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# Snacks and Saints. Mawlid Festivals and the Politics of Festivity, Piety and Modernity in Contemporary Egypt

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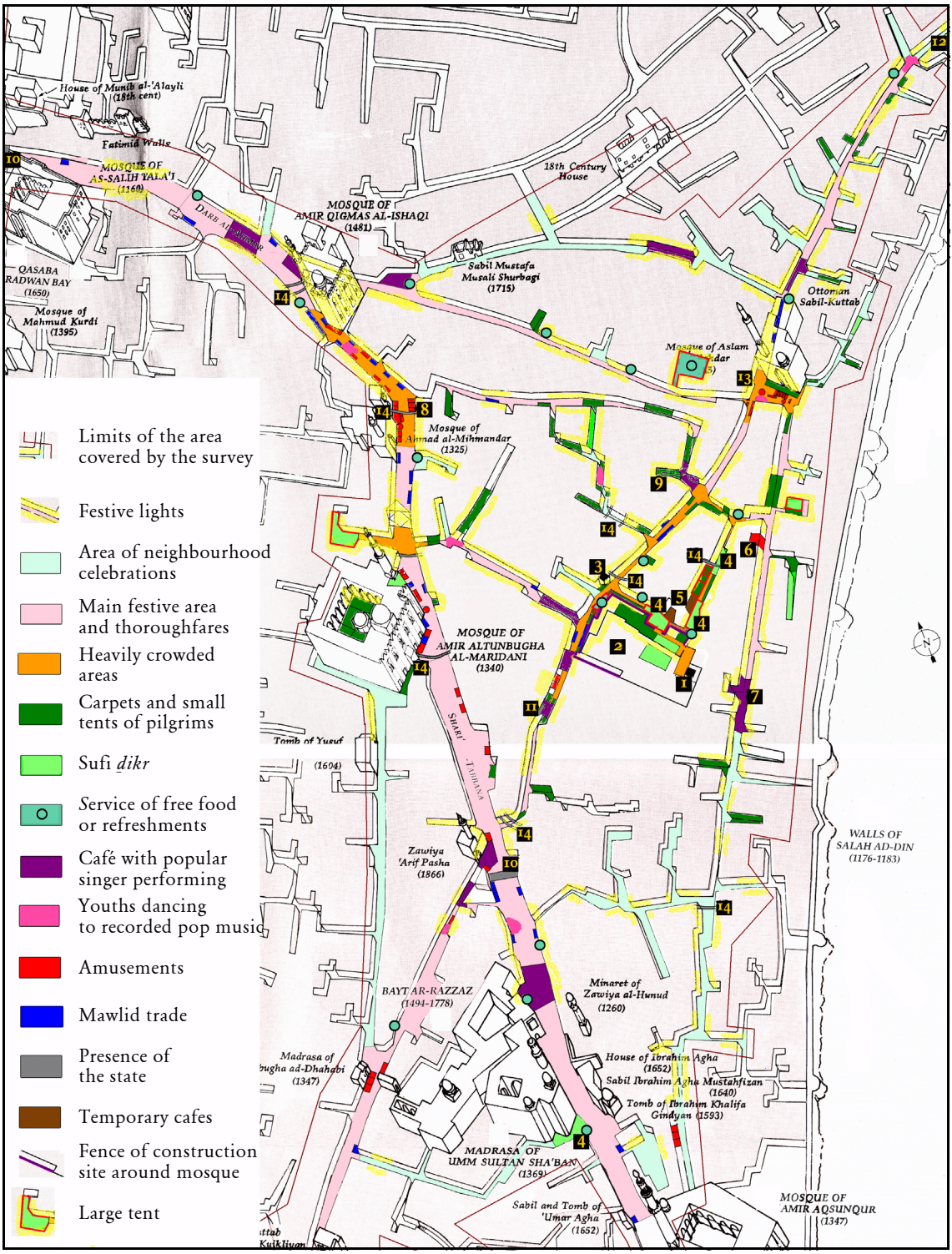
# Snacks & Saints

*Mawlid Festivals and the Politics of Festivity, Piety and Modernity in Contemporary Egypt*

Samuli Schielke

# The mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya

*Cairo, 2-3 June 2003 (2-3 Rabīʿ II 1424) 6 p.m. - 3 a.m.*




**1.** Shrine of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya (under construction). **2.** Mosque of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya (under construction). **3.** Shrine of Sīdī ʿAbdallāh ad-Disūqī. **4.** Sufi *ḏikr* in a café. **5.** Park filled by café chairs, normally closed for public. **6.** Circus show of Ṣalāḥ al-Maṣrī **7.** Café serving beer. **8.** Amusements and gambling stands in at-Tabbāna St. **9.** Ḥidma of Sheikh Ḥasan ad-Dirīnī **10.** Police roadblock. **11.** Fire brigade. **12.** Area of neighbourhood celebration continues along the street up to the district of Bāṭlīya, ca. 300 m further. **13.** Aslam Silāḥdār Square. **14.** Banners greeting the visitors of the mawlid in the name of local politicians.

# Snacks and Saints

*Mawlid Festivals and the Politics of Festivity, Piety and Modernity in Contemporary Egypt*

**Akademisch Proefschrift**

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
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ten overstaan van een door het
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Joska Samuli Schielke
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# Table of contents


Nederlandse Samenvatting (Dutch Summary) vi
English Summary viii
Arabic summary x
Acknowledgements xii
Transcription of Arabic xiv

Chapter One: Introduction 1
1. A controversy 1
2. Studying mawlids 3
3. Method and fieldwork 12

Chapter Two: At the mawlid 15
1. What a mawlid looks like 17
*1.1. The shrine* 18
*1.2. The Sufis* 22
*1.3. The celebrations* 25
2. The order of chaos 31
*2.1. Habitus* 33
*2.2. Boundaries* 36
*2.3. Openness, class, and power* 39
3. Festive space and time 41
*3.1. Space and the sacred* 41
*3.2. Time and social order* 44

Chapter Three: Festive experiences 50
1. Approaches to festivity and pilgrimage 50
2. Many mawlids 54
*2.1. The Sufi mawlid* 56
*2.2. The community mawlid* 62
*2.3. The fun mawlid* 68
3. The mawlid as festivity 71
*3.1. Mawlid and ʿid* 72
*3.2. A spectacle without footlights* 75

Chapter Four: Criticism of mawlids 78
1. Modernism and reformism 78
2. Un-Islamic... 81

*2.1. Bid'a* 81
*2.2. Women and men* 85
*2.3. Chickpeas* 89
*2.4. Bodies and selves* 96
3. ...And backward 99
*3.1. Opium for the people* 100
*3.2. Chaos* 102
*3.3. Progress, rationality and the habitus of the modern Muslim* 105

Chapter Five: Mawlids as an Other of modern Egypt 111
1. What will the foreigners think? 111
2. Genealogy of the debate 112
*2.1. The tractates against innovations* 112
*2.2. The invention of society and the causes of its retrogression* 115
*2.3. Selection and exclusion* 122
3. Dissociations and Distinctions 126
*3.1. 'Consciousness'* 127
*3.2. Nostalgia, rejection and fascination* 130
*3.3. Hegemonic publics* 132

Chapter Six: Defence of mawlids 136
1. Defending the ideal, criticising the practice 136
2. Defence of festive joy and subversion of orthodoxy 142
*2.1. Good intentions* 142
*2.2. The antinomian mawlid* 147
*2.3. 'Sunnīs'* 149
3. Alternative development, national unity, and hybrid discourses 151

Chapter Seven: The mawlid as cultural icon 157
1. The construction of popular heritage 158
*1.1 Writing the history of mawlids* 159
*1.1.1. Pharaohs* 159
*1.1.2. Fatimids* 163
*1.1.3. Sufis* 165
*1.2. Studying popular beliefs* 166
*1.2.1. The class of popular things* 166
*1.2.2. What makes beliefs popular* 169
*1.2.3. From a classification to a thing* 171
2. The product of representation 174
*2.1. Folklore* 174

*2.2. Artistic production* 176
*2.3. The many lives of 'The Great Night'* 179
*2.4. The official festivity* 183

Chapter Eight: Transformations 188
1. How to organise a mawlid 188
2. Policing morals, rituals and hygiene 191
*2.1. The first wave* 191
*2.2. The limits of reform* 194
3. From open space to public spectacle 198
*3.1. Ṭanṭā: enforcing boundaries* 198
*3.2. Qinā: modernising the city, relocating the festivity* 203
*3.3. Control and spectacle* 208
4. The reformist ḥaḍra and the respectable mawlid 216
*4.1. Al-Ḥāmidīya aš-Šāḏilīya: 'the Soviet model farm'* 218
*4.2. Al-'Azmīya: the mawlid as conference* 220
*4.3. Al-Ǧāzūlīya: some emotion, some discipline* 222
*4.4. Strategies of adaptation* 224
5. Transformation, decline and dynamics 228

Chapter nine: Conclusions 233
1. Festivity and the everyday 233
2. The politics of habitus 235
3. Whose hegemony? 237
4. The Christian debate 240
5. Genealogies of reform 242

List of illustrations 247
References 248
1. Books and articles in journals 248
2. Articles in newspapers and magazines 259
3. Qur'ān quotations 262
4. Ḥadīṯ quotations 263
5. Internet sites 263
6. Administrative documents 264
7. Audiovisual media 264
8. Interviews 264
*8.1. By first name* 264
*8.2. Anonymous, by date* 266

## Nederlandse samenvatting (Dutch summary)

Deze dissertatie 'Hapjes en Heiligen: Mawlid festivals en de politiek van feestelijkheid, vroomheid en moderniteit in het huidige Egypte' analyseert de controverse omtrent *mawlids*, ofwel festivals ter ere van moslimheiligen in het huidige Egypte. Het richt zich op twisten rondom feestcultuur, benadrukt het politieke karakter van feestelijkheid en laat zien hoe de debatten over mawlids verband houden met de strijd om religie en maatschappij in het algemeen. Daarmee impliceert het ook een kritische herziening van de onderlinge relatie tussen religieuze bewegingen, verlichting en moderniteit. Het laat zien dat islamitische politieke en sociale bewegingen geen terugkeer naar de traditie vormen. Integendeel, ze geven vaak blijk van een sterk vooruitgangsgeloof en een kritische kijk op traditionele opvattingen en praktijken. Aan de andere kant moeten de hervormings- en moderniseringsprojecten niet gelijkgesteld worden aan een liberale utopie van vrijheid en emancipatie. Moderniteit in het Midden-Oosten is, zoals overal, altijd gekenmerkt geweest door krachtige elementen van morele en bestuurlijke discipline ten opzichte van de burgers en de uitsluiting van degenen die deze discipline niet navolgden.

De verering van heiligen, die in de islam bekend staan als 'vrienden van God', is wereldwijd een belangrijk onderdeel van moslimspiritualiteit. Pelgrimages naar hun graftomben behoren in vele landen tot de belangrijkste openbare festivals. Zo is dat ook het geval in Egypte, waar duizenden festivals ter ere van islamitische mystici (soefis), geleerden en afstammelingen van de profeet Mohammed plaatsvinden. Deze festivals vormen een combinatie van de spirituele ervaring van een pelgrimage, de gemeenschapszin van een buurtfeest en het amusement en de handel van een kermis. Maar terwijl vele Egyptenaren de mawlids zien als een uiting van vreugde en liefde voor de Profeet en zijn familie, kijken veel anderen kritisch tegen deze festivals aan. Zij beschouwen ze als een on-islamitische innovatie (*bid'a*) en als een uiting van een achterlijke mentaliteit.

Het is belangrijk om vast te stellen dat de debatten over mawlids niet verlopen volgens de scheidslijnen tussen islamisten en secularisten, noch volgens die tussen orthodoxe en volks-islam. Islamisten en secularisten, hoezeer ze in sommige situaties ook tegenover elkaar mogen staan, delen in feite in sterke mate de nadruk op rationele vooruitgang en op het 'authentieke' culturele erfgoed, zoals dat tot uiting komt in hun gemeenschappelijke kritiek op ambivalente feestelijke tradities. Dit kan zeer goed geconstateerd worden aan de hand van de manier waarop vele (maar niet alle) stedelijke Egyptenaren uit de middenklasse proberen om de uitingen van vroomheid en feestvreugde van hun landgenoten te beteugelen of te bespotten in naam van religie én in naam van moderniteit. Verder zijn orthodoxe en volks-islam in de praktijk geen gescheiden werelden. Datgene wat als de correcte islamitische doctrine en praktijk wordt beschouwd heeft aanzienlijke veranderingen ondergaan gedurende de laatste 150 jaar. Wat tegenwoordig door vele moslims alsmede door westerse geleerden wordt voorgesteld als authentieke orthodoxe islam is het vernieuwende resultaat van een beweging van hervorming die, geconfronteerd met kolonialisme en Europese kritieken op de islam, een herdefiniëring formuleerde van religie en samenleving, waarbij deze werden begrepen als onderling afhankelijke systemen, die gebonden waren aan de criteria van rationaliteit en functionaliteit.

Zowel het feestelijke karakter van de mawlids als de manier waarop vele moslims de religie, de samenleving en de eigen identiteit in de afgelopen honderd jaar zijn gaan interpreteren hebben bijgedragen aan hun omstreden karakter. Op zich is er niets on-islamitisch of anti-moderns aan mawlids. De mensen die ze vieren zijn vaak modern opgeleide mensen en vrome moslims die zich terdege bewust zijn van hun religie. Het probleem is eerder dat zij vroomheid samen met vreugde uiten op een manier die

ongepast wordt gevonden door degenen die geloven dat samenleving en religie gekenmerkt moeten worden door een plechtstatige, beheerste houding en een stevige ordening die alle dingen en emoties hun eigen duidelijke, aparte plaatsen toebedeeld. In die laatste optiek moeten hapjes en heiligen gescheiden van elkaar worden gehouden.

De ambivalentie van mawlids verstoort de gedachte (die vooral sterk leeft bij de middenklasse) dat moderniteit en religiositeit met ernst omgeven dienen te zijn. Tevens doorkruist het de fragmentatie van de eigen identiteit in een vroom aspect en een profaan aspect. Mawlids vieren de gemeenschap, het heilige en het individu dat hieraan toegewijd is. Maar door hun publieke en uitbundige karakter vormen zij ook plaatsen waar de grenzen tussen deze categorieën (individu, gemeenschap, het heilige) worden opgeheven, doorbroken en gerelativeerd. Dat maakt ze altijd in zekere mate problematisch voor een religieus gelegitimeerde morele en maatschappelijke orde. De islamitische spiritualiteit van vroegere eeuwen kon mawlids bevatten omdat die ingebed waren in een begrip van religie als gemeenschappelijkheid, waarbij de maatschappij feestvieren erkende als een oncontroversieel onderdeel van het leven. Maar voor een zienswijze die modernisering van bovenaf voorstaat wordt een feestelijk moment dat op zichzelf staat en geen duidelijk doel dient beschouwd zowel als een uiting en als een oorzaak van verval. Doordat festivals van het volk zich onttrekken aan definitieve categoriseringen en een eenduidige functionaliteit ontberen, mislukken pogingen om ze in te zetten voor allerlei projecten ten behoeve van ontwikkeling of hervorming. En dus lijken ze nutteloos te zijn waar productiviteit wordt verwacht, lijken ze rusteloos juist daar waar kalmte opportuun is, subversief op punten waar conservatisme vereist is en reactionair waar ze progressief zouden moeten zijn.

Maar kritiek op mawlids is niet alleen een reactie op de uitdaging die mawlids vormen ten aanzien van een modernistisch wereldbeeld; het bekritiseren van mawlids is belangrijk voor vele Egyptenaren omdat het hen helpt om hun eigen begrip van de orthodoxe islam en de moderne maatschappij te definiëren. De bepaling van de mawlids als 'afwijkend' wordt zodanig geconstrueerd dat de afwijzing van de mawlids past in de formulering van een moderne identiteit. Naarmate de modernistische visie in de 20e eeuw steeds meer terrein won raakten mawlids, die eens centraal stonden in de religieuze cultuur van Egypte, steeds meer gemarginaliseerd. Voor degenen die mawlids verdedigen tegen de critici ervan betekent dit dat ze ofwel kunnen proberen te bewijzen dat mawlids in werkelijkheid voldoen aan de criteria van eerbiedig en beschaafd gedrag die door de critici worden hooggehouden, ofwel dat ze die criteria in twijfel kunnen trekken. In dat laatste geval zullen ze echter uitgesloten blijven van het dominante culturele discours. Niettemin heeft de kritiek op de mawlids ook de weg geëffend voor hun herinterpretatie en waardering juist vanwege hun uitsluiting. Dezelfde mensen die mawlids bekritiseren omdat die on-islamitisch en achterlijk zouden zijn geven vaak uiting aan fascinatie en waardering ervoor. Maar in plaats van dit als een gelegenheid op te vatten om de kritiek op mawlids ter discussie te stellen, herdefiniëren ze mawlids als iets dat onderscheiden dient te worden van religie en moderniteit, en dus als iets potentiëel waardevols uit de erfenis van het volk. Tenslotte wordt de marginalisering versterkt door direct overheidsingrijpen: herstructurering van mawlidterreinen hebben tot gevolg dat het volkse karakter van mawlids in de marge verdwijnt.

De resultaten van deze dissertatie wijzen op de centrale en betwiste rol die belichaamde praktijken en esthetische stijlen spelen in de definitie van religie en samenleving, ofwel: de relatie tussen habitus (geïnternaliseerde gewoonten) en ideologie. Door het vieren (of het niet vieren) van mawlids op een specifieke manier en door het bekritiseren, verdedigen, vertegenwoordigen of reorganiseren ervan toont men toewijding aan een visie op religie, samenleving en identiteit dat geplaatst is in handelingen en verschijningen. Voor mawlidgangers verschaft het zitten in een tent en het delen van een bord eten een moment van transcendentale spiritualiteit. Mensen die kritisch zijn ten

aanzien van de festiviteiten wijzen op de mensen in de tent en verwijzen naar dit tafereel als 'bijgeloof'. Overheidsambtenaren geven opdracht om de tenten te verplaatsen naar achterafstraatjes en noemen dit dan een maatregel ter verbetering van de openbare ruimte en het bewustzijn van de burgers. Feestelijke praktijken zijn van belang omdat ze worden gelijkgesteld aan overtuigingen en levenshoudingen. De relatie tussen habitus en ideologie is echter nooit een vaststaand gegeven; het is onderwerp van een voortgaande strijd van het soort dat plaatsvindt rond de kwestie van de mawlids.

## English summary

This thesis, 'Snacks and Saints: Mawlid Festivals and the Politics of Festivity, Piety, and Modernity in Contemporary Egypt', analyses the controversies surrounding *mawlid*s, festivals held in honour of Muslim saints, in contemporary Egypt. Focussing on the contestation of festive culture, it emphasises the political nature of festivity and demonstrates how the debates on mawlids are related to struggles over religion and society in general. In doing so, it implies a critical revision of the relationship between religious movements, enlightenment and modernity. It shows that Islamic political and social movements do not call for a return to tradition. On the contrary, they are often characterised by a belief in the progress of society and a critical view of traditional beliefs and practices. These projects of reform and modernisation should, however, not be equated with a liberal utopia of freedom and emancipation. Modernity in the Middle East, like elsewhere, has been strongly characterised by the moral and administrative discipline of citizens and the exclusion of those who do not comply.

The veneration of saints, known as 'friends of God' in Islam, is an important part of Muslim spirituality around the world. Pilgrimages to their burial sites form some of the most important public festivals of many countries, among them Egypt, which houses thousands of festivals in honour of Muslim mystics (Sufis), scholars, and descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. These festivals combine the spiritual experience of a pilgrimage, the communal reunion of a neighbourhood celebration, and the amusements and commerce of a fair. But while many Egyptians see mawlids as an expression of joy and love for the Prophet and his family, many of their compatriots view these festivals in a harshly critical light. They see them as an un-Islamic innovation (*bid'a*) and an expression of a backward mentality.

It is important to note that the debates on mawlids do not follow simple divisions between the views of Islamists and secularists or orthodox and popular Islam. Islamists and secularists, antagonistic as they may be in some situations, in fact often share a strong common ground in their emphasis on rational progress and authentic civilisational heritage, as expressed in their shared criticism of ambivalent festive traditions. This can be very well seen in the way many (but not all) urban middle-class Egyptians try to, in the name of religion *and* modernity, curb and ridicule the forms of piety and festive joy their compatriots express. Furthermore, orthodox and popular Islam are, in practice, not separate fields, and what is considered to be correct Islamic doctrine and practice has undergone significant change over the past 150 years. What is today presented as authentic orthodox Islam by many Muslims and Western scholars is the innovative outcome of a movement of reform that, in confrontation with colonialism and European critiques of Islam, has undertaken a redefinition of religion and society, conceiving them as interdependent systems bound to the criteria of rationality and functionality.

Both the festive character of mawlids and the way many Muslims have come to interpret religion, society and the self over the past hundred years contribute to their controversial character. There is nothing un-Islamic or anti-modern *per se* about mawlids. The people who celebrate them are often modern professionals and pious Muslims well

versed in their religion. The problem is, rather, that they express piety and joy in an interrelated manner that appears improper to those who believe society and religion should be characterised by a solemn, constrained attitude and a firm order that allocates all things and emotions their clear, separate places. Snacks and saints, in their view, have to be kept apart.

The association of modernity and religiosity with a tone of seriousness and a purified but fragmented self that keeps different fields of life carefully apart (a world view to which many middle-class Egyptians adhere), is compromised by the ambivalence found in mawlids. Mawlids celebrate the community, the sacred, and the individual committed to these. But through their openness and atmosphere of the extraordinary, they also are sites of suspending, breaking, relativising and questioning these categories. This makes them always to some degree problematic to any religiously legitimised moral and social order. The Islamic spirituality of earlier centuries was able to embrace mawlids because it was embedded in a communal concept of religion and a vision of society in which times of celebration appeared as legitimate segments of the circle of life. But for a view promoting top-down modernisation, a festive time in its own right beyond clear utilitarian purpose is conceived of as an expression and cause of decay. Eluding definite categorisation and clear functionality, popular festivals resist attempts to employ them for any great project of development or reform. Hence the people celebrating mawlids have come to appear as idle when they should be productive, restless when they should be calm, subversive when they should be conservative, and reactionary when they should be revolutionary.

But the opposition to mawlids is not only a response to the challenge mawlids form to the world view of modernism; criticising mawlids is important for many Egyptians because it helps them to define their particular understanding of orthodox Islam and modern society. The 'otherness' of mawlids is constructed and used as a marker of exclusion to distinguish a modernist view of society. As this view has gained ground in the 20th century, mawlids, once central in the religious culture of Egypt, have become increasingly marginalised. For those who defend mawlids against their critics, this means that they can either try to prove that mawlids actually fit the criteria of reverent and civilised behaviour held by the critics, or challenge them but remain excluded from the public debates. Yet the criticism of mawlids has also opened the way to their reinterpretation and appreciation through their very exclusion. The same people who criticise mawlids for being un-Islamic and backward often express fascination with and appreciation for them. But instead of taking this as an occasion to question their criticism, they redefine mawlids as something distinct from religion and modernity, and thus potentially valuable as a form of popular folkloric heritage. Finally, government projects restructuring pilgrimage sites physically bring these lines of exclusion into mawlids themselves as their central spaces are turned into spectacles of state presence and most other celebrations are moved to the area's margins.

The results of this thesis point at the central and contested role of embodied practices and aesthetic styles for the definition of religion and society, in short: the relationship between habitus and ideology. To celebrate (or not to celebrate) mawlids in a specific way, to criticise, defend, represent or reorganise them, is to show commitment to a vision of religion, society and the self that is located in actions and appearances. For pilgrims, sitting in a tent and sharing a plate of food provides a moment of spirituality. People critical of the festivities point at the people in the tent and refer to the scenery as 'superstitions'. Government officials order removal of the tent to the back streets and phrase this measure as raising the sophistication of the citizens' consciousness. Festive practices matter because they are equated with beliefs and attitudes. Yet the relationship between habitus and ideology is never a given; it is subject to an ongoing contestation of the very kind that takes place around the issue of mawlids.

## مختصر عربي (Arabic Summary)

يهتم هذا البحث "الولاية و الحلاوة: الموالد و سياسات الاحتفال و الحداثة و التدين في مصر المعاصرة" بتحليل الجدل الدائر حول الموالد التي تقام للأولياء في مصر المعاصرة. ولدى التدقيق في هذه النقاشات، نجد أنها تؤكد على الطبيعة السياسية لهذه الاحتفاليات، وتوضح ارتباط النقاشات الجدلية حول الموالد بالتنافس الديني والاجتماعي بشكل عام. كما أنه يحتوي مراجعة نقدية لعلاقة الحركات الدينية بالتنوير والحداثة.

بالإضافة لذلك، فإن الحركات الاجتماعية والسياسية الإسلامية لا تدعو إلى العودة للتراث والتقاليد. بل على العكس من ذلك، فإن جدول أعمالهم غالباً ما يتصف بالدعوة للتقدم و برؤية نقدية للممارسات والمعتقدات الموروثة. من ناحية أخرى فلا يجب خلط مشروعات الإصلاح والتحديث بالدعوة للمفهوم الليبرالي للحرية و حقوق الإنسان. إن الدعوة للحداثة تتميز في الشرق الأوسط - كما في أي مكان آخر- بوجود منظومة أخلاقية وتنفيذية تطبق على الأفراد ويتم إقصاء من لا يلتزم بها.

في الإسلام، فإن توقير أولياء الله يعتبر جزءاً مهماً من الممارسات الروحانية للمسلم في العالم كله. كما تعد زيارات الأضرحة - في الكثير من الدول- من أهم الاحتفالات الشعبية ومن ضمنها مصر والتي يقام فيها آلاف الموالد تكريماً للكثير من الصوفيين والعلماء وآل بيت النبي عليه الصلاة والسلام.

تجمع هذه الاحتفالات بين كلٍّ من الجانب الروحي والنشاطات الاجتماعية، بالإضافة للتسلية والتجارة. ويرى بعض المصريين في تلك الموالد تعبيراً عن الفرح وحب النبي وآل البيت، بينما ينظر إليها البعض الآخر نظرة نقدية معتبرين أنها بدعة و تعبير عن التخلف.

من الضروري أن نلاحظ بأن الجدل حول الموالد لا يعد جدلاً بين الإسلاميين والعلمانيين أو بين صحيح الدين والدين الشعبي. إذ إن الإسلاميين والعلمانيين يتعارضون في وجهات النظر حول بعض المواقف، إلا أنهم يتفقون في تأكيدهم على التقدم العقلاني والتراث الحضاري الأصيل المتمثل في نقدهم المشترك لازدواجية هذه التقاليد. بإمكاننا أن نلاحظ هذا لدى عدد كبير من المنتمين الطبقة الوسطى (ولكن ليس كلهم) من المصريين الحضريين الذين يحاولون باسم الدين والحداثة، السخرية من ممارسات التقوى والفرح لمواطنيهم وردهم عنها.

فضلاً عن ذلك، لا يمكن اعتبار صحيح الدين والدين الشعبي عملياً مجالين منفصلين، وما يتم اعتباره ممارسة سليمة ومذهب إسلامي صائب قد تعرض لتغييرات واضحة خلال المائة وخمسين عاماً الماضية. فما يُقدَّم اليوم كجزء أصيل من صحيح الدين من قبل العديد من المسلمين والمستشرقين يعد نتاجاً مستحدثاً لحركة إصلاحية، خلال فترة المواجهة مع الاستعمار والنقد الأوروبي للإسلام، وقد قامت هذه الحركة بإعادة تعريف الدين والمجتمع، واستيعابهما على أنهما منظومتين مترابطتين داخلياً، بحيث تلتزم هاتين المنظومتين بالمعايير العقلانية والوظيفية.

ويساهم كلٌّ من الطابع الاحتفالي للموالد، والطريقة التي وصل إليها العديد من المسلمين في تفسير الدين والمجتمع والذات خلال المائة عام الماضية، بخلق الاختلاف حول الموالد.

لا يوجد ما يتعارض مع الإسلام والحداثة بحد ذاته في الموالد. فغالباً ما يكون المحتفلون بالموالد مسلمين ورعين وعلى دراية كاملة بدينهم. بل تكمن المشكلة في أنهم يعبرون عن تقواهم وفرحهم بطريقة غير سليمة من وجهة نظر أولئك الذين يعتقدون بأنه يجب أن يتميز الدين والمجتمع بالوقار والالتزام والنظام الحازم الذي يفصل كل الأشياء والمشاعر عن بعضها البعض بشكل واضح، فلا بد برأيهم الفصل بين الولاية و الحلاوة.

إن ارتباط الدين والحداثة بظاهر جدي ونفس نقية لكن ممزقة، تعزل مجالات الحياة المختلفة عن بعضها البعض (وهذا ما يلتزم به العديد من أبناء الطبقة الوسطى من المصريين)،

يتم تقويضه من خلال ازدواجية الموالد. فالموالد تحتفي بالمجتمع وتعمق علاقاته بالمقدسات وبالأفراد الملتزمين بها. لكن وبفعل الانفتاح والجو البهيج الذي تتميز به، فإنها تقوم بإيقاف و إعادة التساؤل حول نفس المجالات التي تحتفي بها. وهذا ما يجعلها تعتبر دائماً إشكالية لحد ما لأي منظومة اجتماعية أو دينية متزمتة.

كانت الروحانية الإسلامية - التي تعود لقرون مضت - قادرة على استيعاب الموالد لأنها كانت محتواة في الفكر الاجتماعي للدين ونظرة المجتمع التي كانت ترى في الاحتفال جزءاً مشروعاً من دورة الحياة. لكن بالنسبة لوجهة نظر الحداثة فإن الوقت الضائع في الاحتفالات بدون غرض نفعي يُعد تعبيراً عن الانحطاط ومسبباً له في آن واحد.

لا يمكن تصنيف الموالد ضمن فئة محددة ووظيفية واضحة، حيث تستعصي الاحتفالات الشعبية على محاولات توظيفها لأي مشروع طموح من مشاريع التنمية والإصلاح. لذلك يبدو زوار الموالد كعاطلين بينما يجب أن يكونوا منتجين، وصاخبين بينما يجب أن يكونوا هادئين، ومفسدين بينما يجب أن يكونوا محافظين، ورجعيين بينما يجب أن يكونوا ثوريين.

لا تعد معارضة الموالد مجرد رد فعل للتحدي الذي تقدمه لرؤية الحداثة للعالم ، لكن هذا النقد له وظيفة مهمة للعديد من المصريين لأنهم يستخدمونه لتعريف مفهومهم الخاص لصحيح الدين الإسلامي وللمجتمع الحداثي.

إن وصف الموالد بالـ"آخر" يميز وجهة النظر الحداثية للمجتمع. وما أن أحرزت وجهة النظر هذه انتشاراً ملحوظاً في القرن العشرين، حتى أصبحت الموالد مهمشة لدرجة كبيرة بعد أن كان لها موقع مركزي في الثقافة الدينية المصرية. وهذا ما يجعل المدافعين عن الاحتفال بالموالد يختارون بين محاولة إثبات أن الموالد تتناسب مع معايير السلوك الوقور والمتحضر التي يطالب بها من ينتقدون الموالد، وبين إبعادها عن المجال العام. من ناحية أخرى فقد فتح نقد الموالد الطريق لإعادة تفسيرها وتقديرها من خلال إقصاءها. إن الكثيرين ممن قاموا بنقد الموالد لكونها بدعة وتعبير عن التخلف هم أنفسهم من يعبر عن افتتانهم بها وتقديرهم لها. لكن بدلاً من أن يكون هذا دافعاً لمراجعة نقدهم، فقد أعادوا تعريف الموالد على أنها شيء مختلف عن الدين والحداثة ولذلك تعد ذات قيمة كجزء من التراث شعبي.

أخيراً، فإن مشاريع الحكومة في الترميم وإعادة البناء في مراكز الأضرحة عززت هذا الإقصاء للموالد، حيث تم تحويل محيط الاحتفال المركزي لمشاهد لتواجد الدولة، بينما تم السماح لأشكال الاحتفاليات الأخرى بالاستمرار على الهامش.

تشير نتائج هذا البحث إلى الدور المركزي والجدلي للممارسات المجسدة والأساليب الجمالية لتعريف الدين والمجتمع، أو باختصار: العلاقة بين المظاهر والأيدلوجية. إن الاحتفال- أو عدم الاحتفال- بالموالد بطريقة معينة أو نقدها أو الدفاع عنها أو اعتبارها نوعاً من الفلكلور أو إعادة تنظيمها، كلها طرق للتعبير عن التزام برؤية معينة للدين والمجتمع والذات يتم التعبير عنها في التصرفات والمظاهر.على سبيل المثال، فإن الجلوس في الخيمة والمشاركة في الطعام يمثل لحظات من الروحانية لزائري الموالد. بينما يمر بها من ينتقدون هذه الاحتفاليات ثم يشيرون إلى من في الخيمة ويصفون ما يحدث على أنه تعبير عن معتقدات هؤلاء الجالسين. ويأمر مسئولو الحكومة بنقل هذه الخيمة إلى الشوارع الخلفية قائلين إنه إجراء لزيادة الوعي العام.

إن المظاهر والممارسات الاحتفالية مهمة لأنه يتم مساواتها بالمعتقدات والمواقف. لكن علاقة المظاهر بالأيدلوجية ليست ثابتة، إنها تخضع للجدل المتواصل، وهذا ما يحدث حول قضية الموالد.

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The fieldwork for this thesis was conducted in a time marked by terror, war, and sharp political confrontation, and this was not without an effect on my fieldwork. Many of the people I met during the course of my research were concerned about the image of Islam and Muslims my research would give to the Western public. Some were sceptical, others encouraging. They all wanted me to show a truthful, positive image, without polemics or defamation. I have done my best to do so, at the same time knowing that what in my eyes is an attempt to understand the roots of a debate will be seen by some as showing a negative image of Islam and Egypt. Many people who, through interviews and other assistance, significantly contributed to this study, will not agree with its outcome. Sufis will be displeased by my dwelling on the popular celebrations they consider marginal to the mawlid. Salafis and intellectuals will disagree with my analysis of their discourses. This I cannot help, yet I have tried to always be truthful by letting people come to speech in a way that does justice to their point of view, even if my conclusions differ from theirs.

Long before I began to work on this project, Harri Juntunen introduced me to the field of argumentation theory and public debates and ʿIṣām Fawzī drew my attention to mawlids. Without the initial inspiration provided by them I would have never begun this study. The first steps of the research that led to this thesis were taken in Bonn, Germany, where Stefan Wild, supervisor of my MA thesis, offered me great support and assistance. From 2001 to 2005, I had the privilege of working as a PhD fellow in Leiden at the International Institute for the Study of Islam (ISIM), which, with generous funding by the Dutch taxpayers, offered me the possibility to widen my perspective to include the approaches and debates of anthropology and other social sciences, enabled me to work in an inspiring intellectual atmosphere, and in general gave me the best working environment and conditions I could ever hope to have. During my fieldwork in Cairo, the Netherlands-Flemish Institute made its facilities available to me and offered me valuable support for my research. As my supervisor, Annelies Moors was always there to provide good advice when problems or questions arose, and gave me both the structure and the freedom I needed for my research.

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Finally, I dedicate this study to the memory of ʿAbdallāh aṣ-Ṣaʿīdī, a man of fine and pious, but also very stubborn, character. He went to the mawlid although he knew that he should have stayed in the hospital.

## Transcription of Arabic

Arabic names and terms are transcribed in this thesis according to the guidelines of the German Oriental Society.[1] If there are different pronunciations of a term, for example classical *mawlid*, colloquial *mūlid* and hypercorrect *mawlad*, the classical pronunciation of the term is preferred, unless the colloquial and classical pronunciations have different meanings (such as classical *mu'allim* "teacher" and colloquial *ma'allim* "master of a craft"). Arabic text passages and purely colloquial terms are transcribed as phonetically as possible within the system of Orientalist transcription. Some letters, however, are pronounced differently in different Egyptian dialects. The letter ج is pronounced as *g* in Cairo and large cities, and *ǧ* in Upper Egypt and the Lower Egyptian countryside. The letter ق is pronounced as ʾ (glottal stop) in Cairo and large cities, *g* in Upper Egypt, and *g* or *q* in the Lower Egyptian countryside. For the sake of clarity, ج and ق are transcribed consequently as *ǧ* and *q*, following their pronunciation in classical Arabic (and parts of the Nile Delta region).

### *Transcription table*

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Consonants* | | س | s | ن | n |
| ء | ʾ | ش | š | ه | h |
| ب | b | ص | ṣ | و | w |
| ت | t | ط | ṭ | ي | y |
| ث | ṯ | ظ | ẓ | *Vowels* | |
| ج | ǧ | ع | ʿ | ا | ā |
| ح | ḥ | غ | ġ | و | ū |
| خ | ḫ | ف | f | ي | ī |
| د | d | ق | q | ـَ (*fatḥa*) | a |
| ذ | ḏ | ك | k | ـُ (*ḍamma*) | u |
| ر | r | ل | l | ـِ (*kasra*) | i |
| ز | z | م | m | | |

[1] *Die Transliteration der arabischen Schrift in ihrer Anwendung auf die Hauptliteratursprachen der islamischen Welt*, reprint of a memorandum issued by the 19th International Conference of Orientalists in Rome, Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1969.

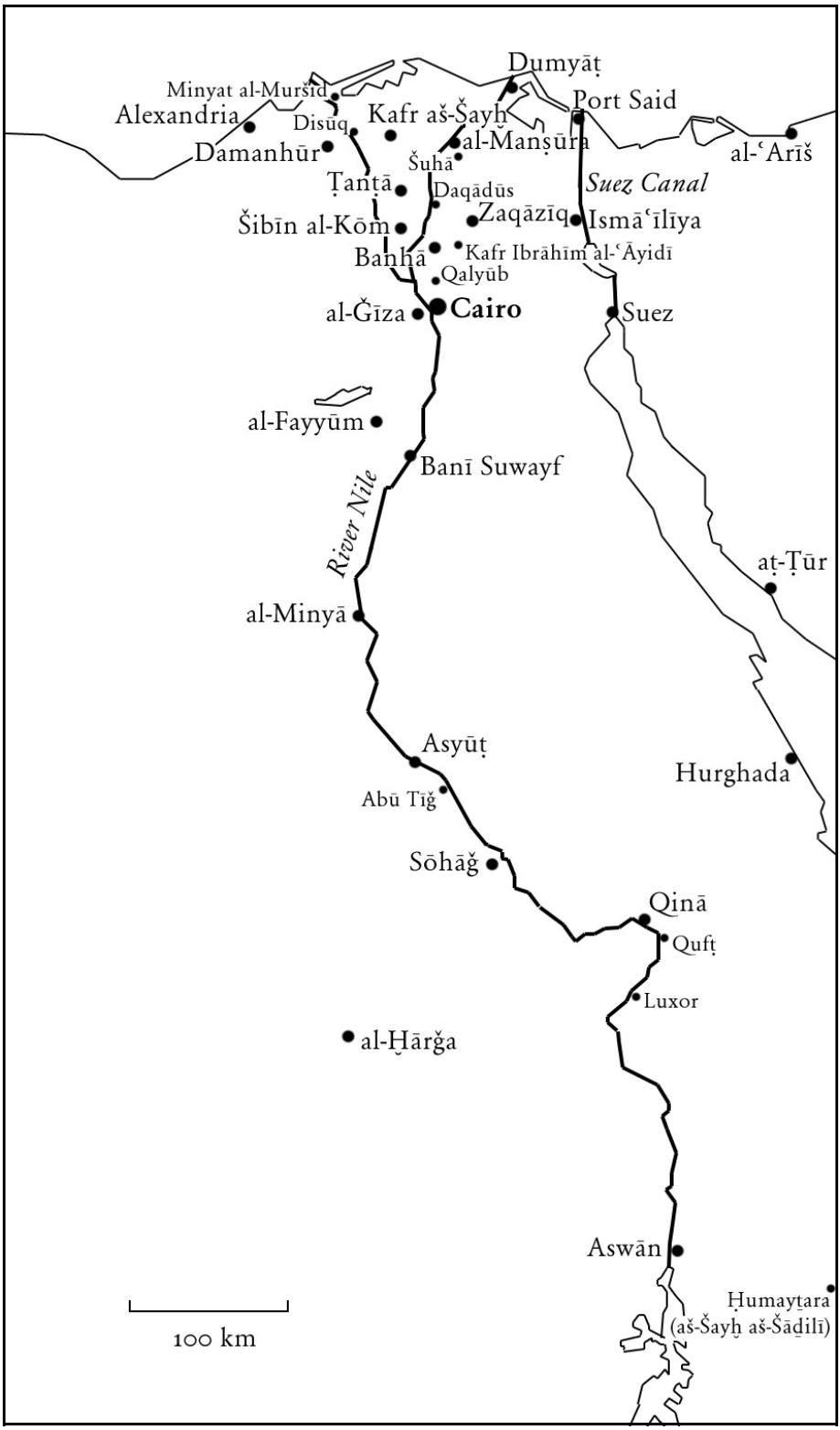


*Image 1: Map of Egypt with province capitals and fieldwork sites.*

"This is Islam!"
(young man distributing drinking water at the mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa)

"Why mawlids? There are no mawlids. Why don't you study something based on the Sunna?"
(Salafi hotel owner in al-Manṣūra upon hearing the subject of my research)

# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1. A controversy

In October 2002, the city of Disūq was in a festive mood. The annual mawlid festival held in honour of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī, a Muslim saint who lived in the 13th century A.D.,[2] gradually built up steam, attracting larger crowds day by day. Growing streams of pilgrims and visitors crowded the city while colourful tents, stalls, and carpets filled its squares and streets. But even as an atmosphere of celebration enveloped the city, not everyone was enthusiastic about the approaching festival.

I was travelling in a service taxi[3] to Disūq two days before the final night of the mawlid when I witnessed a heated argument about the festivity among the passengers. It began as a matter-of-fact discussion between the driver and the passengers about the growing amount of traffic during the mawlid, until one of the passengers, sitting in the front, declared in a loud voice:

> 'But of course the mawlid means undertaking a pilgrimage (*šadd ar-riḥāl*), and the Prophet said: "Undertaking the pilgrimage is only allowed to three mosques: the mosque of Mecca, al-Aqṣā mosque, and my own mosque [in Medina]."'[4]

Another passenger, sitting in the middle, disagreed:

> 'The people go there out of love! They go there saying "There is no deity but God and Muḥammad is the apostle of God!"'
> *Man in the front*: 'No, they don't say "There is no deity but God" at all! Ninety per cent of the people there don't even pray! And there is gambling and drugs and prostitution and all that filth!
> *Man in the middle*: 'Well go to Cairo, check it out, you'll find the same filth. From Madīnat Naṣr to Haram[5], from south to north, you'll find it all there as well! You shouldn't judge the whole thing [i.e. the mawlid] because of some deviations!'
> *Man in the front*: 'And what about the people who stay there on the street and in tents, you see them using the street as a toilet!'
> *Man in the middle*: 'Then why won't the government build them toilets!?'

The heated discussion then calmed down a little and turned to the qualities and miracles of saints, until a man in the middle row on the right brought it back to mawlids again:

> 'But it's clear that the mawlids are all (rises his voice) a *bidʿa*! (i.e. an illegitimate innovation in religion)'
> *Man in the front*: '*Bidʿa*!'
> *A man sitting on the left*: '*Bidʿa*!'
> *Man on the right*: 'Even the mawlid of the Prophet, peace be upon him, is a *bidʿa* that has been invented by the people, he is innocent of it.'
> *Driver*: 'And these things are an invention of the Fatimids.'

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[2]See Hallenberg, Helena: *Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī (1255-96) – a Saint Invented*, Helsinki: Department of Asian and African Studies, University of Helsinki, 1997.

[3]Service taxis, usually extended Peugeots with three rows of seats that can take up to seven passengers, are an important form of public transportation between provincial cities. Service taxis drive throughout the night and charge slightly lower fares than micro-buses and overland coaches.

[4]*Lā tušadd ar-riḥāl illā ilā ṯalāṯati masāǧid: al-Masǧid al-Ḥarām, al-Masǧid al-Aqṣā, wa-masǧidī anā.* Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ: Kitāb al-ḥaǧǧ, ḥadīṯ* 511.

[5]Madīnat Naṣr (Nasr City), on the eastern side of Cairo, is one the city's up-scale districts that are often associated with loose morals in the popular imagination. The district of Haram (Pyramids Road), on the western side of Cairo, hosts Egypt's largest red light district.

The man in the middle tried to add his opinion but he was clearly the minority in this discussion, and thus the talk moved on to other topics.

The men in this service taxi were not alone in their views. Mawlid festivals are highly controversial in contemporary Egypt. While great numbers of Egyptians attend these festivities in honour of saints and describe them in terms of love, spirituality and joy, a critical view of mawlids is widespread in the public sphere and among a significant proportion of the population. But what is so striking about this discussion is not so much the fact that some people like or dislike mawlids, but rather the passion with which they do so. Critics' vehement treatment of mawlids has nothing of the easy-going statements of taste that people make in regard to movies or food, nor of the tongue-in-cheek fanaticism that people display when they speak about football. Of course, there are people who simply do not particularly like mawlids, be it due to the crowds, the noise, or any other reason. But for the men in the service taxi who criticised the mawlid, the festivity is not a matter of taste that one is free to like or dislike. For them, the mawlid is a grave issue indeed, and much more than personal preference is at stake.

