Review Essay

Popular Culture in the Muslim World: Past and Present

Dilnawaz A. Siddiqui

Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo. By Boaz Shoshan. Cambridge, UK and New York: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1993. 148 pp.

Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East. By Edmund Burke, III (ed.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993, 400 pp.

Living Islam: From Samarkand to Stornoway. By Akbar Ahmed. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1994. 224 pp.

One of the many expressions of the postmodernist revolt against the modernist western establishment is said to be its popular culture. The theoretical literature produced across this cultural divide often characterizes it in terms of two extremes: as a supreme expression of the true aspirations of the heretofore underprivileged masses or as a weapon in the hands of the traditionally powerful political, social, and economic elites. The latter use it as a tool with which to manipulate the masses for their own respective agendas. A constant refrain of Hitler invoking Nazi supremacy over all humanity, as well as our own self-serving politicians doing their own thing in the name of the "intelligent and well-informed will of the American people," are only two of many examples of this instrument's ubiquitous use.

The Multiple Uses of Popular Culture

The vast grey area between these two margins includes umpteen other descriptions of popular culture, such as real "texture of our environment" and "adjustive syndrome," and Matthew Arnold's "heedless democratization." In addition, there are such definitions as "banality" (Elliot), "reduction of the individual to basic instincts," "titillation of the superficial senses" (Whitman), and "an expression denied by persistent puritanism and bourgeois power" (Marx). Leavis also joined Arnold and Elliot in resisting the popular resistance to "authority" found in traditional culture.

Dilnawaz A. Siddiqui is professor of communication, Clarion University, Clarion, Pennsylvania.

In the context of nineteenth-century Europe, the beginnings of popular culture's emergence were attributed to the two major societal upheavals of industrialization and its concomitant urbanization. These forces started to place unexpected demands upon the elitist foundations of the society. Some of these tendencies later resulted in a powerful movement—communism—that shook the world. The new slogans of that time sounded sincere enough to arouse a genuine mass revolt against both the metaphysical and the mundane orders. In the early stages of popular culture's literary expression, Dickens painted the bleak plight of the urban poor and Marx took up the cudgel on their behalf. Later on there were many voices, such as those of Arnold and Elliot, bemoaning the loss of "the best that was thought and known in the world" as well as that of the heretofore well-ensconced spirituality of the European psyche.

In the early twentieth century, a battle of sorts began between elites and nonelites on the literary and the cultural fronts. The great divide had started to appear. Across the Atlantic in the United States, there were ripples of this divide, but they never gathered any momentum, for Yankee ingenuity took a different course: Scandalizing and rumor mongering, according to some, were utilized as morally liberating forces or commercial instruments of reducing human existence to instant sexual or gastronomic gratification. Powerful media interests colluded with big business to auction even filial, sororal, and maternal sexually appealing bodies "to sell overpowered and dangerous cars to men who wish to live out the fantasies spun from the corporate mind of motor manufacturers and advertising copywriters."

It would be interesting to determine where the three works of popular culture reviewed below fit in the continuum described above. Let us also observe how ordinary Muslims, so chronologically and spatially diverse, fare in spiritual, political, social, and economic domains vis-à-vis real internal and external challenges. While in the West such people have traditionally been largely without history, the so-called nonelites of the Muslim world have often been featured in the works of various Muslim historians.

Purpose and Scope

In the opening section of his anthropological work, Ahmed explains the rationale for the *mawlid* (the Prophet's birthday) celebrations in Muslim societies as a symbolic popular reproach of the rulers to let them know how far removed their behavior has become from the life of the Prophet, who is supposed to be their role model. These festivities, which he regards as part of the nonelitist mode of life, have multiple implications of a spiritual, political, social, cultural, and economic nature.

The two other books under review draw sharp distinctions between traditional elitist and popular nonelitist cultures along the same lines.

Shoshan digs into the popular culture of Cairo in the relatively distant past: the Mamluk era of the mid-thirteenth to the early sixteenth centuries. Burke chronicles the cultural and ideological variety of Middle Easterners during three distinct periods: precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial. Ahmed seeks to generate a genuine understanding of Islam and Muslims, especially in a western world that still regards them as other, strange, foreign, and distant.

