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″Mediators and Wanderers″: Ulrich Haarmann and Mamluk Studies

The recent and untimely passing of Ulrich Haarmann, Director for Modern Oriental Studies at the University of Berlin, has not only deprived *Islamwissenschaft* of one of its greatest modern influences but the field of Mamluk Studies of one of its most important Continental exponents. For while the corpus of Haarmann′s scholarship was predictably wide-ranging in the time-honored Orientalist tradition, his reputation rested primarily on the bedrock of his published dissertation on early Mamluk historiography.[1] Indeed, his many subsequent contributions to the general study of Mamluk civilization may be said to have characterized the main thrust of his scholastic career. Haarmann felt that a ″deeper understanding″ of the general ″Mamluk phenomenon″ could be achieved by studying particularly the interrelationship of Mamluks and non-Mamluks. However, he believed that it was ″[e]qually critical″ to analyze the ″relationship between Mamluk fathers and their non-Mamluk descendants, the so-called *awlād al-nās*. . . .″[2] To that end, Haarmann insinuated in the late 1980s that one of his primary ambitions as an historian was to produce ultimately a ″comprehensive study of [the] military, economic, and cultural standing . . . from 1250 to 1517″ of this vital but little-understood stratum of medieval Syro-Egyptian society.[3] A culturally as well as ethnically hybridized group, the *awlād al-nās* fulfilled a crucial social function as ″mediators and wanderers between the foreign [Turco-Circassian] elite and the local Arabic-speaking population of Egypt and Syria.″[4]

That Haarmann, a philologist by training, should take such a keen interest in culture is unsurprising. Since the early nineteenth century, language and culture have been closely intertwined in the German *wissenschaftlich* tradition, especially in the works of such lights as Johann Gottfried von Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt,

Jacob Grimm, and Franz Bopp. Indeed, theoretical advances in historical linguistics have often foreshadowed the development of related ideas in social and cultural anthropology.[5] Thus, while Haarmann praised the philologist Helmut Ritter, best known perhaps for his association with *Bibliotheca Islamica*, as ″the most important German Orientalist of our century,″ he also acknowledged the singular achievement of Carl Heinrich Becker in introducing critical method into the study of Islamic history.[6] One-time Prussian Minister of Culture and a founding father of *Der Islam,* Becker argued that Islamic cultural systems were capable of producing dynamic socioeconomic change. His adaptation of the idea of ″cultural circles″—the grouping of related cultural traits derived from the *Kulturkreis* theory prominent in contemporary *mitteleuropäisch* ethnology and anthropogeography—seems to have been particularly revelatory to Haarmann, for whom *Sozialgeschichte* seems to have been largely the product of *Kultur* anyway. Certainly, his belief in a pre-logical concept like the *kollektiv Bewusstsein der Zeit* as a source of historical change invokes the same *Volksgeist* of the *Kulturkreis*—the fundamental psychic principle shaping the traits of the ″cultural circle.″[7] Indeed, Haarmann′s cataloging of the various traits of the *awlād al-nās* could be interpreted as an effort at decoding their *Weltanschauung,* another configurative concept of Austro-German culture-area theory.[8]

Empowered by the synergistic relationship between *Philiologie* and *Kulturgeschichte,* Haarmann came to notice in Mamluk historical texts how a relatively small, discrete social group—*awlād al-nās*—occupied a unique and strategic nexus in Mamluk civilization, bridging the cultural interstices between the alien-extracted *umarā'* (their own fathers) and the indigenous ulama (their colleague/competitors). The lack of meaningful scholarship about these people, he believed, was the outcome chiefly of an historiographical bottleneck created initially in the medieval period by ″non-Mamluk scholars″ attempting to communicate what they believed was the cultural irrelevance of the *nās* and *awlād al-nās*. Haarmann sought actively to counteract the ″bias″ he detected in this discursive, ulama-authored literature by drawing attention to the importance of more objective archival materials.[9]

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[5]Alan Barnard, *History and Theory in Anthropology* (Cambridge, 2000), 48.

