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# Spiritual Leadership and Political Controversy: Reassessing the Role of Sufi Shaykhs during Mamluk Formation through the Lens of Islamic Religious Authority

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ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the impact of the Mamluks' formation on their relationship with the Egyptian society, particularly with the Sufis. Both Mamluks and Sufis emerged in Egyptian society during the Ayyubid period. In less than a century, the Mamluks gained control of Egypt and the Levant, establishing a rule lasting over two and a half centuries. During this time, Sufis played a crucial role in Egyptian society, reaching their peak influence under Mamluk rule. One of the key roles of Sufi Shaykhs was to serve as intermediaries between the Mamluk rulers and their subjects. Sufi Shaykhs frequently went beyond spiritual guidance, developing ties with sultans and emirs that exceeded traditional roles. This paper explores the distinctive relationship between certain sultans, emirs, and popular Sufi shaykhs during the Mamluk era. Unlike previous studies focusing on mutual benefit, this analysis investigates the psychosocial dynamics underlying the Mamluks' formation to uncover the deeper motivations behind these relationships. The unique social identity cultivated by the Mamluks and the sense of otherness (alterity) formed during their early years significantly shaped their relations with various groups in Egyptian society, particularly with Sufi Shaykhs.*

*Keywords: Mamluk history; Sufi shaykhs; military elites; Islamic religious authority; Mamluk's social identity; medieval Islamic society*

## INTRODUCTION

The advent of Mamluk in Egypt during the Ayyubid Period, alongside the growing influence of Sufi shaykhs, marked two significant developments within Egyptian society. Both the Mamluk and Sufi, both emerged from external sources, with their origins lying beyond the Egypt's geographical boundaries of Egypt. Mamluks were primarily from Turkic origins, particularly the Kipchak Turks from Central Asia. Sufis, many of whom also arrived during the Ayyubid Mamluks era, came from Central Asia as well and often shared a common Turkish heritage with the Mamluk. Initially serving as slave-warriors, the Mamluks eventually overthrow their Ayyubid masters, defeated both the Crusaders and the Mongols, and established a powerful dynasty. The Mamluk military-political elite ruled Egypt and Syria for over 250 years (1250-1517).

By the end of Ayyubid's period, Sufis played a key role in Islamic society across religious, spiritual, social, and political spheres. They acted as social mediators between rulers and subjects, accumulating significant social capital through this role.

The relationship between the Mamluks and Sufi Shaykhs is a significant area of study. On one hand, it helps elucidate the dynamics of Islamic society, where the ruling class was often socially and culturally alienated from the general population. On the other hand, it sheds light on the human side of the Mamluks an aspect often overshadowed by historical and modern portrayals that emphasize their identity solely as a warrior knight only.

Szczepanski, Kallie wrote that:

> "The Mamluks were a class of warrior-enslaved people, mostly of Turkic or Caucasian ethnicity, who served between the 9th and 19th century in the Islamic world"
>
> (Szczepanski, Kallie 2024).

This paper explores the multifaceted interactions between the Mamluk sultans and various segments of Egyptian society, with a particular emphasis on the Sufi Shaykhs affiliated with Popular Sufism. It further examines how the Mamluks' distinct social identity shaped by their formative experiences and marked a sense of otherness (Alterity) affected their capacity to assimilate into and engage with the social and cultural fabric of Egyptian society.

Due to the limited number of studies focusing on the psychosocial dimension of Mamluk life, this study should be regarded as a preliminary step in that direction, with its conclusions considered tentative.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The intricate ties between these two groups of Egyptian society during the Mamluk Period (1250-1517) are highlighted by Leonor Fernandes in his work about the Foundation of Baybars al-Jashankir (Fernandes 1988). Fernandes discusses the relationship that developed between Sufi Shaykhs and members of the ruling elite, citing several examples. One such case is that of Shaykh al-Khidr (1277), for whom Sultan Baybars al-Bunduqdari established more than three *zawiya*-s in both Egypt and Syria. Similarly, Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad founded multiple *zawiya*-s, including two for Tarturiyya Shaykhs' brothers and one for Shaykh Taqiy al-Din Rajab al-ʿAjami (Fernandes 1987). However, Fernandes does not offer a convincing explanation for the Mamluks' apparent inclination toward the Sufism.

In 1982, the work of Carl F. Petry on *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Petry 1981) was considered a new approach utilising the modern tool at that time the computer for analysing of the bibliographies of many thousands belonging to various groups of Egyptian Society, as mentioned in two fifteenth-century biographical dictionaries. In this work, he presented the multi-layered relationships among the Mamluks, *ulama,* and Sufi. Petry suggested that the Mamluks believed that the Sufis had an inner force that connected them directly with Allah, so they feared Sufis' invisible power.

The work of Richard McGregor exanimated the relationship between the Sufis and the Mamluk, in his article "Sufis and Soldiers in Mamluk Cairo, through the written sources belonged to 'Ali Wafa' (1357- 1405) and his father Muhammad Wafa' (1302-1363)" (Richard J. A. 2002).

The Mamluks' transition from a military to civil elite was the subject of the work of Aharon Layish. His study, based on a family archive from Aleppo, shed light on the relationship between the Mamluks and their sons *Awlãd al-Nãs* (Layish 2008).

