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Popular Culture under the Mamluks: A Historiographical Survey

There is something apparently appealing about the topic of popular culture. Perhaps the appeal lies in the riotous nature of the festivals in which popular culture was frequently expressed. The medieval ulama critics who chose to address popular religious and cultic practices of which they disapproved described them in almost rapturous detail, dwelling at sometimes astounding length on transvestitism, games of sexual inversion, bacchanalia—of all of which, of course, they disapproved. Their disapproval may or may not be shared by contemporary historians, but we do seem to love to dwell on it. This is not, perhaps, surprising. What early twenty-first-century historian, having just plowed his or her way through one of those endless passages in the chronicles about the price of bread, or about the relative value of one copper coin or another, or about which deputy qadi resigned his office and was replaced by another—what twenty-first century-historian could fail to be intrigued by the violent expostulation of Ibn al-Ḥājj against the muleteers who helped guide female visitors to the Qarāfah around the tombs, furtively leading them to abandoned cells and dark corners on moonlit nights, chatting them up in a place which should inspire feelings of religious awe and thoughts of eternal damnation, and sliding their mischievous hands over the thighs of the unsuspecting—or perhaps the all-too-suspecting—women?¹

Whatever the reason, popular culture has, directly or indirectly, been the subject of much research in recent years.² It should be acknowledged at the outset that cultural historians of the Mamluk period owe a great deal to those social historians who have described the social structures of medieval Egypt and Syria over the last four decades. The publication of Ira Lapidus' study of *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* was a turning point for everyone working in the field of medieval Islamic social and cultural history, but it has been supplemented by important works such as Louis Pouzet's book on religious life in Damascus, Jean-Claude Garcin's important study of a provincial Egyptian town, and Carl Petry's analysis of the *Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages*.³ These works provide the

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¹Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal al-Shar' al-Sharīf* (Cairo, 1929), 1:267–68.

²One of the first significant works was that of Barbara Langner, *Untersuchungen zur historischen Volkskunde Ägyptens nach mamlukischen Quellen* (Berlin, 1983).

³Ira Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA, 1967); Louis Pouzet, *Damas au VIIe/XIIIe siècle: vie et structures religieuses d'une métropole islamique* (Beirut, 1988);



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necessary foundation for any analytical investigation of popular culture in the period. In particular, they have provided us with a clear understanding of the character of the ulama and their authority. This is especially important, both because the ulama will figure prominently as arbiters of cultural practices, and also because their peculiar function in Islamic societies is one of the most important features distinguishing those societies from, say, those of medieval Europe. Special mention should also be made of what appears to be a distinctive sub-topic of the field of Mamluk social history: namely, the character and function of crowds in Mamluk society. Again, Ira Lapidus initiated this line of research, but it has been continued in more focused studies by others.⁴ What emerges from these studies is a view of crowds consisting of ad hoc assemblages of common people articulating specific grievances against ruling authorities, very often the market inspector. Significantly, however, these crowds seem to have lacked any propensity to embrace a political vision completely dismissive of the existing order—on the contrary, they occasionally expressed a rather conservative support for the legitimacy of the status quo. That nuanced relationship between the common people and the Mamluk authorities, with crowds willing to express frustration on particular issues but reluctant to pose a structural challenge to existing patterns of authority, may foreshadow a similar complexity in the character of popular culture.

Despite the attention the topic has received in recent years, the historian must first consider the question: “Does popular culture exist?” The question is not an idle one, particularly if the historian of the Near East hopes to participate in the broader historiographical discourse that until now has taken place largely among European historians. The issue, of course, is not whether the “people,” that is, social groups beyond a social or cultural elite, had “culture.” Rather, the central issue might be phrased this way: is there a stratum of cultural activity and production that is self-consciously distinct from that of the elite, and which is produced independently from, or even in opposition to, elite culture?⁵

For all that historians of the Near East, to overcome our deeply-rooted sense of methodological inferiority, might wish to meet the challenge of European historians on their own rarefied turf, it is important to recognize the distinctiveness

Jean-Claude Garcin, *Un centre musulman de la Haute-Égypte médiévale, Qūṣ* (Cairo, 1976); Carl Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1981).

