



BOOK REVIEW

**PAUL M. LOVE, Jr. *The Ottoman Ibadis of Cairo: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). 236pp., \$105.55 cloth. ISBN: 9781009254267.**

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Paul M. Love, Jr.'s *The Ottoman Ibadis of Cairo* centers itself on the networks of Ibadi Muslims, mainly merchants and scholars, that lived and traveled in Cairo from roughly the seventeenth century to the early 1920s, and even slightly beyond. It uses a local Cairene institution, known as the *Wikālat al-Jamus*, the “Buffalo Agency,” as the focal point through which to organize and investigate these actors. Love’s book makes, to my mind, three very important and related interventions in the study of the Ibadīyya, as well as one larger point about religious minorities such as the Ibadīyya. First, by focusing on Cairo from the late medieval to early modern period it provides a history of Ibadis outside of the usual places (North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and Tanzania) and time periods (early medieval, or modern period) where studies on the Ibadīyya usually focus. Moreover, Love’s study takes seriously the transnational aspect of the Ibadi presence in Cairo, treating Ibadis as actors with multiple facets of identification, such as Maghrebi, Cairene, and Ottoman. And he is right to point out that the late medieval to early modern period is woefully understudied in the field of Ibadi Studies.

Second, his work highlights how the Ibadis of Cairo were fully engaged in the life of the city. As a minority within a majority, Love shows how Ibadis participated in virtually all aspects of political, commercial, legal, academic, and social life in Cairo. This approach can be contrasted with how many studies of the Ibadīyya, whether consciously or not, tend to silo Ibadis in specific geographical locations, whether it be the mountains of Oman, the island of Jerba, Tunisia, the Mزاب Valley of Algeria, or the Jebel Nafusa in Libya. Likewise, studies of the Ibadīyya have tended to examine intra-Ibadi concerns. How unique was this Ibadi involvement in the Ottoman daily life of Cairo? Love surmises that the depth of Ibadi involvement in the city was somewhat unique to Cairo in these periods, and that other Ibadi communities were perhaps less

connected. Nevertheless, Love's convincing portrait of an engaged community calls scholars (like myself) to question the assumed remoteness of our subjects. Thus, the medieval Ibadi scholar Abū Ya'qūb al-Wārjlānī (d. 570/1174), to whom is attributed the most well known (and probably the first) collection of Ibadi hadith, was said to have studied in medieval Cordoba. Also, there are reports of communities of Ibadis living throughout medieval Iberia. Could it have been possible that al-Wārjlānī, when he studied in medieval Cordoba, lived and moved among a community of Ibadi merchants and scholars not unlike that of the Ibadis of Cairo? Love's study opens up the possibility of researching networks of Ibadis, both modern and medieval, involved in unexpected locales.

Third, and comprising the central argument of the work, is how Love's book shows Ibadis as Ottomans. Building on the idea of Ibadis as a minority that participated fully in all aspects of Ottoman society in Cairo alongside the majority Sunnis, Love argues that scholars should consider the Ibadis of Cairo as Ottomans: they participated in the Ottoman shari'a courts; they attended al-Azhar alongside of their Sunni counterparts; they partook of the intellectual currents of the day. Reflecting the sources that Love uses, his study tends to draw attention to the complementary role of Ibadi merchants, religious scholars/students, and local dignitaries (18), but his evidence is convincing, especially when he draws upon court records to show how Ibadis operated seamlessly within the Ottoman court system (despite having a developed legal tradition of their own). Again, I suspect that Love's insights into the nature of Ibadi participation in the Ottoman Empire might find counterparts elsewhere in time and space. It is a testament to Love's research that he has opened our eyes to such possibilities.

There is a grander point to be made about religious minorities lurking in Love's study – one that I think he has not fully plumbed. In his introduction he touches on the work of Stephan Winters (12), noting how many administrators in the Ottoman Empire chose not to make an issue of Shi'i confessionalism in the day-to-day administration of their provinces, and saying how it is "likely" that the same was true for the Ibadis of Cairo. This point – and a larger point about religious confessionalism – I believe could have been made much more forcefully and louder. It is very easy to "see" examples of religious "sectarianism" when they show themselves through violence and conflict. Easier still is the tendency to posit confessional identities as fixed, durable, and eternal, and therefore to consider them as the drivers of conflict. What Love (and indeed, Winters) has done is to provide an example of communal affiliation as the complex, ever-shifting, ever-negotiated identification. Love isolates at least three levels of identification in the Ibadi community of Cairo: Ibadi, Maghrebi, and Ottoman. Moreover, his work has shown how these three levels intersect in important ways, with one or another coming to the fore as needed. Sometimes the communal affiliations matter, or are made to matter, and sometimes they do not. What Love's work seems to imply rather forcefully is that the case of the Ibadis of Cairo presents itself as one where the communal affiliation of "Ibadi" was present, but did not "matter" outside of very local contexts. It was, to use Haddad's terminology, an example of "banal" sectarianism. As such, Love's study represents something of a rarity: an example of

“sectarianism” that did not “matter” in the way that it is usually assumed to matter, and this is an important point that cannot be made enough, I think, in our current political environment.

*The Ottoman Ibadis of Cairo* remains an important contribution to the study of the Ibadiyya and to the burgeoning field of Ottoman Studies. Among other things, the narrative intimacy of its pages allows the reader a glimpse into the daily life of a religious minority in late medieval and early modern Cairo, a feature that stands as a testament to Love’s utilization of his sources. Scholars of the Ottoman Empire, early modernity, and Ibadism alike will find something captivating in its pages. From my own perspective, one of the joys of reading Love’s work lies in discovering the ways that it corrects and re-directs my own assumptions about Ibadis.