

## BLACK SLAVES IN MAMLŪK NARRATIVES: REPRESENTATIONS OF TRANSGRESSION

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While a great deal of scholarly attention has been paid to the white military slaves and freedmen in the Mamluk Empire (1250-1517), the black slaves (*'abīd*) have often been overlooked. In Egypt, Mamluk society, especially military society, was marked by a profound racial discourse that privileged white over black. This was by no means the only ethnic/racial categorization of people and groups, nor was it the only mechanism of privilege. But the definition of black slaves as the subaltern had social, economic and political ramifications that can not be ignored. Such definitions are especially evident in accounts of black slaves who are perceived to violate existing boundaries. My purpose in this paper is to explore the ways in which six Mamluk historians construct often mutually contradictory narratives of transgressive black slaves.

*Key words:* Slavery; Mamlūk Empire; Army; Ethnic group; Race; Black slaves (*'abīd*).

A pesar de que en los estudios sobre el Imperio Mameluco (1250-1517) se ha prestado gran atención a los esclavos blancos del ejército y a los libertos, se ha pasado por alto a los esclavos negros (*'abīd*). En Egipto la sociedad mameluce, especialmente la sociedad militar, se caracterizaba por un discurso profundamente racial que privilegiaba lo blanco sobre lo negro. Ésta no era la única clasificación étnica/racial de gentes y grupos, ni el único mecanismo de establecer privilegios. Sin embargo, la definición de los esclavos negros como subalternos, tuvo consecuencias sociales, económicas y políticas que no pueden ser ignoradas. Estas definiciones son especialmente evidentes en los relatos sobre esclavos negros que se considera que han violado los límites existentes. Mi propósito en este artículo es explorar los modos con que seis historiadores mamelucos construyen las narraciones, a menudo contradictorias, de los esclavos negros transgresores.

*Palabras clave:* esclavitud; Imperio Mameluco; ejército; etnia; raza; esclavos negros (*'abīd*).

### The Black Sultan

In Dhū l-Ḥijja or Dhū l-Qa‘da of 849/February, 1446, a group of black slaves assembled in Giza, outside of Cairo and elected their own Sultan. What subsequently ensued, whether viewed as a carnivalesque theatre or an open rebellion, is the subject of at least three different narratives by Mamlūk historians. Two of these historians, Ibn Taghrībirdī and Badr al-Dīn al-‘Aynī, were contemporary to the event, and the third, Ibn Iyās, was born some years afterwards.

The three narratives contain important differences in detail and, in the case of that of Ibn Iyās, a dramatically different plot and conclusion. It may be impossible to construct an exact account of what the black slaves actually did. It is worthwhile, however, to examine the ways in which three Mamlūk historians represented what they all perceived to be an event that was very much out of the ordinary (*ḥādītha gharība*). Such an examination may bring us closer to an understanding of the complex representation of the black slave in Mamlūk society and of the broader representation of subaltern groups in ninth/fifteenth century Cairo.

The renowned historian and legal scholar Badr al-Dīn al-‘Aynī (762/1361-855/1451) was in his eighties when the incident of the black slaves took place.<sup>1</sup> His account is quoted at length in al-Sakhāwī’s (830/1427-902/1497) *Kitāb al-tibr al-masbūk fī dhayl al-sulūk*. Al-Sakhāwī was nineteen when the slave court was convened but he does not present his own independent version of events, although he does comment on al-‘Aynī’s account.

A very strange event (*ḥādītha gharība jiddan*) occurred in this year. A large group of black slaves (*‘abīd*)<sup>2</sup> assembled in the plain of Giza during the days of spring pasturage (*ayyām al-rabī’*)<sup>3</sup> and appointed a Sultan from among themselves. They set up a pavilion for him and furnished it with carpets. Inside it, they

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the following colleagues for their assistance and advice concerning various questions regarding this article: Humphrey Davies, Andras Hamori, Carl Petry, Everett Rowson and Jacqueline Stone. Needless to say, they are not responsible for any errors I have made.

<sup>2</sup> In the Mamlūk period, in historical writing, *‘abd* is usually reserved for “black male slave” and *mamlūk* for “white male slave.” *Mamlūk* generally refers to a white, military slave but can also refer to a white, civilian slave. Both *‘abd* and *mamlūk* are also used for individuals who have been manumitted. When I refer to “slave Sultan”, I am referring to the black slave Sultan. I have used *mamlūk* to refer to individuals and Mamlūk to refer to the dynasty and time period. A discussion of the constructions of race in the late Mamlūk period is beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that, in Egypt and Syria, those constructions, for slaves in particular, were very much determined by categories of skin color. Generally speaking, these categories worked to privilege people defined as “white.” This racial discourse had important social, economic and political ramifications. The only black men who could achieve positions of authority in Mamlūk Cairo were those of slave origin who had been castrated. Although there were individual exceptions in the civilian sector, there is no doubt that the black slaves, *‘abīd*, were a subaltern group.

<sup>3</sup> For the rendering of *al-rabī’* as “pasturage”, see Zīyāda, M.M. (ed.), al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk li-ma’rifā duwal al-mulūk*, Cairo, 1957, 373, vol.1, pt. 2, n.º 1, who cites Quatremère, E., *Mémoires géographiques et historiques sur l’Égypte, et sur quelques contrées voisines*, Paris, 1811, 16, vol. 1, pt. 1, n.º 16. See also Biberstein-Kazimirski, A. de,

put up a platform (*dikka*) and other things [related to] what is put in place for a king in all his doings. They cut in half at the waist a number of black slaves who opposed them. Their Sultan appointed one of them to [rule over] the domain of Syria and another to [rule over] the domain of Aleppo. It happened that a black slave belonging to one of the Sultan's *mamlūks* ran away. His master went out looking for him and was guided to him. When he [the *mamlūk*] came to them [the slaves], permission was requested for him to enter the sitting place of the leaders (*qā'idat al-ru'asā'*), permission was granted to him and he entered. He saw such a dreadful and awe inspiring presence (*hayba muhawwila*)<sup>4</sup> that he was afraid. When he stood before that 'abd [the slave Sultan], the [slave Sultan] said to him "What do you seek, oh *mamlūk*?" He responded, "I seek a black slave of mine here. He has entered your army (*dakhala fī 'askarikum*)."<sup>5</sup> The [slave Sultan] said to someone who was standing there to serve him, "Bring this one his slave." So they brought in the black slave in chains. The [slave Sultan] said to the [*mamlūk*], "Is this your black slave?" The [*mamlūk*] responded, "Yes." Then, he [al-'Aynī] said that they cut him [the black slave] into two pieces. His master was overcome by fear and he asked permission to depart. Then the [slave Sultan] said to him "What is the price of your slave?" He [the *mamlūk*] said, "I bought him for twenty five *dīnārs*." [The slave Sultan] then lifted up the corner of the cushion on which he was sitting and there was a pile of gold. He then measured out for him [the *mamlūk*] the amount that he had specified and said to him, "Take this sum and buy yourself a black slave to replace him." When he had taken the money, [the *mamlūk*] requested from him [the slave Sultan] that he would send someone with him to bring him to a place where he would be safe (*'ilā mawḍi' ma'manihi*). So he [the slave Sultan] sent someone with him [the *mamlūk*] who brought him to the tents set up for the spring pasturage. Then he left him. This *mamlūk* then went up to the Sultan [Jaqmaq, r. 842/1438-852/1453] and told him what had happened. The Sultan said "Have they disturbed anyone from amongst the subjects?" The *mamlūk* said "No." So the Sultan said, "Leave them to kill one another. My opinion is that their deed is done on a whim and I consider their affair to be of little consequence (*fī 'luhum dhalik 'alā wajh al-mizāj wa istahwana amrahum*)."<sup>5</sup> I [al-Sakhāwī] say, that if it were not for the killing, then it would be a simple matter, despite my hesitation concerning the affair of the master of the black slave. But this is what al-'Aynī narrates. And he [al-'Aynī] says that it was something the likes of which has never happened and that a king like him [the black slave Sultan] has never been heard of. Then he [al-'Aynī] is silent.<sup>5</sup>

*Dictionnaire arabe-français: contenant toutes les racines de la langue arabe, leurs dérivés, tant dans l'idiome vulgaire que dans l'idiome littéraire ainsi que les dialectes d'Alger et de Maroc*, Cairo, 1875, 188, "s'arrêter séjourner au printemps dans un pays riche en pâturages".

<sup>4</sup> *Hayba* is a difficult term to translate. Al-Firūzābādī defines *hayba* as a quality that inspires *al-makhāfa wa l-taqīya*, "fear and respect", *al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*, Beirut, 1970-, vol. 1, pt. 1, 146. In the context of Mamlūk historical texts, *hayba* is usually a quality ascribed to Sultans and to other high status figures.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Sakhāwī, *Kitāb al-tibr al-masbūk fī dhayl 'alā l-sulūk*, Cairo, 1972, 126-127. In a much more abbreviated account of the slave court in his *Wajīz al-kalām fī l-dhayl 'alā duwal al-islām*, Beirut, 1995, 2, 601, al-Sakhāwī also cites al-'Aynī as his source.

The reason for al-Sakhāwī's hesitation regarding al-'Aynī's account is somewhat unclear. Did the episode concerning the *mamlūk* and the fugitive slave, especially the story of the execution of the fugitive, seem implausible to al-Sakhāwī? Is this because he could not imagine such a reversal of roles and of legal hierarchy?

Ibn Taghrībirdī, (812/1409-874/1470) was thirty-seven when the slave "Sultanate" was enacted. In his *Ḥawādith al-duhūr fī madā al-ayyām wa-l-shuhūr*, he presents an account that is very close to and may be derived from that of al-'Aynī. There are, however, some noteworthy differences in detail.