⁴Boaz Shoshan, “Grain Riots and the ‘Moral Economy’: Cairo, 1350–1517,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 10 (1979–80): 459–78; James Grehan, “Street Violence and Social Imagination in Late-Mamluk and Ottoman Damascus (ca. 1500–1800),” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35 (2003): 215–36.

⁵For a review of the literature in European history, see Natalie Zemon Davis, “From ‘Popular Religion’ to Religious Culture,” in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. Steven Ozment (St. Louis, 1982), 321–41.



of Islamic societies. They are structured differently than, say, European societies, and consequently questions about cultural transmission and the social frameworks that make that transmission possible will necessarily be different, as will the character of the sources available to the historian. A festival such as that of Nawrūz, celebrated by medieval Egyptians apparently with some abandon despite the disapproval of various religious and secular authorities, displays plenty of parallels to the saturnalia and carnivals of misrule that colored the late medieval and early modern European scene; but noting the parallels takes us only part of the way down the road of understanding the specific historical significance of the festival.⁶ This is a point which, in a slightly different context, Michael Chamberlain made convincingly in his excellent book on *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus* in the late Ayyubid and early Mamluk period.⁷ It would be delightful to find an Islamic Montaigne, a French village whose inhabitants' controversial religious beliefs and practices Emmanuel Leroy Ladurie famously brought to light, or a medieval Muslim artisan whose unconventional cosmological convictions could be elucidated like those of the Italian miller studied by Carlo Ginzburg.⁸ It would be silly, however, to wait for studies which, given the nature of the source material, probably will never emerge. Better, as Chamberlain demonstrated, simply to work with the sources we are given. From them, in fact, much can be said, if we pose questions that are appropriate and relevant to a medieval Islamic society.

So: Was there such a thing as "popular culture" in Egypt and Syria during the Mamluk period? There have been at least two distinct answers to this question in recent literature on the subject. One is that of Boaz Shoshan, who tackled the issue directly in his study of *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo*. Shoshan was sympathetic to the arguments of European historians that it is misleading to think of "popular culture" as something distinct from the culture of elites. In the Islamic Middle East, of course, that distinction may be even harder to draw, since the lines separating one social group from another were, in general, more porous than they were in medieval Europe. Nonetheless, Shoshan considered the concept of "popular culture" analytically useful, in so far as it pointed to "genres of 'texts', both written and non-written . . . , which, despite their unavoidably uncertain

⁶See Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge, 1993), 40–51, and my review in *American Historical Review* 100 (1995): 1637.

⁷Cambridge, 1994.

⁸*Montaigne: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294–1324*, trans. Barbara Bray (London, 1978); *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1980). Boaz Shoshan actually found such an Islamic miller, but the sources were far too limited in nature to allow a study similar to Ginzburg's; "On Popular Literature in Medieval Cairo," *Poetics Today* 14 (1993): 349–65.



boundaries, provide safe bases for analysis as primarily popular”—that is, which are in some way the preserve of social groups “inferior to the bourgeoisie.” (Shoshan actually went further and suggested that these social groups were “supposedly also illiterate, at least by and large.” That is probably a slightly more problematic assertion, since illiteracy can take different forms and can be found in different degrees, particularly in an Islamic society where some familiarity with the Quran and other religious texts was so highly valued, and since the task of measuring illiteracy in a pre-modern Islamic society is daunting.)⁹

