

PRELIMINARY DISCOURSE

Khuṭbat al-kitāb

This book argues that the large-scale and diverse cultural production in Arabic in the postclassical era (approximately the twelfth through the eighteenth centuries) was the outcome of an active sphere of discussion and disputation spanning the entire medieval Muslim world.¹ I explore this production over a long temporal stretch and across a vast swathe of Islamic territories. My focus is on the thematic and genealogical constructions that were of greatest significance to the accumulation of cultural capital, which, I argue, constitutes a medieval Islamic “republic of letters.”² My emphasis is also on human agency and on the sites and methods of conversation, discussion, compilation, and writing that are of most relevance to the development of this communicative sphere. Although the fact that Arabic is the language of the Qurʾān necessarily entails its dominance in the battle to ensure a place for vernacular literatures, I redirect attention away from that battle and toward individual writers, grammarians, and lexicographers as active players in a larger Islamic cultural pursuit.

The pervasive Islamic consciousness that takes the Arabic language as its pivotal point, given its bearing on Qurʾānic studies and the emerging strategies of study and discourse, seems more important here than a metropolitan-peripheral demarcation, despite the marked presence of local, regional, and national production. Under precarious and

ever-shifting politics, centers at any given time may be replaced by other centers, and scholars are compelled to develop their own counterstrategies in a vast Islamic domain where theological studies hold sway. Thus, the issue of centers and peripheries is secondary in relation to cultural activity. Arabic grammar, for instance, which is basic to training in the religious sciences, *kalām* (scholastic theological discourse), and disputation, cannot be described as an ethnic-bound pursuit. It is the foundation for every other pursuit in Islamic knowledge.³ The prioritization of Arabic is evident in the study of rhetoric, where heavy emphasis was placed not only on figures and tropes but also on methods and strategies of application and analysis, and which enlisted the efforts of numerous scholars east of the Arab region proper. Such innovations contributed to the development of a cultural sphere that was greater than any single territorial center.

Lending credence to this premise of a medieval Islamic republic of letters is the fact that literary production spilled over into a variety of sites, such as mosques, hospices, educational institutions, markets, and other public spaces. It involved a rigorous conversation among authors, coteries, particular texts, poems, theories, and insights, which took the form of glosses, marginal explications, correspondence, epistles, and disputes and debates over a centuries-long period. Nearly every postclassical cultural production communicates some involvement and participation in this republic. Philological inquiry, for example, as manifested in lexicons, disputes, speculative theological treatises, and their marginalia, often either consciously integrates with or else rebels against one or another system of thought and politics, and thus contributes to an accumulating rhetorica over the long period under consideration. Rhetors and texts are the marked traces in this genealogical succession.

The focus on rhetoric in this book implies a recognition of its significance to the *littérateurs*, grammarians, poets, lexicographers, and copyists of this republic of letters. As I argue throughout, rhetoric is a combative verbal domain, where battles are fought and achievements inscribed. Its dense figures and tropes distance it from the strictly official discourse that is usually upheld in traditionalist circles, with their marked distrust of logic and hermeneutics.⁴ The recourse in rhetoric to indirection, or *lahn al-qawl* (i.e., implicitness), and to *taʿrīd* (dissimula-

tion, connotation, concealment) signifies the other side of written and verbal transactions in this *jumhūr* (majority) of littérateurs, which is the basis for Arab and Muslim modernists' application of the term *jumhūriyyah* (i.e., republic). In this verbal domain, the root and conjugation of the verb *jamhara* also connote dissimulation. Hence, both verb and noun are loaded in Arabic in a binary structure, negation, or *taḍādd* (based on opposites or contrasts — *aḍḍād*), implying both revelation and concealment.⁵ Unless we perceive this philological undertaking in relation to the rise of *badīʿ* (inventiveness and innovation) and the subsequent multiplication of a *badīʿiyyah* ode (i.e., encomium to the Prophet in poetry and poetics, with specific application of figures and examples in each verse) for more than six centuries,⁶ we are bound to overlook this development as a countermovement to an official discourse that was bent on attenuating the presence of the Prophet's family in popular memory. Until the eighteenth century, littérateurs' shows of veneration are downplayed as mere Sufi or Shīʿī aberrations.