The thesis of Or Amir on the Relations between Mamluk and Sufi Shaykh dates to 2020, explored the political domination of Mamluk and the growing influence of Sufi shaykhs in the Medieval Islamic world, as well their impacts on Islamic societies (Or 2020).

Nathan C. Hofer submitted an insightful dissertation on the relationship between Mamluk and the different classes of the Egyptian Society (Hofer 2022).

In another recent study focused on the relationship between Mamluks and Scholars (*muhaddith*), "Hadith and Scholars in the Mamluk" (Emiroğlu 2020), the author confirmed the mutual beneficial relationship between Mamluks and Ḥadith Ulema in this period.

Büşra Sidika Kaya (2023) addressed the formation of the Mamluk social identity in her article, emphasising the role of Mamluk madrasas in cultivating a shard sense of community among Mamluks. She also examines how the *Ulama* contributed to the analysed the critical role played by the *Ulema* in shaping and reinforcing Mamluk identity (Kaya, B. S. 2023).

In contrast, the work of Kathryn Anne Moench in her thesis was essential for understanding the new vision of the Mamluks' multiple identities, the concept of Alterity or "Otherness", and its implications (Moench 2015).

While prior scholarship has largely interpreted the relationships between the Mamluks and Sufi Shaykhs as well as other scholarly elites through the lens of mutual benefit, this paper adopts psychosocial framework that focuses on the formative processes shaping Mamluk identity. The unique social of the Mamluks, marked by an inherent sense of alterity developed during their early integration into society, played a critical role in shaping their interactions with various segments of Egyptian society, particularly Sufi Shaykhs.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a combined inductive and analytical approach to explore the roots of the relationship between the Mamluks and Sufi shaykhs. The inductive method will be used to trace this relationship as reflected in historical chronicles and biographical works (*ṭabaqāt*) of Sufi figures and scholars. Through a qualitative analytical method, the study will identify and interpret the core dynamics and driving factors that shaped this relationship.

Following the introduction, the paper will provide a brief historical overview of the Ayyubid and early Mamluk periods, highlighting the composition of Egyptian society during this transitional era. It will then examine the formation

of the Mamluk regime and the development of their distinct socio-political identity. Before focusing specifically on Mamluk–Sufi relations, the study will analyse the interactions between the Mamluk elite and the *ʿulamāʾ* (religious scholars) and jurists comparing these with their relationships with Sufi shaykhs and noting both parallels and distinctions.

The article examines on one hand, the relationship between the Mamluks ruling elite and the Shaykhs associated to what was known as "Popular Sufism". These Sufis were largely outsiders to Egyptian society, many of whom originated from the eastern parts of the Islamic world and arrived during the Ayyubid era and early Mamluk period. On the other hand, the study explores the personal characteristics and spiritual profiles of those Sufis figures who developed particularly close ties with the Mamluk class, aiming to uncover the factors that enabled their privileged status and influence.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

By the mid-12th century, the Fatimid empire which ruled Egypt and Syria (969 – 1173) was nearing its decline. From 1161 to 1169, Fatimids faced multiple problems: internal conflicts between viziers, wars against the Crusaders, and the Nur al-Din's growing interest in Egypt.

In 1164, Nur al-Din sent the first campaign in Egypt to restore Shawar, the Fatimid vizier who had been expelled from Cairo and had taken refuge with Nur al-Din. In 1164, the Crusader King of Jerusalem sent his army to Egypt for the second time, the first in 1163. That same year, Nur al-Din's Army, led by Shirkuh, also entered to Egypt.

After a series of events including clashes between Fatimids and Crusaders, Shawar's burning of Fustat, and Shawar's assassination al-ʿAdid appointed Shirkuh as vizier. Following Shirkuh's death in 1169, following Shirkuh's death power in the Fatimid state passed to his nephew, Saladin.

Between 1169 and 1174, Saladin (Salah al-Din, son of Najm al-Din Ayyub) strengthened his position in Egypt, became a Sunni vizir for al-ʿAdid (al-Adid li-Din Allah), the last Fatimid caliph of Egypt. In 1171, Saladin officially abolished the Fatimid state and its Caliphate, reuniting Egypt with the Sunni world (Lev 1999). He then founded a new dynasty the Ayyubids (1171-1250) which ruled Egypt and large parts of Levant *Bilad al-Sham* for nearly eighty years (Bora 2015).

The Ayyubid era was decisive in Egypt's history, shaping the century's fate later. The Ayyubids introduced two new groups into Egyptian society, both of which became extraordinarily influential during their rule. The first group was the Mamluks, a military corps formed under Sultan al-Salih Najm al-Din. The second group was the Sufis. These two groups along different paths, though these two groups followed different paths, they were at times connected through unique and distinctive relationship among their members (Sayyid Marsot 2009).

### THE MAMLUKS

Al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub (1240–1249), one of the last Ayyubid rulers, added a new Mamluk regiment to his army. These soldiers were of enslaved origin, recruited mainly from Turkish clans in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Over time, the Mamluks of this new regiment became a powerful faction, eventually assuming exclusive political and military power. In 1250, they overthrew the Ayyubid dynasty and established their own, which ruled Egypt and Syria from 1250 to 1517. Petry argued that Saladin could be seen as the true founder of the Mamluk system, having laid its foundations by granting it economic independence, largely through land endowments (*iqtaʿ*) (Petry 1981).