A second answer to the underlying question is considerably more skeptical that the designation “popular culture” has any serviceable meaning. Some scholars, following perhaps the dominant trend in European historiography, have been deeply suspicious of conventional “two-tiered” models of culture, setting, for example, “high” or “elite” culture against “low” or “popular” culture. If E. H. Carr was right, that all history is in the final analysis contemporary history, then it is likely that this line of analysis stems at least in part from the suspicion of hierarchies which is endemic in our contemporary *zeitgeist*, or at least in the *zeitgeist* dominant within academic circles. It also perhaps reflects the extraordinary influence of the work of Peter Brown, the pre-eminent historian of religious culture in late antiquity, an influence that derives both from its sheer intellectual force and also from the particular academic “genealogies” of many historians in our field. Whatever its origins, this suspicion of a “high-low” model of medieval Islamic culture has been enthusiastically embraced by several historians in important recent works. Ahmet Karamustafa, for example, argued strongly against seeing the practices of the Qalandarīyah and other odd or antinomian Sufi groups as in any sense a manifestation of a “popular religion,” and insisted instead that they should be viewed as normal and natural outgrowths of mainstream Sufi values and principles.¹⁰ Christopher Taylor’s study of the *ziyārat al-qubūr* in medieval Cairo makes similar points. He argues in the first place that the visitation of tombs was a “liminal” practice and the cemeteries a liminal space, in which conventional social distinctions and hierarchies broke down. Secondly, he points out that those religious scholars who opposed the practice did not by any stretch of the imagination represent a consistent ulama voice, and so it is difficult if not impossible to identify what would constitute the “high” end of a two-tiered cultural model. Ibn Taymīyah, for instance, famously opposed the cult of saints and visitation of tombs, or at least certain aspects of them; but his arguments grew more out of specific theological concerns than any

⁹Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, 7.

¹⁰Ahmet Karamustafa, *God’s Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period, 1200–1550* (Salt Lake City, 1994).



generalized suspicion of “popular culture.”¹¹ (And to complete the confusion, of course, Ibn Taymīyah’s tomb became an object of pilgrimage after his death.)

These two historiographical positions are not perhaps mutually exclusive. It may be possible to accept that there is a cultural stratum which can meaningfully be called “popular,” while at the same time agreeing with Karamustafa, Taylor, and others that the two-tiered model is inadequate and misleading, especially in a medieval Islamic context.¹² Without trying to resolve the question in any definitive way, I will attempt in this article to outline the parameters of the issue and how the topic of “popular culture” has been and could yet be productively approached. Much of the following discussion will necessarily focus specifically on religious culture.

Some evidence for a distinctive “popular culture” can be found in the character of the surviving historical sources themselves. While the historian of Mamluk society mostly lacks certain types of sources that have been the bread and butter of European medievalists—archives, for example, or documentary sources—in broader terms the period is extremely rich in terms of the material available for its reconstruction. Some of these materials—chronicles, biographical dictionaries—are of course widely familiar. For all of their familiarity, they still can, when approached creatively, yield new insights, as demonstrated so clearly by Chamberlain’s book. But the literary foundation on which Mamluk history has largely been constructed has been described as “deceptively firm.”¹³ That is, there exist in the libraries of the Near East, Europe, and North America vast quantities of texts still in manuscript form, many of them of apparently quite a different character than the more polished and familiar works of al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Taghrībirdī, and others. These sources need to be surveyed more thoroughly—especially in terms of their authorship, and in terms of their role in the cultural life of medieval Egyptians and Syrians—before any adequate reckoning can be made of the character and scope of “popular culture.”

These new or underutilized historical sources vary widely in character. Among them, of course, are the by now famous *waqfiyahs* of Cairo. Their value to the cultural historian is, strictly speaking, somewhat indirect, but nonetheless important. They have proven valuable for reconstructing the history of certain areas of economic

¹¹Christopher S. Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous: Ziyāra and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Medieval Egypt* (Leiden, 1999). Cf. Muhammad Umar Memon, *Ibn Taimīyah’s Struggle Against Popular Religion* (The Hague, 1976), 46–57. See also Boaz Shoshan’s critique of this viewpoint in his review of Taylor’s book, *IJMES* 32 (2000): 543–46.

¹²Certainly that is what I tried to suggest in my own recent study of “popular” preachers and storytellers. Jonathan P. Berkey, *Popular Preaching and the Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle, 2001).

