Shirazi calls Parvin I’tişāmī (1907–1941) “one of the first female poets in Persian poetry” (p. 166), despite a literary tradition that predates her and is recorded, among other places in I’timād al-Saltanah’s biographical dictionary, *Khayārāt-i Hisān* (three volumes, published in Tehran, 1887–89). Her suggestion that Ghālib in nineteenth-century India “lived in a social and religious milieu that was similar to that of the two medieval poets [Ḥāfiz (14th century) and Rūmī (13th century)]” (p. 170) is hard to sustain by any standard.

The book, in short, is significant for putting at the centre of our attention a significant cultural query; it offers a rich array of images to pose this query forcefully. Yet its richness is frustrated by theoretical and methodological weaknesses and at the end it is disappointing for the answers it provides.

Afsaneh Najmabadi


This is a very interesting and consciously revisionist study of modern Egyptian history, one which certainly fits the evident intention of the series in which it is published, “Middle East Studies Beyond Dominant Paradigms”. The dominant paradigm, as the author presents it, sees the Egyptian people as extremely conservative in culture, ruled over by “Oriental despots” who from time to time bring new ideas. The major historical break for modernity comes with the brief invasion of Napoleon (d. 1821) followed by the rule of Muhammad ‘Alī (d. 1265/1849), a despot who begins the process of imposing modernization and Westernization from the top down. This process has continued to the present, whether under foreign or native rule. The author contests this paradigm in two major ways. She emphasizes the continuity in Egyptian history from the 18th century to the present and she emphasizes the active role of the people and popular culture.

While the standard view represents the late Mamluk period (18th century) as one of cultural decline and political chaos, Sonbol presents evidence of a vibrant economic, social and intellectual life during this period. More
importantly, many of the institutions of this period can be seen as continuing through the later periods or as being revived at some point, though often under new names. The title of the book points to one example of this. When the military have predominated in the ruling class, until the end of Muḥammad ‘Alī’s time and again since 1952, they have operated politically and related to the rest of society in a way similar to the Mamluks. Muḥammad ‘Alī can be understood as “the last of the great Mamluks” (p. 3) and Abdul Nasser [‘Abd al-Nāṣir] and his successors are described as “the new Mamluks”. Systems of patronage and the principle of ʿiltizām, as Sonbol broadly defines it (p. 97), have continued through the whole modern period. The ʿuljār, the merchants engaged in international trade, have always had a major role. The ‘ulamāʾ have also always had an important role, losing power in the early 19th century but regaining much of it by the end of the century, we are told, and being junior partners in the present ruling group. Mercantilism, explicit or otherwise, is seen as a continuing feature of state policy. Interestingly, the author reserves the label “feudalism” for the post-1952 period, on the grounds that the previous regimes did not have the element of reciprocity necessary to feudalism (p.122).

The most general and most important continuing characteristic is the distinction between the khāṣṣāb (the establishment, the people of distinction, the people of power and wealth) (p. 227) and the ʿāmmah (public, people, masses, general populace) (p. 225). The actual composition of the khāṣṣāb has changed significantly over time. Muḥammad ‘Alī largely replaced the old khāṣṣāb with people of his own choosing, particularly Ottomans, Albanians and Armenians among the political elite. By the end of the 19th century, under British rule, the khāṣṣāb was made up largely of foreigners and those Egyptians who had adopted the European culture. This continued to be very much the case until 1952. Since that time, native Egyptians largely drawn from the ʿāmmah have come to replace them. The role of the khāṣṣāb and its relation to the ʿāmmah, as well as the importance of this relationship, has varied much less than its composition.

Another important point is that the 19th century was not just a period of incipient Westernization, but also a period of Ottomanization. The gap between the ruling class of the Ottoman culture and that of the common people was greater than it had been earlier and the spread of Ḥanafi fiqh affected other levels of society. This, along with the influence of Western law, had the effect of reducing women’s legal rights in comparison to what they had been, and increasing the class divisions in society.