[6]Haarmann, ″L′orientalisme allemand,″ *MARS: Le Monde Arabe dans la Recherche Scientifique/The Arab World in Scientific Research/Al-'Ālam al-'Arabī fī al-Baḥth al-'Ilmī* 4 (1994): 75.

[7]Haarmann, ″Einleitung,″ in *Geschichte der arabischen Welt*, ed. Ulrich Haarmann (Munich, 1987), 10.

[8]Barnard, *History and Theory,* 50–51.

[9]Haarmann, ″Arabic in Speech,″ 81.

The endowment deed *(waqfīyah),* for instance, was not only an important—and largely untapped—source for understanding the socioeconomic foundations of cultural institutions in fourteenth and fifteenth century Syro-Egypt but, because it was ″an intrinsically legal genre of writing″ allowed ″no space for manipulation by a scholar. . . .″ They served, moreover, as ″a precious correlate to the often biased reports on academic life and strife found in contemporary . . . literature.″ The deeds studied by Haarmann revealed in particular that while the madrasah, which provided state-sponsored stipends for sufis, served as a physical nexus ″between popular and academic religious life in the time of Barqūq,″ it also segregated members of *awlād al-nās* from participating directly in the cultural life within its precincts.[10] Haarmann drew attention as well to library inventories as portals into the contemporary intellectual and cultural life not only of ulama but also the Mamluks (and presumably their dependents), for whom ″[b]ook-collecting was an expensive yet widespread hobby.″ One such inventory, of the library of a fourteenth-century Jerusalem shaykh, demonstrated significant holdings in sufi-oriented materials but little interest in the very historical literature in which Haarmann himself detected so much bias against the *nās* and *awlād al-nās* .[11]

Despite Haarmann′s best pedagogical efforts, these non-Mamluk progeny have fallen by the scholastic wayside. Largely ignored by David Ayalon, except as military reservists, then ″underestimated″ by Ira Lapidus in terms of their social and cultural significance in Mamluk urban and court life, the *awlād al-nās* experienced not transparency but invisibility as subject matter during the crucial formative years of the field.[12] There has been subsequently little remediation. Even now, an extemporaneous cross-cutting of scholarship on Mamluk administrative, intellectual, socioeconomic, and military subjects reveals few traces of their historical passage. Haarmann′s study of the *awlād al-nās* stands, therefore, as the *ne plus ultra;* of sad necessity, it will remain incomplete. Still, his contributions to date, particularly the several published revisions of a seminal article that achieved final form only in 1998, provide vital insights into the sociocultural processes of this otherwise unheralded group.[13]

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[10]Haarmann, ″Mamluk Endowment Deeds as a Source for the History of Education in Late Medieval Egypt,″ *Al-Abḥāth* 28 (1980): 35–38.

[11]Haarmann, ″Arabic in Speech,″ 93; idem, ″The Library of a Fourteenth Century Jerusalem Scholar,″ *Der Islam* 61 (1984): 327–33.

[12]Haarmann, ″Arabic in Speech,″ 83, n. 5; 105, n. 114.

[13]The article began in 1977 as a conference paper [″Mamluks and *awlād al-nās* in the intellectual life of fourteenth century Egypt and Syria″] delivered at the Seventh Oxford-Pennsylvania History Symposium in Oxford. After two published revisions (1988 and 1995) it achieved its final incarnation as ″Joseph′s law—the careers and activities of Mamluk descendants before the Ottoman Conquest of Egypt,″ in *The Mamluks in Egyptian politics and society*, ed. Thomas Philipp and Ulrich