### MAMLUK'S CREATION: THE MULTI-IDENTITIES

The Mamluk institution in Egypt was distinct from other political and military systems that developed within the Islamic world since the Abbasid dynasty. No comparable institution emerged beyond these boundaries. Petry has noted the unusual and specific terminology used to refer to the Mamluks, highlight the unique nature of their identity and role within the Islamic polity. Petry wrote:

> Among the several Arabic words for the enslaved person (such as ʿabd, khadim, or guide), the passive participle "Mamluk," derived from the verbal root m-l-k (to own) and meaning something which is owned, came to denote an enslaved person and even more particularly a military enslaved person. The Mamluk sultanate thus refers to the regime that ruled Egypt and Syria from 1250 to 1517, in which mamluks (military enslaved people), individuals of humble origin, constituted the ruling elite (Daly & Petry 1998).

Child slaves (Mamluks) were purchased from Turkic tribes in Central Asia and then the Caucasus. However, at the time of the last Sultan Ayyubid, the majority of the Mamluks were of Turkic origin primarily from the Kipchak steppes. They were brough to Cairo, where they were educated and trained in the barracks to master the use of weapons, eventually becoming skilled soldiers and capable commanders.

During the Mamluk Sultanate, sultans chosen from among the Mamluks themselves. With few exceptions, the hereditary transfer of power was avoided, which created a continuous need to acquire new Mamluks. Each new sultan who come to power surrounded himself with his own corps of Mamluks (EL Morsy 2017).

According to Ayalon, the Mamluk was separated from his native environment at an early age in order to be trained according to the neds of Islamic rulers. He was integrated into a military school that functioned as a training crucible. During his period, the non-Muslim Mamluk was transformed into a believer. From a boy, he became a man; from a novice, he became a trained soldier; and from the status of a slave, he was made a free man.

In the early stages of his training, the Mamluk was introduced to the basics of Isam and turned into a devout Muslim, although his knowledge was not deep. He was also taught the art of warfare using the most effective techniques of the time. Upon completing his training, he emerged as both a committed Muslim and a capable soldier an effective military instrument prepared to defend Islam and serve his master (Ayalon 1996).

However, the Mamluk was deprived, from an early age, of any connection to his past. The only relationships that remained in his memory were those with his master and fellow trainees. Under these conditions, a strong sense of loyalty and solidarity developed within the "school family," particularly between the master (*ustaz*) and his Mamluks, as well as among the Mamluks themselves (Ayalon 1996).

Nevertheless, although the Mamluks received religious instruction in Arabic, few of the Bahri Mamluks spoke the language fluently. Even fewer were proficient in its everyday spoken form. This resulted in a significant linguistic divide between the Mamluks and the broader non-Mamluk population (Moench 2015).

## IDENTITY, ALTERITY, OR OTHERNESS

Broadly speaking, identity refers to our sense of self. It is also a distinct impression of an individual as presented to, or perceived by, others (Bhugra et al. 2023).

In the case of the Mamluks, it is difficult to speak of a unique personal identity during their formative years, as they were subjected to uniform educational and social conditioning. Their identities were shaped collectively rather than individually.

The Mamluks experienced a layered and complex form of "Otherness" as slaves, foreigners, and as individuals born outside the Islamic faith. The creation of the mamluk followed several transformative stages. The process began with the removal the boy from his homeland and his transport to Egypt, making him an outsider in multiple dimensions. This dislocation was not just geographical; it symbolically erased his former identity. the severing of the Mamluk from his history, family and homeland was a deliberate act, reinforced through the obliteration of his original name, language, and cultural memory. During the training period, the Mamluk was stripped of familial and communal ties and redefined as an individual within a closed military class a class entirely distinct from the surrounding society. This elite group operated as a uni-generational institution, systematically excluding the children of Mamluks from inheriting their fathers' social or political status (Moench 2015).

The concept of "Otherness" is multifaceted, and its application to the Mamluk case is particularly fitting. The scholar Kathryne A. J. M. argued that the term fully encapsulates the unique condition of the Mamluks. As she wrote:

> The positioning of Otherness becomes a question of belonging: if not 'Same,' then what? The Otherness of the Mamluks is both more and less simple than the absolutes inherent in much of the prevalent concepts of alterity and the Other. Simpler in that the binary relationship being investigated is neither abstract nor ontological, it manifests as a tangible binary of 'Other and Same'; Mamluk and non-Mamluk. A clear distinction is created between the class of Mamluk and extant culture(s) within the Sultanate, most notably the dominant Arab culture. This distinction is manifest in both physical and symbolic ways; distance is created through linguistic, cultural, and architectural means (Moench 2015).

Mamluk social identities were shaped by a strong sense of distinction from the local population, whom they regarded as fundamentally separate from themselves (Bhugra et al. 2023). The Otherness was not only a social reality but also a core element of the Mamluks' *raison d'être* their reason for being, which they deliberately maintained. Rather than integrating into local society, the Mamluks preserved this separation as a defining feature of their identity.

