

Popular culture in medieval Cairo

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1993

Reprinted 1996

First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Shoshan, Boaz.

Popular culture in medieval Cairo / Boaz Shoshan.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in Islamic civilization)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 43209 X

1. Cairo (Egypt) – Social life and customs. I. Title.

II. Series.

DT146.S54 1993

962'.1602-dc20 92-34084 CIP

ISBN 0 521 43209 X hardback

ISBN 0 521 89429 8 paperback

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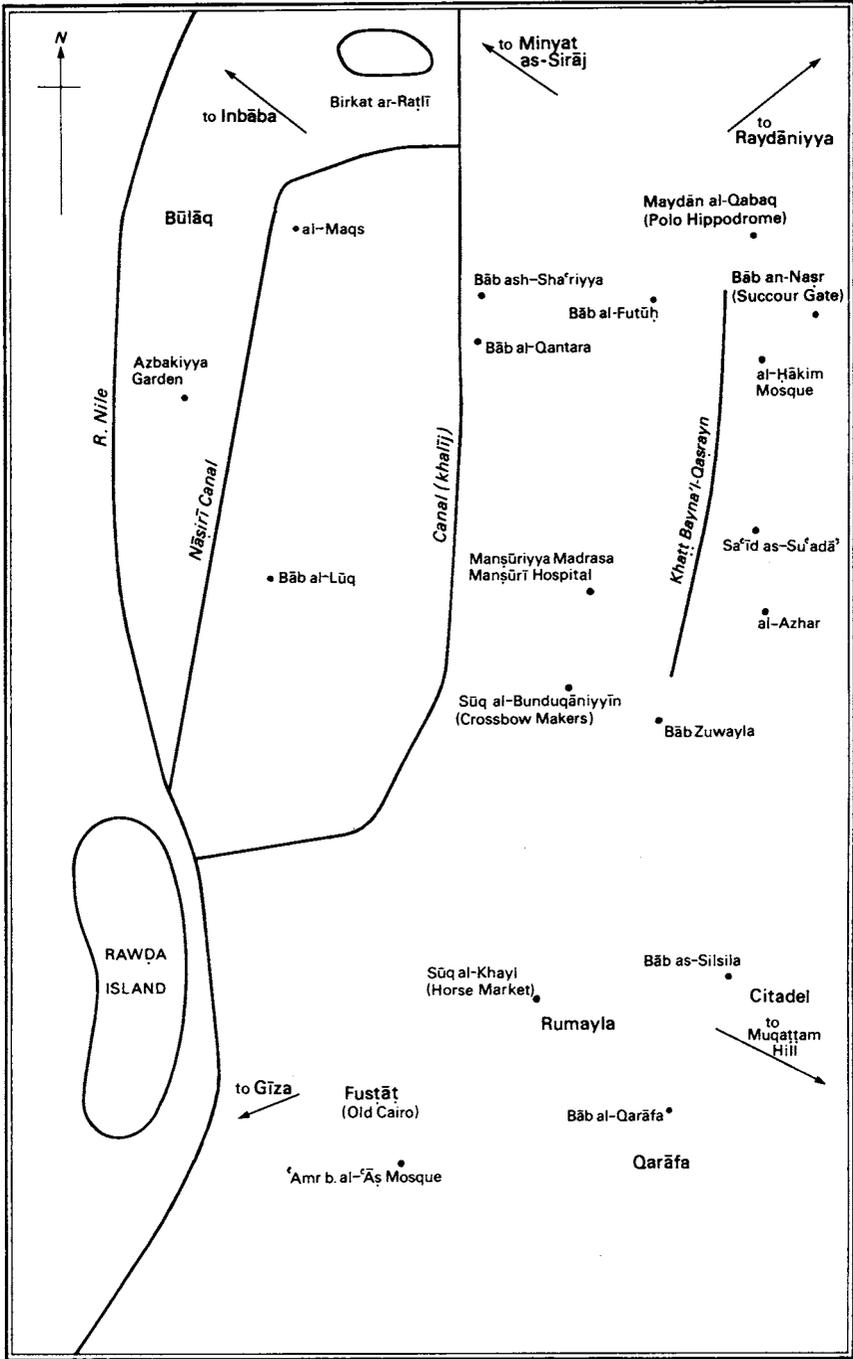
Introduction