Indeed, Haarmann′s self-avowed goal was to detect the ″patterning of . . . non-Mamluk cultural activities.″[14] Whereas their Mamluk fathers had undergone a process of acculturation, these non-Mamluk offspring—the *awlād al-nās*—had had a kind of intercultural experience, wandering between the ″two heterogeneous traditions″ represented by the *umarā*' and ulama. Though not an anthropologist per se, Haarmann was nevertheless seeking to understand the cultural role of one of the chief carriers of social process in the ″highly polarized″ environment of late medieval Syro-Egypt. The *awlād al-nās* functioned primarily as interlocutors *(Dolmetschern)* between the bias of the Arabic-speaking ulama and the parochialism of the Turkish-speaking *umarā*', their placement at the social ″fulcrum″ symbolized by the heraldic emblem of the pen-box. All cultures, of course, undergo a certain degree of internal differentiation. But the *awlād al-nās* appear to have been something more than just culturally different. Haarmann at times gives an impression almost of alienation. For a group trapped eternally between the ″barracks″ *(Kasernen)* and the ″mosque colleges″ *(Moscheehochschulen)* this is not altogether surprising. Haarmann did not believe, however, that the *awlād al-nās* were ″caught helplessly″ between the two cultural camps. He felt that despite the informality of their social status, they at least ″recognized their potential of surviving and indeed thriving as *born . . . mediators.″* Still, their *Mittlerstellung* could not have been a comfortable cultural space to inhabit.[15]

Overshadowing their medial position were of course the ulama, who flatly ″declared culture and science their own proper domain.″ Because of such absolutist claims to communicative competence the ulama had little incentive to understand the culturally ″other″ in Mamluk society. Even the appearance of Arabic-Qibjaq glossaries and Turkish grammars in early fourteenth-century Syro-Egypt, which Haarmann considered an important potential breakthrough in intercultural *Kommunikation,* did little to stimulate ulama interest in the literary sources of the *Türkentum,* which in addition to their (con)fusion of *Faktum* and *Legende* were viewed as entirely too pagan to be incorporated into the ″hallowed genre of Islamic writing.″ Any possible ″intercultural perspective″ the ulama might have developed naturally ″was stifled by various self-imposed dogmatic restrictions.″[16] These very same ulama, however, were not so shy about generating their own

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Haarmann, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge, 1998): 55–84.

[14]Haarmann, ″Arabic in Speech,″:82.

[15]Ibid., 83; idem, ″Väter und Söhne im Herrschaftssystem der Mamluken,″ *Berliner Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft e.V-Jahrbuch* (1995): 222.

[16]Haarmann, ″Alṭun H̱ān und Čingiz H̱ān bei den ägyptischen Mamluken,″ *Der Islam* 51 (1974): 1–36; idem, ″Arabic in Speech,″ 84, 85.

vehemently anti-Turkish propaganda, accelerating the historical development of ″the traditional stereotype of the Turkish barbarian . . . not only without culture but by their very nature . . . excluded from it.″[17] Neither were they above passing windy judgments even about the use of some of the Turks′ own military equipment. Ulama authors debated whether the preference shown by the Turks for the use of the standard, if foreign, Persian bow constituted unacceptable innovation. But, as this bow helped the Mamluks guarantee the integrity of the *ummah,* it finally passed muster by the ulama.[18]

Haarmann seems to suggest that neither the Mamluks nor their progeny, despite some genuine intellectual capacity, ever succeeded in engendering a more cosmopolitan sensitivity toward their cultural diversity. Language, both written and spoken, created not cultural unity but cultural apartheid within late medieval Syro-Egyptian society. The *awlād al-nās,* whose first language after all was Arabic rather than Turkish, seemed unable to convert their linguistic competence into communicative competence. Though ethnic hybrids themselves with ″unencumbered access . . . and membership rights in . . . the military and civil worlds,″ they failed to negotiate any hybridized cultural rules favoring their communicative equality. What cultural freedom they already enjoyed—to use ″exotic materials without restraint″ in their writings—they failed for the most part to exploit. The ″split identity″ exemplified by the Egyptian chronicler and *walad al-nās* Ibn Aybak al-Dawādārī was, Haarmann regretted, an all-too-rare demonstration of ″the latitudes of eccentricity and independence of mind which the *awlād al-nās* could enjoy . . . if only they were ready to use it.″ [19]

That the monologic ulama found the cultural aspirations of the *nās* and *awlād al-nās* so insubordinate reflects not so much chronic miscommunication or existential crisis as the contrived distortion of cultural politics. Yet, even in an atmosphere of ″petrified conservatism,″ those cultural politics occasionally folded back on themselves. Amidst the general subsidence of intellectual life in fifteenth century Syro-Egypt, Haarmann detected some subtle changes in the normal ″xenophobic″ discourse of the ulama. For instance, the alim Muhibb al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Khalīl, better known as Abū Ḥāmid, came to manifest an ″ambivalent attitude″ in his political writings about the culturally ″other″ Turco-Circassians. While initially critical of their vanity, ignorance, and un-shari'ah-like tendencies, he decided ultimately that the Mamluks were not total boors. It was instead the

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[17]Haarmann, ″Ideology and History: Identity and Alterity: The Arab Image of the Turk from the 'Abbasids to Modern Egypt,″ *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20 (1988): 183.

