

Slave Girls and Learned Teachers

Women in Mamluk Sources

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The social and gender histories of the Middle Islamic Period are now engaging an increasing number of scholars.¹ Their work has led to a better understanding of the social position and image of women in these societies, and of Mamluk women in particular.² Nevertheless, some of these cutting-edge studies, often heavily influenced by the growing feminist hermeneutics literature, employ too wide a brush in painting a portrait of the gender history of past Islamic societies.³

Chronicles, biographies, legal texts, and inscriptions cast light on both the ideal social position of women and their image, as well as on the historical reality of women throughout the long Mamluk centuries. These sources describe free or slave women who were engaged in a variety of domestic and non-domestic forms of labor.⁴ Aside from al-Sakhāwī's volume on girls and women, and the comparatively few women with a scholarly reputation to merit an entry in Mamluk biographical dictionaries,⁵ most of the data on women are found in writings that aimed initially at confining them. Undoubtedly these texts reflect the prevailing social position of their authors' circles and audiences.

A long ode (*qaṣīda*) dedicated by Abū Shāma to his wife Sitt al-'Arab constitutes a contribution to the history of medieval Islamic emotions. It illustrates the great affection that he felt towards her and did not hesitate to demonstrate. It opens with the declaration:

1 Waines, *Through a veil darkly* 642–59; Keddie and Baron (eds.), *Women in Middle Eastern history*.

2 Rapoport, *Marriage*; and see the critical remarks by Meisami, *Writing medieval women* 49, 67, 74.

3 Mahmood, *Politics of piety*.

4 Ayyubid and Mamluk authors devoted books or volumes to the history of women. This is also the main topic of several *adab* works. The earliest are two volumes by Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh madīnat Dimashq*, and al-Malāqī al-Ma'āfirī's *al-Ḥadā'iq al-ghīnā' fi akhbār al-nisā'*. The latter tells stories about pre-Islamic and Muslim women. On this author and others, see Kilpatrick, *Some late 'Abbāsīd and Mamlūk books about women* 56–78.

5 Homerin, *A bird ascends the night* 247–80; idem, *Writing Sufi biography* 389–99.

I married a beloved woman from the household of Danw
 she is blessed with outstanding qualities that confused even the wise
 all her features, her characteristics and stature, are superb
 she is loveliness and most welcomed
 fertile, adored, free woman from the tribe of Quraysh
 modest. Despite her beauty she respects [me] her husband.⁶

The dominant social values as reflected in juridical writings⁷ indeed reinforce women's image as a marginal component of Mamluk society. This seems to be the aim of the North African Maliki juriconsult (*faqih*) Ibn Ḥajj al-'Abdarī. Reports in the chronicles about dress code follow a similar line. In his satirical shadow-theater, Ibn Dāniyāl plays down Baybars' moralistic campaign.⁸ As women were prevented from holding leading juristic, political or military positions, they were forced into the background. This articulated common arrangement is visible in accounts of social gatherings (*majālis*) in which wives did not participate, but professional female performers took an active part in transmitting religious knowledge and values.⁹

On the other hand, a great number of Mamluk chroniclers were keen to report on the merits of women who belonged to their own social milieu.¹⁰ They often described them as modest and learned women.¹¹ Yet only rarely do we come across rich accounts, such as Ibn Ṭawq's description of ordinary women. In his "diary" we read reports on women who earn their living or are sticklers when negotiating the conditions of re-marriage. Hence the data at our disposal on the great majority of common women are still partial and imperfect.¹² However, although women are underrepresented in Mamluk chronicles and biographical dictionaries, it should be emphasized that these sources offer rich accounts that shed light on their lives and conditions.¹³

6 Abū Shāma, *Tarājim rijāl al-qarnayn al-sādis wa-l-sābiʿ*, ed. Shams al-Dīn, 301–2.

7 However, in this chapter I will not dwell on legal texts that depict an ideal (in Weberian terms) social reality.

8 Guo, *The performing arts in Medieval Islam*.

9 Ḥassan, *Ṭāʾifat al-maghānī fi Miṣr fi l-ʿaṣr al-Mamlūkī* 376–416.

10 al-Khazrajī, *Akhbār awliyāʾ wa-manāqibuhum* 26–7.

11 The origins of this historical tradition can be found in earlier centuries. See, for example, al-Sulamī, *Dhikr al-niswa al-mutaʾabbidāt al-ṣūfiyyāt*; Sayeed, *Women and the transmission of religious knowledge* 70, 129, 133.

12 Guo, *Tales of a Medieval Cairene harem* 101–21; Shoshan, *On the marital regime in Damascus* (refers frequently to Ibn Ṭawq).

13 Lutfi, *al-Sakhāwī's Kitāb al-Nisāʾ*; idem, *Manners and customs of fourteenth century Cairene women* 99–121; Rapoport, *Women and gender in Mamluk society* 1–47.

Therefore, I will not try to narrate the story of women over a lengthy period (1250–1517) or over the vast territory stretching from the first cataracts of the Nile to Anatolia. To demonstrate the potential of future research, and considering the complex reality of the past and the source data, two social groups were selected: slave girls (concubines) and learned women. Although these prototypes could be placed on either end of the social spectrum, they were not chosen to represent the Weberian “ideal type.” Readers of Mamluk documentation should not accept any overstated popular generalization. Parameters such as class and changing local conditions should restrict our investigation to a concrete place and time. The information on the social position of Mamluk women and their literary image reflects, in contrast to a simplified and idealistic picture of past societies, a complex reality. This stems from varying conditions, including these women’s status and roles. Thus, a colorful picture can be composed from multiple layers that eschew a one-dimensional picture.

The present study inspects a limited number of case studies and deals with concrete data on a handful of women. What I aim to highlight for the purposes of the present paper is that we should reject a-historical statements about “Muslim women, Islam and the women, etc.”¹⁴ By narrating their story, my intention is to demonstrate, inter alia, that the popular talk on “Muslim women” is misleading. This research strategy points to the dualism reflected in male dominated sources, and the multifaceted conditions in urban centers of the Mamluk Sultanate.