¹³*Ibid.*, 10.



life, as in the works of Carl Petry and Adam Sabra. In his recent book on poverty and charity in Mamluk Cairo, for example, Sabra used the *waqfiyahs* to begin to elucidate certain aspects of the economic and social life of those who—if popular culture exists—produced and consumed it.¹⁴ But in the end the *waqfiyahs* are a limited source. A richer vein for the historian of popular culture lies in the vast array of unpublished, even uncataloged manuscripts of a religious nature in the major libraries in Egypt and Europe. On this score it is worth drawing special attention to the most recent, and mostly still unpublished work of Christopher Taylor, who has begun a more systematic survey of prayer manuals, *fatwá* collections, and various other religious texts, all of them outside the well-traveled mainstream of Mamluk-era literature, from the collection in Dār al-Kutub in Cairo.

It was not perhaps exactly the literature that he had in mind, but some evidence for Shoshan's position can perhaps be gleaned from the literature of popular entertainment. The Mamluk period was an exceptionally fruitful period for the production of literary works such as the *Thousand and One Nights*, the *Sīrat 'Antar*, and the *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*. These texts pose very difficult questions of origin—the question of “authorship” is really not even relevant—but there are plenty of indications that the Islamic Middle Period was a critical one for the crystallization of identifiable (if not definitive) versions of them. The *Sīrat 'Antar*, for instance, concerns the exploits of a pre-Islamic hero, and there are references to 'Antar in very early Islamic sources. But the versions in which the romance is now known contain numerous references to much later events and persons, including European Crusaders. Moreover, the earliest known more-or-less complete narrative of 'Antar's life is found in a manuscript dating from 1466.¹⁵ If dating these entertainments is difficult, so is assigning them to a particular literary genre, since they must at all times have circulated (especially in oral form) in widely different circumstances. Since E. W. Lane's popular nineteenth-century *Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, however, it has been common to see them as the preserve of popular storytellers, reading or reciting the romances to largely illiterate audiences in coffeehouses and on street corners.¹⁶ By itself, that view may perhaps place unfair or unnecessary limits on our understanding of these complex texts, but it certainly reflects one aspect of their manifestation in

¹⁴Adam Sabra, *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam: Mamluk Cairo, 1250–1517* (Cambridge, 2000).

¹⁵B. Heller, “'Antar, Sīrat,” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 1:518–21; Peter Heath, *The Thirsty Sword: Sīrat 'Antar and the Arabic Popular Epic* (Salt Lake City, 1996), esp. 27–30.

¹⁶See E. W. Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, 5th ed. (London, 1860), 414–15.



medieval society. Complaints by figures representing the cultural elite about how these texts circulated among the *‘āmmah*, about how popular storytellers fabricated false and distracting tales to the delight of their ignorant audiences, provide a sort of backhanded confirmation of the independence of this popular voice.¹⁷ Students of storytellers and reciters of epics in contemporary Egypt have also stressed the agency of the storytellers themselves: that is, that they are not simply transmitters to common people of texts originally produced for or among elite groups, but actively shape the stories they tell in response to their own experiences and those of their audience. Of course we cannot assume that contemporary practice necessarily reflects that of the Mamluk period, but it does at least support the case for a distinctive cultural stratum which, as Shoshan put it, “provide[s] safe bases for analysis as primarily popular.”¹⁸

If there is such a thing as popular culture, then it must be predicated upon some sort of hierarchy: that which is popular is that which is common, and its opposite is the preserve of some elite or elites. At least in general terms, the underlying social distinction is perhaps that which medieval Muslim writers themselves made in separating the *‘āmmah* from the *khāṣṣah*. Those terms are not terribly precise—it may, for example, be slightly more difficult to identify who was an *‘āmmī* than who was, say, a serf in a medieval European village. And more generally, the hierarchies that characterized medieval Islamic societies—at least those distinguishing indigenous social groups, as opposed to that separating the Mamluks from the locals—were more flexible and porous than those of medieval Europe. But the fact that the hierarchies were more flexible, or the underlying social categories more porous, does not mean that they were less important. On the contrary, their very flexibility may have made the matter of preserving them more important to those who benefited from them.