What is it about a mawlid, then, that bothers them so much? Or, to ask the same question from a different perspective, what kind of a view of society and religion informs their critical judgement of the mawlid? These questions form the subject of this study in which I look at mawlids as a subject of interpretation, controversy and representation. This thesis does not, therefore, only concern mawlids. It takes the debates on mawlids as a point of crystallisation for much wider issues of concern in Egyptian society: What does it mean to be a modern citizen and in what relation does this stand with being a Muslim? How should a society inhabited by modern Muslim citizens be structured and organised? What kinds of visions of religion, civility and social order are attached to festive practices?

My primary aim is not to present a historiography or an ethnography of the customs, rituals and milieus of mawlid festivals. Of course these issues cannot and are not be ignored, but my primary focus is on the various understandings of piety, festivity, social order, and the self that inform the different interpretations people give to mawlids. Such an approach differs from an ethnography of a festive tradition or an argumentation analysis of a debate through its focus on the relationship between discourse and practice, or, in a different formulation, its view of discourse as a practice, that is, the active – and potentially strategic – definition and construction of social reality that informs the actions one takes. In other words, this study problematises the relations between festive practices, public discourses, and ongoing religious and social transformations in order to explore the discursive commonplaces that guide festive practice and its criticism. These commonplaces are typically treated as self-evident to the degree that they are not made explicit at all. Yet they become visible in matters of controversy like that surrounding mawlids, often less through the exact reasoning of the arguments put forth than by the ellipses and gaps that point at unspoken premises.

This focus on the contestation of piety, festivity and social order can be described as one centring on cultural politics: the way different understandings of and control over society, morality and polity are contested on the level of cultural practices or representations. To speak of mawlids from the perspective of politics implies a focus on power, or more specifically, on hegemony, that is, 'the power to determine the structuring

rules within which struggles are to be fought out'.[6] When people celebrate, organise, reform, criticise, defend or describe mawlids, they are engaged in a struggle over hegemony that involves wider issues. In the case of mawlids, the contested issues are:
– festivity, its meaning and function;
– piety, that is, the way religiosity is expressed in habitus and its place in social practice;
– civility, that is, the spatial, temporal and bodily structure of moral and civic boundaries;
– modernity, that is, the function of these boundaries for the development of the nation as whole; and
– the body and the self, that is, the way these issues are expressed in a disposition of the body and a state of mind, and the way the relationship between appearances and inner states is conceived.

In the following chapters, I do not discuss these issues separately. They are inseparable in the debates, and so must be addressed together in their analysis. Instead, I structure my argumentation as a sequence of changing perspectives that, step by step, sheds light on the foundations, functions, genealogies and consequences of the debates. The form and elements of mawlids, the interpretation of the festivities by their participants, the critical discourse on mawlids including its emergence and significance, the defence of mawlids, the attempts to rationalise the ambivalence characteristic for many perceptions of mawlids, and the enactment of the debate on mawlids in administrative and festive practice, all have a logic of their own and require an analysis of their own.

After a critical review of previous research on the subject and a discussion of fieldwork and method, the analysis begins with a third-person view on the structure of mawlids. It then moves to the interpretations given to the festivities by their participants, followed by the criticism of mawlids and its genealogy and function in the current hegemonic constructions of religion and the nation, and the attempts to defend mawlids against criticism. The focus then turns to the complex representations of mawlids as popular heritage and folkloric art, finally followed by the transformations of the festivities along their discursive representations throughout the 20th century.

## 2. Studying mawlids

Mawlids have been often described and studied, most commonly in the context of research on Sufism (Islamic mysticism) and popular Islam. Yet our understanding of the complex nature of these festivities and their place in society has remained limited. This limited understanding has been mainly due to a long-standing Orientalist paradigm of a definition of Islam that ignores the historicity of its subject, but it is also to some degree attributable to the complex nature of the festivity that is difficult to grasp through research conducted among clearly limited social groups, notably Sufi orders.

The first works with extensive ethnographic documentation of mawlids appeared in

[6]In this understanding, hegemony, like discourse, is not confined to the field of ideas and ideologies, but must also be seen as a mode of action. Crehan, Kate, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology*, London: Pluto Press, 2002, p. 204.

the 19th century, most notably those by Edward William Lane[7] and ʿAlī Mubārak Pasha,[8] both of whom included public festivals as a part of their descriptions of Egyptian culture and society. Likewise, the two most prominent 20th century works on mawlids are also characterised by a primarily descriptive nature. *The Moulids of Egypt*[9] (1940) by the British colonial officer J.W. McPherson, a standard work to this day, contains a detailed account of a great number of mawlids around the country but only a little in terms of interpretation. *Egypt: Moulids, Saints, Sufis*[10] (1990) by Nicolaas Biegman, the former Dutch ambassador to Cairo, is a photo book that, although well-researched and systematic, was not written as an academic study. Highly valuable in terms of ethnography, both books share a focus on documenting mawlids, but not on interpreting their various meanings in Egyptian society.

That said, such descriptive studies are never devoid of some implicit theoretical framework. McPherson, for example, is frequently engaged in a search for traces of pre-Islamic cults.[11] In doing so, he stands in a line of interpretation that was current in his time. This theory, concerning mawlids in particular and popular festivals and the cult of Muslim saints in general, made its first appearance in the 19th century. Its most prominent, although not first, representative was Ignaz Goldziher, who in his *Mohammedanische Studien* (1889)[12] interprets the cult of saints in its entirety as a trace of pre-Islamic customs that, in the form of popular piety, have been superimposed on the presumably original pure and rigid monotheism of Islam. For Goldziher, the mawlids of Egypt are consequently 'the last heirs of those ancient Egyptian rites'.[13]

More recent studies (notably those by Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen) have shown that both the material evidence for such trans-historical continuity and its value for understanding the meaning of the tradition to the people involved in it are in fact very weak.[14] Despite this, Goldziher's analysis and its likes have remained influential to date[15]

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[7]Lane, Edward William, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, reprint of the 1895 edition, London et al.: East-West Publications, 1989 (1836[1]), pp. 241-249, 436-462.

[8]Mubārak, ʿAlī Bāšā, *ʿAlam ad-dīn*, Alexandria: Maṭbaʿat ǧarīdat al-Maḥrūsa, 1299/1882, vol. 1, pp. 139-163; Idem, *al-Ḫiṭaṭ al-ǧadīda li-Miṣr al-Qāhira wa-mudunihā wa-bilādihā al-qadīma wa-š-šahīra*, Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-kubrā al-amīrīya, 1305 [1886/1887], e.g. vol. 13, pp. 50 f.

[9]McPherson, J.W., *The Moulids of Egypt (Egyptian Saint-Days)*, Cairo 1941.

[10]Biegman, Nicolaas H., *Egypt: Moulids, Saints, Sufis*, Den Haag: Schwarz / Kegan, 1990.

[11]*The Moulids of Egypt*, e.g. pp. 3-5, 29 f., 228 f., 306 f. Another, more individual theoretical trait in McPherson's work is the determined anti-modernism he expresses, for example, in his sympathy for the communal experience of the mawlid, his repeated lamentation of the 'kill-joy' tendency of modernity, and his short excursion against jazz (see pp. 6-28, 93-97). It is possible that McPherson was either involved in or sympathetic to Traditionalism, an spiritual-intellectual movement that enjoyed some presence among the European community of Cairo in the 1930s and 40s. See Sedgwick, Mark, 'Against Modernity: Western Traditionalism and Islam,' *ISIM Newsletter* 7 (2001), p. 11.

[12]Goldziher, Ignaz, *Mohammedanische Studien*, Halle: Niemeyer, 1889, vol. 2, pp. 275-378.

[13]*Ibid*., p. 338.

[14]Mayeur-Jaouen, Catherine, 'Égypte', in Henri Chambert-Loir / Claude Guillot (eds), *Le culte des saints dans le monde musulman*, Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1995, pp. 61-73, here p. 71.

[15]Most recently, Georg Stauth has drawn on Goldziher's work in an attempt to reconstruct the ancient Middle Eastern god-king in the figure of the Muslim saint. Stauth, Georg, 'Skizzen zur materiellen Kultur des religiösen Ortes (Islam)', in H. Schrader / M. Kaiser / R. Korff, *Markt,*

because they offer a simple analytic grid and a strongly normative view of Islam. Goldziher's Islam is one that is originally pure, rational and abstract, but which has been influenced by syncretisms over the centuries.[16] This view has left a lasting mark on Western Islamic studies whereby certain scriptural intellectual traditions have been identified as the 'proper' orthodox Islam and everything else has been conveniently labelled as 'popular Islam' and left for ethnographers and anthropologists to study, who, in turn, long ignored the ways popular piety is embedded in the scriptural tradition.[17]

In its normative construction of true Islam, this view has also been eagerly taken on by Salafi modernists who, as I argue in chapter five, have been engaged in the active redefinition of Islam in confrontation with colonial and Orientalist representations. Egyptian folklorists and social scientists, notably Muḥammad Fahmī ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, Sayyid ʿUways and Fārūq Muṣṭafā[18] have further developed the image of mawlids and the cult of saints as a popular tradition separate from but attached to religion, accompanied by a clear normative judgement in disfavour of the popular tradition (see chapter seven). The result of this line of interpretation has been that the study of mawlids has very often been framed by the opposition of orthodoxy and popular religion, while these categories in and of themselves have remained strikingly unquestioned.

In May 2003 I presented some of the results of my fieldwork at the German Academic Exchange Service in Cairo. After the lecture, a man from the audience spoke up to criticise me for showing things that, in his opinion, presented a terribly incorrect image of Islam. His advice to me was to inform myself of the opinion of al-Azhar university because this honourable institution, as Egypt's highest religious authority and the true guardian of the orthodoxy, could provide me with the objectively true Islamic point of view. Indeed, ordinary Egyptians and western and local scholars alike display a deep and profound faith in the orthodoxy of al-Azhar. Some Egyptians have told me that al-Azhar, of course, is opposed to mawlids, while others have said that al-Azhar, of course, is supportive of them. In conferences and discussions with academics in Europe I have repeatedly encountered the assumption that 'the orthodox *ʿulamāʾ*' are opposed to mawlids and anything of the like. This is rather strange, however, because al-Azhar as an institution has published no official views on mawlids at all since the 1960s,[19] while individual sheikhs of al-Azhar have in fact published views of all kinds. The reason for this distorted perception is the long-standing Orientalist tradition of defining a strictly

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*Kultur, und Gesellschaft*, Münster: Lit Verlag, 2001, pp. 149-166.

[16]See, e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 277-290.

[17]This approach has become increasingly questioned in recent studies, notably by Abu-Zahra, Nadia, *The Pure and Powerful: Studies in Contemporary Muslim Society*, Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 1997, pp. 37-49; and Mayeur-Jaouen, Catherine, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage légendaire en Islam: Le mouled de Tantâ du XIII^e siècle a nos jours*, Paris: Aubier, 2004, pp. 15-23.

[18]ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, Muḥammad Fahmī, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī wa-dawlat ad-darāwīš fī Miṣr* (Maktabat ad-dirāsāt aš-šaʿbīya; 30), Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-miṣrīya al-ʿāmma li-l-kitāb, 1999 (1948[1]); 'Uways, Sayyid, 'Min malāḥim al-muǧtamaʿ al-Miṣrī al-muʿāṣir: ẓāhirat irsāl ar-rasāʾil ilā ḍarīḥ al-imām aš-Šāfiʿī', in *al-Aʿmāl al-kāmilā li-d-duktūr Sayyid ʿUways*, Cairo: Markaz al-maḥrūsa, vol. 1, pp. 9-314; Idem, 'al-Izdiwāǧīya fī t-turāṯ ad-dīnī al-miṣrī: dirāsa ṯaqāfīya iǧtimāʿīya tārīḫīya', in *al-Aʿmāl al-kāmilā li-d-duktūr Sayyid ʿUways*, vol. 1, pp. 624-699.; Muṣṭafā, Fārūq Aḥmad, *al-Mawālid: dirāsa li-l-ʿādāt wa-t-taqālīd aš-šaʿbīya fī Miṣr*, 2nd ed., Alexandria: al-Hayʾa al-miṣrīya al-ʿāmma li-l-kitāb, 1981.

[19]In 1965, the *šayḫ al-Azhar* Maḥmūd Šaltūt issued a *fatwā* condemning the celebration of mawlids. Abu-Zahra, *The Pure and Powerful*, pp. 205 f.

scripturalist intellectual reading (that is opposed to ecstatic and mystic tendencies) as *the* orthodox Islam. Based on this often implicit assumption, many researchers of popular Sufism have reached rather questionable results.

An outstanding and recent case of this assumption is Aviva Schussman's study on a *fatwā* by al-Azhar concerning the legitimacy of *mawlid an-nabī*.[20] The birthday of the Prophet Muhammad is celebrated widely throughout the Muslim world, and in Egypt it is a major public holiday. Although some Salafis consider it illegitimate, their view is marginal in Egyptian public media and scholarly debates. And unlike the case of mawlids held in honour of saints, there is enough consensus within al-Azhar to actually issue a *fatwā* on the matter.[21] Schussman, however, starts with the unquestioned assumption that the cult of saints and the Prophet is 'contrary to Muḥammad's early message'[22] and that orthodox Muslim scholars are opposed to *mawlid an-nabī*.[23] The *fatwā* that legitimises the festivity in principle but stipulates certain conditions concerning the form of celebration is, according to Schussman, nothing but a half-hearted compromise to popular religion and does not even fulfill the formal criteria of a legal *fatwā*, sounding, rather, more like a popular sermon:

> 'In conclusion, the *fatwā* seems evasive, tenuous, vague, and to some extent – erroneous. It creates the impression that the *muftī* hardly approves of the *mawlid* and totally disapproves of the popular ceremonies involved; but for pragmatic reasons he carefully considers – first and foremost – his audience's social needs and wishes. This may be the reason why he does not establish his legal attitude to the *mawlid*. Thus, on the one hand the *fatwā* reflects the flexibility of a religious leader towards his people; on the other hand it reflects a concession by a scholar to popular religion. Is this a sign of "the general decline of modern religious thought in Islam and in contemporary Egypt?"'[24]

In fact, the *fatwā* in question is a very typical example of the *fatwās* that are issued by al-Azhar: scholarly discussion is kept to a minimum and the line of reasoning is easy to follow but diplomatic, producing a careful balance between different currents. Claiming that, formally, this is not really a *fatwā* at all is only possible if one takes the scholarly conventions of a different era as an ossified, ahistorical ideal to which contemporary orthodox scholarship should adhere. More importantly, however, there is no urgent reason to assume that the *fatwā* only makes concessions to 'popular religion' (a highly problematic term I address in chapter seven). It is equally reasonable to assume that the scholars who wrote the *fatwā* actually like the popular mawlid celebrations but need to phrase their opinion carefully in order not to compromise their habitus as stern, orthodox scholars. After all, the *'ulamā'* of al-Azhar grow up in ordinary Egyptian families, and it is quite likely that they have at some point thoroughly enjoyed the festive joy and tasty sweets of *mawlid an-nabī*. Finally, it makes very little sense to suggest that

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[20]Schussman, Aviva, 'The Legitimacy and Nature of *Mawlid an-Nabī*', *Islamic Law and Society* 5 (1998), pp. 214-234.

[21]See also *Ṣawt al-Azhar*, 23.5.2003: Muḥammad Sayyid Ṭanṭāwī, 'Li-māḏā naḥtafil bi-l-mawlid an-nabawī aš-šarīf', p. 7.

[22]*Ibid.* p. 216, note 7. It is worth noting that Schussman refers to Goldziher to substantiate this interpretation.

[23]*Ibid.* p. 215.

[24]*Ibid.*, p. 233, citing Lazarus-Yafeh, H., 'Muḥammad Mutawallī aš-Ša'rāwī – a Portrait of a Contemporary 'Ālim in Egypt', in G.R. Warburg / U.M. Kupferschmidt (eds), *Islam and Nationalism in Egypt and the Sudan*, Praeger: New York, 1983, pp. 281-297, here p. 282.

such a *fatwā* is an expression of decline just because it does not work the way Orientalist common sense would expect.[25]

Orthodoxy, to stick with the exemplary case, is produced, not given. It makes little sense to blame al-Azhar for not playing orthodox because what is recognised as the dominant, authoritative reading of Islam varies in different historical settings. Itzchak Weismann and Leila Hudson, in their studies on the Sufis and scholars of 19th century Damascus,[26] have demonstrated that there was never a precise moment of dramatic break when popular, heterodox Sufism was replaced by orthodox Salafi Islam. What actually happened was that some of the Sufi-oriented and *maḏhab*-based orthodox scholars initiated a Sufi-minded reform movement that slowly shifted – in consecutive waves of reform and not without conflict – towards a Salafi-oriented rationalism and the rehabilitation of *iǧtihād*. In a process that lasted more than 50 years and involved successive generations of orthodox scholars, the meaning of orthodoxy shifted. Hence, it makes little sense to ask what orthodox Islam says about mawlids. The question that does more justice to Islamic scholars and is more fruitful to analysis is how orthodoxy is constructed through certain judgements of controversial issues.

Schussman's article exemplifies the way many researchers of contemporary Islam still start their research with ready-made assumptions about the actors, ideologies and interests involved. Meanwhile many scholars in the field have credibly questioned such assumptions including those about 'orthodoxy', most notably Malika Zeghal in her study on the *'ulamā'* of al-Azhar,[27] and Nadia Abu-Zahra in her study of the veneration of as-Sayyida Zaynab.[28] Yet it remains very common to draw a dividing line between official or orthodox Islam, or Great Tradition (meaning intellectual scholarly trends and modern Salafi movements), and popular Islam, or Small Tradition (meaning communal and mystical traditions), without considering the historical and contextual character of such categories.[29] Moreover, orthodoxy is only one case of contextual categories that are far too

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[25]Interestingly, Vardit Rispler-Chaim, in her study of the scholarly debates on the Middle of Šaʿbān celebrations, states a process of decline for exactly the opposite reason. While Schussman blames the scholars of al-Azhar for abandoning the proper tradition of orthodox jurisprudence, Rispler-Chaim laments that scholarly discourse (which, also in this case, is characterised by a cautious and conditional defence of the festivity) sticks to traditional models of argumentation and remains conservative and devoid of innovation. It seems that whatever contemporary Muslim *'ulamā'* do, they cannot satisfy some scholars' claims of what Islamic scholarship should really be about. Rispler-Chaim, Vardit, 'The 20th Century Treatment of an Old *Bidʿa*: *Laylat Al-Nisf min Shaʿbān*', *Der Islam* 72 (1995), 1, pp. 82-97.

[26]Weismann, Itzchak, *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus*, Leiden: Brill, 2001, pp. 305-316; Hudson, Leila, 'Reading al-Shaʿrānī: The Sufi Genealogy of Islamic Modernism in Late Ottoman Damascus', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 15 (2004), 1, pp. 39-68.

[27]Zeghal, Malika, *Gardiens de l'islam: Les oulémas d'Al Azhar dans l'Egypte contemporaine*, Paris: Presses de sciences po, 1996.

[28]Abu-Zahra, *The Pure and Powerful*, pp. 37-49.

[29]The best and most influential presentation of this model has been offered by Gellner, who, in his analysis of the tension between official and popular Islam, reproduces the reformist imagination of Islam in an ingenious way but fails to consider its historical, constructed character (Gellner, Ernest, *Muslim Society*, Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 4 f.). Gellner's interpretation has been followed by some attempts to reinterpret 'popular' in order to also include populist political movements (Waardenburg, Jacques, 'Popular and official Islam: Contemporary developments with special reference to Iran', *The Arabist: Budapest Studies in Arabic*

easily taken as general distinctions to guide one's research without adequately analysing their theoretical and practical validity. Other cases relevant to this study are the construction of a fundamental ideological split between secularists and Islamists,[30] the dissociation of Islamism and modernism, and the assumption that the public sphere is a site of empowerment and contestation of state hegemony.[31] As I show in chapters four and five, all these assumptions are valid in specific contexts but might turn highly misleading in others.

For this reason I abstain from analysing the debates on mawlids along the usual lines of dichotomies such as Islamists and secularists, government and opposition, or orthodox and popular Islam. Instead, I approach the debates on mawlids by beginning with what people say about them and then moving on to reconstruct the relevant discursive fields. This approach quickly compelled me to give up distinctions that I, in the early stages of my research, had assumed to be relevant. The general image given by much of Egyptian public debate, but also Western literature, is that traditional(ist) Sufis support mawlids as a part of the popular religion they represent while orthodox scholars of al-Azhar and the Islamists oppose them because they are un-Islamic, and secular modernists stand above the debate. This image represents one particular point of view in the contestation of religion and modernity in Egypt. It is neither an accurate nor comprehensive description of the debates surrounding mawlids. While holding mutually exclusive points of view on issues such as, say, family law, Islamists and secularists may in fact share very similar views in regard to Sufism, mawlids, and popular culture. Moreover, al-Azhar, the institution taken to represent unified Islamic orthodoxy, is far from united on the issue of mawlids.

Just as categories like orthodoxy and modernity do not exist beyond the social actions that construct them, festivities, beliefs and rituals do not *have* a hidden authentic meaning inherent in them but obscure to their believers and practitioners. On the contrary, they are *given* meanings by their participants. These meanings are subject to change, and only understandable through their construction via forms of discourse and modes of action. This is why I consider research based on fixed classifications such as orthodoxy and popular Islam biassed and misleading. Instead of taking these classifications for granted, it is necessary to explore how they are defined and established through social practice and discursive description and contestation.

Prior to the 1960s, the focus on textual traditions in Oriental studies and on small

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13-14 (1995), pp. 313-341), but it has also inspired some serious pitfalls when researchers have set out to analyse Muslim societies through the filter of a presumed original, egalitarian, non-mystical spirit of Islam. See, e.g., Lindholm, Charles, 'Prophets and *Pir*s: Charismatic Islam in the Middle East and South Asia', in Werbner/Basu (eds), *Embodying Charisma*, pp. 209-233.

[30]The most typical example of this is the (outspokenly secularist) construction of secular modernity versus (and, through,) fundamentalist anti-modernity (see, e.g., Tibi, Bassam, *Islamischer Fundamentalismus, moderne Wissenschaft und Technologie*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1992). For a critique of this view, see, e.g., Asad, Talal, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2003.

[31]Eickelman, Dale, 'Mass Higher Education and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary Arab Societies', *American Ethnologist* 9 (1992), 4, pp. 643-655; Eickelman, Dale F. / Jon W. Anderson, 'Redefining Muslim Publics', in Dale F. Eickelman / Jon W. Anderson (eds), *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999, pp. 1-18.

village communities in anthropology left urban Muslim piety largely beyond the focus of research. Large mawlids were never restricted to village communities, however, and by the mid-20th century they had developed into a primarily urban affair. Yet for a long time, they remained lumped under the diffuse category of popular Islam that effectively isolated them from the study of 'proper' Islamic piety.[32] With the transformation of the methodological and theoretical foundations of both historical and anthropological research, Sufism and the veneration of saints slowly developed into a relevant topic for researchers, and cities became a respectable place for anthropologists to conduct their fieldwork. Simultaneously, the focus of research shifted towards attempting to interpret the social construction of tradition and the meanings given to it by the people involved. The ground-breaking work in this direction was Michael Gilsenan's *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt*, based on fieldwork conducted in the mid-1960s and published in 1973.[33] A study on the reformist Sufi group al-Ḥāmidīya aš-Šāḏilīya, *Saint and Sufi* was a crucial step towards an understanding of the ways religion, religious practice, and orthodoxy are constructed and established in a given social and historical setting. Although partly limited by restrictions imposed on Gilsenan's fieldwork by the Egyptian authorities, Gilsenan's study of the way a Sufi order works, including a remarkable investigation of how the Ḥāmidīya aš-Šāḏilīya employs the mawlid of its founder for mobilisation and self-representation, remains useful to date.

*Saint and Sufi* has since been followed by a number of empirical studies on Sufism in Egypt. In *The Hidden Government*[34] (1990), Edward Reeves presented the first Western ethnography on mawlids and the veneration of Muslim saints in the Nile Delta region[35] and a much too little appreciated analysis of the cult of saints from the perspective of clientelism. Between 1991 and 1993, Pierre Luizard published several articles on Sufi orders, mawlids, and their relationship to the state.[36] Luizard, like many of his successors, relied heavily on Fred de Jong's historiography of Sufi orders in 19th century Egypt, a standard work until today.[37] The first extensive ethnography of contemporary Sufism was

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[32]See, e.g., Kriss, Rudolf / Hubert Kriss-Heinrich, *Volksglaube im Bereich des Islam: Vol. 1: Wallfahrtswesen und Heiligenverehrung*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1960; Bannerth, Ernst, *Islamische Wallfahrtstätten Kairos*, Cairo: Österreichisches Kulturinstitut Kairo, 1973.

[33]Gilsenan, Michael, *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973.

[34]Reeves, Edward B., *The Hidden Government: Ritual, Clientelism, and Legitimation in Northern Egypt*, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990.

[35]The first Arabic ethnography of the mawlid in Ṭanṭā was ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, *As-Sayyid al-Badawī*, a highly polemical book first published in 1948. It has been followed more recently by Ḥilmī, Ibrāhīm, *Adabīyāt al-ma'ṯūr aš-šaʿbī fī mawlid as-Sayyid al-Badawī* (Maktabat ad-dirāsāt aš-šaʿbīya, vol. 9), Cairo: al-Hay'a al-miṣrīya al-ʿāmma li-l-kitāb, 1996, an impressionistic work that is written primarily from a folkloric perspective of collecting colloquial poetry but which also includes interviews with pilgrims and atmospheric descriptions. Most recently, Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen (see below note 45) has thoroughly researched the veneration and mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī.

[36]Luizard, Pierre-Jean, 'Le rôle des confréries soufies dans le système politique égyptien', *Monde arabe Maghreb Machrek* 131 (January-March 1991), pp. 26-53; *Ibid.*, 'Un mawlid particulier', *Egypte / Monde Arabe* 14 (1993), 2, pp. 79-102.

[37]de Jong, Frederick, *Ṭuruq and Ṭuruq-Linked Institutions in Nineteenth Century Egypt: A Historical Study in Organisational Dimensions of Islamic Mysticism*, Leiden: Brill, 1978. See also de Jong, Frederick, *Sufi Orders in Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Egypt and the Middle East: Collected Studies*, Istanbul: The Isis Press, [ca. 2000].

provided by Valerie Hoffman in her *Sufis, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt* (1995),[38] a monumental work of broad scope on Sufi practice in contemporary Egypt that significantly contributed to correcting the image of Sufism being on the brink of extinction. The following years saw a rapid increase of studies on Sufi rituals and reformist Sufism. Julian Johansen's *Sufism and Islamic Reform in Egypt* (1996)[39] was the first study devoted to the debate on Sufism and Sufi traditions and the attempts of reformist Sufis to respond to the criticisms directed at them. *The Pure and Powerful* (1997), by Nadia Abu-Zahra, focusses on the saint veneration of as-Sayyida Zaynab in Cairo. Michael Frishkopf's PhD thesis *Sufism, Ritual and Modernity in Egypt* (1999)[40] looks at the way some Sufi orders reshape their rituals to fit modernist standards of ritual and bodily disposition. Rachida Chih's *Le Soufisme au Quotidien* (2000)[41] offers a detailed and profound study of the Ḫalwatīya Sufi brotherhood. At the same time, Sufi movements, local Muslim pilgrimages, and the debates surrounding them have become a subject of research at sites around the Muslim world, most prominently in the Indian sub-continent and West Africa.[42] From a historical perspective, the transformations of and debates on Sufi practice have become an established field of research, most notably represented in the edited volume *Islamic Mysticism Contested* (1999)[43].

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[38]Hoffman, Valerie J.: *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995.

[39]Johansen, Julian, *Sufism and Islamic Reform in Egypt: The Battle for Islamic Tradition*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

[40]Frishkopf, Michael, *Sufism, Ritual and Modernity in Egypt: Language Performance as an Adaptive Strategy*, PhD thesis, Los Angeles: UCLA, 1999.

[41]Chih, Rachida, *Le Soufisme au quotidien. Confréries d'Egypte au XXe siècle,* [Arles]: Actes Sud, 2000.

[42]Jansen, Willy, 'Het offensief tegen de Zusters van de Broederschap: Vrouwen in de algerijnse islam', *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift* 15 (December 1988), 3, pp. 507-527; Coulon, Christian, 'Women, Islam, and *Baraka*', in Cruise O'Brien and Christian Coulon (eds), *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, pp. 113-133; Troll, Christian W. (ed.), *Muslim Shrines in India: Their Character, History and Significance*, Delhi etc.: OxfordUniv. Press 1992; Loimeier, Roman, *Islamische Erneuerung und politischer Wandel in Nordnigeria: Die Auseinandersetzungen zwischen den Sufi-Bruderschaften und ihren Gegnern seit Ende der 50er jahre*, Münster etc.: Lit Verlag, 1993; Chambert-Loir, Henri / Claude Guillot (eds), *Le culte des saints dans le monde musulman*, Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1995; Westerlund, David / Evers Rosander, Eva (eds),*African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounters between Sufis and Islamists*, London: Hurst & Co., 1997; Werbner, Prina / Helene Basu (eds), *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, locality and the performance of emotion in Sufi cults*, London: Routledge, 1998; Declich, Francesca. 'Sufi Experience in Rural Somalia: A Focus on Women', *Social Anthropology* 8 (2000), 3, pp. 295-318; Evers Rosander, Eva, 'Going and not going to Porokhane: Mourid women and pilgrimage in Senegal and Spain', in Simon Coleman / John Eade (eds), *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 69-89; Idem, 'Mam Diarra Bousso – the Mourid Mother of Porokhane, Senegal', *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 4 (2003); Muhaimin, A.G., 'The Morphology of *Adat*: The celebration of Islamic Holy Day in North Coast Java', *Studia Islamika* 6 (1999), 3, pp. 103-130; Stauth, Georg (ed.), *On Archaeology of Sainthood and Local Spirituality in Islam* (Yearbook of the sociology of Islam; 5), Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2004; Chiffoleau, S. / Anna Madoeuf (eds), *Les pelerinages au Maghreb et au Moyen-Orient: Espaces publics, espaces du public*, Beirut: Publications IFPO, 2005; Chanfi, Ahmed (ed.), 'Nouveaux visages du soufisme", theme issue of *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, Vol. 133 (January-March 2006), forthcoming.

[43]de Jong, Frederick/ Berndt Radtke (eds), *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, Leiden et al.: Brill, 1999.

These studies have contributed to a better understanding of mystical and communal spirituality and the significance of mawlids to it. Yet they all focus on Sufi orders, with the exception of Reeves and Abu-Zahra, who focus on specific pilgrimage sites. The consequence of this focus is that mawlids do not appear as a discrete phenomenon, but rather as an epiphenomenon of Sufism or the Muslim cult of saints. This perception very much reflects the point of view of the mystics and pilgrims who are the main empirical source of these works, but it largely overlooks elements of mawlids that are not immediately related to Sufism and the veneration of saints.

Mawlids are based on, but are not identical with, Sufism and the veneration of saints. A saint's festival would be impossible to celebrate without the presence of a saint's tomb and the collective effort of active mystics. To a large extent, pilgrimage to the saint's tomb is the core of the mawlid festivity. But while most participants share a general sympathy for mystical spirituality, they need not be fully devoted to it. For them a mawlid is a complex festive experience that involves more than mysticism and sainthood. And in fact, for many participants, spirituality and sainthood play only a marginal role, and some of the people who wholeheartedly celebrate a mawlid may actually be openly hostile to Sufism and the veneration of saints.

The complexity of mawlids is acknowledged by devout Sufis who readily agreed when I explained that I did not study Sufism but rather mawlids and that mawlids are not only about Sufism just like Sufism is not only about mawlids. Yet in studies that look at mawlids in a Sufi context, much of the festive practice, most notably the neighbourhood festivities and the wild, unruly celebrations of roaming youths, appear as a background scenery at best. To fill this gap, some researchers have recently turned their attention specifically to mawlids. The geographers Anna Madoeuf and Delphine Pagès-El Karoui[44] have chosen a direction of analysis very different from the studies on Sufi orders, looking at the spatial and temporal construction of festivity and the ways a mawlid transforms and establishes urban space and social order. Their work has been highly influential to this thesis, as have been the recent works of Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen who, from the perspective of a historian, has written extensively on mawlids and the cult of Muslim saints. Her work includes a study on the biography of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī, a historiography of his mawlid in Ṭanṭā, and a long-needed general historiography of mawlids in Egypt.[45]

This thesis builds on the empirical and analytical findings of these works but takes a somewhat different perspective. With its focus on mawlids as a subject of contestation, it stands in a line of research on Islamic religion and Muslim societies (notably the work

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[44]Madoeuf, Anna: 'Les grands mûlid-s: des vieux quartiers du Caire aux territoires de l'islam', in Guy Di Méo (ed.), *La géographie en fêtes*, Paris: Ophrys, 2001, pp. 155-265. Pagès-El Karoui, Delphine, 'Le mouled de Sayyid al-Badawî à Tantâ: logiques spatiales et production d'une identité urbaine', in Chiffoleau / Madoeuf (eds), *Les pelerinages*, pp. 237-264.

[45]Mayeur-Jaouen, Catherine, *Al-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī: un grand saint de l'islam égyptien*, Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1994; Idem (ed.), *Saints et Héros du Moyen-Orient contemporain*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2002; Idem, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*; Idem, *Pèlerinages d'Égypte. Histoire de la piété copte et musulmane (XVe-XXe siècles)*, Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS, 2005; Idem, 'Le corps entre sacré et profane: la réforme des pratiques pèlerines en Égypte (XIXe-XXe siècles)', *Revue d'Etudes des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, forthcoming.

of Timothy Mitchell, Gregory Starrett, Walter Armbrust, and Lila Abu-Lughod)[46] that seeks to deconstruct the nationalist narratives of reform and modernisation and to analyse their underlying mechanisms of exclusion and relations of hegemony. In doing so, it is a critical project that questions the validity of the narratives of progress and development commonly offered in Egyptian nationalist historiography and political discourse, but also in a number of international academic and non-academic publications. This does not mean, however, that I propose a nostalgic view of the subject: mawlids are based on their own relations of power, and it would be naïve to view them as a site of popular empowerment in the face of modernist hegemony. My intent is not to take sides with any of the models of society and the self offered by the participants in the debates, but rather to show the complex and partly contradictory character of those models and the exclusions they need to make in order to create the harmonic and organic whole they take as given.

## 3. Method and fieldwork

The methodological approach of my research has been influenced by my personal trajectory in the academic field. Originally trained in German Islamic studies with a strong emphasis on textual study, I later increasingly moved towards the methods and analytical tools of cultural and social anthropology. In an attempt to exploit the benefits of both traditions of research whenever possible, I came to combine different analytical perspectives that may together be labelled as discourse analysis: the study of the ways people describe, judge and construct social reality through various forms of communication, be it through informal conversations, oral histories, or literary and academic writing, to name just a few examples.

The concept of discourse has become heavily inflated in the social and cultural sciences over the past two decades, to the extent that is has lost much of the power it had in Foucault's formulation of 'discourse itself as practice'.[47] To provide more than a mere trendy label, the study of discourse in the social sciences has to account for this imminent relationship between saying and doing, of constructing objects through discourse and acting in a world inhabited by such objects. This is a fairly trivial insight, but realising it in a study of a controversial social practice requires a complex approach to the subject, both in the collection of empirical data and in the structure of the text.

I began my research with some hypotheses in mind, most notably expecting to find a triangle of secular modernist, Islamist, and traditionalist positions.[48] However, my early

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[46]Mitchell, Timothy, *Colonising Egypt*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988; Starrett, Gregory, 'The hexis of interpretation: Islam and the body in the Egyptian popular school', *American Ethnologist* 22 (1995), 4, pp. 953-969; Armbrust, Walter, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; Abu-Lughod, Lila, 'Feminist Longings and Postcolonial Conditions', in Lila Abu-Lughod, (ed.), *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1998, pp. 3-31.

[47]Foucault, Michel, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972, p. 46.

[48]Such as suggested by Shepard, William E., 'Islam and Ideology: Towards a Typology', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19 (1987), pp. 307-336.

hypotheses soon turned out to be inaccurate, and I discarded them in favour of an approach that bears some similarity to grounded theory, even though I was not versed with its methodology at the time. Discarding fixed classifications or theories as a starting point, the first task of an analysis such as that proposed here is to map the classifications and theories presented by the people involved and the discursive constructions they make of the subject of mawlids. Only upon completion of this task does it become possible to move forward with the analysis in order to understand the significance and function of specific classifications in a specific historical context, and to trace their relationship to the administrative and festive practices that form and transform the object of debate.[49]

The method of sampling I have chosen bears some similarity to the work of a historian: searching for available clues from available sources in an attempt to reconstruct an accurate and intelligible narrative of what happened or, in this case, continues to happen.[50] The purpose of the data collection was, thus, to find reoccurring patterns of celebrating, describing and judging mawlids, not to measure their frequency in relation to other variables. Such a sample must represent the variety and complexity of the issue with some accuracy but it does not need to be representative in quantitative terms. Following this approach of theoretical sampling I proceeded with my fieldwork with no formal criteria for my material, instead allowing the preliminary results of fieldwork and archive research guide my next steps. This approach quickly enabled me to generate new interpretations in place of my discarded early hypotheses. It also lead me to opt for multi-sited fieldwork (not confined to a fixed location or group of people)[51] that best suited my analytical approach.

Researching mawlids, in the plural, I had to take various locations and discourses into account. My fieldwork was based on a combination of interviews, participant observation and written sources. This choice of fieldwork and method had its limits, of course. It broadened the scope of analysis at the cost of the depth that might be reached through intensive research within a given group. But while analyses of the latter kind have become readily available and the inner dynamics of a Sufi movement or a site of pilgrimage quite well understood, our understanding of mawlids as festivities embedded in complex social relationships and public representations is still far from comprehensive.

The main primary sources for this study are interviews, notes from participant observation, sound recordings, and photographs taken during fieldwork conducted between 2002 and 2005. Additionally, I have used press articles covering a period from the late 1980s to 2005, selected historical sources, contemporary religious and academic literature, secondary literature on related subjects, motion pictures, television, literary fiction, historical photographs, maps, and unprocessed data provided by other researchers in the field.[52]

In the course of fieldwork I discussed the subject of mawlids with a variety of people,

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[49]Glaser, Barney G. / Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed., Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1970 [1967[1]].

[50]See Ricoeur, Paul, *Histoire et vérité*, 3rd ed., Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964 [1955[1]].

[51]See Marcus, George E.. 'Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995), pp. 95-117.

[52]Especially to be mentioned are Niek Biegman, Wendy Dunleavy and Jennifer Peterson, who have offered me a look at their unprocessed material and preliminary conclusions.

sometimes in arranged interviews but usually in informal encounters, and travelled to mawlids around Egypt to observe the festivities and talk with participants and local residents. I attended some thirty different mawlids, mostly in Cairo and the Nile Delta region (Lower Egypt, the region between Cairo and the Mediterranean Sea). This selection was based on pragmatic considerations: because I stayed in Cairo during my fieldwork, Greater Cairo and the Nile Delta region were geographically nearby. Additional factors played a role: state-imposed restrictions concerning the movement of foreigners in Upper (that is, southern) Egypt were still in force, which caused some limitations on conducting fieldwork. These factors have together contributed to the landscape of this study: that of Greater Cairo's popular districts and Nile Delta cities and villages, a densely populated region that houses rapid religious and cultural changes. A research focussed on Upper Egypt, a region poorer and more conservative than Lower Egypt, and characterised by a strong local identity and the traumatic experience of political and tribal violence, would have produced different questions and different answers.[53]

A further limitation to the sample is that this thesis is more about men than it is about women. This is due to the patterns of gender segregation and standards of modesty that in Egypt often make it more difficult for women than men to engage in discussion with a male researcher beyond an exchange of greetings. When available, I have tried to include women's accounts to balance the image but the reader should remain aware that this was not always possible.

Although there is also a strong tradition of Christian saints-day festivals in Egypt,[54] this thesis is almost exclusively about Islamic mawlids, the reason being that Christian pilgrimages have a very different position in the discursive field and would thus require a separate study. For one thing, they cause significantly less controversy. But more importantly, the place of Christian pilgrimages in Coptic piety and identity in the wider public sphere shows some significant differences to related issues in the Islamic tradition. Christian mawlids are not wholly overlooked in this thesis but they appear primary as a contrastive case that allows us to question whether and to what degree the debate on mawlids is specifically Islamic.

Some of the people whose voices are quoted in this thesis present views that are not accepted in the Egyptian public sphere, in some cases not even within their own circle. For this reason, most of the people interviewed appear either anonymously or by only their first name. For the same reason, some locations and Sufi groups have been made anonymous. On the other hand, many scholars and sheikhs saw the presence of a foreign researcher as an opportunity to present their views and public persona to an international audience, a fact they often made very clear to me. These people, as well as persons of public prominence (for example politicians and public intellectuals), appear with their full name and credentials.

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[53]See, e.g., Hopkins, Nicholas / Reem Saad (eds), *Upper Egypt: Identity and Change*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2004.

[54]Meinardus, Otto F.A., *Coptic Saints and Pilgrimages*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2002, pp. 67-82, Mayeur-Jaouen, *Pèlerinages d'Égypte*.

# Chapter Two: At the mawlid

Sometimes when I asked people what the mawlid of their town looked like, they told me: 'It looks just like a mawlid!'. On one occasion, I met a young man at a shooting stand during the mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa in Cairo. He was having the time of his life and exclaimed: 'The mawlid is mawlid!' (meaning approximately: 'This mawlid is really rocking!'). The mawlid, it seems, has a specific imagery and atmosphere so vivid that 'mawlid' is description enough.

*Image 2: The primary area of pilgrims' tents and Sufi gatherings in the Sīǧar fields at the mawlid of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 7 October 2004.*

So what does a mawlid look like, then? To an outsider, the initial appearance is utterly chaotic. It is characterised by a colourful mixture of Sufi pilgrims, roaming youths, families in front of their homes, amusements, trade, ecstatic piety and solemn commemoration, all framed by colourful lights and very loud Sufi music.

The character of different mawlids varies greatly depending on the regional and social setting of the festivity as well as the public in attendance. But certain characteristic features can be observed at almost all mawlids: The celebration usually takes place around a shrine in which the saint, or parts of his or her body, is believed to be buried. Although 'mawlid' literally means birthday, the festivity usually takes place on the day of the saint's death, or at another convenient time following either the lunar or solar calendar.[55] A

[55]In general, the mawlids of Cairo and Upper Egypt follow the Islamic lunar calendar while in the Nile Delta they usually take place according to the solar calendar. The fact that the celebrations often take place on the day of the saint's death has pragmatic reasons: the saint's date of birth is not always known, and the saint cult of a Sufi sheikh often begins with the funeral that becomes the starting point of an annual ritual. But religious reasons also play a role: death is seen as a union with God, thus being the real birth of a mystic. The mawlids of descendants of the Prophet Muhammad in Cairo are usually celebrated near the day of the saints' death according to the lunar calendar and based on a fixed day of the week, such as the second Wednesday of Ǧumādā II (as-Sayyida Nafīsa) or the last Tuesday of Raǧab (as-Sayyida Zaynab). Recently it has become common to additionally celebrate the birthday (*mīlād*) of major saints in Cairo. These celebrations, like the small secondary mawlids known as *raǧabīya* (although they usually do not take place in the month

mawlid is almost always a public festivity open to everyone to participate in, and the celebrations usually include a complex mixture of pilgrimage, ecstatic piety, community celebration, trade and amusements. The festivity typically takes place on the squares and streets of a village or an urban quarter, but sometimes a mawlid is celebrated on agricultural land adjacent to a settlement in order to take advantage of wider space. The celebrations take place at night and often last a week or longer, culminating in the final 'great night' (*al-layla al-kabīra*).

*Image 3: Crowds in front of the mosque at the mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 5 August 2003.*

In this chapter I offer a third-person description of mawlids, beginning with an ethnographic introduction to the shape and appearance of one particular mawlid, followed by an analysis of the structure of mawlids and the conditions that make them possible. My main argument in the following is that mawlids are characterised by a temporally and spatially limited suspension of social boundaries and a festive organisation consisting of numerous separate celebrations with little or no overarching programme. In this chapter I do not discuss the significance of this festive atmosphere from the point of view of the participants; a separate chapter is devoted to that issue. Here I stick to the perspective of a sociological observer, attempting to recognise what happens in a mawlid and how it works.

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of Rağab) are smaller, primarily Sufi events and have less if any trade and amusements. Twentieth century saints are usually celebrated according to the solar calendar. The exact timing of a mawlid is commonly adjusted according to pragmatic considerations. Many mawlids in the Nile Delta follow the agricultural calendar, most importantly those of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī and Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī, which take place in October following the cotton harvest. Most of the mawlids of Alexandria take place during the summer holiday season (July-August). During Ramaḍān no mawlids are celebrated, and festivals that follow the solar calendar are either held earlier or postponed. See McPherson, *The Moulids of Egypt*, pp. 43-50, 100-102; Reeves, *The Hidden Government*, pp. 136 f.