In fact it is possible to argue that the sources paint a polar spectrum of images, from the pious ascetic woman to the shameless adulteress. Mamluk *‘ajā’ib* accounts (*mirabilia*) transport their readers, as is accepted in this literary genre, to realms of fantasy. Women in these stories often have uncontrollable seductive power and play the role of destructive temptresses. An example of these fables is the story of the imaginary al-Wāqwaq Island.¹⁵ This threatening representation of women even led several writers to express views that, in hindsight, we can term misogynistic.¹⁶

Several lines by the jurist and man of letters (*adib*) Badr al-Dīn al-Ghazzī are examples of this. He wrote (in 944/1538):

The very character of [this] one [woman] resembles the horse you are riding. If you loosen her reins slightly she will remain ungovernable. If

14 Meisami, *Writing medieval women* 47.

15 Malti-Douglas, *Woman’s body, woman’s word* 87–95; however, compare with the critical remarks by Meisami, *Writing medieval women* 52, 66.

16 For a plea to use this term carefully, see Meisami, *Writing medieval women* 48, 52, 65.

you lighten up the cheek-strap of her bridle a little she will pull you for a long time, but if you curb her and control her firmly when it is needed you can rule over her.¹⁷

He even goes on to say: "A bad nature characterizes most women who are shallow-minded." To make his point Badr al-Dīn al-Ghazzī tells a story about the caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who scolded his wife: "You are merely a toy in the backyard of the house, if need arise [we call you], and if not, remain seated."¹⁸

Despite these harsh sayings, women were clearly visible in the streets of the large urban centers of the sultanate. The regular calls to seclude women and efforts to force them to behave according to the imagined codes of the female ideal actually reflect the failure of these measures. Prostitutes (*qihāb*) and brothels are regularly mentioned in the chronicles.¹⁹ They are a conspicuous theme in the script of Ibn Dāniyāl's shadow play, which tells the story of Cairo's peripheral social circles.²⁰ One main character in this milieu is Umm Rashīd the procuress:

So summon Umm Rashīd, the marriage agent (*khāṭiba*) even though she is one who goes out at night into the bush (*ḥātiba*). But she knows every honorable woman and every adulteress and every beauty in Miṣr and al-Qāhira. For she lets them leave the baths disguised in servant's clothes, and finds secret hideouts for the prostitutes the police are looking for, and provides them with clothes and jewelry for free.

... She also knows how to deal in a friendly way with the hearts of lovers, and she sells the pleasures of love only on a trial basis. She does not break her promise, she does not haggle over the price. She does not visit an inn to collect the wax that drips down from the candles, nor does she ransack the clothes of the guests for money. And she does not take the fragrant flowers round the bottles, pretending it is to decorate the clothes of the sinful women. And she does not filch the pieces of meat from the plates, nor does she pour together what has cleared from the dregs of the wine. She does not exchange an old slipper for a new one, and she does not criticize the clothes of customers, as a housewife would do.

17 al-Ghazzī, *al-Murāḥ fi l-muzāh* 53–4.

18 *Ibid.*, 54.

19 Elbendary, *The sultan, the tyrant, and the hero* 143; Lev, *Symbiotic relations* 19–20.

20 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three shadow plays* 7–13; Guo, *The performing arts in Medieval Islam* 11, 32, 79, 126, 167–72 (translation).

Mostly she goes round the houses of the women of rank and sells bolts of fabric, raw and bleached, and all kinds of spices and incense. She sells on credit and makes appointments for Thursdays and Mondays. And she does not haggle over the price. And she keeps her appointments even if it is the night of fate (*laylat al-qadr*).²¹

This vague description in the shadow play should be viewed with caution in terms of its ability to represent social reality, as it may be only a fragmentary picture of urban society. Yet, the popular image of women as intriguers who cunningly try to manipulate men is found in other literary genres. The following historical story (797–8/1395–6) confirms this argument. Ibn al-Nashū (murdered in 799/1397), a wealthy grain-broker from Damascus,²² divorced his wife ‘Ā’isha, who claimed to be pregnant. The divorcé made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Meanwhile, back at home she was still said to be expecting a child, until one day she sent word to her former husband that she had delivered a baby boy. Ibn al-Nashū acknowledged that he was the father and organized a party. Soon, however rumors spread that ‘Ā’isha was not the mother. The investigation revealed the infant was born to a poor woman, who was paid to claim that her fetus had died and handed the baby to the fictitious mother. At the *qāḍī*'s court, beautiful ‘Ā’isha admitted that her child was stillborn and that she pretended that this stranger's baby was her child.²³

There are noticeable misogynic stances in a number of genres. This can be seen in an *adab* composition by ‘Alī ibn ‘Umar Ibn al-Batanūnī, who is said to have lived in Egypt during the last years of the sultanate (900/1495).²⁴ He takes the story of Joseph in the Qur’ān as his point of departure, a position that is in line with remarks voiced by some of his contemporaries.²⁵ In the introductory section of his work, Ibn al-Batanūnī states that “I will depict women's guile and

21 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three shadow plays* 22–3; Ḥamāda, *Khayāl al-ẓill wa-tamthīlīyāt Ibn Dāniyāl* 161–2; Kahle, *The Arabic shadow play in Egypt* 32–3; Buturović, *Sociology of popular drama in Mediaeval Egypt* 162–3; idem, *The shadow play in Mamlūk Egypt* 170; Guo, *The performing arts in Medieval Islam* 184 (translation).

22 Brinner, *The murder of Ibn An-Našū* 207–10; not to be confused with Shams al-Dīn the Egyptian who had a similar (in transcription) nickname (and who died in 740/1339). See Levanoni, *The al-Nashw episode* 207–20.

23 Ibn Ḥijjī, *Ta’rīkh Ibn Ḥijjī* 164–5.

24 Marjiyya, *Shakhṣīyat al-mar’a* 175 (based on Ibn al-Batanūnī's *al-‘Umwān fī l-iḥtirāz min makāid al-niswān*, including translation of this work). I was not able to consult Jiyad's *Anti-women sentiments in Arabic literature*.

