Middle-Class Culture in Cairo Under Ottoman Rule – Perceptions of Power and Knowledge

Waleed Rikab

Rice University

Introduction

Cairo has been a major cultural center in Egypt and one of the most important cities of the Arab world at least since it stabilized as the capital during the Fatimid and Ayyubid eras. Subsequent rulers retained it as their administrative center and it attracted a flow of merchants interested in international trade, scholars that attended its religious institutions, and settlers from the rural areas of Egypt. Its status was enhanced during the Mamluk era, and it became the seat of the sultan who also ruled Greater Syria (al-Sham) and the Hijaz, with its holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Cairo remained an important city under the Ottomans, and although it was not as prominent as Istanbul, the Ottomans saw it as the most prestigious city in the Arab territories.[1] Contrary to traditional perceptions, the city continued its geographical expansion under the Ottomans and its population increased considerably during the Ottoman period.[2]

This paper focuses on the emergence of a middle-class culture in Cairo under the Ottomans from the 16th to the 18th century and follows in the footsteps of studies conducted by Nelly Hanna and André Raymond. However, although this paper is deeply indebted to their work, I focus less on trends of urban development and changes to the economy that gave rise to early modern

---

[1] André Raymond, *Cairo*, trans. Willard Wood, (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2000), 191
[2] Ibid, 225

capitalism, but on the cultural production of that era, and how it can be analyzed and evaluated against the background of specific political, social and economic conditions. This period saw a rise in the copying and dissemination of manuscripts containing anecdotes, poetry and wise saying, and it is through the examination of two such manuscripts from the 18th century that I conduct my inquiry. Following Max Weber, my assumption is that a reductionist point of view that sees the cultural superstructure as conditioned wholly by the economic infrastructure cannot be comprehensive and lacks the grounding in culture, time and geography. An investigation into the realm of ideas and conceptions might reveal a more nuanced picture that represents more adequately the complexities of reality. I hope to show that the emergence of this middle class was predicated not only on the economy, but also on strategies of adaptation on the part of the population to a new political reality in which the ruling class was essentially doubled and divided into Mamluk and Ottoman elements. These strategies included the development of familial ties with members of the military classes, the encouragement of their participation in the market, and cultural production that limited the opportunities for the use of power of the rulers.

The Social Fabric of Cairo under the Ottomans

The roots of the social structure of Cairo lie in the Mamluk period (1250-1517). This structure was preserved in the transition to the Ottoman period, albeit with important transformations that will be discussed in the coming pages. According to Michael Winter, the Mamluks kept a sharp division between the ruling class, the Mamluk Emirs who originally came from outside the Egyptian lands and had military capacities at their disposal, and the ruled population. The most prominent emir would typically rise to the rank of sultan and would have to manage precarious and fragile alliances and balances of power with other emirs who could either strengthen or threaten his position. If the Sultan failed in passing on the reins of power to his progeny, a

struggle for power would typically ensue.[3] The Abbasid Caliphs, who were hosted in Cairo after the sacking of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1260, were for the most part symbolic figures, lacking any real political or military authority. The rest of the population under the Mamluks had its own internal divisions and hierarchies. At the top of the social ladder were government bureaucrats and clerics, who were mostly of Egyptian stock, and could include Christians and Jews in addition to Muslims. Whereas most of the Egyptian population lived in villages and rural areas and comprised peasants, Cairo's urban classes included artisans, merchants and shopkeepers. These were followed by a group of the most poor, who were at the bottom of the social ladder. In terms of power relations in society, they seem to have rested on the personal authority of the sultans. The sultan could appoint or dismiss as he pleased, but he could also be deposed of if opportunity arose for his rivals. Winter provides an example of a sultan who dismissed all the four chief Qadis at once when they refused to issue a verdict that he wanted,[4] and the chronicles of Ibn Iyās abound with such instances. Religious scholars enjoyed prestige and could rise to prominence at times, but they ultimately depended on the sultan to keep their positions and flow of revenue which sustained them. However, also apparent in Ibn Iyās is that some of these clerics achieved so much prestige that they had a profound impact on the behavior of rulers, who sought their blessing and wanted to appease them. Most interestingly, a deterrent against the mistreatment of such clerics in some cases was the belief that they possessed special powers or access to the divine that could inflict damage on those who wished to harm them, at least according to Ibn Iyās.[5]

---

[3] Ibid, 165-167
[4] Michael Winter, *Egyptian Society Under Ottoman Rule, 1517-1798* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 19
[5] See for instance, Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-zuhūr fī waqā'i' al-duhūr* (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣrīyah al-'Āmmah lil- Kitāb, 1982-1984), vol. 1, pt. 2, 218-19, where a Sultan refrained from firing a judge after learning that the judge had a piece of animal skin that was thought to be part of a shoe that belonged to the Prophet.

In the transition into the Ottoman period (starting from 1517), this social hierarchy was initially preserved,[6] with the Ottomans landing at the top of the ladder. The early years of Ottoman rule were characterized by repeated revolts, conducted by both Ottoman and Mamluk elements, forcing Istanbul to "reconquer" Egypt and reformulate its apparatuses of control through the Qanun-name of Suleiman the magnificent issued in 1525. The administration of Egypt now rested on three pillars: the governor who was awarded the rank of *pasha*, the chief judge, and the *ocaks*, Ottoman military units deployed in Egypt. However, the Mamluks were not entirely rooted out, but incorporated into the new system of administration. Notable emirs were given the rank of *bey* and were sometimes in charge of the collection of revenue in the provinces. These beys would pose an increasing challenge to Ottoman control, especially in the 18th century. The Mamluks were also allowed to keep their system of recruitment of Georgian or Circassian slaves who were trained to fill their future ranks. Therefore, the ruling class under the Ottomans comprised two elements: [7]