The present project also concentrates on genealogical constructions in lexicography, dynastic growths in chancery institutions, apprenticeship, mentorship, and the exchange between public and private spheres in poetry and art. On the material level, the outcome is manifested in impressive biographical dictionaries, encyclopedias, and *khizānāt* (treasure troves), that is, multivolume productions that encapsulate authors' comments on and engagements with widely circulated and celebrated forms of knowledge. The overall cultural production that documents contemporary literary life and the culture industry (authorship, street performance, copying, book marketing, and so forth) presents a strong case for the appellation of "the medieval Islamic republic of letters." Rather than being bound to a specific cultural form or formative episode, this designation refers to a general condition that makes it possible for scholars, modes, genres, and ideas to consort with each other over time and to thereby create new cultural trends and projects, along with an ethos of reciprocity, exchange, and obligation. Cultural genealogies are established, not necessarily as uniform structures but rather primarily as distinctive systems of thought and inquiry. There is no better evidence for this hypothesis than the cumulative effect in cultural production in every field of knowledge in the long period under consideration. The thoughtful discourse

and the gravity of issues that are raised often provoke parody and biting satire from less canonized authors. Along with the growing body of reading publics in the medieval Islamic world—as attested to by the lucrative business of copyists⁷—public sites turned into recognizable centers for innovative and alternative cultural production, which often held traditionalists at bay and even forced chancery officials to admit the writings and anecdotes of professionals and craftsmen into their compendiums and encyclopedias.

The culture industry produced an enormous corpus of treatises, compendiums, lexicons, commentaries, glosses, and supplements in history, geography, philosophy, speculative theology, philology, rhetoric, topography, and other domains in the humanities, along with scientific inquiry and research. Updated modes of communication, writing, and *mukhtar-a'ah* (invented) terminology confront us with the need to re-address rigorously the cultural complexity of the postclassical period. Through the consolidated efforts of littérateurs, philologists, lexicographers, speculative theologians, and epistolographers in Islamic domains, prototypes and forms of literary value systems and conceptualized republics of letters emerged, where cultural capital and consumers seem to be entangled in an ongoing transaction. In one marked case, a grammatical tradition that takes shape in ibn Wahb al-Kātib's (d. after AH 334/AD 946)⁸ groundbreaking *Burhān* in the tenth century connects genealogically with Abū Ya'qūb al-Sakkākī's (d. 626/1229) *Miftāḥ*,⁹ opening up the field of grammar and rhetoric to a succession of abridgements, commentaries, and explications for over seven centuries, setting grammar free from earlier limits, and situating it within larger inquiries in knowledge and life.

Classical Arabic, although experiencing many ups and downs, was already established in Islamic dominions by the twelfth century as the language of religion, rhetoric, epistolography, and, at times, philosophy and science. Its very strength as the language of the Qur'ān and hence its dominant status, however, also curtailed its availability for a much-needed conflation of popular and classic literary forms, which was given sporadic impetus by certain middle-period poets and rhetors. Problematic as this is for my reading of a republic of letters—a point that will be discussed in due course—the fact of this republic needs to be argued in terms of an enormous cultural capital that could not have retained

value and availability had it not been meeting, in its times, the needs of Islamic literate communities. The Arab and Muslim modernist view that the literary output of the medieval Arab and Islamic nation-states is ineffectual has to do with the role of these modernist native elites—such as the prominent Egyptian writers Salāmah Mūsā (1887–1958), Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889–1973), and Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt (1885–1968)—who have long internalized a European Enlightenment discourse and looked with suspicion and distrust at the past and its massive accumulation in cultural capital.¹⁰