And during this month [Dhū l-Ḥijja] a strange event (*ḥāditha gharība*) occurred. The black slave grooms (*al-ghilmān al-'abīd*)<sup>6</sup> were in the spring pasturage (*fī l-rabī'*) in the land of Giza and Munbāba. When they went there with the horses of their masters, they stayed there for a short time and then set up among themselves a black slave and made him Sultan. They appointed for him officials of the state and holders of offices and had him judge among them as he wished. They set up a throne (*takht*) for him that he could sit on. This aforementioned black slave began to do as he pleased. No one could oppose him until another man from among the black slaves went against him. Each one of them gathered their followers and they fought with one another. The one who had been made Sultan was victorious and he had a number from the opposing faction cut in half at the waist. The master of the black slave who was killed could say nothing.<sup>7</sup> It is said that he [the master] went there and spoke with the black slave who had been made Sultan. There are those who say that the black slave [Sultan] also wanted to cut in half the *mamlūk*, the master of the [executed] slave. And some say that he [the black slave Sultan] recompensed him [the *mamlūk*] for the price of the black slave. This reached the Sultan [Jaḡmaq] and they told him that he [the slave Sultan] had appointed a viceroy of Syria and a viceroy of Aleppo and that they [the black slaves] were continuing [to behave] in this manner. The Sultan remained silent. One of the great men of the regime (*akābir al-dawla*) said, "this is a foolish affair of little consequence (*amr fashrawī*)."<sup>8</sup> When the spring

<sup>6</sup> For the definition of *ghulām* (pl. *ghilmān*) as groom, "the one who is concerned with the care of the horses", see al-Qalqashandī, *Kitāb ṣubḥ al-a-'shā fī ṣinā'at al-inshā'*, Cairo, 1964, 5, 471. Al-Qalqashandī makes it clear that the term *ghulām* used to mean a young child or a slave but is now used for servants (*min arbāb al-khidam*). Cf. Ayalon, D., *Gunpowder and Firearms in the Mamluk Sultanate*, London, 1978, 66-67.

<sup>7</sup> Ibn Taghrībirdī switches here from the narrative of the execution of a number of black slaves to (apparently) the specific narrative of the *mamlūk* and his runaway black slave.

<sup>8</sup> The definition of "fashrawī" in the impressive glossary of Humphrey Davies' dissertation, *Seventeenth Century Egyptian Arabic: A Profile of the Colloquial Material in Yūsuf al-Shirbīnī's Kitāb Hazz al-quḥūf fī sharḥ qaṣīd Abī Shādūf*, Berkeley, 1981, 432-433, is "facetious, fatuous, comically stupid, ridiculous." I would like to thank

pasturage has been depleted, they will disband and each one will go back to his appropriate station. For they do this on a whim (*'alā ṭarīq al-mizāj*)” This is what happened and the affair ended. This was a thing that had not been heard of in past ages.<sup>9</sup>

The historian Ibn Iyās (852/1448-930/1524), unlike al-‘Aynī and Ibn Taghrībirdī, was not alive when the black slaves gathered in Giza to set up their slave “Sultanate,” an event that occurred some two years prior to Ibn Iyās’s birth. This historian gives us a very different version of the narrative. He sets the event as having occurred in Dhū l-Qa‘da as opposed to Dhū l-Ḥijja. According to Ibn Iyās, the black slaves (*al-‘abīd al-sūd*) deliberately went to Giza to set up their court.

In this [month], a strange event (*ḥādītha gharība*) occurred. A group of black slaves went to the land of Giza and took up residence there. They set up a tent there for themselves and hung a standard (*sanjaq*) over it. They appointed for themselves a Sultan, a *wazīr*, and a *dawādār*. Their Sultan would sit on his platform (*dikka*) and judge among the black slaves. He would have brought before him any one from among the black slaves who was hostile to them [the Sultan’s party] and he would have him cut in half at the waist in his presence. Then their Sultan appointed for them a grand *amīr* (*amīr kabīr*) and a chief chamberlain (*ḥājib al-ḥujjāb*). He [the slave Sultan] appointed a number of them to offices. This one was the governor of Syria, this one was governor of Aleppo, this one was governor of Tripoli. Thus, they divided up the kingdom of Egypt and Syria. Their affair became known among the people. When this reached the Sultan, he was greatly vexed. The black slaves began to commit highway robbery and to loot the farmland. They would take the *kharāj* and the *diyāfa* of the people they waylaid.<sup>10</sup> So the Sultan appointed an expedition against them [the black slaves.]

Everett Rowson for referring me to Humphrey Davies. I would also like to thank Dr. Davies for sending me additional information on the term, *fashrawī*. In a footnote to his edition of Ibn Taghrībirdī’s, *Ḥawādith al-duḥūr fī madā al-ayyām wa-l-shuhūr*, Cairo, 1990, 1, n.º 1, 89, Faḥīm Muḥammad Shaltūt cites al-Shartūnī’s, *Aqrab al-mawārid fī fuṣaḥ al-‘arabiya wa-l-shawārid*, Tehran, 1995-6, 4, 165-166 for the definition of “*fushār*” as a colloquial word meaning *al-hadhyān*, “buffoonery.” Shaltūt also goes on to say that it is possible that, in the context of this passage from the *Ḥawādith*, *fashrawī* means “the play (*tamthīliya*) that is put on by the black slaves.” Since I have found no evidence of the latter, I consider *tamthīliya* to be an unlikely meaning. It is clear from the citations provided by Dr. Davies, that al-Shartūnī is drawing on al-Firūzabādī, 2:110 (personal communication from Dr. Davies). Neither Shartūnī nor al-Firūzabādī give the word in the form *fashrawī*. However, Yūsuf al-Shirbīnī uses the word in this form more than once.

<sup>9</sup> *Ḥawādith*, 1, 87-88. Ibn Taghrībirdī does not mention the slave court under his entry for the year 849/1446 in his *al-Nujūm al-zāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa l-Qāhira*, Cairo, 1929-1972, 16 vols. Given that the *Nūjūm* is an abbreviated version of the *Ḥawādith* for the period of Ibn Taghrībirdī’s own lifetime, this is not surprising.

They [the *mamlūks*] went to them [the black slaves] by boat. They [the *mamlūks*] fought with them and defeated their Sultan and scattered them. They [the *mamlūks*] imprisoned a number of them and the rest fled. Then the Sultan proclaimed in Cairo that anyone who had an adult black slave should bring him up to Bāb al-Silsila and receive his price. So whoever went up [to Bāb al-Silsila] with a black slave received 4000 dirhāms. When a large number of them [the black slaves] had been gathered together the Sultan ordered them to be imprisoned and to be sent by ship to the port of Alexandria and from there to the lands of Ibn ‘Uthmān. Thus the ruffian black slaves (*al-‘abīd al-shanātira*)<sup>11</sup> were uprooted from Egypt.<sup>12</sup>

In all three accounts, the authors describe the story of the slave court as a “strange event” (*ḥāditha gharība*). The slave Sultan, like the legitimate Sultan, has the power to judge his subjects and to put them to death. These executions are, however, not only a subversion of real royal authority, they are transgressive in that they violate the law and the established social order. The executed slaves are, after all, property. In al-Aynī’s account and in that of Ibn Taghrībīrdī (although to a lesser degree), the killing of the *mamlūk*’s runaway slave is a dramatic illustration of the authority of the slave Sultan.

Like the majority of the successful Mamlūk Sultans, the slave Sultan is chosen by his peers. He has the authority to designate individuals to offices that mimic those of the Mamlūk court and to appoint fictive governors for the provinces of Syria. In all three narratives, the slave Sultan appropriates the symbols of royal authority. A pavilion is set up for him like the pavilions that are erected for the legitimate Sultan when he goes down from the Citadel. A military standard, *sanjaq*, flies over the pavilion. The slave Sultan sits on an elevated platform

<sup>10</sup> These two terms both refer to revenues, the land tax (*kharāj*) and the village tax (*ḍiyāfa*). The usual meaning of *ḍiyāfa* in the Mamlūk period is a feast for guests. According to Dozy, R., *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes*, Leyden, 1881, vol. 2, 17a, *ḍiyāfa* can also mean a hospitality gift, a tip to laborers, refreshments offered to sailors when they reach port and a tax imposed on each village. For the latter definition, Dozy cites Quatremère, E., *Histoire des sultans mamlouks de l’Égypte*, Paris, 1845, vol. 1, pt.1, n.° 1, 76.

<sup>11</sup> I have not found *shanātira* in the available sources. Dozy, *Supplément*, 1:790; Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, Beirut, 1955, 4, 431; al-Firūzabādī, *al-Qāmūs*, and Biberstein-Kazimirski, *Dictionnaire arabe-français*, 2:271a, give *shanātir*, without the *tā marbūta* as meaning “fingers”, “the space between two fingers” and the title of the rulers of Yemen. I am translating *shanātira* here based on context.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn Iyās, *Badā‘i‘ al-zuhūr fī waqā‘i‘ al-duhūr*, M. Muṣṭafā (ed.), *Bibliotheca Islamica*, Wiesbaden, 1972, vol. 2, pt. 5b, 2, 253.

(*dakka, mastaba*) or throne (*takht*). In al-‘Aynī’s account, the pavilion is described in more detail. A carpet is spread inside the pavilion and the black slaves do for their Sultan “what is put in place for kings in all their comings and goings.” So successful is the recreation of royal space that the *mamlūk* in al-‘Aynī’s narrative is overcome with fear by the *hayba*, the awe inspiring presence of the slave Sultan.