Coincidentally, these three books on popular Muslim culture were authored by a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim, respectively. Shoshan seems to combine an old Middle Eastern scholarly tradition with a pinch of political salt while analyzing the lives of ordinary people in Mamlūk Cairo. Burke has compiled a set of twenty-four biographical essays, written by different authors, on the life of "people without history" in order to represent various Middle Eastern religious communities. Ahmed offers a personal and very rational defence of Islam and the Muslim world in the face of attacks by the western-dominated global media. He covers the salient features of their faith, past glory and present challenges, and a mosaic of their variegated cultures within the framework of the fundamentals of Islam by separating sensational myths from a continuous and all-pervasive reality.

With regard to the size of their canvases, the three works vary in significant ways: Shoshan's work focuses on a large medieval Muslim city, Burke's book covers the modern Middle East (Muslim and non-Muslim as well as non-Arab West Asia), and Ahmed encapsulates fundamental Islamic principles and Muslim history and documents the popular culture of the Muslim *ummah* as it exists and which is erroneously perceived even in the postmodern West as a huge monolith opposed to it.

The Spiritual and the Mundane: The Blurred Line

Shoshan devotes chapter one, "Sufism and the People," to the role of Sufis in the popular culture of thirteenth- through fifteenth-century Cairo as observed by al Maqrizī. The period seems to be characterized by constant conflictual confrontation between Sufi-led ordinary people and contemporary traditional religious and bureaucratic elites. Burke's collection shows the religious aspects of the lives of ordinary people, although religion does not feature in it distinctly. Ahmed continually displays the tremendous variety of modes of implementing Islamic principles from one culture to another, from Samarkand to Stornoway.

In Shoshan's Cairo, the link between the common people and Sufism was the shaykh, who normally resided in a Sufi lodge (*zāwiyah*). In the mid-fourteenth century, the activities of shayhks where also permitted in mosques and orthodox learning institutions. Some of the popular preachers include the Shādhilī Shihāb al Dīn Aḥmad, also known as Ibn al Wafā'. Shoshan has tried to comprehend the complexity of popular Islam through

Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh's sermons as contained in *Tāj al 'Arūs al Hāwī li Ahdhāb al Nufūs* (The Encompassing Bride's Crown for the Discipline of Souls). Despite the spiritual and metaphysical acuteness of issues discussed in these sermons, he succeeds in reaching the hearts and minds of the masses through the use of allegories. With these and other pertinent historical records, Shoshan illustrates clearly the dynamism of that period's popular culture and how the power flowed from the spiritual arena to all other walks of the lives of ordinary people.

Shoshan offers examples of confrontation between the bureaucratic and strict religious authorities, such as the *muḥtasib* (market inspector) and the poor underprivileged populace. In 1419, Cairo's market inspector forbade men to enter the Ḥakīm Mosque if they were wearing shoes and banned the attendance of women altogether. The mosque's sanctity was restored after many had tried to disrupt it. In 1509, Sultan Qansawh al Ghawrī called on Muslims to perform the five daily prayers in congregational mosques. The problem was not that these demands were incompatible with Islam, but that the market inspector made disciplinarian demands on the people without providing the wherewithal to facilitate their implementation. The Sufis, on the other hand, were more tolerant of the moral lapses of the people and served as their advocates when they confronted the authorities, especially when the latter levied unbearable taxes.

Religious celebrations, along with sermons, were other occasions during which ordinary Muslims would fall under the spell of Sufi shaykhs. In Mamlūk Cairo, the foremost of these events was the *mawlid* (celebrations to commemorate the Prophet's birthday), which fell on the twelfth day of Rabī' al Awwal. There were also *mawlid*s to honor various Sufi saints reputed to have performed, sometimes even after their deaths, miracles and other magical acts while solving the problems of ordinary people. Such beliefs had nothing to do with Islam and were resisted by the religiously literate. However, the more the scholarly groups opposed these popular, but un-Islamic, practices, the more the populace felt oppressed, and the more opportunities the Sufis had to support the "underdog." The continued celebration of Nawrūz (the Zoroastrian New Year of pre-Islamic Iran) in many Muslim countries has generated similar tension.