This self-imposed distance extended to all levels of society, including *ulama*-s who typically shared the same language, cultural background and social ties as broader population. More strikingly, the impermeability of Mamluk's class even created a divide between Mamluks and their own children. As their children were born Muslims and free, they could not be classified as slaves and therefore were excluded from joining the Mamluk military elite (Moench 2015).

Islamic inheritance law reinforced this boundary: a freeborn Muslim could not inherit from a slave, and a slave who has fled from his master was not eligible to inherit. This legal divide added another layer of separation between generations. To overcome this, many Mamluks used the waqf (religious endowment) system as a means of preserving their wealth and ensuring its transfer to their descendants, thereby protecting their patrimony despite legal and social constraints (Layish 2008).

## SYSTEM AND SOCIETY

Seizing the throne and controlling succession led to a privileged upper class of Mamluk emirs, distinct from the general elite class composed of the broader body of Mamluks, which grew even larger during the Sultanate (Moench 2015). The Mamluks quickly gained an early sense of legitimacy for their regime when they succeeded in defending the realm of Islam against the Crusaders and the Mongols (Philipp & Haarmann 1998).

Structurally, Mamluk society, like the Ayyubid system before it, was organized into three fundamentally distinct groups. At the top was the ruling caste *(arbab al-suyuf*), which held political and military power. The civilian elites included men of religion, scholars (*arbab al-qalam*), and administrators who played a dual role: on the one hand, they assisted rulers in civil governance; on the other, they served as intermediaries between the state and the population.

The subjects (*raʿiyya*) formed the productive base of society and were subject to taxation. This group included traders, artisans, and peasants (Martel-Thoumian 1991). The Sufis, though spiritually significant, were included within this third group the *raʿiyya***.**

## INTRODUCTION OF SUFIS UNDER THE AYYUBIDS AND THE EARLY MAMLUKS

The first critical mission of Saladin was to *restore Egypt to Sunni orthodoxy* and reestablish it as a center of intellectual Sunni belief. The Fatimids, despite their long rule (969–1173), had not succeeded in conveying their doctrine to the *majority of the Egyptian population*.

Saladin and his successors introduced new Sunni religious institutions such as *madrasas, khanqahs,* and *zawiyas*. In 1170, he founded three *madrasas* in Fustat, the first Islamic capital of Egypt. Two years later, Saladin established the first *khānqāh* in Egypt by transforming an old Fatimid palace *Dar Saʿid al-Suʿadaʾ*, located in the heart of the city into a Sufi lodge (Hofer 2022).

Under the Ayyubids, Egypt especially Cairo became widely open to different Sunni intellectual and spiritual currents, including Sufism. Hundreds of foreign Sufis arrived in Egypt from various regions of the Islamic world (Sayyid Marsot 2009).

The word Sufism is commonly used to translate the Arabic term *taṣawwuf,* which refers to the act or process of becoming a Sufi. The earlier usage of the term clearly reflects a consensus around its basic meaning: a straightforward, sincere faith within Islamic theology, marked by personal devotion to God and unwavering trust (*tawakkul*) in Him under all conditions (Salleh 1996).

In Egypt, it was under the Ayyubids and early Mamluks that Sufism truly became popular. By the early thirteenth century, it was no longer a fringe practice; Sufism had evolved into a mass movement that held a significant place within the religious and social fabric of society. It achieved full development and was increasingly accepted by both the *ʿulamaʾ* and the broader Egyptian cultural sphere (Hofer 2022).

The widespread distribution of *zawiyas* throughout the confined city of al-Qahira during the early Ayyubid period and their placement in central urban locations further supports this development (El-Morsy 2017).

Researchers have broadly categorized the Sufis of the Mamluk period into two major groups. The first were the official Sufis, who lived in *khanqahs*, which provided an organized institutional setting, especially for immigrant Sufis. The second group comprised those associated with what scholars refer to as popular Sufism, who often lived in isolated *zawiyas,* particularly during the Ayyubid and early Mamluk eras.

Despite the benefits Mamluk sultans and emirs gained from sponsoring the Sufis residing in *khanqahs*, there was no close or confidential relationship between the rulers and these Sufis. Those who lived in *khanqahs* were rarely given extended attention in the biographical dictionaries (*ṭabaqāt*). When they were mentioned, the entries were typically extremely brief (El Morsy 2017).

As conscious heirs to the Ayyubids, the early Mamluk sultans supported the *khanqah system* and appointed the *Shaykh al-Shuyukh*, or Shaykh of Shaykhs (Homerin 1999). However, the Sufis who lived in khanqahs were not buried within them; instead, they were interred in the Turbat al-Sufiyya, located outside al-Qahira (Fernandes 1988).

The Mamluk sultans and emirs also actively participated in the construction of zawiyas for Sufi shaykhs, with twenty-one *zawiya*s known to have been erected by them. In contrast to the khānqāh system, Sufis living in *zawiya*-s often had close relationships with rulers. While khanqahs typically bore the names of the Mamluk patrons who founded them, most zawiyas were named after their respective Shaykhs.

Each *zawiya* was administered by a Shaykh or a Sufi brotherhood, which initiated members, trained new disciples, and established the rituals and rules to be observed (Homerin 1999). The *zawiya* Shaykh was typically buried within the *zawiya* itself. Additionally, chroniclers and the authors of biographical dictionaries (*tabaqat*) often recorded visits by sultans and emirs to Sufi shaykhs in their *zawiya*-s (El-Morsy 2017). Almost all of these Shaykhs, who belonged to the popular Sufi tradition, maintained special relationships with Mamluk rulers.