One of the striking differences in Ibn Iyās’s account, compared to those of his predecessors, is that he omits the story of the executed slave and the *mamlūk*. This story is central to the account of al-‘Aynī and reappears in the account of Ibn Taghrībirdī, although the latter presents an alternative ending, the near execution of the *mamlūk*. In these two earlier versions, the slave Sultan destroys the property of others when he has his fellow slaves killed, as he does in the narrative of Ibn Iyās. However, in the narratives of Ibn Taghrībirdī and especially of al-‘Aynī, the execution of the runaway slave in the presence of the *mamlūk* serves as a dramatic illustration of the slave Sultan’s appropriation of royal authority and his disdain for the laws of property. The real master of the executed slave, the royal *mamlūk*, can do nothing to stop the execution.

In the normal order of things, the *mamlūk*, a light-skinned “Turk” and one of the Mamlūk Sultan’s own military slaves or freedmen, would enjoy a much higher status than that of the black slave who is playing the role of Sultan. In the mock court of the black slaves, however, this hierarchy is turned upside down. In Ibn Taghrībirdī’s account, the *mamlūk*’s slave appears to have been executed because he belonged to the group that rebelled against the slave Sultan. The text, however, is not completely clear. In al-‘Aynī’s account, we are never given a reason for the execution. The event seems to be a kind of theatre, a demonstration for the *mamlūk* of the slave Sultan’s arbitrary power as a ruler. The demonstration succeeds. The light skinned *mamlūk* is placed in the position of a supplicant. He is overcome with fear (al-‘Aynī); barely escapes execution at the hands of the slave Sultan (Ibn Taghrībirdī); and must petition the slave Sultan for safe conduct (al-‘Aynī).

The slave Sultan’s payment of compensation, in the accounts of Ibn Taghrībirdī and al-‘Aynī, is not an act of compliance with the normative order but a manifestation of the slave Sultan’s authority in this mimetic court. Ibn Taghrībirdī refers to the payment of compensation as one of the two possible conclusions to the story. In al-‘Aynī’s ac-

count, the payment is a theatrical event which, like the entire narrative, has a distinctly literary flavor not far removed from popular tales. By killing the *mamlūk's* slave, the slave Sultan demonstrates his power. By paying compensation that equals the price that the *mamlūk* paid for the slave, the slave Sultan appears to be following or even exceeding the *sharī'a*, which sets the *diyya* for a slave as the value of his or her depreciated market price. In this case, however, since the individual who ordered the execution is himself a slave, the individual responsible for paying the *diyya* should be his master. The latter also has the option of surrendering his slave to the master of the slave who was murdered.<sup>13</sup> But the slave Sultan, by his payment of compensation, appropriates the role of his own master and inverts the legal and social hierarchy between master and slave. In al-'Aynī's narrative, the payment of compensation by the slave Sultan, is the real denouement of the story. It confirms the fantastic quality of the entire event.

In Ibn Iyās's account, we are told, as in the other two chronicles, that the slave Sultan judged his subjects and executed those who opposed him. However, unlike the accounts of Ibn Taghrībirdī and al-'Aynī, Ibn Iyās's version of the story does not make the narrative of the runaway slave, the *mamlūk* and the payment of compensation central to the story. The *'abīd* in Ibn Iyās's account perpetuate violence against one another and, more importantly, against society as a whole. The denouement, in this case, is not a curious tale but a violent act of racial cleansing.

In all three accounts, the slave court is an undefined anomaly. It is the responsibility of an accepted figure of authority, the Sultan, as in the accounts of al-'Aynī and Ibn Iyās, or one of the *akābir al-dawla*, "the great men of the regime," as in the account of Ibn Taghrībirdī, to render this anomaly harmless. In the narratives of al-'Aynī and Ibn Taghrībirdī, the Mamlūk military elite, personified by Sultan Jaqmaq or by one of the grand amirs (*akābir al-dawla*), does not construct the black slaves' actions as subversive. Their "court" is set up on a whim. It is a *fashrawī* matter, a piece of silliness, a burlesque that is linked in some way to the spring season of pasturage. Despite the fact that the black slave Sultan is destroying the property of Muslims when he executes the other slaves, Sultan Jaqmaq dismisses the bloodshed,

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the stipulations regarding the *diyya* in the case of slaves, see Brunschvig, R., "'Abd" in *EP*, 1, 24-40, 29 a-b.



“leave them to kill one another.” Thus, the slave court is removed from the category of the subversive and the black slaves are relegated to the category of the comic and the expendable.

Ibn Iyās dramatically alters the existing narrative. The black slaves’ mock court is not just a threat but a present danger to the social and political order. When the Mamlūk Sultan finds out about the slave court, he takes it very seriously indeed. In this narrative, he should. The black slaves when they take to highway robbery, violate one of the *ḥudūd* (divine laws) of Islam. They pillage farmland, a dangerously disruptive crime in an agrarian economy. They rob travelers of revenue that is due to the state. After the defeat of the black slaves, Sultan Jaqmaq issues a decree that anyone who has an adult male black slave in Cairo should bring him to the Citadel and receive compensation for him. After a large number of black slaves have been assembled, the Sultan then imprisons them and subsequently has them transported to Alexandria and from there sent to Ottoman lands, far away from the domain of the Mamlūks.

We expect accounts of the same event by different historians to vary in detail. But one does not expect such a radical reworking of events as we find in Ibn Iyās’s account of the slave court. All three narratives, especially those of al-‘Aynī and Ibn Iyās, have the literary qualities of a good story. If we assume, however, that there is a historical reality behind these stories, it seems logical to accept the accounts of al-‘Aynī and Ibn Taghrībirdī to be more authoritative than that of Ibn Iyās. Al-‘Aynī and Ibn Taghrībirdī, unlike Ibn Iyās, were adults when the slave court was enacted and they both enjoyed a privileged access to the Mamlūk court.

Badr al-Dīn al-‘Aynī, historian and legal scholar, had close ties with the Mamlūk court.<sup>14</sup> Fluent in Turkish, he was the translator and mentor for Sultans al-Mu‘ayyad Shaykh, Ṭaṭar and Barsbay. In 849/1446, when the slave court was enacted, al-‘Aynī simultaneously held the offices of *muḥtasib*, “inspector of the markets,” chief Hanafī judge, and superintendent of pious foundations. Given al-‘Aynī’s intimate ties with the Mamlūk elite, we can presume that he would most

<sup>14</sup> On the biography of al-‘Aynī, see al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw’ al-lāmi’ li-ahl al-qarn al-tāsi’*, Beirut, n.d., vol. 10, n.º 545, 131-135. See also, Marçais, W., “al-‘Aynī”, *EF*<sup>2</sup>, 1, 790-791.

likely have had first hand knowledge of an event so out of the ordinary (*gharība jiddan*) that it was brought to the notice of the Sultan.

Ibn Taghrībirdī, al-‘Aynī’s younger contemporary and his student, was the son of a commander in chief of the Mamlūk army. Ibn Taghrībirdī’s parentage gave him an elite status and access to a range of informants, both from his family and from his father’s fellow *mamlūk* freedmen, his *khūshdashīya*. Himself an *amīr*, Ibn Taghrībirdī also had ties to the Mamlūk court and was an intimate of more than one Sultan. The historian maintains that he wrote *al-Nujūm al-zāhira* for Sultan Jaqmaq’s son.<sup>15</sup> Like al-‘Aynī, Ibn Taghrībirdī was well placed to hear the news of the Sultan’s response to the black slave court. It is certainly possible that Ibn Taghrībirdī derived his narrative from that of his teacher al-‘Aynī, for whom he had a high regard; but the differences in detail, the allowance for two possible endings and the hearsay quality of Ibn Taghrībirdī’s account indicate that he may have relied on his own informants. Unlike al-‘Aynī, Ibn Taghrībirdī allows for the possibility that there is more than one possible ending to the story of the *mamlūk* and the black slave Sultan.

Ibn Iyās was the grandson and great grandson (on his maternal side) of *mamlūk amīrs*, but his life, unlike that of al-‘Aynī and Ibn Taghrībirdī, is poorly documented. We know little about him, as Brinner points out, outside of what Ibn Iyās tells us in his own chronicle. This may be due to the “relatively unimportant position” of Ibn Iyās or, as Brinner posits, to the “decline of historical writing in Egypt.”<sup>16</sup> However, we do know that Ibn Iyās studied under al-Suyūfī. It is hard to believe that Ibn Iyās, having been trained in history, would have been unaware of the works of such authoritative historians as al-‘Aynī and Ibn Taghrībirdī. Ibn Iyās even includes a brief biography of the latter in the *Badā’i*.<sup>17</sup> If so, why did Ibn Iyās, writing many years after the event, choose to represent the convening of the black slave court as a sinister event? Why does Ibn Iyās’s narrative, unlike those of his predecessors, end with the ruthless punishment of the black slaves in question?

<sup>15</sup> Popper, W., “Abū ‘I-Maḥāsīn”, *EP*, 3, 812-813. For a somewhat biased contemporary biography of Ibn Taghrībirdī, see al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw’*, vol. 10, n.º 1178, 305-308.

<sup>16</sup> Brinner, W., “Ibn Iyās”, *EP*, 3, 812-813.

<sup>17</sup> P. Kahle and M. Mustafā (eds.), *Bibliotheca Islamica*, Istanbul, 1936, 3, 42-43.