## 1. What a mawlid looks like

The term *mawlid* literally means 'birthday' and derives from the celebration of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (*mawlid an-nabī*). It is used to denote local celebrations of saints in Egypt. In other Muslim countries similar festivities are held under different names: *mawsim* in Morocco, *ḥauli* in East Africa, *mevlud* in Turkey, *ʿurs* in the Indian sub-continent and *ḥawl* in Indonesia.[56] Yet the term mawlid is not specific to Islamic pilgrimages in Egypt. Christian and Jewish pilgrimages (of the latter only one is still celebrated)[57] are equally known as mawlids and share many similarities with the Muslim tradition: the festive atmosphere of piety and entertainment, the character of pilgrimage, the festive commodities and amusements, and the belief in miracles of the saint. But although mawlids certainly have strong syncretic elements, they are always clearly either Muslim or Christian, never both.[58]

Egypt hosts countless shrines of Muslim and Christian saints. Although not all of them have an annual festival, almost every city and village in Egypt celebrates a mawlid in honour of a local saint.[59] Most of them, though, are small local festivities, and the

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[56]See, e.g., 'Ziyāra' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., Leiden: Brill, Vol. 9, pp. 524-539.

[57]The Jewish mawlid of Yaʿqūb Abū Ḥaṣīra (Yaakov Abu Hatzeira), the legendary founder of the Abū Ḥaṣīra tribe, has been celebrated near Damanhūr in the Nile Delta region whenever the political situation has permitted. The festival, dating from the 19th century, was discontinued in the 1950s and reestablished in the late 1970s. Since then it has attracted a few hundred pilgrims annually, mainly from France and Israel, followed by the rage of the Egyptian media which has regularly used the occasion to channel anti-Israeli sentiments. In the year 2001, the Egyptian government banned the festival following growing tension caused by the second Intifāḍa. In the course of improving relations between the governments of Egypt and Israel the festivity was reopened in January 2005. What has remained less known in the debates about this festival is that it has a strongly tribal character and used to also attract Muslim members of the tribe that extends from Morocco over Egypt to Palestine/Israel. (Interview with Muslim members of the Abū Ḥaṣīra tribe, Gaza City, June 1999; Yūsuf, Sūzān as-Saʿīd, *al-Muʿtaqadāt aš-šaʿbīya ḥawl al-aḍriḥa al-yahūdīya: dirāsa ʿan mawlid Yaʿqūb Abī Ḥaṣīra bi-muḥāfaẓat al-Buḥayra*, Cairo: ʿAyn li-d-dirāsāt wa-l-buḥūṯ al-insānīya wa-l-iǧtimāʿīya, 1997; *aš-Šaʿb*, 20.11.1998: Muḥammad as-Saʿdānī, 'al-Yahūd yataḥaddawn mašāʿir al-muslimīn fī ramaḍān wa-yaḥtafilūn bi-ḏikrā Abū Ḥaṣīra fī Damanhūr!!', p. 8; *al-Ahrām*, 23.1.1999: Zakarīyā Nīl, 'Min Hunā .. wa-hunāk! Šaḥṣīyat Abū Ḥaṣīra wahmīya fa-lā huwa walī aw iskāfī'; *NRC Handelsblad*, 10.9.2001, 'Egyptische rechter: joodse graftombe "kwetst" moslims', p. 4; 'Controversy Over Abu Hasira Tomb Rages On', The Egyptian State Information Service, 16.9.2001, http://www.sis.gov.eg/online/html4/0160921.htm, viewed 27.6.2005; 'Egypt Cancels Jewish Festival After Protests', 25.12.2000, http://hsje.org/ egypt_cancels_jewish_festival_af.htm, viewed 27.6.2005; *Cairo Magazine*, February 2005 (zero issue): Lina Attala, 'Return of the pilgrims: With the thaw in relations, Egypt's only Jewish moulid is being celebrated again'.

[58]The only exception seems to be the Jewish mawlid of Abū Ḥaṣīra (see previous note) who has been venerated in the past as a Muslim saint by Muslim members of the Abū Ḥaṣīra tribe, and more recently claimed as a Muslim by Egyptians opposed to the presence of Jewish pilgrims in Egypt.

[59]According to one estimate, there are as many as 2,850 mawlids all over Egypt, although most of these are very small (Diyāb, Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ, 'ad-Dīn aš-šaʿbī .. aḏ-ḏākira wa-l-muʿāš', *Suṭūḥ*, 30 (May 1999), pp. 16-18). According to a press article from 2003, there were 742 mawlids that took place with the approval of the Ministry of Religious Endowments (*awqāf*) (*al-Muṣawwar*, 27.6.2003, Sulaymān ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm, 'Man hum awliyāʾ Allāh', pp. 18-20, 69, here p. 20). The Supreme Council of Sufi Orders and officially registered Sufi orders were responsible for 259 mawlids (most of which were probably included among the above-mentioned 742) in the year 1995 (*Taqrīr al-ḥāla ad-dīnīya fī Miṣr 1995*, ed. Markaz ad-dirāsāt as-siyāsīya wa-l-istrātīǧīya bi-l-Ahrām/al-Ahram Center for

number of large mawlids that attract pilgrims from all over the country is much smaller. There are some twenty to twenty-five Muslim mawlids and five to ten Christian ones that have importance beyond their immediate local settings. The largest of all, the mawlid of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī in the Nile Delta city of Ṭanṭā is said to draw up to two million visitors,[60] most of whom come from the Nile Delta region and Cairo. In Cairo, the mawlids of Sīdnā al-Ḥusayn and as-Sayyida Zaynab gather pilgrims from the entire country. In Upper Egypt, people from the entire region travel to the Islamic mawlids of Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm al-Qināwī in Qinā and Sīdī Abū l-Ḥasan aš-Šāḏilī in the eastern desert, and to the Christian mawlid of the Virgin Mary in Durunka near Asyūṭ. This study cannot cover the entire variety of these various festivals. The focus in the following will be on urban (city and small town) mawlids, both large and small, in Cairo and the Nile Delta.

## *1.1. The shrine*

One of the many mawlids celebrated in Egypt is the festival of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya,[61] a third-generation descendant of the prophet Muḥammad. I have selected it as an illustrative case because it is relatively small in size, thus allowing a detailed description, and because there is relatively little state involvement in it. It stands as an example of a festive order that allows for a high degree of ambiguity and mixture of different festive elements, and exhibits only a few aspects of the moral, spatial and temporary discipline imposed by the state upon many of the more famous mawlids. Nevertheless, one should not mistake the mawlid of Fāṭima an-Nabawīya to be representative of what the atmosphere of mawlids might have been like in the 19th century. Instead it stands as an example of mawlids as they are celebrated in the early 21st

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Political and Strategic Studies, Vol. 1, 5th ed., Cairo: al-Ahrām, 1997, p. 278). Yet these figures are not exhaustive because not all mawlids fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Religious Endowments or the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders. All mawlids require permission from the Ministry of Interior, but I have not been able to obtain their figures.

[60]All estimates about the numbers of visitors at mawlids must be treated with utmost scepticism. Policemen and visitors, if asked, may easily give figures reaching up to ten million. The only serious attempt known to me was undertaken by Reeves, who made an estimate of the number of visitors at mawlids in and around Ṭanṭā based on their 'catchment area'. His estimate of visitors to the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī in Ṭanṭā in the late 1970s was 500,000 to one million, which is significantly less than the commonly mentioned figure of two million visitors (Reeves, *The Hidden Government*, p. 141). The fragmented character of mawlids makes it very difficult to produce any reliable figures on the number of visitors at a given mawlid. The festive space is vast and fragmented, and since mawlids last several days, not all participants are present at the same time. The only large mawlid for which somewhat reliable figures exists is that of Sīdī Abū l-Ḥasan aš-Šāḏilī, located in an uninhabited region, where local authorities reported the number of vehicles arriving at the mawlid as 28,000 in 2001 and 30,000 in 2002. Because most of the vehicles transporting pilgrims to the mawlid were trucks and minibuses, the number of visitors could have reached as high as 300,000 (Interview with Fatḥī ʿAbd as-Samīʿ, poet and journalist, Qinā, 22 October 2002).

[61]Fāṭima bint Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, d. 110 H / 728-29 A.D. Ibrāhīm, Muḥammad Zakī, *Marāqid ahl al-bayt fī l-Qāhira*, Cairo: Maṭbūʿāt wa-rasā'il al-ʿAšīra al-Muḥammadīya, 5th ed., 1997, pp. 93-95; Abū Kaff, Aḥmad, *Āl bayt an-nabī ṣallā llāh ʿalayh wa-sallam fī Miṣr*, Cairo: Dār al-maʿārif, 2nd ed., 1998, pp. 71-85.

century and allows us a look at their structure and significance in a contemporary urban setting.

Only a short walk from downtown Cairo, the shrine and mosque of Fāṭima an-Nabawīya are located at the crossing of small alleys[62] in the old city district of ad-Darb al-Aḥmar, a long-established urban community proud of its local traditions but weakened by the earthquake of 1992 after which many of its inhabitants moved to other parts of the city. The mawlid is celebrated in the streets, alleys and small squares around the shrine, covering the eastern parts of ad-Darb al-Aḥmar district, the streets of at-Tabbāna and Sūq as-Silāḥ, and the quarter of al-Bāṭinīya (also known as al-Bāṭlīya). During the festivity, half of ad-Darb al-Aḥmar turns into a colourful festive world of its own, but beyond this area the mawlid is as much as invisible. A few minutes' walk away on Port Said Street, one of the city's busy thoroughfares, life goes on as usual.

Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, one of the many members of the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt* or *āl al-bayt*) who are buried and venerated in Egypt, is the patron saint of ad-Darb al-Ahmar and draws pilgrims from near and far. Although Islam does not have a canon of saints the way Orthodox or Catholic Christianity does, the concept of sainthood is strongly present in Muslim spirituality. In the Islamic tradition saints, 'friends of God' (*awliyā' Allāh*) as mentioned in the Qur'ān (10:63),[63] are people who enjoy a special grace of God and a mediating position between the human and the transcendent. A saint displays exceptional piety, can communicate with the transcendent in a way ordinary believers cannot, and can perform acts ordinary humans cannot. Hagiographic literature and oral tradition describe the saint as a person who displays extraordinary piety, exceeds his or her religious duties (praying tens of times a day instead of the required five, fasting for most of the year instead of just during Ramaḍān, etc.), and possesses superior knowledge of religion – both exoteric and esoteric.[64] Female saints are often associated

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[62]In this respect it differs from many other major shrines of Cairo that are located at central squares or intersections.

[63]'Verily upon the friends of God rests no fear, nor do they grieve (62). Those who have believed, and have been God-fearing (63) – for them is the good tidings in the present life and the Hereafter; there is no alteration in the words of God; that is the mighty success (64).' (*alā inna awliyā' Allāhi lā ḫawfun 'alayhum wa lā hum yaḥzanūn* (62) *al-laḏīna āmanū wa-kānū yattaqūn* (63) *la-hum al-bušrā fī l-ḥayāti d-dunyā wa-l-āḫira; lā tabdīla li-kalimāt illāh; ḏālika huwa l-fawzu l-'aẓīm* (64))Transl. freely after Bell, Richard (transl.), *The Qur'ān: Translated, with a critical re-arrangement of the Surahs*, Edinburgh: Clark, 1937, Vol. 1, p. 198.

[64]The biographies of saints are often highly topical in nature and it is often impossible to reconstruct the historical person of a saint beyond his or her legendary figure. As the cult around a saint develops, more and more hagiographic material is produced, and the memories of contemporaries give way to more topical descriptions of saintly qualities (see, e.g., Reeves, *The Hidden Government*, Hallenberg, *Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī*, Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*). Due to these circumstances, even the authenticity of many shrines is subject to debate. This is the case, for example, with many of the Cairene shrines ascribed to descendants of the Prophet. Some, like as-Sayyida Nafīsa (died ca. 200 H), a fifth-generation descendant of the Prophet, are very widely agreed to be buried in Cairo (see Bannerth, Ernst, *Islamische Wallfahrtstätten Kairos*, Cairo: Österreichisches Kulturinstitut Kairo, 1973, pp. 42-45; Abū 'Alam, Tawfīq, *Ahl al-bayt: as-Sayyida Nafīsa raḍiya llāhu 'anhā*, 2. Ed., Cairo: Dār al-ma'ārif, 1998; 'Uṣfūr, Ramaḍān 'Abd Rabbuh, *ad-Durar an-nafīsa fī manāqib wa-ma'āṯir as-Sayyida Nafīsa (raḍiya llāhu 'anhā)*, Hurghada, Cairo: Dār aṣ-ṣafwa, 1996). Many other shrines are likely to date from later periods, and their authenticity has been questioned by both Western and Egyptian scholars. The most prominent case is the shrine

with motherly qualities and referred to as 'mama', so also in the case of Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, who earned her honorific titles 'mother of compassion' (Umm al-Ḥanān) and 'mother of the orphans' (Umm al-Yatāmā) for taking care of the orphans of the massacre of al-Karbalā'.[65]

The Muslim cult of saints is a vast and complex field that cannot be grasped in the limited frame of this thesis.[66] Here we must restrict our view to two key issues of sainthood that are constitutive of mawlids: the concept of *baraka*, and the centrality of sainthood to organised Islamic mysticism. The most important sign of sainthood, and a concept central to the celebration of mawlids, is *baraka*, meaning blessing, charisma, aura or power. It is a spiritual beneficient power that emanates from God, and can be transferred to the believer through divine inspiration or mediation by the Prophet and his family, saints and sacred sites and objects.[67] *Baraka* is concretely expressed in miracles (*karāmāt*), displays of God's grace to the saints.[68] Accounts of *karāmāt* constitute a main element of the cult of saints and the most important indication of sainthood. The most famous accounts are legends about major saints who perform spectacular supernatural acts, such as travelling over extremely long distances in very short time, being in several places at the same time, knowing the future, reading peoples' thoughts, etc.[69] But most

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of as-Sayyida Zaynab, which may have originally housed Zaynab bint Yaḥyā ibn Zayb ibn ʿAlī Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn (d. 240 H/ 854-55 A.D.) and later been reinterpreted to be the resting place of the more famous Zaynab bint ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, granddaughter of the Prophet and one of the most important saints in contemporary Egypt. (Bannerth, *Islamische Wallfahrtstätten*, p. 29 f.; Ibrāhīm, *Marāqid ahl al-bayt*, pp. 57-65.) Her brother al-Ḥusayn, whose head is believed to be buried in Cairo, represents an especially complex case, there being six other Muslim cities (al-Karbalā', Kūfa, Naǧaf, Medina, Damascus and Raqqa) that also claim to host his body or parts of it (Bannerth, *Islamische Wallfahrtstätten*, pp. 22-34). Many Sufis are quite relaxed about saints having multiple shrines, arguing that a shrine does not necessarily have to be identical with the site of the saint's burial: 'The travelling [saint] has forty shrines. There is one where he is buried, one where he taught, and so on. And it is said about al-Ḥusayn that wherever he dropped a drop of blood he has a shrine.' (Interview with Sheikh Ḥasan ad-Dirīnī, Cairo, mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, 29 May 2003.)

[65]Abu Kaff, *Āl bayt an-nabī*, p. 82.

[66]For the cult of Muslim saints, see, e.g., Chambert-Loir Guillot (eds), *Le culte des saints*; Chodkiewicz, Michel, *Le Sceau des saints: Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn Arabî*, Paris: Gallimard, 1986; Cornell, Vincent J., *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998; Mayeur-Jaouen, *Al-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī*; Idem, *Pèlerinages d'Égypte*; Idem (ed.), *Saints et Héros*.

[67]Abu-Zahra, *The Pure and Powerful*, p. 145; Coulon,'Women, Islam, and *Baraka*'.

[68]According to prevalent Muslim interpretation there are two categories of miracles. Miracles of the saints are called *karāmāt*, displays of God's grace, and are not performed by the saints themselves but rather channelled through them via Divine intervention. Miracles proper (*muʿǧizāt*) were performed by the prophets. The Qur'ān was the last and conclusive miracle proper. Gilsenan, Michael, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and Society in the Modern Middle East*, revised ed., London: Tauris, 2000 [1982[1]], p 79; Badrān, Muḥammad Abū l-Faḍl, *Adabīyāt al-karāmāt aṣ-ṣūfīya: dirāsa fī š-šakl wa-l-maḍmūn*, al-ʿAyn (United Arab Emirates): Markaz Zāyid li-t-turāṯ wa-t-tārīḫ, 2001, pp. 23-26.

[69]Badrān, *Adabīyāt al-karāmāt*; for accounts in popular hagiographies see, e.g., ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, Sulaymān Ḥasan, *al-Adab fī sīrat Šayḫ al-ʿArab: dars wāfin wa-taḥlīl šāfin li-šaḫṣīyat walī Allāh al-kabīr as-Sayyid al-Badawī*, Ṭanṭā: Maktabat Tāǧ, undated, pp. 35-37; Saʿd, Ṭāhā ʿAbd ar-Raʾūf, *as-Sīra al-ʿaṭira li-walī Allāh aṣ-ṣāliḥ Sīdī al-Farġal: ḥayātuh, karāmātuh, masǧiduh, iḥyāʾ mawlidih*, Cairo: Maktabat al-ʿilm wa-l-īmān, 2001, pp. 58-62.

*Image 4: The shrine of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī during his mawlid, Disūq, 25 November 2004. The barrier fixed to two corners of the shrine separates male and female sections of the mosque. At the shrine of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, there is no such barrier.*

miracles are much less spectacular. They are personal or second-hand accounts of healing, success or spiritual enlightenment. These accounts appear, on the surface, to have little of the supernatural about them: everyday occurrences that might be seen simply as a coincidental sequence of events are interpreted as manifestations of *baraka*. Here, the miracle is used as a narrative frame to interpret everyday events in a way that connects them to higher levels of meaning. These daily little miracles are very central for mawlids, and there is a complex economy of pious exchange at work in order to gain God's grace. A miracle can occur unexpectedly any time, but one can also ask for an act of grace by the means of a vow (*naḏr*). A vow is typically declared at the shrine of the saint who acts as a mediator, but only when the wish is granted is the vow fulfilled, which may consist of distributing food or money (*ṣadaqa*),[70] a donation to the mosque, a pilgrimage, or the like. Thanks to the income from fulfilled vows, pilgrimage mosques are a considerable source of income to the state (most major mosques are administered by the Ministry of Religious Endowments) and the employees of the mosque.[71]

The place to search for God's blessing and grace, and the focal point for the veneration of a saint, is his or her tomb (*qabr*, *turba*) or shrine (*ḍarīḥ*, *maqām*). In ad-Darb al-Aḥmar, the shrine and adjacent mosque of Fāṭima an-Nabawīya is the site of an ongoing stream of visitors and periodical rituals and festivities. The tomb, surrounded by a brass railing (*maqṣūra*), is located in a room attached to the mosque and covered by a dome. It is well-visited every day but Monday is preferred over other days, and on Monday evening the shrine is especially crowded and Sufi celebrations are held in and outside the mosque.[72] It is also on a Monday that the most important and dramatic celebration at the shrine is opened and concluded: the annual mawlid, during which the

[70] *Sadaqa* is a voluntary form of charity, in contrast to the obligatory *zakāt*.

[71] *al-Ahrām*, 21.8.1998: Saʿid Ḥalwā, '"Ḫināqa" ʿalā ṣanādīq an-nuḏūr', Friday supplement, p. 3.

[72] Most major shrines in Cairo have preferred days for *ziyāra* or *ḥaḍra* (Sufi gathering): for example Thursday for as-Sayyida Zaynab, Saturday for Sīdī ʿAlī Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn, and Sunday for as-Sayyida Nafīsa.

shrine is filled with a continuous stream of visitors and the mosque is decorated with lights and banners.

The shrine is the focal point of the mawlid, and it is here that the festival is opened and concluded. The old mosque, dating from the mid-19th century,[73] was demolished around 2000, and the new mosque was still under construction when I attended the mawlid in 2003. The shrine, although also under construction, remained open to visitors, and during the mawlid, a constant flow of people circled around it to pay their respects to the saint. In the dusty and grey environment of the construction site the richly decorated shrine was almost invisible, covered by a wooden structure to protect it from the construction works, but this did not disturb the festive atmosphere.

*Ziyāra*, a ritual visit to a shrine, is the central moment of the mawlid and the mawlid is the best time for a *ziyāra*. Each visitor does so in his or her own way. Some hold still for a moment to recite the Fātiḥa (first chapter of the Qurʿān), others say prayers and vows out loud, or touch and kiss the *maqṣūra* and circumambulate the shrine. Some people express their feelings vocally with recitations, loud invocations or by ululating. Here, as in most spaces of the mawlid, there is no spatial segregation between men and women.[74] The crowd is mixed and the atmosphere is strongly spiritual, joyful and informal.

## *1.2. The Sufis*

A similar atmosphere prevailed on the streets and alleys of ad-Darb al-Ahmar when on Monday, 19 May 2003 (18 Rabīʿ II), one week after *mawlid an-nabī* and two weeks before the great night, the mawlid was opened with a small procession that ran around the block. Inhabitants of the area and members of the Burhānīya Sufi order[75] carried banners, people smiled, sang and clapped their hands, women ululated, and the atmosphere was happy, excited, and playful.

The Burhānīya was just one of the many Sufi groups that participated in the festival. In the alleys around the mosque, Sufi pilgrims began to arrive in countless small groups, camping in equally countless tents and apartments, some humble, others lofty, each under the leadership of their own sheikh.[76] These temporary dwellings are referred to as

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[73]Bannerth, *Islamische Wallfahrtstätten*, p. 37.

[74]Ziyāra is often framed as a typically female practice, and although the public found at shrines can be often largely female on ordinary days, this perception needs to be somewhat revised. Unlike ritual prayer in the mosque, which is a predominantly male practice, *ziyāra* is a mixed ritual that is performed by both men and women, usually also in a mixed space. It is not specifically a women's ritual.

[75]The Burhānīya is a Sufi group of Sudanese origin that has been highly successful in mobilising support among the urban middle classes. Its success was felt as a threat by the Sufi establishment in the 1970s, which led to its prohibition from 1975 until 1988 when the order was again allowed official status. Today, the Burhānīya is present at many major mawlids with large *ḏikrs* held inside the mosque. See Luizard,'Le rôle des confréries soufies', pp. 38-46.

[76]People usually travel to mawlids together with fellow members of a Sufi group, neighbours, or family. Sites for their *ḫidmas* are usually rented for a small fee. Groups setting up a *ḫidma* in an alley rent their sites from alley inhabitants who allow them to use the space in front of the house and sometimes also the toilet and kitchen in the house. *Ḫidmas* in front of the mosque and on the main streets require permission from the police.

*Image 5: The opening procession of the mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 19 May 2003.*

*ḫidma*, literally meaning 'service' (from *ḫidma li-llāh*, a service for the sake of God). The term *ḫidma* can simply imply the act of offering food or refreshments free of charge, but it also denotes the main physical unit of the Sufi mawlid: the site where pilgrims sleep, food and refreshments are served, and Sufi gatherings take place. The physical form of a *ḫidma* varies greatly according to the resources of its organiser: In the alleys around the mosque there are rows of simple carpets and small tents equipped with a gas cooker and a teapot, a water pipe and some cooking utensils. At prominent locations next to the mosque and on main streets stand lavish tents where food is served to thousands and famous Sufi singers perform at night. The *ḫidma* is the space where pilgrims spend most of their time. In fact, their lives centre around these spaces during the mawlid: they sleep in the *ḫidma*, eat there, and visit friends at other *ḫidmas* or receive visitors in theirs.

For Sufi orders (*ṭuruq*, sg. *ṭarīqa*), the organised form of Islamic mysticism, the mawlid is a key occasion to gather and represent themselves publicly. Vice versa, Islamic mawlids would be unthinkable without the overarching ideology of Sufism and the contribution of Sufi orders. The term 'order' needs to be treated with caution, however, for it suggests a more rigid and bureaucratic organisation than is necessarily really at hand.[77] Although Sufi orders formally follow the path (*ṭarīqa*) laid out by the founding sheikh, in practice the most important relationship is that of a Sufi disciple (*murīd*) to a living sheikh (or

[77]Since the late 19th century, a partial tendency towards bureaucratisation can be observed as the Egyptian state has attempted to bring Sufi orders under bureaucratic control. According to the Law on Sufi Orders of 1976, Sufi orders have to be registered with the state-controlled Supreme Council of Sufi Orders (*al-Maǧlis al-aʿlā li-ṭ-ṭuruq aṣ-ṣūfīya*) and to fulfill a number of administrative requirements. But the power of the Sufi Council is restricted to the dissemination of public discourse and the affairs of the central founding 'mother' orders (Aḥmadīya, Šāḏilīya, Rifāʿīya etc.). Despite bureaucratisation on higher administrative levels, the informal and personal nature of Sufi leadership persists in practice, while the influence of the official Sufi establishment on what actually happens in the meetings of a Sufi branch is very limited. Furthermore, there are at least as many unregistered orders as there are registered ones. Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi*; De Jong, *Ṭuruq*; *Taqrīr al-ḥāla ad-dīnīya*, Vol. 1, pp. 273-286; Luizard,'Le rôle des confréries soufies'; Chih, *Le soufisme au quotidien*, p. 143. For the text of the Law on Sufi Orders, see Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform*, pp. 257-292.

*Image 6: The ḥidma of Sheikh Ḥasan ad-Dirīnī at the mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 29 May 2003.*

to the living memory of a sheikh who has passed away) who in turn has been guided by a sheikh, and so on, all the way back to the great authority, the founder of the *ṭarīqa*. Rather than formal organisations, Sufi orders are dynamic communities based on personal ties between sheikhs and disciples, spread among numerous branches that are held together through their shared allegiance to a founding sheikh via chains of initiation (*silsila*) and descent (*nasab*).[78]

The chains of initiation correspond to a hierarchy of sainthood that is central to the hierarchy of mawlids. There is a widespread consensus among Egyptian Sufis that all Sufi orders must show a chain of initiation based on the four 'poles' (*aqṭāb*, singular *quṭb*): ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Ǧīlānī, Aḥmad ar-Rifāʿī, Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī and Aḥmad al-Badawī.[79] Abū l-Ḥasan aš-Šāḏilī is commonly included in the list as an additional *quṭb*.[80] Except for ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Ǧīlānī, these axial saints are also among the most venerated saints of Egypt. Many of the other highly venerated saints of Egypt were their pupils.[81] Together with early descendants of the Prophet (especially al-Ḥusayn and as-Sayyida Zaynab) they form the highest ranks of Muslim saints in Egypt, bestowed with the aura of the Prophetic Light (*an-nūr al-muḥammadī*)[82], the most outstanding share of God's grace, and

[78]Sedgwick, Mark, *Saints and Sons: The Making and Remaking of the Rashīdi Ahmadi Sufi Order, 1799-2000*, Leiden: Brill, 2005, pp. 1-6; Pinto, Paulo G., 'Performing Baraka: Sainthood and Power in Syrian Sufism', in Stauth (ed.), *On Archaeology of Sainthood*, pp. 195-211.

[79]Mayeur-Jaouen, *As-Sayyid al-Badawī*, pp. 526-532.

[80]See, e.g., Abū l-ʿAynain, Saʿīd, *Riḥlat awliyāʾ Allāh fī Miṣr al-maḥrūsa*, Cairo: Dār māyū l-waṭanīya li-n-našr, 1997, esp. p. 36. Most Sufi orders in Egypt carry a reference to these axial saints in their titles: Qādirīya, Rifāʿīya, Burhāmīya, Aḥmadīya, and Šāḏilīya feature as elements of names that indicate the founder of the branch and the source of his *silsila*, such as al-Marāziqa al-Aḥmadīya, al-Burhāmīya aš-Šahawīya, etc.

[81]For example, Sīdī al-Mursī Abū l-ʿAbbās of Alexandria and Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm al-Qināwī of Qinā were students of Abū l-Ḥasan aš-Šāḏilī. al-Ḥaǧǧāǧī, Muḥammad ʿAbduh, *Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm al-Qināʾī al-muftarā ʿalayh*, 2. ed., Cairo: Maktabat ʿālam al-fikr, 1996 (1990[1]); al-Qādī, Saʿd, *al-ʿĀrif bi-llāh Sīdī Abū l-ʿAbbās al-Mursī*, Cairo: Dār al-Ġarīb, 2001.

[82]Hoffman, *Sufis, Mystics, and Saints*, pp. 54 f.

the most extraordinary miracles. It is for them that the greatest mawlids are celebrated, and it is the complex networks of their Sufi orders that provide the basis for the mobilisation that turns a mawlid into a popular pilgrimage where, in numerous parallel celebrations, living Sufi leaders and their followers rejoice in reviving the memory of the grand saint, creating a momentum of grandeur and unity not only despite, but indeed through, their diversity.

## *1.3. The Celebrations*

Diversity is not limited to Sufi groups, however, but is woven throughout the entire spatial fabric of a mawlid festival. Turned into festive grounds during the mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima, the quarter of ad-Darb al-Aḥmar hosted various celebrations and ambiences in 2003. The first days of the mawlid were characterised by a slow buildup of the festivity. Festive lights were hung on the mosque, while pilgrims' tents, amusement stands and temporary cafés increased in number day by day. In the narrow alleys around the mosque, Sufi celebrations were held every night of the mawlid, and in cafés a few steps away, popular singers performed. On at-Tabbāna Street some 100 metres west of the mosque and on Aslam Silāḥdār Square to the northeast, amusement areas appeared, and children and youths of the district began to frequent them. Pilgrims began to arrive in growing numbers. Colourfully patterned cloth tents, bright coloured lights, generators to provide electricity for the festivity, carpets covered with people sleeping, eating and chatting, temporary cafés, stands selling plastic toys, sweets and tinsel party hats, shooting stands, and swing-boats painted in bright colours thoroughly changed the appearance of the area. The streets and alleys of the quarter were transformed into a fairground, a landscape of the extraordinary with countless attractions spread over the squares, streets and alleys waiting to be discovered by the visitor.

When the crowds began to move the mawlid really began to look like one. The festive atmosphere gained intensity night by night until it reached its climax on the great night, the final and most festive moment of the celebration. Mawlids are nighttime festivities; on the afternoon of the great night, the district lived in calm expectation. Daytime at the mawlid was mainly a family time when women and children frequented the amusements and the shrine, but as the evening neared, vast crowds began to push their way through the narrow alleys, concentrating on central points of festivity: the area around the mosque, the two main amusement areas, and the streets leading to them.

The most spectacular element of the mawlid was its sessions of Sufi *ḏikr* (from *ḏikr Allāh*: mentioning the name of God, invocating God), collective rituals of ecstatic meditation that were held in tents in the small square in front of the mosque and the surrounding streets. The settings and styles of *ḏikr* vary. Sufi tradition differentiates between silent '*ḏikr* of heart', vocal '*ḏikr* of tongue', and 'standing *ḏikr*', which includes certain bodily movements in rhythm to recitation or music, and which is the most prominent form of *ḏikr* at mawlids. A *ḏikr* may either be a precisely orchestrated ritual in which only members of a Sufi order participate, with a fixed programme and little space for spontaneity, or it may be open to passers-by, with an atmosphere more

spontaneous and ecstatic.[83] It may be based only on vocal recitation, or it may be led by a Sufi singer (*munšid*)[84] who is accompanied by a band consisting of percussion, *nāy*, violin, and sometimes *ʿūd* or keyboards. The music of Sufi *ḏikr* is rhythmic, emotional and designed to create an ecstatic atmosphere. The *munšid* performs religious poetry in praise of the Prophet and the saints (*madḥ*), a task considered to be not merely a craft but a religiously inspired mission. There is a high level of interaction between the *munšid* and his audience, expressed by the term *ṭarab* (meaning approximately 'enchantment'), the close emotional interaction between the performer and the listener and the resulting spontaneous and improvised character of the performance.[85]

Participation in a *ḏikr* has different degrees, especially in rituals that are open to all: while some people perform the *ḏikr*, others watch. The different means of participating

*Image 7: Ḏikr in the ḫidma of Sheikh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Fayṣal. Sheikh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, leader of a branch of the Rifāʿī order, opens the ritual with recitation of prayers (top left), after which the munšid Ǧumʿa al-Bannā leads the ḏikr (top right to bottom left) while bystanders gather in front of the tent to watch and listen (bottom right). Mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī, Disūq, 25 November 2004.*

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[83]Chih, *Le soufisme au quotidien*, pp. 254 ff.

[84]*Munšids* are usually men, however there are numerous female Sufi singers, *munšidāt*, in the Nile Delta region. Some *munšids* have gained considerable fame, most prominently so Sheikh Yāsīn at-Tuhāmī (see below pp. 226-227) whose performances are surrounded by a star cult in some ways similar to those surrounding secular pop stars. See Frishkopf, Michael, 'Tarab ("enchantment") in the mystic Sufi chant of Egypt' in Sherifa Zuhur (ed.), *Colors of Enchantment: Theater, Dance, Music, and the Visual Arts in the Middle East*, Cairo: American Unversity in Cairo Press, 2001, pp. 233-269; Waugh, Earle H., *The Munshidīn of Egypt: Their World and Their Song*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989; Dunleavy, Wendy, 'Il Munshidat, The Female Sufi Singers of Egypt: Gender and Popular Religion in Contemporary Egyptian Society' Paper presented to the workshop 'Gender, Myth, and Spirituality', London, Arts and Humanities Research Board, 3 April 2004.

[85]Frishkopf, Michael, 'Tarab'.

*Image 8: Popular singers in a café. Mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 2 June 2003.*

and listening lend the *ḏikr* its characteristic mixture of ecstatic and aesthetic experience: it is simultaneously – but to different degrees for different participants – a religious ritual and an artistic performance. A *ḏikr* is usually part of, and sometimes synonymous with, a Sufi gathering (*ḥaḍra* or *maǧlis*). Most Sufi orders hold weekly or monthly *ḥaḍras* in which only members participate. In a mawlid, however, the *ḥaḍra* is usually held in the *ḫidma* and is open to all. There the atmosphere is more festive and inclusive than that of the closed meetings of a *ṭarīqa*. The *ḥaḍra* may consist of a short opening ceremony, a *ḏikr*, and a short closing ceremony, but it also may take more elaborate forms with speeches, prayers, and different sequences of *ḏikr*.[86]

The *ḏikrs* held in front of the mosque of as-Sayyida Fāṭima during her mawlid represented a specific form of Sufi gathering: the public *ḥaḍra*, a public performance of a *munšid* that is not restricted to the members of a Sufi group. Such *ḥaḍra*s are usually characterised by an ecstatic and spontaneous atmosphere lacking a fixed ritual programme. The ritual in a public *ḥaḍra* is always led by a *munšid*, unlike in *ḥaḍras* organised by Sufi orders where the sheikh of the order often leads and controls the ritual.[87] In front of the mosque during Fāṭima an-Nabawīya's mawlid, one *ḥaḍra* was celebrated next to another, some organised by temporary cafes, others by local Sufi associations. Loudspeakers turned on full blast amplified the voices of several *munšids* and their bands. The scenery was dominated by the bright colours of the decoration and electric lights, and the ecstatic movement of the people performing *ḏikr* was mixed with the passing crowds and bystanders coming and going from the surrounding cafés.

The mawlid is high season for cafés. Around the mosque during Fāṭima an-Nabawīya's mawlid, temporary cafés served the pilgrims and spectators. Women were welcomed as customers unlike at most *baladī* cafés,[88] which are usually strictly male

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[86]Frishkopf, *Sufism, Ritual and Modernity*, pp. 263-322.

[87]*Ibid.*

[88]There are different categories of cafés in Egypt, each with its own logic of class and gendered space. The inexpensive *baladī* cafés of living quarters are usually an exclusively male public space. At popular pilgrimage and picnic sites, cafés are slightly more expensive and welcome families and women. These cafés are common at many saints' shrines, notably al-Ḥusayn and as-Sayyida Nafīsa

spaces. All around the district, many cafés sponsored a *munšid* or a popular singer performing *ša'bī* style music that is very popular at weddings.[89] One of the cafés, located in a back alley, also served beer during the mawlid. In the past, and to some extent until today, mawlids have held the reputation of being full of female dancers, alcohol and prostitution. Until the 1990s, the mawlid of Fāṭima an-Nabawīya was associated with open trade in drugs.[90] Dancers, mostly women but also transvestites, once were a main attraction at mawlids.[91] Yet dancers' shows have since disappeared from most mawlids, and bars have become a rarity. Even in the only bar at the mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima there was no trace of red light district ambience. On the contrary, a relaxed atmosphere similar to that of a wedding celebration prevailed with families and friends, music, and, almost coincidentally, some beer.

A calmer and more intimate atmosphere prevailed in those *ḫidmas* where no *ḏikr* was being held. In a blind alley two blocks from the mosque, Sheikh Ḥasan ad-Dirīnī put up his ḫidma consisting of a few carpets and a small tent. Neighbours, passers-by and friends were offered tea or simple food. Later in the evening, invited guests arrived for a small *maǧlis*. Food, tea and sweets were served while people chatted about a football match that took place the same day and then turned their attention to spontaneous religious lectures and recitation. This celebration was more sober than its neighbouring *ḏikr* sessions, yet

*Image 9: The gathering of Sheikh Ḥasan ad-Dirīnī (wearing a white turban). Mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 1 June 2003.*

in Cairo. Strictly distinct from these are the upscale coffee shops with upper/middle class mixed-gender space and exclusive styles and prices. See de Koning, Anouk, *Global Dreams: Space, Class and Gender in Middle Class Cairo*, PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2005, pp.122-149.

[89] *Ša'bī* singers use mawlids as an opportunity to advertise themselves, hoping to gain the attention of potential customers who might book them for a wedding.

[90] The district of al-Bāṭlīya (officially al-Bāṭinīya) to the north of the shrine of Fāṭima an-Nabawīya was a centre for drug trafficking until it was raided in a large police operation in the 1990s.

[91] To understand the scandalous character of dancing, we need to remember that the dance shows seen at weddings, nightclubs and, only rarely now at mawlids, have an explicitly erotic character. For dancing, see van Nieuwkerk, Karin, *"A Trade like any Other": Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995. For the tradition of transvestite singers and dancers, see, e.g., McPherson, *The Moulids of Egypt*, pp. 84 f.

the spirituality it expressed was embedded in a very informal and familiar atmosphere. People laughed, smoked, ate, drank and interrupted the recitations and speeches with words of praise such as '*Allāh!*', 'God bless the Prophet!' (*Allāhumma ṣallī 'a-n-nabī!*) or 'Assistance oh Lady [Fāṭima]!' (*Madad yā sitt!*).

A few blocks further away, Aslam Silāḥdār Square was packed with carousels, swings and shooting stands. The streets were heavily crowded with men and women, adults and children crowding the streets while enjoying the amusements, people-watching, or simply passing by. Even the small space of the square hosted very different ambiences: in front of homes and around the swing-boats young women from the district moved around in groups, many dressed in their finest. An exclusively male public gathered a few steps away at the shooting stands. The stands were run by young women wearing make-up and no headscarfs and were frequented by young men who competed at their shooting skills by hitting firecrackers with an air rifle. Next to the shooting stands, a music store played recorded pop music, attracting youths to dance. The atmosphere was wild, loud and rough. Occasionally young men gathered in a line (known as 'train') and rushed through the crowds as noisily and as fast as they could. At other, larger mawlids, women are usually careful to avoid such areas so as not to be severely harassed, but at the mawlid of Fāṭima an-Nabawīya people of the quarter know each other well and there is enough social control to keep most of the young men aware that there are certain limits they cannot cross without getting into serious trouble.

At-Tabbāna Street, the main thoroughfare of the area, featured another amusement area with shooting stands, swing-boats and gambling, along with cafés, small trade, and many *munšids* and popular singers. In an alley northeast of the mosque, the artist Ṣalāḥ al-Maṣrī put up his sideshow featuring magic tricks, a marionette show, and a puppet theatre play with *qarāǧūz*.[92] The show was packed with children and youths who came to enjoy the show for the modest price of 50 piastres, often several times knowing that the *qarāǧūz* play has a different – and always truly hilarious – plot every time.

The mawlid hosted a colourful variety of small trade. Along the streets and alleys, street vendors sold souvenirs, sweets, toys, tinsel party hats, tapes and religious commodities. The mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya is located in the middle of Cairo near major markets and shopping areas, so its trade is limited and does not constitute a prevalent feature of the festivity. Large mawlids in provincial cities still form major marketplaces for commodities of all kinds, but in Cairo the trade at mawlids concentrates on religious commodities, souvenirs, sweets, and toys.[93] These goods are

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[92]The *qarāǧūz*, derived from Turkish *karagöz*, pronounced *'aragūz* in Cairene vernacular, is a satirical puppet theatre play (similar in ways to Punch and Judy) that used to be very common at mawlids but has become rare over the last decades. See McPherson, *The Moulids of Egypt*, p. 81 f.

[93]The following is a complete list of services and commodities for sale at the mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa in Cairo, August 2002. *1) Services and commodities offered at two or more locations*: swing-boats, carousels, shooting stands, ring-throwing, gambling (dice and roulette), shops with telephones and refreshments, cafés (some featuring a performing singer), fast food, tinsel party hats and fezzes, mawlid caps (Southeast Asian style caps that depict the Dome of the Rock), posters (with religious content as well as football and pop stars), plastic toys, walking sticks, sweet potatoes, chickpeas, *libb* (various edible seeds, mainly of the cucurbit family), lupine beans, popcorn, peanuts, music tapes (pop music and Sufi *inšād*), perfume and incense, juice, amulets, cheap jewellery, inflatable toys, religious literature, tapes and videos of Sheikh Yāsīn at-Tuhāmi, prayer

usually very cheap. Although only some of the commodities are religious in a narrow sense, none of them is entirely profane in the context of a mawlid: they have their share in the *baraka* of the festivity and the souvenirs – snacks, sweets, and toys people bring home from the mawlid – are believed to carry with them the *baraka* of the saint.

*Image 10: Amusements in at-Tabbānā St. To the right is a shooting stand and behind it a swing. The banner over the streets greets visitors in the name of ʿIṣām Saʿīd, member of Cairo Provincial Assembly. Mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 2 June 2003.*

During the mawlid, the entire district of ad-Darb al-Ahmar was in a state of celebration. For the duration of the great night, police forces closed at-Tabbāna Street to traffic, allowing the crowds to freely roam about. Shops played tapes with Sufi *inšād*, streets and houses were decorated with bright lights and homes were open to visitors. Families sat on the sidewalks and enjoyed the night of festivity. Friends and relatives living outside the quarter came back to their "hometown" to spend the evening at the mawlid. Many inhabitants of the area celebrated the patron saint of their quarter by offering free food and refreshments as a form of *ḫidma*.[94] Some offered sandwiches and others served cinnamon tea (a drink popular at mawlids – for an image see front cover), tamarind and liquorice juice or lemonade, each according to their resources. A local member of parliament sponsored a large tent serving full meals of rice, meat and vegetables for anyone who wished to drop in.

Following the dawn prayer the mawlid was concluded by a morning celebration (*ṣabāḥīya*). A procession, similar in form to the opening procession but on a larger scale, set out from the front of the mosque and moved around the block. At every *ḏikr* and popular singer's stage the procession passed, the performers joined the chant of the crowd: '*Ṣabāḥīya mubārka yā sitt, bismillāh yā Ḥusēn!*' (blessed morning oh Lady [Fāṭima], in the name of God, oh Ḥusayn), declaring her mawlid completed and anticipating the upcoming mawlid of al-Ḥusayn, Fāṭima's father. Afterwards, the mawlid slowly came to

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beads, sweets, and pastries. *2) Commodities on offer at only one location*: plastic bags, calligraphic art (on textiles and paper), plastic cups, sunglasses, shawls, ladies' shoes, fluffy toys, fresh sheep skins, fried corn, socks, men's shirts, and ladies' blouses and skirts.

[94]Unlike the Sufi *ḫidma* which is also a temporary establishment for lodging and rituals, the neighbourhood *ḫidma* entails simply the service of free food and refreshments.

an end, people began to go home, and some tents were packed up, but the *ḏikrs* at the mosque still continued until the morning when the remains of the festival slowly dissolved into the beginning workday.

Just as the mawlid had slowly built up, so it took some time to end. Some of the pilgrims stayed on for one more day to celebrate the 'residual night' (*al-layla al-yatīma*, lit. orphan night) the following evening. Officially it was the mawlid of Sīdī ʿAbdallāh ad-Disūqī,[95] who is buried next to the mosque of as-Sayyida Fāṭima. It was a small, purely Sufi celebration with an atmosphere more intimate and devotional than the bright, loud and chaotic great night. Following the final celebrations, remaining tents and stalls were packed up and readied to move on to the next mawlid, and the quarter returned to its daily rhythm of life. In other parts of the city, the cycle of mawlids continued. One week later was the mawlid of Sīdī al-ʿAǧamī in Dār as-Salām, then al-Ḥusayn, followed by as-Sayyida Sukayna, as-Sayyida Nafīsa, as-Sayyida Zaynab and many more. With the beginning of Ramaḍān, the festive season in Cairo came to an end, only to begin again the next year.

*Image 11: Members of a family sitting in front of a shop in at-Tabbāna St. Mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 2-3 June 2003.*

## 2. The order of chaos

It is not a coincidence that in the Egyptian idiom 'a mawlid in the absence of its master' – i.e. the saint – (*mūlid wi-ṣāḥbuh ġāyib*) implies a state of total disorder. But chaotic as they may seem at first sight, and manifold as they are, the celebrations of a mawlid are embedded in a festive order that allows for various expressions of festivity while limiting them in terms of time and space. Indeed, a certain degree of chaos is tolerated as part of the festive atmosphere, and the festivity does not have a central ritual programme. The shrine is the symbolic and often geographic centre of the mawlid, but most of the

[95]Reputedly the brother of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī.

celebrations take place outside it, in a decentralised manner. However, the apparent chaos of mawlids is an organised one, as the idiom reminds us: only in the absence of a focal point – the master of the mawlid – would the mawlid turn into total disorder. The mawlid has its order, but it is of a flexible, ambiguous, festive kind.