The 19th century saw the development of a cultural dualism between the khāṣṣāb and the ʿāmmah which continued through the first half of the 20th
century. The khāṣṣah was made up of people who commonly spoke Turkish or a European language as their language of preference and had embraced Western culture. Their position was justified by the claim of “modernity”, which was part of their “hegemonic discourse” (p. 65). In the last chapter, however, the author argues that this cultural dualism is decreasing and that “the culture of the ʻammah is now becoming dominant” (p. 179). She illustrates this from such things as Islamic revivalism, current tastes in language, music and theatre, village customs spreading to the city, and increased marriage between the different classes. Although she notes the existence now of a “middle class” between the khāṣṣah and the ʻammah, there is no indication that the cultural integration is accompanied by greater political or economic equality. Hence the title, “The New Mamluks”, perhaps refers not only to the current rulers of Egypt but also to the idea that the social situation today is in some respects more like that of 18th century Mamluk Egypt than later periods.

In making her case the author makes considerable use of recent monographs, including her own work on the medical profession in Egypt and that of scholars such as Walter Armbrust, Robert Vitalis, Afaf Lufti-al-Sayyid Marsot, Peter Gran, Nenny Hanna, Tim Mitchell, Adolph Grohman, Soraiya Faroqhi, Chris Eccels and others.

One of the areas of concern is that Islamic religion is treated exclusively in terms of its cultural significance. In particular, the Islamic revival of the last generation is viewed as one of the main aspects of the current cultural revival (p. xii). In fact, Sonbol says surprisingly little about Islam — probably as little as possible in a book on Egyptian society. For example, there are only seven references to the Muslim Brotherhood in the index and all are incidental. The story of the group is never clearly told, much less analyzed or explored. Where Islam, or more generally religion, does appear, the use is instrumental. Islam is viewed, and sometimes even defined, in terms of its effect on something else, which is seen as more significant. We are told that “the call for Islam is really a search for solutions to contemporary problems” (p. 178), and that Islam is “really” a perceived “synthesis of Egyptian cultural ‘essence’” (p. 179). These things are undoubtedly a significant part of what the current Islamic revival is about, but to put it this way suggests that Islam involves nothing more, or that what it involves is of no interest. Secular writers have the right to decide what is of interest to them, of course. But even from a secular point of view this choice is likely to miss something important. For the people involved, Islam represents God’s will and is regarded by them as universally valid. What does it mean that something so theologically freighted and universalistic in perspective becomes a major vehicle for an indigenous cultural revival?
Surely the answers to questions such as this are of interest to the secular historian. Also, it seems to me somewhat arrogant to treat the major features of people’s religious beliefs as “symptoms” of something else, even if this something else is “underlying social phenomena” (p. 179). Having said all of this, however, I do think that the author makes useful and perceptive points about Islam. For example, I think that she is probably right when she says that much of what is preached as Islam is “the ‘urf (customary law) of the countryside” (p. 183).

I have said at the beginning that this is a very interesting book. It is not, however, a book for the novice but is meant for a reader with considerable knowledge of modern Egyptian history. The author sometimes alludes to items without providing the background that a beginner would need. For example, she mentions “the Taḥrīr project and its ensuing crisis” but does not explain what exactly “Taḥrīr project” is (p. 142). The reforms of family law pushed by Jehan Sadat are said to have been “passed” when in fact they were promulgated by decree (pp.184–85). A potentially interesting discussion of the relationship between contemporary veiling and marriage problems fails to spell out all the links a beginner would need (p. 203). The book presents a wealth of information which is of considerable value to the knowledgeable scholar, but this very wealth of information could be confusing to the beginner. Some chapters are structured in such a way that the wealth of information tends to obscure the over-all arguments. (This seems to me particularly true in the last chapter, which in places reads like a catalogue of problems but which also presents the author’s most important thesis.)

These criticisms, however, point mainly to the defects of virtue. I believe that this book will stand as a major contribution to scholarship on modern Egypt, both for the recent scholarship it incorporates and for the distinctive theses it presents and the new directions it maps out.

William Shepard


The September 11 attacks on New York and Washington have galvanized interest not only in the militant Islamic groups but also in the Muslim