After the successful 1978-79 Islamic revolution in Iran, western academics and nonacademics sought to analyze the congregational Friday *khutub* (addresses) and its dynamics in order to keep track of the extent of popular feeling as regards their rulers and their governments' foreign policies. Sometimes these addresses are issued, or at least approved, by the government *awqāf* department, and any departure usually results in a fate similar to the one befalling 'Abd al Raḥmān al Kishk, the blind cleric implicated by western intelligence agencies in the World Trade Center bombing case apparently because of his popular criticism of Egyptian and American policies in the Middle East.

Most of the biographies in Burke's *Modern Middle East* emphasize the region's panoramic social multidimensionality during its precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods. Since colonialism is Burke's operational term, political nationalism, rather than the religious aspects, seems to dominate the scene in his selections. The main point that emerges from the rise of secular nationalism is that although it resisted oppressive foreign occupation, it sometimes degenerated into ethnic prejudice against non-Muslim minorities, who had usually enjoyed peace and justice under Muslim rule.

In the three time spans covered, the significant role of Muslim women in political struggles is also discussed: Julie Oehler's Bībī Maryam, who fought the British around the time of the First World War; Julia Clancy-Smith's Shaykhah Zaynab, who opposed French opposition to her leadership of her father's Sufi *zāwiyah*; and Lila Abu-Lughod's Grandma Migdim, who revolted against Muḥammad 'Alī's policies of settling Egyptian bedouin. These examples belie the stereotypical images of Middle Eastern women. Other illustrations of male religious leaders providing political as well as moral leadership to their people are rife. Burke has included stories of such people as Palestine's 'Izz al Dīn al Qassām of the 1930s, Rostām Qashqā'ī of southwestern Iran, and Mehdi Abedi's description of the rise of the Iranian mullahs.

Ahmed's *Living Islam* sheds ample light on the powerful impact that religious leaders have on Muslim masses, especially in their recent past and right now. He shows how the annual reenactment of the battle of Karbalā' during the month of Muḥarram, particularly in the non-Arab Muslim world, illustrates the Islamic need and duty to fight all forms of injustice. The Islamic revolution in Iran, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, provides a successful example of a politically active religious leadership and validates Muslim assertions that Islamic politics, unlike its western counterpart, need not be dirty or amoral.

Ahmed also counteracts the western media's and individual's image of Arabs and Muslims, which derives largely from pro-Israeli sources, that both groups have no genuine cause for which to fight and use violence against Israel because Islam teaches them terrorism. As for Sufism's influence on ordinary Muslims, he agrees that it has been weakened greatly by the counterinfluence of orthodox Islam. The more the western media targets the latter's impact, the stronger it grows.

Popular vs. Orthodox Belief

One might observe the dangerous recipe for diluting Islam by promoting, in the name of popular culture, an incremental tolerance of needless innovations in fundamental Islamic beliefs and practices. In effect, external forces have inserted, either directly or in collaboration with local supporters, sophisticated mechanisms in the society in order to popularize, particularly among the illiterate, ancient national and pre-Islamic symbols.

The Shah's Aryan Iran, Ba'athist Iraq, Pharonic Egypt, and the Indian subcontinent's Muslim veneration of dead saints are prime examples of such attempts.

It is difficult to determine who was behind the popularization of al Bakrī's biography (*sirah*) of the Prophet. According to Shoshan, al Bakrī's account, along with some of his other works, was popular during the medieval period. However, its popularity was opposed vehemently by orthodox Muslim scholars of that and later periods, who maintained that "whatever al Bakrī related was full of falsification, corruption, or additions." Ibn Kathīr, a renowned fourteenth-century scholar, stressed: "The lies produced in al Bakrī's *sirah* are an offence and a grave sin; their fabricator has fallen into the category of those warned by the Prophet: 'He who reports lies about me deliberately shall be condemned to Hell.'"