“Mother of cities . . . mistress of broad provinces and fruitful lands, boundless in multitudes of buildings, peerless in beauty and splendor . . . she surges as the sea with her throngs of folk and can scarcely contain them for all the capacity of her situation and sustaining power.” Thus Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, a Muslim globetrotter, described the city of Cairo in the 1320s.¹ Lest we think of his description as the report of a highly partisan Muslim, the enormous population of medieval Cairo is also described in several foreign accounts. In 1384, the Italian Frescobaldi claimed that “This city of Cairo has a population greater than all of Tuscany, and there is one street more populated than all of Florence.”² At the end of the fifteenth century, Bernard von Breydenbach wrote: “I do not think that there exists another city in the world today as populous, as large, as rich, and as powerful as Cairo . . . Elbowing our way through masses of men, we saw one spot where the throng of people was beyond words.”³ Similarly, to Fabri (1483), Cairo was the largest town in the world, three times larger than Cologne and seven times larger than Paris.⁴

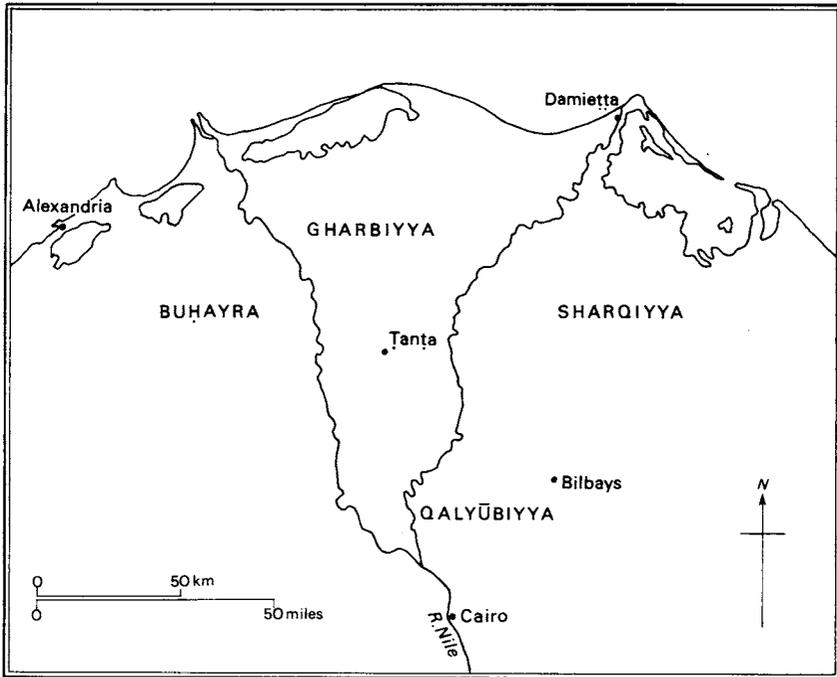
Statements of magnitude by medieval reporters, be they indigenous or foreign, should not be taken at face value. Cairo’s population, by modern estimates, reached 250,000 to half a million by the mid fourteenth century,⁵ and declined to between 150,000 and 300,000 by the fifteenth century, a result of the ravaging recurrences of the plague known as the Black Death.⁶ The city was possibly larger, but certainly not many times larger than major European towns. Scholarly guesses put the population of medieval Paris, for example, the largest European town at the time, at 100,000 to 200,000.⁷

In any case, precise numbers of Cairo’s population are not a major concern for us in the present study. Suffice it to state that, judging by medieval standards, Cairo was indeed a very large and densely inhabited town. It is in this regard that the travellers’ accounts are of some value. Fuṣṭāṭ (Old Cairo) had houses of five, six, and even seven storeys – a Persian traveller wrote of no fewer than fourteen, which made Fuṣṭāṭ look like “a mountain” – occasionally up to two hundred people living in one house (houses were mostly built of unfired brick).⁸ The commercial zone of fourteenth-century Cairo, according to a contemporary

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Map 1 Locations in Mamluk Cairo cited in this book