This was certainly the case with the religious elite, the *ulama*. Lacking precise institutional mechanisms for consolidating their authority, they relied instead upon a variety of social and ideological tools. Among the latter was the important distinction between that which was *sunnah*, accepted normative tradition, and that which was *bid‘ah*, unacceptable innovation. Of course, the Islamic discourse over innovations was very old and very complex, and not all jurists felt that all innovations were to be eschewed. But hostility to *bid‘ah* was a common discursive theme amongst Mamluk-period scholars. Of them, Ibn al-Ḥājj is the most colorful, and consequently he is perhaps the most cited Mamluk-period author on the subject of popular culture—indeed, so pervasive is his presence in the historiography of the field that the study of popular culture in the Mamluk period might more accurately

¹⁷Shoshan, “On Popular Literature,” esp. 353.

¹⁸See Bridget Connelly, *Arab Folk Epic and Identity* (Berkeley, 1986).



be called the study of Ibn al-Hājj. But in fact he was hardly alone or unusual in warning his readers against the perils of unlawful innovations; his concerns were shared by many writers from amongst the ulama. Their discursive attack on innovations served as one means of affirming their authority in the face of practices, many of them associated with suspect festivals such as the Prophet's birthday and the new year celebrations of Nawrūz, which were popular among those the ulama writers dismissed as the *'āmmah*.¹⁹

The attack on innovations was part of a broader effort on the part of the ulama elite to defend their authority in the face of challenges to it which, from the viewpoint of the leading scholars themselves, might be said to have "bubbled up from below." These challenges took different forms. On one end of the spectrum was the group known as the *muwallahūn*, who might be described generously as marginal holy men, who lampooned the rituals and pretensions of the ulama, by living in rubbish heaps, or wearing dirty clothes, or urinating in their robes, and generally indulging in behavior which was, at least superficially, both anti-social and contemptuous of *shar'ī* norms. Such individuals, however, were so far beyond the pale that, as has been argued, their transgression of the "normal order" served paradoxically to reaffirm it, and to affirm the dominant role of the leading ulama in the production of knowledge and in putting it to social use.²⁰ A less dramatic but more serious threat was posed by those preachers and storytellers who, operating independently, sometimes in mosques and sometimes on street corners, and catering to a primarily non-elite audience, transmitted to their listeners a body of religious knowledge that, from the standpoint of the ulama, was of dubious legitimacy: unsubstantiated hadith, for example, or popular but suspect stories of the pre-Islamic prophets. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, in his attack on these miscreant storytellers, understood their authority to derive directly from their relationship with the common people. He was moved to write his treatise, he says, after being humiliated by a storyteller whose authority and learning he had challenged. When Suyūṭī had suggested to the man that he should check the authenticity of the hadith he recited with recognized scholars in the field, the storyteller had reacted with rage. "You expect me to verify my hadith with the scholars? Rather," he said, "I will verify them with the people [*al-nās*]."²¹ What these storytellers represented was a challenge to the authority of the ulama, not simply or even primarily because of the *content*

¹⁹For a survey of this literature, see Jonathan Berkey, "Tradition, Innovation and the Social Construction of Knowledge in the Medieval Islamic Near East," *Past and Present* 146 (1995): 38–65, and Maribel Fierro, "The Treatises Against Innovations (*kutub al-bid'a*)," *Der Islam* 69 (1992): 204–46.

²⁰Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice*, 130f.

²¹Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Taḥdhīr al-Khawāṣṣ min Akādhīb al-Quṣṣāṣ* (Beirut, 1972), 4.



of what they transmitted to the common people, but because the texts and stories they transmitted they had acquired outside the channels—such as personal training with a reputable teacher, attested by an *ijāzah*—which defined the ulama’s authority.²²