To understand exactly how this festive order works is of crucial importance, not only to map out mawlids but also to comprehend the debates surrounding them. To understand why some Egyptians view mawlids as a threat to religion and society we must first examine what exactly happens to the order of society and the dispositions of believers and citizens during a mawlid. To unravel this complex order I undertake an examination from three perspectives: the behaviour of the participants, the organisation of public space, and the temporal structure of social boundaries.

## *2.1. Habitus*

The most important element of a mawlid is, evidently, the people in it. The festival is made up of a vast number of individual and collective celebrations that, together, create the festivity as a whole in all of its different ambiences. But how to reconstruct festive order from such a diffuse field of festive practice? Perhaps by attempting to reconstruct the festive experiences of the participants? My solution is to postpone the intangible issue of festive experience – it has a logic quite different from that of festive organisation, and thus requires a different perspective – and, for now, stick to that which can be seen: the styles and dispositions, in other words, the habitus (in the plural) of celebration. This is all the more important because, as is shown in chapter four, the appearances and activities of the people participating in the festivity are at the centre of much of the criticism of mawlids.

To speak of habitus in relation to festive practice means, firstly, to indicate that there are dispositions of the body (in a wider sense including dress, speech, movement and the like) that are specific to the festive context and contribute to the atmosphere of festivity. Secondly, by focussing on habitus I highlight, but – for the time being – leave open, questions about the relation of bodily forms to attitudes, ideologies and beliefs.

The concept of habitus – learned and internalised bodily dispositions, styles and aesthetic judgements that carry social or ethical significance – was introduced to the social sciences by Marcel Mauss[96] but is best known through the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who defines habitus as

> 'both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification (*principium divisionis*) of these practices. It is in the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e., the space of life-styles, is constituted.'[97]

Habitus in Bourdieu's use is a concept key to understanding the symbolic structure of class society. But to understand what actually happens at mawlids, what the roots of their

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[96]See, e.g., Mauss, Marcel, *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950, pp. 365-372.

[97]Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London etc: Routledge, 1984, p. 170.

contested nature are and how discursive positions are related to festive practices, Bourdieu's concept of habitus may turn out to be too narrow.

A different approach is offered by Saba Mahmood, who, in her study of the Salafi piety movement in Egypt, takes a different direction, reinterpreting the concept of habitus to include the *habitualisation* of morals and ideologies, the interlinkage of bodily practice and moral dispositions. Habitus, according to Mahmood, involves the active capacity of forming and transforming the self through bodily practice.

> 'An inquiry into ethics from this perspective requires that one examine not simply the values enshrined in moral codes, but the different ways in which people live these codes. Thus, what is relevant here is not so much whether people follow moral regulations or break them, but the relationships they establish between the various constituent elements of the self (body, reason, volition, and so on) and a particular moral code or norm.'[98]

> 'One result of Bourdieu's neglect of the manner and process by which a person comes to acquire a habitus is that we lose a sense of how specific conceptions of the self (there may be different kinds that inhabit the space of a single culture) require different kinds of bodily capacities. In contrast, the Aristotelian notion of habitus forces us to problematise how specific kinds of bodily practice come to articulate different conceptions of the ethical subject, and how bodily form does not simply express the social structure but also endows the self with particular capacities through which the subject comes to enact the world.'[99]

Mahmood's reading of habitus is based on fieldwork conducted among women involved in the Salafi piety movement in Egypt, a religious current that heavily emphasises the moral discipline of the body and the self. Based on this empirical focus, she concentrates on the way habitus forms the self. But that relationship can be thought of in two directions: What about the use of habitus as the visible marker of beliefs and attitudes?

That perspective has gained significant currency in the anthropology of the Middle East under the label of identity politics, meaning the expression of religious, national or other identities through distinctive forms of dress and consumption (Muslim women's headscarves being the most prominent example thereof).[100] While the label of 'identity politics' may be somewhat misleading – after all the politics of habitus is not confined to the issue of identity – it stands beyond doubt that ideologies can and do become embodied. What is less clear is what such embodiment does to the bodies and ideologies involved. This is pointed out by Gregory Starrett, who, in his study of the introduction of colonial concepts of order and learning in Egypt, shows that the embodiment of ideology in habitus does in fact involve a change of perspective for the people involved:

> 'Thus, rather than conceiving of hexis primarily as wordless, unconscious, and practical transmission of bodily habit, we might instead read "the embodiment of ideology in habit" as a set of processes through which individuals and groups consciously ascribe meaning to–or *learn to perceive meaning in*–bodily disposition, and establish, maintain, and contest publicly its political valence.' [my emphasis][101]

Starrett's approach implies that when specific embodied practices become associated (or

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[98]Mahmood, Saba, 'Ethical Formation and Politics of Individual Autonomy in Contemporary Egypt', *Social Research*, 70 (2003), 3, pp. 837-866, here p. 846.

[99]Mahmood, Saba, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 139.

[100]See, e.g., Kandiyoti, Deniz / Ayse Saktanber (eds), *Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey*. London: Tauris, 2002.

[101]Starrett, 'The Hexis of Interpretation', p. 954.

even identified) with specific ethical dispositions, both undergo a redefinition as objects of a discursive formation. It is precisely the contingency and dynamic nature of such associations that makes them political. Claiming and denying their self-evidence is a form of contestation over the values and public interest of a society and the power to define them. The contestation of habitus can be read as the embodiment of ideologies, but it also transforms them.

Neither Mahmood's nor Starrett's approach should be taken as the final word. Ethical formation and embodiment of ideology both take place, but instead of opting for either specific perspective, we need to realise that the relationship of the body and the self is not only a matter of academic discussion: it is a matter of open debate in Muslim societies,[102] and in fact much of the debate on mawlids can be seen as part of a wider debate on the body and the self. Different ways to celebrate a mawlid do stand in relation to beliefs, attitudes and ideologies, but that relation is subject to contestation, and that contestation is in turn central to the debate on mawlids. This is why, instead of answering the question concerning the relationship of appearances and inner states deductively, we should enquire what interpretations of the body and the self are held by the people who celebrate mawlids, as well as the people who criticise them. But before moving on to interpretation, we must first give way to the perspective of the sociological observer and focus on the actual appearances and activities of people at mawlids.

What kind of habitus (in the plural), then, are characteristic of a mawlid? What quickly stands out is the overwhelming character of the festive atmosphere: overwhelming in terms of quantity, with roaming crowds and a tremendous display of lights and sounds, but also overwhelming in bodily terms: celebrating a mawlid can be simultaneously emotional, ecstatic, pious, carnal, cheerful and joking. Expressions of piety, joy and sexuality – to take just a few examples – are never far removed from each other, and they are often united to the degree that they cannot be accurately described as discrete categories. For the researcher, Egyptian or foreign, who is trained to think along clear and universal boundaries, it can be a serious challenge to grasp what is going on, a feeling that Michael Gilsenan vividly caught in his description of the scenery at the shrine of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī:

> 'People crowd into a tiny room to circumambulate the shrine, pressing themselves against the outer brass railings, kissing it and rubbing their clothes and hands over it, and then making a washing motion of their hands over their bodies to transfer the *baraka*. This is, *par excellence*, the propitious time at which to do so; in the popular phrase "*khud al-baraka min al-mulid*" ("take the *baraka* from the *mulid*").
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> 'People do so vocally and with feeling. There is almost as much noise as at the fireworks, and anyone who has absorbed Victorian notions of reverent behaviour as being synonymous with whispers and quiet decorum soon has his assumptions disrespectfully shattered. As far as the saint is concerned reverence can be demonstrated as well by shouting as by muttered prayer. Attendants roar and push the struggling mass round the shrine, using bamboo canes on those who cling too long to the holiness. Those who leave must do so through those clamouring to enter. Huddled in a corner, chewing on a sweetmeat dangerously thrown over ecstatic faces by a mosque servant, the anthropologist has time to reflect on the wreckage of his own fixed ideas about proper expressions of

[102]Mahmood recognises this, but, due to the different objectives of her study, it is not her primary focus. See Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, pp. 146-147.

piety.'[103]

The festive atmosphere of the mawlid escapes simple categorisation along the lines of binary dissociations such as sacred and profane or public and private. The seemingly trivial task of describing what is going on turns into a profound epistemic problem of understanding what a mawlid does to the boundaries of the social world. In an attempt to solve this problem, Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen argues that in the mawlid the body is the central location of the sacred, incorporating all aspects of human life – food, smoking, disease, healing, and sexuality – in a moment of sacred-carnal experience:

> 'Le corps, dans les mouleds traditionelles, était donc omniprésent, invoqué. représenté, revendiqué, allant jusqu'à transgresser les normes habituelles. Le corps sexué, tout particulièrement, y était sans cesse sollicité dans un étroit rapport au sacré. L'idée d'une dissociation entre sacré et profane, entre un sacré d'ou le corps serait exclu – ou tout au moins bridé – et un profane où le corps aurait sa place, était absolument absente des pratiques comme des pensées de plus grand nombre.'[104]

Looking at the various ambiences of the mawlid, this observation is strikingly fitting, and yet it also calls for a closer look at the places and shapes of the body in the mawlid. The atmosphere of the mawlid is not simply characterised by the central position of the body at the centre of the sacred experience; the body is also the central location of the sacred in ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*). The particular relationship of the body and the sacred in the mawlid, and the resulting particular festive ambience, is based on specific dispositions of the body and a specific understanding of the sacred. Hence, the question we need to ask is what habitus, concept of the sacred, spatial organisation and temporal structure of social boundaries make it possible to celebrate the mawlid in such a way.

There is not one habitus of celebrating the mawlid, but many. The main emotional tone of a mawlid is that of love and joy, but it is mixed with moments of grotesque laughter, solemn commemoration, voluntary hardship, sexual tension, and sometimes aggression. The multiple habitus of celebrating the mawlid can be seen in the cases of the Sufi *ḫidma* and the crowds in the streets, to take just two examples of many.

In the Sufi *ḫidma*, an atmosphere of spirituality is combined with a familiar gathering in which eating, drinking and smoking accompany ecstatic rituals, spontaneous performances and theological discussions. Tea, coffee, plates of food, sweets and pastries are served to the guests throughout the evening. Men, and many of the women, smoke water pipes and cigarettes. People lead discussions and listen to preachers, lectures, and recitation of the Qurʾān or religious poems, expressing their appreciation loudly with phrases like 'May God open a way for you!' (*Allāh yiftaḥ ʿalēk!*).

Food and eating in particular stand as an intersection of charity, pleasure, piety and community. To offer food is to commit a pious act, and visitors in a *ḫidma* are commonly offered a symbolic meal (*luqma*) even if they are not hungry. Eating, even smoking in the presence of the friends of God, is to share the *baraka* of the sacred occasion. The mawlid is a main occasion to buy snacks and sweets that are believed to carry *baraka*, and in the early morning hours at the end of a mawlid, almost everyone leaves the festival carrying plastic bags loaded with chickpeas and sweets. Eating is, in a

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[103]Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi*, p. 50.
[104]Mayeur-Jaouen, 'Le corps entre sacré et profane'.

way, archetypal to the festive habitus.[105] In the mawlid, eating is not a profane act but is rather intrinsically connected to the joy and spirituality of the special day:

> 'I like the mawlid because of the love and the charity and the joy. Normally the mosque isn't full like this, but because of his (Abū l-ʿIlā's) birthday everyone has to celebrate. People give food and drink to the poor. Everybody eats on this day; our Lord makes this food *ḥalāl* (legitimate; ritually permissible). People love meat, a loaf of bread with rice and meat. And the ladies love it very much; they go out of the house to get here and meet and listen to the recitation of the Qurʾān.'[106]

In the streets, the atmosphere is often rougher and less harmonic. Mawlids often are, and are expected to be, very crowded, and the moving crowds provide a moment of anonymity and an atmosphere of overwhelming festive mood that allows for expressions of both general aggression and aggressive sexuality. The young men who rush through the crowds, joke and laugh loudly, and dance in an exaggerated style around music stores and Sufi *ḏikrs* express a mixture of completely letting oneself go in a surrender to the moment and a tense, potentially explosive performance of juvenile masculinity. At countryside mawlids fights are common, and in the cities the crowds of the mawlid are infamous for the *muḍaqqarīn*, youths who use the anonymity of the crowds to aggressively grab women. Most people would openly condemn such behaviour but some young men, encouraged by the anonymity of the crowds, wholeheartedly define it as the main attraction of the festival: 'The mawlid is great! In the crowd there's flesh!'[107]

It is, thus, less the prevalence of specific dispositions or a specific aesthetic style that characterise the atmosphere of a mawlid than its openness to a very wide variety of styles and dispositions. In the mawlid, piety and joy can be expressed in a multiplicity of ways that, contrary to each other as they may be, coexist in the same event. This, together with the crowdedness of the festival, contributes to the often extreme character of mawlids, their atmosphere ranging (and often rapidly shifting) from ecstatic spirituality and familiar joy to fights and aggressive sexual tension.

## *2.2. Boundaries*

Mawlids are profoundly ambivalent events. They are full of *baraka*, and mark a sanctified time and space temporarily distant from the ordinary rhythms and structures of the surrounding mundane world.[108] Yet their sanctity is not exclusive: Mawlids are also full of trade, amusements, food, outings, joking, flirting, and trouble-making, in short, practices that Egyptian common sense would generally consider thoroughly profane. The Durkheimian opposition of the sacred and the profane does not hold in the mawlid. The

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[105]See Werbner, Pnina, 'Langar: Pilgrimage, Sacred Exchange and Perpetual Sacrifice in a Sufi Saint's Lodge', in Werbner / Basu (eds), *Embodying Charisma*, pp. 95-116; Mayeur-Jaouen, 'Le corps entre sacré et profane'.

[106]Interview with a man from Bāb aš-Šaʿrīya, mawlid of as-Sulṭān Abū l-ʿIlā, Cairo, 26 June 2003.

[107]Male teenagers at the mawlid of al-Ḥusayn, Cairo, 24 June 2003.

[108]This festive atmosphere can be described as liminal, or liminoid, and yet that would be an attribute of the festive experience rather than of the festive organisation. This is why the question of whether and to what degree mawlids can be described as a liminal experience in the sense promoted by Victor Turner is discussed in the following chapter on festive experiences.

festive habitus, time and space of a mawlid do not host structurally different spheres of religion and the material world (*dīn wa-dunyā*, to follow the idiom of contemporary Islam instead of that of western sociology). This is all the more important since this distinction is not an exogenous import.[109] It is, however, conceived of in a less exclusive and absolute fashion by most Egyptians. The sacredness, or perhaps more accurately, sanctity, of things in this understanding is an inclusive power reified in the concept of *baraka*. This inclusiveness and potential for expansion of the sacred makes it a quality that can be attached to all things rather than as a transcendent sphere set apart from profane objects.[110]

The categories of the sacred and profane are constitutive for much of social and religious life in Egypt, as is expressed, for example, in the architecture and symbolic status of mosques, which are visibly distinguished from their mundane surroundings both in their appearance and the way people act in them. But this opposition is not absolute. It is subject to temporary shifts and it is exactly these shifts of dichotomies, not their absence, that give mawlids their atmosphere of the extraordinary. Things that are usually defined as sacred and profane do not lose their distinctive characteristics in the mawlid. What happens, rather, is that different practices such as trade, worship, eating etc. become connected to each other through the festive habitus, time and space. The market remains a market, but buying commodities that carry *baraka* becomes a sacred act. The mosque remains a mosque, but the moment of pilgrimage turns it into an inclusive space surrounded, and often filled, by people celebrating, sleeping and eating. Food still serves to fill the stomach, but the act of eating is framed as an act of devotion. The festive context transforms social practices and spaces, thus creating a temporary different world that gains its power and attraction from its conscious and dramatic opposition to the ordinary world.

The boundary of the sacred and the profane is only one of the many that are suspended in the mawlid: the celebration of a mawlid is characterised by the temporary and spatially limited inversion and suspension of a number of boundaries and their replacement by a festive order of the extraordinary. Anna Madoeuf, in her study of the great mawlids of Cairo, has pointed out the character of mawlids of being an interface, as a space and time of inversion and transgression under the protection of the *baraka* of the saint's festivity:

> 'Un monde se fonde à partir d'un autre sur lequel il se calque, qu'il emprunte et bouleverse. Le *mûlid* abolit le quotidien. Il trouble l'ordinaire. Cette célébration festive d'une commémoration religieuse est aussi une interface: entre Le Caire et la province, entre le quartier et la ville, entre la *baraka* et le pélerin, entre le sacré et le profane. Des contrastes, simultanés ou successifs, se font jour.'[111]

This festive order of the mawlid allows participants to relativise or temporarily suspend the boundaries of daily life. Religion becomes fun, and entertainment and trade enjoy

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[109]It is likely, however, that the sociological dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, especially as presented by Durkheim, has played a role in Egyptian academic debates on religion and its place in society. See Durkheim, Emile, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: Le système totémique en Australie*, 5th ed., Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1912, pp. 50-58.

[110]See, e.g., Eliade, Mircea, *Le Sacré et le Profane*, Paris: Gallimard, 1965.

[111]Madoeuf, 'Les grands mûlid-s', p. 164.

their share in the *baraka* of the noble celebration. Gender boundaries are eased. In old city districts, young women go for a legitimate outing and houses are open to visitors, and in the Sufi tents space is shared by men and women, as are most of the religious rituals. With the inhabitants of the districts sitting in front of their houses, and the Sufi pilgrims sleeping in tents or on carpets on the sidewalks, the distinctions between house, alley and open street lose significance. The city is invaded by the countryside when pilgrims from the Nile Delta and Upper Egypt storm the sidewalks. Night becomes day as the mawlid sleeps in the daytime and festivities only begin with sunset, continuing until the dawn prayer.[112]

On the imaginary level, the temporal boundaries of history collapse, giving way to a mythological temporality characterised by the *barzaḫ*, the state between death and Judgement Day, in which the believer, the grand saints, and the Prophet and his family (*aḥl al-bayt*) coexist and can communicate. The visible mawlid, many pilgrims believe, is only the shadow of a hidden mawlid in the *barzaḫ*, attended by the saints, angels and the Prophet himself. Thus, even the boundary between the living and the dead is far from clear at the time of the mawlid. It is no coincidence that many mawlids take place in the middle of graveyards where the dwellings of the dead host the celebrations of the living. The buried saint, it is believed, is not really dead, but conscious and perceiving, and even capable of action. From the *barzaḫ*, the saint continues to display miracles of grace and act as a mediator between the believer and the transcendent. This continuous presence of the saint is key to the *baraka* of the mawlid, and a primary motivation to undertake a pilgrimage to the shrine. From the mystics point of view, there can be no mawlid without the active participation of its master, the saint:

> 'It's not a mawlid in the absence of its master (*mūlid wi-ṣāḥbuh ġāyib*) like some say, no. That is the description of the streets and squares (*sāḥa*). The true mawlid of the mystical path (*ṭarīq*) is a mawlid in the presence of its master (*mūlid wi-ṣāḥbuh ḥāḍir*)."[113]

Of course, this suspension of boundaries never means that everything is possible, and the presence of the saint indicates that a mawlid is not characterised so much by a lack of order than by the replacement of the daily order of things with an order of an extraordinary, mystical kind. Thus no matter how overwhelming the moment of festive freedom, some limitations are always in force. For example, women's movement in mawlids is generally more restricted than men's. When in the mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya young women from the district dress up and mingle with the festive crowd, it happens on the condition that there is enough social control to prevent sexual harassment. In larger mawlids where the crowds are vast and no such social control is possible, women usually stay away from crowded areas unless they are accompanied by male friends or relatives.

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[112] *Ibid.*, Pagès-El Karoui,'Le mouled de Sayyid al-Badawî', pp. 250-253; Drieskens, Barbara, *Living with Djinns: Understanding and Dealing with the Invisible in Cairo*, PhD thesis, Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2003, pp. 226 f., 236.

[113] Interview with Sheikh Ḥasan ad-Dirīnī, Cairo, 6 January 2003.

## 2.3. Openness, class, and power

As Mohand Akli Hadibi has argued in context of Sufi pilgrimages in Kabylia in Algeria, the suspension of boundaries and the contingency of festivity is key to a pilgrimage site's ability to contain so many different, often contradicting elements.[114] Open to different practices and interpretations, the festivity remains capable of providing a moment of common identification:

> 'This mawlid is a *mā'idat ar-Raḥmān*[115] that collects the pious and the sinner alike. So you see very many things in the mawlid. There is safety in it, and that collects the bad, because where else should they go? So they come and do the things they want to. The mawlid is like a bus: in it travel the sheikh and the thief, all of society. You see the swing-boats and the sheikh, it's all in there.'
> S.: So where does the bus go?
> 'To our lord the Prophet, God willing.'[116]

The topic of saints and thieves is key to understanding the openness of the festivity: everyone in the festival is a legitimate guest of the saint, even if his or her way of celebrating may appear inappropriate in the eyes of other participants. The openness of the festival is related to another key topic of the festive society: the suspension of class hierarchies. Everyone is welcome and everybody is equal:

> 'Here there is no difference between a doctor and an engineer and the president of the Republic [compared to an ordinary man], all become equal when they come here. You can meet a minister eating next to a man who doesn't earn more than half a pound, and a famous actress next to a poor beggar woman who doesn't earn a shilling,[117] and there is no difference between them.'[118]

The habitus of the participants and the spatial organisation of the *ḫidmas* further underline the suspension of class distinction. In the public imagery of modern Egypt, mawlids are almost uniformly represented as a lower-class phenomenon. But looking at who actually comes to a mawlid, this assumption is quickly disproved. While many of the participants do come from a rural or urban lower-class background, mawlids are also frequented by wealthy *šarīf* families conscious of their spiritual role as descendants of the Prophet and highly educated young professionals, along with housewives, civil servants, small businessmen, masters of manual professions, and so on. But while the participants of mawlids come from all social classes, they commonly enact an unmistakably rural and lower-class habitus during the festivity. People sit on carpets and in tents, smoking water pipes and domestic cigarettes and eating simple traditional dishes

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[114]Hadibi, Mohand Akli, 'From "Total Fullness" to "Emptiness": Past Realities, Reform Movements and the Future of the Zawiyas of Kabylia', in: Stauth (ed.), *On Archaeology of Sainthood*, pp. 71-88.

[115]'Table of the Merciful', a service providing a gratuitous meal at fast-breaking time during Ramaḍān. The name refers to the Qurʿānic account (5:112-115) of how God sent 'a table set with food' to Jesus and his disciples.

[116]Interview with a male Sufi pilgrim at the mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 26 May 2003.

[117]Five piastres, or less than one euro cent. By 2002, one shilling was the smallest coin in circulation, and the only thing it would buy was a loaf of state-subsidised bread.

[118]Interview with ʿAlī Muḥammad, from Sōhāǧ, and Ḥasan Abū Rawāš al-Ǧundī, from Gīza, visitors to the mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 20 August 2002.

from shared plates. They address each other in an informal style, enriching their speech with religious phrases, popular proverbs and jokes. While there are certain class distinctions in how to celebrate the mawlid, in general Sufi mawlid celebrations exhibit a very limited level of class distinction. The *ḫidma* is open to all, people usually eat the same food from shared plates, and there is little visible distinction between people of various backgrounds.[119] The ambience is informal and lacks the distinctive symbols of middle- and upper-class lifestyle. Middle- and upper-class Sufis often consciously take over a 'traditional', rural habitus, most visibly marked by their style of dress. Men who in other contexts would wear a shirt and trousers – markers of urban middle classes – often put on a *ǧallābīya* and a turban – markers of rural or lower-class habitus – when they go to the mawlid.[120]

These moments of openness and equality stand in striking contrast to the hierarchic society they are part of. Mawlids are organised through various informal structures of power, notably local master-client relations and charismatic religious leadership, that are based on the key assumption that people are not equal. In the mawlid the distinctions of power, money and class do not cease to exist but rather they are symbolically suspended. When a member of parliament wears a *ǧallābīya*, sits in a humble *ḫidma* and shares tea and domestic cigarettes with workers and dervishes, power is exercised in a subtle and effective way. The people present do remain aware of his social status, and yet by suspending the markers of his social status and not making a point of his superior access to power and resources, he makes himself accessible, demonstrates commitment and renews the clientele relations his power is based upon.

A successful mawlid is organised through networks of clientelism based on personal relations of patronage: Sufi sheikhs and disciples, politicians and their constituency, and master craftsmen and workshop owners (*maʿallimīn*) and their workers and dependants. These networks are renewed through religious legitimisation, sponsorship, charity, and

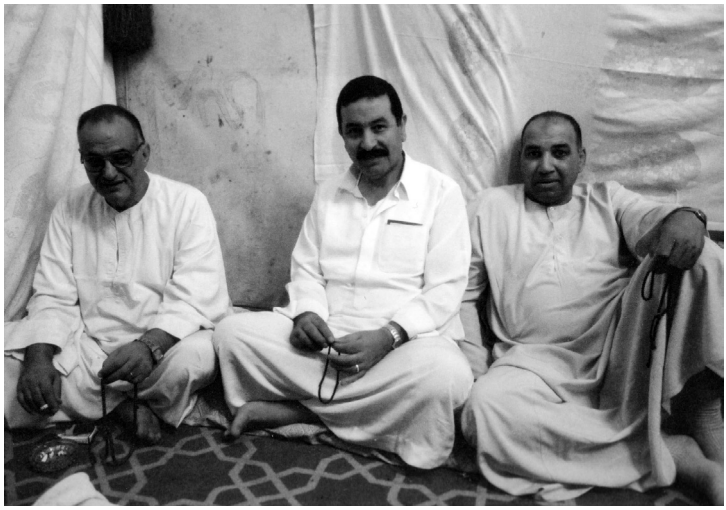

*Image 12: Brigadier-General Sayyid Aḥmad (middle), member of the National Assembly (Maǧlis aš-Šaʿb, second chamber of the Egyptian parliament), in a ḫidma at the mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 5 August 2003.*

[119]Chih, *Le soufisme au quotidien*, pp. 173 f.

[120]Women do not generally dress differently at mawlids, making class distinctions expressed by dress more visible than is the case among men.

the symbolic suspension of the very hierarchic relationships that make this festive atmosphere possible. A mawlid is an occasion in which patrons have to prove their moral and communal qualities by acting like 'one of us' while people in subaltern positions might feel that those with money and power are not really above them after all. Although it may seem paradoxical, the suspension of boundaries and the power of clientelistic and charismatic networks go hand in hand in the mawlid.[121]

This ambiguity, and these moments of reversal between the order of the festivity and the order of the everyday, are fundamental to the way mawlids work. The suspension of boundaries could not take place anywhere and anytime, else were there no boundaries left to suspend. As I argue in the following section, mawlids exist in a tension between the time and landscape of the extraordinary and the order of the everyday. While these two 'worlds' (and the festivity is in fact often described as being like a different world) produce and sustain each other, they also limit and question each other's validity and power.

## 3. Festive space and time

The suspension of the everyday in the mawlid works through an understanding of space, the sacred, time and social order that does not define these categories as rigid and uniform. The extraordinary order of the mawlid is made possible through an order of the everyday that views space as contingent, the sacred as an active source of power, time as circular, and social norms as subject to partial temporary reversal.

### *3.1. Space and the sacred*

Mawlids stand in close relation to the structure of villages and old urban quarters. Many villages and quarters are named after the saints buried in them (e.g. the quarters of as-Sayyida Zaynab, al-Ḥusayn and Bulāq Abū l-ʿIlā in Cairo). The shrines and the mawlids held around them form central public spaces. Public space, however, means something quite different here from the liberal concept of public versus private.[122] Mawlids represent a way to structure the open space that was once dominant in the cities of Egypt but has since become either exoticised as folklore or rejected as backward by the discourses and imageries of Egyptian modernity.[123] In this spatial order, spaces are classified according to complex hierarchies of protection and openness, gender, sanctity etc. Open spaces can have widely variant characteristics according to their position in these hierarchies.

The mawlid, insofar it takes place in streets and squares, is set in the spatial category of *sāḥa*, the open space around the shrine, or, in a wider sense, the open space of the

[121]An excellent analysis of the interconnection of clientelism and the veneration of saints is offered by Reeves, *The Hidden Government*, esp. pp. 167-180.

[122]See Kaviraj, Sudipta, 'Filth and the Public Sphere: Concepts and Practices about Space in Calcutta', *Public Culture* 10 (1997), 1, pp. 83-113.

[123]See Madoeuf, 'Les grands mûlid-s'; Pagès-El Karoui,'Le mouled de Sayyid al-Badawî', pp. 259 f.

festivity. The *sāḥa* – in itself an ambiguous term that in rural Sufi context has a meaning closer to that of the *zāwiya*[124] – facing the shrine is an intersection, a particular form of open, yet protected, space where an aura of sanctity allows for the licit blending of different spheres of life. It is a contingent and ambiguous form of space that is defined by its being open to all people and for multiple uses (market, bus stop, mawlid). The *sāḥa* can only be open to everyone – rich and poor, men and women – because it is simultaneously protected. This protection is, in the case of mawlids, based on the relationship of the space to a specific kind of sanctity. The *sāḥa* of the mawlid, through its connection to the sacred space of the shrine, shares some of its *baraka* and enjoys some of the special protection of the sacred sphere.

*Baraka*, in this understanding, is the objectified, material expression of the sacred. It is a power that emanates from God through His word (the Qur'ān), His messengers (the prophets), and His friends (the saints). In a way clearly inspired by Neo-Platonist metaphysics, this spiritual power gradually mixes with matter, so that while there is a clear hierarchy between sites, objects and persons according to their degree of sanctity (Mecca and Medina have more *baraka* than any shrine, the shrine of a grand saint has more *baraka* than that of a minor one, and the shrine has more *baraka* during the mawlid than at other times), there is no strict boundary between the spiritual and the material.

*Baraka*, thus understood, is the power that makes a mawlid possible, providing protection and legitimacy to the gathering of different people and practices. In the *sāḥa* the sacred is not protected against the profane world because it is not in need of such protection: on the contrary, the holy shrine is a source of power and protection that extends to the surrounding profane space, turning it into a protected realm that is capable of containing very different spheres of life:

> 'It is no accident that the holy towns one finds throughout the Middle East, for example, are also often the sites of major regional markets and caravan route stopping points. Religion and economy here link tightly and those who are sanctified men of peace, perhaps descendants of the Prophet, guarantee the functioning of the social system of the men of honor and violence. They extend a symbolic canopy of religious sanctions and symbols over the market and impose, at least in theory, a qualitatively different order and code upon those who come together there.
>
> [...] The space thus formed is a world apart, even though activities within may be of very worldly and practical nature. If, in symbolic terms, it rests on opposed principles to that of the zone beyond its boundaries, it is also most intimately linked to that region beyond. The making of peace at this kind of sacred site is only one of the highly important ways in which such islands of sanctuary are connected to the wider universe.
>
> In sacred space things become possible, even prescribed, that may be uncertain and problematic outside. There is protection – of goods, of persons, of collective and individual property. [...][125]

The festive space of the mawlid is structured according to this concept of sanctity that

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[124]In the Sufi context, especially in rural areas, *sāḥā* is a place, often a house with an open courtyard hosted by an order, a family or an individual, in which Sufi celebrations are held and pilgrims may stay and enjoy the host's hospitality. The institution of the Sufi *sāḥa* bears great resemblance to that of the *zāwiya*, or Sufi hospice. Like the *sāḥa* as an open space, the Sufi *sāḥa* is characterised by its being simultaneously open and protected, at the intersection of different social spaces and practices. Chih, *Le soufisme au quotidien*, 287-292.

[125]Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam*, p. 177.

is practised by most of the participants in the festival. The form of the shrines is often clearly inspired by the holy sites in Mecca and Medina, specifically the tomb of the Prophet in Medina, and the Kaʿba in Mecca (shrines are built and decorated in a way similar to the tomb of the Prophet, and the ritual of circumambulating the shrine counter-clockwise is clearly an imitation of the same ritual around the Kaʿba and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem), but also Mt. ʿArafa outside Mecca (in a way that bears

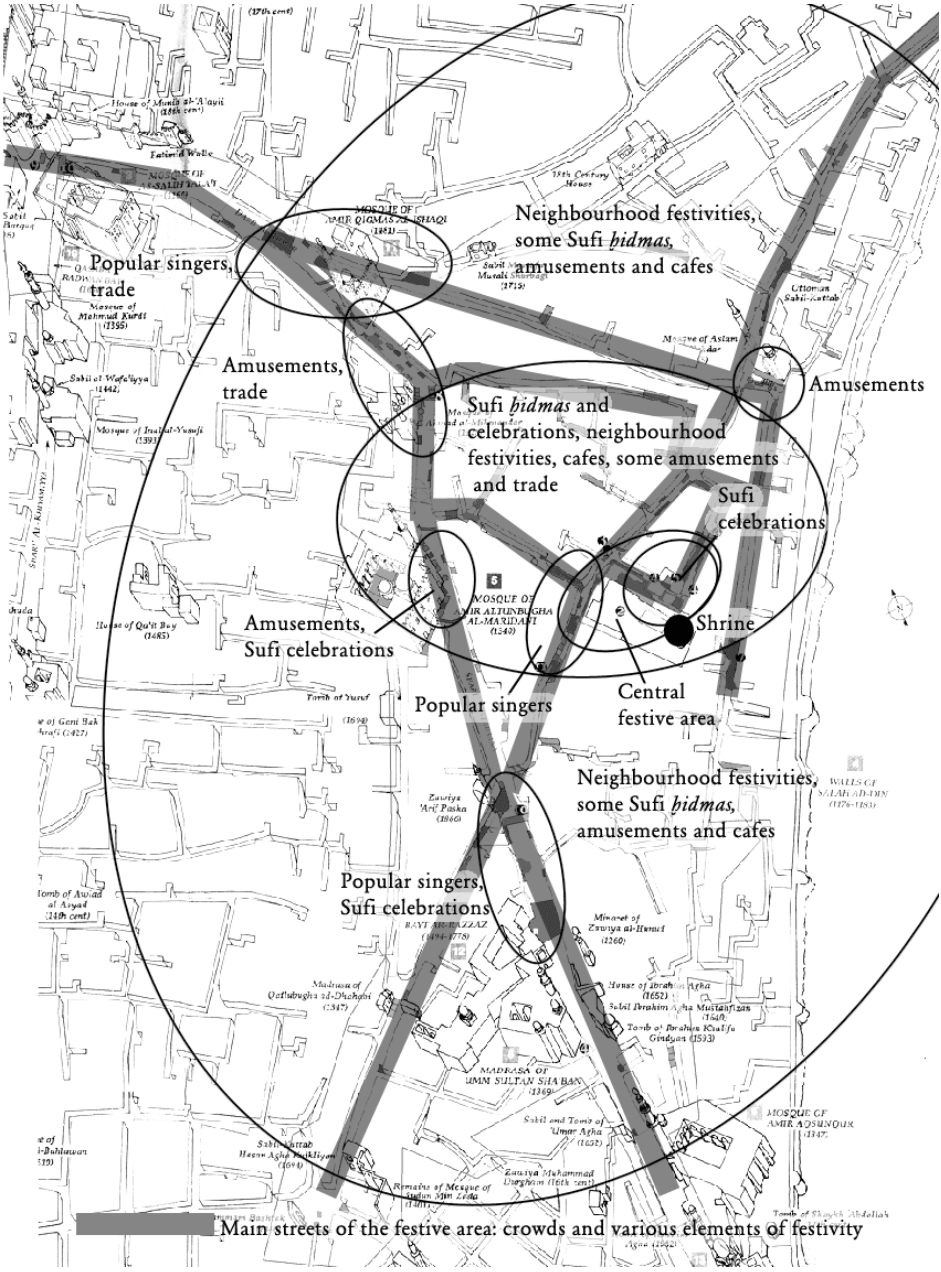


*Image 13: Parallel centres, overlapping spheres and the main streets of celebration in the mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 2-3 June 2003.*

striking likeness to the rituals of *ḥaǧǧ*, climbing to Mt. Ḥumayṯara is a central ritual at the mawlid of Sīdī Abū l-Ḥasan aš-Šāḏilī, which is celebrated simultaneously with the *ḥaǧǧ*). These forms of space and movement place the shrines of saints in a hierarchy of *baraka* right below the three holy sites of Islam.

A similar hierarchy of *baraka* is, in turn, applied in the spatial organisation of mawlids. One can best imagine such organisation as a field of overlapping circles, structured along the central square(s) and the mains streets.[126] As shown in the case of the mawlid of Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, a mawlid usually has numerous parallel centres connected by main streets, while the shrine is generally the central, most crowded and most festive spot. Sufi festivities take place around the shrine, accompanied by countless stands of vendors. Swing-boats, popular singers and all of the other popular amusements of mawlids sometimes concentrate in areas of their own, but this is based on pragmatic considerations determined by the organisers and the vendors (availability of open space, the commercial advantage of being close to competitors, etc.), not a sense of having to be separated from the devotional celebrations. People in movement form a central element of the festivity, moving continuously between the different areas and, via this movement, connecting different celebrations into one festival. Crowds are concentrated in the central square(s) and the main streets while in the side streets and alleys a different atmosphere prevails: they host numerous Sufi *ḫidmas* and, especially in the mawlids of Cairo, are characterised by a local neighbourhood celebration marked by a more intimate atmosphere than that found on the main streets.

These different elements of festivity are partly mixed, partly separated, and yet all centre around the shrine of the saint, a source of holiness and *baraka* and the focal point and very reason behind the festivity. The festival does not have a clear programme, a clear meaning or a clear plan, however it does have a clear centre in its festive geography (both physical and imagined): the shrine of the saint, which radiates an aura of sacredness over all of the festivity, encompassing everything and everyone to various degrees. While a pilgrimage to the shrine brings more and purer *baraka* than drinking tea in a café next to the mosque, even the most profane parts of the festivity are not fully separate from nor opposed to the sacred centre, on the contrary, they become part of the sacred-profane spectacle.[127]

## *3.2. Time and social order*

On 25 October 2002, one week before the great night, the mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī was officially opened in the city of Disūq (Kafr aš-Šayḫ province in the Nile Delta). The Friday noon prayer was attended by a large crowd of people and the park facing the mosque was filled with picnicking families. The mosque of Sīdī Ibrāhīm is always well-attended, but because it was the opening day of the mawlid there were even more people present than usual on Fridays. Before the prayer, the mosque gave its usual impression: a busy but controlled and calm pilgrimage site.

The large mosque of Sīdī Ibrāhīm is separated into different sections for men and

[126]Madoeuf, 'Les grands mûlid-s'.
[127]*Ibid.*

women, each with entrances of their own. In the men's section, some people sat around, some performed supererogatory prayers, others passed by on their way to visit the shrine. Slowly more people gathered in expectation of the imminent collective prayer. The shrine is located in a separate room, a large space covered by a dome that also houses some smaller shrines belonging to Sīdī Ibrāhīm's followers. A wooden fence separates this room into two sections – one for men and one for women. Conveniently, it also prevents people from circumambulating the shrine, a practice which, because of its resemblance to the rituals performed at the Kaʿba, has been subject to criticism almost as much as the mixing of men and women at the shrine.[128]

When the call for the Friday noon prayer sounded, believers crowded the mosque to perform their prayer and listen to the sermon. Then, the very moment the prayer service ended, the mawlid began. The transformation was rapid and dramatic. Immediately when people began to leave the mosque, families began to enter it, carrying newspapers and baskets. As soon as they were inside, they spread the newspapers on the floor, unloaded the contents of their baskets onto the newspapers, and a picnic was ready. At the same time, people crowded towards the shrine to pay their respects to Sīdī Ibrāhīm. At the shrine, mosque employees struggled against the crowd to remove the fence that bisects the room. As soon as the fence was gone, a vortex of human bodies – men, women, and children – began to move around the shrine, invocating God, praising the Prophet and greeting the saint in loud voices. Half an hour after the prayer, a *ḏikr* of the Burhānīya order began in the main hall of the mosque. While half of the mosque had turned into a mixed family space, the *ḏikr* was exclusively male. Led by a *munšid*, the men moved their bodies rhythmically, invocating names of God: '*Allāh!*', '*Ḥayy!*', '*Qayyūm!*'.[129] The space was filled with the ecstatic movements of their bodies and the chant of the *munšid*.

Within minutes following the Friday prayer, the character of the space and the habitus attached to it had radically changed. The mosque and the shrine had been transformed from a gender-segregated, exclusively spiritual space into a multi-functional family space. The calm, almost sterile sanctity of the morning was swept away by the emotional, crowded, ecstatic celebration of the mawlid that would prevail until the great night the following Thursday. After that, the fence at the shrine would be put back in place, men and women would be confined to their respective areas once again, and the regular everyday order of the mosque would return.

The intensity and attraction of the mawlid is essentially connected to its short, fleeting nature. It takes place only once a year and only lasts a few days. Although there are some people who spend most of their time going to mawlids, for the vast majority of people, and for the pilgrimage sites themselves, the mawlid is a rare, special moment in time that, by definition, simply cannot be a permanent state of affairs. A mawlid is

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[128]All in all, the mosque of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī is a typical example of the way state authorities have attempted to discipline and restructure great pilgrimage mosques in the last two decades: women and men are segregated and controversial practices such as eating, sleeping and circumambulating the shrine are prohibited. For the restructuring measures that have taken place at the mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm, see below pp. 208-209.

[129]A *ḏikr* that is held inside a mosque is, unlike one held in a *ḫidma* or on the street, almost always purely vocal, with usually only round frame drums as instrumental background if at all, and participation is restricted to men.

something one waits for, something that exists as a promise sparkling through the dullness of daily life. In visitors' accounts, this passing, extraordinary character is often strongly emphasised. In their narratives the mawlid emerges as a beautiful moment beyond the boundaries of daily life, a time when all people from all classes of society unite and where the mystic and the thief come together in the realm of the saint – a beautiful congregation with the Sufi brethren, a moment of freedom far removed from the restriction of the home and daily routines. During the mawlid you can 'leave behind your work and family and set out for a hard, long, journey', 'change the atmosphere', 'see strange, new things' and 'empty your head and enjoy. The mawlid means to forget all your worries and live in the moment."[130] The next morning, however, it is time to go to work and behave again.

Time, or to be more precise, the temporal structure of norms and boundaries, is key to the specific character of a mawlid – and most other festivities, for that matter. The mawlid is a limited period of time during which different rules apply, when, for example, circumambulating the shrine, the mixing of men and women in sacred space, and eating in the mosque are permitted. During the mawlid, under the protection of the saint and with the mercy of God, or, from a different point of view, in the anonymity and vastness of the crowds, one can let loose and do what one might otherwise not do. This can sometimes mean outright transgression of social norms – drinking, libertine sexual contacts, harassment, fights – but more often the situation is more subtle, as 'rules are stretched but not broken'.[131] In most cases, what is transgressed in the festive time of the mawlid is not so much the moral norms of a society than the boundaries which mark these. Women's movement and gendered space make a good example. In Sufi *ḫidmas* and many Sufi rituals, space is shared by men and women who are not members of the same family[132] and yet Sufis would never see this as an expression of libertine morals. On the contrary, they argue that in the realm of the saint, on the noble occasion of his or her birthday, people are busy with spiritual matters and are not exposed to sexual temptation, *ergo* there can be nothing immoral about it:

> 'This was a beautiful day, with *ziyāras*, friendship, spirituality and love (*maḥabba*), everyone was sitting here in a state of innocence and purity. These are beautiful, innocent moments. The mawlid is like the *ʿīd*, all people rejoin in friendship and peace, all of them sinless (*maʿṣūm*). In my *ḫidma*, all people, men and women, sit here in a state of pure spiritual love (*maḥabba*) without any bad things to disturb it."[133]

This is more than merely an apologetic strategy of argumentation. In the Sufi *ḫidmas* I have attended, the atmosphere has almost never been sexually charged. At the mawlid, most people do not do things they consider to be immoral. However, they do act in ways

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[130]Interviews with Sheikh ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, imam of a mosque in Ṭanṭā, mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī, Disūq, 29 October 2002; Laylā from Zaqāzīq, mawlid of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2002; Marwa, young woman running a temporary café in the mawlid of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 17 October 2002; Ḫalīl, French teacher, mawlid of Sīdī Ibraḫīm ad-Disūqī, Disūq, 31 October 2002.

[131]Drieskens, *Living with Djinns*, p. 238.

[132]A less rigid form of segregation usually remains in force, however, for example through the seating of women and men at different ends of a tent.

[133]Interview with Sheikh Ḥasan ad-Dirīnī, mawlid of as-Sayyida Zaynab, Cairo, 28 September 2002.

they would consider unsuitable on other occasions but which they view as legitimate during the mawlid because of its spiritual character and/or its exceptional, fleeting festive nature.