- The first element was the Mamluks who gained positions of authority, especially in the provinces, and enjoyed a growing flow of revenues from taxation as the Ottoman grip on Egypt weakened.[8] David Ayalon suggested that the Ottomans did not annihilate the Mamluks of Egypt because they needed their troops to aid in regional and international disputes against the Safavids and others, and also to man administrative positions.[9]

---

[6] Raymond, *Cairo*, 202
[7] Ibid, 202
[8] It is not surprising that the Ottomans did not initially get rid of the Mamluk ruling class but tried to co-opt it, as it was a matter of policy for the Ottomans not to disrupt the local customs of populations under their rule as much as possible, and as long this did not threaten them. Ibid, 195
[9] David Ayalon, "The End of the Mamlūk Sultanate: (Why did the Ottomans Spare the Mamlūks of Egypt and Wipe out the Mamlūks of Syria?" *Studia Islamica*, No. 65 (1987), 127

- The second element comprised the Ottomans who ruled Egypt through a governor and kept armed forces stationed in the country. These forces had the use of military power at their disposal and oversaw tax collection in Cairo.

These two factions did not exist in harmony at all and frequently fought for supremacy. Indeed, it is not surprising that André Raymond would characterize the history of Egypt from the 16th to 18th the century as "one long struggle for political power and its attendant profits."[10] The continued violence has led many scholars, such as P.M. Holt, Michael Winter, Jane Hathaway and David Ayalon, to focus on aspects of inner rivalries between the Mamluks, especially after the resurgence of the Mamluk households in the late 17th century, and the ongoing conflict between the Faqariya and Qasimiya.[11] Ayalon even stated that "Killings, counter killings and executions literally fill the pages of al-Jabarti's chronicle and of other chronicles of Ottoman Egypt."[12] [13]

The relations between these two factions, and their ties to Istanbul, can conveniently be divided into three periods: At first, the Ottomans used Mamluk emirs to suppress revolts of Ottoman units during the 16th century. Subsequently, Mamluks began to acquire key roles in the administration of Egypt and intensified their recruitment of slaves. Finally, they began to

---

[10] Ibid, 197
[11] Holt, P.M. "The Beylicate in Ottoman Egypt during the Seventeenth Century". *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 24, No. 2 (1961), 214-248; Jane Hathaway, *A Tale of Two Factions: Myth, Memory, and Identity in Ottoman Egypt and Yemen* (Albany: State University of New York), 2003
[12] David Ayalon, "Studies in al-Jabartī I. Notes on the Transformation of Mamluk Society in Egypt under the Ottomans (Continued)", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 3, No. 3 (October 1960), 302
[13] A notable exception is a study by Mary Ann Fay, who looked into commercial and investment activities of both elite and non-elite women who belonged to Mamluk households. Mary Ann Fay, "Women and Waqf: Toward a Reconsideration of Women's Place in the Mamluk Household", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Volume 29, Issue 1 (February 1997), 33-51

challenge the governor and periods of political turmoil began to be a common occurrence.[14] In the last quarter of the 18th century, just before the French invasion of Egypt in 1798, the country was ruled by Mamluk emirs who even refused to pay the annual remittance.[15]

From the point of view of the local population, the introduction of a second ruling class only exacerbated societal conditions that lent themselves to the abuse of power by emirs and their soldiers. First, the population, especially the economically active classes in Cairo, suffered from the repercussions of frequent factional fighting either between the Mamluks and the Ottomans forces, or between the Mamluk factions (as was increasingly the case), or between the seven Ottoman military units stationed in Egypt. These disputes often caused disruptions to the daily life of Cairo's inhabitants. Second, a Cairene encountering any one of these elements could potentially be subjected to violence, especially in the case of merchants and artisans because of the financial aspects involved. Third, all these elements combined had an interest in the collection of taxes and other forms of revenue and fought over them. This resulted in over-taxation of the population and instances of extreme wealth among the emirs. André Raymond discusses this wealth, relying on the chronicler al-Shadhili:

> *"It is easy to understand the melancholy of the emirs who, as parties to a losing faction, found themselves forced in 1711 to leave Cairo, "where they had lived in the greatest luxury and had had good times. They had enjoyed "every kind of choice food, magnificent clothes, blooded horses, beautiful slave women, running water-courses, large gardens and orchards with every kind flower and fruit, and a host of servants. The chronicler al-*

---

[14] Ahmad al-Damurdashi, *al-Damurdashi's Chronicle of Egypt, 1688-1755: al-Durra al-musana fi akhbar al-Kinana*, translated and annotated by Daniel Crecelius and 'Abd al-Wahhab Bakr (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1991), 22-23 (footnotes).
[15] Raymond, *Cairo*, 199

Shadhili describes them (not unironically, perhaps) as making a halt at Tora, some distance from Cairo: "Each of them cried and was filled with grief at the thought of being separated from his attendants, his children, his house, his slaves and his troops." [16]

Wealth, exquisite food, slaves, and gardens resulted in a life that was worth mourning when it was lost, in the eyes of these emirs. The ruling class held most of the fortunes derived from taxation in Egypt and sent only a small part of it to the Ottoman court.[17] Both emirs and wealthy merchants were able to acquire and portray amazing riches, while ordinary merchants and shop keepers were sometimes subject to attacks and extortion. They appear to have tried to develop ways to avoid acts of hostility, to the point which they had to ally themselves with factions that were dominant in their area and payed protection fees. Some components within the ruling class were aware of this unholy alliance. They tried to curb the power of the military units and prevent illicit ties with the artisans and merchants. Jabarti provides an example:

"The Qadi summoned the chiefs of the crafts, and informed them that an order was issued that no craftsmen and artisans should have any relations whatsoever with the seven ocaks, so they answered that most of them are soldiers and sons of soldiers and did not comply. The Qadi was later informed that they had conspired to cause him harm, so he became fearful and dropped the matter." [18]

This was probably an effort by Ottoman or local authorities to prevent financial ties between groups of artisans and merchants and the military, but the Qadi was deterred by the possibility of

---

[16] Ibid, 205

[17] Ibid, 196; Nelly Hanna, *In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Cairo's Middle-class, Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press), 2003, 44

[18] 'Abd al-Rahman Jabarti, `*Ajaib l-Athar fi al-Tarajim wa-al-Akhbar*, (al-Qahirah: Matba`at Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyah, 1997), v. 1, 70.

retaliation and refrained from implementing the order, in an example of the ability of these military units to intimidate their surroundings. The guilds' claim that many merchants and artisans were soldiers will be addressed in the following pages.

The activity of the military class, both Ottomans and Mamluks, intensified the burden of taxes on the population, leaving the government helpless in the effort to stem their destructive influence. The following incident reported in al-Jabarti's chronicles reveals the levels of popular resentment that taxation engendered on the one hand, and the direction in which it was channeled, on the other hand:[19]

> *"On the thirteenth of Ramadan 1107 (1696) the troops rose against Yasif the Jew and killed him, they dragged him from his feet and threw him in al- Rumayla (square). The people collected wood and burned him on Friday after the prayer. He oversaw the taxation during the reign of the deposed Ali Pasha. He was summoned to Istanbul and asked about the affairs of Egypt. He gave statements and committed to an annual remittance that was larger than usual and came up with innovations. When he came to Egypt the Jews from Bulaq greeted him and took him to the Diwan. His orders were received, the Pasha agreed to implement them, and they were read in the streets of Cairo. The people were not satisfied, and the merchants and the notables went to the emirs and told them about the matter. The emirs went to the Citadel and negotiated with the Pasha. He gave them answers that they didn't like so they rose against him as one man and asked him to surrender the Jew. He refused but they were determined to take him anyway. He asked to put him in detention until he could look into the matter. They did so*

---

[19] Additional analysis of this incident is found in Winter, *Egyptian Society Under Ottoman Rule,* 1992, 198

but then the soldiers (jund) rose against him as one man, and though the governor

refused to hand him to them they went to the prison and got him, and did to him what they

did." [20]

This incident is also reported in al-Damurdashi's chronicles.[21] According to him Yasif brought

an edict from Istanbul granting the house of Aq Birdi a franchise for grinding coffee and

ordering the closure of all other grinding places. The edict also tried to restrict the commerce in

cloth such as flax and silk and subject any commercial transactions in these materials to the

sultan's approval. This was an injurious decree to some Mamluk emirs who claimed that the

grinding of coffee finances various pious activities of waqfs (religious endowments), and that

cloth sellers were poor and couldn't pay a fine if they didn't have a seal. They laid the blame on

Yasif and one of the soldiers subsequently killed him. They wanted to kill his assistant, Ibrahim

al-Yahudi (the Jew) but he managed to avoid execution by converting to Islam. A servant from

the palace wanted to return Yasif's body to his house, but crowds who gathered in Rumayla

square were able to seize the body and burn it.

This account demonstrates that the population, especially the merchants, were suffering from the

burden of taxes, which would explain their outrage upon hearing that the annual remittance that

they owed to Istanbul was increased. In al-Damurdashi's account, they expected heavy losses

following Istanbul's edict. Their choice of target for this outrage is noteworthy – it is not aimed

at the Ottoman symbols of power, such as the Pasha, or the de facto ruling class, the emirs, but at

a bureaucrat who belonged to the Jewish minority group. Did the economically-active class in

Cairo misidentify their fiscal oppressors, or were they just unable to take real action against the

---

[20] Jabarti, `*Ajaib l-Athar*, v.1, 52.
[21] Al-Damurdashi, *Chronicle of Egypt*, 114-115

emirs, and thus chose a less threatening target? Yasif's assistant, also Jewish, avoided a similar fate by converting to Islam. The soldiers killed Yasif while ignoring the Pasha and disobeying his orders. In al-Damurdahi's account, the emirs were protecting the interests of the common merchants. Arguably, this is further evidence of the extent to which the emirs were able to dominate all other political and social actors. Indeed, it was not uncommon for the military class to oust the Pasha and request that Istanbul send another.[22] However, I think that a more nuanced explanation might be needed to make sense of the actions of the different participants in this incident, and I hope to present such an explanation towards the end of this paper.

It is important to stress that Cairo was not lawless and chaotic during the Ottoman period. On the contrary, the Ottomans were interested in order and stability, and encouraged commerce. They imposed harsh punishments against criminals, for instance,[23] and were aware of the problematic behavior of the soldiers and emirs. Mustafa Ali, the famous Ottoman historian and administrator, traveled to Cairo in 1599, and noticed that soldiers of Egypt are always engaged in arguments among themselves, that they fight and kill each other over either "a young boy or some baseless argument concerning an Arabian horse", and that such behavior was unheard of among members of the military in Istanbul.[24] Apparently speaking about soldiers of Mamluk descent, he adds:

> *"Year after year they all come to Cairo at the beginning of the year and completely fill*
> *the streets with their shameless behavior. They eat and drink, go around bragging,*
> *uttering foul language, and in the end, they either stand up against their commanders or*
> *distinguish themselves in a general rebellion…if they (i.e., the authorities) do not try to*

---

[22] Jabarti, `*Ajaib l-Athar*, v.1, 53

[23] Raymond, *Cairo*, 240

[24] Mustafa bin Ahmet Ali, *Mustafa Ali's Description of Cairo of 1599: Text, Transliteration, Translation, Notes.* (Wien: Verl. d. Österr. Akad. d. Wiss, 1975)., 53-54

improve the situation their mischievous acts will be worse than what we have

described."[25]

Despite the Ottoman awareness of the problems in Cairo, evidenced in Mustafa Ali's report, the situation did not improve, but worsened over time and culminated in a mamluk takeover.