[18]Haarmann, ″The late triumph of the Persian bow: critical voices on the Mamluk monopoly on weaponry,″ in *The Mamluks in Egyptian politics and society*, 185–86.

[19]Haarmann, ″Arabic in Speech,″ 101, 110–12.

ulama who were actually ″intolerably self-righteous and pernicious.″ Ergo, Abū Ḥāmid′s famous epithet: ″ẓulm al-turk wa-lā ‘adl al-‘arab.″ His ″vacillation between denigration and adoration″ typified for Haarmann ″the profound instability″ which existed in relations between the *umarā'* and ulama. The cultural dichotomy reflected in Abū Ḥāmid′s writings condemned him, like any *walad al-nās,* to the ″no-man′s land″ between the ″fortified trenches″ occupied by the *umarā',* on the one hand, and the ulama, on the other.[20]

Such cultural ambivalence resided not only among contemporary Arab ulama but also among some of their Persian and Maghribi colleagues. The Shafi‘i jurist and theologian Faẓl Allāh ibn Rūzbihān Khunjī Iṣfahānī, for instance, though a foreign alim was nevertheless a ″sensitive″ observer of late Mamluk civilization. While not uncritical of all he saw, the erudite Khunjī clearly expressed at times ″pro-Mamluk sentiment,″ praising them not only for their physical defense of Islam but also its cultural support in what he considered to be its true ″homeland″ *(bayẓat al-Islām).* In fact, Haarmann believed that Khunjī′s masterpiece, the *Tārīkh-i ‘Ālam Ārā-yi Amīnī,* was composed in part to resolve the author′s cultural ambivalence, his ″oscillating and contradictory judgments,″ about Mamluk civilization.[21] The legendary Maghribi alim, Ibn Khaldūn, viewed the Turkish elite of the Mashriq from his own historicist perspective as a natural stage in the development of Arabo-Islamic history, praising them for their combination of true belief and nomadic virtues.[22]

While the Mamluks themselves possessed a certain *Kollektivverhalten,* it is unclear what kind of *Kaste* their offspring formed. Indeed, Haarmann asked in 1988 ″[t]o what degree did [the *awlād al-nās*] form at all a clearly definable separate group . . . ?″[23] A decade later he concluded that because of their ″informal″ social status between two more traditional corporate groups, the *awlād al-nās* lacked any ″tangible collective identity . . . or resulting group solidarity.″[24] Yet, there are other instances when he thought of them as relatively ″well consolidated,″ a ″corporate body,″ even briefly a ″subsidiary″ *Militararistokratie.*[25] In fact, they

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[20]Haarmann, ″′Rather the Injustice of the Turks than the Righteousness of the Arabs′—Changing *‘Ulamā'* Attitudes Towards Mamluk Rule in the Late Fifteenth Century,″ *Studia Islamica* 68 (1988).

[21]Haarmann, ″Yeomanly Arrogance and Righteous Rule: Faẓl Allāh ibn Rūzbihān Khunjī and the Mamluks of Egypt,″ in *Iran and Iranian Studies: Essays in Honor of Iraj Afshar*, ed. Kambiz Eslami (Princeton, 1998): 109–24.

[22]Haarmann, ″Ideology and History,″ 182.

[23]Haarmann, ″Arabic in Speech," 104.

[24]Haarmann, ″Joseph′s law,″ 83.