In the challenge posed to the ulama by purveyors of knowledge and culture such as the storytellers and popular preachers, we can locate a cultural stratum which is in some meaningful sense “popular.” While they did not use the term popular culture, many medieval ulama at least *thought* that they were conducting a rear-guard action against threats to the integrity of Islam posed by cultural attitudes and practices associated with the common people, the *‘āmmah*—that is, *they* perceived a distinct popular culture and the threat it posed. At the same time, it is important to remember that, when we survey the cultural scene through a lens broader than the narrow ideological one of scholars such as Ibn al-Ḥājj, what we perceive is less a bipolar cultural world than a rich and complex one, in which various cultural attitudes and practices cannot be assigned unambiguously to one end of the spectrum or another. This has been the dominant theme embraced by cultural historians of the Mamluk period over the last decade or two. At one end of the spectrum, we encounter men and women from diverse social backgrounds—not just scholars or scholars in training, but common folk, men and women, and Mamluks—participating actively and meaningfully in the transmission of Islamic religious knowledge, of the texts in which that knowledge is embedded.²³ At the other, we meet perfectly reputable and elite jurists such as Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī who, as Christopher Taylor has amply demonstrated, mounted a vigorous defense of popular practices such as the visitation of tombs from *within* the mainstream Islamic tradition. Even Ibn al-Ḥājj morosely admitted that ulama could be found indulging in various popular religious practices of which he disapproved, such as participating in festivals associated with non-Muslims.²⁴

One forum in which the various strands of culture, elite and popular, came together and mingled fruitfully was, of course, Sufism, a topic in Mamluk cultural history which has probably been addressed more thoroughly than any other. In addition to an enormous and comprehensive survey of late Mamluk Sufism in all of its organizational, institutional, and theological forms,²⁵ we have now a plethora of more focused studies on particular saints, orders, and institutions. It sometimes

²²Berkey, *Popular Preaching*, passim.

²³Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton, 1992).

²⁴See, for example, Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal*, 2:4–7 and 141–43.

²⁵Éric Geoffroy, *Le soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie sous les derniers Mamelouks et les premiers Ottomans: Orientations spirituelles et enjeux culturels* (Damascus, 1995).



seems as though the category of ideas and practices labeled "Sufi" has become so broad as to be almost meaningless; but until a more precise vocabulary of scholarship is formed, we must continue to use it.

Sufism was an unmistakably "popular" cultural phenomenon. Developments within Sufism during and around the Mamluk period contributed to the increase in the number of those Muslims who would identify themselves in some way as "Sufis": the proliferation of *khānqāhs* and other Sufi institutions, for example, and the crystallization of the "orders" (*ṭuruq*, sing. *ṭarīqah*) as objects of Sufi affiliation. Michael Winter has suggested that, in a way, by the later Middle Period Sufism had for many supplanted the study of hadith as a cherished pious activity open to virtually any Muslim. Not, of course, that the transmission of hadith had died out—on the contrary, large public recitations of some of the principal collections of prophetic traditions remained a prominent feature in the religious landscape. But as Winter put it, the recitation of hadith "lost its place to Sufism as the sphere in Islam where a ruler, an *‘ālim*, or a commoner could request a personal, or least a partially creative and active participation in religion."²⁶

But here again, we perceive an ambiguity in what, culturally speaking, popular Sufism involved and implied. Part of the appeal of Sufism lay in the fact that, as Winter suggested, it provided a forum in which non-elite voices could be heard addressing and contributing to religious life. Hence, for example, those occasional women identified as *shaykhahs*, serving in leadership roles within various Sufi groups, and about whom we would like to know much more. Hence, too, the figure of the *shaykh ummī*, the "illiterate" or more precisely (since not all of them were really *illiterate*) the "unlettered" Sufi master, who typically came from a humble background, who lacked much if anything in the way of a systematic education, but who nonetheless claimed an authority based on his access to religious knowledge via dreams or visions, or more vaguely through his "heart."²⁷ More generally, religious practices which may or may not have been technically "Sufi" but which nonetheless shared Sufism's emphasis upon a cult of personality focusing on holy men and women, such as the practice of visiting the tombs of the dead, provided scope for the articulation of the religious concerns of the common people. One cannot, for example, read the stories told about the miraculous intercession of "saints" buried in the cemeteries of Cairo to relieve the hunger, or illness, or fear of those who visited them in their tombs, without recognizing in them an expression of the religious concerns, priorities, and world-view of the "common people."²⁸

²⁶Michael Winter, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt: Studies in the Writings of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1982).

²⁷See Winter, *Society and Religion*, 192–95, and Geoffroy, *Le soufisme*, 299–307.

²⁸Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous*, 130–54.



