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The Hungarian Cultural Counsellor in Cairo**
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Front cover

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Office of the Hungarian Cultural Counsellor in Cairo

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Current Research of the

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The Moroccan Jurist Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ (d. 1336/7) on Egyptian Women: The Condemnation of Their Heretical Customs

Tamás Iványi

INTRODUCTION

The full name of the author is Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad al-‘Abdarī al-Fāsī al-Mālikī, who became famous under the name of Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ.¹ He was of Arab origin, showed by his attribution to the Banū ‘Abd al-Dār tribe. He may have been born around 1258, in Fez, Morocco and died in Cairo, in 1336/7. He arrived to Cairo before 1299 since he occupied the place in the instruction of his earstwhile master, Abū Muḥammad b. al-Jamra who had died in 1299. That means that he lived at least 40 years, about half of his life, in Cairo, which made possible for him to obtain a wide range of knowledge about the everyday life and customs of the inhabitants of Cairo.²

His *opus magnum* under study in this paper is the *Madkhal al-shar‘ al-sharīf ‘alā l-madhāhib*: „Introduction to Islamic Jurisprudence According to the Schools of Law”.³ It consists of four volumes of which the first two contain unordered themes concerning the unlawful and harmful customs and rituals of the Cairene population, both men and women.⁴ The third and fourth volumes contain also a large set of unorganised themes of descriptive and prescriptive but not always critical character, e.g., the questions of the jihād, and even such themes of the handicrafts as book copists and illustrators.⁵ Not surprisingly, the *Madkhal* also discusses a wide scale of different Ṣūfī topics since Ibn al-

1 Many authors dealing with Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ confused him with Abū Muḥammad al-‘Abdarī, the author of an itinerary of his Meccan pilgrimage. See, e.g., Adil Salahi, “Scholar of Renown – Ibn Al-Hajj Al-Abdari”, Arab News 2002. 07. 15. According to Carl Brockelmann: “al-‘Abdarī, Muḥammad b. Muḥammad”, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. M. Houtsma et al. 1st ed. I, 68. Leiden, Brill. 1913, he may have been the father of our author and that is the cause of his being named “the son of the pilgrim”.

2 About his life, see Niḍāl Ḥamid Sa‘īd – Muḥammad ‘Alī Ḥusayn: “Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ al-‘Abdarī (737 H.) – dirāsa fi siratihi.” *Majallat Diyālā* 66 (2015) 605–622. Cf. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur (GAL)* S II. 95.

3 I used the Cairo edition, Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, no date, no editor. Brockelmann wrongly characterised Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ as a theologian and the *Madkhal* as a theologian work, Brockelmann, GAL, *ibid*.

4 These themes are shortly touched in an earlier paper by Maryta Espéronnier: “La sunna du sacrifice: les recommandations d’Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ al-‘Abdarī.” *Revue des Études Islamiques* 50 (1982): 251–255. However, I did not find mention in the literature about the severe criticism of Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ on the behaviour and activities of the women of Cairo in his time.

5 See Giovanni Canova: “Considerazioni di Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ sull’etica di lavoro di cartai, copisti, rilegatori e decoratori di libri (XIV secolo)”, *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* N.S. 3 (2008): 219–236.

Hājj himself also was a Ṣūfī, although one who considered the severe observance of the ordinances of the Islamic Law a prerequisite of the mystical life.⁶

The *Madkhal* is similar in its critical intention to Ibn Taymiyya's *lqīdā' al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* ('Following The Straight Path').⁷ The difference of substance between the two is that while Ibn Taymiyya's work summerizes in an orderly way his objections to the refutable customs of the Egyptian Muslims without giving detailed informations, Ibn al-Hājj in his *Madkhal* fully describes each wrongdoings of the Egyptians in an unsystematic and casual way.⁸ He had arrived to Cairo when he had been in his thirties and watched their manners and customs closely and criticised them in detail in this new society in which he not only lived but also acted as a teacher and preacher. Ibn al-Hājj wanted first of all to teach by way of showing what is objectionable and what is acceptable by the Islamic law in his view. He says: „God obliged the scholars to teach.“ (*Madkhal* I. 11).⁹

However, he does not judge the invalid and harmful innovations of men and women in Egypt signs of infidelity (*kufr*), since he found that their intentions were good and according to the teaching of Islam it is the most important element of every ritual: „Imām Mālik b. Anas said: Do you not see that the adorer of God and the adorer of the pagan idols are of the same kind, the difference being that the first is religious devotion while the second is infidelity by intention (*niyyatan*).“¹⁰ (*Madkhal* I. 8)

In the following pages I try to quote the most interesting condemnatory descriptions and remarks of the author. The parts relating to women are limited mainly to the first two volumes of the four volume *Madkhal*. It is important to note that his criticism of the behaviour and customs of the women always starts from the incorrect and unlawful conducts first of the religious scholars and then the husbands who should be responsible for the correct behaviour of their wives.