Orthodox scholars were very cautious when confronted with such situations, for an exaggerated account that found uncritical acceptance could lead to *shirk* (associating false partners with God's divinity), the worst of all sins. Their fears were not completely unfounded, as even minor compromises with fundamental principles can result gradually in a great deal of confusion. In Burke's stories, a distinction between original Islamic principles and popular religious practices is only incidental. However Ahmed, in his anthropological vein, covers many examples of orthodox–popular clashes and often justifies the latter.

Shoshan seeks to point out that *sirah* stories grounded in the Qur'an, such as those of al Bakrī and al Majlisī, were intended to entertain the rank and file and thus to appeal to the common people's hearts and minds. But these legends, a mixture of fact and fiction, expanded beyond the masses and spread among the elite. Ahmed also stresses that "these stories are allegories, metaphors, stories within stories, and like the layers of an onion they require patience to peel; they sometimes end in tears."

And they certainly have—in the form of the existing inability of popular Sufi "Islam" and those interested in grappling with the West on its own intellectual terms to communicate with each other. The perceptions of life created by these two diverse groups and the diction they use for the same concepts leave the impression that they have little or nothing in common. Therefore, it is almost impossible for Muslims to join together in one nation, let alone to achieve the much-desired goal of global unity. Under the influence of such authors, certain Sunni and Shi'ah sections have, knowingly or unknowingly, helped Christianize Islam: "Such is the power of literature." It is this power that some anti-Islamic forces are seeking to tap in order to influence the Muslim masses.

Political vs. Moral Economy

Unlike the capitalist perception of the free market's corrective role despite inherent societal corruption, Shoshan's fourth chapter shows

clearly the need for moral intervention in a nation's economy. Again, and contrary to the capitalist assumption that the regime or its traders always have the public's best interests at heart and in mind, the Cairene commoners of yesteryear have taught us the lesson: "Rise and surrender to Allah! Vacate the post reserved for a man only! Step down from the throne to which you don't belong!" The public refused to submit to the military force of the unpopular Baybars regime and forced it to sell basic necessities at God's (fair or subsidized) prices.

Shoshan balances the effectiveness of this instance of popular justice with the manipulation of such resentment by powerful and privileged elites. He discusses how Egyptian rulers of that time used price controls and built economic institutions to forestall corrupt business and "regulatory" practices of government officials, welfare programs, the roles of farmers and factory workers, as well as the resulting interactive dynamics with one another and with the public at large. Another interesting feature of this analysis is his comparison, in terms of the locus of government control on bread and grain prices, between thirteenth-century Cairo's moral economy and its eighteenth-century versions used in England (a self-regulating free market) and France (more paternalistic). In contrast, in its Cairene prototype, the people always demanded that rulers intervene by opening government granaries to the public and by stopping grain exports during times of local shortage. This was, as it were, Islamic economics in action.

Burke deals with economic issues by recounting the devastating impact of secularization and westernization of the precolonial economic systems on farmers, craftsmen, other poor and politically disarmed masses, and on the lower middle classes in the nineteenth-century Middle East. There were, he mentions, those who left the region in order to pursue greater economic opportunity in the more prosperous West and eventually rose to comfortable heights. Ahmed bemoans the ever-widening gap between the Muslim world's rich and poor under the subsection "Class, Corruption, and Communism" and attributes it to "the asymmetry of post-colonialism. It is the greed of rampant capitalism. It is the selfish and myopic acquisitiveness of the elite. It is doomed." Among the internal causes of this shameless spectacle, he includes a massive lack, or even awareness, of the Islamic spirit of equity and justice as well as tribal- and ethnic-based nepotism, both of which Islam has always condemned. There is little to suggest that today's Islamists are even as organized in opposing twentieth-century governmental corruption as were the people of thirteenth-century Cairo.