Time is so important to understanding mawlids because it is central to structuring the norms and boundaries of social order. The concept of time that makes mawlids possible is not a universal, linear time in which all moments are equal and interchangeable, with the same rules and logic of behaviour valid at any other given time. Such a uniform, progressive concept of time (which does not exist in such pure form in any society) would imply a moral and social habitus based on homogenous, universal norms and boundaries.[134] The concept of time that mawlids are based upon is contingent and, to a significant extent, circular. It is contingent because it is based on an understanding of social order in which norms and boundaries are bound to a temporal context, as is pointed out by the colloquial proverb: 'There's an hour for your heart and an hour for your Lord.'[135] What is suitable at a certain time is out of the question at another, and vice versa. It is circular because it implies periodic shifts of social and metaphysical order: once a year, a mawlid is a special time in which, depending on what one is looking for, the mythological time of the Prophet and the grand saints is mingled with the present, the world is good and free of oppression and greed, or the worries of the past year are forgotten and there is no tomorrow to be troubled about.[136] This festive time is never a progressive shift into another state; it implies that the order of the everyday is neither absolute nor beyond questioning, but also that when the festivity ends the order of daily life inevitably returns. The experience of this festive time can be, as I argue in the following chapter, described as liminal. But due to the recurrent character of mawlids it is not accurate to describe them as rites of passage (although they, of course, may be so in some individual festive experiences). A mawlid does not imply a transformation from a structure through anti-structure to a new level of structure,[137] but rather an alternative, recurrent 'counter-structure'.[138]

A much criticised feature in the social study of time has been to construct the time of the Other (the object of anthropology) through its opposition to a supposedly linear and abstract time of the modern, Western society. According to its critics – notably Johannes Fabian and Barbara Adam – such an approach is not only inaccurate concerning its subject, but also problematic in the way it leaves crucial premises

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[134]As is suggested by Elias, Norbert, *Über die Zeit*, 2nd ed., Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985, pp. 117 ff.

[135]*Sāʿa l-qalbak w-sāʿa l-rabbak*. Interview with Sheikh ʿAbd al-Muʿizz al-Ǧazzār, editor-in-chief of *Maǧallat al-Azhar* and deputy secretary-general of the Islamic Research Academy (*Maǧmaʿ al-buḥūṯ al-islāmīya*) of al-Azhar, Cairo, 8 July 1999.

[136]This understanding of time bears some similarity to Mircea Eliade's concept of sacred time as characterised by circularity and ruptures. However, it does not follow Eliade's contrast of profane homogenous 'duration' and sacred, circular, reversible 'time'. Although it may offer a qualitatively different temporal experience, the time of the mawlid is not structurally different from the time of the everyday. The time of the mawlid is part of and made possible by the same understanding of social order that structures the everyday. See Eliade, *Le Sacré et le Profane*, pp. 60-63.

[137]See Turner, Victor W., *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974; and below p. 59.

[138]Werbner/Basu, 'The Embodiment of Charisma' pp. 12 f.

concerning the structure of time unquestioned.[139] Therefore it is necessary to point out what exactly is at stake when we talk about different models of time in the context of mawlids. Firstly, speaking of time in this and following chapters, what is intended is primarily the temporal structure of norms and boundaries, that is, the question as to what extent norms and boundaries are seen to be contingent upon specific moments of time. Secondly, the homogenous and universal time referred to in the previous paragraph is not, although it may seem so, that of Western industrial societies.[140] It is, and this proves to be a significant element of the debates on mawlids, a specific interpretation of time that goes along with the Egyptian modernist concepts of progress and public order. Neither is the contingent time of mawlids in any way essentially Egyptian or pre-modern. It is a contemporary, albeit contested, way to organise society, morality, and religious experience. Ideal types as they are, these concepts of time are not independent entities. The experience and social organisation of time cannot be reduced to either linear and universal or reoccurring and contingent elements.[141] Yet the distinction remains important for this study because a specific understanding of time is expressed at mawlids with an intensity that can be problematic for constructs of order and society that emphasise discipline and progress.

What does this mean for the concrete case of mawlids? Let us return to the case of the mawlid in Disūq: The end of the Friday prayer in the mosque of Sīdī Ibrāhīm al-Disūqī marked the beginning of a qualitatively different period of time.[142] In this festive period of time, special rules applied. Because it was the noble celebration of Sīdī Ibrāhīm, people could relax and express their joy, and because it was a time to relax and express joy, people didn't need to behave the way they would at work or during prayer. Of course, not all aspects of temporal discipline are subject to change. Mawlid or not, murder and robbery are not tolerated, to take just two examples. Furthermore, the moral norms and the temporal discipline of any given society are in constant change: what was acceptable behaviour on some occasions in the 19th century, may in the 21st century be seen as a transgression at all times. In fact, the mawlids of the 19th century seem much wilder to the present-day reader (see below pp. 191-192), while the basic characteristics of mawlids – ambivalence and the suspension of boundaries – remain constant.

The festive order of mawlids (along with many other festivities) is based on a social order that allows for a relatively high degree of ambivalence and temporal contingence of boundaries. In this order, the mawlid is part of the circle of life and plays a legitimate role in both sustaining and questioning the preceding and following ordinary times. Because everything has its time, there is, among others, a time to let go and forget, even to question some of the otherwise undisputed boundaries of life.

But what about the function of this kind of festive time? Is it perhaps a popular form of resistance to hegemonic norms? Or is it mere 'bread and games' to distract people

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[139]Adam, Barbara, 'Perceptions of Time', in Tim Ingold (ed.), *Companion Encyclopaedia of Anthropology*, London etc.: Routledge, 1994, pp. 503-526; Fabian, Johannes, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983, pp. 26 ff.

[140]See Adam, 'Perceptions of Time', pp. 508-516.

[141]*Ibid.*, p. 519.

[142]Festive time does not always begin as dramatically but it is invariably marked by rituals of opening and conclusion.

from their real problems and to keep the people happy and passive? Both views enjoys significant popularity, both in Egypt and internationally, but both fail to understand the deeply ambivalent nature of the festive time. A mawlid is at the same time profound and joking, spiritual and commercial, conservative and subversive, and it makes little sense to try to figure out which part comes first. The question has to be phrased differently. If we want to understand what function, if any, mawlids have in politics and society, we first have to ask what a mawlid means to the people who participate in it. This question forms the subject of the following chapter devoted to the various, often contradictory interpretations and practices of the festivity.

# Chapter Three: Festive experiences

It has become commonplace to compare mawlids with Catholic carnivals: colourful spectacles with entertainment, music and processions in which the rules of everyday behaviour are inverted.[143] Although some researchers in the field, notably Barbara Drieskens,[144] have credibly questioned this, the analogy of carnival is compelling and to some extent justified. Yet this analogy is also far too simplistic to be taken as a research question. Firstly, if we were to look for comparative cases, Catholic saints-day festivals (a custom clearly distinct from carnival)[145] – for example the pilgrimages of Mexico and the *Kirchweih* of southern Germany[146] with their mixture of religious celebration and the atmosphere of a fair – might show more similarities to mawlids than carnival does. Secondly and more importantly, the question concerning the carnivalesque nature of the mawlid is embedded in a more complex problem, namely the character of the mawlid as a festivity as perceived and celebrated by its various participants. Hence, the question is not whether mawlids are like carnivals (or carnivals like mawlids). Instead, we must ask what kind of festive experiences and ideologies they are embedded in, and what kind of relationship the different festive practices of the mawlid have to each other, daily life, and other festivities.

I argue in this chapter that for the people involved in them, mawlids are characterised by a temporary utopian vision of a better world. There is not one festive utopia but rather many. These utopias are partly opposed to each other but also share a stark contrast to daily life in a way not typical of other festivities in contemporary Egypt. Although mawlids are strongly ambiguous and potentially subversive towards hegemonic norms, they are not a form of open resistance or transgression. And yet they may become perceived so from the perspective of different understandings of festivity, piety and social order.

## 1. Approaches to festivity and pilgrimage

There is an old and ongoing debate in the social and cultural sciences about how to interpret festivity and pilgrimage. Emile Durkheim, to begin with a prominent classic, provides a functional explanation of festivity as a means to renew and reinforce the

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[143]E.g. Sonbol, Sherif (photographs) / Tarek Atia (text), *Mulid! Carnivals of Faith*, Cairo: AUC Press, 1999.

[144]Interview, Cairo, May 2003; Drieskens, *Living with Djinns*, p. 238.

[145]The term carnival is often used to describe a wide variety of festivities, but in Catholic festive tradition it specifically designates the pre-Lenten Carnival that marks the beginning of a forty-day period of fasting before Easter. Although carnival is part of the Catholic ritual calendar, it is usually not a religious celebration, contrary to saints-day festivals in which pilgrimage often features as the central moment of festivity.

[146]See Turner, Victor / Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1978, pp. 97-100; Wagner, Karin, *Kirchweih in Franken: Studien zu den Terminen und deren Motivationen*, PhD thesis, Erlangen: Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, 1971. Some festive traditions unconnected to the veneration of saints, for example the Spanish bullfight, also display some significant similarities in terms of festive time and space. See, e.g., Braun, Karl, *Toro! Spanien und der Stier*, Berlin: Wagenbach 2000 [1997[1]], pp. 144-153.

values and coherence of a community.[147] In the successive tradition of structural functionalist anthropology, festive rites of reversal that appeared to question the values of a community were generally interpreted as a way to stabilise social order through the symbolic enactment of conflicts.[148]

A different approach is offered by Victor Turner,[149] who argues that rituals and pilgrimages represent a moment of anti-structure, a transition from one status to the other whereby otherwise valid structures and hierarchies are temporarily replaced by *communitas*, the egalitarian community of participants in which the authority of the ritual leader is recognised while other forms of authority and hierarchy may be suspended or inverted. This moment of anti-structure, or liminality, becomes a (necessarily short) period of extraordinary unity and equality, before the passage to a new structural status is completed.

The power of Turner's approach is that it enables us to look beyond apparent functional or structural continuities and analyse the dialectic and dynamic nature of ritual and festivity. His approach was later criticised, however, for sketching an image that is too idealised to give justice to the complex nature of ritual. In the context of pilgrimage, John Eade and Michael Sallnow[150] argue that while pilgrimage rituals may be a form of communitas on the ideological level, the practice of pilgrimages is characterised by mutually contested interpretations and heavy competition, which makes them capable of attracting people from different regions holding different ideas of what the pilgrimage is about:

> 'Pilgrimage is above all an arena for competing religious and secular discourses, [...] for conflict between orthodoxies, sects, and confessional groups."[151]
>
> '[W]hat confers upon a major shrine its essential, universalistic character [is] its capacity to absorb and reflect a multiplicity of religious discourses, to be able to offer a variety of clients what each of them desires."[152]

One should be careful not to dismiss the experience of liminality entirely on the grounds of the power struggles that take place during a pilgrimage.[153] Yet the advantage of Eade's and Sallnow's criticism is that it calls attention the plural and fragmented nature of pilgrimage – and any other major festivity. One cannot point out the one communitas, the one ritual momentum at work in a festivity because there are always many of them, partly in competition, partly together contributing to the shape of the festivity.[154]

An approach that I consider highly fruitful to understanding this complex puzzle of

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[147]Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, pp. 491-500.

[148]See, e.g., Gluckman, Max, *Custom and Conflict in Africa*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, pp. 109-136.

[149]Turner, *The ritual process*; Turner/ Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage*.

[150]Eade, John / Michael Sallnow (eds), *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, London: Routledge, 1991.

[151]*Ibid*., p. 2, cit. by Coleman, Simon / John Elsner, *Pilgrimage: Past and Present: Sacred travel and sacred space in the world religions*, London: British Museum Press, 1995, p. 199.

[152]*Ibid*., p. 15, cit. by Coleman / Elsner, *Pilgrimage*, p. 208.

[153]Coleman / Elsner, *Pilgrimage*, p. 208-209; Coleman, Simon / John Eade, 'Introduction: Reframing Pilgrimage', in Coleman, Simon / John Eade (eds), *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 1-25, here pp. 2-4.

[154]Reader, Ian, 'Conclusions', in Reader, Ian / Tony Walter, *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, London: MacMillan, 1993, pp. 220-246, here pp. 237-244.

multiple festive ideologies and practices is presented by Mikhael Bakhtin, who, in his book *Rabelais and His World*[155] (written in the 1930s and 40s and first published in 1965),[156] argues that the mediaeval popular feast, especially the carnival, represented a moment of utopian freedom:

> 'The feast was a temporary suspension of the entire official system with all its prohibitions and hierarchic barriers. For a short time life came out of its usual, legalized and consecrated furrows and entered the sphere of utopian freedom. The very brevity of this freedom increased its fantastic nature and utopian radicalism, born in the festive atmosphere of images.'[157]

Even following the decline of the mediaeval carnival traditions, Bakhtin argues, this has remained a characteristic feature of festivities:

> 'The feast has no utilitarian connotation (as has daily rest and relaxation after working hours). On the contrary, the feast means liberation from all that is utilitarian, practical. It is a temporary transfer to the utopian world. The feast cannot be reduced to any specific content (for instance to the historical event commemorated on that day); it transgresses all limited objectives.'[158]

Festive time, according to Bakhtin, is a time in its own right, a popular utopia of freedom and equality. Carnivalesque speech allows for ridiculing otherwise eternal truths, representing 'people's unofficial truth' and 'the victory of laughter over fear.'[159] Laughter and festivity are, in Bakhtin's interpretation, not a form of distraction from 'true' matters and dispositions, on the contrary they appear as a powerful and truthful expression of the human condition. Festivity, according to Bakhtin, is a utopian moment in which – for a limited period of time – people are able to articulate and experience a better world free of moralism, oppression, poverty and boredom.

Bakhtin's analysis is problematic on several levels. His work is based on a narrow selection of sources, his historical analysis is over-generalising and his concept of festivity highly idealised.[160] But these shortcomings mainly concern the validity of Bakhtin's work as an interpretation of Rabelais. On a more abstract level, Bakhtin remains useful for the study of festivities, and his concept of festive utopia can be developed further to analyse how festivities are given competing meanings.

Writing in the Soviet Union of the 1930s and 40s, Bakhtin offers a model of utopia that is strongly influenced by the Marxist concept of utopia as a pre-revolutionary ideology that proclaims a better society but lacks the political programme and scientific understanding of society required for it to be actually realised.[161] A festive utopia, to argue

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[155]Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, Cambridge, MA etc.: The M.I.T. Press, 1968.

[156]Based on a dissertation submitted to the Gorky Institute of World Literature in 1940, *Rabelais and his World* was first published in Russian in 1965 and translated into English in 1968. Emerson, Caryl, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, pp. 91-94; Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura Srednevekov'ia i Renessansa*, Moscow: Khudezhestvnnaia literatura, 1965.

[157]Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 89.

[158]*Ibid.*, p. 276.

[159]*Ibid.*, p. 99.

[160]Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin*, pp. 94-107, 162-206.

[161]See Marx, Karl / Friedrich Engels, 'Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei', in Karl Marx, *Werke – Schriften, vol. 3: Frühe Schriften*, Hans-Joachim Lieber / Peter Furth (eds), Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975, Vol. 2, pp. 813-858; 'Utopie' in: *Philosophisches Wörterbuch*, Georg Klaus / Manfred Buhr (eds), Leipzig: VEB Bibliographisches Institut, 1975, Vol. 2, pp. 1249-

with Bakhtin, shares with political utopias the vision of an ideal social order but differs from the latter on two significant points. The first is that unlike the political utopias (in a wider, non- Marxist sense)[162] of the 19th and 20th centuries that have been either imagined as ideal communities or located in the future, festive utopia is not imagined but lived. The better world presented by a festivity is not a promise yet to be realised but a recurrent experience that offers a time to question and relativise the order of the everyday. From this follows the second point, namely that while a festive utopia can (but does not have to) present a clear critique of the otherwise valid norms of society, it is always ambiguous in character because of its temporary nature. Those who share a festive utopia do not expect it to one day replace the contemporary social order for good. Festivity stands in a dialectic relationship with the norms and structures of society: it may serve their cohesion but may also subvert them.

Speaking of utopia instead of liminality, on the condition that we remain aware of the specific characteristics of festive utopias, highlights the ambiguity of festivities and their contested meanings. Utopia, in all its forms, belongs to the field of political imagination and speaking of festivities in terms of utopia highlights their political character, that is, their significance to contestations over the values and resources of a society. After all, the meaning and function of festivity are not only the subject of academic debate in which some researchers see utopian time, others liminality, and still others renewal of the community. The people participating in a festivity themselves hold different commonsense theories of what the festivity is about that sometimes bear striking resemblance to the academic models. Festive experiences are accompanied by understandings – implicit or explicit – of what the festivity means. A festivity does not simply *have* functions waiting to be discovered by the social scientist. It is *given* functions by the participants, and these functions are subject to explicit negotiation and change.

This is what makes Bakhtin's concept of utopian time so interesting, provided that we do not assume that there is just one utopia that all people live out at all festivities. Instead, we need to ask what kind of utopian views people produce and express at different festivities. Most festivities, not only mawlids, display a utopian spirit of some kind: at the time of the feast, the world is good, such as at carnival time when everything (or a lot) is allowed, and during Christmas or *ʿīd al-fiṭr* when everybody loves each other and conflicts are settled. Each festivity has its own utopian view of a temporary better world, but these temporary better worlds show great variety, which again is related to the occasion, social context, space and time of the festivity. To analyse these different visions of festivity is all the more interesting with festivities that contain a high degree of variety, competition, and even conflict – as is the case with mawlids.

Of course, as Eade's and Sallnow's analysis of pilgrimage reminds us, real celebrations

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1254; Dierse, U., 'Utopie' in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2001, Vol. 11, p. 518. The confusion between 'utopian' and 'revolutionary' has been one of the most influential misreadings of Bakhtin. See e.g. Schümer, Dirk, 'Lachen mit Bachtin: ein geisteshistorisches Trauerspiel', *Merkur*, Vol. 641/642 (September-October 2002), pp. 847-853.

[162]Political utopia may be more accurately defined as the imagination of an ideal state of affairs that is part of any political ideology with a progressive agenda. The Marxist concept of utopia is relevant mainly to help us develop Bakhtin's reading of utopia, but will not be important in the further course of this thesis.

can be far removed from a particular festive utopia. Christmas may be perceived as a feast of love and solidarity, but policemen working the Christmas night shift might tell a different story centred on outbreaks of violence as fragile families try but fail to act out the ideal of mutual love. This discrepancy between festive ideal and practice does not mean that the utopian view of festivity is irrelevant. On the contrary, festive practice is continuously measured against an ideal of how a certain celebration ought to be celebrated. When such implicit measure sticks become topics of discourse, this justifies speaking of a festive ideology – a normative description, to some extent coherent and rationalised, of what a festivity is about, what it means, and how it ought to be celebrated, combined with the will and sometimes the resources to apply these norms.

## 2. Many mawlids

I have argued that the success of mawlids and other pilgrimage festivities is based on their ability to unite highly different festive practices and ideologies under an overarching theme everyone can share in. Yet in a mawlid, finding such common ground is not easy. For most participants, the festivity is a way to honour the memory of a grand saint and, hence, Islam as a whole. But there are also many participants who do not share the belief in saints, and others still who are not Muslims.

One overarching theme appears in almost all descriptions of mawlids. A mawlid, according to almost all participants, is in one way or another a festivity characterised by joy, to the extent that the word for joy has become a word for the festivity. The mawlid, in popular idiom, is a *faraḥ*, meaning joy but also the term used for a wedding celebration. The association between a saint's festivity and a wedding is expressed in the similarity of many of the mawlid's rituals to those of nuptial celebrations: the opening processions are known as *zaffa*, a term borrowed from wedding processions, and at the festivals of female saints, a henna celebration analogous to those organised for brides prior to weddings is held at the shrine.

The general theme of joy contains many different nuances, and allows for the containment of highly different visions of festivity:

> 'The mawlid collects all. It's open for everybody without exception, that's why the mawlids also have very many ways of celebration. [...] There are those who come to look, or to grab girls, some come to listen to the *munšidīn*, others to watch a female dancer. It's all there. But all are in one way or another there for the saint whose celebration (*faraḥ*) it is. [...] All come to celebrate (*yifraḥ*), and although each have a different moment of joy (*farḥa*), all are in the same celebration (*faraḥ*)."[163]

What is common to all festive joy at the mawlid is its special intensity and overwhelming and extraordinary character. Fatḥī ʿAbd as-Samīʿ, a poet and journalist from the Upper Egyptian city of Qinā, interprets the need for joy in a life full of hardship as the driving force that turns mawlids into utopian time:

> 'I think that mawlids really are a conspiracy to create joy. They are an expression of joy and suppressed feelings in an otherwise very closed society [i.e. Upper Egypt]. People live under hard circumstances and extreme poverty, women in the villages live in a small space and the most they move is between two houses in the same alley. For them going to the

[163]Interview with Sheikh Fārūq, mawlid of Sīdnā al-Ḥusayn, Cairo, 22 June 2003.

*Image 14: Henna procession in the mawlid of as-Sayyida Sakīna, Cairo, 22 July 2003.*

mawlid is a rare occasion of joy and travel. [...] The mawlid is a mirror for the suppressed feelings (*muġlaqāt*) of the society. [...] It is a moment of breaking the order. The city [of Qinā] follows the course of order perfectly except in the days of the mawlid. [...] I'm especially intrigued by the relation of the living and the dead when the mawlid enters the graveyard. The utmost noise amidst the utmost silence! A whole mythical life, it's not by coincidence among the dead."[164]

In this interpretation, joy appears as the emotional tone of a temporary liberation from the bonds and hardship of daily life. But it is not determined what bonds are broken, nor what kind of joy prevails during the time of the mawlid. United in the same great moment of joy, participants have very different experiences and interpretations of the festivity.

On a closer look, it turns out that a mawlid is not really one festivity at all but rather a festival in a most profound sense of the word: a time and an area for countless different celebrations, some of which overlap while others never meet. In this temporary city of celebration, each visitor makes his or her own mawlid, depending on where one goes and what one does. The choices are many: read the Fātiḥa at the shrine, take a ride on a swing-boat or the Ferris wheel, participate in a *ḏikr* and reach a state of trance, sit in the *ḫidma* with Sufi brethen and friends, hang around on the streets, make or fulfill a vow, play dice or roulette, listen to a *munšid*, eat for free, go to a café or restaurant, have a good look at members of the opposite sex, study the biography of the saint, obtain *baraka*, sit in front of one's house and watch the changing scenery, go target-shooting and choose a stand run by a pretty girl, donate food or drinks, beg, give alms, feel united with God, sleep, cook, get high, earn money by selling cheap commodities, make fun of people, watch the side-show, walk in or watch a procession, praise the Prophet, rush through the crowds, pick a fight, buy snacks and souvenirs, recite the Qur'ān and religious poetry, kiss the shrine and break into tears, laugh, ululate, distribute money and presents, listen to a popular singer, shake hands and greet: '*kull sana w-inta ṭayyib!*'[165]

One can choose to participate in any of these moments of festivity, but few choose all. In fact, the pluralistic character of the mawlid makes an attempt to see it all a

[164]Interview with Fatḥī ʿAbd as-Samīʿ, poet and journalist, Qinā, 19 and 20 October 2002.

[165]Meaning approximately 'may this day find you well every year', a greeting that is used on all annual festive occasions.

practically impossible task, and most mawlid-goers never even try. It sometimes happened during my fieldwork that people whom I had interviewed about their relationship to the festivity in turn asked me to show them around. Young men from Disūq who went to the mawlid of their hometown every year turned to me to inquire about what Sufi pilgrims actually do at the mawlid. At the same mawlid a Sufi pilgrim who had come to celebrate Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī for 15 years asked me to take him to the amusement area because he had never been there. The researcher is, by definition, expected to go everywhere, but most people have their own particular interests and regular places to frequent.[166] Every visitor thus makes his or her own imaginary map of the festivity, each one showing the way to a different mawlid.

So what are these different mawlids like? If, as I have suggested, festivities often have a utopian nature, then what kind of festive utopias do people experience at mawlids? And in what relation do these stand to each other, other festivities, and daily life? In the following, I take a closer look at three different understandings of the mawlid and the utopian worlds it represents. These are, of course, heavy generalisations. In individual festive experience, different interpretations of the festivity come together in an unpredictable way. But these three ways to celebrate and to describe the mawlid are central, recurring interpretations of its festive utopia, allowing an approximate if not fully accurate overview of the festive interpretations and practices that make up the mawlid.

## *2.1. The Sufi mawlid*

For Sufi pilgrims, the mawlid, framed as joy (*faraḥ*), is first and foremost an expression of love: love of God, love of the Prophet and *ahl al-bayt*, and mutual love of pilgrims, brethren and sisters.[167]

> 'I used to be opposed to mawlids completely until I was convinced to change my mind by the living example of my sheikh. People come to a mawlid for different reasons like following the example of the pious or having fun, but the essence, the absolute foundation of the mawlid is love, indiscriminate love including everyone, near and far. What can bring people all the way from Indonesia or the Philippines to visit the Arab imam while some of the neighbours stay away, if not love? I know people who cry heavy tears in the face of severe economic hardship just to go to the mawlid. Visiting the mawlid is a Qur'ānic duty: "Say: I do not ask of you a wage for this, except love for the kinsfolk".[168] Those are the children (i.e. descendants) of the Prophet, his bond of kinship.'[169]

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[166]See Bertaux, Daniel, 'From the Life-History Approach to the Transformation of Sociological Practice', in Daniel Bertaux (ed.), *Biography and Society: the Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*, Beverly Hills, CA. and London: Sage Publications, 1981, pp. 29-45, here p. 40.

[167]See also Abu-Zahra, *The Pure and Powerful*, pp. 136-144; Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints*, pp. 77-87; Chih, *Le soufisme au quotidien,* pp. 268 f.

[168]*Qul lā as'alukum 'alayhim min ağrin illā l-mawaddata fī l-qurbā*. (42:23). This passage is regularly quoted in support of the veneration of the descendants of the Prophet. Translated after Arberry, Arthur J. (transl.), *The Koran Interpreted*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983 [1955[1]].

[169]Interview with Sayyid, teacher, formerly leftist poet and now active Sufi, Quft (Qinā province), 21 October 2002.

> 'For us as *ašrāf* (descendants of the Prophet)[170] the mawlid is like a birthday, of my great-grandmother as-Sayyida Nafīsa. Other people view the shrines of *ahl al-bayt* differently, they see *baraka* and giving (*'aṭā'*). And indeed, miracles really happen there, with the power of God, at the mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, through vows. Of course everyone has his own way to celebrate the mawlid. The mawlid is at the same time *baraka* and closeness to God (*qurbā*); it is at the same time pious charity (*nafḥa*) and remembering. But all the Sufis gather on one issue: love of the Prophet and God."[171]

The Sufi experience of a mawlid is characterised by leaving home and everyday life behind and entering a realm of love, *baraka* and spirituality for a limited period of time. For Sufis, the mawlid is a pilgrimage, although the pilgrims may only travel very short distances to reach their goal. More essential than the physical movement is movement in the sense of transformation:[172] the moment of leaving home and the successive time spent dwelling at the mawlid. There, in tents and rented apartments, on carpets and at the shrine, Sufi pilgrims live out the unique time of the mawlid.

Dwelling at the mawlid is associated with great physical fatigue: uncomfortable travel, spartan living conditions and, most crucially, lack of sleep. Most Sufi pilgrims tend to see this fatigue as a privilege rather than a problem. Attending the mawlid of as-Sulṭān al-Farġal in Abū Tīǧ (near Asyūṭ) in July 2003, I was invited by the fresh Azhar graduate Ḫamīs and his sheikh ʿAlī Abū Nabbūt to stay in their *ḫidma* located in a secondary school classroom. Ḫamīs and his friends who ran the *ḫidma* appeared exhausted but happy and told me that they had hardly slept or eaten in the past three days: 'All we need are cigarettes and the grace of our Lord'. When I worried that they may be wearing themselves out too much, they countered that that was the least thing concerning them: 'The people here don't think about things being trouble, because God will reward them for the effort of the *ḫidma*. One doesn't want it to be easy."[173] In fact, they appeared rather proud of holding out. Voluntarily going through hardship in the mawlid is seen as an expression of the love the festivity is founded upon. In Cairo, many Sufis who could easily take the bus home prefer to stay in a tent for the duration of the festivity. Some people go to the extreme and attend the mawlid even if they are seriously ill.[174]

Despite the physical discomfort of pilgrimage, many pilgrims stress how they feel intensively alive at the mawlid. Through its stark contrast to daily life and its temporary

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[170]Sg. *šarīf*, *šarīfa*. Like many Sufi leaders, al-Ḥāǧǧa Sihām, speaking in this account, draws a large part of her authority from her lineage as a descendant of the Prophet.

[171]Interview with al-Ḥāǧǧa Sihām al-Ḫalīfa, charismatic leader of a Sufi group in Alexandria, mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 21 August 2002.

[172]Unlike in many other pilgrimages, (See Coleman/Eade, 'Introduction: Reframing Pilgrimage'; Coleman/Elsner, *Pilgrimage*, pp. 205 f.) travel itself is not essential to Islamic pilgrimages (Pagès-El Karoui,'Le mouled de Sayyid al-Badawî', p. 253). It may be so in some cases, though, as in the case of the mawlid of Sīdī Abū l-Ḥasan aš-Šāḏilī, located in the eastern desert far from any other settlements and requiring a long journey that becomes a part of the festive experience in the accounts of those who undertake the trip. But more often the mawlid is within reach of a few hours' ride by bus or train, and frequently it can be reached by foot in less than half an hour.

[173]Interview with Ḫamīs, graduate of al-Azhar, and his friends, Sufi pilgrims to the mawlid of as-Sulṭan al-Farġal, Abū Tīǧ, 18 July.

[174]People often undertake the pilgrimage to a shrine in search of healing, but I have also encountered people who did not expect to be healed and yet consciously defied the advice of doctors to stay home. On the theme of voluntary hardship, see also Reader, 'Conclusions', pp. 224-226.

character, the time spent at the mawlid appears as more real, more intense and more profound than that of other days. So also to Laylā, a young woman from Zaqāzīq who travelled with her parents and a Sufi group of some ten people to the mawlid of as-Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawī in Ṭanṭā. For most of the mawlid she spent cooking tea and food for their small *ḫidma* on the sidewalk near the mosque, and yet the plenty of work she was busy with did not prevent her from being in an excellent mood.

> S.: 'It looks like you run the whole mawlid.'
> 'Yes, I like it a lot. It's much better than being at home – there I don't have work and stay at home and feel tired/ill (*ta'bāna*). Here it's different. I stay awake all the time – you saw me yesterday night: I was awake until late at night and up again early.
> S.: 'Do you go to mawlids a lot?'
> 'Only here in Ṭanṭā. I always come with the same people, but there are some new ones every year. I was once on my own in Cairo at the mawlid of as-Sayyida Zaynab but I felt left alone (literally orphan, *yatīma*) and lonely in the crowd. Here it's much better, also much better than at home, I get a change of atmosphere (*aġayyar il-ǧaww*).
> S.: 'Do you stay here in the *ḫidma* or do you move around in the mawlid?'
> 'Why would I go out into the streets? The youths there have bad manners, they would just harass me. And all the people I want, I can see them here.'[175]

'Getting a change of atmosphere' (*taġyīr al-ǧaww*), that is, moving to a different environment and taking time off from daily routines and worries,[176] is a central motif of almost all festive accounts. But nowhere else is the utopian moment as explicit as among the pilgrims. For them, mawlids are often almost like a second life. Usually people go to certain mawlids every year, finding there old friends and familiar places.[177] Their life at mawlids develops into something of an alternative lifestyle based on rules and conventions different from those of daily life. For many the *ḫidma* becomes a second, or even first, home. So also Sheikh Ḥasan ad-Dirīnī who, after touring the mawlids of Egypt with his *ḫidma* for several months every year, has to adjust to middle-class lifestyle again when the mawlid season ends.

> 'You know when my tour is over, I feel addicted and upset and sad, and when I change my clothes [from *ǧallābīya* and turban to shirt and trousers] and move around in Heliopolis and al-Muhandisīn and al-Haram[178] I feel like a stranger; here [in the mawlid] I feel in my own element. A friend of mine caught the point well when he said: You can't take a fish out of water.'[179]

Most Sufi pilgrims only attend one or just a few mawlids every year, but there is also a much smaller but very visible group of pilgrims who, like Sheikh Ḥasan, travel from one mawlid to the next throughout the different festive seasons,[180] to the degree that they may live more than half of the year at various mawlids around the country. It is these people

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[175]Interview with Laylā from Zaqāzīq, mawlid of as-Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2002.

[176]See Drieskens, *Living with Jinns*, pp. 225-227.

[177]A mawlid is rarely a once-in-a-lifetime experience the way the *ḥaǧǧ* pilgrimage is.

[178]Up-scale districts in Cairo.

[179]Sheikh Ḥasan ad-Dirīnī, mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 6 August 2003.

[180]The main seasons when mawlids are celebrated are the lunar season from *mawlid an-nabi* (12 Rabī' II) to the beginning of Ramaḍān, and the solar seasons of cotton harvest (October) and summer holidays (July-August).

who are commonly described as dervishes or *mawāldīya*:[181] nearly full-time mystics who devote all their free time to Sufi practice or even give up regular work and live completely 'for God'. The fact that some people actually live as dervishes bestows the festive experience with the quality of an alternative life; not only are there times when people can free themselves from some of the bonds of the society, but some people actually live their entire life that way.[182]

Most full-time dervishes live on the margins of society without steady income or even housing. Although many people who are sympathetic to Sufism express admiration or respect for them, they would hardly want to change places with them. Many of the people who work in the *ḫidmas* and travel from one mawlid to another are driven to this lifestyle by utter poverty. The *ḫidma* is often the last refuge for homeless youths, single mothers, the mentally ill, and others with no other place to go. Their life at the mawlid is mostly hard work for which they receive food and shelter, plus some occasional tips. But working at a *ḫidma* is never merely a way to survive hardship for them – they always frame it in religious terms: they take pride in doing it for the sake of God. What they demand in exchange is respect and recognition for the service they offer, as exemplified by the account of Umm Nūrā, the single mother of a young girl. She spotted me once during the mawlid of Sīdnā al-Ḥusayn and asked me whether I had recently seen Sheikh N. at whose *ḫidma* I would often sit and where she used to cook.

> 'I left his *ḫidma*; I got angry at him. I felt disrespected and badly treated, doing the *ḫidma* and cooking the food for the sake of God, not asking for thanks. But Sheikh N., he was always very demanding and unfriendly and had no respect. I did my work from the morning till late at night, and he would just be commanding around and hurrying me. I wouldn't take it. I can cook well, do it properly, and with patience; that's the way you have to do it. Sheikh N. didn't treat me well; he doesn't listen to people, he only commands around. [...] With so many of the sheikhs you can't know what they are up to... This sheikh Muḥammad (at whose *ḫidma* the discussion took place) is good, but with others you can't know. [...]'
> S. 'So are you now working in another *ḫidma*?'
> 'No, I don't work in a *ḫidma* now. I'm staying with an old sick woman nearby here and cooking for her and taking care of her. After the mawlid I'll go to Būlāq Abū l-'Ilā where I live and find some work with my brother. I hope to get some work to get enough money to put my daughter Nūrā in school. This is actually the first year that I have worked in a *ḫidma* at a mawlid. [...] I do hope the best for Sheikh N. although I had a quarrel with him. But I'm really upset because later, when I went to say hello to him, he just shouted at me. I won't take that. Say, if you meet him, tell him greetings from Umm Nūrā. Just tell him that and see how he reacts."[183]

For most people, however, staying in the *ḫidma* is a matter of voluntary choice. What attracts them to the life at mawlids is the experience of living in a better world ruled by the altruistic principles of love, equality and spirituality. In the *ḫidma*, everybody appears equal and everything is free of charge. At the shrine and in the *ḏikr*, one has a share in

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[181]The term 'dervish' (Arabic *darwīš*) is ambiguous and has many connotations. It is sometimes used to denote a false Sufi who does not really follow a spiritual path, but it can also be used to describe a Sufi who has reached a very high level of mystical knowledge and abandoned all worldly desires. The term *mawāldīya* (sg. *mawāldī*) mainly denotes the merchants who run amusements and small trade at mawlids and other festivals, but it can also be synonymous with 'dervish'.

[182]See also Hoffman, *Sufis, Mystics, and Saints*, pp. 111 f.

[183]Interview with Umm Nūrā, mawlid of Sīdnā al-Ḥusayn, Cairo , 22 June 2003.

higher spheres of meaning. Oppression and greed, banality and profanity are absent from the world of the mawlid – at least that is what the festive ideology claims.[184]

In a way that strikingly resembles Victor Turner's concept of communitas, the Sufi gathering of the mawlid is framed and experienced as an altruistic community in which material interests are absent.

> 'People only think about materialistic things these days: work, marriage etc., but here, this is a different moment because people are not interested in material things but in love (*maḥabba*). The people here don't take, they give, which is difficult for the lower self (*nafs*), which is greedy. But the people of God are distinguished by love and giving. Who gives, God loves him, and he can live with all people, and he won't get sick from bad food. The people with love are few, but they can go through life and are treated well by people. They may not work at all – they don't need to. Did any of the prophets work?'[185]

This vision of an altruistic spiritual world is also strongly reminiscent of Bakhtin's concept of festive utopia: the temporary, better world stands in tension with the order of daily life. When Aḥmad al-Farmāwī praised the love that prevails in the mawlid, he was also quite openly criticising what he sees as the driving forces of contemporary Egyptian society: selfishness and materialism. But through the specific characteristics of festive utopia, this view is not turned into a general programme of action. Aḥmad al-Farmāwī himself is a civil servant and would not quit working, and he would hardly agree with the idea that everybody should give up earning profit and concentrate on giving. The festive utopia is temporarily real in the festive *communitas*, but remains 'utopian' (in the Marxist sense), that is, unrealistic if taken as an alternative model of society.

This seeming limitation is actually a great source of power for the festive utopia: impossible on a large scale, it is still possible to live out for one night. This temporary and extraordinary nature of festive utopia provides it with enormous emotional intensity, which is often described by participants as a cathartic experience of inner renewal.

> 'The mawlid is about two things: it is an expression of love for the *ahl al-bayt*, and it is rest and recreation for the mind (*rāḥa nafsīya*). You arrive troubled and return happy.'[186]

> 'The mawlid has a lot of good things, the most important of which are getting to know people (*taʿāruf*), friendship, sincere devotion and mutual love. And when you do *ziyāra* [to the grave] there's *baraka*. The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said 'The grave is a garden of paradise'.[187] And your mind is relaxed (*inta mustarīḥ nafsīyan*) because it's a pure place and has *baraka*. [...] That is the joy (*farḥa*) of the mawlid: everyone is busy

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[184]Julia Schlösser, who conducted fieldwork in a large Sufi *ḫidma* at the mawlid of as-Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawī in 2004, reported that she was struck by the contrast between people's enthusiastic descriptions of the mawlid and the fact that many of them were actually having a terrible time at the festival. This contrast between her and my experience is probably due to the different people we did fieldwork with and perhaps also to our different research approaches. Clearly women in particular who are more often confined to cooking and cleaning in the *ḫidma* may often live out a mawlid experience quite different from that of its ideal. Interview with Julia Schlösser, anthropologist, Cairo, 13 October 2004. See also Qāsim, ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm (Abdel-Hakim Kassem), *The Seven Days of Man*, translated by Joseph Norment Bell, Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, 1989, pp. 218 f.

[185]Aḥmad al-Farmāwī, imam of a mosque, mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 1 June 2003.

[186]Interview with Ḫalaf, *ṭabla* player and dervish from Qinā, mawlid of Sheikh Muḥammad Mutawallī aš-Šaʿrāwī, Daqādūs (Daqahlīya province), 19 June 2003.

[187]*Innamā l-qabr rawḍa min-riyāḍ al-ǧanna*. Tirmiḏī, *Ǧāmiʿ aṣ-Ṣaḥīḥ: Kitāb wasf al-qiyāma, bāb* 26, *ḥadīṯ* 2460.

in his head, and when he comes [to the mawlid] he is relieved of his worries, thinks about God and relaxes, and returns satisfied."[188]

As this second account by Sheikh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz indicates, the festive ideology of the Sufi mawlid is not restricted to the experience of spiritual love. Learning, community building and the reinforcement of spiritual authority are other central elements of the Sufi mawlid. For Sufi groups, mawlids are the most important occasion available to mobilise their *murīdīn* and *muḥibbīn*,[189] bring together members who otherwise live far from each other, display the identity of the order to the public, and, last but not least, demonstrate and exercise the unity of the order and the power of the sheikh.[190] In Sufi accounts of what mawlids are about, this is framed in the terms of *taʿāruf* (getting to know each other) and *iqtidāʾ* (following the moral example of the saint).

'The purpose of the mawlid is the congregation of the *muḥibbīn* in a way to save time and effort, for learning and self-improvement through the example of other *muḥibbīn* in the mawlid, and the search for esoteric truth (*ḥaqīqa*). The most important purpose of the mawlid is getting to know each other (*taʿāruf*), based on the verse of the Qurʾān "We have made you peoples and tribes, that you may know one another."'[191]

The relationship of love and learning may be tense at times. What some pilgrims see as an expression of love is perceived by others as improper behaviour that misses the real point of the mawlid. These different experiences and interpretations coexist, and even unite in individual festive practice. People who can be tolerant to the degree of being antinomian at one moment, can turn very orthodox at another. The festive utopia and ideology of the Sufi mawlid is characterised by a strong ambivalence between equality and unrestrained love on the one hand, and authority and discipline on the other. As I show in more detail in chapters six and eight, this tension has gained increasing relevance to the course of debates on and attempts to reform mawlids.

Tension is not only found between different forms of Sufi celebration, but also within the wider spectrum of different festive ambiences. Although some Sufis completely refuse any elements of mawlids that are not in line with a spiritual Sufi celebration, most view the popular celebrations, amusements and trade as a marginal yet legitimate part of the festivity. On a pragmatic level, popular amusements and trade are either viewed as a natural and largely unproblematic byproduct of any great festivity, or – accompanied by a somewhat more critical judgement of amusements and trade – as a way to mobilise masses:

'The appearance (*ẓāhir*) of the mawlid is amusements. And [some] people are opposed to amusements, [saying]: "How come are they together with matters of religion and moral values, and these values are not applied at all in the mawlid, when the people come who work as magicians, and who run amusements, and who do stuff like that, and some youths come as if that would be the purpose of it." And when I asked that question [of someone],

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[188]Interview with Sheikh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Fayṣal, sheikh of a branch of the Rifāʿīya order in Kafr az-Zayyāt, mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 16 October 2002.

[189]The term *murīd* denotes a person committed to the mystic path, who has taken an oath from a sheikh. The term *muḥibb* includes the wider circle of people attached to or sympathetic with Sufi spirituality. Chih, *Le soufisme au quotidien*, p. 350.

[190]Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi*, pp. 47-64.

[191]*Wa-ǧaʿalnākum šuʿūban wa-qabāʾila li-taʿārafū* (49:13), translated freely after Arberry (transl.), *The Koran Interpreted*. Interview with Sheikh ʿAṭīya ʾAbdallāh al-Ḫālidī from the province of al-Buḥayra, mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 22 August 2002.

> he told me that those amusements may be the thing that collects the people. Everyone comes. There is one who comes for the swings, there is one who comes to do illicit things, and we open the places to tell knowledge. So we come to fish among these people, you see. How do you get the people to come here? Because there are amusements. But we say to the people [who criticise that]: no, maybe some of them come to us so that we can show them the correct way. So the essence (*ǧawhar*) is here, then, the essence is not that the folks sit and walk around and do *ḏikr*, no. All that stuff is to make the people come, and afterwards we will teach them the correct way to God."[192]

The reference to the 'appearance' (*ẓāhir*) versus 'essence' (*ǧawhar*) of the mawlid in this account indicates that pragmatic considerations are accompanied by a more profound view of festivity that is fundamental to the inclusive and ambivalent nature of the Sufi mawlid, namely the distinction between the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) festivity. This goes in line with the basic teaching of Sufism that religion is not restricted to the exoteric teachings concerning rituals and law (*šarīʿa*), but has a deeper level of esoteric spiritual truth (*ḥaqīqa*). At least officially, most Sufis hold that *ḥaqīqa* does not contradict *šarīʿa,* and that fulfilling one's legal and ritual obligations is a precondition of moving further on the mystic path. In practice, more antinomian tendencies are present, and many people state that a person who lacks formal religious training and even may not fulfill ritual obligations can nevertheless enjoy a special grace of God and hold deep knowledge of the *bāṭin*. The *bāṭin* is hidden except for the initiated, thus it is impossible to conclude inner states from appearances. This quality of esoteric knowledge is essential for the Sufi interpretation of the mawlid. The real mawlid is, in this view, invisible to the eyes of, say, the Salafi scholar or the Western anthropologist.

> 'Knowledge (*ʿilm*) is limited. God grants knowledge according to the capability of the human. The appearance (*ẓāhir*) that you see has its good and bad sides. When people stand up in the visible (*ẓāhir*) *ḥaḍra* it's only the beginning of the invisible (*bāṭin*) *ḥaḍra*. [...] It's like the ocean: who stands above it does not see more than its surface, only who dives into it can see its depths."[193]

In this esoteric view of the festivity, appearances may or may not be expressions of hidden spiritual states. There is no one given way to celebrate the mawlid. But all festive expressions (or most of them) are motivated by one all-encompassing deeper meaning: the love of God, the Prophet and his family. This view of hidden meanings and various expressions allows the legitimisation or at least the toleration of the mawlid as a whole, and is key to the openness of the festival to different practices and interpretations.

## *2.2. The community mawlid*

For many villages, towns and urban quarters, the local mawlid forms an important community celebration. Once a year, the local community comes together in a celebration that in many significant ways differs from that of the Sufi festivity.

For the quarter of ad-Darb al-Aḥmar in Cairo, the mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-

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[192]Interview with Waǧdī, member of the Sufi circle around Dr. Aḥmad Ḥalaqa (to whom he probably referred to as the person whom he asked the question about amusements), mawlid of as-Sāda as-Šahāwīya, Šuhā (near al-Manṣūra), 18 September 2002.