## MAMLUK BETWEEN *ULAMA* AND SUFIS

### Mamluk and *Ulama*

During the reign of al-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb, the founder of the new Mamluk regiment, Mamluks were granted high-ranking government positions due to their critical role in ensuring state security and their desire to increase their wealth. This rise in status inevitably led to tensions with other segments of Egyptian society, particularly the *ʿulamāʾ*.

The early conflict between the Mamluks and the *ʿulamāʾ* was particularly delicate and may have shaped their relationship for years to come. One notable clash occurred between the Mamluks and the prominent scholar ʿIzz al-Din ʿAbd al-Salam (also known as Izzeddin). He arrived in Egypt in 1242 and was initially welcomed with great respect by Sultan al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub.

However, ʿIzz al-Din was convinced that the Mamluks, as enslaved individuals who had been purchased and trained to serve the Islamic state militarily, remained legally slaves. On this basis, he issued a *fatwa* declaring that Mamluks, as slaves, lacked the legal capacity to engage in commercial transactions, including buying and selling:

> The actions of Mamluk were not valid unless they regained their freedom; they were the property of the Muslim state. Hence, he ruled that they all must be sold and freed by their new masters before they could function in their respective positions in government. Izzeddin started the sale process at once. All the princes were gathered at the marketplace. The Shaykh called them out by name, one by one, asking for unaffordable prices. They were then freed and thus could function in their respective post (al-Suyuṭi 1968).

The Mamluks appealed to the sultan to intervene against this *fatwa*. But ʿIzz al-Din refused to compromise on matters of justice and stood firmly by his ruling. He immediately began enforcing the *fatwa* by initiating a public sale process. All the princes were gathered at the marketplace, where the Shaykh himself called them out by name, one by one, demanding unrealistically high prices for their "purchase." Once this symbolic transaction was completed, the Mamluks were officially manumitted and thus legally able to hold their respective positions (al-Suyuti 1968).

Following the establishment of the Mamluk dynasty, sultans and emirs were compelled to demonstrate respect toward scholars, especially the ʿulamāʾ, particularly at the beginning of their reigns. At this time, the region faced serious external threats the advancing Mongols from Syria and Palestine, and the remaining Crusader forces still in control of parts of the eastern Mediterranean coast. Yaacov Lev wrote:

The relations between the ulama and the early Mamluk sultans evolved in a period dominated by the Mamluk-Mongol war, when a vigorous defense of Islam was much needed. Following the Mamluk victory at the Battle of ʿAyn Jalut, the ulama, typified by the qadis and chief qadi, played a crucial role in both providing legitimacy for Baybars' rule and shaping the Islamic identity of the Mamluk regime (Lev 2009).

The previous ruling authority, the Ayyubids, had no difficulty engaging directly with the people (*raʿiyya*), who shared their language and culture. In contrast, the Mamluks differed from the local population in ethnicity, language, and cultural background. Naturally, the Mamluks required scholars to serve as intermediaries between themselves and the people. But the relationship was mutual: the scholars also depended on the Mamluks, who controlled political power and economic resources.

Shaykh ʿIzz al-Din ʿAbd al-Salam (Izzeddin) did not hesitate to challenge the authority of the first Mamluk sultan, Qutuz. During Qutuz's reign, Egypt faced the catastrophic threat of Mongol invasions. In response, ʿIzz al-Din issued a fatwa deposing the young and inexperienced sultan then in power, in favor of the more capable Emir Qutuz a move intended to strengthen the country's defenses against the advancing Mongol forces.

However, when Sultan Qutuz later called upon the population to contribute money and valuables to finance the army, ʿIzz al-Dīn intervened once more. He insisted that wealthy soldiers should be asked to give up their own valuables before the general population was burdened with such demands. He said what we quoted:

If the enemy is at the gate, it is time to fight him, to give up your valuables like golden saddles and silver machinery, so that each soldier has his weapon and his shoes like the civilians have. You cannot take money from the public and leave lavish equipment in the hands of the soldiers (Muhammad al-Zuhayli 1992).

The courageous *faqīh* ʿIzz al-Din (Izzeddin) confronted a third sultan, Baybars, who began his reign in 1260 (1260–1277) after assassinating Sultan Qutuz. There are several versions of this event, but one of the most widely accepted is that Qutuz had reneged on his promise to appoint Baybars as governor (*naʾib*) of Aleppo (Levanoni 2022).

Upon returning to Egypt, Baybars held a grand ceremony in the reception hall of the Citadel to formally receive the allegiance of emirs, state officials, *ʿulamāʾ*, courtiers, and other dignitaries. Many ordinary people hoping to greet the new sultan were also present. Suddenly, a loud voice rang out, addressing the sultan by his personal name: "Baybars, I know you. You are the slave of al-Bunduqdari. That means you are a slave and you are not legally qualified to be sultan unless you have been emancipated."

Baybars quickly presented a document proving that his former master, al-Salih Ayyub, had manumitted him (Muhammad al-Zuhayli 1992).