The book argues its case, therefore, against the widespread disparagement of the postclassical Islamic era (medieval and premodern) as one of literary decadence, degeneration, and darkness. The modernists' disillusion with that cultural production was primarily informed by a European discourse but was also driven by a misreading of the compendious and commentarial effort of the period, a misreading that could not discern the significant redirection of cultural capital to escape imitation, while simultaneously assimilating ancient and classical knowledge. In fact, by appropriating and classifying these sources rather than duplicating them, postclassical scholars and *littérateurs* embarked on what Pascale Casanova terms a “diversion of assets.”¹¹

A number of recent works have raised similar concerns and contributed significant insights that could correct the modernist misreadings of particular authors or texts. However, little has been done to account for the large-scale literary production that continued for centuries across the Islamic world under circumstances of social and political upheavals, wars, invasions, and drastic shifts in ideology and methods of reasoning. Indeed, there is even less concern with social networks, sites of production, and the significance of biographical, lexical, topographical, and encyclopedic constellations as representative landmarks in a republic of letters.

Because such a discussion demands a focus on specific centers for the transmission, acquisition, and construction of knowledge, this work emphasizes the importance of Cairo, not only as the site for a substantial part of this cultural production but also as a medieval-premodern epicenter where travelers, scholars, exiles, poets, and others settled, argued, and met fellow scholars. Founded in the tenth century as the capital of

the Fatimid Caliphate (909–1167), Cairo largely escaped the destruction that befell many other metropolitan centers as a result of the Mongol invasions. It turned into a repository of libraries, archives, and centers for learning that no other city outshone during the period under consideration. As a center for writers from all over the world, Cairo occupied a special place of honor from the tenth through the fifteenth centuries, according to two prominent contemporaries of the Mamluk period, ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) and al-Qalqashandī (d. 1418). The erudite Russian Arabist Ignatii Lulianovich Krachkovskii argues that Egypt possessed a literature unequalled anywhere else in the East.¹² Intellectuals from both east and west, whether fleeing political upheavals or settling in Cairo temporarily while on their way to Mecca, viewed it as “the garden of the Universe, the orchard of the World,” as ibn Khaldūn reports in his *Taʿrīf*.¹³ Al-Qalqashandī notes that Cairo “benefited from the most honorable of writers as no other kingdom did,” and that “it had the kind of notables and men of letters that no other country had.”¹⁴

Cairo of the middle and premodern period was an epicenter of both material production and symbolic capital. The nature of its growth and its shifting body politic place us squarely within a cosmopolitan nexus that witnesses a dialogue among schools of thought, scholastic controversies, scientific achievements, poetic innovations and shifts in expression, the massive use of prose for statecraft, and soaring heights of Sufi poetry that simultaneously derive and refract worldliness from common tropes. Its cosmopolitan culture was partly its own, but also to a large extent was forced on it by virtue of place. Situated at the crossroads to Mecca, to Africa, to the Mediterranean, to Syria, and to eastern Asia all the way to the borders with China—which ibn Baṭṭūṭah (d. 1369) would reach and describe—Cairo was a place but not an identity. What was its own and what was brought to the place and its people involve and define its makeup at that particular historical intersection, one in which another, non-Arab element (i.e., the Mamluk and Ottoman dynasties) enforced its presence while acclimatizing itself to the accommodating Islamic space. Fighting its way between its own populations and its Arab and Afro-Asian communities, especially the Maghribi component and the superimposed Mamluks and Ottomans, this City-Victorious, as its name al-Qāhirah signifies, emerges cosmopolitan but also as an Arab-Islamic

metropolitan epicenter. The influx of scholars, poets, travelers, and entrepreneurs continued markedly into the nineteenth century and played a significant role in giving the city its cosmopolitan features.