[193]Interview with Ḥusayn ʿAbd al-Munʿim from al-Minyā, Sufi pilgrim to the mawlid of as-Sayyida Zaynab, Cairo, 29 September 2002.

Nabawīya (see chapter two) is the greatest event of the entire year. People who used to live in the quarter in the past but have since moved elsewhere return 'home' to celebrate the mawlid, inhabitants and local notables put up small *ḫidmas* to serve tamarind and liquorice juice, cinnamon tea and snacks, and the sidewalks and alleys are packed with families who spend the evening receiving visitors and enjoying the night of festivity. This particular form of festivity also represents a temporary better world, but in a very different way than it does to the pilgrims. No move from home to pilgrimage, no second life here: the local community mawlid takes place right at home, and celebrating home in the German sense of *Heimat* is at the core of its festive ideology:

> 'These are old customs of the Egyptians who celebrate the family of the Apostle of God. It's a good commemoration, and all people contribute to it according to their ability. [...] We provide a *ḫidma* here by serving cinnamon tea to the people. We do it for God. For us, it's a moment of joy (*baḥǧa*); we are all happy and glad. People who had moved away from here come back during this time. It's beautiful, a good day, people all gather together."[194]

> 'Many of us live elsewhere in Cairo, but for the mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima we all come here. You can consider this the National Day of ad-Darb al-Aḥmar! And it's a celebration in memory of *ahl al-bayt*. It's an ancient celebration; it goes back to the days of the Fatimids. We gather here every year, it's a heritage that goes from father to son, you see. Now we are drinking tea here, and then we will move on to an other place to greet the people there."[195]

> 'Tonight is the great night. The whole family comes to celebrate like this as you see, with the kids, and all bring what they can to serve as a *ḫidma* for the sake of God, and to celebrate Fāṭima an-Nabawīya. People bring whatever they can. That's a very fundamental project in Islam."[196]

In these accounts the joy of the religious celebration (in memory of the local patron saint in particular and *ahl al-bayt* in general) is closely intertwined with the imagination and renewal of community. The local shrine is a great source of local pride and identity, and by celebrating their patron saint, inhabitants of a district actually celebrate themselves as an ideal community ruled by hospitality, solidarity, and joy. This is most clearly articulated in festive projects that require a high degree of cooperation, most notably the processions:

> 'The procession costs a lot of money and effort. There is a trusted guy who, accompanied by others, collects money from the people. The big *maʿallimīn* (masters of crafts and small industries) contribute by donating money. The craftsmen contribute by assistance in their field of expertise: the electrician in installing the lights, the carpenter in building the carts, etc. It's a big common effort and an expression of a lot of solidarity."[197]

In this account describing the celebrations of as-Sayyida Nafīsa in the district of al-Ḫalīfa in Cairo, the procession appears on the one hand as a display of the wealth and power

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[194]Interview with Maḥmūd, a young lawyer serving cinnamon tea to passersby in the mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 2 June 2003. For an image, see the front cover of this thesis.

[195]Interview with a group of men sitting in chairs in front of a house during the mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 3 June 2003.

[196]Interview with a family sitting in front of their house, mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 2 June 2003.

[197]Interview with Zaynhum, interior painter who participated in the procession of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 13 August 2003.

*Image 15: The procession in the mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa. The cart in front represents Noah's ark. Cairo, 6 August 2003.*

of the 'big *maʿallimīn*' and a demonstration of their commitment to their local community, and on the other hand as an expression of the collective pride of a marginalised and disadvantaged[198] district joined in celebration of their patron saint. In any case, be it with the families on the sidewalk, the big *maʿallimīn*, or the young men who build the procession, the basic tone is similar: the ideology of the community mawlid looks very much like a Durkheimian renewal of the collective: living out an ideal self-image of the quarter, populated by warm-hearted, hospitable and glad people. But the image is, once again, more complex upon a closer look. After all, it is exactly this kind of community celebration that also contains some of the most frenzy and, perhaps, carnivalesque moments one can observe in a mawlid, and the most important occasion for these is the festive procession.

Festive processions consist of two parts: a Sufi procession made up of people bearing flags and banners, playing tambourine, performing the *tannūra* spinning dance[199] and chanting religious verses; and a procession of local craftsmen.[200] The craftsmen's processions may consist of a colourful display of religious, professional and political symbols, but also of grotesque political parodies and sexual travesties. A source of great local pride, the procession of the mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa is lead by a Sufi sheikh and

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[198]The district of al-Ḫalīfa where the said procession of as-Sayyida Nafīsa takes place is an old city district suffering from a bad reputation. The district is not much poorer than many 'middle-class' districts elsewhere in Cairo, but – like most popular districts – it suffers from poor infrastructure and a marginal position in the administrative and symbolic hierarchy of Cairo.

[199]This performance, similar to the *ḏikr* of the Turkish Mevlevi order, is shown to tourist and upper class audiences as 'Sufi dance'. In contemporary Egyptian Sufi context it is used exclusively as an artistic performance in processions and does not form a part of *ḏikr*.

[200]In the past these were processions organised by local guilds. With the decline of the guild system they have developed towards neighbourhood processions, but informal networks of craftsmen and professionals still play a central role in them, and some carts are often made by representatives of a certain profession. Baer, Gabriel, *Studies in the Social History of Modern Egypt*, Chicago etc.: The University of Chicago Press, 1969, pp. 216 f.; see also ʿĀmir, ʿAbd as-Salām ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm, *Ṭawāʾif al-ḥiraf fī Miṣr 1805-1914*, Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-miṣrīya al-ʿāmma li-l-kitāb, 1993.

*Image 16: Cart representing a boxing ring in the procession of the mawlid of as-Sayyida Sakīna, Cairo, 23 July 2004.*

*Image 17: "Mr. President" leading the mawlid an-nabī procession, June 1999.*

flag bearers, followed by a truck carrying a large balloon, then carts and cars representing the Kaʿba, the tomb of as-Sayyida Nafisa, a mosque, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, a ship, a fountain, a rocket, a laser show, and finally followed by a Sufi singer and a truck loaded with tamarind and liquorice juice and candies that are distributed to the bystanders. The procession passes through streets packed with families who have come to see the event. The atmosphere is one of joy, and the young men in the procession dance, joke and chant religious verses. Other processions take on more grotesque forms: at the mawlid of as-Sayyida Sakīna, the carts display a barber shop parody, a transvestite wedding, a fat young man surrounded by doctors and giving birth to a little dog, prison guards and a prisoner, and a boxing ring. The *mawlid an-nabī* procession in one Nile Delta village used to be led by a mock president of the republic (a local café owner with a striking likeness to former president Anwar as-Sādāt), dressed in military uniform and surrounded by mock republican guards. A megaphone in hand, he would promise the villagers telephone lines, clean drinking water and a new brothel. Since 2003 he has not

been allowed to appear in the procession after he crossed a red line by directly criticising local authorities in his 'address to the nation'.[201]

These processions form the part of mawlids that makes it the most compelling to draw a parallel to Catholic carnival: they are colourful, fun, and full of grotesque humour. While mawlids cannot be parallelled with carnival in general terms, the specific case of mawlid processions does share a crucial moment of ambivalence with carnival. These processions at once represent subversive mockery of authorities (president of the republic in a village with a long tradition of political activism,[202] and prison guards and prisoners in a district where recently many people had been imprisoned for drug trade), grotesque expressions of sexuality (transvestite wedding[203] and giving birth to dogs), and proud religio-political representations of symbols of collective identity (the shrine, the Dome of the Rock and the Ka'ba in the procession of as-Sayyida Nafīsa), while it is not at all clear which tone is prevalent in the community celebration.

This ambiguity between the mockery of dominant norms and proud self-representations of an ideal community is especially puzzling because there is strikingly little discourse on the procession among the people who participate in it and watch it. Unlike Sufis and pilgrims who often have elaborate stories and explanations as to what the mawlid means, the people who put together the procession and those who watch it seldom have more to say about it than that it's great. People would largely agree that a good procession is 'really great', 'joy', 'pleasure', 'a special unique thing of our district', or that 'it was very beautiful this year: even the policemen were dancing', but, in the end, 'I can't really tell how it is, you have to see it yourself.'[204] The procession as a performance is a very explicit form of expression, but the procession as an experience works so much on physical and visual levels that people (including the anthropologist) have difficulties putting it into words.

Lacking explicit verbal discourse, one may nevertheless assume that this dramatic ambiguity between communal identity and total openness and demonstration of power and ridicule of authorities, has to do with the way the suspension of boundaries and

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[201]When I conducted my fieldwork, many of these processions had been suppressed by the state, and others had declined due to lack of resources or commitment by local sponsors. Yet at some mawlids they still flourished, most notably at the mawlids of as-Sayyida Sakīna and as-Sayyida Nafīsa in Cairo. These mawlids take place in the district of al-Ḫalīfa three weeks apart. The same people are involved in building both processions, but each procession has a distinct flavour. In 2005, security officers refused to give permission to the procession of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, citing the risk of demonstrations and the proximity of presidential elections. See *Cairo Magazine*, 10-16.3.2005, Jennifer Peterson: 'On the Margins: Facing Religious and Official Disapproval, Moulids Barely Survive', pp. 14-19.

[202]The village in question was an important mobilisation base for the Wafd Party in the 1920s. Currently it has a very active branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Even a left-wing group is active in the village, which is rare in rural areas.

[203]The transvestite shows of contemporary mawlids are mainly appreciated as humorous jesting, and although they contain sexual gestures they do not have an erotic character as they might have had in the 19th century. They appear to be mostly young men's proof of courage, amateur events put on by a group of men, with one dressed as a woman and others escorting "her," or posing as exaggerated female dancers. There used to be tents offering transvestite dancing on a commercial basis, but the few remaining were banned in the 1990s.

[204]Accounts of people who saw or participated in the processions of as-Sayyida Sakīna and as-Sayyida Nafīsa in July and August 2003.

informal structures of power are intertwined during the mawlid. Clientelistic structures of power allow, and perhaps even attract, utopian reversal of hierarchies. Without the money of the 'big *ma'allimīn*' there would be no procession, and by paying they are able to demonstrate their commitment to the local community. But the procession does not represent them; it stands for the common effort and collective solidarity of the district, masters and workers alike. In a way, the masters become subordinates during the festivity while for one evening, young workers and craftsmen rule the district and women and families own the streets, creating the moment of ideal community that is key to the neighbourhood mawlid.

As a pilgrimage, the mawlid brings together locals and pilgrims, and changes the face of urban quarters. For the people of the neighbourhoods this is a source of joy and pride, but also of astonishment and discomfort. Particularly in old city districts where the tradition of mawlids has a high standing, locals have a lot of respect for the devotion of dervishes but most of them would not like to live or act like them. The inhabitants of the area where a mawlid takes place are proud of the festivity and the fact that people travel from all over the country to visit their quarter, and yet for many, the Sufis remain a fascinating but rather strange variety of people. Sayyid, a butcher from al-Ḫalīfa active in organising the procession of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, displayed this attitude in his comparison of the local festive procession and Sufi festivities:

> 'In the procession there is spirituality; it's not like those who move their heads around (imitates Sufi *ḏikr*). Dance, that's what that is. The mawlid of ar-Rifā'ī that will take place after tomorrow is different [from our celebration], because it's all people from Upper Egypt, strange people who do weird things with snakes and spikes.'[205]

This tension is laid in the way mawlids are organised and celebrated: they are open to all, which significantly contributes to the festive atmosphere, but can be also experienced as a source of discomfort not only to the inhabitants of the district but also for Sufi pilgrims who sometimes feel exposed to the curious and ridiculing glance of bystanders:

> 'You should avoid those people (referring to young men from the district I had spoken with earlier the same evening). I know those guys and they are no good. They are the people who look at girls and who come to the *ḏikr* and imitate us and are sarcastic about it and make fun of us.'[206]

Many Sufis complain in similar manner about all those ignorant troublemakers who lack both the consciousness and the love required to behave according to the true nature of the festivity, but instead just go and make fun of everything, spoil the reputation of the Sufis, and cause mischief. This is why some Sufis say that the so-called *al-layla al-yatīma* (the night after the great night, when most of the people have already left but many of the pilgrims stay on and some *ḏikrs* are organised) is the best part of a mawlid, 'because it's only for us'.[207]

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[205]Interview with Sayyid, butcher, Cairo, 5 August 2003.

[206]Karīm, a teenager working in a *ḫidma* during the mawlid of Sīdnā al-Ḥusayn, Cairo, 23 June 2003.

[207]Interview with Maḥmūd, Sufi pilgrim to the mawlid of as-Sulṭān al-Farġal, Abū Tīǧ, 18 July 2003.

## *2.3. The fun mawlid*

The Sufi and neighbourhood celebrations of mawlids are always firmly anchored in the veneration of a saint who provides the occasion to celebrate and legitimises the festive joy. But with a number of other participants, this is not the case. For many people, a mawlid is primarily about 'relaxation' (*tarfīh ʿan an-nafs*), 'having/making fun' (*tahrīǧ*) and 'pastime' (*lahw*), and they may or may not agree with the religious basis of the festivity. This is not to say that the spiritual and entertaining aspects of the mawlid are mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they mostly go hand in hand. What I argue in the following is that entertainment is as constitutive of the mawlid as pilgrimage and community celebration are, and that, for some people, it is the sole attraction that draws them to a mawlid.

Pilgrimage itself, no matter how spiritual, can be a very entertaining experience. 'Changing the atmosphere', a central element of pilgrimage, may involve a great deal of fun and merriment. So for example with the men of the Šiḥāta family from the village of Nāhyā near Cairo who travel to the mawlid of as-Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawī every year. They leave their wives and children behind and for a few days thoroughly enjoy being away from their family responsibilities. Most of the day the men – there are approximately ten of them – sit in the hall of an inexpensive hotel where they have rented rooms, smoking, chatting, and listening to tapes they have brought with them: Qurʾān recitation, Sufi *inšād*, and pop music. In the evening, their celebration follows a standard programme: *ziyāra* at as-Sayyid al-Badawī's shrine, going to the cinema, walking around the festive grounds, shooting at firecrackers (and preferably choosing a shooting gallery run by a pretty girl), eating sugarcane,[208] joking, drinking tea and smoking water pipes at their favourite temporary café in the fields, and watching their favourite *munšids* perform. In many ways, their visit to Ṭanṭā is a holiday framed as pilgrimage, with excitement, shopping, a good time, and no wives or children around to stress them.

*Image 18: Men of the Šiḥāta family in the hotel they lodge in during the mawlid of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī , Ṭanṭā, October 2004.*

[208]A specialty of the mawlids of as-Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawī and Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī.

For many others, most notably young men (and fewer women) who roam the streets of the mawlid during the great night, the mawlid is primarily, or even exclusively, about fun. These people are often hardly interested in the religious side of the festivity, and many among them express strong disagreement with Sufi beliefs and rituals. Their celebration is especially wild and rough, significantly contributing to the chaotic and loud atmosphere of the great night.

At the mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī I once joined a group of university students and fresh graduates from the city and nearby villages to celebrate the great night. At the beginning of the evening we gathered in a café and, around 8 p.m., set out to move through the mawlid. We kept together, moving in a group, and wherever there were enough people we held onto each other's shoulders to form a 'train' and rushed through the crowds as fast as we could, making a lot of noise along the way. Past the mosque and the Sufi *ḫidmas* we moved straight ahead to the amusement area located to the east of the mosque. When my fellow celebrators said 'mawlid', what they meant was the amusement area. Sometimes they stopped to watch Sufi performances, but did not join the *ḏikr*, rather staying on the margins and dancing the way people dance at weddings, shaking their hips and clapping their hands, and then laughing at themselves and at the Sufis who, of course, took the situation much more seriously. Mostly they walked past the Sufi *ḫidmas* (which, in this mawlid, are mostly in the side streets) and concentrated on the amusements on the main streets: electric cars, target-shooting (after, as usual, spending some time to look for a stand run by a sufficiently good-looking girl) and the like. As they passed a music store playing the songs of Šaʿbān ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm,[209] they spontaneously began to dance to the tune of the music. Along the wide Nile promenade they walked in a row, singing and shouting loudly, then stopped to buy sugarcane and sat down to enjoy the refreshment. One of the young men, a student of medicine at al-Azhar in Cairo, had come back to his hometown to celebrate the mawlid. But his view of the festivity was actually very critical:

> 'The mawlid is a *bidʿa*, and there are many things that happen here, like gambling and female dancers, that are *ḥarām*.'
> S: But aside from the things that are *ḥarām*, what about the rest?
> 'Without forbidden things it's OK, having fun in itself is fine!'[210]

Fun, the key frame of festivity for these young men, has different dimensions in their accounts. On one level, it stands for absolute freedom and intensely living in the moment, beyond the control of parents, teachers, bosses or any other authorities. For Ḫalīl, a fresh university graduate from a village near Disūq, this is what makes him come to the mawlid every year. Now that he has become a teacher – a person embodying authority himself – he only goes to the mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm for a day or two and nostalgically recalls his student years:

'We would travel from Kafr aš-Šayḫ [where we studied] to Disūq and stay the whole week

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[209]For the career and work of this popular singer who has reached considerable fame with witty and often political texts (his breakthrough was the song 'I hate Israel') combined with the beat of *šaʿbī* pop music, see, e.g., Borrel, Anna, 'Saddam, je t'aime: Shaaban Abdel Rahim explose les charts égyptiens', 13.3.2003, http://www.afrik.com/article5808.html, viewed on 27.6.2005.

[210]Interview with a student of medicine at al-Azhar, mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī, Disūq, 31 October 2002.

> at the mawlid. That was a very, very beautiful time. Now I will have to go to work the next day, but in those days we had time and the right group of people to celebrate and relax. [...] The point of the mawlid is that you can empty your head and enjoy. The mawlid is about forgetting all your problems and living in the moment'.[211]

While letting go and living in the moment, these participants nevertheless maintain an observant and often sarcastic attitude towards the festivity of which they are a part. To go to the mawlid is to 'see strange, new things', that is, to be a spectator to a colourful and fantastic world:

> 'We go to see the mawlid every night. The most interesting thing about it are the Sufis, the dervishes who put up tents and do *ḏikr*. They live in a way that we don't. You know, all the youths are busy with material things: work, marriage and so on. But those people don't perceive anything of the world, they do their spiritual thing. They don't worry where to eat, where to live; they live for religion and spiritual things.'[212]

While these university students expressed their fascination with the Sufi utopian life at the mawlid, many other spectators have a more critical attitude. A group of young men, also university students, whom I encountered in Ṭanṭā displayed this attitude in a striking way. I met them at a *ḏikr,* where they were standing at the margin of the ritual, dancing, laughing and imitating the participants. But as soon as I asked them what they thought about it, they became serious and started criticising the festivity and the rituals, arguing that they were 'wrong' and '*ḥarām*', a way to 'fool the peasants'. In the same tone they went on to point out that asking for the intercession of the *ahl al-bayt* and kissing the *maqṣūra* of a saint's tomb is 'wrong'.

> S: Is there anything you do like about the mawlid, then?
> 'Oh yes, it's a lot of fun. We hang around, play in the amusements, meet people. You see, we don't like those things (i.e. ecstatic *ḏikr*) but we like to watch them.'[213]

The discourse of these young men (as they usually are: women are fewer in this group, and with growing age people generally either stop going to mawlids or turn towards the spiritual and communal aspects of the festivities) on mawlids is strikingly contradictory: They love the festivity, but at the same time find much of the people and rituals ridiculous and wrong. In this festive utopia, two rather different motifs intertwine: On the one hand, the experience of 'living in the moment' free of the restrictions, boredom and moralism of daily life, and on the other hand a sarcastic commentary on the very event the people find themselves in, making fun of it and thus distinguishing themselves from it (an issue to which I return in chapter five). What holds these motifs together is the topic of having fun and the framing of the mawlid as an aesthetic experience, a cavalcade of beautiful, striking, exotic or shocking things that provide a spectacle for the senses that would be impossible in the grey dullness of ordinary days.

> 'It's nice like this only once a year. The rest of the year the place is a ruin – just one day it's passion; it's something we look forward to with desire. In the noise you can't think, you just go with it and forget all your worries and sorrows. There are people who come to the mawlid for knowledge. You can also come to the mawlid to learn, but not me.'
> S: So you come just for the fun?
> 'Yes, that's it. We sit here in this place, most importantly to listen to [the *munšida*] Ḥāgga

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[211]Interview with Ḫalīl, French teacher, Disūq, 31 October 2002.
[212]Students in a café near the university, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2002.
[213]'Ādil and Mīdō, students, mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 17 October 2002.

*Image 19: Young men dancing at the side of a Sufi ḏikr. Mawlid of Sheikh Abū Zaġlal, Kafr Ibrāhīm al-ʿĀyidī (aš-Šarqīya province), 5 June 2003.*

Wafāʾ who will sing here. Do you want to smoke some grass?'[214]

Of all festive experiences I have encountered in the mawlid, this is the most contradictory. In a way it displays a vision of a world where everything (or a lot) is allowed: there are no authorities, no moral limits, no disciplinary restraints of daily life at home, school, university, work. But unlike the Sufi utopia of an altruistic world and the neighbourhood utopia of perfect community, this view of festivity is much less framed as a criticism of the social order, in fact, it often has an openly escapist tone. More than that, through its sarcastic attitude it has something of an anti-utopian tendency: it celebrates the extraordinary time when everything is possible but at the same time states that it is merely illusion, nonsense or error.

## 3. The mawlid as festivity

The various ways to perceive and judge mawlids are already present in their fragmentary character as festivals comprising very different forms of festivity. The various festive experiences of a mawlid express different, often competing and contested utopian views of a better world. The Sufi mawlid utopia consists of all-encompassing love and equality between all, the suspension of economic imperatives and their temporary replacement with a world based on altruistic motives, the experience of inner renewal and purification, and the marked difference between pilgrimage and life at home. The utopia of the community celebration is based on the reunion of a perfect community during the night of the celebration and the simultaneous demonstration and inversion of local power structures. The sarcastic young men's mawlid utopia celebrates freedom from parental and other forms of control, the euphoria of forgetting daily life, 'living in the moment', 'making one's head empty', 'spending time', and a contrast between normality and the fascinating, exotic and also ridiculous other world of the festivity.

[214]Aḥmad, a man in his twenties sitting in a café with his friends, mawlid of Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān ibn ʿAwf, Qalyūb, 14 July 2003.

These accounts are far from exhaustive. I have focussed on three specific festive experiences because they are very common and because they particularly well demonstrate how celebrating a mawlid is a highly fragmented experience subject to reflection and contestation among participants. This has been at the cost of other significant differences: the mawlid is not the same thing for merchants and customers, young and old, men and women, villagers and city-dwellers, or Muslims and Christians. All three festive experiences sketched above include a good deal of shopping and commerce, but what from the visitors' point of view is a special festive occasion is a season of hard work for the merchants. For young people, fun and excitement are often more central to their mawlid experience, but with age people tend to turn to more spiritual matters. For men, the crowds of the mawlid are a chance to dive into the anonymity of the masses and become part of its dynamics, but for women the crowd is a dangerous place that one should avoid in favour of the tent, the mosque, or the private home. For villagers, a big mawlid in the city is a special event, a holiday one must plan and undertake, but for city-dwellers the mawlid comes to them and they may take part in it spontaneously if they like. For Muslims, the veneration of saints is connected to the spirituality of Islamic mysticism, an ideology that unites believers across the country and around the world but also distinguishes them from Salafi reformists. For Christians, celebrating the festival of a Christian saint is to express the communal identity of a religious minority that shares a feeling of suffering from discrimination.

All experiences and interpretations of celebrating the mawlid show inner contradictions and tensions with other experiences and interpretations. The Sufi mawlid revolves around the tension between learning and ecstatic love, and often displays a problematic relationship with popular amusements and trade. The neighbourhood mawlid is at times conservative, at times subversive and grotesque, and displays a mixture of admiration of and uneasiness with the Sufi festivity. The fun mawlid celebrates the exotic and extraordinary while at the same time criticising and ridiculing it. What emerges as the central tone of the various festive utopias is not so much their specific materialisation of a better world. What seems to unite them is, paradoxically, their strong ambivalence. In many ways parallel to what Ian Reader,[215] John Eade, and Michael Sallnow[216] have argued about pilgrimage in general, a mawlid provides an overarching occasion for festive joy that can embrace a high degree of contradiction.

## *3.1. Mawlid and ʿīd*

But this is of course valid to a vast number of other types of festivities as well. What is it, then, that distinguishes mawlids from other festivals in the eyes of their participants? The most common comparison people make is between the mawlid and the *ʿīd*. The term *ʿīd* literally means feast or festivity – such as birthday (*ʿīd al-mīlād*) or national day (*al-ʿīd al-qawmī*) – but it is primarily used to specifically designate the two canonic Islamic festivities *ʿīd al-fiṭr* (feast of breaking the fast at the end of Ramaḍān) and *ʿīd al-aḍḥā* (feast

[215]Reader, 'Conclusions', pp. 241-244.
[216]Eade / Sallnow (eds), *Contesting the Sacred*.

of sacrifice at the end of the *ḥaǧǧ*).[217] These two festivities have their own specific features but they share a very similar festive atmosphere and are in popular usage lumped together under the name *ʿīd*.

The duration of the two *ʿīd*s is characterised by familial reunion as people travel to visit their relatives and celebrate in the circle of family. Maintaining neighbourhood relationships is also very important, and an essential ritual of every *ʿīd* is to visit and greet friends and neighbours. Unlike mawlids, the *ʿīd* is mainly a daytime celebration. Followed by a special *ʿīd* prayer at sunrise, three days of celebrations begin, characterised by shared meals, visits to friends, outings to and picnics at parks and Nile promenades, visits to graveyards where families may picnic for an entire day, television programmes consisting of special *ʿīd* features and Hollywood films, and popular amusements similar to those found in mawlids: shooting stands, carousels, swings, sideshows and the like.

The festive ideology of the two *ʿīds* shares significant similarities to as well as differences with mawlids. Joy is the prevailing tone of all these festivities, hospitality and charity are given high emphasis, and they are accompanied by a great deal of amusements, food and merchandise.

> 'On the day of the mawlid, when you come here it's a big outing (*fusḥa*) and there's lots of playing. Same thing in the *ʿīd*. All go walking around, and it's crowded like today. Like in Fusṭāṭ Gardens,[218] for example.'[219]

From the perspective of twelve-year-old Karīm, the mawlid, the *ʿīd* and the amusement park are essentially the same thing with the same festive atmosphere of playing, walking about and being beyond the control of parents, teachers and other persons of authority. From a different perspective, a journalist writing in the English-language *al-Ahram Weekly* compares the atmosphere in her grandmother's house in Ṭanṭā during the *ʿīd*, with guests coming and going all day, to that of the mawlid. A festive time of hospitality and coming

*Image 20: Amusements on the Nile banks on the second day of ʿīd al-aḍḥā. Idfīnā, February 2002.*

[217]See, e.g., Nabhan, Layla, *Das Fest des Fastenbrechens (ʿīd ak-fiṭr) in Ägypten: Untersuchungen zu theologischen Grundlagen und praktischer Gestaltung* (Islamkundliche Untersuchungen; 147), Berlin: Schwarz, 1991.

[218]A public park nearby that features playground equipment and fairground rides.

[219]Interview with Karīm, 12 years old, visiting his grandparents' house in the graveyard near the mosque of as-Sayyida Nafīsa. Mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 21 August 2002.

together with friends is characteristic to the *ʿīd* and mawlid alike.[220]

Parallels notwithstanding, the differences are evident and manifold. *ʿĪd al-fiṭr* and *ʿīd al-aḍḥā* are national events and almost everybody celebrates them, but they usually do so within a circle of family. A mawlid is a special event for those who either live nearby or have a special relation to the saint, but at the same time it is a street festivity open to everyone. The *ʿīd* is a festivity for all Muslims (and the media follow the celebrations around the world) but the actual event of celebration takes place largely in a familiar setting. The mawlid, on the other hand, is a celebration of the extraordinary that is open to all, and the atmosphere is often significantly rougher than that of the *ʿīd*. Groups of rambunctious young men also make going out difficult and intimidating for women during the *ʿīd*, but nowhere is the roughly masculine atmosphere as outspoken as in the crowded main streets at a large mawlid. This characteristic difference was pointed out to me by a man who was working at a Ferris wheel and touring mawlids, *ʿīd* celebrations and amusement parks:

> S.: Does the work differ on different occasions?
> 'Yes, in the *ʿīd*s it's people coming for a walk around, while in the mawlid it's pilgrims (*ẓuwwār*). In the *ʿīd* people come with their families; they are relaxed and take it easy. In the mawlids people come for *ziyāra* of the sheikh, and to buy sweets and toys, and to play, and there is more stupidity (*habal*)'
> S.: Stupidity?
> 'Yes, stupidity, idiots (literally 'animals', *bahāyim*). It's more crowded and you see the people trying to push the line [to the Ferris wheel] and get in although there is no place. I think in Europe, where you're from, people are more disciplined and civilised. At the mawlid in particular it's crowded and chaotic, and there are fights. Sometimes people might come to the mawlid because they have had a quarrel and want to pick fight with each other. But in the *ʿīd* people are relaxed, visit friends, and sit with their family.'[221]

The days of the *ʿīd* are at least as multi-faceted as the nights of the mawlid, yet both kinds of festivities display quite distinctive features. The festive ideology of the *ʿīd*s lays great value on maintaining and restoring solidarity and communal values. The time of *ʿīd al-fiṭr* and *ʿīd al-aḍḥā* alike is family-based and constructive, oriented to consolidating and reinforcing ties of kinship, neighbourhood and friendship. The mawlid offers an outspokenly different atmosphere where night replaces day, the living celebrate with the dead, pilgrims' tents replace homes and daily life seems very far away. In contrast, the festive utopia of the *ʿīd* does not represent such an exotic alternative reality. It is more like a utopian perfection of an ordinary day, together with one's family, friends and neighbours, and on the level of imagination with all Muslims, but unlike on most other days, in perfect joy and harmony. Contrary to the *ʿīd* – or weddings, or the National Day, etc. – the mawlid is not a festivity of harmony. It is, and this is what distinguishes it from other festivities of contemporary Egypt, a festivity of cheerful chaos open to everyone and everything, and its festive atmosphere stands in explicit and dramatic opposition to the boundaries of the normal world.

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[220] *al-Ahram Weekly*, 5-11.12.2002: Amina Elbendary, 'Cookies and new wardrobes', p. 21.
[221] Man working at a Ferris wheel, mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqi, Disūq, 30 October 2002.

## *3.2. A spectacle without footlights*

The space and time of the mawlid, embracing various fields of society, is ambiguous by definition and open to all kinds of people and interpretations. The mawlid is an overwhelming and fascinating spectacle for both the pilgrim and the researcher, yet it lacks the typical elements of a spectacle: an orchestrated programme, the distinction of performers and audience, and a top-down line of communication. With a phrase taken freely after Bakhtin,[222] the mawlid is a spectacle without footlights. As such, it does not have a clear hierarchy of authority that might reinforce a specific interpretation of what the festivity is about or how it ought to be celebrated. Interpreting and celebrating the mawlid remains in the hands of its participants, who may do it in ways that differ from those propagated by official authorities, and even defy them.

This presents an occasion to return to the question of whether mawlids can be interpreted as a form of popular resistance against dominant norms and structures of power or whether they are a form of 'opium for the people', keeping the masses passive by providing them distraction from their real problems, or, less polemically, whether mawlids are subversive or conservative in regard to the power relations of the everyday. Both views enjoy some popularity not only in the debates on mawlids in Egypt but also in international academic and political debates on the meaning of festivity in general.

Both interpretations fail to grasp the way mawlids are based on a concept of time and social order in which the temporary suspension of boundaries has no clear functionality. It can serve both to maintain power relations and to subvert them. But the problem is not yet solved. Firstly, these two interpretations (or actually four, depending on the normative value given to dominant boundaries: 'resistance' can be also read as the transgression of social order, and 'opium for the people' can be seen as upholding social order) are an important part of the debates on mawlids and their cultural and political implications need to be grasped in order to understand the importance of this question. I return to this issue in the following chapter. Secondly, if mawlids do indeed subvert hegemonic norms (which is not to be confused with resistance), how do they do it?

James Scott, in his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,*[223] introduces the concept of 'hidden transcripts', that is, the discourses and practices that are not included in the public communication between people in different positions of power. Hidden transcripts, according to Scott, are not necessarily more true or truthful than public ones, but they, and the moments when they can be publicly declared, offer an insight into the struggles and shifting lines of class and power.[224] Scott argues that one of the moments in which the hidden transcripts of subordinate classes can become public are festivities

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[222]Bakhtin claimed that 'carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators' (Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 7). Such a radical unity of all participants is not present in the mawlid, but the distinction between audiences and performers is weak and often reversible. Yūsuf, Sūzān as-Saʿīd, 'al mawlid wa-l-ʿurūḍ aṯ-ṯaqāfīya aš-šaʿbīya', *aṯ-Ṯaqāfa aš-Šaʿbīya* (al-Markaz al-Ḥaḍārī li-ʿulūm al-insān wa-t-turāṯ aš-šaʿbī, Faculty of Letters, al-Manṣūra University) 1 (October 1998), pp. 2-41.

[223]Scott, James, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

[224]*Ibid.*, pp. 1-16.

that 'are socially defined in some important ways as being out of ordinary',[225] Catholic pre-lenten carnival being only one example thereof. Critical of the safety-valve theory of festivity, Scott argues that although carnival is often framed by symbolic subordination to the proper order of things and domesticated through its use for public representation, it remains a potent site of resistance and revolt. 'It would be just as plausible to view carnival as an ambiguous political victory wrested from elites by subordinate groups.'[226] Elites have never felt very certain about the functioning of the safety-valve, and public festivals of reversal have constituted an ambiguous moment of disorder and potential for revolt.[227]

Are mawlids occasions for the public proclamation of hidden transcripts? ʿIṣām Fawzī, in his study on patterns of religiosity in Egypt, suggests that this is the case. According to Fawzī, popular patterns of religiosity including carnivalesque festive culture are characterised by pragmatic, ironic and materialistic tendencies that subvert and even ridicule hegemonic religious discourses. For ʿIṣām Fawzī, popular festivities such as mawlids represent one of the moments in which a development from below, despite the hegemonic relationships of power, is possible.[228]

A look at the various celebrations of the mawlid indicates that to some extent, this might actually be the case. The symbolic suspension of class and power relationships is one possible proof: it is a way to reinforce these relationships, but also to demonstrate their contingency. Some festive processions contain very open moments of criticism and mockery of the secular authorities, such as the mock president of the republic and his mock republican guard. Finally, the accounts of miracles (*karāmāt*) that are told at mawlids often contain passages in which the saint, with God's help, successfully defies and derides the police, the state, or people who are opposed to Sufism.[229]

But before we rush to declare mawlids celebrations of subversion, and thus tacitly vehicles of counter-hegemony, a pause of healthy caution is required. Subversion has become a very popular term in some fields of literary and social research that have been inspired by the work of Bakhtin, to the degree that Greil Marcus has been attributed with commenting that 'a lot of the people in cultural studies these days kind of remind me of the FBI in the fifties: They find subversion everywhere.'[230] And we need to be aware that Scott's concept of hidden and public transcripts is based on understandings of self, power, and publicness that may be too simplified and dualistic to explain what actually

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[225] *Ibid.*, p. 173.

[226] *Ibid.*, p. 178.

[227] *Ibid.*, p. 181.

[228] Fawzī, 'Iṣām, 'Anmāṭ at-tadayyun fī Miṣr: madḫal li-fahm at-tafkīr aš-šaʿbī ḥawl ad-dīn', in *Iškālīyāt at-takwīn al-iǧtimaʿī wa-l-fikrīyāt aš-šaʿbīya fī Miṣr*, Nicosia: Mu'assasat ʿībāl li-d-dirāsāt wa-n-našr, 1992, pp. 214-248; idem, 'Ālīyāt al-haymana wa-l-muqāwama fī l-ḫiṭāb aš-šaʿbī', in *Qaḍāyā l-muǧtamaʿ al-madanī al-ʿarabī fī ḍaw' uṭrūḥāt Gramsci*, Cairo: Mu'assasat ʿībāl li-d-dirāsāt wa-n-našr and Markaz al-buḥūṯ al-ʿarabīya, 1992, pp. 122-135.

[229] Reeves, *The Hidden Government*, pp. 74 f.

[230] Cit. by Kleinhans, Chuck, 'Cultural Appropriation and Subcultural Expression: The Dialectics of Cooptation and Resistance', paper presented to the Northwestern University Center for the Humanities, 14 November 1994, http://www.rtvf.nwu.edu/people/kleinhans/cult_and_subcult.html and http://media.ankara.edu.tr/~erdogan/kleinhans.html, viewed 24 August 2004.

is going on at a mawlid.[231]

Firstly, the distinction between the hidden and public may not be very helpful in understanding the festive time of mawlids. The utopian visions of society expressed at mawlids are not 'hidden' for the rest of the year. Mawlids are public, but they have a very different status than some other sites of public debate and action, and it is these relationships of hegemony and exclusion between different public actions and actors that should draw our attention if we want to understand the potential of mawlids for controversy. Rather than focussing on the dichotomy of 'hidden' vs. 'public', we have to problematise the construction of the public and ask whether and under what conditions mawlids may be included in or excluded from the field of hegemonic definitions of social order and the common good.

Secondly, while mawlids may be counter-hegemonic towards, for example, middle-class constructions of urban space and civility, they can, at the same time, be sites of power and mobilisation for Sufi groups and local politicians. And although mawlids do contain moments of irony, mockery and subversion, this is not their main emotive tone. Even where mockery and subversion can be found, it is not shared by all participants and neither does it have the same targets. *Karāmāt* stories and festive processions may ridicule Salafis and secular authorities but they do not question religion and recognised religious authorities. Students may ridicule the Sufis but they do so in order to demonstrate their own intellectual hegemony rather than to challenge another.

Finally, when we speak of subversion, we need to ask from whose perspective something becomes subversive, or even transgressing. After all, in the eyes of most participants, the mawlid is not a transgression of boundaries because the boundaries to transgress are not valid during the festivity. But what is an honest expression of piety or joy in the eyes of a participant might appear as mockery to an outside observer.

Hence, hidden transcripts do not take us very far in understanding the potential of mawlids for controversy. The problem must be approached from a different angle, starting with the observation that while most of the festive atmosphere of the mawlid is not subversive in the eyes of the people involved, it may become so if described within a discourse that shares different commonplaces about piety, festivity and the order of society. The trick of subversion is, hence, that mawlids might not be subversive at all from their participants' perspective, but they can become so when they enter the hegemonic discourses and imageries of contemporary Egypt. To understand why and how they do so is the task of the following chapter.

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[231]Gal, Susan, 'Language and the "Arts of Resistance"', *Cultural Anthropology* 10 (1995), 3, pp. 407-424.

# Chapter Four: Criticism of mawlids

## 1. Modernism and reformism

Many Egyptians do in fact consider mawlids subversive, but they definitely do not view this subversion in a positive light. For them, mawlids are an ensemble of erroneous, backward, profane and ridiculous beliefs that threaten the order of religion, society and the nation.

The criticism of mawlids varies in degree. Some see mawlids as altogether wrong and detestable. Many are sympathetic to the basic idea of venerating and celebrating a saint but do not agree with the actual form of celebration. Others disagree with the religious foundations of mawlids but enjoy their festive atmosphere. Critics also highlight a diversity of issues. While some see mawlids primarily as an issue of religion and ritual, others emphasise their social and political role. At first glance, the manifold criticisms of mawlids may appear unrelated. They are, however, interconnected and can only be properly understood as elements of a discourse, not a coherent, rationalised ideology, but rather a field of interrelated statements that differ in their emphasis and intensity and yet share significant commonsense assumptions.

In all their variety, critical views of mawlids share such a number of commonplaces that it is not possible to diacritically split them along the lines of, say, Islamist and secularist modernist discourses. In the eyes of their critics, mawlids are simultaneously backward *and* un-Islamic. The criticism of mawlids is an expression (and, as I argue in the next chapter, a distinctive marker) of an Islamic reformist *and* nationalist modernist common sense of what function festivities ought to have, how piety ought to expressed, how society should be organised, and how these issues should be embodied in and acquired through habitus and a visible matrix of spatial order. People who criticise mawlids perceive them as opposed to the aesthetic and habitual criteria that together are constitutive of the disposition of the modern/pious subject and, hence, the order of a progressive and authentic nation. The key issues at stake are thus, I argue in the following, the constitution of the self, its relation to embodied practices, and the significance of these to the order of religion and the nation-state.

Yet before moving on to analyse the critical discourse on mawlids it is necessary to substantiate my decision to lump their critics under the label of modernism and reformism. What do radical Salafis and Islamists have to do with modernity? What do secularist intellectuals have to do with Islamic reform? First of all, these different political and religious currents share a genealogy, as I illustrate in the next chapter. But more importantly and immediately, they do not necessarily appear as separate currents or discourses in relation to mawlids, but rather participate in a common hegemonic discourse.[232] This discourse should not be mistaken for an ideological doctrine – it is far

[232]By hegemony I mean the ability to define the terms and direction of debates and struggles and to present one's particular discourses as objective 'true' or 'normal' points of view, thus making it necessary for competing actors to either match the standards set by hegemonic discourses, or to risk marginalisation by openly questioning them. See, e.g., Crehan, *Gramsci, Culture and Anthropology*; Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds), London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, esp. pp. 12-13, 53-58; Mah,

too diverse to be one. It should rather be seen as a diffuse common sense marked by shared implicit or explicit assumptions and distinctive markers of habitus that is capable of defining the terms of debate on a wide range of issues. For example, while different actors and authors in the public sphere do not agree on exactly what role religion should have in the national identity and legal system of Egypt, they generally have little difficulty in agreeing on what religion is or enforcing their understanding of religion against other interpretations.

For this reason I have preferred to use the term Salafīya – rather than Islamism – to denote a legalistic, scriptural and anti-mystical interpretation of Islam. While 'Islamism' highlights the aim of a part of the political spectrum to organise state and society according to an authoritarian reading of Islamic Law, 'Salafīya' emphasises the importance of ritual and moral (self-)discipline to the project of Islamic reform. The Salafi movement is in fact distinguishable from the various Islamist movements in Egypt. While Islamist groups generally follow a Salafi interpretation of Islam, not all Salafis hold to Islamist political ideologies.[233]

The Salafīya is the most radical current within the wider discourse of Islamic reform. Few Egyptians are committed to the rigid pious discipline of being a Salafi – distinctive dress, exact observance of ritual obligations, and a rigid and comprehensive moral discipline – but the Salafi reformist understanding of Islam as a rational system of ritual and morality has much wider currency. It is this interpretation of Islam that I refer to with the term reformism, including but not confined to Salafi and Islamist movements.[234]

Reformism, in turn, is closely connected to the overarching discourse of modernity. Modernism (in a wider sense denoting the project of modernity and modernisation, thus not restricted to the modernist movement in arts, letters and architecture) in 20th and 21st-century Egypt is an ideology, strongly propagated by the state but generally shared by opposition and non-state actors who declare rationalisation, enlightenment, independence and development as the key qualities that the nation needs in order to flourish (Egyptian modernism is intrinsically connected to nationalism). Unlike in some other contexts, in Egypt the project of modernity does not imply a break with conservative values. The Egyptian modernist, as depicted by school textbooks and the self-image of many a modernist intellectual is progressive yet committed to religion, communal morals and national heritage.[235] It is this attempt to unite progress and

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Harold, 'Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians', *The Journal of Modern History* 72 (March 2000), pp. 153-182; Moors, Annelies, 'Introduction: Families in Public Discourse,' in *Framings: Rethinking Arab Families*, Arab Families Working Group (eds), Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, forthcoming; Idem, 'Representing Family Law Debates: Gender and the Politics of Presence', in Birgit Meyer / Annelies Moors (eds), *Media, Religion and the Public Sphere*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2005, forthcoming.

[233]Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, p. 46-48. See also note 371.

[234]For the developments of Salafīya and Islamic reformism in different local contexts, see, e.g., Adams, Charles C., *Islam and Modernism in Egypt: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muḥammad 'Abduh*, London: Oxford University Press, 1933; Loimeier, *Islamische Erneuerung und politischer Wandel in Nordnigeria*; Weismann, *Taste of Modernity*; for a prominent reformist's interpretation of Islamic reformism and modernism, see Rahman, Fazlur, *Islam*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, pp. 193-234.

[235]Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism*, p. 191.

authenticity that makes modernism a twin of reformism in contemporary Egypt. And it is this linkage of authentic religion and national progress that is key to understanding the modernist and reformist criticism of mawlids.

Rather than further dwelling on theoretical discussions of reformist and modernist discourses, let us look at a contemporary example of a critical account that is representative of the modernist and reformist criticism of mawlids. It contains almost all the standard topics found in the critical view of mawlids, which makes it a good starting point for analysis while also serving as a reminder that even if the criticism directed at mawlids can, for analytical purposes, be described as a field of separate arguments, in practice these arguments are woven together. This account does not originate from a renowned intellectual but from ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm, a school teacher whom I interviewed at the mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa where, by coincidence, he was taking a short cut to a bus stop.

S.: What do you, personally, think about the mawlid?

'It is absolutely un-Islamic. These people are not really religious. [...] The mawlid is a *bidʿa*. In the *ḏikr*, men and women mix and everything. The *ḏikr* sessions are undesirable, in general the veneration of the sheikhs is opposed to the idea of monotheism (*tawḥīd*). The *ḏikr* sessions [of the kind held at mawlids] are not proper for the religious, rational, civilised human. On the contrary, they will provoke the anger of the Prophet.'

