REPETITION AS NARRATIVE STRATEGY: IBRĀHĪM’S EMBASSIES

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It has been sometimes argued that one of the weak points of the *siyar* is their merely repetitive structures. The fact that the same situations occur again and again, following the same pattern, may indeed appear as a flaw. To a certain extent, if the well-known *siyar* can reach such enormous proportions, it is due to the constant repetition of storylines and motifs. However, I wish to argue that, far from being a flaw, such repetitions constitute a major structural element of the *siyar* in the form of variations on a theme.

Repetition as variation is one of the major devices in art, whether it be literature, painting or music where it probably achieves its most impressive effects. No one would think to criticize William Byrd, or Mozart for such a use of repetition, and the same goes for oriental music: one only has to listen to Umm Kalṭūm to realize that the repetition of a musical phrase, with sometimes minute variations, is at the core of her art; the virtuosity expressed through what seems like endless repetitions.

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1 This is, for instance, the kind of comment that we can find: «What completely disturbs the reader and makes him renounce the continuation of his reading, are the numerous repetitions which become unbearable» Ilfāt al-Idilbī, *Nāẓra fī ṭadabīnī aš-šābī*, Damascus: Dār al-Šāfi: 1992 (1974), p. 125.

variations can only be praised as “infinite variety”, 
always the same, yet always different.

The use of repetition as variation is linked to the notion of substitution which is constantly at work in *Sirat al-Malik al-Zahir Baybars*. Central to this concept of substitution is the possibly controversial phrase used to qualify al-Malik al-Zahir in the *Sirā*: ʿḥalīfāt Allāh, and the opposite phrase used to qualify Baybars’s arch-enemy, Ġawān: ʿḥalīfāt Iblīs. Not only is the notion of substitution present in the term “ḥalīfa”, but here we also find a substitution of “Iblīs” for “Allāh”. The word “ḥalīfa” establishes a link between protagonist and antagonist through their function; the other terms separate them in such a way that no reconciliation is possible. The two phrases allegorise the characters who are urged by a force way beyond them, and which links ʿālam al-ġayb or ʿālam as-sīr (the World of the Secret), for which time and space have no relevance, and the here and now of the dunyā. Thus, Baybars’s “real” visions of al-Šāliḥ Ayyūb or the other Protectors from ʿālam al-ġayb, and Ġawān’s “pretended” visions of the Elders, point the listener in the right direction: “real” vs “pretended”; this opposition constitutes one of these significant variations on the same theme, playing on apparent contradictions between sameness and difference.

This notion of repetition through variations and substitution, sameness and difference, can be found in Ibrāhīm’s embassies which form one of the most spectacular recurrent sequences and motifs throughout *Sirat Baybars*. They eventually become a legend among the Frankish kings and princes to whom they are usually addressed. The embassy itself, as a rite, is the result of a substitution and a long elaboration which culminates in a full ritual, the origin of which can be found in Baybars’s first formal embassy from al-Malik al-Šāliḥ Ayyūb to Alfrad-mākūl. When Baybars becomes al-Malik al-Zahir, Ibrāhīm Ibn al-

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4 I use the spelling “Baybars” with [s], as found in the Damascus Manuscript which is here the exclusive object of my study (I.F.P.O./I.F.E.A.D. MS 29995, Bks. 1 to 180). Other manuscripts such as BL Or. 4644, and the printed version (Cairo), use the spelling “Baybars”, with [s]. From now on we shall refer to the Damascus Manuscript as *Sirat Baybars*.

5 Damascus MS. Bk. 13-14; Bohas/Zakharia, vol. 2, p. 136-150. The Damascus manuscript is in the process of being edited by Georges Bohas and Katia Zakharia (Damascus: I.F.P.O./I.F.E.A.D.). Three volumes, each containing ten booklets, are currently in print. When possible we shall give the proper references to this edition as Bohas/Zakharia.