From a systemic point of view, the unregulated military power that the emirs enjoyed, and their inner divisions and disputes, increased the opportunities for misuse of authority. Often, the judges or the governor had to back down and stay out of the emirs' way. In other words, the systemic conditions and the power dynamics that the Ottomans either encountered in Egypt or allowed to continue to exist even after their reforms in 1525, were amenable to the misuse of power and the eruption of periodic conditions of political instability. I think that these systemic conditions of precariousness and instability probably affected not only the general population, the religious classes and those who held government positions, but also the soldiery itself, because of the pervasive threat of factional fighting and outbreak of violence. It is reasonable to assume that the dynamics of power that unfolded in Cairo during the Ottoman period left their marks on all members of society, each from their own point of view and position in the network of societal relations. Although this is beyond the confines of this paper, this sense of precarious living might have been felt the most by minority groups (as the case of Yasif exemplifies) and non-elite women.

The Emergence of a Middle Class

According to Nelly Hanna, important transformations in the social structure of Cairo were seen during the 17th and 18th centuries. Cairo witnessed an intensification of economic activity and a growth in the population taking part in it. Cairo became a city of craftsmen, artisans and

---

[25] Ibid, 54

tradesmen who probably had extra revenue that they could invest or lend.[26] These middle-class

entrepreneurs should not be confused with excessively wealthy merchants involved in

international coffee and spice trades, who can be considered as part of the ruling class.[27] This

new class seems to have been formed from among the ranks of religious scholars (*ulama*) and

soldiers, but over time gained its own distinctiveness. As for the *ulama*, they began to be

involved in the growing book industry, and supplemented their income, derived from their

activities in waqfs or teaching, through participation in the book industry as copyists or

booksellers, and through lending and investment. A growing participation in the economy was

also seen among soldiers. A Decrease in salaries and money devaluation in the 17th century

drove soldiers to look for additional sources of income. Members of the military classes began to

open shops and work in all sorts of professions – silk merchants, saddlers, moneychangers,

shopkeepers, goldsmiths, coffeehouse owners and tobacco sellers.[28] This might be tied to the

previous discussion of the characteristics of the power relations between different elements in the

Cairene society, and it suggests various explanations to the fact that existing guilds did not

oppose the soldiers' entry into commercial activity, beyond what Hanna sees as the operations of

irresistible "market forces."[29] First, perhaps guilds were simply not able to block the soldiers'

entry into the market, because they were unable and unwilling to confront them. More probably,

perhaps we are seeing the results of cooptation and cooperation between tradesmen and soldiers

that improved the standing of both sides – for tradesmen this was a way to ensure protection and

limit the possibility of clashes with members of the soldiery by associating themselves with the

soldiers through personal ties, while for the soldiers it was a way to supplement their income and

---

[26] Hanna, *In Praise of Books*, 39
[27] Ibid, 40
[28] Ibid, 43
[29] Ibid, 43

take part in an emerging market. This would also explain the development of close links between soldiers, religious scholars and tradesmen through marriage, social interactions and living quarters, which Hanna discuses.[30] At any rate, a distinct middle class seems to have emerged, formed in the interaction between existing social elements, but resulting in a new social stratum.

Notably, the emergence of this class was tied to changing patterns of consumption and social gathering. Nelly Hanna discusses transformations in the function of the old Islamic institution of *majlis* (salon, or any social gathering taking place at one's residence, including recreational or religious sessions). Holding a *majlis* was previously a distinct feature of courtly culture, hosted by rulers and other elements in the ruling class. It appears that in Ottoman Cairo this practice spread to the emirs and other notables, who held *majalis (pl. of majlis)* of their own. *Majalis* were also held among the religious classes. These gatherings served a variety of purposes, from entertainment, including story-telling, music and poetry, to Sufi rituals, and reflected the interests of their organizers.[31] Thus, gatherings of all kinds were held by military emirs, religious scholars and notable merchants, and served as an opportunity for artistic expression. Hanna lists some evidence that toward the end of the 17th century these *majalis* became open to members of the new middle-class, using a manuscript written by Muhammad Abu Dhakir, which will be discussed further in the following sections. Abu Dhakir critiques these gatherings for the emphasis they placed on how people were dressed as an indicator of whether they were rich or poor.[32] If they were well-dressed they were showered with praise and compliments that they were also eloquent and knowledgeable. However, if they were modestly-dressed, they were made fun of, regardless of their character. We might be seeing here evidence of new distinctions

---

[30] Ibid
[31] Ibid, 73
[32] Ibid, 75

that are displacing to some extent previous markers of social status, and providing new groups with access to these gatherings.