Ibn Iyās's narrative of the slave court reappears in modern scholarship. Bernard Lewis, in what remains the signal monograph on racial attitudes in pre-modern Muslim societies, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East, An Historical Enquiry*, refers to the incident of the slave court.<sup>18</sup> He appears to rely solely on the account of Ibn Iyās. In a footnote, Lewis does acknowledge the existence of other "slightly variant accounts" but does not comment on their contradictions.<sup>19</sup> Lewis also cites Poliak who, in his 1934 article, "Les Révolts populaires en Égypte à l'époque mamelouk et leurs causes économiques," draws exclusively on Ibn Iyās's version of the story. In the relevant footnote, Poliak also cites Ibn Taghrībirdī (whose version Poliak does not make use of in the text of his article) but does not comment on the contradictions between the two accounts.<sup>20</sup> Ira Lapidus in *Muslim Cities in the Late Middle Ages* gives an account of the black slave court that is similar to that of Ibn Iyās. In his footnote, Lapidus cites Ibn Iyās's *Badā'i'* as well as al-Sakhāwī's *Dhayl duwal al-islām*, Ibn Taghrībirdī's *Ḥawādith* and Ibn al-Ṣayrafī al-Jawharī's (819/1416-900/1495) *Nuzhat al-nufūs wa-l-abdān fī tawārīkh al-zamān*. Unfortunately, Lapidus does not specify which source or sources he is drawing on for his own account.<sup>21</sup>

More recently, 'Alī al-Sayyid 'Alī, in an essay entitled "*Thawrat al-'abīd al-sūd fī l-'aṣr al-mamlūkī*," also makes use of Ibn Iyās's narrative to further his thesis that the black slaves, resentful of the higher status of white slaves, were staging a real social and political revolution in 849/1446. 'Alī maintains that the enactment of the slave court during

<sup>18</sup> Lewis, B., *Race and Slavery in the Middle East, An Historical Enquiry*, New York, 1990, 68.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 131, n.° 23.

<sup>20</sup> Poliak, A. N., "Les Révolts populaires en Égypte à l'époque mamelouk et leurs causes économiques", *Revue des études islamiques*, 8 (1934), 272-273.

<sup>21</sup> Lapidus, I., *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 1967, n.° 45, 171-172, 292. The one source that Lapidus refers to in which I have not found a complete account of the slave court is the *Nuzhat* of Ibn al-Ṣayrafī al-Jawharī. Lapidus, in his bibliography, cites the *Dār al-Kutub*, Ta'rīkh n.° m. 116 manuscript. All that we find in the edited version of the *Nuzha* is the following: "In this year a strange and unheard of matter (*amr 'ajīb lam yusma' mithluhu*) came to light. A large group of black slave grooms (*al-'abīd al-ghilmān*) assembled in the spring pasturage in the land of Giza and set up a Sultan [to rule] over them. The set up a pavilion for him, placed in it a high platform made of wood and spread a carpet inside it [the pavilion]..." *Nuzha*, Cairo, 1994, 4, 327-328. The editor, Ḥasan Ḥabashī, maintains in a footnote (4:328 n.° 1) that the remaining lines of the account were missing from the manuscript. None of the manuscripts of the *Nuzha* were available to me at the time of this writing so I can not ascertain the nature of the narrative or even if the complete story is present.

the season of pasturage was a conscious attempt on the part of the black slaves to strike at the *mamlūks* who were, of course, dependent on their horses. However, there is no indication in any of the accounts that the black slaves appropriated the horses or did anything to harm them; nor is the Mamlūk Sultan represented as expressing concern for the horses. The latter were presumably let free to graze during the season of pasturage. Since ‘Alī does not make use of the accounts of al-‘Aynī and Ibn Taghrībirdī (in which the slave court is not perceived of as revolutionary), his thesis is hard to sustain.<sup>22</sup> Ira Lapidus’s comments about the slave court are more compelling. “Perhaps in the slaves’ mind there was magic in imitating the state, not for any political purpose, but to ease the inchoate yearning of men isolated and abandoned to find some solidarity, belonging, and dignity.”<sup>23</sup>

If we follow Ibn Iyās’s narrative, the story of the slave court does indeed fit into the category of a “*révolte populaire*” in the sense in which Poliak uses the term. The way in which the anomaly of the slave court is resolved demonstrates the futility of such a revolt. More importantly, perhaps, Ibn Iyās manifests a familiar theme in discourses of racial difference. The black slaves are not only “other,” they are the dangerous, criminal other who cross established boundaries and threaten the moral order.

The narratives of al-‘Aynī and Ibn Taghrībirdī and that of Ibn Iyās show a range of possible responses to transgressive black slaves. In his chronicle, Ibn Iyās frequently complains about gangs of armed black slaves who engaged in criminal activity in the streets of Cairo. Could Ibn Iyās’s rewriting of an event that took place before he was born have been influenced by the threat the black slave gangs posed in his adulthood? Disruptive gangs of ‘*abīd* had, however, long been a feature of life in fifteenth century Cairo. The Cairene historians of the later *Mamlūk* period all include accounts of the violent, antinomian actions of the black slave gangs.<sup>24</sup> The ‘*abīd* were even known to at-

<sup>22</sup> ‘Alī al-Sayyid ‘Alī, “Thawrat al-‘abīd al-sūd fī l-‘aṣr al-mamlūkī”, *al-Rafḍ wa-l-ihitijāj fī l-mujtam‘a al-miṣrī fī l-‘aṣr al-‘uthmānī*, Nāṣir Ibrāhīm (ed.), Cairo, 2004, 43-48. The author does make use of the few lines of al-Jawharī’s account that exist in the edited version but then goes on to quote Ibn Iyās whom ‘Alī incorrectly describes as “the contemporary historian” (*al-mu‘arrikh al-mu‘āṣir*).

<sup>23</sup> Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, 172.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of the black slave gangs in the broader context of “lumpen proletariat violence”, see Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, 170-184.

tack the officials responsible for maintaining order, such as the *muḥtasib*.<sup>25</sup> The historians complain as frequently, however, and with equal vehemence about the unruly *julbān*, the Sultan's recently imported *mamlūk* recruits who frequently descended from the Citadel barracks to wreak havoc in the city. Both the 'abīd and the *julbān* are portrayed as engaging in riots, robbery and assaults. Ibn Iyās lists the 'abīd, the *zu'ar*<sup>26</sup> and the *julbān* as three equally disruptive and anti-social groups.<sup>27</sup> Ibn Taghrībirdī and al-'Aynī (and, for that matter, al-Sakhāwī), also lived in times in which the black slave gangs were perceived to be a threat to the social order. However, unlike Ibn Iyās, they did not envision a "racial cleansing" in Cairo as the conclusion to the story of the slave court of 849/1446. This does not mean that al-Sakhāwī and al-'Aynī were more willing than Ibn Iyās to concede agency to a subaltern group. Nor does it mean that they were any less influenced by the racial discourse of Mamlūk society. Unlike Ibn Iyās, however, the literary strategy of Ibn Taghrībirdī and al-'Aynī (and perhaps the real strategy of Sultan Jaqmaq), was not the destruction of the slave court but its disempowerment through ridicule.

In all three texts, the appropriation of the symbols and powers of the Sultanate has a carnivalesque quality. The black slaves had indeed turned the world upside down. But it is difficult to relegate this strange event, *ḥāditha gharība*, to the category of carnival. As Bakhtinian as the slave court might appear to be, it does not fit comfortably into Bakhtin's definitions of "ritual spectacle." On the one hand, the slave court can indeed be described as a "second world and a second life outside of officialdom," but it is not "organized on the basis of laughter."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, unlike most carnivals, the slave court is an isolated event. The black slaves do not parody the Sultan's court every spring when they go out to the verdant pastures near Giza. Although the black slaves do mimic the offices and rituals of the

<sup>25</sup> Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Ḥawādith*, 1:71.

<sup>26</sup> Lapidus translates *zu'ar* as "street toughs", 88 and "paramilitary youth gangs", 143.

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Iyās (*Badā'i' al-zuhūr*, 3: 268) complains that in Shawwāl of 895/1490, the 'abīd had divided into two separate factions and were battling one another in Cairo. See *ibid*, 3: 200, 889/1484 on the increase in homicides due to the 'abīd and the *zu'ar*. See Ibn al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhat*, 3:399 on conflicts between 'abīd and *julbān*. Cf. al-Maqrizī, *Kitāb al-sulūk*, 4, 2: 804.

<sup>28</sup> Bakhtin, M., *Rabelais and His World*, Cambridge, 1968, 5-8.

Mamlūk Sultan's court, their mimicry lacks a comedic aspect. Similarly, the slave court does not level hierarchy but soberly reenacts it. The slave court might appear to outsiders as a burlesque (*fashrawī*), but it is a serious business for the black slaves, some of whom lose their lives. For them, there is no "ritual laughter."

The slave Sultan does not resemble the carnival "rulers" of pre-modern Europe.<sup>29</sup> Nor does the slave Sultan resemble the *amīr nawrūz*, the comic "misruler" of the rowdy Cairene festival of Nawrūz.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, the slave Sultan is a dignified and powerful personage. He has the power of life and death over his subjects and orders real executions, the manner of which, cutting in half at the waist, mimics the executions ordered by the Mamlūk Sultan.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the slave Sultan, in the account of Ibn Taghrībirdī, comes to power through real as opposed to symbolic warfare, not unlike many of the Mamlūk Sultans. The slave Sultan has a real army. In al-'Aynī's account, the *mamlūk* who comes before the slave Sultan as a petitioner says, "I seek a slave here who belongs to me and who has entered your army (*dakhala fī 'askarikum*)."<sup>32</sup> Like any royal court, the slave court can be understood as a kind of theatre. The slave court is a mimetic enactment of the enactment of the Mamlūk Sultan's court. But the slave court does not, in any way, correspond to the genre of popular theatre in the Mamlūk period, a genre that was not unconnected to carnival. As S. Moreh has demonstrated, the representation of figures of authority (frequently *qādīs*) in popular theatre was always satirical.<sup>32</sup> The black slaves who gathered in Giza were not mocking the Sultan's authority, they were reproducing it.

<sup>29</sup> Davis, N.Z., "The Reasons of Misrule", in *Society and Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Stanford, 1975, 97-123, for a discussion of carnivals in the pre-modern European context.

<sup>30</sup> On the festival of Nawrūz which may or may not have been suppressed in 1400, see Shoshan, B., *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo*, New York, 1993, 40-51.

