The Persistence of Jokes

And that is what it looks like when an Arabist starts joking about Arab jokes – jokingly funny! (Imagined jokes!)

My friends laughed and called me a «revolution tourist» – which wasn’t incorrect, since part of my reason for coming was to see what was happening up close. But the other reason, of course, was to visit the state archives to check on the status of my application. Last fall, I wrote up a vague proposal for research I intended to undertake on the inefficiencies of cotton pricing in the nineteenth-century. I submitted the proposal in triplicate: one to the head of the Ministry of Higher Education; one to the section of the Ministry of Culture which oversees the administration of the State Archives; and one to the head of the particular archive for which I sought permission. I was optimistic when I first submitted my application – not just because I had a foreign research institution backing me, but because my advisor had contacted the archives director and requested his assistance in expediting my request.

But now, after these last few months, I had begun to worry that my proposal might fall through the cracks. I examined in a wave of zealous post-revolution cleaning. It was only after I arrived for my visit that I discovered in store for me. He winked at me as pressed a button under his desk. When his secretary arrived, he told her to let me into the reading room and to make sure I was given whatever reference works I needed. He shook my hand vigorously, and I said I would back as soon as the permission came through. The next thing I knew, I was in the beautiful cool quiet of the reading room, looking through reference books.

Frankly, it was a letdown, though through no fault of the archive. I was simply not prepared to do “research” that day. Not surprisingly, I looked up things I had in store for me. He winked at me as pressed a button under his desk. When his secretary arrived, he told her to let me into the reading room and to make sure I was given whatever reference works I needed. He shook my hand vigorously, and I said I would back as soon as the permission came through. The next thing I knew, I was in the beautiful cool quiet of the reading room, looking through reference books. Or that it might be re-

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through the ministries. Before I arrived at “nizara,”
your eyes were struck by the citation of a complete
notebook on jokes, “nukat, with multiple files. My
handler was still at lunch, and so I decided to try my
luck with the assistants who were there. I requested
the first dossier seeing if they might deliver it.
I did not get to read the whole file, but here is
more or less what I could make out from them. Some
clarification is in order first. The text I was reading
was a translation of the original Ottoman Turkish,
the language of the state throughout this period. Like
other documents and files from this period, this was
a selection that was translated in 1922 by an Egyptian
clerk who maintained the elegance of the Ottoman
bureaucracy in the Arabic. This effendi did not just
translate the documents in the file I was reading, but
also summarized their contents in a lengthy intro-
ductionary report, which gave a brief historical overview
to the making of the file, the scope of its contents and
its importance. I translate them here into English:

“Since the beginning of his reign, the Pasha’s advi-
sors have pressed upon him the wisdom and perspec-
tivity of gauging public opinion. Censors scan newspa-
pers for meritorious praise and hints of dissent. They
read letters sent by and addressed to important men
which shed light onto the image of the ruler in the
lands of Egypt is transcribed and is thus read by
and scholars and leaders. All that is of significance in
the hands of Egypt is transcribed and is thus read by
our eyes, for consideration by our minds.…

“The [French] doctor advised that it was not
ever enough to survey merely what is written. True, it
is the spoken word, not the letter, which remains
dearest to people’s hearts. Officers and spies – the ears
and eyes of the state – are thus now sent out to cafes
to collect what is said among the common folk in the
cities and the provinces – unfounded gossip, trea-
cherous planning, idle chatter, nefarious scheming
and the like. As for the wandering reciters of ballads
and singers of the epic, not to mention the itinerant
puppeteers and story tellers: they claim only to repeat
what was handed down to them from time immem-
oral, but we know in actuality that they change their
tunes and stories to fit the times. We have recorded all
this and more.”

As far as I could gather, the spies soon found
themselves overwhelmed with this kind of work. The-
re was simply too much material. They soon decided
to ignore “idle chatter” and “unfounded gossip” on
the grounds that it was difficult to ascertain popular
will from such vague sources. They concentrated
instead on schemes and plans and also, interestingly,
the telling of jokes, which were collected by this same
network of government agents.

Sitting in the archive, my stomach rumbling with
hunger, I imagined this same anonymous Egyptian
effendi selecting, summarizing and translating the
best political jokes of the 1870s. His introduction
focused on the last years of that decade, when the
speculation, greed and corruption of the ruling class
provoked foreign interference and set in motion the
British occupation of the country. The corruption of
the era was so thick, you could smell the revolution
that was going to come. I imagined what this bu-
reaucrat was thinking about as he worked on the eve
of formal Egyptian independence, decades after the
events recorded in the registers. Most of the jokes he
summarized were about the nepotism of the Royal Fa-
nily, and the propensity of the sons of high officials
to use their privilege for ill-gotten gain. Here are some
jokes in that genre:

- A minister came home one day to find his son
  had purchased a chic new horse-drawn coach from
  Paris. The Minister asked, “Son, how did you buy
  this?” The son answered, “With my own money.”
  The father then asked how, since the son’s allowance
  would not cover such an extravagant expense as this.
  The son replied, “I paid for it from the allowance you
gave me, fair and square. You can check with the mer-
chant who sold me it.” The minister, disbelieving his
son, decided to visit the merchant. The man beamed
when he saw the Minister at the door of his shop and
invited him in. The minister asked him whether it was
true that his son had purchased the coach from him,
and the latter replied, “Of course, your Highness. And
what an honor it is for you to visit my humble store.
” The minister though for a moment, then asked, “Did
you pay him in cash, or in credit?” “Of course, your
Highness, he paid in cash, though his credit would
always be good with me.” The minister considered
the matter further. “How much did my son pay?” The
merchant laughed and twisted his moustaches. “Ahh,
sir, you are embarrassing me! I did give him a good
deal on it.” The minister demanded, “How much did

he pay then?” And after a long silence, the merchant
whispered, “Five pounds.” The minister thought for
a moment, then took out his checkbook and wrote a
check for ten pounds. Clapping his hands he barked,
“That’s a great price. I’d like to buy two more of the
same.”

- A Bey was walking in the desert and came upon
a magic lamp. He rubbed and rubbed and out came
a genie. “Your wish is my command!” roared the genie
to his new master. The Bey roared back, “No – your
wish is my command!”

- A Minister was walking in the desert and came
upon a magic lamp. He rubbed and rubbed and out
came a genie. “Your wish is my command!” said the
 genie to his new master. The Minister began listing
his wishes, when the genie stopped him. “Hold on,”
said the Minister, “Are you sure you want these? I just
did this list for your son yesterday.”

- The Khedive’s youngest son asked his father
for a palace. Being generous, the Khedive built one
for him in Alexandria. The son moved in with his family,
but not a month went by before he came back to his
father and complained, “We need a bigger palace, father.
That one is too small.” The father, who could never
fail to please his son, built him another palace, this
time in Aswan. Not a month went by before the son
came back to the father, “Father, this one seems even

smaller!” The Khedive scratched his head. “Son, I’ve
built you two lovely, spacious palaces—one at each
end of the country. What more can I do for you?” The
son thought for a moment and asked, “Here’s what
you can do for me – knock down the walls and build
add-ons until they connect!”

- A Pasha was walking in the desert and came
upon a magic lamp. He rubbed and rubbed and out
came his son. The Pasha asked, “What are you doing
in there?” “I’ve gone into business with the genie!” the
son laughed.

There were many more variations, each duly recor-
ded and categorized by genre. Not long after I finished
reading the jokes filed under the category of “jinn,”
the director burst into the room. The employees sud-
denly woke up and saluted their boss and his guest,
another professor visiting from abroad. I was not
surprised when the director introduced me in English
as his “disciple.” The three of us exchanged small talk
about research. The director asked me whether I had
had an interesting time, and I admitted I had. He then
called the assistants over to help me return the books I
had been perusing. He smiled and said he would soon
speak with the Minister of Higher Education and that
perhaps in two more months, God willing, my permis-
sion would come through. I promised I’d be in touch
as soon as I returned to the States.

Editions, Alger.

No 34

Editions, Alger.

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Über die SGMOIK / Sur la SSMOCI

Die SGMOIK will dazu beitragen, das Verständnis für die Kulturen und Gesellschaften Westasiens und Nordafrikas in unserem Lande zu fördern. Sie tut dies, indem sie den Dialog mit den mittelöstlichen und islamischen Nachbarkulturen pflegt und wissenschaftliches, publizistisches sowie künstlerisches Schaffen unterstützt.

Die SGMOIK verteilt sich als Forum für alle, die mit der Region Westasien/Nordafrika in irgendeiner Weise beruflich zu tun haben. Die Vermittlung zwischen der universitären wissenschaftlichen Forschung, den Medien, der Politik und der interessierten Öffentlichkeit ist ihr ein wichtiges Anliegen.

La SSMOCI a notamment pour but de favoriser, en Suisse, la connaissance des sociétés et civilisations du Moyen-Orient et d’Afrique du Nord. Elle poursuit, dans ce but, un dialogue avec les cultures de divers pays du Proche-Orient et du monde islamique et soutient des activités scientifiques, journalistiques et artistiques.

La SSMOCI se veut un lieu de rencontre et d’échanges pour tous ceux que l’activité professionnelle amène à travailler sur la zone Moyen-Orient/Afrique du Nord. Elle considère qu’elle a pour principale tâche de servir d’intermédiaire entre la recherche scientifique universitaire, les médias, la politique et un plus large public intéressé.

SGMOIK

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Ich möchte/wir möchten der Schweizerischen Gesellschaft Mittlerer Osten und Islamische Kulturen (SGMOIK) beitreten als:

Je souhaite/nous souhaitons adhérer à la Société Suisse Moyen Orient et Civilisation Islamique (SSMOCI) en qualité de:

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