

Usages of Kinship Terminology during the Mamluk Sultanate and the Notion of the ‘*Mamlūk* Family’

Koby Yosef

Introduction

Inspired by the work of David Ayalon, most students of Mamluk politics and society have tended to focus on *mamlūk* ties such as the relationship between a master and his *mamlūks*, or the connections among *mamlūks* of the same household serving the same master (*khushdāshīyya*), and underestimated the role of non-*mamlūk* elements in Mamluk politics and society, and the importance of non-*mamlūk* relationships such as blood ties and marital ties.¹ Although not uncontested, Ayalon’s notion of a ‘one generation nobility’ is still very persuasive, and the Mamluk Sultanate is still sometimes perceived as a political entity dominated by a non-hereditary principle in which any influence of non-*mamlūk* elements “was the result of the breaking of some ‘basic law’.”²

Amalia Levanoni was one of the first specialists to challenge the perception of the Sultanate’s ruling elite as exclusively, or almost exclusively, *mamlūk*. In her *A Turning Point in Mamluk History: The Third Reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad Ibn Qalāwūn (1310–41)*, published in 1995, she drew attention to the role of marital ties and non-*mamlūk* elements including the *mamlūks*’ descendants (*awlād al-nās*) and *mamlūks*’ relatives, in Mamluk politics and society during al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn’s third reign (709–41/1310–41).³ In her “*Awlād al-Nās in the Mamluk Army during the Baḥrī Period*,” published in 2006, Levanoni further explored the position of *mamlūks*’ descendants during the Turkish period of the Sultanate (648–784/1250–1382), and showed that even in the early Turkish period (648–709/1250–1310) *mamlūks*’ descendants at times held high-ranking military positions.⁴ In the last three decades, students of the Mamluk Sultanate have gradually come to acknowledge the role played in Mamluk

1 See for example Northrup, *The Baḥrī Mamlūk Sultanate* 256–9; see also *ibid.*, 243, 245, 263.

2 Richards, *Mamluk amirs* 32; see also Fuess, *Mamluk politics* 95–6.

3 Levanoni, *A turning point* 34–72.

4 *Idem*, *Awlād al-nās* 96–105.

politics and society by *mamlūks*' descendants and *mamlūks*' relatives, and the importance of marital ties in consolidating networks of dependencies and loyalties between sultans and their *amīrs*, and in transferring status, privileges, and property, thus challenging Ayalon's notion of a 'one generation nobility' and the exclusive nature of the Sultanate's ruling elite.⁵

On the other hand, Ayalon's notion of the '*mamlūk* family' has received less attention and has been less contested. According to Ayalon, the *mamlūk*'s period of enslavement determined his affiliations for life; therefore, the structure of Mamluk society was based on what he called the '*mamlūk* family' or 'slave family.' This was not a family based on blood relations but on relations of slavery and patronship. The patron and the comrades in servitude formed the family of the *mamlūk*. The patron and his freedmen developed relations very similar to those of a biological family, and the terminology marking the relations among them was identical to biological family terminology.⁶

Some scholars have argued that the concept of *khushdāshiyya*; i.e., the horizontal bond of loyalty between the *mamlūks* of one master, was at most a "moral ideal, which never actually managed to defeat individual interests" rather than "a historical reality,"⁷ and have emphasized the materialistic nature of the relationship between a master and his *mamlūks* (i.e. patron-client ties).⁸ Nasser Rabbat even suggested that:

[T]he relevance of these presumed relational structures in accounting for the shifting loyalties of the Mamluks after their manumission is at best mixed and often disappointing....[T]he number of incidents reported by the chroniclers in which a *khushdāsh* came to the assistance of his

5 Haarmann, *The sons of Mamluks* 141–68 (esp. 142); idem, *Joseph's law* 55–84; Petry, *A paradox of patronage* 199–203; idem, *Class solidarity versus gender gain* 122–6; Richards, *Mamluk amirs* 32–54; Behrens-Abouseif, *Waqf*'s remuneration 55–67; Van Steenbergen, *Mamluk elite* 192–4; idem, *Order out of chaos* 76–85; Bauden, *The sons of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad* 78–9; Yosef, *Ethnic groups*; idem, *Mamluks and their relatives* 55–69; Broadbridge, *Sending home* 1–18; D'hulster and Van Steenbergen, *Family matters* 61–82; Sievert, *Family* 81–103.

6 Ayalon, *Mamlūk: Military slavery* 14–5; idem, *Mamlūk military aristocracy* 206–7; idem, *Mamlūkiyyāt* 327–8; idem, *Baḥrī Mamlūks, Burjī Mamlūks* 42–3.

7 Van Steenbergen, *Order out of chaos* 86; and see also Sievert, *Family* 93.

8 Van Steenbergen, *Order out of chaos* 57–75; Sievert, *Family* 101–2; Irwin, *Factions in Medieval Egypt* 237. However, Van Steenbergen emphasizes that the *mamlūks* of a master should be considered as more than mere calculating clients. See Van Steenbergen, *Order out of chaos* 88–9.