More pointedly, there is evidence that Sufism became a channel for embracing magic and the occult, and for a recasting of popular thaumaturgical expectations in Muslim garb, aspects of the mystical life which certainly made Sufism, or at least some Sufis, the target of the ulama's wrath.²⁹

But Sufism did not speak with a single voice, and if it allowed the common people to articulate their religious vision and concerns, it could also serve to reinforce the authority among them of the ulama. In the first place, of course, Sufism was not simply popular with the common people. Sufi affiliations became common among the leading ulama, even among those most inclined to criticize certain aspects of Sufi ritual and behavior, such as Ibn Taymīyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah. Even more telling are those rural Sufis studied by Jean-Claude Garcin, who constitute a reminder that "popular culture" need not always oppose itself to elite culture. These figures were held in considerable esteem by their neighbors, very often, however, not because they represented in the eyes of their beholders any sort of popular resistance to dominant Islamic authorities, but precisely because they were taken as models of the pious Muslim living in accordance with *shar'ī* norms. *Popular* Sufis may thus have been quite "normal"—that is, Muslim in a very conventional, shari'ah-oriented way, providing a level of basic education to the common folk who followed them, even undertaking the Quranic injunction to "command the good and forbid the evil."³⁰ By contrast, the outlandish, antinomian behavior of groups like the Qalandariyah was not limited in either origin or appeal to lower social strata, despite efforts by some medieval writers to make precisely that connection as a way of discrediting them; on the contrary, there is evidence that many of those most drawn to such movements were young dissenters from within the various social elites.³¹

There are several other important themes connected with the study of popular culture in the Mamluk period which are worth mentioning, in part because they may yet contain considerable scope for further investigation. The first is that of intercession. Intercession, of course, is at first glance more a topic of social or

²⁹See, for example, J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford, 1971), 27–28 and 199–200; Winter, *Society and Religion*, 172–76; Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, 18–22. Michael Winter in particular has insisted on a persistent tension between Sufis and juristically-oriented scholars, the *fuqahā'*. See *Society and Religion*, esp. 230–36.

³⁰Jean-Claude Garcin, "Histoire et hagiographie de l'Égypte musulmane à la fin de l'époque mamelouke et au début de l'époque ottomane," in *Hommages à la mémoire de Serge Sauneron*, vol. 2, *Égypte post-pharaonique* (Cairo, 1979), 287–316, esp. 293–96 [reprinted in *Espaces, pouvoirs, et idéologies de l'Égypte médiévale* (Variorum, 1987)]; Leonor Fernandes, "Some Aspects of the *Zāwiya* in Egypt at the Eve of the Ottoman Conquest," *Annales islamologiques* 19 (1983): 9–17.

³¹Karamustafa, *God's Unruly Friends*, 5–10 and 93.



even political history, but it may offer some chance at investigating the complex place of popular culture in Mamluk society. The importance of intercession in this society is of course well known. The intercession to be sought from the Prophet or respected holy men and women was the foundation of the cult of the saints and the visitation of the tombs, and provided a cultural forum in which Muslims of very different social strata might meet and participate in a common activity. More practically, Sufis became prominent over the course of the Mamluk period as intercessors, both with God and with secular powers. Theirs was not so much a comprehensive political threat, since there is little evidence they held any grand political ambitions; but they did seek in various ways to ameliorate the lives of the common people. Their power was very real, if Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī is to be believed—he ascribed the defeat of Sultan al-Ghūrī to the ruler's quarrel with a popular shaykh—and judging by the Mamluks' own frequenting of these shaykhs, the perception of their power was widely shared. Al-Ghūrī himself is a case in point, since his respect for Sufi shaykhs led him (to no avail, apparently) to take the shaykh of the Badawīyah order with him to Syria on his last campaign. (By contrast, he had earlier offered his police a reward for every drunken *faqīh* they could find.)³² What intercession offers is a way of measuring the precise social and political consequences of cultural ideas, practices, and the individuals engaged in them *in the specific context of Mamluk society*—that is, a way of studying popular culture in a framework that makes specific sense for the medieval Islamic world, and that does not rely on categories or insights drawn from European history.