Another important feature of the period which facilitated the spread of middle-class culture was the growing consumption of coffee and the establishment of coffeehouses. Coffee trade and consumption contributed to the emergence of middle-class culture both materially and culturally.[33] On the economic level, coffee trade opened new opportunities for commerce when pepper trade was declining and brought about a new alignment of the economy in which a place for new actors was found. On the level of culture, the consumption of coffee facilitated the introduction of new types of social gathering and interaction. At first coffeehouses had a questionable reputation. Mustafa Ali offers an abundance of observations on the daily life and culture in the city. He said that the multitude of coffeehouses in Cairo was remarkable, and that they were found at every step.[34] Though he acknowledged that these coffeehouses served "worshippers and pious men", he was mostly critical of the population that attended these establishments, which he characterized as "dissolute persons and opium-eaters". Referring specifically to Mamluk ex-soldiers and officers, who cannot pronounce Turkish properly, he complains that they spend all day in coffeehouses: *They are a bunch of parasites…whose work consists of presiding over the coffeehouse, of drinking coffee on credit, talking of frugality, when the matter comes up, and, having told certain matters with all sorts of distortions, of dozing off as soon as the effects of their "grass" subside.*[35]

---

[33] Nelly Hanna, "Coffee and Coffee Merchants in Cairo, 1580-1630," in *Le Commerce du café avant l'ere des plantations coloniales*, edited by Michel Tuscherer (Cairo: Institut francais d'archeologie orientale, 2001*,* 91
[34] Ali, *Description of Cairo*, 37
[35] Ibid

Nevertheless, Hanna describes a process of diversification of coffeehouses. They were no longer just the refuge of "dissolute populations" but were increasingly sponsored by wealthy merchants who had a financial interest in encouraging the spread of coffee consumption.[36] These new establishments were in the commercial areas of Cairo, thus attracting the economically-active strata and giving them an aura of respectability. Most notably, these coffeehouses provided new platforms for cultural production. Story-tellers were now employed in coffeehouses, giving new life to their profession. Comedies and farces were also enacted in coffeehouses, according to the account of Johann de Wild, who traveled to Cairo between 1606 and 1610. Some storytellers specialized in specific genres, such as the epic tales of Baybars (the illustrious Mamluk Sultan who fought the Mongols and the Crusaders).[37]

Book Culture

According to Hanna, Several factors combined to make books more available to a larger portion of society in Cairo from the 16th to 18th centuries. Records show that private libraries were found not only in the possession of religious scholars, but also in the homes of bureaucrats, artisans, merchants, craftsmen and military personnel.[38] Book culture was spreading, and manuscripts began to be produced in higher rates than ever.

Many explanations for this trend are possible. Certainly, it was facilitated by a decrease in paper and book prices and improvements to the process of copying that enabled a larger availability of books. Many people appear to have entered the business of copying, as a form of supplementing their income. The use of writing in business dealings and court procedures also increased the

---

[36] Hanna, *Coffee and Coffee Merchants*, 96
[37] Hanna, *In Praise of Books*, 66-67
[38] Ibid, 99

utility of writing as opposed to oral transmission of information.[39] In addition, there were high

rates of literacy, especially among students of religious educational institutions, such as al-

Azhar, who were trained in greater numbers than the religious sector could absorb and

subsequently began to take up commerce-related professions, especially as scribes and copyists.

An additional factor to be considered is the communal fashion in which books were read.

Reading was not only a solitary activity. Books were read during social gatherings at home or in

public places, allowing for greater distribution of the written word than the ability to read.

Hanna detects an increase in the number of manuscripts in the lead up to the 19th century. There

is a distinct preponderance of manuscripts from the 18th century in catalogues in the Arab world,

Turkey and Europe, exceeding any other period.[40] An inspection of the Arabic catalogue of the

Bibliothèque nationale de France, for instance, shows that more than half of the manuscripts in

poetry and erotic subjects were produced in the 18th century.[41]

Finding Meaning in Manuscripts

In this section I examine two manuscripts from 18th century Cairo that might be seen as a

continuation of the work that Hanna and Raymond have done on the subject. In any case, the

discussion is indebted to their scholarship. They adopt a materialist point of view, in which

changes in the economic infrastructure bring about changes to the cultural superstructure,

implying that cultural ideas are subservient to, and perhaps a by-product of, the economy.

Hanna develops previous work done by Raymond regarding the expansion of trade in early

modern Egypt and emphasizes changes to the economy that allowed a middle-class culture to

---

[39] Ibid, 62
[40] Ibid, 83
[41] Ibid, 84

develop.[42] I follow in the footsteps of Max Weber, in showing that there were also political and societal dynamics that flowed in the opposite direction, from the culture to the economy. Weber did not deny that economic conditions have a formative influence on society, but he saw more intricate causal links than just a reductionist view that economy is the sole determinant factor in societal relations.[43] He famously argued, for instance, that protestant ethics, with their emphasis on success in this world as an indicator of salvation, had considerable influence on the development of capitalism. This influence is not strictly causal but is manifested in the form of "elective affinity" between conceptual and economic factors. He preferred to discuss status groups rather than classes, which include also a sentiment of prestige that a status group enjoys and its self-awareness of what distinguishes it from other groups in society. I don't adhere strictly to his arguments but wish to highlight certain sentiments that contributed to the formation of middle-class cultural production that were not necessarily rooted in the economy, but in political and social dynamics.

My argument is that a certain feeling of dissatisfaction regarding the traditional social order that developed under the Mamluks and Ottomans contributed to a new middle-class culture. This by no means implies that the role of the economy was peripheral or that economic relations did not influence this new culture. On the contrary, these changes walked hand in hand with changes in the economy and contributed to them.