Pascale Casanova in her *World Republic of Letters* argues that “the exceptional concentration of literary sources that occurred in Paris over the course of several centuries gradually led to its recognition as the center of the literary world.”¹⁵ Such a description is no less applicable to Cairo; it stood to the postclassical Islamic world as Paris stood to Europe. It was the space where the learned functioned as transmitters and providers of knowledge on multiple levels. Their encyclopedic bent and their appropriation of antecedent tradition did not detract from their other literary pursuits. As an example, consider Shams al-Dīn al-Nawājī (d. 859/1455). His books comprise not only anthologized material on erotica and wine but also rigorous readings and criticism. A copyist famed for his copying skills, an anthologist, and a sharp critic, especially in his criticism of contemporaries, al-Nawājī is typical of many scholars whose role, production, and diversified interests placed them in dialogue with each other as well as with a wide body of readers, who obviously were keen to peruse their books and manuals.

The concentration of scholars, authors, and copyists in Cairo and, to a lesser degree, in Damascus, Aleppo, and other Islamic centers west of the Arab region valorized Arabic; but it also prompted the “revolutionary vernacularizing thrust” that was noticeable throughout the Islamic world.¹⁶ This vernacularizing effort made heavy use of lexical transmission, appropriation, and transference of Arabic grammar, rhetoric, and poetics. National languages also brought into Arabic their own distinctive traits, a point that will receive further attention in the following chapters. Although the process of linguistic and cultural differentiation is particularly noticeable in the new states to the west of the Arab region, it should be seen in terms of the valorization of a wide political and cultural field. Every new political formation ended up with an increasing dependence on and appropriation of Arabic for religious, scholastic and symbolic reasons. Arabic itself underwent some of its most serious transformations, in the form of nonclassical modes and practices that were theorized by several prominent scholars, and in the upsurge of the so-called *‘āmmī* (colloquial) poetry. Hence, in spite of linguistic divergence,

a common Islamic literary, theological, and symbolic field emerged that warrants the present discussion of an Islamic republic of letters. The massive production that has unsettled Arab modernists attests to this cultural space.

In this book I examine an extensive corpus through various lenses. Underlying patterns of social networking are always present to account for the ultimate material presence of cultural production. Travel, pilgrimage (*hajj*), migration, the search for libraries and centers of learning, assemblies (*majālis*), diverse modes of writing and compilation, and treasuries of knowledge (*khizānāt*) all function as the means and mediums, as well as self-sufficient pursuits, in the makeup of a broad republic of letters.

I attempt to demonstrate that a layered structure held together the seemingly disparate modes of writing, rewriting, compilation, revision, commentary, and disputation in nearly every field of knowledge and gave them validity and meaning over a long period of power struggles and knowledge construction. Only through examining such a layered structure of multiple, challenging, cultural spectrums can we escape the temptations of an ethnically-based identitarian politics outside the canvas of an Islamic culture with its many ideologies and forms of self-constitution. Indeed, the stupendous encyclopedic growth and the dynamic channels of disputation, emendation, gloss, rewriting, invention of new modes in poetry, recitation, and so on confront us with questions that become more acute whenever we understand these activities as simultaneously peripatetic and stationary—depending on the appropriate location or settlement across the Islamic world, from central Asia to Timbuktu, a world that was traversed by ibn Baṭṭūṭah between 1325 and 1354.¹⁷ This Moroccan traveler, whom Jawaharlal Nehru rightly ranks “amongst the great travelers of all time,”¹⁸ could not narrate his travels without a “cultural script” that constituted his frame of reference.¹⁹

Travel accounts are not the only traces of a republic of letters in this Islamic map. In more than one sense, a compendium, gloss, or praise poem to the Prophet, for example, often traversed lands, challenging other texts and literary practices and putting down new roots in more than one

place. The “street,” as opposed to scholars and other elites, has always been part of this vibrant encounter and unfolding, and on many occasions it displays its own opposite poetics or discourse, while in other instances its case may be played out against innovations in theological discussion. Ultimately, the present book seeks to contribute to an understanding of this formative process in the transmission and acquisition of knowledge in its entirety, as larger than any one of its many component parts and hence more complex than has been recognized. This republic of letters, whose topography is mapped out in the course of this study, resists compartmentalization. By presenting it thus, the book attempts to provide a solid base to engage with Islamic societies in a crucial period of their shared cultural history.