S.: Can you imagine how a legitimate (*šarʿī*) mawlid festivity would look?

'A legitimate mawlid festivity really doesn't exist at all. There is no reason to celebrate someone who has already passed away in order to gain something from him. The only legitimate mawlid festivity is the mawlid of the Prophet, God's blessing be upon him. Unfortunately, the Sufi orders and much of the Egyptian people, up to 40 or 50 percent, celebrate it in an un-Islamic way. A correct way of celebrating the Prophet's birthday would consist of reciting verses of the Qurʾān. We should follow his example, revive his tradition. What is more right, that I recite the Qurʾān or that I dance like that (points at Sufis participating in *ḏikr* in a nearby *ḥidma*)? That is all just pastime and foolery (*lahwun wa-ʿabaṯ*)!'[236]

S.: Can't pastime and religion coexist?

'No, because God didn't give us two hearts so that I could have pastime (*lahw*) in one and invocation of God (*ḏikr*) in the other. Either it's pastime and foolery, or it's invocation and sunna.

'These things go back to the Fatimids who established a Shiite state and set out to lead the Muslims astray. They are the origin of these practices, they and these districts of Fatimid Cairo.[237] You must come to ʿAyn Šams, Heliopolis and al-Maṭarīyya. There are no shrines in the mosques there and no mawlids. [...]'

S.:What about the religious feasts, like *ʿīd al-fiṭr*, when people in the countryside go on the second or third day of the feast to the banks of the Nile for picnics and walks, isn't that an acceptable kind of pastime?

'It's reprehensible (*makrūh*). The pastime on the Nile promenades doesn't belong to the

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[236]This is a modified reference to 'amusement and pastime' (*laʿbun wa-lahw*), a recurring phrase in the Qurʾān (6:32; 6:70; 7:51; 21:3; 21:17; 29:64; 31:6; 47:36; 57:20; 62:11) where it stands for the vanity of this world (*dunyā*) as opposed to the hereafter (*āḫira*). But unlike in the Qurʾān where 'amusement and pastime' is ambiguous – legitimate, but vain – ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm's formulation of pastime and foolery' is clearly pejorative.

[237]Although the Fatimid city of al-Qāhira was much smaller, today the term 'Fatimid Cairo' is used to designate all the old city districts of Cairo, extending from al-Ǧammālīya in the north to al-Ḫalīfa and as-Sayyida Zaynab in the south. Most of the shrines of Muslim saints in Cairo are located in this area, and it is where most mawlids in the city take place.

correct *ʿīd*, which should consist, as mandated by the Prophet, of prayer, visiting friends and relatives, and helping the orphans. Here in the mawlid the people are rich! They don't need all that food [offered in the *ḫidmas*]. One should give to the orphans who really need it. The people should follow the sunna. Look at these people! (Pointing again at Sufis in an ecstatic state of *ḏikr*) Are these Muslims? Islam is a religion of dignity, work and worship, not a religion of laziness, neglect and begging. These charities here are of no value. One must work, that is what our religion teaches.'[238]

ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm's account exhibits a characteristic feature of most criticism directed at mawlids. He lists a wide range of issues that, in his view, makes celebrating the mawlid a grave error and does not treat them as separate issues but rather as different aspects of one great error. To sum up his account, mawlids are opposed to Islam for a number of somehow interrelated reasons: They are an illegitimate innovation in Islam (*bidʿa*), men and women mix, the veneration of sheikhs is opposed to monotheism, the behaviour of Sufis in the *ḏikr* circles is not religious or civilised, it is a tradition of Shiite origin, there are shrines in the mosques, and the people are lazy and do not work. All this is incompatible with the habitus of 'the religious, rational, civilised human.' There can be no ambivalence in these matters. These themes provide us with a rough outline of the main lines of argumentation used in expressing criticism of mawlids: Religious authenticity, morality, civilised habitus, and progress and rationality.

## 2. Un-Islamic...

### *2.1. Bidʿa*

Historically, mawlids are an innovation within Islam, and from the beginning, this has provided critics with a strong argumentative weapon based on a *ḥadīṯ* of the Prophet Muḥammad prohibiting innovations (*bidaʿ*, sg. *bidʿa*):

'Every novelty is an innovation (*bidʿa*), and every innovation is an error, and every error leads to hell.'[239]

On this basis, it is very commonly argued that mawlids are un-Islamic simply because they did not exist in the age of the Prophet: Mawlids are, the argument goes, a Fatimid (that is, Shiite) innovation, or perhaps a trace of a Pharaonic cult, but in any case, 'there is no such thing called mawlid in Islam'.[240]

Most Islamic schools of law distinguish between different categories of *bidaʿ*, ranging from forbidden (*muḥarrama*), reprehensible (*makrūha*), indifferent (*mubāḥa*), recommended (*mandūba*) and obligatory (*wāǧiba*).[241] Muslim scholarly tradition determines that a practice is illegitimate *bidʿa* not simply when it is not sanctioned by the

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[238]Interview with ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm, English teacher, at the mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 20 August 2002.

[239]*Kullu muḥdaṯatin bidʿa, wa-kullu bidʿatin ḍalāla, wa-kullu ḍalālatin fī n-nār.* Nisāʾī, *Sinan: Kitāb ṣalāt al-ʿīdayn, bāb* 22 (*kayf al-ḫuṭba*).

[240]Sheikh Sayyid Aḥmad al-Ḥaḍarī, in an interview with *ʿAqīdatī*, 22.6.1999: Mūsā Ḥāl and Islām Abū l-ʿAṭṭā, 'Mawlid aš-Šaʿrāwī .. taḥawwal ilā malḥan li-d-darāwīš mihraǧān li-l-ḥummuṣ wa-l-ḥalwā wa-laʿb al-aṭfāl!!', p. 11.

[241]These legal qualifications were developed by Mālikī and Šāfiʿī scholars in the 13th century. Fierro, Maribel: 'The treatises against innovations (*kutub al-bidaʿ*)', *Der Islam* 69 (1992), pp. 204-246, here p. 206.

Qur'ān and the Sunna, but when it is also seen to compromise the purity of sacred practices, the validity of the canonic texts and rituals, or the identity of Islam against other religions.[242] Hence, there are no objective criteria on what constitutes an illegitimate innovation: the religious assessment of a practice depends upon social and ideological factors external to the religious scripture.

However, this is not how *bid'a* is conceived of by those who regularly use this term in contemporary Egypt: most notably so Salafi activists and authors who have a strong influence on the religious debates over mawlids. They argue that while secular issues are subject to improvement and development, in the field of religion innovations are categorically forbidden: 'There are no [classes of] good and bad *bida'*. The good innovations are those in worldly affairs, the bad ones are those in religion.'[243]

The issue is far from simple, however. While it is widely agreed that the prohibition of innovation only applies to religion, not all innovations in religion are actually considered *bida'*. There are numerous other religious innovations that do not originate in the age of the Prophet but which at the present time are not considered to be *bida'*: professional religious hierarchies such as those represented by al-Azhar, printing and broadcasting the Qur'ān, which caused significant controversy when first introduced but has since been considered unproblematic,[244] and the festivities of the Middle of Ša'bān and *al-isrā' wa-l-mi'rāǧ*,[245] neither of which were celebrated in the age of the Prophet and yet, while not unanimously recognised, are not a cause of controversy in modern Egypt.

If mawlids are a *bid'a*, they are not so simply by their being an innovation, but rather because they, in the view of critics, compromise the rituals and spirit of Islam.[246] The basic argument in this direction is that mawlids are opposed to monotheism, the most

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[242] *Ibid.*, p. 214.

[243] Interview with Dr. Muḫtār al-Mahdī, imam of al-Ǧam'īya aš-šar'īya li-l-'āmilīn bi-l-kitāb wa-s-sunna, Egypt's oldest and largest Salafi organisation, Cairo, 17 December 2002. This argument is developed further by a Saudi author who argues that there are no praiseworthy innovations (*bida' ḥasana* – a term that originates in Islamic scholarship and is used by the opponents of the Salafi movement) at all: if an innovation appears good it is either not a *bid'a* or not good after all. Hence, even in the strictest Salafi and Wahhābī discourses defining *bid'a* is in practice never just a matter of reading the scripture. See, e.g., Al-'Uṯaymayn, Muhammad b. Salih, *al-Ibdā' fī kamāl aš-šar' wa-ḫaṭa' al-ibtidā'*, Cairo: Maktabat al-'ilm, 1998, p. 14.

[244] For the 20th century debate on the broadcasting of the Qur'ān, see Larkin, Brian, *Uncertain Consequences: The Social and Religious Life of Media in Northern Nigeria*, PhD Thesis, New York University, 1998.

[245] The middle of the Islamic month of Ša'bān is currently interpreted to commemorate the changing of the *qibla* from Jerusalem to the Ka'ba. *Al-isrā' wa-l-mi'rāǧ* is celebrated on the occasion of the Prophet Muḥammad's nighttime travel to al-Aqṣā mosque and ascension to heaven mentioned in the Qur'ān (18:1). Cf. Rispler-Chaim, 'The 20th Century Treatment of an Old *Bid'a*'; 'Mi'rādj' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.,Leiden: Brill, vol. 7, pp. 97-105; Sells, Michael, 'Ascension', in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), Leiden: Brill, 2001, vol. 1, pp. 176-181.

[246] While Salafi scholars would not agree, in popular discourse this is tacitly recognised:
S.: What exactly is *bid'a*?
'It's what is new in Islam. I mean, if you study Islamic history, there weren't mawlids or stuff like that. But in the Fatimid age and such was when there were these things, and the lanterns [which are used in Ramaḍān to decorate the streets] and all that, I mean, also beautiful things, but the mawlids, they aren't good.' Interview with Ǧamāl, mawlid of Sīdī Muḥammad Maslama, Cairo, 9 August 2002.

central pillar of Islamic faith. In this view, invocations at a shrine, asking a saint for assistance, believing that saints have a mediating position between men and God, slaughtering (a religious ritual in Islam) on the occasion of a mawlid, making vows to a saint, kissing and touching a shrine, and circling around it counter-clockwise (as around the Kaʿba and the Dome of the Rock), are all seen as opposed to the direct, unmediated relationship between the believer and God, and thus an expression of polytheism, *širk*.[247] Pilgrims to shrines see it differently, of course: they express their love to the saints but do not worship them, worship (*ʿibāda*) being restricted to God only. Salafi critics, however, use a significantly wider definition of worship that includes all expressions of devotion, including love, fear and obedience.

This argument is further supported by two references to *hadīṯ*, one prohibiting Muslims from taking graves as sites of worship, the other (referred to by one of the men in the service taxi quoted on p. 1) restricting pilgrimage to the three holy sites of Islam.[248] On this basis, Salafis argue, it is prohibited to construct shrines at all, to pray in mosques attached to them, or to travel to a shrine to celebrate a mawlid there.[249] Yet neither reference they base their argument on is unproblematic: the mosque of Medina is built around the shrine of the Prophet Muhammad,[250] and three of the four Sunnite schools of law conditionally allow prayer in mosques attached to tombs.[251] The *ḥadīṯ* on

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[247]*Širk* in the Qur'ān refers to the Meccans who believed that God has companions (*šurakā'*, sg. *šarīk*), and to the Christian belief in the Trinity. (Mir, Mustansir, 'Polytheism and Atheism', in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʿān*, Vol. 4, pp. 158-162) Inspired by the work of Ibn Taymīya, the Wahhābī movement that emerged in Naǧd in the 18th century made wide use of the accusation of *širk* and used it as a ground for *takfīr*, the declaration of Muslims who did not follow Wahhābī doctrine as infidels. This interpretation has been taken over by the 20th century Salafi movement, however to different degrees. Peskes, Esther, *Muḥammad b. ʿAbdalwahhāb (1703-92) im Widerstreit: Untersuchungen zur Rekonstruktion der Frḥugeschichte der Wahhābīya*, Beirut and Stuttgart: Steiner, 1993, pp. 15-32.

[248]'Do not take tombs as mosques' (*Lā tattaḫiḏū l-qubūra masāǧid*). Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ: Kitāb al-masāǧid, ḥadīṯ* 23; 'Undertaking the pilgrimage is only allowed to three mosques: the mosque of Mecca, the al-Aqṣā mosque, and my own mosque [in Medina]' (*Lā tušadd ar-riḥāl illā ilā ṯalāṯati masāǧid: al-Masǧid al-Ḥarām, al-Masǧid al-Aqṣā, wa-masǧidī anā).* Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ: Kitāb al-ḥaǧǧ, ḥadīṯ* 511.

[249]Duhayna, ʿAbd al-Karīm, *al-Aḍriḥa wa-širk al-iʿtiqād*, Cairo: Dār an-nūr al-muḥammadī, 1993, pp. 5 f.; al-Ǧamal, Ibrāhīm, *Bidaʿ wa-munkarāt yaǧib an taẓūl: laysa min al-islām*, Cairo: al-Maktaba at-tawfīqīya, undated, pp. 41 f.; Ibrāhīm, Maǧdī as-Sayyid, *Bidaʿ wa-ḫurāfāt an-nisāʾ*, Cairo: Maktabat al-Qur'ān, 1992, p. 54; al-Munaǧǧid, Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ, *Muḥarramāt istahān bihā n-nās yaǧib al-ḥaḏar minhā*, Cairo: Maktabat al-ʿilm, 1993, with several reprints, pp. 12 f.; aṭ-Ṭahṭāwī, ʿAlī ʿAbd al-ʿĀl, *Bidaʿ al-maqābir*, Cairo: Maktabat aṣ-ṣafā, 2001; ʿUṯmān, Fatḥī Amīn (ed.), *Fatāwā hāmma: taḥrīm iqāmat al-aḍriḥa wa-taẓyīnihā wa-waḍʿ al-qanādīl ʿalayhā wa-n-naḏr li-sākinīhā*, Cairo: Ǧamāʿat anṣār as-sunna al-muḥammadīya, undated [ca. 2000]; Zahrān, Ṭalʿat, *Iḥḏar! aqwāl wa-afʿāl wa-ʿtiqādāt ḫāṭiʾa*, Alexandria: Dār al-ʿaqīda li-t-turāṯ, 1995, pp. 86-88.

[250]Salafis with whom I have discussed this issue argue that the Prophet's mosque in Medina is a different case because the Prophet's grave and the mosque were originally separate and have become attached only through successive enlargements of the mosque. The problem is that this is exactly how the mosques at many prominent Sufi shrines have also been built. See, e.g., on the development of the mosque of as-Sayyid al-Badawī in Ṭanṭā: Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, p.p. 126-128, 133.

[251]Only the Ḥanbalī *maḏhab* prohibits it categorically. Others permit it, however upon strict conditions, most importantly that the grave should not be located so that worshippers face it when praying. See, e.g., Ibn ʿUṯmān, Muwaffiq ad-Dīn (d. 1218), *Muršid az-zuwwār ilā qubūr al-abrār al-*

pilgrimage speaks of travelling to mosques, not to shrines. Other interpretations of these textual references are thus possible, and have been favoured over the centuries; the Salafi reading of the texts has gained its present hegemony only in the 20th century. Mawlids are neither unequivocally forbidden nor sanctioned in the scripture. There must be something more than these textual references, then, to make it plausible and compelling to interpret mawlids as *bidʿa*.

Some Egyptians, mostly those belonging to the group of active Salafis who adopt a strictly pious discipline and habitus, do argue that the mere fact that a shrine has been built makes anything that happens around it *ḥarām*. But even in the context of the Salafi movement most people always bring in other arguments to condemn mawlids.[252] Furthermore, the active Salafis represent a clear minority that also condemns various other things that are widely accepted in Egyptian society, most notably music, images and tobacco. This poses the important question of why people who do not care that some sheikhs consider music *ḥarām* believe the same sheikhs when they condemn mawlids. The question is in fact twofold: What non-scriptural factors make mawlids a *bidʿa* in the eyes of many Egyptians? And why do they care?

The imam of Egypt's largest Salafi organisation, Dr. Muḫtār al-Mahdī, provides us with some clues:

> 'If we remember the friends of God on the ground of their piety and follow their example, this is allowed. But to construct shrines for them, and mawlids, with forbidden things (*munkarāt*) such as the mixing of sexes, seating of women [among men], *ḏikr* lacking true devotion, or folkloric movements, it's without any bond to Islam. [...] There is not one proof from the Qurʾān or the Sunna to allow us these noisy mawlids with their [bodily] movements that are claimed by the Sufi profiteers who have nothing to do with [real] Sufism. True Sufism is obedience to God and withdrawal from worldly pleasures. This is the correct understanding. But these phenomena/appearances (*maẓāhir*), and the way people invocate graves, searching for mediation and appealing the dead for assistance [are incorrect]. In Islam appealing for assistance is only directed to God. The Prophet, God's blessings and peace be upon him, says: "If you ask, ask from God, and if you appeal for assistance, appeal God for assistance."[253] And our sublime Lord says [in the Qurʾān]: "And when My servants ask thee about Me – I am near to answer the call of the caller, when he calls to me"[254] There is no mediation (*wasāṭa*) in Islam between man and God. The believer asks from God directly. [The founder of al-Ǧamʿīya aš-Šarʿīya] Sheikh as-Subkī attacked those who gain profit from mawlids and they started to criticise him, saying that he had left the good tradition. But the truth is that these mawlids didn't appear in the Islamic world until in the days of the Fatimids. They were Shiites and Egyptian society refused the

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*musammā ad-durr al-munaẓẓam fī ziyārat al-ǧabal al-muqaṭṭam*, Muḥammad Fatḥī Abū Bakr (ed.), Cairo: ad-Dār al-miṣrīya al-lubnānīya, 1995, p. 64.

[252]This was actually the subject of a debate I attended among members of Anṣār as-sunna al-muḥammadīya, a Salafi organisation closely oriented to the Saudi Arabian Wahhābī movement. One of the persons present argued that Sufism as a philosophical and ethical discipline as represented, for example, by Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, is a good thing, and that the main problem with mawlids is not the fact that saints are celebrated, but the way it is done. Others objected, arguing that Sufism is completely *bāṭil* (invalid in a legal or ritual sense) and that because the construction of shrines is *ḥarām*, the actual form of the celebration makes no difference.

[253]*Iḏā saʾalta fa-sʾal illāh wa-iḏā istaʿanta fa-staʿin bi-llāh.* Tirmiḏī, *Ǧāmiʿ aṣ-ṣaḥīḥ: Kitāb ṣifat al-qiyāma, bāb* 59, *ḥadīṯ* 2516.

[254]*Wa-iḏā saʾalaka ʿibādī ʿannī fa-innī qarībun uǧību daʿwat ad-dāʿi iḏā daʿāni*: 2:186, transl. freely after Arberry (transl.) , *The Koran Interpreted*.

> Shiite *maḏhab*, so with these movements and mawlids for the saints, they distracted and appeased the people from their oppressive rule, so that people wouldn't oppose their politics.'[255]
>
> 'As for those who claim to invocate God; the positive sides have no impact in that atmosphere. The conduct of the people sitting on the street is not approved by religion, especially concerning cleanliness, wasting time, and hysterical, folkloric movements. [...] We have rules and responsibilities to fulfill in religion and in society. On the day of resurrection God will ask us about them and make us responsible for them: what we did with our life, our property, how we spent them to profit us in this world and the hereafter. But to stay up all night in the mawlid, that alone is a crime against the interest of religion and society.'[256]

Now if even the current leader of the largest Salafi organisation in Egypt thinks that there is nothing wrong with commemorating saints *per se*, but that the problem is the way it is done, in the 'noisy' way of celebration, the invocation of graves and the 'wasting of time' that go against the interest of religion and society alike, then it is worth taking a closer look at what exactly is so problematic about the 'appearances' or 'phenomena' (*maẓāhir*) of festivity.

Besides the issue of *širk*, the key issues Dr. Muḫtār mentions are the mixing of men and women, the bodily movement of Sufi rituals, the exploitation of the festivities by Shiite rulers, and neglecting one's responsibilities in religion and society by celebrating all night. These are factors that contribute to the definition of mawlids as *bidʿa*, but at the same time they stand as independent issues of morality, bodily disposition, festive time, progress and rationality.

## *2.2. Women and men*

People who criticise mawlids and the veneration of saints as *bidʿa* almost always include the issue of the 'phenomena' or 'appearances' (*maẓāhir*, sg. *maẓhar*) of festivity in their argumentation. Furthermore, many people who are sympathetic to sainthood and shrines, and may regularly visit them, remain firmly opposed to mawlids. Mawlids are almost never only about the construction of shrines, and for a large number of people the saints' shrines are in fact the least problematic part of mawlids. What troubles people much more, and significantly boosts the claim that mawlids are a *bidʿa*, is what they see as immoral and improper behaviour facilitated by the festive atmosphere.

In the hegemonic religious discourses of 20th century Egypt among the religious establishment and the Islamist movements alike, the issue of religion is intimately connected to the issue of morality.[257] And so also is the condemnation of mawlids as *bidʿa* attached to the argument that mawlids are wrong because they are full of, even primarily an occasion for, debauchery: prostitution, female dancers, alcohol, drugs and gambling. Meanwhile, the reality of mawlids has fallen far behind this scandalous image – with few exceptions, alcohol and prostitution are absent from mawlids, and dance shows have become rare as well – (see below p. 196) and yet the topic of *munkarāt*

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[255]Interview with Dr. Muḫtār al-Mahdī, Cairo, 17 December 2002.

[256]Interview with Dr. Muḫtār al-Mahdī, Cairo, 11 January 2003.

[257]Ismail, Salwa, *Rethinking Islamist Politics: Culture, the State and Islamism*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2003, pp. 45 f., 58-81.

(immoral acts prohibited by religion) has remained central to criticism of them:

> 'The results that follow from the celebration of mawlids are that uncontrolled behaviour (*ašwā'īyāt*) is encouraged, debauchery flourishes, and theft is incited, not to forget female dancers who also take part in mawlids. And all this is considered to be searching for closeness to the saint. And we must add to the calculation the vices (like adultery) that take place at mawlids. And God protect, furthermore there are always dealers of drugs and liqueur in this night (staying up all night is required) as it is called.'[258]

This image of wild debauchery in the name of religion (used in a newspaper article as part of a furious attack on mawlids of a kind that is quite common in the Egyptian press) is so far removed from the contemporary practice of mawlids that it is likely the author is basing her account mainly on indirect sources. This is perhaps telling of the power of the moralistic argument. The imagery of *munkarāt* is a powerful – and exciting – argumentative tool used to depict mawlids as a dangerous medium of moral corruption.

But even without actual debauchery taking place, the fact that space and rituals are shared by men and women is enough to provoke the outrage of the religious press.[259] Relations between men and women have long been a sensitive issue in most Muslim societies (as elsewhere), conceived of as a potential source of chaos and decadence on the one hand, and a marker of morality and religiosity on the other. While most Sufi groups have been relatively tolerant of the participation of women, for the Salafi and Islamist movements of the 20th century gender segregation – in practice typically meaning the seclusion of women – has been a key issue. While it is not surprising that the religious press and Salafi and Islamist activists stress this issue, it is striking to note that people who spend much of their time in the mixed spaces of, say, universities, shops and offices without finding that problematic, and who may in fact enjoy the atmosphere of romance and flirtation that prevails on the Nile promenades, also object to the presence of women at mawlids.

It is true that the atmosphere in the streets during mawlids is often sexually charged. Mawlids serve as an important occasion for young men and women in the countryside and small cities to meet.[260] A more aggressive sexual tension rules the main streets on the great night of mawlids in large cities when groups of young men roam the crowds, often grabbing and harassing women. However, the main criticism is not directed against the crowds in the streets but rather at the presence of women in the mosque, at the shrine and in Sufi *ḫidmas*, and their participation in rituals where the atmosphere is, in fact, not sexually charged.

There must be more to the issue of mixing, then. In the moralistic atmosphere of present-day Egypt anything indicating loose morals is a powerful basis for argumentation, and mingling of the sexes has become an argumentative front for a more complex issue: namely the kind of presence women have, which in turn is related to the sacredness of the occasion and its class habitus.

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[258] *Ra'y aš-Šabāb*, 1.10.2004: Amīra Rāšid, 'al-mawlid bayn al-ḥaqīqa wa-l-ḫidā'', p. 10.

[259] See, e.g., *'Aqīdatī*, 21.7.1999: Ǧamāl Sālim / Mūsā Ḥāl, 'Karāmāt am ḫurāfāt fī aḍriḥat al-awliyā': fī mawlid Fāṭima an-Nabawīya: ar-riǧāl wa-n-nisā' fī ṣalāt muḫṭalaṭa wa-qiblatuhum al-maqām!', pp. 12-13.

[260] While in large cities class also plays a role, mawlids being less attractive for those with access to the meeting places of the upper classes, in a rural context the character of the mawlid as a place to meet has not been related to class.

To understand the problems posed by women's presence it is illustrative to look at two Sufi gatherings organised by two women, Hudā and al-Ḥāǧǧā Sihām, who represent two models of female participation at mawlids. Both organise *ḫidma*s at mawlids that share a familiar and informal atmosphere but which differ in terms of their rituals and class habitus. Sihām, holder of a university degree and emanating matriarchal charisma, organises small, intimate meetings that are mostly frequented by her circle of followers. The programme consists of spontaneous speeches and performances, and sometimes a *ḏikr* without loudspeakers. Sihām does not participate in the *ḏikrs* herself; she always keeps a certain distance, restricting herself to the role of a motherly spiritual leader, and

*Image 21: The ḥaḍra of al-Ḥāǧǧa Sihām (third from the right, wearing sunglasses) at the mawlid of al-Mursī Abū l-ʿAbbās, Alexandria, 24 July 2003.*

never forgetting to stress her well-educated background. Hudā, on the other hand, organises an ecstatic gathering with plenty of bystanders spontaneously joining in and famous *munšid*s performing, loudspeakers magnifying the sound of the *ḏikr*. Hudā radiates the habitus of a *maʿallima*:[261] she smokes, participates in the *ḏikr* and talks with the guests of her *ḥaḍra* in a familiar and informal manner. Both women are problematic in the critical view of mawlids, but Hudā much more so than Sihām. They both represent female leadership in the field of religion, a very sensitive issue that has led to the imprisonment of two other women.[262] But what Hudā also does is act contrary to the

[261]*Maʿallima* is the female equivalent of *maʿallim*, a master craftsman or entrepreneur in a popular district. A *maʿallima* embodies social status and habitus otherwise reserved for men, such as sitting in a café and smoking.

[262]Sheikha Manāl, widow of a sheikh of a branch of the Bayyūmīya *ṭarīqa*, established a *ṭarīqa* of her own after the death of her husband in mid-1990s. She drew a significant number of followers from the upper classes, and was sentenced to five years in prison in 2000 on the grounds of 'denigrating Islam by claiming prophecy and using the Islamic religion to propagate extremist ideas'. (*Rūz al-Yūsuf*, 3.2.1997: Ibrāhīm Ḫalīl, 'Inšiqāq aš-šayḫa Manāl ʿalā ṭ-ṭarīqa al-bayyūmīya', pp. 80- 83; *Cairo Times*, 27 July – 9 August 2000: John Iskander: 'State vs. the Sheikha'; *Middle East Times*, 37/2000: Heba Mustapha, 'Cairo court sends Sufi sheikha to jail'). Sheikha Nādiya, a popular preacher prominent for healing with the Qurʾān, gained significant following in the 1990s and was sentenced to three years in prison earlier in 2000 and was not released at the end of her term, which is a common practice in Egypt (*Ṣawt al-Umma*, 28.10.2002: Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, 'aš-Šayḫa Nādiya: niǧmat siǧn al-Qanāṭir wa-ḥikāya tantaẓir an-nihāya', p. 19).

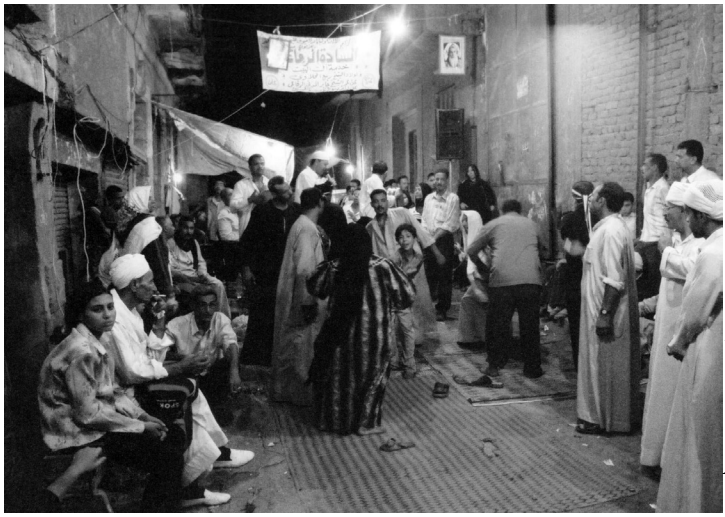

*Image 22: The ḥaḍra of Hudā (not pictured), mawlid of Sīdī Aḥmad ar-Rifāʿī, Cairo, 7 August 2003.*

publicly propagated roles of women. She meets neither the modest and shy habitus required from the religious woman, nor the professional middle-class style of those women who have successfully made careers in Egypt over the past few decades. Sihām, for her part, is carefully balancing between these two parallel, partly interdependent and partly contradictory trends that define the role of women in public space.

During the 20th century, the role of women in society underwent complex changes that cannot be depicted as a straightforward path of emancipation. While there are increasingly more women in professional and public life, the bodies of women have also been subject to a strong moral discipline. This discipline is not confined to the field of religion. As Afsaneh Najmabadi (writing about Iran) and others have argued, the entire move of women to the public in the 20th century has been connected to forms of disciplining, be it religious or secular.[263] Women who do not fit into these standards are increasingly excluded from a legitimate public presence. Following this logic of inclusion and exclusion, women with access to education and the ability to display a modest middle-class habitus are more likely to be accepted in public space, while the public presence of women who have little formal education, wear lower-class dress, smoke in public and sit with men on sacred occasions is perceived as immoral and un-Islamic.[264]

But why is mixing (*iḫtilāṭ*) such a problem at mawlids while it is not so, for example, at universities and workplaces? To understand this we have to take a closer look at what the issue of mixing is really about: the gender and habitus boundaries that define the religious, civic and moral order of modern Egypt, and their relationship to the boundaries that define the sacred and the profane. This issue is not restricted to the presence of women; it is related to the habitus and atmosphere of the entire festivity.

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[263]Najmabadi, Afsaneh, 'Veiled Discourse – Unveiled Bodies', *Feminist Studies* 19 (1993), 3, pp. 487-518; Abu-Lughod, 'Feminist Longings and Postcolonial Conditions'; Moors, 'Representing Family Law Debates'.

[264]Sufi *ḫidmas* are also often places for women on the margins of the moral order (divorced, orphaned, unmarried) in the role of a *darwīša*.

## 2.3. Chickpeas

When Egypt's most influential television preacher Sheikh Muḥammad Mutawallī aš-Šaʿrāwī died on 17 June 1998, a veritable cult soon developed around his person.[265] The conservative sheikh had been subject to some controversy in his lifetime but after his death the press was full of praise for 'the Imam of the modern age',[266] and posters and wall calendars with his picture soon swept the homes and shops of the nation. One year later, a scandal followed as Šaʿrāwī's son al-Ḥāǧǧ ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm posted an ad in a leading newspaper announcing that the mawlid in honour of the late sheikh would be celebrated on the anniversary of his death.[267] The event gained widespread publicity, and several magazines and newspapers wrote about it both before and after. Some of them took a neutral stand on the issue,[268] but the two weekly religious papers *ʿAqīdatī* and *al-Liwāʾ al-Islāmī*[269] launched a furious campaign against the mawlid that continued, in somewhat more moderate tones, in the following years while the mawlid, a considerable success, grew and flourished.[270]

What makes this debate interesting is the fact that al-Ḥāǧǧ ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm aš-Šaʿrāwī was very concerned with keeping the mawlid free of controversial elements. The tomb, covered by a large ornamented dome, does not stand near a mosque, and at the entrance an announcement appeals visitors to direct their prayers to God only and observe good manners at the shrine. Dancing, alcohol and gambling have been successfully banned from the mawlid. To add further respectability, a large official celebration with lectures, Qurʿān recitation and poetry readings dominates the centre of the festivity.

Yet the critics were not impressed. They argued that the sheikh himself had been

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[265] *Cairo Times*, 19/2000: John Iskander,'The making of a saint: Controversial to the end and beyond, Sheikh Shaarawi continues to inspire debate', pp. 14-17; Chih, Rachida / Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, 'Le cheikh Sha'râwî et la télévision: l'homme qui a donné un visage au Coran', in Mayeur-Jaouen (ed.), *Saints et Héros*, pp. 189-209.

[266] E.g. *al-Maydān*, 15.6.1999: 'aš-Šaʿrāwī imām al-ʿaṣr', pp. 1, 7-10; see also *al-Liwāʾ al-islāmī*, 17.6.1999: 'Wa-maḍā 365 yawman ʿalā raḥīl imām qarn al-ʿišrīn', pp. 1, 3 ff., 14 ff.

[267] The ad appeared in *al-Ahrām* on Friday 4 or 11 June 1999, but I have not been able to trace the exact date.

[268] *aš-Šabāb*, July 1999: Ṣabāḥ Ḥamāmū, 'aš-Šabāb fī mawlid Sīdī š-Šaʿrāwī!', pp. 8-9; *Āḫir Sāʿā*, 16.6.1999: Ḥusām ʿAbd Rabbuh, 'Wuzarāʾ wa-ʿulamāʾ .. wa-zuwwār min as-Saʿūdīyya wa-l-Kuwayt wa-Andūnīsiyā fi ḍarīḥ aš-Šaʿrāwī', pp. 36-37; Maʾmūn Ġarīb, 'Li-awwal marra: mawlid Sīdī aš-Šaʿrāwī', pp. 38-40; *al-Aḥrār*, 9.7.1999: Ṣalāḥ Qabaḍāyā, 'al-Mawlid', p. 12.

[269] The first is published by the public sector al-Gumhūrīya publishing house, the latter by the ruling National Democratic Party. Both represent a politically loyal but strongly moralist reading of Islam.

[270] *ʿAqīdatī*, 22.6.1999: Basyūnī al-Ḥilwānī, 'Man yunqiḍ sumʿat aš-Šaʿrāwī min hāḏā l-ʿabaṭ?', p. 6; Mūsā Ḥāl and Islām Abū l-ʿAṭṭā, 'Mawlid aš-Šaʿrāwī .. taḥawwal ilā malḥan li-d-darāwīš mihraǧān li-l-ḥummuṣ wa-l-ḥalwā wa-luʿab al-aṭfāl!!', pp. 10-11; *ʿAqīdatī*, 12.6.2001: Mūsā Ḥāl / Muṣṭafā Yāsīn: 'Mawlid aš-Šaʿrāwī bayn al-qubūl wa-r-rafḍ' *ʿAqīdatī*, 3.7.2001: 'Tilāwat al-Qurʾān wa-malāhin fi mawlid aš-Šaʿrāwī!! Daqādūs tataḥaddaṯ ʿan al-ǧāmūsa al-latī aḥaḍahā ṣāḥibuhā li-ziyārat al-maqām', p. 13; *ʿAqīdatī*, 25.6.2002: Mūsā Ḥāl: 'Tanāfas al-qurrāʾ wa-l-munšidūn.. wa-l-bāʿa al-ǧāʾilūn afsadū l-iḥtifāl', p. 8; *al-Liwāʾ al-islāmī*, 24.6.1999: ʿAbd al-Muʿṭī ʿUmrān, 'Mawlid .. sīdnā aš-Šaʿrāwī!', pp. 4-5; *al-Liwāʿ al-Islāmī*, 6.7.2000: ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm, 'Li-awwal marra: Mawlid aš-šayḫ aš-Šaʿrāwī: mūlid w-ṣāḥbuh ġāyib: ḥummuṣ wa-ṭarāṭīr wa-tilāwat al-Qurʾān wa-ḏikr Allāh!', pp. 3-5. See also *al-Maydān*, 15.6.1999: Muḥammad Taġyān, 'Raġm istinkār ʿulamāʾ al-Azhar: ibn aš-Šaʿrāwī yuqīm "mawlidan" li-mawlānā', p. 10; *al-Muṣawwar*, 27.6.2003.

opposed to mawlids (which was not quite accurate: Šaʿrāwī actually sponsored *ḫidmas* at various mawlids but rarely publicly discussed the issue, well understanding its potential for controversy),[271] and that to honour the 'Imam of the modern age' with a mawlid was mockery and travesty of the most outrageous kind. This second argument deserves a closer look: what was presented as particularly offensive in the headlines and commentaries was the turning of a legitimate pious celebration into a popular festival with all of its entertainment and commerce:

> 'The *mawlid* of aš-Šaʿrāwī turned into an amusement ground of dervishes and a festival of chickpeas, sweets and children's play!'[272]
>
> 'Mawlid without its master (i.e., total chaos): chickpeas and party hats, recitation of Qurʾān and invocation of God!'[273]

According to these critics, al-Shaʿrāwī's memory should indeed be celebrated, only not in such a shameful, un-Islamic way:

> 'Sheikh aš-Šaʿrāwī left his name in the record of the nation's greatest *ʿulamāʾ* who earned their glory through their struggle, excellence and sincerity in their call for God and their defence of the rights of the Muslims [...] It is not reasonable and not acceptable that one of the sheikh's sons comes to destroy all this by associating the name of his father with the shameful amusement and superstitions which are witnessed in the mawlids.'[274]

The debate was not restricted to the press: it also divided the people of Daqādūs, aš-Šaʿrāwī's native village and site of the mawlid. As part of this local debate, a story circulated that a man had gone to the shrine of aš-Šaʿrāwī with his water buffalo and circled around it to make the animal fertile. *ʿAqīdatī* used the story for another critical headline on the mawlid,[275] but it is possible that this event never actually took place: *ziyāra* with a water buffalo (and never with any other animal) is a recurring topic in the criticism of the cult of saints, and has been told on many different occasions to ridicule the rituals of *ziyāra*.[276]

The mawlid adds up to the destruction of all that aš-Šaʿrāwī stood for, we are told,

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[271]Šaʿrāwī ran several *ḫidmas* at major pilgrimage sites, one at the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī in Ṭanṭā, one in an apartment next to the mosque of al-Ḥusayn, and one in a building constructed specifically for the purpose across from the mosque of as-Sayyida Nafīsa (for Ṭanṭā, see Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, p. 229). The two posthumous collections of *fatwā*s by as-Šaʿrāwī contain no opinions on mawlids, except of a *fatwā* in favour of *mawlid an-nabī* (aš-Šaʿrāwī, Muḥammad Mutawallī, *al-Fatāwā: kull mā yuhimm al-muslim fī ḥayātih yawmih wa-ġadih*, as-Sayyid al-Ǧamīl (ed.), Cairo: al-Maktaba at-tawfīqīya, 1999, pp. 600 f.). In an interview made a few years before his death, aš-Šaʿrāwī expressed a view cautiously in favour of mawlids:

'We do not talk about "the mawlids" [per se], what concerns us is what happens in them. As long as there is no immorality and transgression it's OK. As long as it's all about *ḏikr* and blessing the Prophet, it's OK. Some Arab countries do not recognise that; they have even been saying that the mawlids that we celebrate have no base [in religion]. I said to them: We do not take it as an issue of judging the idea of the mawlid, but what happens at the mawlid. If there happens nothing but obedience to God, then give me the proof of forbidding obedience to God.' (Abū l-ʿAynayn, Saʿīd, *aš-Šaʿrāwī yabūḥ bi-asrārihī maʿa s-Sayyida Zaynab wa-l-Ḥusayn: Anā min silālat .. ahl al-bayt*, 6th ed., Cairo: Maṭābiʿ Aḫbār al-yawm, 1997, p. 179; see also Idem, *Riḥlat awliyāʾ Allāh*, pp. 188-190.)

[272]*ʿAqīdatī*, 22.6.1999, pp. 10-11.

[273]*al-Liwāʿ al-Islāmī*, 6.7.2000, p. 3.

[274]*ʿAqīdatī*, 22.6.1999, p. 6.

[275]*ʿAqīdatī*, 3.7.2001, p. 13.

[276]See, e.g,. aṭ-Ṭahṭāwī, ʿAlī ʿAbd al-ʿĀl, *Bidaʿ al-maqābir*, Cairo: Maktabat aṣ-ṣafā, 2001, p. 16. In this case the owner of the water buffalo was a woman, making it even worse.

because of the presence of amusements, children playing, sweets, party hats, chickpeas and a water buffalo. These things all have one feature in common: None of them is, *per se*, opposed to either Islam or morality, but in the context of the mawlid they transgress and subvert the norms that Šaʿrāwī, in the view of the critics, stands for. Let us take the example of roasted chickpeas for closer examination. They are inexpensive, tasty, healthy and *ḥalāl* according to Islamic Law. But as a commodity, they acquire additional connotations. Part of the flourishing trade in sweets, snacks, amulets, toys and souvenirs at mawlids, chickpeas are archetypal to mawlid imagery, so much so as to enter the Egyptian colloquial idiom.[277] Chickpeas, in this context, are much more than just a snack: they symbolise the concept of *baraka* and the suspension of boundaries at mawlids.

The issue of chickpeas is, just like the issue of mixing, part of a wider argument stating that the behaviour of people and the general festive atmosphere at mawlids is improper, un-Islamic and uncivilised. This topic is key to the entire debate. The issues of *bidʿa*, immorality, and – as we shall see in the following section – backwardness, are all openly or tacitly related to this central issue of habitus and festive time.

To understand why this is so, we must move step by step, first sketching the argument in more detail and then trying to understand what discursive commonplaces the argumentation is built upon and showing how mawlids (don't) fit into them. The main critical arguments concerning the festive atmosphere are the following:

–Mawlids mix profane behaviour with a sacred occasion, thus banalising and desacralising it. This includes the mixing of men and women, having fun and shopping on a religious occasion, eating and sleeping in a mosque or in front of it, and celebrating in a graveyard.[278] Having fun and shopping are entirely acceptable, but should not happen under the pretext of religion.

–The embodied practices of saint veneration are opposed to the condoned expressions of piety. The fact that people at shrines are loud and their movements impulsive, that many of them are women and some of them wear dirty or eccentric dress, and that they touch and kiss the shrine, is contrary to the way devotion at shrines should be expressed (if at all), namely through calm and quiet meditation, study, and recitation of the Fātiḥa.

– The movement of Sufis in *ḏikr* is not a proper way of invocating God: it is mere

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[277]In the expression 'leaving the mawlid without chickpeas' (*ṭiliʿ mi-l-mūlid bi-lā ḥummuṣ*), meaning 'failing to catch an opportunity'.

[278]The issue of celebration in graveyards illustrates the perception of things being out of place especially well. Like in the following passage from a contemporary Salafi tractate, joy in the place of fear is seen as an expression of lack of faith and respect:

'Among their *bidaʿ* is that they turn [the graves] into a festival (*mawsim*), a feast (*ʿīd*), a lodge, a playground for children and a marketplace on weekly holidays (Friday) and on seasonal festivities like *ṭalʿat Rağab* and the feasts. You will even find at the shrines of the people of the house of the Prophet (Ṣ), (if it is true that they are buried there), that the people have called [these shrines] a *ḥaram* (sanctuary) and have fixed for each saint a night in which their *ḥaḍra* is held. Add to that the make-up [or generally making themselves attractive] of the women and the noise and the *širk* by asking the dead for what only God is capable of, and the mixing of men and women, and forbidden private encounters, [all this] in the places of admonition, fear and shiver of the horror of the death. One of the pious said: "if you should see someone eating or laughing in the graveyard, then know that his heart is extinguished and he is far from the mercy of God because he was being frivolous in the place of fear."'aṭ-Ṭahṭāwī, *Bidaʿ al-maqābir*, pp. 18-20.

hysteric dance that may have therapeutic effects but contradicts the habitus of Islamic piety, which should be that of concentrated, restrained and conscious worship, as ideally exemplified by ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*).
–The use of music, especially that of musical instruments in Sufi *ḏikr*, is prohibited either because music is completely *ḥarām* or because it is otherwise acceptable but should not be used in mosques and on religious occasions.

These arguments leave us with a number of questions: Why does piety have to be quiet and constrained? What is the problem with music? Why is the sacred in need of protection? Why is having fun opposed to religion? To begin with the problematic nature of fun, it is useful to look at how critics of mawlids view other festivities. Most Egyptian Muslims do not express a general dislike for amusements and entertainment. So also three local activists of the Muslim Brotherhood in a village in the Nile Delta whom I interviewed about local festive traditions.[279] They were strictly opposed to the mawlid of the local saint and to the festive procession held on the occasion of *mawlid an-nabī*. What they found especially objectionable was 'the spirit of joking' and the 'sarcastic attitude' expressed in these festivities.[280] In their view, the birthdays of the Prophet and saints should be celebrated through education, preaching and contemplation. Beyond this, they considered the very idea of special festive time suspect: Instead of celebrating once a year, a Muslim should live every day according to the example of the Prophet and the saints (provided that they really are worthy of being venerated as saints). Yet their suspicion of the festive time of mawlid appears strange when compared to their enthusiastic descriptions of the festive atmosphere of the two religious feasts. During the *ʿīd*, according to these activists, one should concentrate on the joy of the special day and forget all sorrows in order to bring the community together and settle all conflicts that might have arisen among the people during the year.