There is not much that is known about the circumstances surrounding the writing of the manuscript "The Companion's Guide and the stroll of the Spirit and Thoughts in Poetry and Curious Anecdotes". Completed by the author Shihab al Din al Bishari al Hafnawi in 1770, it

---

[42] Ibid, 26–44

[43] Lewis A. Coser, *Masters of Sociological Thought – Ideas in Historical and Social Context*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 228

comprises an anthology of poetry, wise sayings, anecdotes and fables.[44] In this regard it follows

a long tradition of storytelling in Islamic traditions,[45] which served the purposes of recreation (at

the courts of rulers for instance), education and socialization. Indeed, many of the materials used

by al-Hafnawi do not appear to be grounded in specific geographical and temporal settings, in

the sense that they carry "eternal" and "universal" lessons about life, emphasizing themes such

as morals, desire, wit vs stupidity, and irony. The author presents himself as a religious scholar,

so he might have been educated in one of Cairo's religious institutions. In one manuscript the

author portrays himself as the most prominent scholar, debater and storyteller of his age, in a

self-conscious exaggeration that sets a humorous tone for the rest of the manuscript. The way in

which these anecdotes were assembled merits consideration. It is divided into twenty-two

chapters, the first three present anecdotes about judges, teachers and grammarians. The judges

are often presented in a grotesque light, as persons who are overcome by salaciousness and

lewdness. They lust for women, young boys, and both male and female slaves, and they use their

status to get what they desire. Furthermore, they are often portrayed as stupid and ignorant

persons, who fail to understand subtleties and complex situations presented to them in court. The

collection of anecdotes ends with several verses of poetry that lambasts the judges for being

thieves who steal from orphans while pretending to have knowledge in God's law. These poems

call on God to protect the people from these judges lest they fall prey to them. In the second

chapter grammarians are heavily critiqued and ridiculed for their insistence on the use of archaic

---

[44] Shihab al Din al Bishari al Hafnawi, *Baghiyat al-Jalīs wal-Musamer wa Nuzhat al-Arwah wal Khawaṭir fi al-Ashāar wal Nawadir*. Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, fonde arabe 3448, 1770 http://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc31344w (accessed April 24, 2018). This manuscript is found in two copies dated from the 18th century in the collection of Arabic manuscripts (fonde arabe) in the Bibliothèque nationale, attesting to its popularity.

[45] In fact, it is probable that al-Hafnawi collected his materials from older anthologies. To me this might not be central to the arguments made in this paper, since it focuses on how these materials were read against the specific political and social background of the period.

forms of expression supposedly derived from religious texts and Islamic history, and their verbose language which does not fit ordinary social situations. The third chapter offers anecdotes on teachers, which are presented in a similar light, as being ignorant and abusive of children. Furthermore, they often find themselves in humiliating situations because of their ignorance. Such is the case with a teacher who removed his own testes, because as opposed to other organs of the body, such as eyes or ears, he couldn't understand their function. Needless to say, he died from bleeding shortly after.[46]

These chapters point to a form of critique and subversion delivered against figures that were perhaps held in higher regard in the past. Given al-Hafnawi's self-portrayal as a religious scholar (allama) and the fact that the above-mentioned figures are all involved in one way or another in the religious establishment (judges, grammarians who are crucial to the sciences of religion,[47] and teachers of madrasas), this manuscript might represent a form of disillusionment with professions that were traditionally associated with the study of religion, and could explain the observations that Hanna makes about scholars starting to take part in non-religious commercial activity, due to the lack of ability to absorb a growing number of scholars in the professions that they were trained for. Ridiculing these professions might have provided a form of comfort for scholars such as al-Hafnawi or signaled their desire to leave the religious professions in favor of more promising opportunities. This is also tied to the critique that Abu Dhakir deliver against the ulama in the manuscript that Hanna discusses. Abu Dhakir was a former al-Azhar student who did not finish his studies due to financial difficulties, and subsequently started working as a

---

[46] Al-Hafnawi, *Baghiyat al-Jalīs wal-Musamer*, 33a

[47] One of the most famous ulama of the mamluk period, Jalal al-Din al-Suyūtī, was also a grammarian and wrote many books on grammar (naḥu). Grammar was, and still is, seen as crucial to any form of interpretation of the divine word contained in the Quran and Hadith literature.

scribe in a waqf.[48] Abu Dhakir was deeply critical of the ulama of his age. Although some ulama were worthy of respect, others lacked proper knowledge and were interested only in acquiring and displaying wealth.[49] Although al-Hafnawi and Abu Dhakir have different styles – Abu Dhakir's style is more autobiographical and personal, while al-Hafnawi is a collector of anecdotes and poetry, they both display a sense of discomfort directed toward the ulama and the traditional religious professions of their age.

Another feature of al-Hafnawi's manuscript is that it is deeply humorous and jovial. One cannot help but burst into laughter while reading the manuscript and could only imagine the entertaining *majalis* in which this manuscript was read. The humor evidenced in many manuscripts from this period might have had an alleviating and comforting effect in a period of economic and political adversity. Humor can also disarm hostility, mitigate threats of violence and convert a tense social encounter into a lighthearted one. Humor allows to transcend a given reality by imagining its negation and opens a space of reflection on a given social order. Through humor reality ceases be to beyond question, and relations of power can be reversed, at least within the confines of the genre. Furthermore, through the ridicule of figures of authority, humor can be interpreted as a form of resistance that brings to the surface deeper currents of societal change.

The manuscript's heavy utilization of sexual content could have only added to its popularity and appeal. This sexual content defies any neat categories of sexual liberation vs repression and is not in line with traditional representations of Islamic societies as conservative. Strict gender roles cannot be easily discerned and both men and women practice their sexuality.