But before we address further the resistance of Arab and Muslim modernists to their past, it is appropriate to take a closer look at the textual community of the Mamluk period in Arab-Islamic history (1250–1811),²⁰ especially in terms of the transmission and reconstruction of knowledge. Although the term “republic” is used here as a conceptual framework, an edifice, to account for a literary world-system in which Arabic functions as the dominating language, its appropriation in this book entails no equation between Latin and Arabic in relation to national vernacular languages. Even with the disintegration of the caliphate that started early in the tenth century, Arabic was the proper medium and resource for a community of scholars and readers across the Islamic lands, scholars who happened to interact, correspond with each other, hold meetings and debates, and thenceforth establish a repertoire of texts in encyclopedic or commentary form. The medieval Arab-Islamic “republic of letters,” although very different from this term and its applications in Western scholarship, presents a rich construction of knowledge made possible through Arabic. As the language known to every Muslim scholar, Arabic facilitates transmission through a number of channels and networks. Wanderlust and the search for knowledge are also among the dynamics that this book explores in order to map out the means and outcomes in this transmission and acquisition of knowledge. Books, modes of writing and recitation, assemblies, correspondence, and conversation complement each other in the structure of this republic over such a long period. For example, a prototype for a collaborative encyclopedic work, a tenth-century joint

project that will be discussed later in this volume, was perhaps in the minds of many when they embarked on supplementing each other's work with book-length studies and commentaries. The case for a republic of letters made possible through Arabic is even stronger for Sufis, who were in need then, as they are now, of connecting to a nuanced Qur'ānic hermeneutic.

Indeed, there is no shortage of prominent names and movements that demonstrate significant social networking. Patterns for this networking had already been set, not only by geographers, intelligence informants in military conquests, and postmasters (*Aṣḥāb al-barīd*; sing. *Ṣāhib al-barīd*) and their network, but also, more significantly, by Sufis, scholars and polymaths, and travelers. Across these networks is always a gravitating fulcrum, exemplified by the compelling commitment to undertake the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) as duty, ritual, and as part of a craving to meet fellow scholars and Sufis and to make use of the libraries in Mecca and Medina that were endowed by prominent emirs, kings, and sultans from the Arab world, Anatolia, Persia, and Africa.²¹ For example, the itineraries of the Sufi grand shaykh, the Andalusian Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240);²² of the saint Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Mursī (d. 1287), whose shrine is in Alexandria; and of the latter's father-in-law, the Sufi master Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (d. 1258), range from Muslim Spain through North Africa, from Alexandria or Cairo to Mecca and other places, and show how travel, pilgrimage, accumulation of knowledge, and Sufi mentoring together built up significant genealogies in Islamic thought and life. *Hajj* can turn into a transformative experience, as the case was with the Andalusian Sufi master ibn al-ʿArabī. His meeting with al-Nizām, the highly gifted and inspiring daughter of Shaykh Abū Shujāʿ from Iṣfahān, and his sojourn in Mecca (1201–1204) were behind his highly acclaimed and controversial collection of poetry *Tarjumān al-ashwāq* (The Interpreter of Desires) and the voluminous *Meccan Revelations* (*Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*). Celebrated travelers such as the Andalusian ibn Jubayr (d. 1217) and the Moroccan ibn Baṭṭūṭah, along with historians and theologians such as ibn Khaldūn²³ and the erudite scholar and speculative theologian Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftazānī (d. 791/1389) of Taftazān (Khorasān),²⁴ traversed lands and established themselves as recognizable and influential presences in this republic of letters.