6 See e.g., Aḥmad Ṣubḥī Maṣṣūr: "Fuqahā' al-taṣawwuf: Ibn al-Hājj al-'Abdarī mithālan", *al-Hiwār al-Mutamaddin* 6401 (2019), Baghdad. Cf. Li Guo: "Doctrinal anxiety and social reality regarding music and dance in Mamluk Cairo. Ibn al-Hājj on al-samā', to sing or not: the case against music", in: Jamal J. Elias, Bilal Orfali (eds.), *Light upon light: essays in Islamic thought and history in honor of Gerhard Böwering*. Brill, Leiden, 2019.

7 Ed. by Nāsir b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-'Aql. Dār Ishbiliyā, Riyād, 1998. On the general anti-innovation character of the *Madkhal*, see Nick Chatrath: *Tradition and innovation in the Mamluk period: The anti-bid'a literature of Ibn al-Hājj (d. 737/1336) and Ibn al-Naḥḥās (d. 814/1411)*. Dissertation, University of Oxford, 2013. In spite of their differences both of them represent what is called 'inter-communal antagonism'. See Lewicka, Paulina: "Did Ibn al-Hājj copy from Cato? Reconsidering aspects of inter-communal antagonism of the Mamluk period", in: Stephan Conermann (ed.), *Ubi sumus? Quo vademus? Mamluk studies, state of the art*. 231-261. Bonn University Press, Goettingen, 2013.

8 Cf. Espéronnier, Maryta: "La sunna du sacrifice: les recommandations d'Ibn al-Hāgg al-'Abdarī." *Revue des Études Islamiques* 50 (1982): 251-255.

9 Chatrath, 2013, 94 deals with this question in detail and says: „I will argue that Ibn al-Hājj's *Madkhal* was intended for students“. Cf. Fawziyya 'Uthmān 'Assāf al-Ghāmīdī: "al-Ādāb at-tarbawīyya al-mustanbiṭa min kitāb li-Ibn al-Hājj al-'Abdarī", *Majalla 'Ilmiyya Muḥkama*, Jāmi'at al-Azhar, 39 (2018), 44-85, and see also, 'Abd al-Laṭīf b. 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Rabāh: "Ādāb al-mu'allim 'inda Ibn al-Hājj al-'Abdarī fi kitāb al-Madkhal", *Majallat al-'Ulūm al-Insāniyya wal-Ijtimā'iyya*, Jāmi'at al-Imām Muḥammad Ibn Sa'ūd al-Islāmiyya, 7 (2008), 62-121, and Khālid b. Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Tuwaym: "al-Ārā' al-tarbawīyya li-Ibn al-Hājj al-'Abdarī min khilāl kitābihi al-Madkhal", *Majallat al-Qirā'a wal-Ma'rifa*, Jāmi'at 'Ayn Shams, Cairo 94 (2009) 154-171.

10 In some MS of the *Madkhal* the word "intention" is in the title of the book: *Kitāb al-Madkhal ilā tanmiyat al-ā'māl bi-taḥsīn al-niyyāt* ('The Book of Introduction to the Furtherance of the Actions by Improvement of the Intentions'). It is also mentioned in the preface of the author, *Madkhal* I. 6.

1. ON WOMEN'S CLOTHES

The *Madkhal* speaks about women of imperfect intelligence and religion who make heretic innovation in their clothes, which, accordingly, do not correspond to the prescriptions of any authentic legal source.

The root of the problem lies in the fact, according to our author, that these clothes which contradict the *sunna* are allowed for them by the religious scholars, their husbands and their environment in general, although the aforementioned constituents of the Muslim society should have influenced these women to return to the dressing code required by the rules of Islam, giving up wearing tight and short costumes prohibited by the *sharī'a*. This tightness of the garments allows to perceive the shoulders and the breasts and other body parts of the women. "Their gowns (*qamīs*) just reach to the knees and if they bend down or sit down or stand up their pudenda will appear from under their gowns. They think it is sufficient to wear pantalons (*sirwāl*) instead of long gowns." (*Madkhal* I. 241) The author, however, notes that it would only be sufficient if their pantalons covered their umbilici, too, but such is not always the case. From the umbilicus to the knee nothing has to be seen not even before other women. Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ makes severe prescriptions with regard to the women's clothes: The gown must be enough thick-woven for not to allow the female body to be seen through it and not to be transparent.¹¹ Some women take on this pantalon only when they go out of the house and in the house they do not wear any underwear. This custom can only be accepted if there is nobody in the house except for their husbands. But, the author notes sorrowfully, they do not wear their pantalon when sitting down with legs spread apart even if a slave or a prohibited member of the family¹² enters the house and this is against the divine law, since the whole female body is considered *'awra* (pudendum or 'private parts'). (*Madkhal* I. 242)