The opposition of the *ʿulamāʾ* to the Mamluks did not end with Shaykh Izzeddin. Other religious scholars played similar roles throughout the Mamluk period. In 1299, Silar and Baybars al-Jashankir asked the people to contribute money and valuables to purchase weapons to fight external threats. However, *faqihs* and *ʿulamaʾ* opposed this appeal (Ibn Taghribirdi 2006).

In 1378, Sultan Barquq and Emir Barka attempted to break the legal inviolability of *waqf* properties endowments that could not be sold to pay debts using similar arguments. Once again, Shaykhs, *faqihs*, and *qadis* opposed the effort, successfully preserving some of the targeted endowments (al-Maqrizi 1997). Similar confrontations occurred during the reigns of Sultan Qaytbay (1468–1496) and Qansuh al-Ghawri (1501–1516) (Ibn Iyas 2008).

The continued opposition of scholars to Mamluk sultans and emirs does not imply that their relationship was always characterized by tension and hostility. On the contrary, sources indicate that some sultans and princes were deeply engaged in Islamic sciences and *ḥadith* and often provided a supportive environment for scholarly activity.

On various occasions, sultans demonstrated their interest in religious learning by organizing scholarly gatherings and initiating discussions with prominent scholars. Sultan Hasan, for example, was known to seek out scholars and directly question them on specific legal and theological matters. Sultan Muhammad b. Qalawun once hosted a large banquet for Sufis, judges, and scholars who had gathered to attend the opening ceremony of the *khanqah* he commissioned near his palace in Sarayakus, an area close to Cairo (Emiroğlu 2020).

The class of *ʿulamaʾ* in the Mamluk state can be described as an official bridge across the significant social and cultural divide between the Mamluks who differed from the local population in various respects and the society they ruled. It was the responsibility of the *ʿulamaʾ* to mediate communication between the military ruling elite and the people.

Sultans and emirs generally showed profound respect to the *ʿulamaʾ* and consulted them on select social and political matters. However, these interactions did not usually result in close or personal relationships. The trust and respect that the general population felt toward the *'ulama'*, whom they viewed as accessible and familiar, further reinforced the scholars' role as intermediaries (Düzenli 2021).

At the same time, the reverse process should not be overlooked: the sons of Mamluks, known as *Awlad al-Nas*, increasingly penetrated the *ʿulamaʾ* class. Undoubtedly, they had mastered the Arabic language and integrated into local culture. One prominent example is Ibn Taghribirdi (d. 874/1469), who became widely known for his commitment to scholarship. His major works include *al-Manhal al-ṣāfī*, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa'l-Qāhira*, among others. He described himself as both a member of the ruling caste and of the scholarly class (Kaya 2023).

In this context, it is important to understand that the relationship between the *ʿulamāʾ* and the Mamluks was primarily official and functional in nature*,* shaped by *mutual interest*. As discussed above, this dynamic enabled the continued patronage of scholarly institutions by the Mamluk elite.

The Mamluks' consistent support for *ʿulamaʾ* institutions combined with the functional interdependence between the two groups was one of the key factors contributing to the stability and longevity of the Mamluk state, which lasted for more than two and a half centuries (El-Morsy 2017). Büşra Kaya said:

> As a result of the patronage, they obtained in these lands and their ability to represent their own identity, the Mamluk ulama clearly expressed the legitimacy of political power in the history texts they wrote. The Mamluk political power, recognised by the *ulama*, owes the continuity of the state in this social structure to the networks of mutual relations established with the civilian elite (Kaya 2023).

However, the state of mutual dependence between the Mamluks and the *ʿulamaʾ* was largely acknowledged and accepted by both groups. The Mamluks, who held exclusive military power and ultimate political authority, maintained an ambivalent attitude toward the *ʿulamaʾ*.

Importantly, neither group succeeded in encroaching upon the other's sphere of influence. Among the two, the *ʿulamaʾ* were particularly determined to preserve their autonomy under the Mamluk regime (Petry 1981).

## Mamluks and Sufi Shaykh

The relationship between Mamluk sultans and emirs and Sufi shaykhs was entirely different from their relationship with the *ʿulamaʾ*. From the Ayyubid period onward, Mamluk rulers made significant efforts to cultivate close and personal ties with Sufi shaykhs.

The contemporary chronicler Ibn Shaddad described the strong relationship between Sultan Baybars (1260–1277) and Shaykh Khidr al-Mahrani, who served as both his soothsayer and trusted advisor. Ibn Shaddad further noted that Baybars built several *zawiyas* for Shaykh Khidr in Egypt and Syria, endowing them generously with wealthy waqf holdings, including cultivated lands and commercial establishments.

Moreover, the sultan visited the shaykh frequently at his *zawiya,* sometimes as often as once or twice a week (Ibn Shaddad 1983). M. Holt translated the following paragraph from Ibn Shaddad:

> When the sultan went to Anatolia, one of his comrades had a meeting with Shaykh Khidr and asked him about the outcome for the sultan of the expedition. He informed him that he would be victorious; then he would return to Damascus and die there "twenty days after my death," and so, it fell out. I heard this anecdote from Emir Sayf al-Din Qashtamur al-'Ajami in his own words, and he is responsible for it. Because of the excessive opinion of our lord the sultan (God grant him mercy) of matters which he commended to him, he built him a *zawiya* outside Cairo on the canal opposite the "Drummery-ground" and endowed it with ground-rents bringing in more than 30,000 dirhams of pure silver annually; and in Jerusalem a *zawiya*, and Damascus a *zawiya*, in Ba'albakk a *zawiya*, in Hamnah a *zawiya*, and in Ḥims a zawiya; all of them had dervishes and endowments. He gave him a free hand in his kingdom since he had authority, and no one had authority over him (Holt 1983).

