

LAUGHTER FESTIVAL AND REBIRTH
Ibn Dāniyāl's Shadow Plays,
an Example of Cultural Tolerance in the Early Mamlūk Ages

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Ibn Dāniyāl's shadow plays are a rich source for the study of the role and cultural meaning of festivals and entertainment during the first Mamlūk reign in Egypt. This great masterpiece of the *muğūn* (comic) literature is rich in its content and shows the different examples of both classical and vernacular poetry. The author composed in both classical metres and *muwašṣahāt* or *zağal*, according to the need of the rotation between the dialogues and the singing. The plays are divided into three pieces, *bābāt*, the first and the third resembling a *maqāma*, and the second to the *Qaṣīda Sāsāniyya* by Abū Dulāf. Ibn Dāniyāl enriched his plays with sophisticated quotations from the most representative authors of *muğūn* productions, like al-Ḥamaḍānī, al-Ḥarīrī, Abū Dulama, and Ibn al-Faqīh al-Ḥamaḍānī. The striking originality of Ibn Dāniyāl lies in his ability to quote both scientific passages, like the *Qānūn* by Ibn Sīnā, and the elegant verses of the court productions, as well as the vernacular remarks of the street dealers. The plays were shown during festivals. Standing behind a tent lit with an oil lamp, the puppeteer would move his marionettes projecting shadows onto the white cloth and he also gave the voices to the different personages, helping his imitating ability with special devices for altering the utterance. A small orchestra with a lute, a flute and a tamburine accompanied the singing. This simple show, of eastern origin, enjoyed great success among the élite as well as the poor, with its funny satire of daily life events.

Many artists had fled from Baghdad after the Mongol defeat of the ʿAbbāsīd Caliphate (1269) and as an effect of their migration into Cairo, the city was flourishing with great cultural activity. The Sultan Zāhir Rukn ad-Dīn Baybars al-Bunduqdārī (658-676/1260-1277), had stopped both the Mongol invasion at ʿAyn Ḡālūt, and the Crusaders advance in Palestine, giving new hope to the people. Cairo was the capital of the Middle East, and due to the Sultan's will it had been transformed into a creative laboratory for both the arts and the sciences. The Sultan wanted to leave a sign of his power in the architecture of the city and therefore ordered the building of gardens, hippodromes, mosques and military constructions. Baybars, and the Mamlūks, loved the horse races and the polo game, both of which flourished greatly in Mamlūk time. During that age betting was wide-spread and only lightly blamed by the orthodox, as long as people did not dilapidate their fortune. The strong social tensions and the radical changes stimulated a need for a more general rebirth, a celebration of life through rejoicing festivals. The culture of public

entertainment was popular in the Islamic world and it was now flourishing as a sign of creative rebirth in Egypt¹.

Amusement has always been considered lawful, because, like laughter, it lightens the heaviness of daily life, but entertainment must always be within the sphere of what is lawful; the infractions of laughter and games must be both moderate and temporary. Betting, like horse racing, was never condemned.

During the first days, the Islamic community had opposed the pagan rituals and the mocking of the pious Muslims in order to underline the seriousness of the newborn religion. Being earnest and steady were considered important values, but they did not imply a refusal of laughter and joy. On the contrary, within the frame of the Islamic culture there emerges the coexistence of two trends, a humorous and a moralistic one. These two trends reflect the two faces of a single conscience, one open minded and tolerant and the other radical and dogmatic. The balancing of these two conflicting tendencies has always been the result of a restless struggle.

Important studies have been devoted to the diffusion of dances, singing and amusement in the Islamic society; here I will recall only a few opinions surrounding the debate of lawfulness of fun and games. al-Ġāhiz̄ (d. 867) had a positive approach to laughter, he used to quote a passage from the Qur'ān, saying that both good and evil were powerfully concentrated in God's hands, to stress that man should enjoy, recognize its value, and be grateful for the pleasures entrusted in him by his Creator.

This conception was strongly opposed by al-Imām al-Ġazālī (d. 1111), who condemned fictitious stories and festivals celebrating non-Islamic beliefs. The historian Ibn al-Aṭīr (d. 1234) accused all the pre-Islamic legends of being false, such as the stories of the Persian kings and the one of the Pharaohs, because they referred to polytheist beliefs which were as blameworthy as the pagans' lies condemned by the Prophet. Ibn al-Aṭīr used to quote only a few of the Persian mythological stories and used to make fun of the belief that the king was of divine origin; he also denounced the evil influence of these stories on a popular level, especially the feast of the death of the old year celebrated during the festival of Nawrūz on New Year's Eve².

¹ Corrao 1990; the translation of the plays has been done on the following manuscripts, the first Egyptian codex is in the Dār al-Kutub, Adab Tal'at, n. 4772; the second is m. 186; the third, Al'āb Taymūr 16, and the fourth Adab 462; the al-Azhar manuscript is Adab 463 / Abāza 7095; the Escorialensis codex is ms. Kasimir n. 467, cat. Derenbourg 469; and the Istanbul copy is in the Sulemaniyye Millet Kütüphanesi, but it belonged to the Hekimoğlu Millet Kütüphanesi. I have confronted my translation with the edition published by Hopwood and Badawi, which had been previously prepared by Kahle, with a critical apparatus by D. Hopwood (Hopwood & Badawi 1992). Cf. al-Maqrīzī, *Hita* II, 45, 159, 198; al-Qalqaṣandī, *Ṣubḥ* IV, 47. See also Corrao forthcoming.