[25]Ibid., 66, 77; idem, ″The Sons of Mamluks as Fief-holders in Late Medieval Egypt,″ in *Land Tenure and Social Transformation in the Middle East*, ed. Tarif Khalidi (Beirut, 1984), 143.

probably did not constitute a corporate but rather a social group. Both recruited from birth, had limits to membership, internal structure, common purpose, and possessed a certain longevity. The principal difference lay, however, in perpetuity. The *umarā'* and ulama, because they spanned virtually the whole of Islamic history, are examples of corporate groups. The *awlād al-nās* appear by comparison to have been a much shorter-lived phenomenon, in short, a social group. Even Haarmann had trouble identifying and dating them securely.[26]

While the *awlād al-nās* shared little social solidarity with their ulama colleagues, they did enjoy a certain economic solidarity with their *umarā'* fathers. As internal distributions of *iqṭā'* to both the royal and non-royal *awlād al-nās* declined in the late fourteenth century, forcing a corresponding economic collapse of their social power, they relied more on their fathers′ establishment of so-called family *awqāf* to support them. While this conversion of public, often *iqṭā'*, land first into private property and then into tax-exempt charitable institutions deprived the military of much of its material base, it ″fitted perfectly the needs of Mamluk fathers and their sons.″ It also had the effect at least in medieval Cairo of creating an unexpected but ″important link″ among the Mamluks, their non-Mamluk offspring, and local learned civilians. In the real estate business servicing this conversion of private estates into pious foundations, the *awlād al-nās* may have taken the opportunity to expand their definition of interlocutor to include ″broker.″[27]

How did the fathers of the *awlād al-nās* figure into their sons *Weltanshauung*? Haarmann believed that while they were probably more consciously affected by the ill-will *(Ressentiment)* of local civilians, many turned intentionally toward the civilian world, eager to eschew ″a world smelling of horses, sweat and weaponry.″[28] This was probably easier to do in Syria than Egypt, Haarmann thought, given the gravitational pull of the ″parental Turkish heritage″ exerted by the court in Cairo and the relatively more developed social power of the Syrian ulama.[29] Some went so far as to disavow their fathers′ Hanafi ″Turkish″ *madhhab,* though they may have been drawn back together again by their mutual attraction to sufism.[30] Did disaffected *awlād al-nās* ever embrace the traditional Arabo-Islamic cultural beliefs in individual honor, freedom, and egalitarianism that contradicted the values of their fathers′ slave/client subculture?

Sadly, Haarmann′s coda to his own study of the *awlād al-nās* seems unnecessarily pessimistic—that ″the ′culture′ of the Mamluks will remain largely inaccessible

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[26]Haarmann, ″Sons of Mamluks,″ 147; idem, ″Joseph′s law,″ 61.

[27]Haarmann, ″Joseph′s law,″ 71–76; idem, ″Sons of Mamluks,″ 161.

[28]Haarmann, ″Väter und Söhne,″ 224; idem, ″Joseph′s law,″ 78.

[29]Haarmann, ″Arabic in Speech,″ 110.

[30]Haarmann, ″Joseph′s law,″ 78–79.

and elusive to us″ because of scholarly bias in the primary sources.[31] Perhaps. But Haarmann′s thoughtful decoding of those ″mediators and wanderers″ has already suggested some deeper implications not only about the long-range intelligibility of that ″culture″ but about the constant value of his own scholarship. He makes us see, foremost, that the structure of Mamluk society was epiphenomenal, an unintended consequence of the intersubjective struggle in late medieval Syro-Egypt to define and redefine communicative competence among the *nās, awlād al-nās,* and ulama. Though confronted by both cultural options—e.g., exploiting ″exotic materials″—and social circumscriptions—e.g., having Turkish mothers—the *awlād al-nās* were clearly not functionalist automata but rather interactionist strategizers. Haarmann was not perhaps as self-conscious a social theorist as, say, Ira Lapidus, but his instinctive interactionism stands up well against Lapidus′s elaborated structural-functionalism. Haarmann′s interest in interpreting cultural patterns rather than explaining social laws, his close collaboration of cultural anthropology and history, his focus on the dynamic process of negotiating cultural meaning rather than on the customary stasis of maintaining social structure all serve to mark his primary intellectual contribution as such.

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[31]Haarmann, ″Arabic in Speech,″ 85.