---

[48] Hanna, *In praise of Books*, 149
[49] Ibid, 154-155

The rest of the chapters in al-Hafnawi's manuscript collect anecdotes on different social types – such as young boys and slave-girls, thieves and tricksters, Bedouins, miserly people, doctors and astrologists, those who claimed prophethood, imbeciles and stooges, people who have deformities, stories about wine, and funny stories by al-Jahiz and others. In the opening pages of the manuscript al-Hafnawi describes his project as acquiring and cataloging knowledge and relates several wise saying to the effect that a person is only good as their knowledge, and that people can be known by what they write. Indeed, the manuscript contains what can be seen as a register of knowledge of society in his age. These social characters that he discusses and derides represented very real individuals, their social roles and what can be known about them. Most importantly, this knowledge opens a space, between the higher-ranking judges, grammarians, and teachers and the lower ranking dissolute stooges and thieves, in which the middle class can represent itself as the norm, and against which the outliers, whether high or low in status, can be judged. This represents a form of middle-class awareness that is not economical but rooted in the social. This space that al-Hafnawi carves out and which is occupied by a knowledgeable person who recognizes and evaluates their society and can navigate its intricacies and multitude of phenomena, is exactly in the middle. All this also implies a certain prestige that is the result of this knowledge and the ability to map society. This constitutes evidence of the development of a bourgeois culture that is characteristic of modernity.

The manuscript "The Ship of Happiness and the Garden of roses",[50] written by an anonymous author and dedicated to an unnamed emir, is also a collection of anecdotes and poetry for the purposes of entertainment. It opens with a praise of knowledge and eloquence, similarly to al-

---

[50] *Safīnat al-Surūr wa Rawḍat al-Zuhūr*, Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, fonde arabe 3447, 1752. http://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc31343n (accessed April 24, 2018)

Hafnawi's manuscript. As part of this praise, the author relates a story about al-Hajjaj bin Yusuf, the ruthless Umayyad era military commander. Al-Hajjaj's head of the guard was out one night patrolling his camp and found that one of the guards was killed. He caught three teenagers who were intoxicated. He asked the first who he was and the boy answered with a few verses of witty poetry. The head of the guard refrained from killing him because faced with such exquisite poetry he thought that the boy might be related to the caliph. The second boy also answered with poetry to the same question, and the head of the guard also did not kill him, because he thought he might be from noble Arab stock. The third boy again answered with poetry, and wasn't killed, lest he belong to a family of Arab warriors. The boys were summoned to al-Hajjaj in the morning and it turned out that they were all sons of simple craftsmen. In the end, al-Hajjaj exhorts parents not to neglect developing their children's education and knowledge, since these were the only things that stood between these boys and certain death.[51] It is not a coincidence that the memory of al-Hajjaj is evoked in this anecdote. Al-Hajjaj, and other figures form the early Islamic history, such as the rightly-guided caliphs and the conqueror Khalid bin al-Walid, resorted to extreme measures to spread the faith and fight sedition within the ranks of Muslims following the death of the Prophet. Al-Hajjaj was remembered for posterity as the ruthless governor of Iraq who managed to suppress the Shiites, and Abu Bakr, the first Caliph, fought an unyielding war against factions that wanted to abandon Islam (in what became to be known as the period of *hurub al-ridda,* the wars against apostasy). The memory of these leaders might have helped legitimize the Mamluk and Ottoman regimes. Like the early Muslims, they managed to crush their rivals – the Mamluks defeated the crusaders and the Mongols, while the Ottomans conquered Constantinople and made Sunnism the dominant doctrine across huge swaths of the

---

[51] Ibid, 6

Islamic world. This couldn't have come without war and violence, and thus the transgressions of these regimes had to be endured. Their militarism carried with it benefits to the community. The emphasis on individual knowledge and personal wit becomes important in this context – it is both a way to negotiate the structure of power and to protect against the might of rulers and draws from the same cultural heritage. This lore was known both to subjects and rulers, it provided "ideal types" for expected and legitimate behavior and formed the horizon of their possible relations. This is seen even in the fact that this manuscript was dedicated to an emir. The idea of wit as a life skill is also found in another anecdote in which a father tells his son that in times of trouble, a person can borrow a friend's mule or clothes, but he can't borrow anyone's tongue.[52]

The rest of the manuscript can be seen as an actual practice in developing the skills of articulateness and wit. It contains wise sayings about dealing with life situations and riddles about various subjects.[53] Large portions of the manuscript are dedicated to poetry of various genres, including love and wine poetry.

Wit and knowledge, these two manuscripts wish to say, are the "great equalizer" in the face of a stratified society. Through wit a person can navigate their way through the hardships of live and accumulate prestige irrespective of their class affiliation and financial status. Prestige, it seems, is the currency that these manuscripts trade in, and this prestige is enhanced with the enhancement of one's knowledge. This also is in line with the critique that Abu Dhakir delivers against the ulama of his age, and this also explains why the boys which al-Hajjaj caught were

---

[52] *Ibid*, 6
[53] The riddles are written in a way that is meant to be read orally – only the reader knows the answer to the riddle, which is included in the title of each riddle.

thought to be of noble origin though there were only sons of craftsmen, and why their lives were spared.

The initial vulnerability of the population and its inability to match the power of rulers and soldiers produced strategies such as alliances and marriages to sediment commercial and familial ties, and the absorption of soldiers into the market, resulting in the limitation of the potential of violence. The emphasis on knowledge can also be seen as the development of a strategy aimed at limiting the power of the ruling class. This is done by introducing a new element of prestige that can help override the distinction powerful/powerless, and replace it with the distinction knowledgeable/ignorant, thus presenting new hurdles to the use of power and introducing a new factor into the equation. Of course, these distinctions of power and knowledge might have been operative also in earlier periods. They are evident in the Mamluk attitude toward the ulama, and they might date back to even earlier periods. Nevertheless, judging from the manuscripts examined in this paper they were operative in the specific social and cultural setting of Cairo during the Ottoman period.