² For the *ḥadīṯ* where the Prophet mentions the games see, Ibn Ḥaḡar al-'Asqalānī, *Faṭḥ* XIII, 334-336 and VI, 150 b 31-33; Ibn an-Naḥḥās, *Maṣāriṣ* I, 448.

Ibn Dāniyāl's shadow plays stand on the side of the tolerant and open minded approach. The choice of using the shadow play as a means to represent the comedy of life reveals the philosophical ideals of the author. He believes, like the mu'tazilites, in the freedom of human action. Furthermore as Ibn al-Fāriḍ had explained, Ibn Dāniyāl's shadow plays affirm that God is like the puppeteer who moves in good and evil the destiny of the marionettes which act freely in the earth scene until the final act when they repent to rejoin their God (Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *Tā'iyya* 68).

Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1254) was very critical of the immoral behaviour people had during his time, blaming it on the vanity of the games, and warning against the danger of leading a corrupted life. He appealed to the Muslims to follow the righteous path shown by the Prophet, admonishing them not to go to the Christian festivals, or mingling with people of different faiths.

Ibn al-Hāḡḡ (d. 1336/7) a man of law, who lived nearly a century later, affirmed that ignorance was the cause of corruption and moral decay. Woman's ignorance was the most dangerous because it led them, unwillingly, to corrupted behaviour. Ibn al-Hāḡḡ exhorted the pious Muslims to reconduct their women to the modesty established in the Qur'ān; among the immoralities mentioned in his reproach were the narration of indecent stories, like *Thousand and One Nights*, singing and dancing with men, the pilgrimage to the saints' tombs in promiscuity with the other sex, their frequentation of the market and the public bath and most of all their waking at night in the cemetery on the occasion of the dead's anniversary (Ibn al-Hāḡḡ, *Madhal* I, 266-270). The fear of corrupting the original spirit of Islam was the real reason behind the lack of tolerance for the transgressive ambiguities of the feast. These less tolerant men of law saw in the lack of moral correctitude the cause of the historical crisis faced by Islam; some even thought that since the Mongols were Muslims, their attack was a divine punishment.

During the festivals, like in the time of the shadow plays, the spirit of the public was well disposed to jokes and ready to tolerate any kind of coarseness and to accept the seduction of fictitious stories. The ambiguity of the time of the feast, like the behaviour of the jester, is based on the quick and unexpected rotation of events; the fast rotation from the seriousness to the humorous is a breakthrough the order of expectations, which is in itself an element of disorder that provokes laughter. The pleasant entertainment seems to be a superficial aimless pleasure, but deeply it responds to the need of a spiritual renewal; it is a process that was represented by the traditional festivals and it was well known to the Egyptian people whose beliefs were strongly rooted in the ancient non-Islamic traditions. For these very reasons the festivals and their pagan message were strongly criticised by the rigorists.

The festival is an extraordinary moment of general catharsis. Even if ideologically it recalls a new edition of an older myth of the origins, or to a legend or to the foundation of a new worship, it always celebrates a renewal. In Egypt there were many festivals, some of them were directly linked to the natural season cycles, like

the festival of *Nayrūz* and *Mibriḡān* (spring and autumn), or the *Haliḡ*, at the breaking of the water canal that watered the land. Other celebrations took place on the occasion of religious anniversaries, of Muslims, Christians and Jews, and also at the departure for a military campaign. The abundance and display ostentated in these occasions were considered to be propitiatory of a long period of prosperity. These extraordinary events served to renew the dream of the time of the rebirth, when the regenerated nature banishes all the sufferings from the daily miseries of life. The collective rejoicing of the amusements removed the pains and the feeling of loneliness; the individual drew the source of satisfaction and reassurance from this communicative and participant sociality³. The entertainment techniques like dance, music, games, mimes and jests, provoked the very much needed evasion. The festival is not the symbol of an escape but one of transformation and of preservation. The reversal of the established order, which takes place during the feast time confirms the immutability of the existing order. It makes it more acceptable. From this temporary reversal people could also draw the needed energy to face the daily struggles for survival, and in this sense it performed a regenerating function⁴. Life conditions were in fact very hard for the poor in a time ravaged by war, the plague and famine and the rivalries among the Mamlūk clans.

From time to time, to appease the ill humour of the people, the Mamlūks granted special tax relief and involved the poor people in the preparations for the festivals. During the limited period of the feast, all the world would be turned upside down, the oppressive government giving generously instead of imposing new duties, and the merchants financing the games and the parades instead of their normal stealings.

Egypt knew since the time of the Pharaohs the sacred representation of an happy land rich with wealth, restaurating the cosmic order. The golden age for the Ancient Egyptian was the mythical projection of a reality which was the dream of the poor and oppressed people; they hoped for the other world, the wonderful land where wheat grows as high as a man. Added on top of this conception of the ultramundane world, was the Islamic idea of a Paradise where every wealth is obtainable without any effort. In the representation of the heavenly there is the solicitation of an happy and ordered world opposite to the current one. In this way the ancient, like the medieval Egypt, was expressing, through the image of the upside-down world, a magic-religious need which was translating real life experiences. The feast anticipated the heavenly time, and in those days Cairo lived according to rules and criterions opposite to the normal one. The barriers were abolished, and Muslims were peacefully taking part in the Christian festivities and vice versa.

³ Bachtin 1979:215-304; Camporesi 1976:3-31; Trigger *et al.* 1989:390-391.