Map 2 Northern Egypt (after William Popper, *Egypt and Syria under the Circassian Sultans 1382–1468 A.D.: Systematic Notes to Ibn Taghrī Birdī's Chronicles of Egypt* (Berkeley, 1955))

account, bustled with 12,000 shops and numberless itinerant vendors, who blocked the public thoroughfares with their wares.⁹

Who were the inhabitants of late medieval Cairo? Standard descriptions of the social set-up of the city suggest that the Cairenes were divided into four social strata: the Mamluk elite, the scholars ('*ulamā*'), the economic bourgeoisie, and the commoners.¹⁰ A modern writer, using a physiological image, described the Mamluks as the head of Cairo, the notables ('*ulamā*' and bureaucrats) as its nerves, the merchants as the circulatory system, and the commoners as the flesh and blood of the largest Egyptian city.¹¹

At present we possess a reasonable body of knowledge about the social fabric and culture of three of the four strata. The Mamluk elite of slaves-turned-soldiers has been extensively studied, and the unique mechanism of its operation is now fairly clear.¹² The courtly culture of the Mamluks is also known to some extent: royal etiquette and ceremonies;¹³ special pastimes – hunting, sport and games, and competitions;¹⁴ patronage of literary works,¹⁵ especially of equestrian treatises (*furūsiyya*) and manuals of military techniques;¹⁶ and support of the visual arts.¹⁷ The community of the Cairene '*ulamā*' of the fifteenth century has been recently

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studied with an emphasis on such questions as geographical origins, patterns of residence, and the distribution of occupations.¹⁸ Its culture, however, still awaits a thorough study. The socio-economic profile of the bourgeoisie and the material aspects of their culture – mainly in the eleventh and twelfth centuries – are known to us thanks to Goitein’s monumental research of the Geniza documents.¹⁹ What about the “flesh and blood”, the commoners, of medieval Cairo?

These were artisans – engaged in dozens of manual occupations, from glass-making through tannery to sawdusting²⁰ – retailers and shopkeepers, as well as men of a rich variety of other occupations, and their families. Very little was recorded about them in contemporary works, and even less has been stated about them by modern historians. Their private lives, unlike that of their social superiors, are therefore almost unknown,²¹ and their professional realm is also largely obscure.²² If one were to write a sketchy history of the commoners in medieval Cairo, it would be, by and large, a history of their misery: economic hardship caused by heavy taxation, monetary instability, and high prices;²³ and political oppression inflicted by the Mamluks and outside enemies.²⁴ Above all, it was Death, so it seems to me, which, ironically, was the prevailing factor in the life of the commoners in late medieval Cairo. It deserves a few words.²⁵

The major cause of death in Mamluk Cairo was the so-called Black Death, which, between 1348 and 1517, struck the city more than fifty times²⁶ and decimated its population.²⁷ The thousands of funerals that crowded the streets of Cairo every third year on the average, creating a long “procession of death”, thus turned death from a private event into a communal affair. At the outbreak of the Black Death in 1348, for example, the daily death toll was 300; then, according to one chronicler, it increased to 1,000. Funerals blocked roadways, but otherwise streets were empty.²⁸ In 1430, another occasion of a severe period of plague, an eyewitness compared the long lines of funerals to columns of white marble, probably in reference to the shrouds covering the corpses.²⁹ There were years in which coffins had to be placed in crowded cemeteries, one on top of the other.³⁰ Lamentations were heard everywhere, and no one could pass in front of a house without being upset by the plaintive cries coming from within. “Everyone imagined himself to be soon dead.”³¹ A contemporary chronicler reported that in the plague of 1468–9 wailings over the victims were heard “day and night” in every quarter of Cairo.³²

The death of multitudes and the endless public funerals, too many to handle properly, surely had an enormous impact on the psychology of the people. One reaction, naturally enough, was of gloom, anxiety, and fear. An example of this reaction may be found in some lines by an anonymous poet, referring to the plague of 1348:

The approaching funerals frighten us,
And we are delighted when they have passed by.
Like the gazelle (*jahma*), fearful of the assailing lion,
Then returning to graze (*rāti’āt*) when the lion is gone.³³