Finally, returning to the killing of Yasif, it is now possible to offer a thesis regarding the activities of the different actors involved in the killing – emirs, soldiers, shop owners, and unidentified crowds. These are only initial thoughts on this matter, which can serve as directions for further research that can be conducted using additional manuscripts. By the time of the incident, 1696, a sense of solidarity might have developed between the Mamluk emirs and the population. In al-Damurdashi's account of the incident, they fought not only for their own financial interests, but also for those of the ordinary shopkeepers and the beneficiaries of the waqfs. The population also felt this solidarity and turned to the emirs when they sensed that they were wronged by the Ottomans. The crowds burned the body of the person deemed responsible

by the emirs. This sense of inner-Egyptian solidarity and identity might have anticipated the later reaction to colonialism and the rise of a nation state in Egypt and was brought to the fore by the presence of Ottomans as a third party. A different religious affiliation might have prevented the extension of this solidarity to Yasif, who was considered an Other, while his assistant managed to avoid death by converting to Islam. Undergirding this solidarity were a shared religious heritage, agreement on the roles of rulers and subjects and on what constitutes knowledge, honorable behavior and virtue, which is reflected in the manuscripts. This sense of solidarity seems to be in line with the history of the weakening of the Ottoman hold on Egypt during the 17th and 18th centuries, and this also means that the Mamluk emirs truly became part of the Egyptian society only when they were displaced by the Ottomans. They were forced to develop enduring ties with the population, take up their causes, and give up on the strict separation between the ruling class and the population that was evident during the Mamluk era. Perhaps because of the abovementioned focus in scholarship on the inner rivalries between the Mamluks and the weakening of the Ottoman hold on Egypt, this subject might merit further research. David Ayalon does mention a narrowing of the gap between the Mamluks and the local population during the Ottoman period. Mamluk households began to accept select non-Mamluk members into their ranks, and non-Mamluks were allowed to own Mamluk slaves.[54] Jane Hathaway claims that the Faqari-Qasimi dispute was not just a conflict between two factions, but cut through Egyptian society and included considerable participation of urban and rural populations. Administrators, merchants, artisans and Bedouin tribes had no option of remaining neutral and were compelled to choose a side.[55] This might indicate that in the aftermath of the Faqari-Qasimi divide a more robust social cohesion began to develop in Egypt, which could have

---

[54] Ayalon, *Studies in al-Jabarti*, 310
[55] Hathaway, *A Tale of Two Factions*, 25-26, 30

been enhanced by a Mamluk competition over the hearts and minds of the population in the course of their disputes and violent clashes.

Concluding Remarks

The two manuscripts from 18th century Cairo discussed in this paper, and numerous other such Arabic manuscripts from the Ottoman period found in collections around the world, offer a window onto the ways in which an emerging middle-class defined itself, the values it held and how it interacted with its surroundings, and even onto the consolidation of an inner-Egyptian social solidarity. Examining the social and historical roots of the ideas of this class is of importance, especially since it was still operative in the 19th and 20th centuries and its influence was evident as recently as the Arab Spring.

Bibliography

Ali, Mustafa bin Ahmet*, Mustafa Ali's Description of Cairo of 1599: Text, Transliteration, Translation, Notes*. Wien: Verl. d. Österr. Akad. d. Wiss, 1975.

Ayalon, David,

- "The End of the Mamlūk Sultanate: (Why did the Ottomans Spare the Mamlūks of Egypt and Wipe out the Mamlūks of Syria?" *Studia Islamica*, No. 65 (1987), 125-148

- "Studies in al-Jabartī I. Notes on the Transformation of Mamluk Society in Egypt under the Ottomans (Continued)", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 3, No. 3 (October 1960), 275-325

Coser, Lewis A. *Masters of Sociological Thought – Ideas in Historical and Social Context*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977

Al-Damurdashi, Ahmad, *al-Damurdashi's Chronicle of Egypt, 1688-1755: al-Durra al-musana fi akhbar al-Kinana,* translated and annotated by Daniel Crecelius and 'Abd al-Wahhab Bakr, Leiden; New York: Brill, 1991

Fay, Mary Ann, "Women and Waqf: Toward a Reconsideration of Women's Place in the Mamluk Household", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Volume 29, Issue 1 (February 1997), 33-51

Al-Hafnawi, Shihab al Din al Bishari, *Baghiyat al-Jalīs wal-Musamer wa Nuzhat al-Arwah wal Khawaṭir fi al-Ashāar wal Nawadir.*

- Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, fonde arabe 3448, 1770. http://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc31344w (accessed April 24, 2018)

- Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, fonde arabe 3449, 1790-1791.
  http://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc313454 (accessed April 24, 2018)

Hanna, Nelly,

- *In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Cairo's Middle-class, Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003
- "Coffee and Coffee Merchants in Cairo, 1580-1630," in *Le Commerce du café avant l'ere des plantations coloniales*, edited by Michel Tuscherer, Cairo: Institut francais d'archeologie orientale, 2001, 91-101.

Hathaway, Jane *A Tale of Two Factions: Myth, Memory, and Identity in Ottoman Egypt and Yemen*, Albany: State University of New York, 2003

Holt, P.M. "The Beylicate in Ottoman Egypt during the Seventeenth Century". *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 24, No. 2 (1961), 214-248

Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-zuhūr fī waqā'i' al-duhūr*, Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣrīyah al-ʿĀmmah lil-Kitāb, 1982-1984

Jabarti, Abd al-Rahman, `*Ajaib al-athar fi al-tarajim wa-al-akhbar*, al-Qahirah: Matba`at Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyah, 1997

Raymond, André *Cairo.* Translated by Willard Wood, Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2000

Winter, Michael, *Egyptian Society Under Ottoman Rule, 1517-1798,* London; New York: Routledge, 1992

Safinat al-Surūr wa Rawḍat al-Zuhūr, Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, fonde arabe 3447, 1752.

http://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc31343n (accessed April 24, 2018)