We have different contrasting notions of festivity here. One is the harmonic, integrative and family-oriented time of the canonical religious feasts. The second is the extraordinary time of mawlids made up of overlapping and contradictory festive practices and utopian visions that all share a stark contrast to the order of daily life. This does not mean that the festive time of the *ʿīd* is uncontested. When these activists wished to completely replace the atmosphere of mawlids with a stern, educational and moralistic commemoration they in fact offered a third model of festivity, one much more restrictive than that of the *ʿīd*. This model is commonly presented in reformist discourses as the true form of festivity to which also *ʿīd* and Ramaḍān celebrations are expected to comply. Festivity, in this view, has to serve (thus no festive time in its own right) the moral and religious improvement of the nation and the *umma*, the pan-Islamic community. The Muslim Brothers I interviewed could be so enthusiastic about the *ʿīd* because they

[279]Interview with leading activists of the Muslim Brotherhood in a village in Kafr aš-Šayḫ province, 21 February 2002.

[280]This procession is, in fact, full of humour and irony. It is led by a mock president, surrounded by mock republican guards (see pp. 64-65) and followed by a travesty of a bride and groom, carts representing the professions of the village, and members of the Sufi orders wearing imitated Arabian dress.

perceived and employed it as a functional part of religious and political mobilisation.[281] But the *ʿīd* is an ambivalent festivity, too, and many people complain about the hedonistic and materialistic character of the celebrations that concentrate on eating and entertainment instead of spiritual and communal values.[282] And some of the people who are opposed to the festive atmosphere of mawlids in fact do extend their criticism to festive culture at large:

> 'Mawlids are far removed from religion. It's the fault of the people who come from outside Qīnā and spoil (*yisīʾū*) the mawlid. The proper intention would be to learn about the life and work of Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm. What's the role of chickpeas and sweets in Islam? Their place is not here. It's the same with Ramaḍān, with TV riddles and *kunāfa*[283] and all that nonsense. It[284] should be celebrated differently, because Islam is a lot more sublime (*arqā*) than that. But only few do it the proper way.'[285]

The problem of the festive culture criticised here by an urban middle-class citizen is that things are out of place. In his view, sweets, chickpeas and TV riddles banalise the spirit of religion. The ambiguity of festive culture, the fact that a mawlid, or Ramaḍān, or *ʿīd*, can mean hedonistic fun one moment and pious commemoration another, or even both at the very same time for one and the same person, is a violation of boundaries that appear to be fundamental to the discourse in which he is participating. We encounter the same anger over the crossing of boundaries, be it with the presence of women, the behaviour of the people at the shrine or in *ḏikr*, the music, sweets and chickpeas, or the festive atmosphere at large. At the mawlid, these accounts indicate, things are badly out of place: graveyards should not be a place to celebrate, the invocation of God should not be expressed by dancing, women should not sit with men, and, most importantly, the commemoration of saints should not be an occasion for eating snacks and having fun.

The most important, but by no means only, boundary of importance in this debate

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[281]Like in many other locations, the Muslim Brothers in that village organise an *ʿīd* morning prayer in the open, carefully and successfully designed to balance between the moments of festive joy and political demonstration.

[282]*ʿAqīdatī*, 1.10.2002: Muṣṭafā Yāsīn / Hāla as-Sayyid, 'al-Munāsabāt ad-dīnīya: hal aṣbaḥat li-l-iḥtifāl faqaṭ.. am wasīla li-taġyīr al-wāqiʿ al-marīr li-l-umma?', p. 12; *al-Liwāʾ al-islāmī*, 5.12.2002: Zakarīyā aš-Šinnāwī / Amal al-ʿAdl, 'Yawm al-fiṭr.. yawm al-ǧāʾiza al-kubrā', p. 7; *al-Aḫbār*, 5.12.2002: 'Rūšitta nabawīya li-l-iḥtifāl bi-l-ʿīd', p. 4.This is not the only tone of the public discourse on *ʿīd*: the moment of joy in harmony with the family and the *umma*, seen in no contradiction with the various popular celebrations, features widely in the press coverage on *ʿīd*, including religious discourse. See, e.g., *al-Aḫbār*, 6.12.2002: Aḥmad Šaʿbān, 'al-ʿĪd yuwaḥḥid al-mašāʿir wa-l-qulūb', p. 5; Muḥammad ʿAbd as-Samiʿ Šabbāna, ' Sulūkīyat al-Muslim fī l-ʿīd', p. 5. It is worth noting that the critical discourse on the way *ʿīd* is celebrated does not question the basic element of joy and holiday but states that it should not be mistaken for the true meaning of *ʿīd*, quite unlike in the critical discourse on mawlids, and also on *mawlid an-nabī,* in which the moment of joy, most notably the consumption of sweets, is often categorically rejected. For *mawlid an-nabī*, see, e.g., *al-ʿArabī*: 13.5.2003: ʿAbdu Zakī, ''Ulamāʾ al-islām: al-iḥtifāl bi-mawlid ar-rasūl (Ṣ) yakūn bi-stirǧāʿ sīratih al-ʿaṭira wa-l-iqtidāʾ bihā: al-ḥalwīyāt bidʿa fāṭimīya wa-lā asās dīnī lahā', p. 10.

[283]Kunāfa is a pastry especially associated with the month of Ramaḍān. Riddles (*fawāzīr*) are a central part of Ramaḍān television programming in Egypt. See Armbrust, Walter, 'The Riddle of Ramadan: Media, Consumer Culture, and the "Christmasization" of a Muslim Holiday,' in Donna Bowen / Evelyn Early (eds), *Everyday Life in the Middle East*, revised ed., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002, pp. 335-348.

[284]It is not clear whether he refers to the mawlid, to Ramaḍān, or both.

[285]Man from Qinā, in a discussion two days after the local mawlid and some two weeks before the beginning of Ramaḍān, Qinā, 22 October 2002.

is that marking the sacred and the profane. Following the concept of *baraka*, the sacred in the mawlid is a powerful force of its own, a source of protection, and hence not in need of protection itself. Yet this concept is clearly not shared by those who criticise the festive atmosphere of mawlids. In his study of religious commodities in Cairo, Gregory Starrett[286] has argued that there are two competing definitions of the sacred strongly related to issues of class habitus. While the *baraka* model remains influential, it is contested by a rationalist view that emphasises the interpretation and understanding of the *meaning* of religious commodities (most importantly the Qur'ān, be it in the form of a printed book, calligraphy, or tape-recorded recitation). While people holding to the latter view agree that the Qur'ān does hold *baraka*, they emphasise the importance of understanding its text and acting according to its commandments and spirit. Following this logic, celebrating the sacred should be based on the habitualisation of its meaning. Commemorating a saint should, then, mean studying his or her pious example and learning to live according to it.

The consequence of defining the sacred through its intellectual interpretation is that removing it from the context of interpretation can desacralise it. The sacred, in the reformist rationalist understanding, implies a pious and moral discipline and cannot serve to legitimise profane practises. The sacred in this interpretation is fragile and in constant need of cultivation and protection.[287] In the mawlid, in contrast, no such discipline or protection is available: on the contrary the sacred expands to protect the entire festivity in all of its aspects. It is exactly this expansion of the sacred to include eating, sleeping and trade that, in the reformist point of view, leads to its inflation and banalisation. Fun in the name of religion is wrong, in this view, because it breaks the boundaries set for religious ritual and space, because it does not express the constrained and serious habitus and the disciplining of the everyday that are taken to be necessary constituents of religiosity. In the words of an Islamist author, it makes it appear 'as if Islam were a religion of amusement and pastime'.[288]

Chickpeas, fun, music and ecstatic bodily movement in the name of religion and in a sacred location are all seen as breaking the boundaries that, in the view of critics, are there to define the proper and separate places of snacks and saints. Hence the debate on mawlids is never simply about shrines in mosques or dancers and alcohol. The mawlid of Sheikh aš-Šaʿrāwī doesn't host any of that, and it has still inspired major debate. It is the very order of celebration and pilgrimage that is problematic and is in fact the core of the problem. If it weren't for the impulsive and emotional habitus of *ziyāra*, only few Egyptians would consider it *širk*. If it weren't for the kind of presence women have in a sacred space, only few Egyptians would object to their participation. And if it weren't for the ambivalent festive time of mawlids, only few Egyptians would object to the fact that people have fun at them. If mawlids were *only* about the love of *ahl al-bayt*, or if they were purely secular festivals the way the spring festival *Šamm an-nasīm* is, only the most radical

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[286]Starrett, Gregory, 'The Political Economy of Religious Commodities in Cairo', *American Anthropologist*, 97 (1995), 1, pp. 51-68.

[287]*Ibid.*

[288]Sulṭān, Muḥammad, *Ru'ya muʿāṣira li-ḥtifālātinā al-islāmīya*, Maktabat al-īmān, al-Manṣūra 1992, p. 7.

Salafis would bother to oppose them.

But why should Islam not be associated with amusement and pastime? Why are these boundaries so important? As one can observe at mawlids, millions of Egyptians do not have a problem with them. They are perfectly able to be pious and/or have fun at the mawlid without feeling that there might be something wrong with it. The issue of boundaries is related to different understandings of religion and society that have been in a process of redefinition and contestation in Egypt since the 19th century, and for which specific definitions of piety and the self are constitutive.

Piety has always been a contested issue in Muslim societies, but became more so in the 20th century when the reformist discourse gained a hegemonic position in the public debates on religion, stating that the proper and only way of expressing religiosity is that of conscious, disciplined and rational obedience and contemplation. This leads to an empirical contradiction when people express piety by, say, kissing a shrine or dancing in a *ḏikr*. In the view of critics, these movements are opposed to two of the fundamental principles of Islamic ritual: rationality and discipline.[289] Piety, the personal disposition of the sacred, is seen as a highly conscious and controlled state of the mind and body that is under constant threat of distraction and banalisation. From this perspective, constrained disciplined intellectualism is the very cornerstone of the Revelation and inherently opposed to uncontrolled, ambivalent emotion: 'God opened the Revelation with the word "Read!", He did not say: "Dance!"'[290]

One could argue that He did not say 'Do not dance', either, but this objection does not apply in the reformist discourse. Ecstatic bodily movement to the tune of music is, it is implied, the opposite of reading. The problem with dancing, in this view, is that it taints the Word of God and distracts from its rational interpretation by giving in to animal instincts of the body and the lower soul (*nafs*). The problem is not just the centrality of bodily movement in *ḏikr*, for the same applies to ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*). By taking the contrastive case of *ṣalāt*, in which the body is disciplined through an exact specified series of movements and phrases and the dominance of the spirit (*rūḥ*) over the lower soul (*nafs*) (any profanity or interruption makes the prayer invalid), we can see its clear opposition to *ḏikr*, which is an ambivalent and weakly controlled expression of an emotional, ecstatic state of soul and body (*infiʿāl*) and not controlled by reason or fixed ritual as required by the reformist understanding of piety. This opposition between conscious discipline and (seemingly) uncontrolled[291] ecstatic states also explains the power of the story of *ẓiyāra* with a water buffalo (see above p. 90). The animal body is the

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[289]Starrett, 'The Hexis of Interpretation'.

[290]Discussion with an Egyptian academic in Cairo on 23 January 2003, referring to the verse 'Recite/read in the name of your Lord who created' (*iqraʾ bismi rabbika l-laḏī ḫalaq*, 96:1), considered to be the first verse of the Qurʾān to be revealed to Muḥammad. See Gade, Anna M., 'Recitation of the Qurʾān', in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, vol. 4, pp. 367-385, here p. 368.

[291]So primarily from the point of view of the reformist critics. In practice, ecstasy in *ḏikr* is reached by conscious and learned movements and breathing techniques, and a certain level of control is present in the ritual context. *Ḏikr* may contain moments of partial or full loss of self-control, but these are restricted to the occasion of the *ḥaḍra* and follow a loose ritual programme in which moments of intense emotion and ecstasy are followed by moments of calm and rest. When participants in a *ḏikr* lose consciousness or the ability to coordinate their movements, which sometimes happens, others are quick to see that they are taken to recover.

ultimate symbol of an undisciplined and irrational habitus, and the water buffalo of all domestic animals the most intimately associated with profane and dirty agricultural work and bare of any religious connotation of sacrifice which, say, a camel or lamb might have.

The logic of dancing vs. reading also applies to music, the subject of an old and long lasting debate among Muslims. Critics see the use of melodic instrumental music as compromising the spirit to a lower level of animalistic instincts. This is more than just an issue of the profane connotations of musical instruments that are also used at weddings and nightclubs. The problematic nature of music is related to the Muslim tradition of rhetoric and aesthetics whereby hearing, understood to be an ethical capacity, has a central position. Listening to the Qur'ān is an act of devotion, and the voice of the recitation is believed to have beneficial power. Following the same logic, listening to profane music is to open one's heart to profanities and illicit thoughts. Music is seen to have an innate power that it exerts on the listener, hence the strong ambivalence in Islamic tradition between the elaborate use of sound in religious rituals and strong reservations towards secular songs.[292]

The interesting thing about music at mawlids is that while most people in Egypt do not think that music is altogether *ḥarām*, they may still object to the use of music in Sufi *ḏikr*. What they see as problematic is not music itself but its presence in a sacred context:

> 'Mawlids are a *bid'a* that Muslims have invented; they didn't exist in the time of the prophets. What you should do is visit [the shrine], recite the Fātiḥa and go, not play music and dance like that (imitates *ḏikr*).'
> S.: Why is that *bid'a*?
> 'It's *bid'a* because of music and amusement in the mosque. In the mosque one should pray and express respect. There is nothing wrong with music but its place is not in the mosque. The problem is in the context, and the way the celebration is expressed.'[293]

To accept music in a profane context but to exclude it on a religious occasion is emblematic of the way modernist and reformist critics conceive the boundaries that mark religion and religious habitus. The rationalist concept of piety and the sacred are embedded in a theory of the self that is key to the reformist reading of Islam and, as we shall see, the modernist reading of society.

## *2.4. Bodies and selves*

To understand the relationship of boundaries and the self we have to briefly return to the beginning of this chapter and listen closely to what 'Abd ar-Raḥīm has to tell us, for he has two important points to offer:

> S.: Can't amusement and religion coexist?
> 'No, because God didn't give us two hearts so that I could have amusement (*lahw*) in one and invocation of God (*ḏikr*) in the other. Either it's amusement and pastime, or it's invocation and sunna.
> [...]
> Look at these people! (Pointing again to Sufis in an ecstatic state of *ḏikr*) Are these

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[292]See Hirschkind, Charles, 'The ethics of listening: cassette-sermon audition in contemporary Egypt', *American Ethnologist* 28 (August 2001), 3, pp. 623-649; Shehadi, Fadlou, *Philosophies of Music in Medieval Islam*. Leiden: Brill, 1995.

[293]Interview with Aḥmad, taxi driver, Cairo, 12 October 2002.

Muslims?'[294]

In other words: the human mind can only contain one emotional state at a time, and because Sufis dance ecstatically in a *ḏikr* it is questionable whether they deserve to be called Muslims. This first statement about humans not having two hearts implies a philosophy of the self based on a rigid differentiation between states of mind, hierarchically ordered and mutually exclusive, the lower always stronger than the higher. According to this theory, a devoted state of mind is invalidated through the presence of the least trace of amusement, sexual desire, or anything else:

> 'Ordinary life can be half-and-half but religion has to be 100% otherwise it's compromised. There is no half-and-half in religion.'
> S.: But isn't 50 or 70% religion better than 0%?
> 'No, 50% adds up to the same as 0%, it has to be 100%.'[295]

This is a philosophy of the mind that completely denies the possibility of ambivalence in the field of piety. It radically differs from the concept of the self that is central to the festive habitus of mawlids and affirms the complex nature of the mind consisting of two competing forces: the lower soul (*nafs*), locus of the animal and sexual instincts, and the spirit (*rūḥ*) aspiring towards God.[296] While the goal of the Sufi is to overcome the *nafs* and to completely follow the *rūḥ*, it is acknowledged that only few ever progress so far on the mystic path as to actually reach this goal. The lower soul is always present, an ambiguous force that can be destructive but which can also be employed in the first steps of the mystic path through the concept of love. While the concept of the self based on a competitive coexistence of *nafs* and *rūḥ* provides plenty of room for ambivalence, the concept of the self presented by ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm implies the mutual exclusion of the two.

The self, in this understanding, must be a disciplined and purified one. But unlike the Sufi self trying to gradually overcome the *nafs* entirely, the disciplined self needs only to be genuinely purified in the context of religion. Going to a football match is considered a different set of (also legitimate) parameters altogether. While radical Salafis tend to be highly sceptical about anything with the slightest potential to taint the disciplined religious self,[297] this view implies a highly ascetic lifestyle and is not very widespread. Young middle-class Egyptians who adapt elements of Salafi religiosity and view mawlids critically do not typically give up amusements and fun (although they may at least try to give up *munkarāt* such as alcohol and marihuana). Instead they draw clear lines between religious and profane fields of life. Religion, in this understanding, may and should enter daily life in the form of moral discipline, but its original, sacred context of interpretation has to remain pure and distinct. For this reason, the modernist pious self requires clear and steady boundaries to mark the different fields of life and the states of mind associated with them. Relativising the boundaries implies relativising discipline of the self.

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[294]Interview with ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm, Cairo, 20 August 2002. For full text see pp. 80-81.

[295]Interview with Ṣalāḥ, white-collar employee in a petroleum company, Cairo, 10 January 2003.

[296]Widespread in the classical Islamic tradition, this theory is not restricted to Sufism. See Werbner/Basu, 'The Embodiment of Charisma', p. 6; Netton, I.R., "Nafs", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., Leiden: Brill, vol. 7, pp. 880-884.

[297]This tendency is clear, for example, among the women whose religious practice is the focus of Saba Mahmood's study on the Salafi piety movement. See Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

This is where ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm's second statement, concerning the appearance and inner state of Sufis doing *ḏikr*, enters the picture. Discipline of the self and the attempt to keep it untainted, is, in practice, a process of habitualising virtues. Following Saba Mahmood's argumentation concerning the Salafi piety movement in Egypt (see above p. 33), habitus in this ethical sense means acquiring states of mind through a discipline of the body.[298] This understanding is different from the Sufi concept of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* that provides an explanation of and legitimation for the complex and contradictory character of the mawlid. In the Sufi view also a virtuous state of the self is acquired through pious acts, strongly expressed in the concept of *sulūk*, which literally means manners or conduct but in mystical context denotes the progress made on the mystic path, and the practices, exercises and meditations that are necessary for it.[299] But while *sulūk* is necessary to reach a mystical state, it remains largely invisible, making it impossible to conclude inner states (*bāṭin*) from appearances (*ẓāhir*). A person displaying no signs of the exoteric education and pious behaviour of an *ʿālim* (religious scholar) may nevertheless be a true *ʿārif bi-llāh*, a mystic with immediate knowledge of God.

The difference lies, thus, not in the habitualisation of virtues but in their subsequent expression in habitus. The reformist concept of habitus states that because inner states are learned through bodily discipline, outer appearances do in fact allow conclusions to inner states. This is a notion most strongly present among the Salafi movement, but Mahmood shows that people who do not share the Salafi emphasis on the habitualisation of virtues and rather highlight the importance of pious itention (*nīya*), may nevertheless maintain that a pious status, once acquired, will be embodied in habitus.[300] This view implies that while a virtuous habitus cannot be taken as a proof of virtue, the lack of virtuous habitus can be taken as a proof of vice. Different though they are, these two readings of piety and habitus share the conviction that it is possible to judge inner states (especially vices) from appearances, or even that the two are identical. Thus the fact that some Sufis do not pray allowed one of the men in the service taxi (see chapter one) to claim that they do not truly believe in God.[301] And the fact that the Sufis move in a way that is contrary to ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm's concept of religious habitus allows him to doubt whether they, in the depths of their selves, are Muslims at all.

Following this logic, mawlids are directly opposed to the reformist and modernist discipline of the self because their habitus is taken to express and, possibly, produce a

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[298] *Ibid.*, pp. 137-139.

[299] See, e.g., al-Qaṣabī al-Ḥusaynī al-Ḥalwatī, as-Sayyid Ḥasan Abū Ḥāmid, *al-Ǧawāhir al-makkīya*, Ṭanṭā: aṭ-Ṭarīqa al-Qaṣabīya, undated [ca. 2000], pp. 85-108.

[300] So in an interview by Saba Mahmood with women in a Cairene middle-class social club, who found the emphasis of the piety movement on performance of piety misguided. They agreed that piety would be expressed in pious habitus, but argued that the direction is from internal states to exterior expressions, and not the other way around: 'performative behaviour may signify a pious self but does not necessarily form it'. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, p. 147.

[301] While most Sufis do pray regularly, and none of them would ever question that it is a Muslim's obligation to pray, it does stand out that a number of active, devoted Sufis do not regularly observe this ritual obligation. This is once again related to the Sufi theory of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*: Persons sufficiently far along the mystic path may not need to pray. Although nobody would actually claim to have reached such an advantaged stage him or herself, this discourse does allow the relativisation of the absolute status of ritual prayer as a marker of piety.

state of the self that is counter to and a threat to the discipline of piety. But this issue would not trouble so many people if it weren't for the crucial role given to the discipline of the self in the modernist view of society. The state of mind of citizens is not a private matter, and neither is it a secret between the believer and God. It is, rather, taken to be key to the development of the nation. This issue leads us to a fourth and final line of critical argumentation that circles around the issue of backwardness.

## 3. ...And backward

The way mawlids are celebrated is highly problematic not only for the discourse of the religious self but also for that of modern society. What makes mawlids such a grave issue for the people whose voices we have heard above is that in their view these festivities are harmful to society, the nation, and religion as a whole. This is a line of argumentation that extends far beyond the issue of religion and piety, connected as it is to the issues of rationality, order, progress, and the image of Egypt as a developed nation. These discourses are interconnected and interdependent. Certainly there are Salafis who focus only on the issue of the religious self, just as there are secularists who only worry about the order of modern society. But the mainstream critical perception of mawlids is based on the important commonplace that progressive modernity and authentic religion are interdependent, even identical. In the eyes of these critics, mawlids are opposed to the order of modern society for the same reason that makes them opposed to the religious self: they break boundaries that are taken to be a universal and necessary condition for piety *and* modernity:

> 'Mawlids have nothing to do with Islam: they have been attached to Islam but do not belong to it. And the mentality of the people is an expression of backwardness and it has a negative effect on society. [...] There are things that might be irrational for society, and bad for religion separately, but mawlids certainly are both.'[302]
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> 'What is this? I mean what is this?! It's a state of mind, yeah, but what's the meaning? [...] These are all backward people (*mutaḫallifīn*), there is not one intellectual (*muṯaqqaf*) among them, nor anyone with education (*mutaʿallim*), nor anyone on a high level! [...] I don't believe in this. This is against the *šarīʿa*, this is against religion, and against reason, and against logic!'[303]
>
> 'The word Sufism has become associated with the image of mawlids, with all their negative aspects such as laziness and idleness, begging and dervishdom, colourful turbans, flags and processions, which all are negative issues that have led us to our present state. [...] Presenting the people with this false and obscure image of Sufism is intended,[304] in order to keep them in their present state, while the West is taking takes vast leaps towards knowledge and progress.'[305]

What stands out in these critical views is how religious authenticity, social progress, and

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[302]Interview with Ṣalāḥ, Cairo, 10 January 2003.

[303]Ṣalāḥ, commenting on the procession of the mawlid of as-Sayyida Sakīna, Cairo, 23 July 2003.

[304]The text does not make clear by whom. The unspecified reference to a diffuse enemy that may be identified with Israel or the West, but also with the authoritarian government or other domestic political opponents, is a common argumentative figure in Egyptian political discourses.

[305]Dr. Muhammad Mihannā in a public lecture quoted by *al-Wafd*, 31.1.1998: 'Imād al-Ġazālī, 'Fī nadwa bi-maktabat al-Qāhira al-kubrā: at-taṣawwuf ǧawhar al-islām wa-lā ʿalāqa lahū bi-l-ḫuzʿabalāt wa-mawālid al-awliyā'', p. 8.

an educated and disciplined habitus are taken to be identical. Idleness, an attitude, is treated as belonging to the same class of things as flags, a material element of festivity. Such equations are characteristic to this line of critical argumentation which, to sum up, goes as follows:

–Mawlids are based on ignorance and superstitions. They are a way to exploit simple people and keep them distracted from their true problems.

–Mawlids represent a form of disorder that subverts the order of religion and modern society.

–Mawlids are irrational and therefore opposed to both religion and modernity.

–Mawlids are an expression and cause of backwardness.

At first glance, these arguments seem somewhat incoherent. How exactly do flags hold back the development of the nation? How can mawlids be both a distraction and subversion? But people who make such arguments present them as logical and convincing, and often view them as self-evident. Hence there must be some, even if weak, underlying logic to them, and it is this underlying logic that I attempt to reconstruct in the following pages.

## *3.1. Opium for the people*[306]

In January 1998, the leftist weekly *al-Ahālī* published an article sharply criticising the mawlid of as-Sayyida Zaynab:

> 'At the mawlid of as-Sayyida: rituals, crimes and superstitions. The oppressed flee to the Mother of the Weak (Umm al-ʿAwāǧiz) and madmen (*maǧāḏīb*) corrupt the intellects of the future generations.'[307]

In the article, the mawlid is described as a site of swindle, exploitation and irrationality: Poor farmers undertake the pilgrimage in the hope of healing, spending their little money on *nuḏūr*. Clever swindlers squat on state property claiming visions and establish mawlids to exploit the poor who believe their absurd claims. Children listen to sheikhs telling miracle stories that in reality are nothing but superstitions that corrupt the minds of the youth. Ignorant parents bring their daughters to be circumcised.[308] The author concludes

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[306]The description of religion as 'opium for the people' is usually attributed to Marx who, in fact, spoke of religion as 'opium *of* the people', arguing that religion was not enforced upon the people but produced by them within specific relations of production: 'Das *religiöse* Elend ist in einem der *Ausdruck* des wirklichen Elends und in einem die *Protestation* gegen das wirkliche Elend. Die Religion ist der Seufzer der bedrängten Kreatur, das Gemüth einer herzlosen Welt, wie sie der Geist geistloser Zustände ist. Sie ist das *Opium* des Volks.' (emphases in original) Marx, Karl, 'Zur Kritik der Hegel'schen Rechts-Philosophie: Einleitung', in Karl Marx / Friedrich Engels, *Gesamtausgabe (MEGA), Erste Abteilung: Werke, Artikel, Entwürfe, vol. 2: Karl Marx: Werke, Artikel, Entwürfe März 1843 bis August 1844*, Berlin: Dietz, 1982, pp. 170-183, here p. 171. The reason I stick to the more common formulation 'opium *for* the people' is that while it may not be a correct reading of Marx, it very precisely catches the spirit of one part of the criticism of popular festive traditions.

[307]*al-Ahālī*, 28.1.1998: Rāndā Samīr, 'Fī mawlid as-Sayyida: ṭuqūs wa-ǧarā'im wa-ḫurāfāt', p. 12.

[308]The circumcision booths were prohibited in 1996, so it appears that the author had seen them at the last minute (Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, p. 38). Mostly boys were circumcised at the booths, and their prohibition has not had significant influence on the circumcision of girls, a practice that remains very common in Egypt. See El-Gibaly, Omaima / Barbara Ibrahim / Barbara

that mawlids are based on a kind of religiosity that makes these festivities carriers of dangerous traditions while preventing their abolition. The mawlid is, in other words, a medium of false consciousness. This is a view by no means restricted to the leftist secular circles that produce and read *al-Ahālī*. Let us recall the Salafi Dr. Muḫtār al-Mahdī arguing that mawlids were invented by the Fatimids who 'distracted and appeased the people from their oppressive rule, so that people wouldn't oppose their politics.'[309]

Distraction is a key concept in this argument: mawlids keep people busy with anything except actually solving their problems. This argument is developed further by Muḥammad, a school inspector who sees mawlids as an instrument of domination consciously employed by colonial rule:

> 'When the French arrived in Ṭanṭā they were very happy about what they saw. The people didn't care about liberating themselves. The mawlid kept them occupied in place of colonialism. The French found this an excellent way to distract the people from reality in service of colonialism. The mawlid is escapism from reality, a bit like weddings or football matches are today. The origin of the great mawlids is in colonialism: give people something to keep them from thinking. When Napoleon saw the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī he hoped all Egypt would be like that. The educated and the intellectuals only go to the mawlid for a day or so, I may go to the mawlid, but for me it's not more than fun, like when a tourist goes to the pyramids. It has no scientific interest. Many intellectuals refuse mawlids because they are not real popular folklore but a colonialist idea. There is no objection to a day of amusement, but that is not [authentic] folklore. The idea of mawlids is a colonialist idea. It's an instrument of domination. For example, you can rule someone with what he loves, like sex and money, and keep him backward and passive, or keep people wearing party hats, playing, dancing, and believing in *baraka.* In my childhood people held a strong belief in the miracles of [the local saint] Sīdī al-Muršidī, but such beliefs are against scientific thought. And they serve colonialism. The sheikh moves to the centre of the people's thinking, and the colonialist to the margin.'[310]

Muhammad's account expresses a mixture of appreciation for festivities – notably mawlids, weddings, and football[311] – combined with a suspicion of festive time: although people certainly need and deserve some fun, it is ultimately a destructive and distracting factor in society. The belief in the assistance of saints makes people helpless and passive, unable to take their destiny into their own hands, and the festive atmosphere of mawlids distracts people from their true problems. Instead of working, people trust in the power of saints and let themselves go in the trance of Sufi *ḏikr* and the unproductive idleness of the *ḫidmas*. Instead of changing oppressive reality they escape into the superstitions and colourful illusions of the festival.

Mawlids, in this view, are nothing more than opium for the people, a medium of escapism and submission as opposed to the activist, progressive self: They have been created by the Shiite Fatimid rulers to lead Muslims astray, exploited by Mamluk Sultans

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S. Mensch / Wesley H. Clark, 'The decline of female circumcision in Egypt: evidence and interpretation' *Social Science & Medicine* 54 (2002), pp. 205-220.

[309]Interview with Dr. Muḫtār al-Mahdī, Cairo, 17 December 2002.

[310]Interview with Muḥammad, school inspector of philosophy, Minyat al-Muršid, 21 February 2002.

[311]Muḥammad used to be a passionate football player in his youth, and this interview took place in a football café he frequents.

to keep the people under their yoke,[312] they have opened the door to colonialist occupation and exploitation of Egypt,[313] and they serve to sustain an authoritarian regime.[314]

A look at the history of Egypt, however, may significantly relativise this picture of passive fatalism. Ṭanṭā was, in fact, the site of a major uprising against the French occupation in 1798, and protecting the shrine of as-Sayyid al-Badawī appears to have played a strong mobilising role in the events. Afterwards, Napoleon prohibited the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī fearing that it might lead to further uprisings. British colonial authorities prohibited the mawlid for similar reasons in 1915, following the declaration of Egypt as a British protectorate.[315]

But the task of this study is not to judge the historical accuracy of the arguments that are presented in the debates. What I am interested in are the discursive commonplaces they share. In this respect, such argumentation would appear fairly sound, if it were not frequently accompanied by another argument pointing in the opposite direction.

## *3.2. Chaos*

Noisy and crowded as they are, mawlids appear as the ultimate symbol of chaos, the opposite of any reasonable form of order. So for example in an article that appeared in the semi-official newspaper *al-Ahrām*, criticising the state of Ramses Square, which faces the main railway station and, at the time the article was written, housed an important bus station:

> 'Only the swings and amusements were missing from Ramses Square to convince all of us that what is going on here is nothing more than a popular mawlid that has moved with all its customs, appearances and practices from the margins of the Egyptian countryside and entered the heart of Cairo, directly in the middle of the crowd of two million passengers who arrive daily to Bāb al-Ḥadīd Square. [...] If you head to the right along the wall in the direction of as-Sabtīya Street you will find the heart and centre of the mawlid

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[312]This topic is very common in historical studies on the Ayyubid and Mamluk eras. See, e.g., Ǧūršīd, Fārūq, *al-Maǧḏūb: al-ʿāqil al-maǧnūn wa-dirāsāt uḫrā* (Maktabat ad-dirāsāt aš-šaʿbīya; 4), Cairo: al-Hay'a al-miṣrīya al-ʿāmma li-l-kitāb, 1996; al-Ǧaʿīdī, Šalabī Muḥammad, *Ṭabaqat al-ʿāmma fī Miṣr fī l-ʿaṣr al-ayyūbī 567-648 H / 1171-1250 M*, (Tārīḫ al-miṣrīyīn; 212), Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣrīya al-ʿĀmma li-l-kitāb, 2003, p. 186; and in an outstandingly radical formulation, Manṣūr, Aḥmad Ṣubḥī, *al-ʿAqā'id ad-dīnīya fī Miṣr al-mamlūkīya bayn al-islām wa-t-taṣawwuf* (Tārīḫ al-miṣrīyīn; 186), Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣrīya al-ʿĀmma li-l-kitāb, 2000; Idem, *at-Taṣawwuf wa-l-ḥayāt ad-dīnīya fī Miṣr al-mamlūkīya 648-921 H / 1250 - 1519 M*, 3 vols., Cairo: Markaz al-maḥrūsa, 2002. The story of the latter book shows that while a criticism of Sufi rituals and festive traditions is commonplace in modernist discourse, an all-encompassing criticism of Sufism is less likely to find acceptance. *At-Taṣawwuf wa-l-ḥayāt ad-dīnīya* is based on the author's PhD thesis that was presented to al-Azhar in 1980 and caused a major scandal that eventually lead to his dismissal from al-Azhar. The author, who takes an outsider position opposed to Sufism and Salafīya alike (he was sentenced to a short prison term in 1987 on the ground of questioning the validity of the Sunna), later worked at the Ibn Khaldun Center and emigrated during its temporary suppression by the state. See the author's introduction to Manṣūr, *Taṣawwuf wa-l-ḥayāt ad-dīnīya*; Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'islam*, pp. 320-324; interview with a bookseller who had Manṣūr's book on stock, Cairo, August 2003.

[313]*al-Wafd*, 31.1.1998; *Ra'y aš-Šabāb*, 1.10.2004.

[314]*al-Muṣawwar*, 27.6.2003; *ad-Dustūr*, 25.6.1997: Samīr ʿUmar, 'aṣ-Ṣūfīya ʿallamat 6 malāyīn miṣrī al-ḥuḍūʿ wa-n-nifāq', p. 4.

[315]Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, pp. 149-151, 203.

where the scenes overlap. To the right, juice vendors struggle for space with cigarette and food vendors. On the pavement on the opposite side of the street, vendors of lottery tickets and shoe-shiners stand in a row, and between them minibuses that have lost their way drive among hundreds of people, all melting away into the scene of incredible chaos on the background of a panorama of hassle and a cacophony of voices: horns of the cars and calls of the minibus drivers, passing over the excitement of the gangsters who demand protection money for every spot of pavement and cart [...]'[316]

In this account, the image of the mawlid stands for deep countryside, disorder, unorganised street trade, organised crime, hassle and trouble: the opposite of how a public square in the capital ought to look: beautiful, clean, quiet, ordered, under control of the law, and with trade restricted to shops. Associating mawlids with chaos is a normative statement with far-reaching implications. The image of a modern city is taken to be a visible matrix of order that is necessary for modern society to function.[317] Following this logic, describing mawlids as chaotic implies that uncontrolled expressions of emotion and cheerful chaos are, through their opposition to discipline and order, opposed to the order of society at large.

This feeling of mawlid chaos threatening the order of the modern city is pointedly expressed in the way middle-class urban citizens view the pilgrims who stay in tents and on carpets on the street. They find it very difficult to understand why these people voluntarily leave their homes to stay in a tent or even on the street for up to a week. While some people simply find it a bit strange, or may actually be proud that their hometown is so important to these people, others strongly condemn such behaviour:

'Why do you come to do research at the mawlid?'
S: 'I study mawlids as a part of Egyptian culture...'
'It's not culture, it's backwardness. Would you come with a tent and all your kids and everything like that? It's backwardness to leave one's home and stay in a tent.'[318]
'What do you think about these beliefs?' (pointing at Sufi *ḫidma* tents on the other side of the street)
S: Well, what do you think?
'I find they are wrong (*ġalaṭ*). Islam didn't tell us to do that.'
S: What exactly is wrong about it?
'That the people sit in tents on the streets like that.'
S: But the Prophet and the Arabs also lived in tents.
'Yes, but that was because in that time they had no other means of housing. Now people can stay in houses, but instead they sleep in the streets and tents. And also rich people who could afford better.'
S: But what's wrong with that?
'The sanitary conditions, and there are women sleeping in the streets. (discusses the problem of sanitary conditions in more detail) I guess you Christians don't have things like that.'
S: Actually we do, like the mawlid of St. George in Daqahlīya, and in Europe, too.
'Yes? (surprised) Anyway, I think that's wrong: I do *ziyāra* to the shrine, that's alright, but not like this.'[319]

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[316] *al-Ahrām*, 20.7.1999: 'Baʿd an iḫtalaṭ al-ḥābil bi-n-nābil: Fawḍā fī Maydān Ramsīs'.

[317] See Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, pp. 92-94.

[318] State security officer questioning me during the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2002.

[319] Interview with a woman running a fish restaurant, mawlid of Sīdī al-Mursī Abū l-ʿAbbās, Alexandria, 24 July 2003.

It is, of course, not the tents themselves that are problematic. What troubles these middle-class urbanites is what they stand for: the redefinition of urban space at the mawlid, the fact that the urban middle classes lose their hegemony over public space to villagers and dervishes who do not respect the standards of hygiene and modesty that these urban citizens are committed to. Sleeping in a tent in the middle of the city threatens the image and order of the modern city that, as the story of Ramses Square very well shows, is taken to be identical with modern society. It is worth noting that although large mawlids are mostly urban affairs, the author of the *Ahrām* article makes the assumption of mawlids being essentially rural, the village and the mawlid both standing as symbols of backwardness, filth and chaos.[320]

But sleeping in a tent is not only perceived as backward, unhygienic and uncivilised. The criteria of being a good, clean, well-educated modern citizen and a good Muslim are so much one that sleeping in the street and leaving one's work and family is considered to be against religion as well:

> 'It's wrong that people leave their home, family, work, women and children and go to the mawlid to do *ḏikr* and sleep on the street. According to a *ḥadīṯ* of the Prophet, blessings be upon him, there are only three legitimate reasons for travel: *ḥaǧǧ*, work, and *ǧihād*.'[321]

I tried to ask the student who expressed this opinion whether this also applies to wealthy people who go for a holiday on the Mediterranean coast, but he did not see my point. People who criticise the pilgrims' behaviour do not place it parallel to the holidays of the upper classes who leave behind their home and work in order to spend time and be unproductive on the beach.

There is a sound logic to this: going to the beach is well within the boundaries of public space and class distinctions as they are defined by the hegemonic classes of society. The pilgrims subvert these boundaries. Not only do they express a form of ecstatic religiosity that contradicts the ideal of rationalist, constrained piety that has been cultivated by reformist and modernist movements, but they are also representatives of a civic order that undermines the ideal of the modern citizen who, in the dominant imagery, is expected to live in a modern city characterised by functional differentiation, clear boundaries, and a temporal, spatial and bodily discipline imposed by moral education and public planning.[322] For such an understanding of social order the temporary suspension of boundaries at mawlids, as expressed, for example, by pilgrims camping in the streets, becomes a serious and real threat to the discipline of the self and the visible order of society that are needed to raise and maintain a nation that is – with varying emphases – modern, civilised, and religious.

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[320]For the conflicts that arise through different understandings and uses of open/public space, see also Kaviraj, 'Filth and the Public Sphere'.

[321]In this account it is seen as problematic that people leave their families, while in the account of the state security officer cited above the fact that people take their families with them appeared as problematic. In either case the husbands/fathers are seen to neglect their family responsibilities. Interview with Sayyid, student from the district of ad-Darb al-Aḥmar, mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 29 May 2003.

[322]Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*; Starrett, 'The hexis of interpretation', Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform*, pp. 134-168

## *3.3. Progress, rationality and the habitus of the modern Muslim*

These two lines of argumentation – false consciousness and chaos – do not quite seem to fit together. First we are told that mawlids are wrong because they maintain oppressive hierarchies, and then we hear that mawlids are wrong because of their anti-hegemonic tendency concerning the shape and use of urban space. Mawlids appear as both a reason for the persistence of poverty and oppression, and a form of subversion and chaos threatening the order of society. It seems that the people who celebrate mawlids just can't get it right for critics of the festivities. If their celebration maintains conservative values, it is backward and un-Islamic. If it subverts them, it is also backward and un-Islamic. This is not a true dilemma, though: these two arguments only contradict each other on the surface. The trouble with mawlids is not their maintaining or subverting order but the way they do it.

To untangle this complex of arguments let us, one final time, return to ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm's account. When he says that the behaviour of people at mawlids is incompatible with the habitus of 'the religious, rational, civilised human' he, in fact, offers us a simple and easy formula for a modernist and reformist reading of Islam: Islam = worship of God + a constrained bodily disposition + a rational (as opposed to ecstatic) state of mind + an ethic of dignity and work. This formula leaves no space for ambivalence: everything has its place in a given order, and what breaks the boundaries of this order is not only un-Islamic, but also uncivilised and irrational. One can thus use exactly the same quasi-logical formula to produce modernity in its twentieth century Egyptian reading: to be modern is to embody a constrained disposition expressing a rational state of mind, an ethic of work and the worship of God. (There are some secularists who might argue that the worship of God is not a necessary component of modernity, but in Egypt such views are mainly confined to academic leftist circles.) What makes this formula of Islam/modernity highly interesting is that following this logic, mawlids are not opposed to Islam and modernity because they are a *bidʿa* and backward. On the contrary, mawlids only become unauthentic and irrational after they become opposed to the habitus and discipline of a modern Muslim.

Before proceeding with this key point, however, a few clarifying words about the relationship of religion and the secular nation-state in Egypt are necessary. This relationship cannot be sufficiently grasped by the opposition of Islamism and secularism. The discourse of nationalism and development that is presented by actors with varying positions toward the state[323] and shared by most of the political spectrum is usually neither Islamist nor secularist, while it is Islamic and secular in varying (and at times contradictory) combinations. While the term 'secularism' has become identified with a point of view that denies a public role for religion – and thus an often pejorative term to which only few Egyptians subscribe – Egypt as a state and Egyptian modernity in its hegemonic readings are secular, however in a different sense. Being secular in this context

[323]The issue of proximity to or distance from the authoritarian government is not clear at all. Often people who count themselves as the opposition are highly dependent on the state, notably through public sector jobs. At the same time, people who carry out government policies may at the same time follow their own agendas that may significantly differ from those of the government.

does not mean the exclusion of religion from the public but rather giving religion a specific meaning and functionality.[324] While the exact place and weight of religion in the definition of the nation-state is a subject of controversy, there is wide consensus that religion has a place in it. The key point here is that religion is conceived of within the frame of the nation-state and that the nation-state is defined, in varying degrees, through its religion(s).[325] The nation must stand on the foundation of the ethical principles laid down by religion, and religion must be capable of being put in the service of the nation's development. Thus framed, religion becomes a functional part of the secular nationalist project, which, as we shall see in the following, has significant consequences for the way 'true' religion is defined.

Walter Armbrust argues that this attempt to unite progress and authenticity is a characteristic feature of the modernist project in Egypt:

> 'The Egyptian modernist, as portrayed by the state and many intellectuals, is a conservative radical. [...] Egyptian modernism allows for Europe as a cultural catalyst, but insists on continuity between present and past: No rejection of tradition, and therefore none of the uncomfortable dislocation of European Modernism.'[326]

In this image, there is no liberal-secularist distinction between the fields of reason and faith, nor is there any apparent break between tradition and modernity such as that which has been characteristic of the liberal modernist project elsewhere. This is a fragile union, however, and further below I illustrate that the relationship between reason and faith and the union of authenticity and progress are by no means unproblematic. To understand how this construction of modernity works, we need to take a closer look at two of its constituents, rationality and progress,[327] and ask why exactly mawlids, in the view of Egyptian modernists and reformists, are opposed to them.

Rationality became a key issue in Egypt in the late 19th century and has remained so since. It extends to all spheres of life: not only the state of mind of modern citizens and the organisation of society, but also their religion is expected to be rational. Today it is a repeated claim in both intellectual and popular discourses that Islam is a rational religion, based on the call to think and understand (let us recall the point of the Revelation being opened with 'Read!' – see above p. 95), and fully in accordance with reason and science. Simultaneously, the issue of emotional inspiration is viewed with great scepticism. In this tone, Muḥammad al-Ġazālī (1917-1996), an intellectual close to the Muslim Brotherhood but whose influence by far exceeds Islamist circles, describes how an influential sheikh told him about hearing a mystic in India play the flute so beautifully that it brought him to tears. Al-Ġazālī is sceptical: was the mystic a Muslim, a Christian or even a Hindu? What was his message? For whose sake was the sheikh actually moved to tears?

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[324]See Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, pp. 190 f.

[325]Abu-Lughod, Lila, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005, p. 190.

[326]Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism*, p. 191.

[327]I do not share the view that modernity and modernism are necessarily bound to issues such as democracy, human rights and individual freedom. While these issues definitely do depend on modernity, modernity does not depend on them, as we can see in the example of the Soviet Union, a state that was strongly committed to modernity and progress while making only lip service to democracy and openly denying the existence of universal individual human rights.

> 'Although I may be emotionally harsh, I nevertheless prefer rational proof to the soft and touching voice of the *mizmār*! And I reject the acceptance of a superstitious creed that runs along with a heart-moving voice. