

Mawlids & Modernists Dangers of Fun

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In the early 1880s, Egypt was in a state of turmoil. European powers were exerting increasing pressure on the Khedivial government, and escalating political conflicts were about to lead the country to the Urabi rebellion and consequent British occupation. In this moment, a new kind of debate on religion and society emerged in Egypt. Festive traditions and ecstatic rituals that were a central part of the religious and communal life of the country quite suddenly became the subject of intense criticism, accompanied by attempts to reform or to ban them. The most important issue

at stake was *mawlids*, popular festivals in honour of the Prophet Muhammad and Muslim saints. These festivals, which combine the communal experience of a pilgrimage, the ecstatic rituals of Islamic mysticism, and the libertine atmosphere of a fair, had always been to some degree controversial, and some scholars and intellectuals had lamented votive rituals at the shrines, the use of music in rituals, and the general licentious character of the festivities. But theirs was a minority opinion, while orthodox scholars of al-Azhar, mystics (who often were scholars of al-Azhar at the same time), political elites of the country, merchants, and peasants all participated in the festivals that took place at the central squares of major cities.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, a growing number among the intellectual elites of Egypt began to rally against mawlids and other festive traditions. In 1881, the debate culminated with the ban on the spectacular ritual of *dawsa* that used to conclude the *mawlid an-nabi* (birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) festival in Cairo, where the shaykh of the Sa'diyya Sufi brotherhood would ride with a horse over his disciples (who were not injured, a feat seen as a demonstration of God's grace) together with attempts to curb the ecstatic rituals of Sufi brotherhoods and to impose strict state control upon them. In the following decades, however, mawlids continued to flourish and the criticism grew more radical, so for example in a press article from 1929 calling for complete abolition of mawlids because of the alleged danger to society at large, they presented:

"Mawlids are nothing but superstitions, un-Islamic innovations and dangerous customs that must be abolished. [...] They are a suicide of virtue, and they are in reality worse than that, but we lack the expression to describe it exhaustively. Because mawlids, especially in the cities, and what goes on in them, are nothing but various expressions of religious, moral and social vices and truthful expressions of the moral deficiency latent in the minds of a large group of people. And those mawlids incite them and assist them in increasing it (i.e., the moral deficiency). [...] Thus why not abolish these dangerous customs that let loose the bonds from all people civilized or on the way to civilization, and that are the source of moral and religious corruption, and which furthermore are a cause for the contempt of the foreigners on us and an incentive to make us doubt in religion and the authority of those who stand to it."¹

The invention of society

Not only was the increasing popularity of such views novel, also the very discourse that emerged in this period represented a radical departure from the way religion, morality, and communal life had been conceived of and practised until then. In earlier debates on festive

One possible solution to the puzzle of how to conceptualize the complex interplay of pre-existing Islamic traditions, the influence of European intellectual discourses, and colonial administrative practices is to focus on the genealogy of intellectual traditions and administrative practices, i.e., the conditions of their emergence and transformation. The case of one particular transformation of popular festive traditions shows the novelty of the project of modern Islam which drew upon Islamic and European traditions, local and global power struggles without being reducible to any of its sources of inspiration.

and ritual behaviour, Muslim scholars had been mainly concerned with the legal status of discrete practices and their implication on the salvation of the individual believer. While their concern was to determine how to act according to God's commandments and, ultimately, to get to paradise, the modernists of late nineteenth century spoke in very different tones. Abstaining from sin and the company of the deviant was no longer enough: society and religion as a whole had to be purified, reformed and modernized. The behaviour of people at public festivals

became a problem of national scale, and reforming them a key to the nation's progress.

In these views, an old (although throughout much of Islamic history, marginal) Islamic tradition of suspicion towards ecstatic emotional states, ambivalent festive traditions, and anything that would compromise a rigid and purified state of the body and soul, comes together with the radically novel concepts borrowed from European intellectual traditions: society—the organic whole in which different ethnic, confessional and professional groups belong to an organic and interdependent whole; nation—the ideological frame of such society; progress—the linear and rational development of the nation towards a growing perfection and power; and religion—the moral and metaphysical foundation of the society that was to be judged by its ability to serve the nation's progress. Self-evident as these concepts may seem in our time, in nineteenth-century Egypt it was radically new to see elites and commoners, Turko-Circassians and Arabs, Muslims, and Christians as part of one organic whole, and even more new was it to measure religion by its functionality for a secular political programme.

Selective synthesis

Where did this new discourse come from, and why was the opposition to festive traditions so important for it? It cannot be reduced to either the pre-existing Islamic tradition or the colonial hegemony. It was an innovative synthesis of both, attempting to reform society and its religion to stand against the European challenge, and in doing so, creating a new and dramatic split between "orthodox" and "popular" Islam and "modern" and "backward" culture. When European observers claimed Islam to be a backward and irrational religion, Muslim intellectuals replied with a twofold strategy: reinterpreting part of the religious and cultural traditions as the true, authentic heritage that would match European standards and serve as the moral foundation of the nation's progress, while excluding other parts from the modernist project by labelling them as backward superstitions at worst, popular religion and folklore at best, but never equal to the true, at once authentic and modern culture.