⁴ Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ir* I, 319, 333; Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīḡ* VII, 10; al-Maqrīzī, *Hiṭat* II, 209.

Among the Muslim celebrations the most popular ones were those which were related to the departure of the *Mahmal*, accompanying the pilgrims to Mecca, and those occurring at the end of the religious fasting, the Lesser and Greater *Bayram*. The travellers and the historians of the Mamlūk age left us with rich witnessings of these extraordinary events. Many common elements emerge from the numerous travel memories, and even if recorded in different centuries they show that these festivals remained unchanged for a long time. A first striking example comes from the scenes representing the musicians, the jesters, the dancers and the trained animals that we find painted on the papyrus and on the wall of the tombs of the Pharaohs. In particular the paintings of the musicians look like those carved on a wooden ornament of the Fātimid Age decorating the tomb of the Mamlūk Sultan Qalā'ūn (678/1280)⁵.

At the time of the festivals the roads in Cairo were crowded with music players, jesters, buffoons, storytellers, acrobats and all sorts of animal trainers. A fresh image of such a colourful and rejoicing environment is drawn by Ibn Dāniyāl in his second *bāba*, *ʿAğīb* and *Garīb*. Here he describes an acrobat:

Wattāb al-Baḥṭiyārī appears with his ropes and poles; he walks on the rope wearing his wooden clogs, while the people anxiously fearing his fall clap their hands; as all the eyes are fixed on him he recites: "My art is based on delicacy and not on strength, to my fall medicine has no remedy * through climbing I've reached the peaks of glory, and my strange position becomes normal * my light body flies away gracefully, praise be to Who keeps me in the air"

A similar scene was described two centuries later by the German mercenary J. Wild:

On attache plusieurs cordes en double à la manière à peu près de nos escarpolettes (balançoires) dans chaucune il se met un homme qui s'y tient des deux mains, et d'autres personnes qui sont en bas leur donnent le branle et les font mouvoir par un corde qui tient à l'escarpolettes et dont il font à peu près la même chose que s'il sonnoient un cloche. Mais si ceux qui sont suspendus vennoient à tomber comme la corde où ils sont assis est extrêmement haute, il ne leur en pourroit pas moins couler la vie (Corrao 1990:173-174; Hopwood & Badawi 1992:83; Wild 1973:235, 281-282).

In an atmosphere of extraordinary abundance people ate a lot and drank away all the money they had gained during the year; the roads were decorated with carpets hanging from windows, and were invaded by a storm of charlatans, trainers of lions, elephants, bears and dogs. Ibn Dāniyāl gives us an example of these scenes in the following lines:

Šibl as-Sabbāʿ (the lion cub) appears and with him the lion tied up with chains and bolts. He walks at first arrogantly and then like a murderer, he seizes it by the mane, as big as an elephant; then he curbs him and gets closer to the head that looks like a crown, and the beast neither hesitates nor is scared, he shows abnormal fangs. And during this time Šibl as-Sabbāʿ tames him; at times it is heavy to pull him and pick him up, but he sings with courage and a fearless heart. Then Mubārak al-Fayyāl (the elephant tamer) appears with the elephant, he recites in Indian in a loud voice: *Ṭalā ṭalīlan talandā wa akindā akarawā rākarandā*. Then he strikes a hooked iron bar on the head of the elephant, he orders him to obey and kneel to serve as a slave; he executes the order then he stands up in the

⁵ al-Maqrīzī, *Hiṭat* tr. 609-611, 194-196; Wildung 1989:57.

way with his huge proboscis while Mubārak al-Fayyāl sings. Then Abū l-ʿAḡāb (the cat tamer) appears with his golden ram, he makes a sign to the ram and he moves the bows of his horns; then he orders him to stand up on two feet and to show him a legitimate child; he helps him mounting on few wooden pieces, and on a chair; then he sings exposing his request: "In vain I've transmitted my teachings to a ram who became my zodiacal sign, though I ignored the stars * but the ram is wiser than he who doesn't understand the teachings". He goes away with his handful (of money) followed by the ram. Abū l-Qittāt comes out with the mouse and a basket, he makes a sign to the cat and sings a poem: "I made a virtuous one whose nature was degenerated and I subdued the stubborn * I had put cats and mice together until love and friendship among them were sure". Then he says: Numayr (little tiger) mount on the circle and be careful don't bite al-Fa'ra (little mouse). Oh Sammur the caudate get out and follow him. Oh Sinān the blazing take the red fur, and you take the yellow one, and you oh Summān the quail of the field attack Singāb (squirrel) on the wall; and you Ṭalīq (saxicola) jump on his back, and you Abū l-Qurmān (father of the rat) bite him on the back! (he goes out) Za'bar al-Kalbī and his friends appear, the puppies and the dogs, he sits down and sings (*mutaqārib* metre): "I have learned from their nature I have no friend as faithful as them * they are patient, they watch over the house, and defend me from the friend in the quarrel * he keeps an eye on me when I sleep in the desert and protects me from the wilderness of the wolves * they are dogs but better than certain people that go around dressed". (he goes out)

Abū l-Waḥš appears with the bear, the stick and beats the stirrup as if it was a bell, and says: Oh Ḥamīs play the flute! And sings: "The company of the bear have taught me to fight and to distinguish the good from the evil behaviour * I have a friend among the bears who has a rude character, arrogant and disobedient he repels stubbornly * When he heard me my stick educated him, though when he is happy the place rejoices". Then he says: The fat people walk like that, the lazy boy sleeps like this. (he goes out)

Natū comes out with the drums, the sugar-loaf hat and the beast, brandishes the pole, he makes a turn around himself and goes up and down the road, opens his eyes wide, and with two fingers opens the corner of his mouth, jumps like a mule, dances with the rhythm of the drum (he sings and then goes out).