The *Madkhal* also condemns the headgears (turbans, *'amā'im*) of the Cairene women because, first, they resemble those of the men and second, they show more of their head and hair than it would be prudent and in this way the women raise the desire of the strange men in the streets. "Besides the women keep their heads high haughtily and proudly, not bowing humbly and modestly as it is prescribed by the books of law. They walk in the streets in strutting gait and allow their hair to break down and make in this harmful way the ordinary housewives look like the whores." In this regard the author emphasises the responsibility of the religious scholars whose duty would be to teach the women and their husbands the right way of dressing and prevent the heretic customs. "In contrast, however, they allow their own wives the same disgusting (*makrūḥ*) clothes and behaviour." "These women are seemingly dressed, but they are nude in reality because of wearing thin garments under which their parts of body appear." (*Madkhal* I. 242) "The women let their hair loose and lowered without the obligatory plaits and locks." (*Madkhal* I. 243)

11 Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ refers here to the Qur'ān, XXIV/31: „Tell the believing women ... to guard their private parts and to show those of their ornaments that normally appear and to draw their coverings over the openings in their garments ...". The Qur'ān, translated into English by Alan Jones, Gibb Memorial Trust, Exeter, 2007. Note that I consider the word *zīna* here as similar to or part of the *'awra* and not simply 'ornament'. The author also mentions here a *ḥadīth* of Mālik about the Caliph 'Umar who prohibited wearing the *qabāḍi* for the women, a very popular garment woven in Egypt that time, because it was too transparent.

12 It is my translation for the *mahārim*, family members who could not be potential husbands of a woman.

Our author, however, defends the rights of the husbands as well: "They (the women) wear the turban (even in the house) in a way to cover their eyebrows by its edge, distorting their faces. The beauty of the woman is in her face and so she prevents his husband to enjoy her beauty. ... Her skin becomes accustomed to the covering and she does not wash her face fearing of hurting it. It is a grave sin." (*Madkhal* I. 243)

Our author also considers the religious scholars obliged to prevent the women from widening the sleeves of their garments, since the wide and short sleeves, in lifting their arms, allow to show their form and obesity and even the shape of their breasts can be seen by strangers. Some women play up their charms and show themselves pretty in front of strange men although this is allowed only in the house and for their husband. Sometimes a woman, wearing short gown without pantalon stands on the roof of the house and let the wind raise her the sleeves of her gown showing her private parts almost naked for the men in the street contrary to the Divine law which prescribes the total covering. (*Madkhal* I. 244)

2. THE PROPER BEHAVIOUR OF WOMAN OUTSIDE HER HOUSE

Ibn al-Hājj demonstrates his anger perhaps more towards the Cairene religious scholars of the time than towards women: "It should be their responsibility to teach the *sunna* for the women as well as their husbands and explain to them what is the proper dressing code for the women in going out of the house, if it (i.e., the going out) seems at all necessary." According to him, when the woman leaves her house her dress serves as a tent so that "she draws her outer garment (*mirt*) behind her", that is, it not only covers totally her body but also reaches the ground. (*Madkhal* I. 244) She should walk close to the walls of the houses, not in the middle of the street, so that the men should not be obliged to step aside avoiding the clash with her. Her husband must walk beside her to defend her. The woman should wear a simple garment not to call the attention of strange men. Although this is the prescription of the *sunna*, says the author, women in Cairo, contrarily, follow bad customs: They put on their most beautiful gowns dressing like brides and walk in the middle of the street, so that men would be forced to evade them or go beside the walls. Or, what is even worse than that, the women mix with the men in moving on the street in a great crowd. The men, on the other hand, frequently bump intentionally into women ignoring the *sunna*. (*Madkhal* I. 245)

3. ON WOMEN GOING OUT TO BUY CLOTHES FOR THEMSELVES

In this sub-chapter Ibn al-Hājj expresses his detailed opinion on the purchase of women's clothes. According him this task falls on the husband if he possesses sufficient knowledge. If he does not, he must turn to someone who may be considered an expert in the women's clothes. It is essential, however, that no woman may be allowed to go out to the shops since it leads to several unlawful consequences, such as sitting in the cloth merchants' and the jewellers' shops for a long time, chatting with the shopkeepers as if they were their husbands. "They do not keep the necessary distance with the men in the shops as regulated by the *ḥadīṭ sharīf*: 'Make separation between the breaths of the women and the breaths of the men!'" (*Madkhal* I. 245) The author continues his desperate complaints:

“How would it be possible to accept without contradiction this direct contact between women and men, the free talks, the joyful laughters and joking – they commit these sins without the slightest shame. All these are the consequences of the licentious behaviour of the women. According to an (unnamed) pious ancestor (*salaf*) a woman may leave her house only in three occasions: When she is brought to the house of her husband (after the marriage, *zifāf*), when her parents die and finally when she will be brought to her grave. How far fall these sinful and harmful women from the ideal of the Sacred Law of Islam! The biggest problem lies in the fact that they do not attach importance to their bad habits since they have no idea about the right way of behaviour, and what is more, their husbands either have no idea about it.”

Ibn al-Ḥājj also accuses the husbands for not being jealous of their wives, although a Prophetic tradition says that jealousy forms part of the belief.¹³ He states that the husband who is not jealous resembles the customs of the Franks whose wives sell and buy in the shops, always going about in the streets while their husbands stay at home waiting humbly for them to return home. It falls in the category of imitating ‘the people of the book’ (*ahl al-kitāb*), which is strictly prohibited by Islamic law. (*Madkhal* I. 246)

4. ON DWELLING IN HOUSES ON THE RIVER NILE¹⁴

The author demands from the religious scholars to prohibit dwelling in these houses because of being harmful and forbidden for several reasons. First of all, the Prophet Muḥammad prohibited dwelling and sitting along the public routes or staying there for a long time and the river being similar to a route the prohibition also applies to it. There is an unceasing traffic on the river: boats move and people bathe in it so that they and even their private parts could be seen from these houses. It is prohibited even for men, not to mention women. On the one hand, on the river banks there are boats with musicians and singers in them and to listen to their music is also counted sinful by the author. On the other hand, women are accustomed to sit in the (open) windows (*tāqa*) of their house boats with uncovered faces watching the riverside events and attracting the attention of men which leads to different kinds of sinful acts, such as gazes and talks. Another harm is caused by the women’s tempting dressing and bespangling themselves with jewellery when they go out of these houses to walk on the riverbank in consequence of which they may be approached wrongfully by some men and this may cause debate and discord between such a man and the husbands of the women. (*Madkhal* I. 247-8)

¹³ „The jealousy of the husband is belief while the jealousy of the wife is unbelief.” The known *ḥadīth* collections do not contain this tradition, but it occurs in the *Nahj al-balāgha*, attributed to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, *ḥikma* 124. See ed. Dashtī, Qum 1987, 162. It may seem strange that a Shi‘i tradition generally refused by the Sunnite scholars was accepted by the Sunnite author.

¹⁴ Though the author does not use the word ‘*awwāma* (‘floating house boat’) the text unequivocally refers to a same type of house which is known in today’s Giza.

5.ON VISITING THE TOMBS IN THE CEMETERY

Ibn al-Ḥājj considers the greatest error committed by the Egyptian women their frequent visitations to the tombs of Ṣūfī saints and eminent religious scholars such as Imām al-Shāfi'ī. "Their husbands and the religious scholars should have to prevent this bad custom and prohibit visiting the cemetery even if to the tombs of their close relatives. The *sunna* of the Islam unequivocally orders women not to attend even the funerals not to mention the tombs." According to a tradition of the Prophet, quoted by the *Madkhal*, women are excluded from the funerals because they do not execute useful tasks during the funeral: They do not bring the dead to the cemetery, do not wash the corpse,¹⁵ do not put him into the grave and do not throw earth over his coffin.¹⁶ (*Madkhal* I. 250)

Our author, however, is a judicious and truth-loving scholar therefore he presents ordinances of the other schools of religion, too, which contradict his prohibition.¹⁷ He says (*Madkhal* I. 251): "There are three different opinions with regard to the participation of women in the funeral. First, those of the respected ancestors (*salaf*) which prohibit it categorically. Second, those legal opinions which permit their participation – although it refers only to their (past) time when the behaviour and the customs of the women were orderly and respectful unlike in our time. Third, there are jurists who hesitate in their decision between prohibition and permission, some permitting the participation for elderly women but not for the younger ones."

The wrongdoings of the women are even graver, the author states (*Madkhal* I. 267), during their travel to the cemetery and back to their homes. They rarely walk, instead they ride donkeys driven by hired donkey drivers. The drivers may touch the women, grasping their arms or putting their hands on their thighs when they help them to mount the donkey and to dismount them. One of the wrong customs during riding is that the woman puts her hand on the shoulder of the driver, although her hands are uncovered. What is more, the women talk to the drivers, joking and saying playful words as if they were their husbands. Furthermore, the most shocking thing is that the husbands are present during all this not saying a word against these abnormal phenomena or not rebuking their wives, although, as it was mentioned earlier by the author, they should be jealous according to the Islamic law.

Then Ibn al-Ḥājj summarises in three points the harmful activities of the women during the visitation of the tombs: "First, they go out to the tombs at night when under the cover of the darkness they meet many men while their faces are uncovered as if they were together with their husbands alone in their houses. Moreover, in the cemetery there are houses and hidden holes in the ground where men of bad will can hide.¹⁸ Second, these women talk to strange men, loudly laughing, joking and singing with them – as I noted earlier – in a place where there might be only silence and humble behaviour as a tribute to the dead persons. They do not take into consideration that the tomb is the

15 This is contradicted by 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī, the author of the famous *Mīzān* ("Balance", i.e., between the four schools) stating that the wife is obliged to wash the corpse of her husband, I, 238. Cairo 1862.

16 See Yūsuf al-Bahrānī: *al-Ḥadā'iq al-nādira fī ahkām al-'itra al-tāhira*, IV. 84. Beirut 1985.

17 All this in the sense of the subtitle of the book: *According to the Schools of Law*. According to *al-Mawsū'a al-fiqhiyya*, Kuwait 1989, XVI. 15ff, the *ḥanafī* and *ḥanbalī* schools absolutely prohibit the participation of women in the funeral, while the *shāfi'ī* school considers it reprehensible (*makrūh*) but not forbidden (*ḥarām*). As for the *mālikī* school, their opinion is told in detail by the *Madkhal*.

18 It is a special feature of the Qarāfa cemetery in Cairo.

first station in the after-life. Here the visitors should show fear and sorrow as opposed to their actual attitudes. Third, this manner of conduct would be wrongful even in daytime, not to mention that they do all this at night. Fourth, they build pulpits (*minbar*) among the tombs as a sinful innovation (*bid'a*), where men and women ascend it to preach and tell false stories in moonlit nights, like the lying storytellers in the mosques and in front of it." (*Madkhal* I. 268)

6. ON VISITATIONS ON THE DIFFERENT DAYS OF THE WEEK

As Ibn al-Ḥājj states sorrowfully and angrily, there are other heretic innovations of the women in Cairo: "They begin their visitations to the tombs of the friends of God ('saints') Friday to ask for their mediation at God to reach their goals, such as bearing sons. This is, of course, against the religion of Islam which states that 'there is no mediation in Islam' (*lā šafā'a fī l-dīn*). Then they expanded these customs to Monday visiting the Mosque of Sayyidunā Ḥusayn, while every Tuesday and Saturday they go to the Mosque of al-Sayyida Nafisa, then Thursday again to the Qarāfa cemetery, their main target being the Mosque of Imām al-Šāfi'ī.

The jealous husbands accompany their wives but notwithstanding they allow strangers to talk to their wives and even touch them in their presence. This means great trouble and disaster. Sometimes, however, the husband gets angry and a discussion develops between the husband and a strange man which may lead to brawl and then the governor will be sent for to enter into the fight. Thus the fighters may end up in the court and sometimes in the prison. And all this happens in consequence of the wrongful behaviour of the women and the unexplainable permissiveness of their husbands. They should play the role of the leader and guide in the family."

The author also criticise the manner in which the husbands handle the accompaniment of their wives in going out of the house. They rarely make company to their wives in the street but as they do not dare to allow them to go out alone they send with them young boys or slave girls or older women. But this does not make the situation better for the women, since strange men who dare not approach lonely women may easily try to join a woman accompanied by others. The source of the troubles originates from the shame of some men to accompany their wives in the street or when they do it they do not go beside them or behind them but they walk far ahead of them, so they cannot perceive in time what happens to their wives and cannot prevent any dissension or strife which would break out around their wives. (*Madkhal* I. 269-270)

7. ON WOMEN VISITING THEIR HOUSES AT THE LAKE (BIRKA AZBAKIYYA)

The author gives voice again to his opinion that religious scholars and husbands should prevent women to go out to their (summer) houses at the lake, since it causes trouble and harm. First, their riding donkeys causes harms which were already discussed, Ibn al-Ḥājj says. Second, they go to their houses in their best clothes, decorated and scented and mixing with men. Some women wash their clothes in the lake while there are men in their proximity watching them. The same applies to their sitting in the windows and roofs of the houses. (*Madkhal* I. 270)

“All this happens during the so called spring festival (*al-khaḍīr*), too.¹⁹ At that time of the year it is especially dangerous for women to walk around the lake, because the lakeside is the favourite place for the men to ramble and watch the women. They do not lower their gaze when glancing at the women sitting in the windows or on the roof, not hiding their external appearance. There are singers and musicians on the lakeside who lure the heart of men and women alike and what they hear and see might make harm and break the connection between wife and husband.” (*Madkhal* I. 271)

Another excess what Ibn al-Ḥājj finds in the conduct of the women is their spending much time in the garden quarter (*basāṭīn*) of the city where many families have encircled fields. The trouble is according to the author that these places cannot ensure coverage for the women and strangers may also enter these premises.

The author mentions another popular amusement of the population: travelling on the river Nile from Cairo to the Qanāṭīr. This, of course, is also disapproved by him considering it dangerous for the women. Beside the previously described harms he mentions the danger caused by the presence of thieves and other brigands both during the trip and at the place of the excursion. The women, not accompanied by her husbands, may get mixed with strangers, men or women, who speak to them and enchant them with their words and tales and the next moment not only the stranger but the woman’s jewels disappear. In an even worse case she may be killed during these encounters with strangers.

8. ON PARTICIPATION AT THE MAḤMAL FESTIVAL

The husbands should prevent their wives to be present and watch the unlawful events of the Maḥmal, i.e., the preparation of the camel which brings a *hawdaġ* (a kind of covered litter) from Egypt to Mecca accompanying the caravan of the Egyptian pilgrims.²⁰ The main part of the preparations consists of the so called *dawarān* (‘circulation’) when the camel, together with its procession, is led in circles ceremonically in a small place densely crowded with people. There are shops around this place²¹ decorated with silk canvas where the women enter and sit down looking around and seeing forbidden things, for instance pictures on these canvases. Outside the shops there are benches with silk shades over them. Our author considers sinful to sit under them from several causes: women and men are mixing there and anyhow, the use of silk as a dear material is prohibited by Islamic law. At the night of the Maḥmal men and women, mixed, go out to the street in their best garments. Sometimes they visit far away mosques bringing with them candle-lights unnecessarily wasting money which is also forbidden by law. (*Madkhal* I. 272-275)

¹⁹ He may have referred to the *nawrūz* or *nowruz* festival without mentioning this name.