25 Particularly Mamluk exegeses of Q 12:28. See, for example, al-Khāzin al-Baghdādī, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-jalīl* ii, 524; al-Shirbīnī, *Sirāj al-munīr* ii, 104.

their cunningness despite their weak intellects.”²⁶ Towards the closing chapter of his work, Ibn al-Batanūnī tells a brief story about the emir Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Ṭīlāwī,²⁷ the *qāḍī*’s daughter and a Jew. It describes an event that took place in the woman’s house, where she was drinking wine and amusing herself with a Jewish companion. Informed of the event, the officer hastened to the crime scene, only to find himself fooled by the young woman who ordered her slave girls to beat up the intruder.²⁸

Slave Girls and Concubines

Slaves were a key constituent of urban societies in lands governed by the Mamluk aristocracy.²⁹ Concubines and eunuchs were a visible component in their palaces as well as in elite civilian households. They were brought to Syria and Egypt from the four corners of the earth.³⁰ Al-‘Ayntābī al-Amshāṭī provides a long list of nationalities that were traded in the slave markets and appends evaluations of their qualities. There is a short account of the physical features of each nation accompanied by an assessment of their characters and potential behavior.

Selecting a slave, al-‘Ayntābī al-Amshāṭī says, requires more than knowledge of geography and ethnography. Physiognomy (*fīrāsa*) was one additional tool that his and other guidebooks encouraged.³¹ This so-called “science” was widely accepted among Muslims including the learned Mamluk classes,³² as shown

26 See reasoning by Ibn al-Batanūnī, *al-Unwān fī l-iḥtirāz* 18, 268; Marjiyya, *Shakhṣīyat al-mar’ā* 212, 447.

27 So is the reading of Ibn al-Batanūnī by al-Tūnjī (ed.), *al-Unwān fī l-iḥtirāz* 423; but Marjiyya, *Shakhṣīyat al-mar’ā*, reads al-Ṭāblāwī. In fact, early Ottoman documentation from Egypt mentions a jurist by the name of Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Ṭāblāwī, but this author passed away in 966/1559 half a century after the presumed time of Ibn al-Batanūnī. See al-Ṭāblāwī, *Murshīd al-mushtaghilīn*.

28 Ibn al-Batanūnī, *al-Unwān fī l-iḥtirāz* 423–6; Marjiyya, *Shakhṣīyat al-mar’ā* 243–6.

29 Hodgson, *The venture of Islam* ii, 140–1, 400.

30 Ayalon, *Eunuchs, caliphs and sultans* 15, 18, 24.

31 al-‘Ayntābī al-Amshāṭī, *al-Qawl al-sadīd* 75–8.

32 Manuals and books of physiognomy provide a rich catalogue of characteristics and physical features, which give the potential buyer tools of reference, or so they claim. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Fīrāsa* 20, 24, 31, 39; al-Dimashqī, *al-Siyāsa fī ‘ilm al-fīrāsa* 19–20; al-‘Ayntābī al-Amshāṭī, *al-Qawl al-sadīd* 75, 80–1; Ghaly, *Physiognomy* 163.

for instance in al-Ibshihī's encyclopedia.³³ Inspecting a slave or slave girl who was put up for sale at the market should begin with a careful look at her color, which breaks down into red, yellow, green or white. Skin complexion was assumed to define the individual's qualities and was a powerful indication of invisible defects, diseases and hidden syndromes. The inspection of the organs and the limbs comes next, from the head downwards.

An example of this methodology is the account of slaves sold in the markets of the sultanate from Black Africa. According to these authors, the shape of the African head explains their inferiority as compared to the Arabs, Persians and Byzantines.³⁴ In portraying these peoples, al-'Ayntābī al-Amshāṭī quotes Galen, who is said to have claimed that blacks have ten peculiar features. Relying on this claim, he concludes that African women are suitable for taking care of babies and supervising children, dancing and playing music, but because of the odor of their skin they have no qualities or skills that encourage men to marry them.³⁵ He adds that East African slave girls who were not removed from their homeland before the age of puberty are unqualified sexually because they undergo excision.³⁶

The slaves who did reach the lands of the sultanate were purchased in slave markets by civilians and soldiers.³⁷ They had a range of duties. Mamluk texts often mention female slaves³⁸ with menial or sexual roles,³⁹ or both,⁴⁰ although certainly none of these slave girls played the crucial role of Shajar al-Durr in the transformation of the political order in the Nile Valley from the Ayyubids to the Mamluks.⁴¹

33 Ibn Buṭlān, *Risāla fi shirā' al-raqīq wa-taqlīb al-'abīd* 388; reproduced by al-Ibshihī, *al-Mustaṭraf fi kull fann mustaṭraf* ii, 88.

34 al-'Ayntābī al-Amshāṭī, *al-Qawl al-sadīd* 83.

35 For more on this, see Gordon, *Female circumcision and genital operations in Egypt and the Sudan* 3–14; Berkey, *Circumcision circumscribed* 19–38; Giladi, *Normative Islam versus local tradition* 251.

36 al-'Ayntābī al-Amshāṭī, *al-Qawl al-sadīd* 50, 52, 59, 61.

37 Frenkel, *Some notes concerning the trade and education of slave-soldiers*.

38 Keddīe claims that "little study has been done on female slaves." This evaluation reflects an early stage in scholarship. See Keddīe, *The past and present of women in the Muslim world* 92.

39 al-Azmeh, *Rhetoric for the senses* 215–31 (replace Ibn Sayyuda with Ibn Sida).

40 'Abd al-Nabī, *al-Zawāj fi usar salāṭīn al-mamālīk* 30–1; and cf. Frenkel, *Marriage and family in Mamluk palaces* 239–48.

41 Levanoni, *Šagar ad-Durr* 209–18.

The Sultan Barqūq (fl. 784–801/1382–99) had six children, three of whom were boys whose mothers are named in the sources.⁴² A Greek concubine named Shīrīn⁴³ gave birth to Barqūq's eldest son, the prince Faraj (in 791/1398),⁴⁴ while another concubine, a Turkish slave girl named Qunnuq-Bey (d. 835/1432), bore al-Malik al-Manšūr 'Abd al-'Azīz⁴⁵ a second prince and heir of Barqūq. The Sultan Khushqadam acquired several concubines.⁴⁶ One of these, a slave girl named Siwar-Bāy, gave birth to a daughter. He married his concubine who in turn was promoted to the highest position that a woman in the royal harem could have (in 870/January 1466).⁴⁷ Khawand Aşalbāy was one of the concubines in the harem of the Sultan al-Ashraf Qāyrbāy (873–901/1468–98).⁴⁸ She bore him a son who inherited the throne.⁴⁹

This social strategy was not limited solely to the governing military elite. Civilians who had the financial resources purchased slave girls in markets.⁵⁰ A few examples suffice to support this claim. It is said that Ibrāhīm ibn Aḥmad al-Zirī preferred Turkish concubines. The maids even taught him Turkish.⁵¹ The Cairene historian al-'Aynī reports on incidents of death in his house and mentions that slave girls passed away together with his children.⁵² Additional cases are mentioned below.

There are several explanations for this social reality: demographically, it contributed to the construction of patrimonial households and increased the likelihood of progeny in an environment that experienced high mortality rates of newborns and mothers; politically, the concubines strengthened male dominance in society, even if the man himself was a manumitted slave. This feature is clearly seen in reports on the awarding of a slave girl to a colleague or a subordinate. These “gifts” fortified males' alliances.

42 Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira* xii, 81, describes the circumcision of two of Barqūq's sons. At the citadel, the sultan held a party that was open only to women.

43 al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi'*, repr. edition Beirut 1992, xii, 69 (no. 427 where Shīrīn claims that she was Barqūq's cousin “*wakanat ibn!* [read *bint!*] *āmm sayyidihā*”).

44 Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira* xii, 168 (line 6); xiii, 149 (line 20).

45 On her reaction to the coup that led to her son's enthronement, see Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira* xii, 331.

46 al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi'* xii, 68–9 (no. 417).

47 Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira* xvi, 292.

48 A mosque bearing Khawand Aşalbāy's name still stands in Fayyūm, Egypt.

49 Rice, *Studies in Islamic metal work-I* 574–5.

50 al-Subkī, *Qaḍā' al-arab fi as'ilat Ḥalab* 304 (question 21).

51 Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Durar al-kāmīna*, ed. al-Karnakawī, i, 16.

52 al-'Aynī, *Iqd al-jumān*, ed. Qarmūt, i, 397 (833)..

Recorded reactions by women and their relatives to the prospects that a husband would purchase a concubine constitute a different form of evidence for the prevalence of slave girls in patriarchal households, both military and civilian.⁵³ This phenomenon is vividly described in a *responsum* by al-Subkī:

A question: what is your opinion regarding the prevailing custom amongst religious scholars, Sufi mendicants and others of purchasing concubines, although they know categorically that this slave girl was Muslim already in her land of origin and she cannot be enslaved?⁵⁴

Women Teachers

Whereas slave girls started their career at the bottom of the social ladder, the highest rung was occupied by learned women, both freeborn as well as enslaved. These women participated in learning sessions and transmitted traditions and books. The following pages support this claim.

Mamluk period authors were aware of the outstanding role of women in the spread of religious knowledge, and highlighted the role and image of the female scholar in their writings.⁵⁵ These sources shed light on the significant contribution of women in the transmission of *ḥadīth* and in the dissemination of other branches of religious knowledge.⁵⁶ In contemporary chronicles and biographical dictionaries, many of their names are mentioned. One example is Sitt al-Wuzarā bint ‘Umar, who died in Damascus at age 93 (716/1316).⁵⁷ ‘Alam al-Dīn al-Birzālī, an eminent Damascene historian and jurist, even dedicated a short tractate to women’s position in the transmission of the canonical volumes of *ḥadīth*.⁵⁸ It is worth mentioning that the six women he names in this

53 Guo, *Tales of a medieval Cairene harem* 109–10; Shoshan, *On the marital regime in Damascus* 11.

54 al-Subkī, *Qaḍā’ al-arab fi as’ilat Ḥalab* 544; idem, *Fatāwā al-Subkī* ii, 281.

55 The female voice is also heard in other genres, as well. Ibn al-Mibrad, *Nuzhat al-musāmīr fī akhbār majnūn Banī ‘Amīr* 33, 49, 69, 101 (*akhbaratnī Fāṭima bint al-Ḥarastānūjāzat^{an}*); on Laylā and her love story, see al-Sajdi, *Trespassing the male domain* 121–46.

56 Goldziher, *Muslim Studies* ii, 366–8; Berkey, *Women and Islamic education in Mamluk period* 143–57; idem, *al-Subkī and his women* 5; Sayeed, *Women and hadith transmission* 71–94; idem, *Women and the transmission of religious knowledge* 163–75.

57 al-‘Umarī, *Masālik al-abṣār*, ed. Jabūrī 2010, xxvii, 337, 343 (722/1322 Umm Muḥammad Zaynab in Jerusalem), 347 (726/1326 Sitt al-Fuqahā’ in Damascus), 352, 354, 358.

58 al-Birzālī, *Juz’ fihī min ‘awālī al-shaykhāt al-sitt* 87 ff.

context were offspring of learned families. They served as a node in various religious chains of transmission.⁵⁹

Often the names of participants in reading sessions are written on the first or last page of the book that was studied during these gatherings. Several scholars have investigated the documentation that attests to this social and intellectual practice.⁶⁰ They have studied certificates (*samā'āt*) of oral transmission and permits authorizing the transmission of a certain chapter, book or tradition (*ijāzāt*). The great majority of these women were daughters of learned families. The role of Ḥanbalī women from the Ṣāliḥiyya neighborhood in Damascus is particularly striking.⁶¹ Yet several certificates name concubines who actively participated in learning circles and transmitted texts, either written books or orally memorized.⁶² Certainly this attests to their social ascension.