Maymūn al-qarrād appears with the monkey and says: In front of you Ṣayḥ an-Naḡdī has arrived, he plays the drums, blows the flute and let the monkey dance! He sings (*kāmil* metre): "A monkey that understands, she almost speaks, the beauty of her elegance is so as to fall in love with her * she hurls herself like an eunuch and hypocrite slave, sometimes she dances with the drum or claps her hands". Then he lets her dance with the veil and the sugar-loaf hat, she turns around on the rope, she dances and turns⁶.

Later scholars recorded the existence of the animal trainers' corporation. For a long time this profession had enjoyed a good fortune, but we are not sure that it had a

⁶ Corrao 1990:173-174; Hopwood & Badawi 1992:74-82. On trained animals see al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān* as follows: on the lion I, 229; II, 124, 212-213; IV, 152, 425; on the elephant VII, 99, 120, 226-231; on the ram II, 139, 150; V, 464-466, 471-473; on the cat and the mouse, see Ibn Rusta, *A'lāq* 199; Ibn al-Faqīh *Buldān* 297; al-Muqaddasī, *Taqāsīm* 31, 436; al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān* I, 298, 373; II, 54, 153, 298; IV, 298-299; V, 224, 252, 271, 290, 338; on dogs see Viré 1990; al-Ġāḥiẓ writes that they are the closest to human beings and says that their trainers entertain the public of the market with their games, cfr. al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān* II, 179-180, 215; VII, 218; al-Muqaddasī, *Taqāsīm* 40, 146-147, 188, 200, 202, 211; on the bear see al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān* II, 215, 316; VII, 218; on the Sudanese trainer see Jacob 1910a; on the monkeys and their understanding see al-Ġāḥiẓ, *Ḥayawān* II, 179-180, VII, 218. See also Ibn Ḥawqal, *Ard* 39; Ibn al-Faqīh 37; al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūğ* (tr.) 485-489, 491, 1355; al-Iṣṭahrī, *Masālik* 27; Mercier 1927:155-167, 197-204; Rosenthal 1975:30-78.

consolidated tradition as early as the 13th century. These characters also appear in the *Bānū Sāsān* poem but without dialogue. It is interesting to note that in these dialogues Ibn Dāniyāl always stresses the logic of the upside down world and the animals' superiority over human beings. During the period of the Pharaohs there were already paintings portraying funny scenes of animals acting as human beings, such as playing musical instruments. Later al-Ġāhiz and some Arab travellers wrote many detailed accounts on the animals' skill of imitating. The people appreciated very much this type of entertainment, and loved to bet on the animals fighting like the cocks or the rams, without disdain for the human competitions, where men were covered only with underwear and grease and would struggle in the all-in wrestling. Ibn Dāniyāl describes with crude realism these scenes in his third *bāba* where he introduces a series of challenges between the two lovers, al-Yatīm and al-Mutayyam⁷:

Mutayyam sings (*dū bayt* metre): "I haven't but a cock Abū l-ʿUrf Šabbāḥ * the brawls between cocks are cackles and pecks * the quarrelsome has stretched the wings forward the fight * you accept it and in so doing you have no blame". Yatīm says: "Don't recall your cock Šabbāḥ until you've seen the merits of Šiyyāḥ, who has never been defeated by any cock and therefore is the best of the country". He recites (*basīṭ* metre): "My cock is Indian, beware of his violent attack * when his beak breaks has the strength of an iron fist * his crest is like cornaline reflected on the rose of his cheek * when incited to peck he attacks like a lion his opponent * he plays the peacock among the chickens, like the lord among the slaves * among these who sees him stretches forward in love for the ever munificent * Enough, my beloved cock whose beauty disturbs the envious". Yatīm's cock appears followed by the one of Mutayyam and the betters put their bet in the hand of the arbiter Zihūn. The arbiter stands between the two with a stick and they peck him on the neck, he breathes and then starts saying: "Praise to God who creates the break of dawn, inspires the cock whose song scans the time. He crowned him with a crest of cornaline, and covered him with a mantle of cornaline, and dressed him with an embroidered scarf, and erected him with the pose of the crowned, and distinguished him for his nobility and generosity, and so doing he preferred him among the other birds, he has attributed to him the prerogative to defend the poultry-pen, and resist the opponent. The prayer, the peace, the salute and the regard to the Lord of the messengers, to the Prophet of the Sovereign of the universe, to his family and all his Companions. Indeed the struggle between the fellow creatures is not exclusive of an animal species, the fight between cocks is the best that rejoices kings and the poor, because it is elusion and contest, resistance and skirmish. These two cocks are ready to come to blows, stubborn in their boldness; the one who dodges the pecks finding shelter in the flight, will get what has been established, and there is no shame for the defeated who comes back and curls himself up. To you, in the name of God oh Šiyyāḥ! I put you under the divine protection oh Šabbāḥ!" Then the arbiter incites them one against the other to the brawl in the way the marionette is accustomed. The cock of Yatīm asks to be dispensed from the fight, then defeated and put to flight, hides himself in a corner.