Baybars also showed deep reverence for other Sufi shaykhs. The author of the *Manaqib* of Ahmad al-Badawi affirms that Sultan Baybars was passionately devoted to Badawi and frequently visited his *zawiya* (al-Misri, 1861). Moreover, when the saint arrived from Iraq, Baybars reportedly left Egypt with his soldiers to meet and honor him (M.-Th. Urvoy 1991).

Baybars also honoured several other Sufi shaykhs, visiting them personally in their *zawiyas*. Among them was Shaykh Muhammad al-Balkhi, associated with the Kalenderiyye order, whom

Baybars visited in Damascus (Ibn F. Allah al-ʿUmari 2002).

Arabic sources do not mention that certain Sufis may have successfully converted a few Mongol rulers to Islam. However, some of the children who were later brought to Egypt as Mamluks were kidnapped from these regions, and it is possible that they had early exposure to Sufi influences (Lubis 1987).

Ibn Hajar described the close relationship between Sultan al-Mansur Lajin (1296–1299) and Shaykh Najm al-Din ibn ʿAbud, for whom the sultan built a personal *zawiya*. Ibn Ḥajar confirmed the shaykh's influence on the sultan, stating that he even intervened in the appointment of high officials such as *Qadi al-Qudat*, the chief judge (Ibn Hajar 1929).

There are numerous examples of close relationships between sultans and Sufi saints, especially during the early Mamluk period. Al-Maqrizi, the major chronicler of the time, recorded several cases. Sultan Baybars al-Jashankir (Baybars II) built a zawiya for Shaykh Naṣr al-Din ibn Sulayman al-Manbagi. Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad also founded multiple zawiyas, including one for the two brothers Muhammad and Ahmad al-Tarturiyya, and another for Shaykh Taqi al-Din Rajab al-ʿAjami around 1320 (Al-Maqrizi 2003).

Perhaps the most striking example of a sultan's relationship with a Sufi is the case of Sultan Barquq (1382–1389), who may be seen as inaugurating a new phase in Mamluk history: the Burji Mamluk period.

Ibn Hajar talked about the curious relationship between Sultan Barquq and Shaykh Ahmed ibn Abul Allah al-Zahawri:

> When Barquq became the Sultan, he brought him (al-Zahawri was originally in Damascus) and made him great, and he did not want any intercession for him. al-Zahawri then exaggerated until he attended the Sultan's Majlis General and sat with him on the same bench. He insulted him in the presence of princes and probably spat in his face in front of everyone. … the people had a great belief in him (Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalani 1972).

At the same time, Barquq maintained a close relationship with the Shaykh of al-Mu'ayyad's khanqah, al-Babrat, whom he assisted during his funeral ceremony (Ibn Hajar 1929). When Sultan Barquq was nearing death, he requested that a dome be built over his grave and was buried at the feet of several Sufi Shaykhs, including Alaa al-Din al-Sirami, Shaykh Talha Abu Bakr al-Baga'i, and others (Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalani 1972).

The last ruler of the Mamluk dynasty, Tuman Bay II (1474–1517), was executed in 1517 by order of the Ottoman sultan Selim I. Although Tuman Bay's reign lasted only a year (Milwright 2017), Ibn Iyas noted the significant influence that the Sufi shaykh Abul Suʿud al-Garhi held over him. The emir Tuman Bay was a devoted follower of Shaykh Abul Suʿud al-Garhi. After the death of his uncle, Sultan al-Ghuri, Tuman Bay initially refused to assume power but was persuaded to accept the throne following the intervention of his shaykh (Ibn Iyas 1984).

## CHARACTERS OF SUFI SHAYKHS HAVING A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MAMLUKS

The examples of Sufi shaykhs who developed special relationships with Mamluk sultans demonstrate that these shaykhs often possessed distinctive qualities. Many of them belonged to Sufi groups that rejected state patronage and chose not to reside in official khanqahs. Such figures were frequently regarded as controversial. For example, Shaykh Khidr al-Mahrani, the Sufi guide and soothsayer of Sultan al-Zahir Baybars (1260–1277), was either praised or condemned by chroniclers, including contemporaries such as Ibn al-ʿAssal (Ibn al-ʿAssal 2017) and Ibn al-Dawadari (al-Dawadari 1982). The individual traits and conduct of these shaykhs were often the subject of polemical debate, as some were connected with the Qalandariyya order. This mystical Sufi movement rejected the use of intoxicants, wore only blankets or hip-length hairshirts, and did not strictly adhere to established religious practices (Al-Maqrizi 2003). Feuillebois-Pierunek (2015) examined the relationship between Baybars and the Qalandari shaykh Muhammad al-Balkhi in Damascus. Al-Maqrizi also described the close relationship between Shaykh Nasr al-Din ibn Sulayman al-Manbagi and Sultan Baybars al-Jashankir (Baybars II) (al-Maqrizi 2003). This shaykh, known for his polemical views, was considered a fervent follower of Ibn Arabi and engaged in a prolonged conflict with the prominent Islamic scholar Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah (Ibn Kathir 2003).