<sup>31</sup> On *tawsī* (cutting in half at the waist) as a form of execution ordered by the Mamlūk Sultans, see 'Alā' Ṭaha Rizq Ḥusayn, *al-Sujūn wa-l-'uqūbāt fī Miṣr, aṣr salātīn al-mamālīk*, Cairo, 2002, 151-153. I am grateful to Carl Petry for bringing this monograph to my attention.

<sup>32</sup> Moreh, S., *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arab World*, New York, 1992.

## Black Slaves and Carnival in Aydın

An event that is somewhat similar to the black slave court of Giza, but which more neatly fits into the category of “carnival,” is a festival of black slaves that apparently took place in Anatolia in the early sixteenth century, during the Ottoman period. According to Soraiya Faroqi, in 938/1576 in the city of Aydın, an order from the Sultan (Murād III) notified local officials that black slaves and freedmen were in the habit of assembling on a yearly basis for a raucous festival. Apparently, the black slaves would come together and choose mock officials (a *bey*, a *kadi* and a *kethüda*) and engage in a rowdy celebration for three days. The slaves were accused of a number of disorderly acts.

Overt hostility was expressed against those Africans who refused to participate, and against slave owners who did not permit their slaves to attend. Apart from other iniquitous acts contrary to the seriat, participants in these revelries had apparently murdered local Muslims and stolen sheep and other foodstuffs.<sup>33</sup>

By the command of the Sultan, masters were to be ordered to forbid their black slaves from participating in this event and black freedmen were to be ordered not to assemble.

Unlike the slave court of Giza, the assembly in Aydın occurs annually and appears to fit more easily into the category of “carnival.” Like the slave court, the Aydın festival also involves the mimetic appointment of figures of authority. The slaves of Aydın do not, however, attempt to recreate the Sultan’s court. They elect mock local officials who preside over the festivities and disorderly actions. The black slaves of Aydın are also accused of killing local Muslims. In contrast, in the accounts of Ibn Taghrībirdī and al-‘Aynī of the slave court of 849/1446, the black slaves, unlike those of Ottoman Aydın, do not engage in ritualized acts of disorder. They do not riot or pillage and the only individuals they kill, as al-‘Aynī indicates, are each other. Ibn Iyās’s account of marauding black slaves is closer to the description of the Aydın festival in that the slaves do engage in acts of violence. However, the violence of the black slaves of Aydın is far less threatening than that of the black slaves of the slave court of

<sup>33</sup> Faroqi, S., “Black Slaves and Freedmen Celebrating (Aydın, 1576)”, *Turcica*, 23 (1991), 207-208.

Giza. The violence that occurs during the annual festival in Aydın is confined to three days out of the year. In Ibn Iyās's narrative of the black slave court, the violence of the black slaves is a criminal uprising that is not confined by ritual or by time.

### An 'Alid Revolt

If the slave court outside of Mamlūk Cairo is not a "carnival" and is a unique event, can we make sense of it in the context of other examples of transgressive behavior by black slaves in the Mamlūk period? One of the most interesting narratives is set in the early Mamlūk period and presented by al-Maqrīzī (766/1364-845/1442), who was born over a hundred years after the alleged incident. According to al-Maqrīzī, shortly after Sultan Baybars came to power in 658/1259, while Cairo was still subject to the political uncertainty caused by the transition from the Ayyūbids to the Mamlūks, a revolt of blacks (*sūdān*), *rakābdārīya*<sup>34</sup> and grooms (*ghilmān*) involved a deadly and serious appropriation of authority. This event, as it appears in al-Maqrīzī's narrative, is much more of a *révolte populaire* of the subaltern than is the slave court of 849/1446 or the Ottoman festival in Aydın. According to al-Maqrīzī, the blacks (*sūdān*), the *rakābdārīya* and the grooms revolted (*thārū*) and went through the streets of Cairo while shouting "Oh people of 'Alī" (*yā āl 'Alī*). They broke into the shops of the sword makers, armed themselves and then went to the stables of the soldiers (*iṣṭabl al-ajnād*) and seized horses.

The instigator of the revolt was a man named al-Kūrānī, of unspecified ethnicity, who was known for his asceticism (*zuhd*), who carried a rosary (*subḥa*) in his hand and lived in a cave in the mountains. The holy man urged the *ghilmān* (and, presumably, the *sūdān* and *rakābdārīya*) to go against the rulers (*ahl al-dawla*). He gave the rebels deeds for *iqṭā'*, or

<sup>34</sup> The *rakābdārīya* were the servants of the Rakāb Khānāh where the tack for the royal horses was kept in the Citadel. According to al-Qalqashandī, the *rakābdārīya* also carried the *ghāshīya*, a lavishly decorated saddle cloth, before the Sultan during festival processions. See al-Qalqashandī, *Kitāb ṣubḥ*, 4:7, 12. On the *ghāshīya* see Stowasser, K., "Manners and Customs of the Mamluk Court", *Muqarnas*, 2 (1984), 19. Stowasser defines *rakābdārīya* as "stirrup holders." "Stable hands" might be a better translation. Even though the *rakābdārīya* do not work in the Royal Stables, these servants care for the horses' tack as stable hands would do.



tax farms, just like the ones the *mamlūks* received from the Sultan. However, according to al-Maqrīzī, the revolt lasted for less than a day. The Mamlūk army was sent out against the rebels and, by morning, they were crucified outside of Bāb Zuwayla. The revolt ended, but Sultan Baybārs was so shaken that he did not process through Cairo at the end of the year with the emblems of sovereignty, as was the custom.<sup>35</sup>

This event not only involved “the blacks,” whom we can presume were slaves or freed slaves, but the *ghilmān* and the *rakābdārīya*, all of whom were subaltern groups who served in low status positions in the Cairo citadel. In terms of their relative status to one another, Ayalon argues that the *ghilmān* in the service of the *mamlūks* were white and freeborn and thus were automatically, by virtue of their skin color, of superior status to the ‘*abīd*.<sup>36</sup> This assumption may be problematic since the relative status of black slaves to white low-status servants has not been an object of study. We have seen in Ibn Taghrībirdī’s narrative of the slave court that black slaves (‘*abīd*) could also serve as *ghilmān*. However, the status of the *ghulām* as a freeborn but low status servant would seem to be supported by al-Qalqashandī who maintains that *ghulām* formerly meant “boy” or “slave” but now means a servant who cares for horses and that the *ghulām* is called by this name because “of his low status in the eyes of the people.”<sup>37</sup> However, in al-Maqrīzī’s narrative of the revolt of 658/1259, the *ghilmān* and *rakābdārīya* are distinguished from the *sūdān*, so we can assume that the former were white.

Lewis argues that this revolt was in favor of the Fāṭimids.<sup>38</sup> However, in 658/1259, some eighty-eight years had elapsed since the fall of the Fāṭimid dynasty. The Mamlūks had usurped power from the Ayyūbids. It seems more probable that, at least in al-Maqrīzī’s representation, some sort of messianic ‘Alid ideology, coupled with the leadership of a charismatic holy man, served as the motivating structure for a popular revolt in which three groups of disadvantaged people united, regardless of skin color.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk*, 1, pt. 2: 440. Cf. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, 171; Poliak, “Les Révolts populaires,” 225; Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 68.

<sup>36</sup> Ayalon, *Gunpowder*, 66-67.

<sup>37</sup> Al-Qalqashandī, *Kitāb ṣubḥ*, 5:471; cf. Ayalon, *Gunpowder*, 66.

<sup>38</sup> Lewis, *Race and Slavery*, 68.

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of al-Maqrīzī’s use of earlier sources for Baḥrī history, see Little, D., *An Introduction to Mamlūk Historiography: An Analysis of Arabic Annalistic and*

## The Black Slave as Holy Man

Another Mamlūk account, narrated by Ibn Taghrībirdī, al-Sakhāwī and Ibn Iyās, tells the story of the subversive actions of a black holy man, a slave or former slave.<sup>40</sup> This account is placed, like the narrative of the slave court, during the reign of Sultan Jaqmaq. In Ṣafar of 854/ 1450, Ibn Taghrībirdī, who was forty-one at the time of the incident, tells us that the Sultan ordered the governor of Cairo to beat, display and imprison a black slave named Sa’dān, the slave of the deceased sub-district governor (*kāshif*), Qāsim.<sup>41</sup> Ibn Taghrībirdī describes Sa’dān as *al-‘abd al-mu‘taqad*, “the black slave who was revered as a holy man.”<sup>42</sup> The Sultan’s orders were carried out. However, the events that preceded the black slave’s downfall were unusual enough for Ibn Taghrībirdī and other historians to narrate them.

The story of this black slave, Ibn Taghrībirdī tells us, was a strange one (*wa-hikāya hadhā ‘abd gharība*). When Sa’dān’s master died, he left money, property and children. The *ustādār* (majordomo) Zayn al-Dīn Yaḥyā attempted to seize the dead man’s property. Sa’dān, the *‘abd* of the dead *kāshif*, repulsed the *ustādār* and spoke harshly to him, “according to the manner of the Sūfīs of the Aḥmadiya.”<sup>43</sup> Sa’dān, Ibn Taghrībirdī tells us, went to extremes and mounted the *ustādār*’s platform (*dikka*). According to some reports, Sa’dān cursed Zayn al-Dīn. According to others, Sa’dān knocked Zayn al-Dīn’s turban off of his head. The outraged *ustādār* then sent emissaries to arrest Sa’dān. However, when these emissaries attempted to seize the black slave, they were stricken with paralysis. Ibn Taghrībirdī adds an aside here that the story of the paralysis is what was related (*qīla*) but that he himself had not been able to confirm it from a trustworthy source. Continuing with the narrative, Ibn

*Biographical Sources for the Reign of Al-Malik An-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qālā’ūn*, Weisbaden, 1970.