The artist choses to protract the challenge between the two lovers as an excuse to present another typical animal fight, the one between the rams:

If my cock runs away from Šabbāḥ, take care from my ram Naṭṭāḥ (the one who knocks down with his horns). Every player knows he is like a wild lion, with his horns he almost knocks down the

⁷ Corrao 1990:203-210; Hopwood & Badawi 1992:100-104, *Abū l-ʿUrf Šabbāḥ*, the one of the morning crest.

towers, and with his two horns he breaks into pieces the bastion of Gog and Magog! The red that is in the air is the twilight of the glory, is the sign that the stars are hiding; with him I have tried to win seriously, I didn't put grease on his horns. Call an arbiter so that he can fulfil his duty. The messenger calls: "Oh arbiter Zayhūn!" And he answers: "To God we belong and to him we return, after the fight we go back to fight, we come from the boredom of laziness, as if in the fight we bore a feather. Give, my lord, where is your bet? When a man goes through a trial he shows whether he is noble or miserable! Few words, each horn recognizes his pair "who siffles doesn't hide his bear"⁸, who among you faces this challenge and kills this small yellow gazelle? And who wins exclaims "Oh arbiter, for him I had wished the victory!" Mutayyam appears and says: "Oh arbiter of the arbiters, this young has shown me a ram from Bašmūr⁹, famous for his attack, he has not a big size, he knocks down with his horns the mountains, he is a demon!" The people have assembled, the games are over, the hit makes a great noise, and the bet is compulsory! Then he puts himself in between the two, Waḥṣī and Abū šīn standing still, then the rams fight. The two rams clash as the marionettes used to do in this field. Yatīm's ram is defeated.

The city was lit with thousands of torches, candles and fire lights while the market roads were animated by any kind of game and amusement. This tradition had remained unaltered throughout the centuries, but it was always surprising for the people and a source of inspiration for the poets, like 'Alī al-Ballanūbī (11/12 cent.) who described the fire torches illuminating the Nile during the *Mibriḡān* festival: "The Nile with thousands of candels is a sky horizon full of stars" (Corrao 1987:56).

A similar scene is described by Ibn Iyās on the occasion of the Coptic Epiphany, *ḡitās*, and for the celebration of the *miqyās* (nilometre); the latter celebrated the rise of the level of the Nile announcing the flooding of the cultivated areas. The Italian traveller Brocardo wrote the following description of the festival for the opening of the *Halīḡ*: "(the boats) were decorated with many lamps, arranged in different ways, that is to say in the shape of pyramids, cubes and so on"¹⁰.

It seems that the fires were so abundant that the water surface was heated up to the point of burning the poor who jumped in the lake to pick up the coins and the food thrown there by the Emirs as a special present for the occasion. There was a large crowd attending the breaking up of the dam wall, the bolder among the spectators dared to get so close that some ended up being killed by the overwhelming rush of the water coming out¹¹.

⁸ These are typical expressions, the last one means that one who sings is showing off, therefore he cannot hide himself. The last two words are difficult to interpret, according to Kahle it means "dishonest player".

⁹ An Egyptian village close to Damietta, renowned for its fat rams.

¹⁰ Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ī* I, 212-213; IV, 276-277; Brocardo, *Relatione* MS fl. 67r & 68, the author left Cairo on the 22nd September 1557; Coppin 1720:247 (this part is missing in the IFAO's edition), 93-137, 158; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* I, 39, 60, 66; Sandys 1973:75-88; Villamont 1970:196, 222-223; Sommer 1970:286, 296; Regnault 1855:371-377.

¹¹ al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭat* French transl. 194-196; Lengherend 1861:182; Palerne 1971:102; Leone Africano MS fl. 42v-43r, 91v-92v; Della Valle 1843 I, 174; Mantegazza 1616:90-111; Castela's travel to Cairo was

The artists came from everywhere to entertain the people during the days of the festivals; the mingling crowds led to lascivious behaviour which sometimes degenerated into obscenities, to the much disgust of some Arab and European travellers. The verses of an anonymous poet quoted by Yāqūt say:

Egypt is the place of the depraved * it troubles who listens * and if you attend you witness * the madness and the malice * buffoons and flatulence * adultery and cuckold * old men and women * choose adultery as a faith * and it is death for the pious * and life for the copulators"

Palerne explained:

Je ne veux point mettre ici quantité des bouffoneries libertines qui se representent dans leur festes publiques, et qui ne sont pas moins dignes de detestation que d'oubly¹².

The Egyptian women were very uninhibited, and their behaviour to the foreigners seemed amazing; they used to walk around very much uncovered, and some of them used to dance and jump with men indecently. The German traveller, John Wild, relates that certain women acted in funny comedies on the roads. In the most popular areas women used to ride donkeys, alone or taken by a payed driver, to stroll in places of bad repute, like the *Bāb al-Lūq*, the quarter of the cooks, without paying much attention to the reproaches of their men or of the pious men of religion. A typical woman of the marketplace is the *Ṣāni'a*, a merchant very well described by Ibn Dāniyāl who introduces her in the second *bāba* together with the other entertainer:

The *Ṣāni'a* enters with her blades and cuppings, she raises her voice and calls: "Oh girls, the *Ṣāni'a*!"¹³ She has a bag under her arm and shows a neck shining with chains and earrings, she has sticks decorated with buckles and needles; she wears a long black silk shawl, and shows the white tattooed leg which excites the blood of the men to be in union with her; she uncovers a face nicer than a doll and says: "Oh light of my eyes, sing my beauty", then she uncovers her ears and turns her voice toward the street and sings: "Oh company of lovers, who resist my call! Oh girls I am the *Ṣāni'a*! * I am the one who bewitches the mind of men * with my gentle curves, my gasps and my blandishments * I make people desire a good meeting * I am the best among the free ones * when I sing: Oh girls, I am the *Ṣāni'a*! * Who has seen in Egypt and Syria * this curl under the tattoo * is like the marguerite or the Syrian beauty * like the green myrth, and the beauty of the plants * Oh girls, I am the *Ṣāni'a*! * I am the bride full of splendour * celebrated in every street * Who sees my flanks and my waist uncovered * cannot but love and die out of passion * Oh girls, I am the *Ṣāni'a*! * when we exchange the cups I suck his soul * and if he faints I kiss and embrace him * I've never wounded anyone with the blade or the razor * but only with my gazelle like languid glances * Oh girls, I am the *Ṣāni'a*! * Who has blood desires her but doesn't go further than the glance and the mouth, she goes out".

The words of this woman evocated what was considered to be indecent behaviour; Cairo was renowned to be the capital of all kind of corruption, and especially the

done in the year 1600, Castela 1974:447; de Savary 1628:260-263; Pococke 1771:98-102.

¹² Yāqūt, *Muḡam* V, 141; Ibn al-Faqīh, *Buldān* V, 75; Palerne 1971:75-83.

¹³ Wild 1973:235, 281-282; on street comedy see Moreh 1992; on women see Corrao forthcoming; ar-Rāziq 1973:75-76; Lane 1846:42; Kahle 1950:11-15, 100; Corrao 1990:76-77.

Fuṣṭāt quarter had a bad reputation, as is witnessed by al-Muqaddasī: “(there) men never stop drinking wine and women don’t cease making adultery, the Ṣayḥ is drunk and the woman has two husbands (the schools have two different factions) and the language is obscene”¹⁴.

Cairo seemed to be the new Sodoma, where charlatans, prostitutes, musicians and dancers circulated freely between the kitchens and the cabarets; the poorest lived by their wits, begging or showing off real, or apparent, diseases to solicitate people’s compassion. Ibn Dāniyāl dedicated the second *bāba* of his shadow theatre to the artists of begging, the Banū Sāsān. One of the two main protagonists affirms to belong to this group and he reveals their secrets:

In my group there is the one who cuts his bones, the arrogant, the quarrelsome, the choleric and the one who pushes with violence * the profiteer, the submissive and the robber, the coarse and the stingy, the whores, the foolish, and the doped * the coward, the impudent, the stinking * the thief of the houses and of the slim beardless * To share the resting place for them is not an obstacle * when I sleep my bed is the oven’s hot ash, and the bowl is under my cheek * I warm myself with the fire until my body is stained like a leopard. This happens when the situation worsens, the money disappears, the mind falls sick, the gold vanishes, the motivation dies away, the silver is stolen, the recovery blocked. We put aside the decency, we have gathered the public in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, and for us things which were similar become the same. I have claimed false petitions, I have pretended to know the chemistry, and from time to time I have revealed spells and white magic, and other times talismans and adjurations. Sometime I write on the remnants liquid of a vase, because the water of the well has disappeared; I pretend to judge the king of the demons, and I invoke Mīṭaṭrūn and aṣ-Ṣayṣubān, then I exalt myself like a mad man and I produce foam with soap and pull it out from my mouth. I have often declared to be blind and I have glued my eyelids with the chewing-gum. I have blown up my muscles playing diriyās, and I have produced tears with the soap-root because I am a failure. Oh *ra’īs* ‘Alī, I have revealed these secrets only because the drunkenness had the upper hand in my mind, and in my head I have a melody that has to be sung, for the life of your neck that is heavy to bear like the shit in the belly¹⁵.

¹⁴ Yāqūt, *Muḡam* V, 141; cf. al-Muqaddasī, *Taqāsīm* 200; Ibn al-Faqīh, *Buldān* 69, 75; Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ, *Madhal* I, 61; II, 17-18, 46, 52, 57, 297; as-Subkī, *Mu’id* 199-200; al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* tr. 182; and Wild 1973:235, 278, 281-282. On wine and alcoholic drinks see an-Nawaḡī, *Ḥalba* cap. X, ms. Vatican V. 311, 469. Ibn Dāniyāl here mentions the persecutions against drunkard and Christian hosts ordered by Sultan Baybars. See also al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* I, 363.

¹⁵ de Savary 1628:263-265; In Hopwood & Badawi 1992 (= c.) we find some words taken from a different manuscript than the one I have used; I have chosen the following words because they also correspond to the *qaṣīda* of the Banū Sāsān edited by Bosworth 1976. In *b.* (Escorial ms.) *razdakāhī*, in *a.* (Al‘āb Taymūr 16) *razkādhī*, quarrelsome, while in *c.* is *zakādaḡī*; in *a.* and *b.* *ar-razmadī*, choleric, in *c.* is *zarandī*; in *a.* and *b.* *kadīkān* the one who pushes with violence, in *c.* is *kuwikāt*; in *a.* and *b.* *ḥafnaḡ*, profiteer, in *c.* is *ḥafanḥu*; in *a.* and *b.* *gardāh*, submissive; in *a.* is *bazbāzī* in *b.* *bazbān*, maybe from the Arabic robber, in *c.* is *bazbār*; in *a.* and *b.* *mufakkak* foolish; in *a.* and *b.* *qunb* cannabis, maybe it means “doped”; in *a.* and *b.* *maḥan* impudent, rather than *maḡann*, as in *c.*; in *a.* and *b.* *qamandī* stinking; in *a.* *naḥṭal* while in *b.* *hatal*, Ḥamāda follows the first (*Ḥayāl* 188), and Jacob (1910c:12) the second, but it is meaningless, like in *a.* in Persian means thief; in *a.* *kad* is house, while in *b.* *kamad* is meaningless. As for *sammāqīn al-‘iṣ* like in *a.* or *sammāqīn al-qīṣ* like in *b.*, I would read as earlier, *sammāqīn al-ḥif*. As for those sleeping in the ashes Jacob writes that at the beginning of this century in Turkey the *kulhanis*