²⁰ Edward William Lane notes that “almost all travellers have given erroneous accounts of the Maḥmal, some asserting ... that it contains the covering which is to be suspended round the Kaabeh. Burckhardt ... describes it as a mere emblem of the royalty.” 440. The Maḥmal itself is described by Lane in 437-9: *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, London, John Murray, 1860.

²¹ According to Lane, 1860, 481, this place is situated in the Khān al-Khalīlī bazaar.

9. ON GATHERING OF WOMEN AMONG THEMSELVES FOR SPREADING BAD INNOVATORY HABITS

Ibn al-Hājj states that the religious scholars should prevent the gatherings of the women since they spread false teachings and superstitious views concerning the religion. Women if they have questions in connection with religious matters should turn first to their husbands and then to the scholars. But they feel ashamed to visit the scholars either in their houses or in the mosques therefore they seek information from the wives of the scholars or from each other. This results in the transmission of false information and bad customs. Some of the different ceremonies performed by women according to these condemnable customs relate to the days of the week or days of the festivals. For instance, to buy milk on the night of the First of Muḥarram month is considered a good omen and it means that the whole year will be favourable (*bayḍā'*) for the family. It is criticised by the author from two points of view: First, this custom is a heretic innovation (*bid'ā*), since it was not followed by the pious ancestors of Islam (*salaf*). Second, it is invalid (*bāṭil*), because the *sharī'a* does not acknowledge good omens. "Even worse is their custom – Ibn al-Hājj says indignantly – to open the Qur'ān (*muṣḥaf*) and to find good signs for the future in the line on which the gaze falls first." (*Madkhal* I. 277-8)

He also considers as scandalous that the women do not buy fish on Saturday and do not eat fish and even they refuse to bring fish into the house on this day, since there are no such prescriptions in the Islamic law: "God permitted the Muslims to eat fish any day they want to". The author regards these customs not only invalid but also as the result of the influence of their Jewish neighbours. "Another improper custom of theirs is that they presume that they are not allowed to go to the bath on Saturday. If their menstruation ceases on Saturday they do not pray on this day and they do not buy soap or any other detergent and do not wash their clothes on the next evening following the Jewish prescriptions." (*Madkhal* I. 278)

Then, he says, it becomes even worse, since on Sunday the women follow the Christian customs, thus they do not work on the forenoon of Sunday and on Sunday itself. They do not stop here, however, and they expand the different unlawful prohibitions and permissions for the other days of the week, too. They think that on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday everything is permitted to do what they choose to. But they believe that their bad customs of Saturday must also be followed on Wednesday and they do not buy milk, do not bring milk into their houses and do not eat milk. On Friday they do not weave and spin imitating the Christians' Sunday, although this kind of prohibitions connected with the sacred character of Friday is forbidden in Islam.²² (*Madkhal* I. 279)

Another unlawful prohibition is, says Ibn al-Hājj, that the women do not allow to bring fire or dishes out of the house after the supper. They exaggerate this prohibition so much so that if the candlelight is still on fire when a visitor comes to bring light from it they do not allow him to bring the fire out of the house. If, however, it seems absolutely necessary to give him fire they feel obliged that the candlelight should be ignited three times and

22 As is stated in a *ḥadīth*: "*man tashabbaha bi-qawmin fa-huwa minhum*", "whoever imitates a (group of) people he becomes one of them", where the 'people' means according to the interpretations 'a different religious community'. See Ibn Dāwud, *Sunan*, VI, 144, no. 4031. Ed. Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūt – Muḥammad Kāmil Qarabullī, Damascus, Dār al-Risāla al-'Ālamiyya, 2009.

put out three times and the visitor is given the fire only the fourth time. This custom was known to Ibn Rushd (the Grandfather), too, but he also refuted its validity.²³

“The women follow another superstitious and prohibited custom: If one of them wants to use a sieve, she first puts in it a stone or a similarly heavy object to expel an evil omen (*tīra*) or evil eye. All these condemnable customs have been taken over from the ‘protected peoples’ (dhimmī). That’s why it has always been forbidden to dwell in their neighbourhood.”²⁴ (*Madkhal* I. 280)

Ibn al-Ḥājj describes, among other things, an interesting Egyptian practice. On the morning when the Sun enters the constellation of the Capricorn men, women and youngsters, relatives and strangers, gather outside their residential quarter in the gardens and look for a kind of vegetable known as *karkīsh* (probably a variety of chamomile). They cut it out from their places with golden and silver jewelleries. In the meanwhile the women are murmuring incomprehensible foreign words which may mean infidelity (*kufri*) according to the author. They make from these herbs flat surfaces coloured with crocus and put them into a box. They believe that it multiplies the goods in the house where it is put and they will become rich in that year and poverty will evade them. This custom and belief are so widely spread among the population that these are even mentioned in some scientific books and are not refused as false. Moreover, these are of Coptic origin. What makes it more harmful is that they ruin their valuable jewelleries by using them for cutting herbs. The whole operation is dangerous, too, because among the herbs there may be vipers. (*Madkhal* I. 281)