During that year people abstained from weddings and celebrations.³⁴ Of the year 881 (1476–7) the contemporary Ibn Iyās stated: “This year has elapsed leaving the people in a state of anxiety (*fī amr murīb*), as they lost their children and families. They have seen no good.”³⁵

There was also a sense of resignation, with people expecting their death any moment. In 1430 the inhabitants of Cairo would return home from Friday prayers, taking account of how many were present to compare with the number on the following Friday. Each man had resigned himself to death, having made his will and repented. Each of the young men carried a string of prayer beads in his hand and did little besides attending the prayers for the dead, performing the five daily prayers, weeping, directing his thoughts to God, and showing his humility.³⁶ In that year people started to wear labels with personal details (name, place of residence, etc.) so that they could be identified in case they died suddenly in the street.³⁷

Panic, a necessary result of rumours hitting upon fragile souls, must have been a frequent visitor. In 1438, Ibn Taghrī Birdī tells us,

The people had rumored that men were all to die on Friday, and the resurrection would come. Most of the populace feared this, and when the time for prayer arrived on this Friday, and the men went to prayers, I [Ibn Taghrī Birdī] too, rode to the Azhar Mosque, as men were crowding to the baths so that they might die in a state of complete purity. I arrived at the Mosque and took a seat in it. The muezzins chanted the call to prayer, then the preacher came out as usual, mounted the pulpit, preached, and explained traditions to the people; when he had finished his first address he sat down to rest before the second sermon . . . but before he had finished his address he sat down a second time and leaned against the side of the pulpit a long time, like one who had fainted. As a result, the crowd, because of the previous report that men were all to die on Friday, was agitated; they believed the rumor was confirmed, and that death had made the preacher the first victim. While men were in this condition someone called out, “The preacher is dead.” The Mosque was thrown into confusion, people cried out in fear, wept with one another, and went up to the pulpit; there was much crowding against the preacher until he recovered.

This particular Friday prayer ended in total confusion.³⁸

There were other circumstances besides plagues in which death became a communal event. Hardly a year passed in Mamluk Cairo without an execution being performed in public. Years with an especially high number of executions (e.g., five in 1341), or the execution of persons of high standing, or inflicting the death penalty on many at one time – all these must have left a grave impression on the people. This was probably the case in 1253, when as many as 2,600, the troops of the *sharīf* (a descendant of the Prophet) Ḥiṣn ad-dīn Tha‘lab, a rebellious bedouin chieftain, were hanged along the road leading from Bilbays (in the Sharqiyya province) to Cairo.³⁹ It could also have been the case in 1453, when a qadi’s servant and his two companions were caught after they had habitually invited whores to their homes, murdered them and stolen their clothes. The criminals were executed and their corpses carried through the streets together with cages containing the bones of their victims.⁴⁰

Gruesome punishments of this sort probably left their mark on people's minds. "The cruel excitement and coarse compassion raised by an execution formed an important item in the spiritual food of the common people. They were spectacular plays with a moral."⁴¹ Take, for example, the execution scene in 1380 of Emir Ibn 'Arrām, governor of Alexandria. He was stripped naked, nailed to a camel, and thus sent from the Citadel down to the Horse Market (Sūq al-Khayl) to be hanged finally at Bāb Zuwayla. Ibn 'Arrām's fate became so well known that a saying spread: "God forbid the suffering of Ibn 'Arrām's sort."⁴² There were possibly profound, hidden effects of capital punishment carried out in front of large crowds. A student of popular culture has recently suggested that "the spectacle of public execution most probably reassured men by projecting death from themselves onto the criminal". A different effect of executions could have been "aggressiveness and scorn for human life".⁴³

It is against this (admittedly, poorly known) background of economic hardship, political oppression, frequent death, and their mental effect – the lot of ordinary people in medieval Cairo – that what follows in this book should be considered. A large part of what we shall encounter in the coming chapters – entertainment through literature, religious celebrations, or festivals – undoubtedly also served as a means of escaping the darker side of life. In fact these diversions, on occasion, caught the eyes of outside observers to the point of creating an illusion that life in Cairo was constant entertainment. Thus, to the Ottoman writer Muṣṭafā 'Alī of Gallipoli (1599), it seemed that "in Cairo [contrary to other places] never a month passes without some festivity [taking place], without their flocking together saying today is the day of the excursion to such and such place, or today is the day when such and such [procession] goes around. Therefore most of their time passes in leisure."⁴⁴ Muṣṭafā 'Alī probably exaggerated about the leisure of medieval Cairenes. Yet, his statement raises some little-studied questions. What did the people of Cairo do for leisure? What was their entertainment? How did they celebrate, and on what occasions? In a larger sense, what was their culture?