A quick look at Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī's (773–852/1372–1449) academic curriculum vitae reveals the strong presence of women among his teachers. He names several women with whom he learned *ḥadīth* including Asan bint Muḥammad (720–98/1320–95)⁶³ and Amat al-Qāhir (793/1391).⁶⁴ He also studied with Umm al-Ḥasan Fāṭima bint Muḥammad ibn al-Munajjā al-Tanūkhiyya (712–803/1319–1400)⁶⁵ and Fāṭima bint Muḥammad al-Ṣāliḥiyya and her sister ʿĀ'isha (719–803/1319–1401).⁶⁶ In addition he learned *ḥadīth* with Ruqayya bint ʿAli from the Ṣāliḥiyya quarter of Damascus.⁶⁷ At the Damascus courthouse, he met with the aging scholar Ruqayya bint Sharaf al-Dīn.⁶⁸ Next in alphabetical order, under Zaynab, he names several teachers.⁶⁹ Among them was Zaynab, the daughter of Kamāl al-Dīn Aḥmad.⁷⁰

59 Cf. al-Suyūṭī, *Nazm al-iʿqyān fī aʿyān-aʿyān* 19, 101, 103 (three daughters of the judge Abū al-Faḍl al-ʿIrāqī), 114.

60 Frenkel, The chain of traditions 165–84.

61 Toru, The Salihyya quarter in the suburbs of Damascus 129–82; Talmon-Heller, *ʿIlm, shafāʿah, and barakah* 34–5; Sayeed, *Women and the transmission* 161–3.

62 The term was coined by Robert Darnton to describe the printing and reading culture of 18th century Europe. See Darnton, What is the history of books? 67.

63 Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *al-Majmaʿ al-muʿassis* i, 470.

64 *Ibid.*, i, 471–3.

65 *Ibid.*, ii, 389–434; iii, 134 (no. 1041), 136; *idem*, *al-Amālī al-mutlaqa* 9, 20.

66 *Idem*, *al-Majmaʿ al-muʿassis*, ii, 368–88.

67 *Ibid.*, i, 592.

68 *Ibid.*, 594.

69 *Ibid.*, 596–8.

70 *Ibid.*, 559–60 (biography no. 71); iii, 212 (no. 587), 215 (no. 592 and 593 two teachers, both named Fāṭima, of Rābiʿa, who is another daughter of Ibn Ḥajar), 360 (721 Hind, the teacher of Rābiʿa).

During his stay in Damascus, Ibn Ḥajar also studied with Sitt al-Qudāh, the niece of the well-known historian Ibn Kathīr.⁷¹ He reports on a tradition that he transmitted from Tatar (734–803/1334–1401), the daughter of Aḥmad al-Tanukhī and adds: “I saw her signature of authorization dated 738/1338. Muḥammad al-Suruḥī said: she [Tatar] aged four at that date.” In addition to this information from Ibn Ḥajar’s intellectual biography, other sources contain dozens of women’s names.⁷² Moreover, Ibn Ḥajar mentions that Sāra bint Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī taught his daughter Khātūn.⁷³

Examination of other contemporary sources supplies additional cases.⁷⁴ Ibn Ṭawq mentions in *Dār al-ḥadīth al-ashrafiyya* the death of an unnamed woman who was nicknamed al-Nāsikha (the transcriber or copyist).⁷⁵ A year later he states that he gave the shaykh ‘Alī ibn Nāṣir two pamphlets of *Ghāyat al-Ikhtisār* (presumably the Shafi‘ī legal compendium of Abū Shujā‘ Aḥmad al-Isfahānī). It was a gift to Umm Hānī, the shaykh’s daughter, who started to study this juridical text the following day.⁷⁶

Elsewhere I have described Bulbul, a slave girl of Ibn al-Mibrad, who mothered a boy to her master. She is represented as a devote Muslim who participated in learning cycles.⁷⁷ Ibn al-Mibrad wrote a booklet that he dedicated to his beloved slave girl (*Laḥṭ al-Sunbul fī akhbār al-Bulbul*):

Many years ago, I bought a slave girl (*ama*) and named her Nightingale (*bulbul*). She was a blessed woman, strictly religious. She gave birth to my son ‘Abd al-Hādī and to a daughter named ‘Ā’isha. Bulbul passed away in an epidemic (in 883/1430). She was with me for ten years. During all these years she never left our house. She did not even attend my brother’s wedding, although he expressed his wish to see her participate. I told him: speak to her. She was approached but declined the invitation. My brother insisted but she refused categorically, saying: “I swore that I would depart this house in a coffin.” She told many stories about abstaining from leaving the house; some of them were fabulous tales. Anyhow she did not go out.

71 Ibid., i, 615.

72 al-‘Aẓm, *al-Ṣubābāt fīmā wajadtuhu ‘alā zuhūr al-kutub min al-kitābāt* 41.

73 Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *al-Majma‘ al-mu‘assis* i 612.

74 Idem, *al-Durar al-kāmina* i, 9 (bint Jawhar in biography no. 11), 12 (no. 15 *wa-samī‘a min ukht jiddatihi Karīma al-Zubayrīyya*), 21 (no. 45 *sitt al-fuqahā’ bint al-Wāsiṭī*).

75 Ibn Ṭawq, *al-Ta’līq* i (885–90/1480–85), 296 (888/1483).

76 Ibid., 410 (889/1484).

77 Frenkel, *Women in late Mamluk Damascus* 409–24.

One story about her is the following: One day she asked me to buy her fabric made of silk that she would sew. One day I stumbled upon a man in the market who sold squirrel fur (*sinjāb*). I bought it for the price of 88 (silver coins?). When I returned home I handed it to her, but she responded disapprovingly. She asked me what it was and I answered that this is what she asked for. So she said: “But you are the one who insisted that the squirrel is a forbidden animal (*ḥarām*). By God I will not sew it, return it.” I disregarded her words and told her just to leave it as it was. Several days later I noticed that she had unstitched the fur. She told me: “Leave the lining here and go and sell the fur.” I took it and sold it for two (?). The lining was left at home. Ten days before her death she told me: “Please sell the lining and with the money buy me a bale of cotton. I will spin it into yarn and weave it. Then you will sell the material and the income will serve me to arrange a meal for the poor. They will pray for me.” I told her: “Leave it, I will buy you the cotton.” But she insisted that she would only use the income from the sale of the lining.