The Social Fabric

These books have a common main point: the social fabric of past and present Muslim societies. Their mosaic pattern reflects the vibrancy of their ideological, social, economic, and political values and the vehe-

mency of interactive relationships between the powerful and the popular. After discussing the size of fourteenth-century Cairo, Shoshan describes the panicky predicament of its plague-stricken people: a population normally engaged in many manual occupations transformed death into "a communal event" under the guise of public executions and pestilence. The scene detailed is one of decimation brought on by plague, mass burials, and rumors of the end of the world. What keeps survivors safe from total despondency is faith in God, reflected by communal prayers to Him in humility.

Despite their "economic hardship, political oppression, frequent death, and their mental effect," they seemed to be a festive lot owing to "entertainment through literature, religious celebrations, or festivals." Such events diverted their minds from the darker side of life. For example, the celebration of Nawrūz provided the poor with a faked opportunity for role reversal in a carnival spirit, which was rightly resented by the orthodox Islamic elite due to the lack of decency and decorum of its festivities. Mock plays parodying royal pageantry and other pompous palace events were a more justifiable part of such festivities. The Sufis' influence on popular culture was pervasive, for they often filled the leadership lacuna in various walks of life, led popular revolts against the ruling elite, and served as bridge builders between the two, thereby melding certain common features into both the popular and elite cultures. For example, the Sufi "cult of saints created a cultural common ground" for both.

Burke's biographies cover the region's social dimension in purely cultural terms without restricting it to Muslims. The fundamental cultural values of Islam provide Jews and Christians the privileged position of "people of the book," which serves to bond the three communities together. Once this understanding is disregarded, due to the pressure of circumstance, it is sorely missed and longed for by those whom it had benefitted. Burke offers a tremendous variety of conditions of life ranging from Dr. Najī, an Iraqi Jewish doctor, to Shemsigūl, a Circassian slave. They are also shown resisting and collaborating with European colonialism regardless of religious affiliation. Many of his biographies show how different domains of Middle Eastern life meld into each other. Those active in sociocultural reform movements end up leading political campaigns. The most interesting example of shaykhs and *zāwiyah*s playing an integrative role is reflected in the character of Zaynab, daughter of Muḥammad Ibn al Qāsim, a famous Algerian Muslim Marabūṭ. This woman fought a feminist battle against her own male cousin, who challenged her right to lead the *zāwiyah* after her father's death in 1887. On the political front, she led a successful resistance movement against the French, perhaps because the latter favored her challenger in the religious dispute.

Both Ahmed and Burke strive to put to rest the popular western perception of the Muslim world as a cultural monolith. Ahmed nullifies such

a broad-brush treatment of the numerous Muslim subcultures from Indonesia through the subcontinent to Morocco, Mali, and Nigeria. He presents Islamic resurgence movements throughout the world as a given, exhorts their opponents to recognize the futility of using media and military might, and recommends a reasoned response based on mutual understanding and respect. While Burke locates permanent creases in the social fabric of the Muslim world, due to various colonial and neocolonial pressures, Ahmed ends his coverage with a hopeful and suggestive five-point rescue plan: a) the West should come out of its colonial mindset; b) greater visibility of Muslims in the western media; c) better explanations by Muslims of Islam in the West; d) curricular reform in both camps to include the sterling qualities of both cultures; and e) the West to function as an honest arbiter in international conflicts involving Muslims as underdogs.

Toward the End

All of the three works make very good reading and are strongly recommended, especially to students and faculty of international relations, media and literature, sociology, anthropology, and social sciences. Ahmed's book, however, needs a strong editorial hand to improve the spelling of Arabic words.

Shoshan's approach to popular culture in medieval Cairo is grounded in social history and anthropology. It is profusely documented—almost half of the book is devoted to appendices, bibliographical notes, and an index—and reflects his research-oriented methodology. Burke's biographical approach to life in the Middle East reflects an honest scholar's genuine concern for the need to challenge the myth of Muslim hostility toward the West. Ahmed tackles the subject from an anthropological perspective by interpreting Islam and Muslims to the West and bringing together his heart and mind to invoke understanding and tolerance by people on both sides: "What comes from the lips reaches the ears. What comes from the heart reaches the heart."