *Ibnat al-Mamlūk* (“The Mamluk’s Daughter”); and Aḥmad Shawqī’s play *Riwāyat ‘Alī Bey al-Kabīr aw Dawlat al-Mamālīk* (“The Story of ‘Alī Bey al-Kabīr or the Mamluk Dynasty”). These texts, especially the ones by Zaydān, were extremely popular in modern Egypt. Just as today medieval fantasies and historical dramas captivate the imagination of contemporary audiences, the intrigues, the backstabbing, and gendered politics that accompanied the rise of the Mamluks to power greatly appealed to Egyptian audiences in the interwar period. In most of these narratives, the Bahri Mamluks, such as Baybars, Quṭuz, and Shajarat al-Durr, became Egyptian national heroes. Sung clarifies that the novels were not independent of their surrounding milieus. A current narrative in the public sphere was that both the Circassian era and the Ottoman eras were marked by despotism and subjugation. The novels convey these narratives, although the search for positive heroes produces a great interest in ‘Alī Bey al-Kabīr, who is celebrated as an Egyptian hero. The fact that a great number of these national heroes did not see themselves as Egyptians mattered little to these novelists.

Nationalism, however, was only one theme, amongst many, which occupied Egyptian Mamlukomania. *Mamluks in the Modern Egyptian Mind* underscores the many ways in which historians, novelists, and journalists evoked the Mamluk past in the service of a wide range of contemporary concerns. The anticolonial struggle was serviced by narratives celebrating victories over the Mongols and the Crusaders. Monarchists saw the successful Mamluk rulers as precursors to the dynasty of Muḥammad ‘Alī. Most importantly, narratives about Mamluk rulers epitomized political allegories. When denouncing Mamluk rulers in Ottoman Egypt, Egyptian authors aimed to illustrate to modern Egyptians that a political system based on tyrannical oppression leads to decline of state and society (a theme that became globally important in the 1930s). Similarly, during this period, some Egyptian thinkers debated whether the Egyptians themselves were Arabs or not; at times, proponents of territorial nationalism argued they were not. Sung examines the ways in which these racial discourses related to the history of the Mamluks. Liberal thinkers believed that Egyptian non-Arabs, including the Mamluks, *became* Egyptians by staying in Egypt and integrating into Egyptian culture and society. Sung, moreover, is able to illustrate that these conflicting national narratives were taken *ad absurdum*. In this regard, the most poignant example is that of secular thinker Salāmah Mūsá. The latter believed in Egyptian territorial nationalism; his passionate convictions led him to argue that the Egyptians were not Arabs, but a mix of races. The racial integration of the non-Arab Mamluks into Egyptian society helped Mūsá to support the claim that Egyptians were not Arabs and to emphasize the non-Semitic racial features of modern Egyptians. At the same time, to Mūsá, a great champion of Western culture, the Mamluks



epitomized oppression, autocracy, and tyranny, qualities he associated with the East. He thus wanted them to play no role in Egyptian history and rejected their usefulness as a historical model. To be an Egyptian nationalist, in other words, Mūsá had to accept and reject the Mamluks at the same time.

I would have liked Sung to provide more details about the historical representations of Arab historical figures from the Mamluk period; studying the ways in which modern Egyptians wrote about Ibn Taymīyah or Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī could have complicated the story presented in the book. More attention to the spatial dimensions of this story (for example, the ways in which the new Egyptian state preserved Mamluk archeological sites) could have been of interest. But in general, this is a compelling and interesting read. Historians of the Mamluk era will be interested to see how the histories they know so well were utilized in modern period. Historians of the modern Middle East will find here much reflection on the manners in which modernity produces historical memories through its print cultures. It might be useful to teach portions from this book not only in classes on modern Middle Eastern history but also in ones on medieval and early modern Egyptian and Islamic history, perhaps taught with one of the novels Sung discusses (*Zaydān's Shajarat al-Durr* is now available in a beautiful English translation by Samah Selim). This could teach students the ways in which modern Egyptians revisited the histories discussed in their classes. It could also be an effective tool against orientalism, reminding our students, who are debating fervently gender and power relations in shows like *Game of Thrones*, that fellow students, in interwar Egypt, have done the same, as they debated what lessons they might learn from the tales of Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī or 'Alī Bey al-Kabīr.