However the next day she became sick and developed a high fever that led to her death. We sold the lining and used the money to provide food for the poor.

After a while I bought another slave girl and because of the above-mentioned experience named her Ḥarām. She is the mother of my sons Badr al-Dīn Ḥasan and Najm al-Dīn ‘Umar. She did only good deeds. God will bless her.⁷⁸

The image of Bulbul is that of a strict and devoted woman, who was involved in performing religious rituals and the commandments to fulfill her role in transmitting knowledge. This role is shown in the following certificate:

I read aloud this book to my son Badr al-Dīn Ḥasan and his mother Bulbul bint ‘Abd Allāh and to his brother Abū Aḥmad, four days old, and [to my son] Abū Bakr ‘Abd Allāh. This was affirmed and confirmed on Thursday 2nd Jumādā the First 897 (1 March 1492). I, Yūsuf ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī [i.e. Ibn al-Mibrad], authorized them to transmit this booklet.⁷⁹

78 Ibn al-Mibrad, *Akhbār al-nisā* 16–7; Murād and al-Sawwās (eds.), *Fihris makhṭūṭāt dār al-kutub al-zāhūrīyya* ii 109–10. Due to the current conditions in Damascus, it is impossible to consult the original document, which should be on the shelves of the Syrian National Library.

79 Ibn ‘Asākir, *Sa‘at rahmat Allāh* 106; cf. idem, *Faḍl umm al-mu‘minīn ‘Ā’isha* 45 (session in the year 877/1472).

This is not the only case where the young were present at *ḥadīth* and creed reading sessions.⁸⁰ Ibn al-Mibrad informs us that he read chapters from the *Kitāb al-I'tiqād* to his children Abū Bakr 'Abd Allāh and Badr al-Dīn Ḥusayn (read Ḥasan), the sons of Bulbul bint 'Abd Allāh and to 'Alī (on Wednesday 11th Jumādā the Second 897/April 1492).⁸¹ Two years later Ibn al-Mibrad read a selection of forty *ḥadīths* in his house in the al-Ṣāliḥiyya quarter of Damascus. Among the audience were:

My son 'Abd al-Hādī, his brother 'Abd Allāh Abū Bakr, and their brother [Badr al-Dīn] Ḥasan, aged five, his mother Bulbul, my concubine Ḥulwa (sweetie) and Ibrāhīm the son of my uncle 'Umar.⁸²

In the list of the *samā'āt* of Ibn al-Mibrad's selection of forty traditions (read on 897/April 1492), we read:

I ['Abd al-Hādī ibn Yūsuf] heard this collection [*al-mukhtār min al-Tirmidhī*] whose composer, my father Jamāl al-Dīn Yūsuf ibn 'Abd al-Hādī [Ibn al-Mibrad] read. Together with me were: 'Abd Allāh and Badr al-Dīn, my two brothers, and my sister 'Aysha (i.e. 'Ā'isha), Bulbul the concubine of my father and the mother of Badr al-Dīn, and Fāṭima the daughter of 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-Hādī.⁸³

From another list of listeners (889/1484), it is abundantly clear that the aforementioned 'Abd Allāh was the son of Jawhara (Jewel), a third concubine that Ibn al-Mibrad obtained.⁸⁴ A fourth concubine by the name Ghazal (Gazelle; 897/December 1491) is also mentioned.⁸⁵ Among the audience in another reading session in his house was Fāṭima, the daughter of his uncle 'Umar, who was the wife of his son 'Abd al-Hādī, and their daughter Maryam, aged three.⁸⁶

80 Ibn Hījī, *Ta'rikh Ibn Hījī* 342 (Umm 'Isā Sitt al-Qudāt d. 801/1399).

81 Abū Ya'lā al-Farrā', *Kitāb al-I'tiqād* 20 (*samā'āt*); cf. al-Azharī, *al-Fihris al-waṣfī* 42, 46.

82 Abū Ya'lā al-Farrā', *Kitāb al-I'tiqād* 17, and other transmissions on 24, 27, 30, 39.

83 *Ibid.*, 14–15.

84 *Ibid.*, 21, 56, 66.

85 *Ibid.*, 35, 77, 80.

86 *Ibid.*, 27, 32, 51, 73, 103.

The presence in the audience of listeners of a tender age is mentioned in several transmission certificates.⁸⁷ Muḥammad al-Tamīmī, for example, read a session of Ibn ‘Asākir’s lectures on “refuting anthropomorphism.” He attested that his two daughters Umm Kulthūm and Ruqayya, aged four and his young son, Anār, were in the audience (in 626/May 1229).⁸⁸

There is abundant additional evidence that women brought their children to sessions, which were mostly convened in private homes. The young age of the students⁸⁹ and the advanced age of the women-teachers can be explained by regulations of modesty in Muslim patriarchal families. The boys were accompanied to the mansions of the elderly ladies. The social openness of this practice actually eliminated a major obstacle that might have prevented mothers from learning and teaching assemblies. The reasons why parents were encouraged to bring a three—to five-year old boy or girl to a reading class should be clarified in another study; here, it is sufficient to show that this practice supports the suggestion that mothers took part alongside men in learned circles. These learning sessions created a familial atmosphere. In this manner, the assemblies deepened transmission networks. Owing to this role of “woman teacher,” no social objection to that practice is reported.

Few women teachers gained the prominence achieved by ‘Ā’isha al-Bā’ūniyya from Damascus. She was an outstanding author and spiritual leader, teaching and travelling in Syria and Egypt during the final years of the Mamluk Sultanate. Her exceptional position is attested both by the respect that her contemporaries showed her, and the reception of her writing by later generations. ‘Ā’isha al-Bā’ūniyya was a scion of a prominent Damascene family.⁹⁰ Her Sufi writing reflects her mastery of different genres of Islamic literary styles, both in prose and poetry.⁹¹ A condensed survey of her “Selection from the

87 See the intellectual biography of Zaynab bint al-Kamāl from Damascus (646–740/1248–1339), who received *ijāzas* in the first year of her life. Sayeed, *Women and the transmission* 163–4.