Some words should be said about "popular culture", for even recently it has been admitted to be an elusive concept, whose "boundaries shift in response to many kinds of circumstances".⁴⁵ One question: with whom should popular culture be associated? Was it the culture of the oppressed classes (as Marxist historians would claim)? Or was it rather the culture of the illiterate?⁴⁶ Of both, is the response of some, combining economic and educational criteria. For them popular culture is the culture of the poor, the rural, the subordinated, the laity, the illiterate, and so on.⁴⁷ A second question: was popular culture created *by* the people or *for* them?⁴⁸ The best answer seems to be that both possibilities apply.⁴⁹ But in that case the implication is that popular culture, at least to some extent, depends on a dominant culture. Popular culture thus suffers from the ideological imprint of a "higher", learned culture, and its existence as a separate entity is doubtful.

Indeed, not only is definition problematic,⁵⁰ but the very concept of popular

culture has lately been under attack. Is it indeed possible to demonstrate exclusive relationships between specific cultural forms and particular social groups?⁵¹ Chartier has been most critical in this regard. He has recently argued that “it is pointless to try to identify popular culture by some supposedly specific distribution of cultural objects”. That is, identifying cultural sets (certain texts, for example) as popular is problematic. To Chartier, the historian’s task is the search not for a specific culture but rather for “differentiated ways in which common material was used. What distinguishes cultural worlds is different kinds of use and different strategies of appropriation.” Hence, a more meaningful approach is to look at “the relation of appropriation to texts or behavior in a given society”, namely, observing the way in which cultural products are used. A good example of this approach is Ginzburg’s study of the world-view of the sixteenth-century Menocchio of Montereale, by now perhaps the most famous miller in history.⁵² The books Menocchio read were in no way designed for a popular audience. Still, he read them, but not in the way a learned man would.⁵³

Popular culture as a concept thus raises crucial problems which, at this stage, can only be handled temporarily and arbitrarily. Certainly, Chartier’s is an interesting and novel approach. But it seems not to contradict the historical existence of popular culture. Even Chartier finds it difficult to do away with classification (“cultural worlds”), and his main approach is to substitute the relation to the cultural object for the object itself. Here I concur with Le Goff that, though it is easy to criticize the method which postulates the existence of a popular culture – for which proof remains to be given – there are genres of “texts”, both written and non-written (non-written including forms as diverse as an oath and a carnival), which, despite their unavoidably uncertain boundaries, provide safe bases for analysis as primarily popular. As Le Goff argues, “the very historical context that shapes us, and from which we have not yet extricated ourselves, obliges us to begin with the vocabulary [of which popular culture is part]”. And despite being manipulated, popular culture has had plenty of scope for originality and freedom.⁵⁴

As for definition, the culture treated in this book is of – what I can mainly assume, but in some cases more safely argue – those socially inferior to the bourgeoisie; hence, supposedly also illiterate, at least by and large. It is a culture some elements of which were created *by* them, and others *for* them. At any rate, I subscribe to the suggestion that, for the time being, and this is especially valid for the case considered here, it may be wiser to describe and analyse rather than futilely attempt an exact definition. “Theologians, after all, can worship together even if they disagree bitterly in the lecture halls.”⁵⁵

Some texts – both in the literal and the metaphorical sense – that can be confidently characterized as popular are my concern in what follows. The method implied in their study is that described by Le Goff as “demanding that the corpus itself explicate the nature and meaning of its culture, whether through structural analysis, or content analysis, or both simultaneously”.⁵⁶ This method of examining cultural objects, as argued by Le Goff, also has the advantage of

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precipitating a hierarchically organized opposition between “learned” and “popular” cultures. It may lead us to some sort of solution to the problems just raised. I think this applies, at least to some extent, also to the case of medieval Cairo. How, I shall try to show in the concluding chapter of this book.