<sup>40</sup> Poliak briefly refers to this story, based on the account found in the *Ḥawādith*. See Poliak, “Les Révolts populaires,” 273.

<sup>41</sup> I am following Ayalon, *Gunpowder*, n.º 125, 68, 121, who translates *kāshif* as “governor of a sub-district.”

<sup>42</sup> This is an awkward translation of *mu‘taqad* but conveys the meaning of the term.

<sup>43</sup> On the Aḥmadiya, see Geoffroy, E., *Les soufisme en Egypte et en Syrie sous les derniers Mamelouks et les premiers Ottomans: orientations spirituelles et enjeux culturels*, Damascus, 1995, 205-06. See also Winter, M., *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt*, New Brunswick, 1982, 93-101.

Taghrībīrdī tells us that when the *ustādār* heard of the paralysis of his emissaries, he immediately returned the property of the dead man, the 'abd's master. The account of these events spread through the streets of Cairo and Sa'dān became famous. "People came from every side for pilgrimage [to Sa'dān] and to petition for blessing (*baraka*)." The sick also came to Sa'dān to be healed. Eventually, the crowds became so dense that it was practically impossible to approach the holy man. His fame spread to the grand *amīrs* and to the notables of the regime, the *dawla*, and they too began to visit Sa'dān.

According to Ibn Taghrībīrdī, this situation went on for ten days until Sultan Jaqmaq heard of Sa'dān's following. The Sultan ordered the governor of Cairo and the *amīr* Tanibak, the *ḥājib al-ḥujjāb* or grand chamberlain, to seize Sa'dān and have him beaten. However, when these two officials confronted Sa'dān, the *amīr* Tanibak was so overcome with fear that he did not dare to approach the holy man. The Sultan, outraged, ordered the exile of Tanibak to Damietta.<sup>44</sup> Once again, the Sultan sent the governor of Cairo to seize Sa'dān, this time accompanied by the eunuch Khushqadam. Sa'dān was apprehended, beaten and imprisoned. His followers from among the common people assembled outside the gate of the prison in protest and they too were either beaten or imprisoned. On the seventh of Rabī' I, the Sultan ordered the release of Sa'dān. The latter was told that he could go wherever he wanted but that he could not remain in Cairo.<sup>45</sup>

Al-Sakhāwī, who was twenty-three when the incident took place, states that the black slave came to peoples' attention on the second of Ṣafar of 854/1450, that his name was Sa'd Allāh or Sa'dān and that he was a freedman (*'atīq*) of Qāsim the *kāshif*. In terms of the story of the rapacious *ustādār*, Sa'dān's confrontation with him and the former's ultimate victory, al-Sakhāwī presents a similar narrative to that of Ibn Taghrībīrdī, although the former places greater emphasis on the slave's desire to protect his master's children. Unlike Ibn Taghrībīrdī, al-Sakhāwī does not specify paralysis as the cause of the

<sup>44</sup> Al-Sakhāwī includes a biography of Tanibak al-Burdbakī in *al-Daw'*, 3, n.º 173, 42. Al-Sakhāwī mentions Tanibak's exile, "because of the slave of Qāsim the *kāshif* who [the slave] pretended piety, *za'ama al-ṣalāḥiyya*." Prior to his disgrace, Tanibak had had a stellar career. He was, however, summoned back to Cairo and restored to favor. He eventually attained the post of *atābak al-'asākīr*, commander of the armies, which he held until his death at the age of ninety.

<sup>45</sup> Ibn Taghrībīrdī, *Ḥawādith*, 1:200-201, 203; cf. *al-Nujūm al-zāhira*, 15:406-07.

failure of the *ustādār*'s emissaries but implies some kind of impotence. "He [the *ustādār*] sent one of his emissaries to seize him [Sa'dān] and he [the emissary] could not do it (*mā astaṭā'*)."<sup>46</sup> Al-Sakhāwī also describes the crowds that gathered around Sa'dān and claims that the large assembly of people, initially riffraff (*ghawghā'*), women and turks and ultimately *amīrs*, officials and jurists, led to "evil deeds [the number of which] only God knows." It was these assemblies and the reprehensible things that went on during them, al-Sakhāwī tells us, that led the Sultan to order the beating and imprisonment of Sa'dān. In al-Sakhāwī's narrative the officials sent to punish Sa'dān on the eleventh of Ṣafar were Tanibak the *ḥājib al-ḥujjāb*, the governor of Cairo, the *muḥtasib* Jānibak and the eunuch Khushqadam al-Aḥmadī. Tanibak hesitated but the others beat Sa'dān over eighty strokes. Al-Sakhāwī's account also includes the disgrace and exile of Tanibak, the protest of Sa'dān's supporters outside the door of the prison and their subsequent punishment. In al-Sakhāwī's version, as opposed to that of Ibn Taghrībirdī, the Sultan ordered Sa'dān to be crucified and displayed on a camel. This, al-Sakhāwī tells us, greatly distressed Sa'dān supporters who included most of the common people (*al-'awāmm*). However, when Sa'dān was paraded through the streets to be crucified, a messenger came from the Sultan and rescinded the order. As in Ibn Taghrībirdī's account, Sa'dān is told that he may go wherever he pleases but that he can not remain in Cairo.<sup>46</sup>

Ibn Iyās, who was less than two years old at the time of the incident, also describes the event as occurring in Ṣafar of 854/1450. He gives the name of Sa'īd to the slave, omits the story of the attempted confiscation of the dead master's estate and only makes a brief reference to the black slave's renown as a holy man. Ibn Iyās simply tells us that the 'abd manifested piety (*ḡahara lahu ṣalāḡ*) and that the people, even women, thronged to him. In Ibn Iyās's account, the reason for the Sultan's anger is that Sa'īd predicted that one of the *amīrs* would obtain the Sultanate. Jaqmaq sends Tānī Bak<sup>47</sup> and the eunuch Khushqadam al-Aḥmadī to apprehend Sa'īd and bring him before the Sultan. Sa'īd was apprehended and beaten in the presence of the Sultan. The latter then ordered the 'abd's imprisonment. However, Ibn

<sup>46</sup> Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Tibr*, 302-303.

<sup>47</sup> His name is vocalized as "Tanibak" in the other narratives.

Iyās tells us, the Sultan learned that Tānī Bak took pity on Sa'īd (*raqqa lahu*) and had hesitated to send him to prison. The eunuch Khushqadam then took over and had the slave imprisoned. Ibn Iyās includes the story of the disgrace and exile of Tānī Bak but makes no reference, unlike Ibn Taghrībirdī or al-Sakhāwī, to the rioting of Sa'īd's followers. In Ibn Iyās's narrative, Sa'īd only spends a few days in jail and is then released. There is no mention made of his exile.<sup>48</sup>

Ibn Iyās, in this case, presents a story line that is similar to that of his older contemporaries, Ibn Taghrībirdī and al-Sakhāwī. There are, however, some remarkable differences. In the accounts of Ibn Taghrībirdī and al-Sakhāwī, the story of Sa'dān's confrontation with the *ustādār*, the paralysis or impotence of the latter's deputies and Sa'dān's ultimate victory over the *ustādār* are the catalysts of the narrative, even if Ibn Taghrībirdī expresses reservations about accepting the report of paralysis. Both Ibn Taghrībirdī and al-Sakhāwī provide detailed descriptions of the crowds that gather in Sa'dān's neighborhood, of the special powers that are attributed to him, of the devotion of his followers and of the riot that follows his arrest. Once the narrative is stripped of these elements, as in Ibn Iyās's account, Sa'dān's agency is dramatically curtailed.

In all three accounts, however, Sa'dān's downfall appears to be inevitable. Unlike the anonymous slaves who enacted the slave court of Giza some four years earlier, Sa'dān is not mimicking figures of authority, he is directly confronting one, an official of the state. Sa'dān speaks to the *ustādār* like a Sufi of the well known Aḥmadiya order, thus appropriating for himself a certain kind of religious capital. At the same time, as a loyal freedman, Sa'dān is displaying the appropriate devotion towards his dead master's children, an expression of the bonds of loyalty that arise out of the clientage of manumission. The actions of the *ustādār* are, after all, unjust. Despite Sa'dān's low status as a black slave or freedman, his piety, miraculous powers and defiance of authority elevate him to the position of a popular saint and legitimize him, at least in the eyes of his numerous followers.

Al-Sakhāwī and Ibn Iyās give reasons for the Sultan's suppression of Sa'dān: his subversive prophecy or the reprehensible acts that take

<sup>48</sup> Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-zuhūr*, 5b, pt. 2:277-278.

place in the crowds that surround him. In contrast, Ibn Taghrībirdī apparently does not see the need for providing a reason. It is enough that Sa‘dān has attracted a large following.