88 Ibn ‘Asākir, *Thalātha majālis li-Ibn ‘Asākir* 120.

89 See al-Birzālī’s account of the birth and death of his son ‘Abd al-Rahmān, who lived for forty days (714/1314): “I wrote an *ijāza* for him and asked several shaykhs to sign it as an act of validation.” And similar words in the account of his son ‘Abd Allāh aged nineteen months. See al-Birzālī, *al-Muqtafi ‘alā Kitāb al-Rawḍatayn* ii/2, 154–5 (no. 312), 311–12 (no. 635).

90 Frenkel, *Between Mongols and Ottoman* 19–38; idem, *al-Bā’ūnī*, *EI*³.

91 Homerin, *Living love* 211–34; idem, *Writing Sufi biography* 389–99.

principles of the path to master Sufi wisdom” reveals her world-view and style.⁹² As is so commonly styled in this genre, the treatise is constructed as an epistle that concentrates on the four major stages of the Sufi path toward Allāh: repentance, sincerity, remembrance and love. Each branch is discussed in light of God’s commandments (*Qurʾān*), the sayings of the Prophets (*ḥadīth*) and practices of early Muslim forebears (*salaf*) and Sufi masters.⁹³ No wonder that she fortifies her position by naming the sources of the maxims she quotes, and even stories from the well-established genre of *Isrāʾīliyyāt*, which in the Mamluk period came under attack.

In her book, ʿĀisha al-Bāʿūniyya says that repentance means, lexicographically, to return. There is both outward and inner repentance; the latter is the Sufi. There are many traditions about repentance. She quotes a tradition that reads: “The Messenger of Allāh said: Every human being is a wrongdoer, but the best of the wrongdoers are those who turn in repentance.” She continues and claims that the third stage in repentance is the returning (*tawba*) to Allāh.⁹⁴ She concludes by quoting a poet and verses from her own *dīwān*. “Sincerity is dedicating faith to God alone. Even in the Bible, one is ordered to worship Him sincerely.” Then she mentions several didactic stories about self-control and morality, as well as sayings by the Prophet Muḥammad. Her conviction is that all acts are judged on intention and dedication. God looks not at corporality (*qliphoth*) but rather into the heart. Based on their intention and not actions He rewards His servants. She concludes with the line: “The chosen is the people who worship in concealment.”

The third principle is remembrance. ʿĀisha al-Bāʿūniyya constructs her theory on a Quranic verse (Q 2:152) and on the theology of Sufi masters such as al-Qushayrī and al-Sulamī. Remembering God means to love Him. This ensures the peace of the heart. Following al-Sulamī she distinguishes four types of hearts: the common people’s heart, the hearts of religious scholars, the hearts of the spiritual elites and the hearts of true Unitarians (*muwaḥḥadūn*). “Know,” she states, “that innumerable prophetic traditions point to the benefits of remembrance, as well as the statements by the pious forebears among Muḥammad’s companions, their followers and the favored saints.” As in the previous chapters, she concludes this section by several verses from her *dīwān*:

92 al-Bāʿūniyya, *Kitāb al-Muntakhab* 374 (second treatise) ff. 7r–33v; this work was recently published by Homerin, who uses a manuscript that was copied in 1074/1661. See al-Bāʿūniyya, [*al-Muntakhab fī uṣūl al-rutab fī ʿilm al-Taṣawwuf*] *The principles of Sufism*, ed. and trans. Homerin.

93 Among them she mentions Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī and Abū Naṣr al-Sarāj.

94 *Awwāb* and *maʿāb* in the *Qurʾān*.

“All of the rules of recollection, I will tell you, so listen, remember, and choose success: repentance, humility, ecstasy, friendship, and fear, truth, presence, purity, fidelity, and flowing tears.”

The fourth foundation of the Sufi path is to love God (*maḥabba*). This means total effacement of the believer until he consumes himself in God the Beloved. This totality makes the difference between the beloved (*ḥabīb*) and the dear friend. It indicates purity. One of its signs are intimacy with God and estrangement from all else. She advises her readers who are searching for mystical truth and divine knowledge to follow the instructions of Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī (d. 1309). This section concludes with an epilogue on the love of God, which is followed by a poem that ends the book.

Women such as ‘Ā’isha al-Bā‘uniyya and the others mentioned above were agents in the diffusion of traditions and texts. They transmitted knowledge, mostly orally, to small audiences that gathered in closed spaces. It is also significant that the traditions that women teachers taught did not deal with specific issues, or with particular feminine topics, although one of them is an Islamic version of the biblical narrative of the judgment of Solomon.⁹⁵ In this version of the story, the two mothers were attacked by a wolf that snatched one of the babies.⁹⁶

The role of Ayyubid and Mamluk women in pious charities and the construction of learning institutions has been studied by several scholars.⁹⁷ Their database can be complemented by a short reference to Ibn al-Mibrad.⁹⁸ In his booklet on immovable property he discusses the Ayyubid princess, the lady (*khātūn*) Zumurrud (green emerald), nicknamed *Sitt al-Shām* (the great-mother of Syria), who bought land. She used the profits from this transaction to construct the *al-Shāmiyya* school in Damascus (in 628/1231).⁹⁹ In a similar manner, although with limited resources, Rābi‘a Khātūn bint Najm al-Dīn (d. 643/1245), another sister of Saladin, built the *Sāḥiba* institution for the Hanbalites in the Ṣālihiyya suburb of Damascus.¹⁰⁰

It should not be difficult to draw a dividing line between the two ends of the social spectrum suggested in the introduction, that of highly admired learned

95 I Kings 3:16–28.

96 al-Birzālī, *Juz’ fihī min ‘awālī al-shaykhāt al-sitt* 102–3.

97 Humphreys, *Women as patrons of religious architecture in Ayyubid Damascus* 35–54.

98 Ibn al-Mibrad, *al-Ikhtiyār fī bay‘ al-‘aqār* 18–20.

99 al-‘Almawī, *Mukhtaṣar tanbīh al-ṭālib wa-irshād al-dāris*, trans. Sauvaire, “Description de Damas,” 409–10; Melčák, *Reconstruction of the lost Ayyubid waqf* 1–39.