The lower part of the body, the area of the genital organs, is the part that fecundates and procreates and the metaphorical use of this terminology confirms the link between death and rebirth, fertility and renewal. At the time of Ibn Dāniyāl this creative approach was not considered to be vulgar. In the gestures of the buffoons and the charlatans, like in the remarks of Ibn Dāniyāl's characters there is neither cynism nor roughness. All the metaphors, both words and gestures, of this kind are part of a unitary conception of the world as a continuous and contradictory becoming. This unity is represented by the burlesque drama of the death of the old and, at the same time, the birth of the new. It would lead us astray to interpret and to judge the elements of these buffoonery of the market place and of the play, according to their actual meaning, namely to take them away from their historical context. If these elements lose their direct reference to the life-death cycle, they would be transformed into vulgar cynism as a result of their loss of ambiguity. But at the time of Ibn Dāniyāl the popular culture of laughter, which had been formed throughout the centuries and kept in the non-official forms of art, had arisen to the peak of the noble literature and had regenerated it. The radical freedom of the comic culture could be partly explained as opposed to the excessive seriousness of the official religious culture, from where it was banned, and as a result of the internal instability of the regime. The political power was not yet firmly consolidated and therefore it was relatively tolerant towards the masses and their beliefs.

Ibn Dāniyāl in his second *bāba* introduces characters that represent different religious beliefs; we have so far introduced the acrobats, but they are followed by the men of knowledge, like Ḥunayš, the dealer of the antidote against the snakes, then 'Usayla who prepares the electuary and Miqdām al-Mawāsī, the surgeon. The most interesting characters, as to the subject of the cultural tolerance, are the magicians, like Hilāl al-Munağğim, and the enchanters, whose tricks do not accord with Islamic principles. Hassūna al-Mawzūn, as an example "changes the dust into wheat and the cedar into a goose".

While 'Awwād al-Ḥarmātī introduces himself by saying some magic formulas against evil, and the evil-eye; then he claims to be able to free his son who is possessed by some devil, with the help of the following sentences:

(vagabonds) used to sleep by the public bath on a bed of ashes. Also Karagöz is called with the same name (Jacob 1910b:7). Jacob (1910c) translates *hankama* jester, but it is *hanğama*, from the Persian as in the *Qasīda Sāsāniyya* by Šāfī (Bosworth II, 295, v.5., 304, n.5). Starting from this point in *a.* and *b.* the character uses the singular and not the plural as in *c.* To Mīṭarūn is dedicated a chapter of al-Būnī's *Šams* 136-137; he is the king of the spirits. The name is transliterated from the Greek *metāthronou* – close to the throne of the Lord – he is the angel Miḥā'il. The name is used as a magic formula, here it appears together with aš-Šayṣubān, one of the names of the devil; see Doutté 1984:136. Mīṭarūn is also quoted by al-Mas'ūdī, as the little lord invoked by the Hebrews on the day of Kippur (al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūğ* II, 802, French transl. II, 303). Diriyās, from the Persian, is a sort of betting, it consists of throwing nine stones.

I swear against you, community of devils, demons, Iblīs, and rebel angels of the damned Šayḥ Abū Murra's ranks. If you are Jews: *Hiyā'*, evil, *hiyā'*!. If you are Christians: For the truth, oh *šīn* if you are inauspicious go away, *hiyā'*. If you are Zoroastrians then: For the light, the fire, the shadow and the hot wind!. If you are Muslims: I swear upon the Qur'ān, thank to the benediction of *Tāhā*, *Yā Šīn*!¹⁶

At the end of the procession a curious personage appears, Ḡammār Mašā'īlī al-Maḥmal, the torch holder, who escorts the *maḥmal* procession at its departure to the Mecca pilgrimage. He is an emblematic type who introduces himself as a fire worshipper, hinting, by saying so, to a possible Zoroastrian origin; but he confuses the listener because soon after he declares to be Muslim and invokes the name of 'Alī; but at the following remark he prays for the Virgin Mary and all the Apostles; and in the end he concludes with the exaltation of the Torah and of the families of Jacob and Israel¹⁷.

It was typical of the Banū Sāsān to claim to believe in every kind of worship, in order to solicit the alms from the believers of the various existing religions. But it also corresponds to a multi-religious reality to which Ibn Dāniyāl always refers in his shadow plays.