Islamic reformism and nationalist modernism, in their shared attempt to bestow religion and society with a rational and progressive spirit, were never based on a simple takeover of European concepts but rather developed in confrontation with and inspired by them, just as they, in their construction of true authentic heritage, never were based on a simple reference to the past but rather invented and interpreted it anew. Its sources of inspiration included the older Islamic tradition of ritual and moral reform, colonial administrative practice, Victorian piety and ethics, and French social theory, but the outcome of this selective reinterpretation was historically new, and cannot be reduced, in causal or structural terms, to any of the traditions it drew upon by evoking or opposing them.

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PHOTO BY SAMULI SCHIELKE, 2004

Mawlid festivities in Cairo

Insofar as the genealogy of modern Islam is a case of a major paradigmatic shift it cannot be grasped by the concept of “discursive tradition” introduced by Talal Asad and increasingly popular in Islamic studies. Speaking of Islam as a discursive tradition is a convenient way to say what Islam “is” while avoiding the pitfalls of essentialism, nevertheless the range of the concept is limited. While it can be very useful for understanding the continuity and persistence of certain topics, it is not very helpful for grasping transformations. This is not so much to criticize Asad (who in his work has demonstrated an outstanding ability to trace historical transformations of both the subtle and the dramatic kind) than the inflationary use of “discursive tradition” as a trendy label and a politically correct way to speak of Islam as something substantial and concrete. Instead, the concept of genealogy, developed by Foucault and elaborated by Asad, appears to be more useful to detect and analyze both the subtle shifts and the dramatic breaks both of which tend to be obliterated by the successive consolidation of discursive formations (rather than traditions, in this case). This is, as Michael Feener demonstrates in another article in this issue, by no means the only possible approach, and we certainly should not fall in the trap of just replacing one “magic” word by another. It does, however, call to attention that intellectual history should be aware of both the traditions and continuities it deals with, as well as of their often subtle and invisible transformations and reinventions.

Distinction and exclusion

The debate on popular festivals shows to what extent the tradition of Islam, its past and present, is invented, how this invention can dramatically shift the lines that mark religion, and how the projection of contemporary discourse to the past can make such shifts largely invisible to later generations. “Invented” does not mean “false” here, but calls attention to the historical shifts of and struggles over Islam among Muslims. By reconfiguring religion to serve the newly invented nation, members of the emerging middle classes claimed power for themselves, and denied it to other groups in society: peasants, the urban poor, guilds, mystical brotherhoods, and the Turko-Circassian political elites. Taking the role of the avant-garde, an elite at once distinguished from “the masses” and committed to their uplifting, nationalist intellectuals could claim the unity of the nation while excluding other con-

tenders from the power to define it. For this purpose, it was necessary not only to create a reading of Islam and modernity that would stand the European challenge, but also to exclude other readings as backward, superstitious, immoral, and erroneous.

Such exclusive tendency has been characteristic of the project of modernity around the globe, and should stand as a reminder that emancipation, enlightenment and empowerment, so much celebrated as key moments of modernity, have been essentially—not coincidentally—accompanied by discipline, exclusion, and domination. And indeed the search for distinction has been characteristic for the aspirants of modernity in Egypt from the very beginnings of the modernization policies, as was noted by Georg August Wallin, a Finnish Orientalist who in 1844 met “one of those scamps whom the Pasha has sent to Europe for study, this one a mechanician, and who have returned half-educated and thousand times worse than before.” In the house of a German family in Cairo where both were invited, the discussion turned to the *mahmal* procession, a colourful parade which used to mark the transport from Cairo to Mecca of a new *kiswa* to cover the Ka’ba prior to the Hajj, and Wallin who had greatly enjoyed the procession the same day, was annoyed to hear the Austrian-trained mechanician “condemn and ridicule these customs of his religion, and calling them nonsense.”²

More than a century later, the distinction through criticism of festive traditions that was undertaken by a member of this (at the time very small) professional class was to become the “normal” point of view concerning religion and society to the degree that its novelty and innovativeness have become invisible, and its adherents able to claim their point of view as the self-evident orthodox Truth.

Notes

1. Hanafi ‘Amir, “al-Mawlid: ‘adat yajib al-qada’ alayha,” *as-Siyasah al-Usubu’iyya*, 21 December 1929, 24.
2. Georg August Wallin, in *Georg August Wallins reseanteckningar från Orienten åren 1843-1849: Dagbok och bref*, ed. Sven Gabriel Elmgren (Helsingfors: Frenckell, 1864), 2:265.

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