100 Ibn al-Mibrad, *Thimār al-maqāṣid fī dhikr al-masājid* 149 (note 3); Herzfeld, *Damascus: Studies in architecture* 9–12.

women on the one hand and slave girls on the other. The concubines were slave girls that were bought to enhance the status of the patriarchal households. The women teachers were mostly daughters of learned men.¹⁰¹ Their social background and their families improved their prospects of strengthening the image of learned Muslim women.¹⁰² Moreover, by their very place in the chain of learning, these women increased the symbolic capital of their families.¹⁰³ The sobriquets of some of these teachers, such as *Sitt al-Wuzarā'* or *Sitt al-Fuqahā'* (The Lady of the Ministers or the Lady of the Jurists) support this claim. This was symbolic capital that could be manipulated to reinforce their status. Their families, brothers and sons benefited from their intellectual achievements. Moreover, women did not only gain prominence in the field of religious studies and welfare. 'Azīza bint al-Saḥī (d. 909/1503) was a famous performer who maintained close ties with the ruling echelons.¹⁰⁴ There are additional reports on singers, but this topic is beyond the scope of the present study.

Nevertheless this historical picture should be counterbalanced by calling attention to voices and measures against women. Efforts to subdue women to male codes of behavior are more strikingly visible in instructions aimed at restricting what seems to be subversive fashion. For example at the very early stages of the sultanate's history, Baybars issued an order that women should not cover their heads with turbans. They also should not walk the streets of Cairo dressed in men's garb. It seems that the sultan and several religious scholars interpreted this attire as a subversive mode adopted by women to challenge the hegemonic measures that men attempted to enforce.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, on occasion, those in charge of the public order tried to limit women's freedom of movement in the public space.¹⁰⁶ Using moral propaganda, the governing male elite tried, from time to time, to eradicate the streets of women.

101 Berkey, *al-Subkī and his women* 1–17.

102 al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl mir'āt al-zamān*, ed. 'Abbās, ii, 1273.

103 al-Birzālī concludes several obituaries with the statement: "I acquired an *ijāza* certificate from her." See *al-Muqtafi* i/1, 379 (no. 552; 576/1277), 406 (no. 571), 416 (598 "she wrote and read"), 435 (no. 647; 677/1278); ii/1, 52 (no. 74); ii/2, 12–13 (no. 12; 711/1311), 21–2 (no. 26), 73–4 (no. 129; 712/1312 "I read the *ḥadīth* collection of al-Darimi in Jerusalem, 'Ajlun, Hebron and near the Damiya bridge with her and traveled with her from Damascus to Jerusalem"), 132 (no. 248), 138 (no. 258), 174–5 (no. 367), 265–6 (no. 555), 289–90 (no. 598), 301–2 (no. 618 "we read with her, with her father, with her sons and with her daughter"), 399–400.

104 Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ī' al-zuhūr*, repr. edition Cairo 2008, iv, 8.

105 al-Maqrīzī, *al-Sulūk li-ma'rīfat duwal al-mulūk*, repr. edition Cairo 2007, i, 503; ii, 810; iv, 594, 619.

106 Ibid., iv, 614; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya* xiv, 160.

Conclusion

This study began with a condensed description of misogynic voices and concluded with several examples of women's presence in the public sphere. However, even these limited data clearly depict the complexity of Mamluk women's status in patriarchal society.¹⁰⁷ In fact, some slave girls (concubines), such as Bulbul for example, were placed in inferior social positions, as the property of an affluent patriarch for whom they bore children (*umm walad*) but even for them, knowledge (*'ilm*) was a form of social capital that enriched their household.

Although only a handful of examples of women's roles in the chains of transmission were analyzed above, I nevertheless believe that these accounts are sufficient to make the point that women teachers and transmitters were perceived by their environment as charismatic authorities who empowered the community (*baraka*),¹⁰⁸ regardless of their gender. Yet, despite being accepted as a source of blessing, women did not gain a foothold in the religious establishment. They were not appointed to official positions and were blocked from legal or teaching (i.e., paid) positions.

In the past it was quite common to read academic studies on the domestication of Muslim women and their low position in the social hierarchy of Islamic societies.¹⁰⁹ This is particularly visible in studies of legal compendia, which were dominated in the past by male scholars. Recently, with the growing number of women scholars and the shift from women's history to gender studies the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme. For example, Abou Bakr constructs her arguments on the assumption that women played a role in the interpretation of the *Sharī'a* and particularly in the implementation of rational exegesis (*'aql*).¹¹⁰

107 Ibn al-Batanūnī, who was quoted above, states that he will conclude his book with stories about righteous women. See Ibn al-Batanūnī, *al-'Unwān fī l-iḥtirāz min makāid al-niswān* 18; Marjiyya, *Shakhṣiyat al-mar'a* 213.

108 See, for comparison, the obituary of 'Ābida (the worshipper) the blind virgin who dwelled in a female lodge in Damascus. al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl mir'āt al-zamān* ii, 239 (662), 780 (703/1303); Ibn Ḥijjī, *Ta'rikh Ibn Ḥijjī* 314 (Zaynab bint 'Uthmān 800/1398), 319 (801/1398 Ṣafiyya bint 'Imād al-Dīn).

109 For an earlier consideration of the debunked myth of the passive Arab Muslim woman who is subjugated without recourse, see Marin and Deguilhem (eds.), *Writing the feminine*.

110 Abou-Bakr, Teaching the words of the Prophet 306–28, as well as her other publications.

Often modern popular Muslim feminist readings of medieval sources reflect political reactions to contemporary challenges. An integrated reading of various literary genres and material leads me to conclude that the social position and image of Mamluk women cannot be depicted in large brush strokes. Rather, and in order to achieve a more balanced perspective of past societies, the complex picture should be favored. Further careful investigation is needed before generalizing on “the status of Muslim women” or oversimplifying under a single and a-historic title of “women in Islam,” both of which positions are slowly fading away from academic texts but still are paramount in popular as well as in apologetic writings.