10. ON INNOVATIONS DURING THE FEAST OF ‘ĀSHŪRĀ’

As we saw in the previous chapters Ibn al-Ḥājj complains most of all about women because of their visitation of tombs in their most ornate and fanciest clothes which do not cover their whole bodies, when they are mixed with strange men. It happens on occasion of the feast of ‘Āshūrā’ as well. At this occasion, however, they include some of the most famous mosques, too, in their ‘visiting tour’, like the mosque of the Imām al-Shāfi‘ī beside the cemetery. (*Madkhal* I. 286)

He also scorns women because of the extreme usage of henna. They think that not to grease their limbs with henna equals with not celebrating ‘Āshūrā’ at all. Another interesting custom of the women on this day, but naturally condemned by Ibn al-Ḥājj as wrong and pointless, is that they swingle the flax fibers, then unfold them to dry up so that they can weave them to make linen from them. When it is done, they whiten the linen on the same day of ‘Āshūrā’ and bring it to the cemetery to sew from it a shroud. They think that the two angels, Nakīr and Munkar, who examine the dead in their graves as to their faith, cannot enter the grave which is covered with this shroud. Our author also considers the fumigation on that day a bad innovation: “Whoever does not use the fumigator is regarded

23 Ibn Rushd al-Jadd, Abū l-Walīd Muḥammad: *Fatāwā*. Ed. al-Mukhtār b. al-Tāhir al-Talī, Beirut, Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1987, 931.

24 Although many Christians converted to Islam during his stay in Cairo allegedly under the influence of the Friday khutba, Ibn al-Ḥājj thought that they had preserved their previous bad customs and so they have negative influence on their Muslim neighbours. See Jones, Linda G.: “Islām al-kāfir fī ḥāl al-khutba: concerning the conversion of “infidels” to Islam during the Muslim Friday sermon in Mamluk Egypt”, *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* 42 i (2012): 53-75.

guilty in a great sin since fumigation is an obligatory tradition among them for which they save money throughout the year to buy fumigators and frankincense. They seek blessing by the fumigation and they fumigate the whole first day of the 'Āshūrā' until the second day comes. They think the fumigation defends against illness, the evil eye and every trouble. They also think that if a prisoner uses the fumigator in his prison on this day he will be soon be freed from the prison. These are dangerous and false thoughts because they are not based on the Divine Law but they figured them out." (*Madkhal* I. 291)

11. ON THE BAD HABITS OF THE WOMEN ON THE 14TH OF SHA'BĀN (NIṢF SHA'BĀN) (MADKHAL I. 308-312)

On this sacred day the men together with their wives and small children gather in the mosque staining and smearing it. "What is more horrible is that on this evening the women go to the tombs of saints in great crowd equipped with drums and trambourines. Some of them are beating the drums while some others are singing. And all this in the dwellings of the dead in the presence of men and even religious scholars. The husbands see all this but they pretend not to take notice of it and do not deny their wives these wrongdoings. They think that their visiting the tombs serves the reverence of God. Unveiled women, as on similar occasions, are mixing with men not covered with *galabiyya* and they are returning to the city in this way. The women only veil their faces when arrived at the city. This is also believed by them to be a religious duty – not to be veiled at the tombs."

At night women and men return to the *zāwiyas* beside the cemetery with lighting devices. They call that night 'the night of the *maḥyā'* ('coming to life'). Outside the *zāwiya* giant tents are built because the crowd is so great that they do not fit inside. However, it contradicts the *sunna*, since this causes harms both for the living and for the dead. The dead suffer even more from the noise and tumult than the living. They already belong to the House of God (*dār al-ḥaqq*) therefore these heretic customs immensely disturb them.

12. ON EATING AND FASTING IN RAMAḌĀN ²⁵

This chapter bears the title "Some habits taken by some Muslim women which lead to the violation of some religious duties" (*Madkhal* II. 60). The most important remarks in it relate to eating and fasting of some women during the month of Ramaḍān. "One of these unlawful habits for which there is no excuse is that an obese woman fearing that she would lose weight by fasting, eats during Ramaḍān. The same happens with some girls whom their families feed during fasting ensuring not to lose weight and beauty (which are important factors in finding a bridegroom). Wives, whose husbands had already entered into the marriage contract but the consummation did not happen, do not dare to fast fearing that their weigh would decrease (and it may lead to the termination of the contract). All these habits are prohibited by the four legal schools without disagreement.

²⁵ See Marion Holmes Katz: "Fattening up in fourteenth-century Cairo: Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ and the many meanings of overeating", *Annales Islamologiques / Hawliyat Islāmīyah* 48 i (2014): 31-53.

Whoever does this is obliged to repent for every day she missed fasting during Ramaḍān. The penance (*kaffāra*) is to fast two consecutive months or to liberate a Muslim slave or to feed sixty paupers.”