In the accounts of Ibn Taghrībirdī and al-‘Aynī of the slave Sultan and his court of 849/1446, the actions of the black slaves are not read as subversive by the legitimate authority but as unimportant. However, in all three accounts of the story of Sa‘dān, Sultan Jaqmaq takes direct repressive actions against the black holy man. Like the black slave Sultan and his retinue, Sa‘dān must be transformed and degraded by the Sultan. In Sa‘dān’s case, however, this is not done by dismissing his actions as being done on a whim (*‘alā ṭarīq al-mizāj*) or as a burlesque (*fashrawī*) but by the use of corporal punishment, public humiliation (Ibn Iyās), imprisonment and exile (Ibn Taghrībirdī and al-Sakhāwī). Unlike the black slave Sultan, Sa‘dān’s transgressive behavior occurs, not in the pasturage of Giza, but inside the city of Cairo. His following includes a broad range of the Sultan’s subjects, not just black slaves. The devotees of Sa‘dān include people from all social strata, commoners as well as elite. The threat that Sa‘dān poses is rendered even more disturbing by the failures of the *ustādār* Zayn al-Dīn and the *ḥājib al-ḥujjāb*, Tanibak, both of whom yield to Sa‘dān’s charismatic powers. In the case of Tanibak, this high ranking official disobeys a direct order from the Sultan. Sa‘dān has indeed turned the world upside down in a very real way and must be punished, degraded and read as a fraud, someone who, in al-Sakhāwī’s words, “claimed piety” (*za‘ima al-ṣalāḥiyya*), rather than as a real holy man.<sup>49</sup>

### Black Slaves and Firearms

Some forty-five to fifty years after the enactment of the slave court and the rise and fall of Sa‘dān, black slaves play a significant role in episodes in the narratives of two historians, one a native of Cairo and the other of Damascus. This time, however, the *‘abīd* are not appropriating the symbols of authority or claiming access to power through piety. Instead, their royal masters are conferring upon them a new role that can be perceived of as violating the racial hierarchy of Mamlūk military society. Two different Sultans, al-Nāṣir

<sup>49</sup> Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Daw’ al-lāmi’*, n.º 173, 3: 42.

Muḥammad b. Qā'itbāy (901/1496-904/1498) and the last Mamlūk Sultan, al-Ashraf Ṭūmānbāy (923/1517) attempted to transform their 'abīd into a corps of infantrymen, armed with arquebuses.<sup>50</sup> Armed black slaves, outside the law, were nothing new in Cairo. The 'abīd who are described as engaging in criminal activities in Cairo were armed. However, the official arming of black slaves by the Sultan had not occurred previously in the Mamlūk period.<sup>51</sup> In one account, by the Syrian historian Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, this introduction of a new role for the black slaves by Sultan al-Nāṣir was viewed by the white *mamlūks* as an insult and as a dangerous threat to the racial hierarchy.

David Ayalon in his landmark book, *Gunpowder and Firearms in the Mamluk Kingdom*, relies upon the accounts of Ibn Iyās and of Ibn al-Ḥimṣī to prove the racial and technological bias of the *mamlūks*. According to Ayalon's well known thesis, the Mamlūks' disdain for firearms as well as their hostility to the black arquebusiers led to the Ottoman defeat of the Mamlūks in 1517. Ayalon's firearms thesis has

<sup>50</sup> I am following David Ayalon and translating a range of technical terms for firearms as "arquebuses" in the context of the discussion of the black slave corps while acknowledging that these terms may also refer, in some cases, to artillery. See Ayalon, *Gunpowder*, 67. For a biography of al-Nāṣir Muhammad b. Qā'itbāy, see Holt, P. M., "al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qā'itbāy", *EP*, 7:63a-b. For Ṭūmānbāy, see *idem*, "Ṭūmānbāy", *EP*, 10:621a-622b.

<sup>51</sup> On the earlier existence of black military slaves in Egypt and Iraq, see Bacharach, J., "African Military Slaves in the Medieval Middle East: the Cases of Iraq (869-955) and Egypt (868-1171)", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 13, 4 (1981), 471-495. During the Mamlūk period, the militias maintained by the *sharīfs* of Mecca and Madina were composed of Ethiopian slaves. In the semi-autonomous Ḥijāz, during the Mamlūk period, where so many of the members of the ruling elite were the children of Ethiopian concubines, attitudes towards skin color appear to have been different from those that prevailed among the elite in Mamlūk dominated Egypt and Syria.

<sup>52</sup> Irwin, R., "Gunpowder and Firearms in the Mamluk Sultanate Revisited", in M. Winter and A. Levanoni (eds.), *Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, Boston, 2003, 117-139. Irwin argues that the Mamlūks, from the second half of the fifteenth century onwards, were not, in fact, adverse to firearms. "The Mamluk sultanate made significant use of handguns from the late fifteenth-century onwards and it was ahead of the Ottomans and Safavids in doing so." According to Irwin, (p. 136) the Mamlūk defeat at Marj Dābiq was due, not so much to their failure to use firearms, but to the facts that they were outnumbered, that their eighty year old Sultan and commander died during the battle, that there were bitter tensions between veterans (*qarānisa*) and recently imported royal *mamlūks* (*julbān*) and that the Mamlūk cavalry indulged in ill-disciplined looting of Ottoman supplies. Irwin further argues that the Mamlūks were, in fact, well equipped with firearms at Raydānīya (p. 138). Irwin challenges Ayalon's use of Ibn Zunbul's (d. after 960/1552) dramatic account of the victory of the Ottomans as an authoritative source.

recently been challenged by Robert Irwin.<sup>52</sup> Given that Ayalon does not resolve the conflicts between the narrative of Ibn Iyās and that of Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, one might argue that there was perhaps more complexity to the story, from a racial perspective, than Ayalon represents.

The ill-fated teenage Sultan, al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qā'itbāy, introduced a corps of black slave arquebusiers sometime before 903/1498. According to Ayalon, this corps was doomed from the start because of the *mamlūks*' combined racial and technological hostility. Ayalon asserts, in fact, that the low opinion the *mamlūks* had of Sultan al-Nāṣir was due to his introduction of the armed black slave corps as much as to his reputed bad character and to his lack of support among the great *amīrs*.<sup>53</sup>

According to Ibn Iyās, in Rabī' II of 903/1498, when Ibn Iyās was fifty, the young Sultan rode through the streets of Cairo in a lavish procession (*mawḳib ḥāfil*).

He placed in front of him drums and horns and black slaves who were firing before him with firearms (*nufūt*) after the fashion of the governors of sub-districts (*kushshāf*). He has disgraced the honor (*ḥurma*) of the kingdom. Never did any of the sons of kings commit such vile deeds as did this al-Nāṣir.<sup>54</sup>

In Jumādā II of the same year, Ibn Iyās reports that the Sultan ordered that all the shops and residences that faced the streets of Cairo be illuminated with lamps. The Sultan then began riding out with his paternal cousins and “before him were a number of black slaves who were armed with handguns (*makhāḥil naḥṭ*).” If the Sultan saw anyone in the street, the unfortunate person would have his nose and ears cut off or even be cut in half at the waist. If a shopkeeper had neglected to put up lanterns, the Sultan would have him crucified and oversee the crucifixion himself. A number of people, Ibn Iyās tells us, were killed in this fashion.

And all of this is frivolity and heedlessness. He (al-Nāṣir) disgraced the honor of the kingdom in his days. He did not follow the path of past sultans in maintaining the honor of the Sultanate and he behaved like a police captain (*wa ṣāra 'alā tariqa walī l-shurṭa*).<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Ayalon, *Gunpowder*, 71.

<sup>54</sup> Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-zuhūr*, 3, 383; cf. Ayalon, *Gunpowder*, 68. I have closely followed Ayalon's translation.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 3: 386-87. Cf. Ayalon, *Gunpowder*, 68-69.



In the same month in which the Sultan initiated his evening processions, in Ibn Iyās's narrative, the Sultan's personal guard, the *khāṣṣakīya*, the *mamlūks* who should have been the most loyal to him, kidnapped and killed one of his favored black slaves, Faraj Allāh (*muqarriban 'indahu 'ilā al-ghāya*), because "at this time they [the *mamlūks*] were seeking evil against the Sultan because of the deeds (*al-af'āl*) that he had committed."<sup>56</sup>

Ayalon argues that the preceding comments by Ibn Iyās and the killing of Faraj Allāh are representative of a general sense of outrage on the part of the *mamlūks* at the introduction of firearms and the arming of the despised black slaves.<sup>57</sup> However, if we look at the larger narrative, it is hard to tell if Ibn Iyās's outrage is directed at the privileging of black slaves, the use of firearms or at the Sultan's unjust behavior. When Ibn Iyās refers to al-Nāṣir's use of his black arquebusiers in other contexts, such as during his battles against Qānṣūh Khamṣi'a, the historian expresses no criticism.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Ibn Iyās, repeatedly and without criticism, refers to the use of various kinds of firearms, including cannons, during this civil war. At the same time, as Ayalon notes, Ibn Iyās repeatedly condemns al-Nāṣir for his immoral behavior and his injustice.<sup>59</sup> Ibn Iyās's comparison of the Sultan's processions to those of a *walī l-shurṭa* or to a *kāshif* might imply that the latter functionaries did process with armed black slaves. It might also be that the Sultan's arbitrary acts of injustice were similar to those of a police chief or to those of a governor of a subdistrict. There is no doubt, however, that Ibn Iyās's descriptions of al-Nāṣir's processions are meant to portray the young Sultan in a negative light.

When we look at Ayalon's second source, the chronicle of Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, we find a dramatically different narrative than that of Ibn Iyās. The latter initially give us a pejorative description of Sultan al-Nāṣir's processions with his black arquebusiers. But it is difficult to ascertain the reason for Ibn Iyās's negative attitude. In the chroni-

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:387.

<sup>57</sup> Ayalon, *Gunpowder*, 68-70.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:335, "wa-kāna 'inda l-malik al-Nāṣir 'idda wāfirā min al-'abīd mā bayna naftīya wa-rumāḥ bi-l-bunduq al-raṣāṣ." Cf. Ayalon, *Gunpowder*, 68.

<sup>59</sup> Ayalon, *Gunpowder*, 68. Ayalon does not, however, mention al-Nāṣir's evening processions that led to civilian deaths.

cle of Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, however, we find a well developed and unambiguous story of racial transgression, punishment and the restoration of appropriate hierarchies.