A second promising theme is that of religious syncretism—the degree, that is, to which Jewish, Christian, and Muslim ideas, texts, attitudes and practices may have influenced one another. This constituted a consuming worry of people such as Ibn al-Ḥājj and Ibn Taymīyah—the concern, that is, that Islam might be corrupted by its adherents adopting and participating in practices associated with the infidels in their midst. The need to draw sharp boundaries between the faith communities was an old concern in Muslim discourse. Given the conditions of medieval life, with reduced but still significant populations of Jews and especially Christians living alongside Muslims, the opportunities for the sharing of religious ideas and practices were legion. This made it all the more necessary to draw firm cultural and psychological lines between them, especially with regard to the seductive appeal of religious festivals. “Participation with [the *dhimmīs*] in their festivals

³²Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr fī Waqā' i' al-Duhūr*, 3rd ed. (Cairo, 1984), 5:85–86; Winter, *Society and Religion*, 19, 100. On Sufi shaykhs and the ruling elites more generally, see Fernandes, “Some Aspects of the *Zāwiya*,” Jean-Claude Garcin, “Deux saints populaires du Caire au début du xvi^e siècle,” *Bulletin d'études orientales* 29 (1977): 131–43; Geoffroy, *Le soufisme*, 120–28.



wholly or partly is synonymous with participation with them in unbelief wholly or partly," Ibn Taymīyah said. Indeed, "festivals are that which most particularly serves to differentiate one religious law from another and constitute their most prominent symbols."³³ One can understand, perhaps, Ibn al-Ḥājj's horror at the behavior of Muslims who participated in the sort-of Coptic, but decidedly non-Muslim festival of Nawrūz, when they would (among other things) drink wine, or indulge in a sort of wet tee-shirt contest. If a professor in a school had the temerity to try to hold a lesson on that day, his students might pounce upon him, and throw him into the institution's fountain.³⁴ Less dramatic, perhaps, but more remarkable are the details given by Ibn al-Ḥājj and others of Muslim participation in specifically Christian festivals, including Christmas and Easter. Given the shrill character of the ulama's expressed fears, it is surprising that the question of syncretism, which would seem to be so potentially rich a topical area, has not received more explicit attention from contemporary historians. Taylor's study of the *ziyārat al-qubūr* took note of the importance of the question, especially with regard to the cult of the saints, but left it for later and fuller investigation.³⁵ Joseph Meri's recent book on the cult of the saints in medieval Syria does include a study of the Jewish as well the Muslim cult, and takes note of a number of pilgrimage sites which were common to adherents of the two faiths, such as the shrine of Ezekiel in Iraq. Jews and Muslims, he observes, shared a "common language of ritual communication," and, more grandly, "shared sacred places and undertook sacred journeys together," but the book leaves for the future a systematic confrontation with the specific question of syncretism.³⁶

Finally, there is the question of gender. Popular culture, and popular religion in particular, provided unusually fertile territory for the active participation and creative contribution of women. There are, in the first place, those women identified in the sources as Sufi *shaykhahs*; the ranks of the storytellers and popular preachers, too, included a number of women. More generally, Ibn al-Ḥājj's account leaves the reader with the impression that it was *women* who were in many cases the driving force behind the popular religious practices of which he disapproved—the unregulated visiting of tombs, the active and gleeful participation in *dhimmī* festivals, etc. Ibn al-Ḥājj's concerns may well have been exaggerated, but at the very least they seem to provide an opportunity for an analysis—perhaps even a Freudian one—of the *gendered* character of the ulama's authority. Natalie Zemon Davis

³³Memon, *Ibn Taimīyah's Struggle*, 206, 213 et passim.

³⁴Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal*, 2:49–52 et passim.

³⁵Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous*, 4.

³⁶Joseph Meri, *The Cult of Saints Among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (New York, 2002), 286–87; on the shrine of Ezekiel, *ibid.*, 229–38.



gave her famous study of popular festivals in early modern Europe the provocative title of "Women on Top." Something similar might one day emerge from the pen of a historian in our field.³⁷

³⁷Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women on Top," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, CA, 1975), 124–51.