“Another kind of sin which these women frequently commit is that they do not stop fasting during Ramaḍān (against the prescription of the law) when they begin to menstruate. Some eat when their menstruation begins for three days then they continue fasting instead of following the law: suspending fasting and after the menstruation ended compensating for the days left out of the month. Instead they complain that they could not fast when everybody is eating. ... Even those who keep the *sunna* and eat during their menstruation think that they will be given reward (from God) if they eat only some dates or the like – but it is a bad innovation and they become sinful by following it.”

13. ON PARTICIPATION IN THE CHRISTIAN FESTIVALS (MADKHAL II. 54FF)

There are especially four Christian feasts in which the participation of Muslim men and women is considered the most loathful custom of all by Ibn al-Ḥājj. First of all, he writes that the Muslims do not only participate in them among the crowd of Christians but some of them celebrate these feasts even in their privacy in the houses.

The first of these Christian feasts is the Maundy Thursday or Holy Thursday (*khamīs al-‘ads*), in which some Muslims, mainly women, take part and do unnecessary things during it. The women, for instance, go out to buy incense for the fumigation and different kind of rings like the Coptic women. On this day there are more women in the bazaars than men who can hardly move there from the crowds of women. If a husband tries to prevent his wife from going out to buy these things on this day he causes heavy discussion and disturbance in the family, so finally he knuckles down and allows her to go out. The woman uses the fumigator for herself and for her husband. Then both of them make seven steps around it, shaking their hands and legs on it, then they spit on it believing that this defends them from the evil eye, negligence, sultriness of the body and illnesses. He or she who brings the fumigator speaks in an incomprehensible language which may be infidelity. All this can be conceived as the glorification of the feast of the people of the book and it hurts the *sunna* and is considered a great sin.

Another Christian feast is the Holy Saturday (*sabt al-nūr*) which is celebrated by Muslim women under the influence of their Coptic neighbours. Among other things, the author says, their dress is not allowed because they wear too short garments and go out unveiled. In addition to many other incorrect and sinful customs which have been described earlier the women do sorcery and charm on this day in the following way: The previous day they collected leaves from different kind of trees and shrubbaries, among them from the sweet basil, then put them into a vessel filled with water to wash them. After this they took out of the water what remained from the washing of the leaves and on the day of the feast they scatter it on the street in the hope that this will protect them from illnesses, skinniness, evil eye and negligence.

The third Christian feast in the celebration of which Muslims, and especially Muslim women traditionally take part is the feast of the Epiphany or Theophany (*mawsim al-ghitās*). Since the meaning of the word *ghitās* is “plunging into the water”, not astonishingly it was used not only for the baptism of Jesus but also, as Ibn al-Ḥājj knows the feast,

for the washing of the body of the Virgin Mary after she arose from her childbed (*nifās*).²⁶ That's why some Muslims, men and women, old and young, following the Coptic tradition, wash themselves on this night.

Finally, the fourth feast is called the Palm Sunday (*'īd al-zaytūniyya*). On this day, according to Ibn al-Ḥājj, the Copts travel to al-Maṭariyya not only from Cairo but also from many other towns. There is a well called the Well of the Balsam (*bi'r al-balsam*), which is very famous and everybody goes to it to wash in its water, which as they think has a healing effect. Now, the Muslims do the same thing, travelling there, rushing to the well and hoping the same balsamic effect as the Christians do. And during the washing the women are uncovered and even their pudenda appear, deeply offending Ibn al-Ḥājj.

CONCLUSION

Although through these passages we can have a look into the severe and strict views of a Mālikī jurist, who was at the same time a truthful and law abiding Ṣūfī, too, but the real significance of these descriptions lies in the fact that through the disapproval of the author we can have a glance into the everyday life of the average Cairene families, how they spend their pastime, what places they visit regularly and what are their customs. These descriptions can be regarded quite unique not only in the Mamluk age but throughout the Middle Ages.²⁷

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26 On the sanctification by Muslim women of the puerperium of Virgin Mary, see Sihām al-Dabbābī al-Maysāwī: *Muqāraba susiyūlūjiyya li-naṣṣ min kitāb al-Madkhal li-Ibn al-Ḥājj al-'Abdarī fī dhikr al-nifās wa-mā yaf'alu fīhi*, Doctoral dissertation, Kulliyat al-'Ulūm al-Insāniyya wal-Iḡtimā'iyya, Ġāmi'at Tunis 2010.

27 For the significance of Ibn al-Ḥājj descriptions, see Muḥāsīn Muḥammad 'Alī Ḥusayn al-Waqqād: „Ṣūrat al-mu-jtama' al-miṣrī zaman salāṭīn al-mamālik fī daw' kitāb al-Madkhal li-Ibn al-Ḥājj, 648-923 = 1250-1517", *Majallat al-Mu'arrikh al-Miṣrī, Jāmi'at al-Qāhira, Kulliyat al-Ādāb, Qism al-Tārīkh*, 34 (2009), 181-236.

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