Another characteristic of those shaykhs who were close to the sultans was their state of attraction (*jadhb*)—that is, being profoundly drawn to Allah. Such shaykhs were known as Sufi majdhubs (*majzūb*, pl. *majadhib*), who were believed to exist

in a spiritual state beyond ordinary experience. They were described as having entered a different level of being, drawn there by Allah's sublime glory. As El-Aswad (2012) explains, *"The majzūb is metaphorically depicted as the person for whom the veil that hides the unseen world is removed."*

Other definition for *majzūb* given by Frembgen:

"The *majzūb* is an enraptured and bewildered person, inspired and seized by God, spiritually intoxicated by His love and abandoning himself to Him" (Frembgen 2013).

This can be seen in the case of Shaykh Ahmed ibn Abul Allah al-Zahawriof, of Sultan Barquq's Shaykh (Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalani 1972).

## MAMLUKS AND SUFIS SHARED SEVERAL SIMILARITIES

There were several points of similarity between the Mamluks and the Sufi shaykhs, especially those active during the Ayyubid and early Mamluk periods. Both groups were in some sense outsiders to the society of Cairo, which became the capital of the Mamluks. Many members of both groups shared similar ethnic backgrounds, particularly immigrant ʿAjam Sufis who came from regions similar to those from which the slaves and future Mamluks originated. The Mamluks and many Sufi shaykhs also adhered to the same madhhab and often had a similar command of Arabic; in some cases, both groups were non-native Arabic speakers. Furthermore, some Sufi shaykhs also spoke Turkish. Both Mamluks and Sufi shaykhs arrived in Egypt and Syria without families, as Sufis often travelled alone in their search for knowledge (*ṭalab al-ʿilm*). In Islam, the pursuit of knowledge is one of a Muslim's obligations. Scholars refer to this obligation as ṭalab al-ʿilm (Librande 1993), while Sufi literature uses the term *siyaha* or *siyaha sufiyya* for the spiritual journey (Zaqzuq 2000).

The bibliographical dictionaries (*tabaqat*) mention at least two Mamluks who became Sufis: Shaykh Shahin al-Khalwati, a Mamluk of Sultan Qaytbay who died in 1547, and Shaykh ʿAbd Allah Shams al-Din Damirdash, also a Mamluk of Qaytbay (Behrens-Abouseif 1982).

Some Mamluk sultans and princes spent part of their early lives in their shaykh's *zawiya*, while others preferred to withdraw their temporarily, seeking refuge from the wrath of their masters. Biographical sources also describe some sultans or senior emirs by referring to their relationship with their shaykhs. Conversely, the names of certain shaykhs were often accompanied by titles identifying them as the shaykh or teacher of a sultan (al-Dhahabi 1993).

## MAMLUK, *ULAMA* AND SUFIS

The special relationship between the Mamluks and the Sufis and their difference from the *ʿulama* should be considered in light of the following points. The Mamluks, who were ethnically, socially, and culturally distinct from the local population and did not share a common history with those they ruled, were able to prevent potential conflicts with the society they governed.

A balanced relationship with the *ʿulama* played a crucial role in this success. Their relationship with the *ʿulama* was maintained at an official level, without close personal contact. Second, the unique Mamluk identity and the sense of otherness inherent in it had a profound impact on their relationships with various social groups both consciously and subconsciously especially with the *ʿulama*.

The few Mamluks who became *ʿulama* were, in fact, *awlad al-nas* the sons of Mamluks, meaning the second generation who were freeborn. Third, although the Mamluks, as a ruling caste, oversaw all military activities and most executive authority, they were not only instruments of war but also required social relationships and an understanding of their own otherness. The *ʿulama,* by virtue of their more rigid and insular nature, could not fulfill these social needs. Earlier patterns of *ʿulama* behavior toward the Mamluks influenced the future nature of relations between the two groups.

Nevertheless, the *ʿulama* maintained an equilibrated cohabitation with the Mamluks, serving them in a symbiotic relationship. In other words, the *ʿulama* recognized the unique identity and otherness of the Mamluks and chose to keep their distance in order to protect themselves from the power of the ruling elite (Richard J. A. 2002).

## CONCLUSION

Mamluk sultans and emirs demonstrated a strong interest in Sufism, particularly in popular Sufi shaykhs, and many factors help explain the exceptional relationship between sultans, emirs, Mamluks, and these widely revered spiritual figures. Of course, it is impossible to disregard the explanations proposed by earlier scholars: namely, that the Mamluks sought the shaykhs' support to

legitimize their authority, to accrue blessings and merit for themselves and their families, and because they were drawn to the charismatic presence of certain Sufi shaykhs reflecting the Mamluks' sense of weakness before individuals perceived to have a special connection with the divine.

However, this paper suggests that the Mamluks' unique identity and sense of alterity should be understood as the primary reason for their special relationship with Sufi shaykhs. The Mamluks found in these shaykhs individuals with whom they could establish warm social ties without fear of competition, rivalry, or assimilation.

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