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Who Were the “Salt of the Earth” in Fifteenth-Century Egypt?

I

The ulama class, the religious scholars, in Mamluk Egypt and Syria, as in other medieval Muslim communities, was not monolithic. Professionally it was a ramified class comprising numerous subgroups such as jurists, theologians, grammarians, and Quran commentators.¹ Rivalry and competition among the ulama over positions in the judicial system and academe, and their patronage relations with the Mamluk elite, fueled schisms and increased this sector’s vulnerability to Mamluk oligarchic rule and its great political, military, and economic power, as the studies by Carl Petry, Jonathan Berkey, and Michael Chamberlain have shown.² In theory, however, the jurists continued to adhere to the fictive model of polarization in government between religion and power, or between ulama and *umarāʾ*. According to the traditional model of rulership, the ulama were granted the role of guardians of the Sacred Law and qualified guides for both the rulers and the population at large.

Prose narratives and archival materials have been the main source for the study of Mamluk society and culture, but only a scant part of the huge corpus of other literary texts, among them the *taqārīz* (s. *taqrīz*),³

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¹ U. Haarmann, “Rather the Injustice of the Turks than the Righteousness of the Arabs—Changing ‘*ulamāʾ*’ Attitudes towards Mamluk Rule in the Late Fifteenth Century,” *Studia Islamica* 68 (1988): 73.

² Carl Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1981); idem, *Protectors or Praetorians? The Last Mamluk Sultans and Egypt’s Waning as a Great Power* (Albany, 1994), chapters 5–6; Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo* (Princeton, 1992); Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350* (Cambridge, 1994).

³ *Taqrīz* (pl. *taqārīz*) was a statement praising a literary work. Works of this kind were generally written by obliged scholars of high reputation of the time in praise of their friends’ newly published works. The purpose of the *taqārīz*, much like today’s blurbs, was to promote the publication of the new work and its author. Franz Rosenthal, “Blurbs’ (*taqrīz*) from Fourteenth-Century Egypt,” *Oriens* 27–28 (1981): 177–78.



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has been utilized for this purpose.⁴ The *taqārīz* are literary texts that can provide valuable information about the dynamics within the ulama social and educational networks.⁵ In some cases, the *taqārīz* contain details that, together with others gleaned from the historical narrative sources, enable us to reconstruct events from which we can learn more about the strategies the ulama employed in their struggles for social survival. Such are the *taqārīz* written in praise of a panegyric biography composed by Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn Nāhid (757–841/1356–1438) in 819/1416 for the Mamluk sultan al-Muʾayyad Shaykh (815–21/1412–21) entitled *Al-Sīrah al-Sharīfah al-Muʾayyadīyah*.⁶ Thus far we know of twenty one *taqārīz* composed for Ibn Nāhid’s *Al-Sīrah al-Muʾayyadīyah* and this number is not exhaustive.⁷ Ibn Nāhid’s case is intriguing because of the unusually large

⁴ Li Guo has impressively explored the dynamics between literary texts, poetry in particular, and historical reality, through the inquiry of the relevance of Ibn Dāniyāl’s verses to specific historical events: “Reading Adab in Historical Light: Factuality and Ambiguity in Ibn Daniyal’s ‘Occasional Verses’ on Mamluk Society and Politics,” in *History and Historiography of Post-Mongol Central Asia and the Middle East*, ed. Judith Pfeiffer and Sholeh A. Quinn (Wiesbaden, 2006), 383–403.

⁵ Amalia Levanoni, “‘Sīrat al-Muʾayyad Shaykh’ by Ibn Nāhid,” in *Texts, Documents and Artefacts: Islamic Studies in Honour of D. S. Richards*, ed. Chase Robinson (Leiden, 2003), 211–33.

⁶ Two copies exist of *Al-Sīrah al-Sharīfah al-Muʾayyadīyah*; one is included in the manuscript of *Kitāb Qahwat al-Inshāʾ* housed in Tübingen Library (Handschrift Ma VI 70) and was therefore mistakenly attributed by C. Brockelmann to Ibn Ḥijjah. See edited version: Abū Bakr ibn ‘Alī Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī, *Kitāb Qahwat al-Inshāʾ*, ed. Rudolf Vesely (Berlin and Beirut, 2005). The second copy of *Al-Sīrah al-Muʾayyadīyah*, together with a collection of the *taqārīz* written for it, is found in the Raza Library in Rampur under the title *Kitāb al-Dhakhīrah fī Taqārīz al-Sīrah*, a microfilm of which is housed in the Institute of Arabic Manuscripts of the Arab League in Cairo: *Fihris al-Makhtūṭāt al-Muṣawwarah, Tārīkh, al-Qism al-Thālith* (Cairo, 1959), S. 151. For the edited version of Ibn Nāhid’s *Al-Sīrah al-Muʾayyadīyah* see: Rudolf Vesely, “Ibn Nāhid’s As-Sīra aš-Šaykhīya (Eine Lebensgeschichte des Sultans al-Muʾayyad Šaykh): Ein Beitrag zur Sīra-Literatur,” *Archiv Orientalni* 67 (1999): 149–220. For the discussion on *Al-Sīrah al-Muʾayyadīyah*, see: idem, “Eine verkannte Sultansbiographie, As-Sīra aš-Šaykhīya,” in *Zafar nāme, Memorial Volume of Felix Tauer*, ed. Rudolf Vesely and Eduard Gombar (Prague, 1996), 271–80; idem, “Ein Skandal in Kairo,” *Ex Oriente: Collected Papers in Honour of Jiří Bečka* (Prague, 1995), 182–90.