Ibn al-Ḥimṣī al-Anṣārī (841/1437-934/1527) was approximately sixty in 903/1498. Unlike Ibn Iyās, Ibn al-Ḥimṣī spent most of his life in his native Syria. In his distinctly different account of the story of the black arbusquiers, *'abīd bārūdīya* in Cairo, he gives Faraj Allāh, referred to as “the chief of the black slave arquebusiers in the Citadel” (*kabīr al-'abīd al-bārūdīya bi l-qila'*), a prominent role as a representative of the violation of racial and social boundaries. In Ibn al-Ḥimṣī's narrative, on the twenty-seventh of Jumādā II of 903/1498, the Sultan's bestowal of honors on Faraj Allāh caused a violent confrontation between his *mamlūks* and his black slaves. The Sultan married Faraj Allāh to a white Circassian concubine who had belonged to his father, Sultan Qa'itbāy (*surrīya min sarārī wālidihi Qāyrbāy bayḍā' jarkasīya*). The Sultan also presented Faraj Allāh with a short sleeved *sallārī* tunic, a kind of *mamlūk* “uniform.”<sup>60</sup> Outraged, the royal *mamlūks* armed themselves and did battle with the black slaves (who numbered some five hundred). The *'abīd* retreated to the towers of the Citadel and fired on the *mamlūks*. The latter, however, were victorious and killed fifty of the black slaves, including Faraj Allāh. The Sultan was then reprimanded by his maternal uncle (Qānṣūh al-Ashrafī, who was the real power behind the regime) and by the *amīrs*. They told al-Nāṣir that if he did not change his ways, they would prefer for him to go into exile with his black slaves. Chastened, the Sultan replied that he would reform and that the black slaves would be sold to the Turcomans.<sup>61</sup>

Ibn Iyās's earlier narrative of the black slave court in Giza in 849/1446 and Ibn al-Ḥimṣī's narrative of the defeat of the black slave corps of al-Nāṣir in 903/1498 share certain structural similarities. Both begin with a scenario in which black slaves threaten the existing moral and social order. Both include a battle in which the *mamlūks* restore that order by defeating the black slaves. Both narratives con-

<sup>60</sup> On the short sleeved *sallārī* tunic as a dress peculiar to the *mamlūks*, see Meyer, L., *Mamluk Costume*, Geneva, 1952, 24-25. Cf. Ayalon, *Gunpowder*, n.º 131, 121.

<sup>61</sup> Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, *Ḥawādiṯ al-zamān wa-wafayāt al-shuyūkh wa-l-aqrān*, Beirut, 1999, 2, 36-37; cf. Ayalon, *Gunpowder*, 70. The latter does not attempt to resolve the differences between the version of Ibn al-Ḥimṣī and that of Ibn Iyās.

clude with the Sultan arranging for the black slaves to be sent/sold to a faraway place. One of the important differences, however, is in the representation of the figure of the Sultan. In Ibn Iyās's account of the slave court, Sultan Jaqmaq is not himself a transgressor. He does nothing to call into question the racial and social hierarchy of Mamlūk military culture. Instead, Jaqmaq, like a good ruler, recognizes the threat posed by the black slaves and acts quickly to neutralize that threat. In contrast, Sultan al-Nāṣir, in Ibn al-Ḥimṣī's story of the black arquebusiers, himself crosses appropriate boundaries and creates a crisis by inappropriately bestowing a mamlūk uniform and a white, Circassian bride on a black slave. In this story, it is not the Sultan, but the *mamlūks* themselves, acting on their own, who set things right. As representatives of the normative order, the *mamlūks* then reproach their ruler and force him to remove the transgressive black slaves from Cairo.

When we compare Ibn Iyās's account of the processions of the black slave corps in 903/1498 to that of Ibn al-Ḥimṣī's, the racial discourse of Ibn Iyās seems to be very different from that of Ibn al-Ḥimṣī. The only feature that the two narratives have in common is the death of Faraj Allāh. But the reasons given for his death are very different. It is only in Ibn al-Ḥimṣī's account that Faraj Allāh is the chief of the black slave corps. The *sallārī* tunic (*mamlūk* uniform), the white Circassian slave girl, the battle between *mamālīk* and *'abīd* and the selling off of the black slaves do not appear in Ibn Iyās's narrative.

Unlike Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, Ibn Iyās was actually a resident of Cairo. The portion of Ibn Iyās's chronicle that covers the years of his adulthood is exceptionally detailed. It seems highly unlikely that Ibn Iyās would fail to mention a battle between black slaves and *mamlūks* that occurred when he was fifty. It is certainly possible that Ibn al-Ḥimṣī created the narrative of the battle with the black slave arquebusiers, as Ibn Iyās may have done in the case of the black slave court, in order to reassure his audience that some social, racial and political boundaries were, in the long run, impermeable.

Ibn Iyās's descriptions of the processions of Sultan al-Nāṣir are clearly hostile to the Sultan. Do these descriptions also represent Mamlūk outrage at the presence of the black slave arquebusiers? The same historian's representations of the black slave arquebusiers under Sultan Ṭūmānbāy (r. 922-3/1516-17) further complicates the reading

of their prior representation under Sultan al-Nāṣir. When he described al-Nāṣir's processions, Ibn Iyās accuses the young Sultan of having "disgraced the honor of the kingdom." In contrast, Ibn Iyās repeatedly praises Ṭūmānbāy<sup>62</sup> and describes in detail his twice weekly-processions through Cairo as *na'ib al-ghayba*, at the time when Ṭūmānbāy was the de facto Sultan. "In front of him there were a great number from the army and from the high ranking *amīrs* (*al-umarā' al-muqaddamīn*) and before him there were [also] his emissaries and the black slave arquebusiers who were firing shots from their handguns."<sup>63</sup> On another occasion, Ibn Iyās refers specifically to the *'abīd naḥīya* marching in procession with Ṭūmānbāy's *mamlūks*.<sup>64</sup> Ibn Iyās also refers to the black slaves again when he describes the parade of the expeditionary force that Ṭūmānbāy prepared for the battle of Raydāniya.<sup>65</sup> In his description of the battle, Ibn Iyās tells us that after the disorderly retreat of the Mamlūk army, Ṭūmānbāy stood his ground with only a small number of his *mamlūks* and *'abīd* and continued to fight the Ottomans.<sup>66</sup> Thus, in this narrative by Ibn Iyās, the majority of the *mamlūks* behave in a cowardly fashion and desert their Sultan. It is the Sultan's loyal *mamlūks* and black slaves who stay by his side and continue to fight.

Ayalon comments on what he perceives to be a changing attitude towards firearms represented by Ibn Iyās between the reigns of al-Nāṣir and of Ṭūmānbāy.<sup>67</sup> But what about racial attitudes? As we have seen above, Ibn Iyās's apparent opposition to the black arquebusiers of al-Nāṣir could be based less on his odium towards black slaves and firearms and more on his hostility towards the son of Qā'itbāy.<sup>68</sup> Clearly, for Ibn Iyās, the figure of authority who armed the black slaves (Ṭūmānbāy vs. al-Nāṣir) was more important than the

<sup>62</sup> On Ṭūmānbāy's popularity among his subjects and his good qualities, see Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-zuhūr*, 5:103.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:101. Cf. Ayalon, *Gunpowder*, 83-86 on the reign of Ṭūmānbāy.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:79.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:131.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:143.

<sup>67</sup> Ayalon, *Gunpowder*, 84-85. One might argue, however, that it is problematic to adduce a negative attitude towards firearms based solely on the stories of the processions of al-Nāṣir.

<sup>68</sup> Ibn al-Ḥimṣī focuses on Syria when he describes the last year of the Mamlūk Sultanate and shows little interest in Ṭūmānbāy. Thus we have no indication of what his attitude would have been towards Ṭūmānbāy's use of armed black slaves.

act of arming them itself. For Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, in contrast, the empowerment of Faraj Allāh by al-Nāṣir was not just an example of al-Nāṣir's iniquity. It was also the catalyst of a story of the reversal of racial hierarchy (including a threat to sexual boundaries) that must be put right through violence and expulsion.

Why did Ibn Iyās view the black arquebusiers of his adulthood as less of a threat than he did the *'abīd* who set up the slave court in Giza before he was born? The answer may lie in the context of the danger represented by the black slave court *versus* that represented by the black arquebusiers. The arquebusiers, unlike the black slave Sultan and his retinue, did not exercise their own agency nor did they appropriate symbols of authority. Any elevation of their status that came with bearing arms was granted by their master, the Sultan. In Ibn Iyās's account of the armed black infantry during the brief reign of Sultan Ṭūmānbāy, there is no implication that the Sultan uses his black slaves to violate a social and racial hierarchy. Ibn Iyās's negative attitude towards the processions of Sultan al-Nāṣir seems to be consistent with the historian's outrage at the arbitrary cruelty of al-Nāṣir himself. But in no way does Ibn Iyās indicate that he sees the black arquebusiers, even under al-Nāṣir, as presenting the kind of danger that the black slave court presented. For Ibn Iyās, the black slaves court's mimetic enactment of the legitimate Sultan's court was far more subversive than was the arming of black slaves by their royal masters.

By looking at different and differing Mamlūk narratives of transgressive black slaves, I have tried to demonstrate the complexity both of the narratives themselves and of the social milieu from which they emerged. In each of these accounts, the black slaves become sites for the exploration of questions of race, authority and legitimacy. The ways in which the various authors represent and attempt to resolve these questions in their historical works are by no means uniform and frequently offer conflicting truth claims. The dramatic differences that we find, for example, between Ibn Iyās's representation of the events in Giza in Dhū al-Ḥijja of 849/1498 and the representations of those same events by Ibn Taghrībirdī and al-'Aynī, should make us cautious, as modern historians, about uncritically approaching Mamlūk chronicles as repositories of facts. These disparate accounts of the same event, if they are read together, may allow us to make some kind of judgment about a histori-

cal reality. More importantly perhaps, the cross reading of these texts gives us a window into understanding the different ways in which educated people of the Mamlūk period understood the relative danger posed by a subaltern group, the *'abīd*.

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