Many sources witness that in Egypt the festivals of different religious communities were jointly celebrated. This is also confirmed by Ibn Taymiyya's and Ibn al-Hāḡḡ's criticism of the Muslims who took part in them and by the remarks of the protagonists of the shadow play. They show a picture of a mass of different religions, which at the time in Egypt were various and articulated. The immigrants brought new elements, which stimulated the showing of alternative religious syncretism¹⁸. They were the refugees escaped from the Mongol invasion, the victims of the Age, like the protagonists of Ibn Dāniyāl's plays, among them were Muslims, Zoroastrians, Mazdeans, Christians and Jews. According to the stereotypes of the slum-dwellers,

¹⁶ «*Hiyā' šarran hiyā'*». The invocation *hiyā' hiyā'* is found within a magic circle described by al-Būnī. As for *šarran*, it is an invocation against the evil, according to Lagarde (1981:24), while for Doutté (1984:123, 148-149), it is an invocation followed by *šarābiā*, which we find in a divinatory formula used to "tie the tongue" and which corresponds to the name of a *ḡinn*; see Fodor 1994:85. The translation of the following sentence is uncertain, *šīn* corresponds to the Arabic consonant, and for al-Būnī it is also a special invocation to evoke the *ḡinn* Ḥirdiyā'īl which is the servant of the *šīn* (al-Būnī, *Šams* 138, 310, 316, 412). According to Jacob 1910b:23, it is the Greek-Christian invocation "in the beginning there was the word".

¹⁷ The man charged to take care of the torches' ashes of the *maḥmal*. In a. "Ḥammāl al-Mašā'īlī and the donkey", there is also added to the first sentence, "and the burning ashes, the crest of fire is spread". This new character is the torch bearer, maybe he belonged to the corporation of the "éclaireurs de nuit du Caire", mentioned by Raymond 1957:156, n. 71. Rosenthal (1971:37) quotes a list (compiled by al-Bakrī in the 17th century) of names of groups of people using the cannabis, and among them he mentions the *mašā'iliyya*.

¹⁸ al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* I, 416, 423, 473; Ashtor 1976:251, 289-290.

with whom they had in common behaviours alien to the orthodox Islam, they were associating themselves with the masses of poor Egyptians.

Only tolerance would allow all these different beliefs to coexist without pogroms, as it happened later in Catholic Spain against the Jews. There were cases of persecutions, and these were not few but isolated, such as in Damascus when the Christians were massacred because they were charged with conspiracy against the Mamlūks with the Mongols; and on different occasions Christian churches were burnt, and hosts were hanged using as a pretext the campaign of moralization. A few cases of anti-semitism were also recorded in Alexandria. This is how Ibn Dāniyāl explains the pretextuous campaign against the Christians and Jews during his time:

Pains would be healed with wine, if the justice was not fickle, and to obey the devil is to disobey the sultan, the seriousness of the punishment, and being punished with the Jews and the Christians.

Historical documents show that there were no forced conversions to Islam, as occurred in the later Middle Ages; at that time the persecutions, as well as the forced conversions were still isolated cases depending on the will of the Sultan. Therefore as they were temporary, the new convert often went back to his original faith and payed the *ġizya*. Ibn Dāniyāl knew the problem and one of his characters, the Christian secretary Šayḥ Babūġ says:

I am half paralyzed like the time, struck by unemployment, and therefore I find myself in the worst condition; if it was not for your nice maid-servant, the monks of the church and being ashamed of Lord Jesus, I would have converted to Islām already, but I am close to making my mind up as I will starve.

The prince Wiṣāl, the Mamlūk protagonist of the first *bāba* shows his tolerance, but at the same time soliciting him says:

If you will become Muslim I will cover you with a splendid robe of honour and I will place you at work in the common land!

Tolerance and the freedom of thought and speech did not last too long. The opinions of the *‘ulamā’* were often contrasting and there did not exist a particular institution that could prosecute the illicit, like the Sacred Roman Rota. If a Šayḥ like Ibn Taymiyya or Ibn al-Ḥāġġ issued a *fatwa*, condemning somebody accused of immoral conduct, it was not taken for granted that the military power would execute it. To give an example a renowned mystic friend of the Sultan Baybars, the Šayḥ Ḥaḍīr al-Mihrānī¹⁹, was accused of peculation, fornication and sodomy, and the *fatwa* against him was immediately executed, because it had been issued on the Emirs' request. While a similar condemnation, against the Šayḥ al-Ḥarīrī (d. 1247/8) was never taken into consideration because the Emirs protected him.

In a relatively fluid situation, where the solidarity between the religious and military powers was not steadily consolidated a regime of relative tolerance was

¹⁹ Irwin 1986:53-55; Bosworth 1976 I, 114-115; Chamberlain 1994:171-173; Hopwood & Badawi 1992:12; Corrao 1990:28.

inevitable. Such conditions were always temporary as Ibn Dāniyāl declares in his shadow plays where he announces the end of an epoch of relative freedom. The poet states it in the first *bāba* when he celebrates the accession of Baybars to the sultanate, the restoration of the Islamic Caliphate under his auspices and then sings an elegy for the funeral of the devil. The elegy represents a double testimony, on the one hand the still alive heredity of the Dionysiac and Temmuzian rites, shown by the funeral of the god of the vineyard which here is impersonated by the devil. On the other it marks the renewed solidarity between the political and the religious powers which condemned the comic culture to redescend to the lowest levels of the literary hierarchies. Ibn Dāniyāl's shadow plays, although they are not unique, and did not inaugurate the birth of a new gender, if compared to the other later plays, mark the apogee and the beginning of the decay. With the end of the first Mamlūk Circassian dynasty the culture of the transgressive freedom of laughter and tolerance towards the rites of different religious beliefs, was destined to be drowsed for a few centuries.

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