⁷ Sixteen of the *taqārīz* written for Ibn Nāhid’s *Al-Sīrah al-Muʾayyadīyah* are gathered in yet another manuscript by an anonymous author housed in the National Library in Berlin under no. 8645 (it was formerly included in the Imperial Museum under MS no. 1473). The manuscript bears the cumbersome title of “Al-Ajwibah al-Muʾtabarah ‘an al-Fatāyā al-Muʾtabirah allatī Ansha’ahā ‘Allāmat ‘Ašrihi wa-Farīd Shāmihi wa-Miṣrihi Jalāl al-Dīn Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣri.” See: W. Ahlwardt, *Verzeichniss der Arabischen Handschriften der Königlich Bibliothek zu Berlin* (Berlin, 1883), 9:580–81 (hereafter *Al-Ajwibah al-Muʾtabarah*). The manuscript of *Al-Ajwibah al-Muʾtabarah* generally deals with the famous polemics between Mamluk period authors, the majority of whom were religious scholars, who opposed or supported the writing of rhymed prose or panegyrics and in particular their inclusion in the historical narrative. Each of the



number of *taqārīz* composed by well-known ulama for an unsophisticated and unimportant work composed by a lower-ranked peer, and even more so because they united to mock him instead of to praise his work, as was the norm in their circles. The purpose of this article is to investigate the reasons for such unfair mockery by an elitist groups of scholars, especially the indigenous Shafi‘i leading class of scholars, who were partisans of Arabo-Islamic culture, against those they ranked as their lower-class peers like Ibn Nāhiḍ. An attempt will be made to place this case in the general context of the ulama rivalry over the hegemony of knowledge and religious power in the state and their struggle for social hierarchy and status.

II

Ibn Nāhiḍ was born in Aleppo in 757/1356 or thereabouts to an Arabized family of Kurdish origin. He became a passionate devotee of belles-lettres (*adab*) and attained adequacy in writing poetry and prose (*fa-balagha nazman wa-nathran*).⁸ Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497) mentions in Ibn Nāhiḍ’s entry that at a certain point in his life, he moved to Cairo where he joined (*tanazzala*, which also means to humble oneself) the Sufi order, or *khānqāh*, of al-Jamāliyah. He wrote panegyrics to the *khānqāh* leaders and composed *Al-Sīrah al-Sharīfah al-Mu‘ayyadīyah*, for which he received *taqārīz* from a number of his colleagues.⁹ Quoting the historian ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1441), al-Sakhāwī relates that Ibn Nāhiḍ also lived for some time in Damascus where he made a living selling

three polemics included in our manuscript is constructed from a collection of short essays, mainly written in rhymed prose, that touch upon a specific controversial event. The manuscript title is drawn from the first collection of polemic between the famous poet and scholar Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Ibn Nubātah (686–768/1287–1366) and Muḥyī al-Dīn ‘Abd Allāh (686–768/1287–1366), nephew of the historian Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir (620–92/1223–92), who like his uncle was in charge of *dīwān al-inshā‘*, the correspondence bureau. The third collection of polemics was written in Egypt in 795/1393 and dedicated to the work *Nuzūl al-Ghayth* by Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr al-Qurashī al-Makhzūmī al-Iskandarī al-Mālīkī, known as Ibn al-Damāminī. The second collection, the most interesting for my part, deals with Ibn Nāhiḍ’s *Al-Sīrah al-Sharīfah al-Mu‘ayyadīyah* and covers seventeen folios of the manuscript (Nos. 9–25). The author of *Al-Ajwibah al-Mu‘tabarah* mentions two other *taqārīz* that he knew of but could not find. Three *taqārīz* appear also in *Kitāb Qahwat al-Inshā‘* by Ibn Ḥijjah (Ibn Ḥijjah, *Qahwat al-Inshā‘*, 137–45). One of them, Ibn Ḥijjah’s, does not appear in the Berlin Manuscript. Four of the *taqārīz* included in *Kitāb al-Dhakhīrah fī Taqārīz al-Sīrah*, those of Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm al-Ba‘ūnī, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Rabbānī, and Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf al-Zu‘ayfrānī, do not appear in *Al-Ajwibah al-Mu‘tabarah* nor in *Kitāb al-Dhakhīrah fī Taqārīz al-Sīrah* (Vesely, “Ibn Nāhiḍ’s As-Sira aš-Šaykhīya,” 150–51).

⁸ Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw‘ al-Lāmi‘ li-Ahl al-Qarn al-Tāsi‘* (Beirut, n.d.), 10:67.

⁹ Ibid.



pottery. On his return to Cairo, he subsisted on donations he received for the panegyrics he composed for local dignitaries, until his death on 11 Sha‘bān 841/31 January 1438.¹⁰ Al-Sakhāwī mentions neither the names of the religious scholars who wrote *taqārīz* for Ibn Nāhiḍ nor the fact that they had organized to mock him. Al-Sakhāwī does provide a comment about the *Sīrah* in one brief sentence: “he composed al-Mu‘ayyad Shaykh’s biography and excelled in what he wanted” (*‘amala Sīrat al-Mu‘ayyad Shaykh fa-ajāda mā shā’a*),¹¹ probably implying Ibn Nāhiḍ’s lack of competence in the art of history and his exaggerated flattery for Sultan al-Mu‘ayyad Shaykh. Taqī al-Dīn Abū Bakr ibn ‘Alī Ibn Ḥijjah (d. 837/1434), the fifteenth-century writer, poet, and historian, relates that in 818/1415 Ibn Nāhiḍ composed a book written in a “strange manner” (*namṭ gharīb*) in which he included the events related to the Victorious al-Mu‘ayyad in unprecedented (*abda‘a* means also to invent, implying heresy) prose and verse.¹² Upon completion of the book, Ibn Nāhiḍ approached Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Damāmīnī, who was a prominent figure among the scholars and intellectuals surrounding al-Mu‘ayyad, for a panegyric. With the purpose of keeping him away, al-Damāmīnī swore that he would not write a word for him unless Ibn Ḥijjah wrote first. However, al-Damāmīnī, who was a man of his word, could not evade writing the *taqrīz* for Ibn Nāhiḍ because the latter went to Ibn Ḥijjah with a number of scholars to intercede for him, leaving him no choice but to grant them their request.¹³

Let us now see who were the learned scholars who took part in the practical joke against Ibn Nāhiḍ. No distinction has been made between persons who held administrative or bureaucratic offices (*al-wazā‘if al-dīwānīyah*) and religious offices (*al-wazā‘if al-dīnīyah*), because all persons involved were trained, at least to a certain level, in the Islamic religious sciences and because it was quite normal during the Mamluk period to shift about among offices in search of advancement in any branch of the government bureaucracy.¹⁴

1. Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn ‘Uthmān Ibn al-Bārīzī (769–832/1367–1428) was born in Ḥamāh to a Shafī‘ī family of well-known scholars going back several generations. He received a traditional education in his native city and excelled in belles-lettres and composition. In

¹⁰ Ibn Ḥijjah, *Qahwat al-Inshā’*, 137–45.

¹¹ Al-Sakhāwī, *Ḍaw’*, 10:67.

¹² Ibn Ḥijjah, *Qahwat al-Inshā’*, 137.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 137–38.

¹⁴ J. H. Escovitz, “Vocational Patterns of the Scribes of the Mamlūk Chancery,” *Arabica* 23, no. 1 (1976): 59–62.



796/1393 he was appointed as qadi of Ḥamāh and later as the secretary of its governor, Yashbak min Uzdamur. He became part of the coterie of Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh when the latter was still governor of the province of Tripoli. Al-Mu'ayyad extricated Ibn al-Bārizī from Yashbak who dismissed him from his posts and confiscated his property. Upon al-Mu'ayyad's rise to power, Ibn al-Bārizī was appointed to the office of secretary to the sultan and became his close confidant. This relationship yielded much property to Ibn al-Bārizī and accorded him "reverence and prestige that no one of his kind [i.e., ulama or *fuqahā'*] had attained (*wa-nāla min al-ḥurmah wa-al-wajāhah mā lam yanalhu ghayruhu min abnā' jinsihi*)." Up to his death he held the office of preacher, *khaṭīb*, in the mosque built by al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh, and was the curator of his library. Upon Ibn al-Bārizī's death, al-Mu'ayyad nominated his son Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Bārizī in his place as the Shafi'i chief qadi. Al-Sakhāwī mentions among Ibn al-Bārizī's intellectual talents his being a man of belles-lettres and a special talent in prose and poetry (*bāri'an naẓman wa-nathran*).¹⁵

2. Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Bārizī (796–856/1394–1452) was the son of Ibn al-Bārizī mentioned earlier. He was born in Ḥamāh and started his education with his father. He emigrated with his father to Egypt where he studied *fiqh* from the famous ulama of the age such as Aḥmad al-ʿIrāqī (see no. 5 below) and al-Bisāṭī (see no. 7 below). He served as chief officer (*kātib al-sirr*) of the correspondence bureau (*dīwān al-inshā'*), apparently thanks to his father.¹⁶

3. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn ʿUmar ibn Raslān al-Bulqīnī (783–824/1361–1421), who was also a Shafi'i scholar, was born in Cairo to an Egyptian family from Bulqīnah. His father, ʿUmar, had held numerous high religious offices, and his close relations to men of power paved the way for his sons to attain high office as well. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān belonged to the close circle of al-Mu'ayyad's confidants. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān served as an official in the bureau of correspondence and later as *qāḍī al-ʿaskar*. After his father's death he was appointed chief *muftī*, the jurist authorized to hand down opinions in matters of religious law. He gained fame for his erudition in the various branches of religious law, his writing skills, and fluent style in prose and poetry.¹⁷

4. Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr Ibn Jamā'ah al-Shāfi'i (749–819/1348–

¹⁵ Al-Sakhāwī, *Ḍaw'*, 9:137–39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9:236–39.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4:106–13; Jamāl al-Dīn Abū al-Maḥāsīn Ibn Taghribirdī, *Al-Manhal al-Ṣāfi wa-al-Mustawfā ba'da al-Wāfi* (Cairo, 1984–99), 7:197; Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī al-Maqrizī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-Ma'rifat Duwal al-Mulūk* (Cairo, 1943–72), 4:600.



1416) was born in Cairo. He was among a third generation of religious scholars in a Kinānī family from Ḥamāh. Among his teachers was ʿUmar al-Bulqīnī, father of the above-mentioned ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. His education was broad-ranged to the extreme; apart from the various fields of traditional Muslim law, it included medicine, astrology, philosophy, literature, and arts such as fencing, archery, and juggling (*shaʿūdḥah*). As a result of his encyclopedic education and tranquil disposition, he gained the admiration of his contemporaries. He was among Sultan al-Muʿayyad Shaykh's confidants and took part in the social gatherings he used to hold. Although he wrote excellent prose and poetry, he concealed this talent, and this is perhaps the reason the panegyric he wrote for Ibn Nāhiḍ does not appear in the manuscript, despite the fact that both the manuscript's author and al-Sakhāwī note its existence.¹⁸

5. Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Ibn al-ʿIrāqī Abū Zurʿah, known as Ibn al-ʿIrāqī (762–826/1361–1423), was born in Cairo in a Kurdish family of religious scholars. His father insisted that his son be educated by the best of the contemporary religious scholars. His father used to take him to his academic and social gatherings, and it was in his early childhood that he was exposed to prominent and outstanding intellectuals in Cairo such as the above-mentioned jurist al-Bulqīnī, the father of the aforementioned ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, and Ibn Jamāʿah and the famous poets Ibn al-ʿAṭṭār and Ibn Nubātah. At the age of three, his father took him to Damascus and then to Jerusalem to study with the best Quran reciters and other renowned teachers in the various branches of the religious sciences. He also stayed several times with his father in Mecca and Medina, where he benefited from famous teachers residing there at the time. Like the scholars mentioned earlier, his father ensured his advancement in various offices through his friend ʿUmar al-Bulqīnī. When the young Abū Zurʿah was left in Cairo to replace his father, who was nominated as the qadi and preacher of Medina, in all his teaching posts, ʿUmar al-Bulqīnī came to his aid against one of his father's opponents, who tried to extract the prestigious post of hadith teacher in al-Kāmiliyah. Abū Zurʿah's assertive struggle to retain this post brought him great prestige and consolidated his authority within the academe.¹⁹ After his father's death, he was given his teaching posts in several colleges (*madāris*) in Cairo and became an authority on religious matters and an object of admiration for his knowledge and noble bearing. He was considered one of the best jurists and teachers in Cairo,

¹⁸ Al-Sakhāwī, *Ḍawʿ*, 7:171–74.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:338.



circle of intellectuals. Most of these scholars were connected to one of two prominent ulama, Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn al-Bārīzī and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Bulqīnī, and it was through their connections that they were brought to al-Mu’ayyad Shaykh’s close circle of confidants and associates. Thus, Kamāl al-Dīn (Ibn al-Bārīzī’s son), Ibn Makānis, Ibn al-‘Aṭṭār, al-Damāmīnī, and Ibn Ḥijjah were identified with Ibn al-Bārīzī. Al-Bulqīnī’s group cohered around their acquaintanceship in academe. Al-Bulqīnī, Ibn Jamā‘ah, and Abū Zur‘ah all were students of al-Bulqīnī’s father, ‘Umar ibn Raslān al-Bulqīnī, who was a close friend of Abū Zur‘ah’s father. ‘Umar was a close confidant of al-Mu’ayyad, and it was through his mediation that all three became his close associates. Al-Maqrīzī was a student of ‘Umar ibn Raslān al-Bulqīnī and Abū Zur‘ah’s father. Al-Bisāṭī, Ibn Ḥajar, and al-Khaḍrī were all students of Ibn Jamā‘ah and Ibn Abī al-Wafā’ was al-Bisāṭī’s student. Ibn Ḥajar was also a student of Abū Zur‘ah. Besides his connections with al-Mu’ayyad, al-Bisāṭī had close connections with the Mamluk amirs Ṭaṭar and al-Mārīdānī. It was through these connections inside academe and with the Mamluk elite that these ulama and *fuqahā’* attained academic posts and judicial and bureaucratic appointments. Some of these families, such as al-Bulqīnī, Ibn Jamā‘ah, and Ibn Makānis, amassed great fortunes while holding key positions in the *qaḍā’* and *awqāf* management. Al-Bulqīnī owned one of the most splendid houses in Cairo.⁴⁰

It would appear that all members involved in Ibn Nāhiḍ’s case were born into educated, competitive families who gave them a broad education of the highest standard. Indeed, they were tuned into their unique position as a leading class among the local intellectuals. In a way their *taqārīz* are a bombastic declaration on the breadth of their education, literary skills, and refinement. Their style is replete with florid language and allusions to the Quran, hadith, and the vast body of Arabic literature through the generations. From the dates of most of the panegyrics noted in the manuscript, it is also evident that the writers responded to one another’s words with no small measure of competitiveness. The *taqārīz* convey, to a certain measure, a statement of what they considered the true model of knowledge a Muslim scholar should possess. Obviously, scholars with education of a lower standard, certainly including foreigners, or *a‘jām*, could hardly measure up to this model. It was the domain preserved for the elitist Arab ulama, the true agents of the indigenous Muslim culture, or to use Haarmann’s words, “the salt of the country.”⁴¹ It is in this context that

⁴⁰ Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Mawā‘iẓ wa-al-I’tibār bi-Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-al-Āthār* (Cairo, 1987), 2:54.

⁴¹ Haarmann, “Rather the Injustice of the Turks than the Righteousness of the Arabs,” 65.



the Syrian and Egyptian ulama's obsession with digging into their peers' works for faults in grammar, style, and content can be explained. Thus, for example, Ibn Ḥajar mentions that in spite of the fine poetry of Ibn Makānis, who was of Coptic origin, minor and grave grammatical faults (*alḥān*, s. *lahn*) slipped into it.⁴²

The case of al-Mu'ayyad's peace agreement with Nawrūz al-Ḥāfiẓī (d. 815/1412), the governor of Damascus and his enemy and protagonist in the civil war of 815/1412, confirms the disrespect the Arab scholars felt towards their non-Arab peers, especially the Turks.⁴³ Ibn Taghrībirdī presents the case as first-hand information he heard from Kamāl al-Dīn al-Bārīzī, the son of the above-mentioned Muḥammad Ibn al-Bārīzī. This ceremony was held to confirm with an oath Nawrūz's surrender and al-Mu'ayyad's commitment to restore him to his position as governor of Damascus. Ibn Taghrībirdī reports that Muḥammad Ibn al-Bārīzī administered the oath of allegiance, deliberately inserting linguistic errors that twisted its meaning and impaired its validity. When the Hanafi qadi turned to the Shafi'i qadi al-Bulqīnī, who is also one of our *taqārīz* authors, and commented on al-Bārīzī's mistakes in Arabic language and style, he was silenced immediately. Ibn Taghrībirdī clarifies that the Mamluk messengers and Turkish qadis who acted as Nawrūz's representatives at the ceremony did not catch on to the trick because of their lack of practice in Arabic. They brought the oath of allegiance to Nawrūz, confident of its validity. In this context, Ibn Taghrībirdī complains about the meager knowledge the Turkish jurists had in the various branches of Islamic science, not to speak of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). This story clearly reveals the idea the Arab ulama sought to convey about their position compared with the ruling Mamluks and the foreign ulama they employed. No matter how powerful the Mamluk *umarā'* were, the validity of their rule depended on the Arab ulama, who held the powerful key to knowledge.

III

Ibn Nāhid was clearly not a member of that exclusive group of scholars. He did, after all, make a living only by writing panegyrics for local dignitaries. We do not know of any salaried position he held in the religious bureaucracy. Ibn Nāhid's panegyric biography for al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh is written with quite a simple vocabulary but in a manneristic style. It is written in rhymed prose, particularly florid language, rhetorical expressions from the sources,

⁴² Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Inbāʾ*, 7:368.

⁴³ Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm*, 14:20–21.



and exaggerated flattery of Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh, to the level of using the most sacred metaphors in Islam such as the Ka'bah to describe his character and deeds or calling him the imam of the community, a role normally reserved for the ulama.⁴⁴ Important for the present discussion is that rhymed prose was rejected by the Arabs and continued to be considered as a typical Persian literary genre. The compiler of *Al-Ajwibah al-Mu'tabarah* does not leave room for guesswork and mentions clearly that Ibn Nāhid's *Sīrah* offended "the kings among the distinguished scholars" (*mulūk al-ulamā' al-a'lām*). Lacking the self-criticism to realize his fault and tongue slips (*wa-lam yash'ur bi-khaṭ'ihi wa-zalalihi*),⁴⁵ he requested "every religious scholar, litterateur, historian, and friend" (*kull 'ālim wa-adīb wa-mu'arrikh wa-ḥabīb*)⁴⁶ to write its praises. Moreover, when they "used double-edged language" (*ista'malū al-ibhām*)⁴⁷ that only appeared to praise his work, he accepted their words at face value. However, in spite of his recognition of Ibn Nāhid's lack of sagacity, the manuscript's author criticizes the *taqārīz* as treatises of "low poetry and mean prose and poor and disgraceful style" (*naẓam sāfil nāzil wa-ibārah rakīkah mustahjanah*) written in "a respite from the pens" (*'alā ḥin fatrah min al-aqlām*), i.e., *taqārīz* written while their pens rested from their truly worthy writing.⁴⁸ The question is: what caused so many distinguished scholars of the time to unite and attack Ibn Nāhid so meanly and mercilessly? In other words, what they were actually defending?

Rivalry over leadership and hegemony over the judicial system and resources of pious endowments arose between the Mamluk elite and the local ulama and *fuqahā'*, especially the Shafi'is, as early as the establishment of the Mamluk regime. The Shafi'i *madhhab* (school of law) that had enjoyed absolute dominance in the Egyptian judicial system became, with the introduction of Baybars' reform of 665/1265, one of the four schools of law.⁴⁹ Baybars' reform was designed to increase the prestige of the Hanafi school of law, to which the Mamluks belonged, and to enhance approval

⁴⁴ Vesely, "Ibn Nāhid's *As-Sira aš-Šaykhiyya*," 174, 184.

⁴⁵ *Al-Ajwibah al-Mu'tabarah*, fol. 9L.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Jorgen S. Nielsen, "Sultan al-Zāhir Baybars and the Appointment of Four Chief Qādis, 663/1265," *Studia Islamica* 60 (1984): 169–76; Joseph H. Escovitz, *The Office of Qādi al-Quḍāt in Cairo Under the Bahri Mamlūks* (Berlin, 1984), 53–61, 235–39; idem, "The Establishment of Four Chief Judgeships in the Mamluk Empire," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 102 (1982): 529–31; Yaacov Lev, "Symbiotic Relations: Ulama and the Mamluk Sultans," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 13, no. 1 (2009): 14–17.



of their policies and alien life style. This reform did not stop in Egypt and Aleppo: Tripoli, Hamāh, and Safad followed suit.⁵⁰ In 749/1348 a Hanafi qadi was nominated next to the Shafi‘i in the army too.⁵¹ Upon his ascension to power, Sultan al-Zāhir Barqūq (784–801/1382–99) initiated the post of Hanafi chief qadi in Jerusalem and Gaza. To these posts he appointed two foreign Sufis residing in the Shaykhūniyah in Cairo.⁵² We learn that in 812/1409, four chief qadis also stood at the head of the judicial system in Damascus.⁵³ Further erosion in the jurists’ situation came when the social leveling of the religious and judicial institutions brought persons from the lower classes to prominent positions, such as the vizierate, *hisbah* inspection,⁵⁴ and qadiships, through patronage relations and the practice of payment for appointments.⁵⁵ The sources reveal that “people from respectable families (*dhūwī al-buyūtāt*)”⁵⁶ felt that they were discriminated against during Barqūq’s reign, for he conducted a deliberate policy of advancing persons of lowly position to high offices that had been previously their privilege. The position of the qadis was also impinged upon when the jurisdiction of the *hujjāb* was extended to deal with matters beyond the military elite and the *dīwāns*, to matters traditionally dealt with according to the shari‘ah. For this reason the number of *hujjāb* consistently increased during the fifteenth century, and by the middle of the century, senior amirs holding high posts such as *dawādār* acquired judicial knowledge and acted as judges among the civilian population. Even the *julbān*, the non-commissioned Mamluks, also accumulated judicial power and acted as arbiters in disputes between civilians who eschewed the *shar‘i* courts. Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī’s (r. 906–22/1501–16) attempts to recentralize the judicial system and ban all courts but the *shar‘i* failed due to the amirs’ pressure.⁵⁷ These processes

⁵⁰ Nielsen, “Sultan al-Zāhir Baybars,” 171; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 3:519–20; Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Ibn Iyās, *Badā‘i‘ al-Zuhūr fī Waqā‘i‘ al-Duhūr* (Cairo, 1984), 1:2:349.

⁵¹ Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:772.

⁵² Ibid., 3:480; Ibn Taghribirdī, *Nujūm*, 11:228.

⁵³ Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 4:91.

⁵⁴ Jonathan Berkey, “The *muhtasibs* of Cairo under the Mamluks: Toward an Understanding of an Islamic Institution,” in *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, ed. Michael Winter and Amalia Levanoni (Leiden, 2004), 245–76.

⁵⁵ Bernadette Martel-Thoumian, “The Sale of Office and Its Economic Consequences during the Rule of the Last Circassians (872–922/1468–1516),” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 9, no. 2 (2005): 49–83.

⁵⁶ Ibn Taghribirdī, *Nujūm*, 11:291; Kosei Morimoto, “What Ibn Khaldūn Saw: The Judiciary of Mamluk Egypt,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 6 (2002): 119–20.

⁵⁷ Robert Irwin, “The Privatisation of ‘Justice’ under the Circassian Mamluks,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 6 (2002): 63–70.



of popularization and privatization in the academe and judicial systems obviously eroded the local *fuqahā's* position. It is not a coincidence that the local Shafi'i ulama were the sharpest critics of the Circassian regime.

When Baybars tried to include in his reform the division of the supervision over the *awqāf* in Egypt and Syria among the four *madhāhib*, he met stiff opposition from the Shafi'i legists. Henceforth the Mamluk sultans and other figures of authority would repeatedly try to lay their hands on the great fortunes amassed in the *awqāf*.⁵⁸ In 775/1373 the supervision of the *aḥbās* (*awqāf* lands)⁵⁹ and *awqāf* in Egypt was given to the amir Manjak al-Yūsufī, one of the prominent Mamluk amirs of the time.⁶⁰ By Jaqmaq's reign (842–57/1438–53), the *aḥbās* lands and *waqf* institutions such as the colleges al-Mu'ayyadiyah and al-Ashrafiyah were regularly put under the *dawādār's* supervision.⁶¹ In 844/1440 the inspection of the Ḥākimi Mosque and the *awqāf* donated for its maintenance, which were by long tradition in Shafi'i hands, were given to the *dawādār* Dūlāt Bey.⁶² During the fifteenth century, the inspection of the prestigious *waqf* of the Bīmāristān al-Manṣūrī, the hospital constructed in Cairo by al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn in 682–83/1283–84, was given regularly to the *atābak al-ʿasākir*. Furthermore, lands of pious endowments were increasingly transferred to the sultan's treasury. From Barsbāy's reign (825–42/1422–38) onward, legal techniques were used to transfer state lands, *iqṭāʿ*, into private hands and turn them into *awqāf*. The sultans benefited from these transactions because it was through *awqāf* manipulation that they channelled public funds to their families and gained covert incomes for their extra expenses in the army and maintenance of the important civilian sectors' support, as Carl Petry has shown in his seminal works on the reigns of Qāyṭbāy (873–901/1468–95) and Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī.⁶³

⁵⁸ Morimoto, "What Ibn Khaldūn Saw," 117–19; Nicolas Michel, "Les rizaq iḥbāsiyya, terres agricoles en mainmorte dans l'Égypte mamelouke et ottomane: Etude sur les Dafātir al-Aḥbās ottomans," *Annales islamologiques* 30 (1996): 114–17; Lev, "Symbiotic Relations," 22–26.

⁵⁹ *Rizaq* (s. *rizqah*) were the lands donated by sultans to prominent figures in their regime only for their lifetime. After their death the land returned to the sultan's treasury. Part of these lands were turned into *aḥbās* or *waqf* lands dedicated for the maintenance of urban religious and charitable foundations established by the Mamluks. See: Ibn Taghribirdī, *Nujūm*, 11:166; Michel, "Les rizaq iḥbāsiyya," 107–8.

⁶⁰ Ibn Taghribirdī, *Nujūm*, 11:65.

⁶¹ Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Tibr al-Masbūk fi Dhayl al-Sulūk*, ed. Aḥmad Zakī Bek (Cairo, 1896), 122.

⁶² Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 4:1223.

⁶³ Petry, *Protectors or Praetorians?*; idem, *Twilight of Majesty, The Reign of the Mamluk Sultans al-Ashraf Qāyṭbāy and Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī in Egypt* (Seattle, 1993). See also Michel, "Les rizaq aḥbāsiyya," 118–19.



It should be noted that the ulama and *fuqahā'* laid their hands on the *awqāf* to a no lesser extent than the Mamluk ruling class, for in addition to their formal remuneration, they embezzled great fortunes from the incomes of public charitable endowments. An indication of the wealth they amassed is the large sums of money confiscated from them upon their dismissal. The sources are replete with such confiscation cases. Furthermore, the ulama often neglected the upkeep of the *awqāf* under their responsibility, and when the estates were priced much below their true value, they would lay their hands on them and buy them cheaply.⁶⁴ In 838/1434 Ibn Ḥajar, who it should be remembered served as the chief Shafī'i judge and is the author of one of the *taqārīz* for Ibn Nāhid, was summoned by Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbāy (825–42/1422–38) and ordered to check the *waqf* stipulations of *madāris* and *khānqāhs* in Cairo and see how they were carried out in practice, with the intention to dismiss the unnecessary office-holders. Accompanied by the other three chief judges, Ibn Ḥajar began investigating the *awqāf* and found that the office-holders took possession of their incomes and disposed of them as they wished. Obviously, part of the incomes disappeared into their own pockets and most probably into their patrons'. Under pressure exerted by the office-holders and their patrons, the sultan had to back down and leave the *awqāf* untouched. Ibn Taghrībirdī complains that if Barsbāy had sent one of the *fuqahā'* serving in the *umarā'* administration (he is probably implying the foreign Hanafi jurists) for this task instead of Ibn Ḥajar, his favor to the public would have measured up to his conquest of Cyprus.⁶⁵ However, al-Maqrīzī's comment on this case is positive. He mentions that the sultan did not like the way Ibn Ḥajar inspected the *awqāf*, but had to give up his plan. The people rejoiced when they learned that the sultan abolished his order of the *awqāf* inspection, for they anticipated "great changes" (*taghayyurāt kabīrah*) in them had it been carried out.⁶⁶ The increasing scrutiny of the informal *awqāf* management on the part of the sultans put the ulama under continuous risk of confiscation of their wealth and dismissal from their positions.

The Mamluks, as aliens, were generally interested in the moderation of orthodox Islam and the introduction of Sufism as an alternative to the indigenous Shafī'i school of law. They invested particularly in the instruction of the Hanafi *madhhab* in the colleges they established for

⁶⁴ See, for example, al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 2:82.

⁶⁵ Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm*, 15:58–59.

⁶⁶ Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 4:939.



the teaching of Muslim law, or *madāris*,⁶⁷ and in Sufi orders, due to their reverence for the Sufi shaykhs and also because they sought the support of the masses who preferred the practice of popular (Sufism) over orthodox Islam. Nevertheless, the Mamluks could not ignore the position held by the Shafi'i *fuqahā'* and ulama as the leading upper class. Therefore, while the Mamluks dedicated *khānqāhs* for the instruction and rituals of Sufism, they stipulated their desire for an orthodox curriculum and invited mostly foreign ulama, generally Hanafis, to teach in them, and Sufis to instruct in the *madāris*, as Leonor Fernandes has shown.⁶⁸ Consequently, both orthodox and Sufi institutions underwent a process of moderation, and by the end of the fourteenth century the differences between them were blurred. Local *fuqahā'* and ulama were obviously the victims of this trend of popularization in academe, as increasing numbers of newcomers, especially Turkish and Persian Sufis from Anatolia and Iraq who had not mastered Arabic, were brought in by the Mamluks to take their place. Furthermore, interest in Turkish literature, both translated from Arabic or originally written in Oghuz Turkish, grew among the Mamluks during the Circassian period because of the increasing literary and intellectual influence from Turkish Anatolia.⁶⁹ Thus, for example, Muṣṭafá ibn 'Umar al-Ḍarīr, the blind Mawlawi from Anatolia, was accepted in Cairo as a religious writer, irrespective of his confessed deficiency in learning. He composed for al-Zāhir Barqūq the Turkish biography of the Prophet Muhammad which is still appreciated in today's Turkey.⁷⁰ The Hanafi shaykh 'Alā' al-Dīn al-Sīrāmī was invited from the east (probably from Iraq) to serve as the head of the newly established Sufi order and college of the same sultan.⁷¹ Ya'qūb Shāh of Arzenjān, who studied in Ṭabrīz and held the post of chief of the chancellery of the Qaraqoyunlu ruler, was nominated as the director of the foreign chancellery in Egypt through the mediation of the grand *dawādār* Yashbak min Mahdī. Another Turk, Ḥusayn ibn Pīr Ḥājjī Abū Bakr from Shirāz, gained favor with Yashbak through his musical accomplishments and was nominated as administrator of his *qubbaḥ* in Cairo. As a reward for composing the Turkish version of the *Shāhnāmah* for Sultan al-Ghawrī,

⁶⁷ Leonor Fernandes, "Mamluk Politics and Education: The Evidence from Two Fourteenth-Century Waqfiyya," *Annales islamologiques* 23 (1987): 87–98.

⁶⁸ Leonor Fernandes, *The Evolution of a Sufi Institution in Mamluk Egypt: The Khanaqah* (Berlin, 1988).

⁶⁹ B. Fleming, "Literary Activities in Mamluk Halls and Barracks," in *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet*, ed. Myriam Rosen-Ayalon (Jerusalem, 1977), 251–52.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁷¹ Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm*, 11:243.



Sharīf Ḥusayn ibn Ḥasan was appointed, over the heads of the Dayrī family, as the shaykh of the al-Muʿayyad Mosque.⁷² Among the Arab ulama, the Mamluks held in high esteem those who were bilingual. Badr al-Dīn al-ʿAynī, the fifteenth-century historian who was the Hanafī chief qadi and drinking companion of Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbāy, mastered Arabic and Turkish. During their gatherings, he used to read to the sultan the history of Islam in Arabic and translate it into Turkish and answer Barsbāy’s many questions on matters of religion “in words close to his understanding” (*bi-ʿibārah taqrubu min fahmihi*).⁷³ Barsbāy admitted, Ibn Taghrībirdī contends, that without al-ʿAynī’s guidance his knowledge of Islam would have been imperfect. Against this background, it is unsurprising that extremist Shafīʿī ulama opposed the Hanafīs and the low Sufī orders that the Mamluks supported and were zealous to introduce their adherents to the judicial system and academe. Al-Maqrīzī was renowned for his fanatic opposition to the Mamluks, Sufīs, and Hanafīs in general.⁷⁴ Muḥammad Ibn al-Bārīzī was known for being extremely hard on his enemies and a zealous benefactor to his friends and adherents.⁷⁵

To cling to their continuously diminishing share in the power structure and the division of the country’s resources, the upper class ulama thus had to navigate between contradicting tendencies: between cooperation with the Mamluks and criticism of their moderate and popular understanding of Islam and their rejection of the inequity of the division of the country’s wealth. Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, a scholar highly esteemed for his knowledge and piety, encapsulates the embarrassing experience these ulama had in the *sharʿī* judicial system. He testifies that he had much regret at his decision to accept the position of chief Shafīʿī qadi and felt he had denied his conscience (*janā ʿalā nafsihi*). Among the reasons he mentions for his discomfort, he refers in the first place to the lack of distinction (*farq*) between the ulama and others. In the second and third place he mentions the Mamluks’ interference in his judicial decisions and the necessity to treat them with flattery (*mudārāh*). To soften the dissonance in his conduct, Ibn Ḥajar would apologetically announce that “there was not one hair on his body that approved his name” (*lam tabqā shaʿrah fī badanihi taqbal ismahu*).⁷⁶ It is worthy of mention that in spite of these declarations, Ibn Ḥajar served

⁷² Fleming, “Literary Activities,” 252.

⁷³ Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm*, 16:10. See also: A. Schimmel, “Some Glimpses of the Religious Life in Egypt during the Later Mamluk Period,” *Islamic Studies* 7 (1965): 356–57.

⁷⁴ Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Manhal*, 1:417.

⁷⁵ Sakhāwī, *Ḍawʿ*, 9:138.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:38.



for over twenty-one years as a Shafi'i chief qadi, and at least one example of the compromises he had to make during his service has already been mentioned.

IV

Some of the scholars who criticized Ibn Nāhiḍ for his exaggerated flattery of those in power were guilty of the same sin. Ibn Makānis wrote poems of praise (*qaṣā'id*) to Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh⁷⁷ without incurring the censure given to Ibn Nāhiḍ. Badr al-Dīn al-ʿAynī wrote the biography of al-Mu'ayyad under the title *Al-Sayf al-Muhannad fī Sirat al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad*. Moreover, writing biographical pieces of a clearly literary nature was an accepted norm, and works of this kind were written under the aegis of the sultan and those in positions of power throughout the Mamluk period. P. M. Holt has noted the literary characteristics of works of this kind, defining them as a “genre of courtly literature.”⁷⁸ Contemporary historians found no flaw in the words of praise for the heroes of such biographies, nor in the selectivity employed in the presentation of the events recounted in them. What made the difference between a praiseworthy and disgraceful panegyric then? It was a matter of the right measure of flattery disguised as historical fact by a good knowledge of history, and above all proficiency in Arabic language and literature and religious sciences. These intellectual skills were the symbols of the upper class ulama's social distinction and certainly part and parcel of the code of conduct they adopted and used as a self-regulating standard that was so necessary for their social survival.⁷⁹ It fostered their image as independent religious scholars and men of letters and conveyed their ethical principles, and at the same time it left room for them to enjoy the privileges that close relations with the ruling Mamluks brought them.⁸⁰ They could not allow others, especially lower-grade peers like Ibn Nāhiḍ, who were not as fluent and eloquent in Arabic as they were, to use their distinctive symbols without compromising their already weakened sociopolitical status.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 6:172; Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalāni, *Inbāʾ*, 7:368.

⁷⁸ P. M. Holt, “Literary Offerings: A Genre of Courtly Literature,” in *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society*, ed. Thomas Philipp and Ulrich Haarmann (Cambridge, 1998), 3–16.

⁷⁹ See for example Ibn Iyās' criticism of al-Ṣayrafī's historical works: Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ*, 3:309–10.

⁸⁰ Lev, “Symbiotic Relations,” 9–10.

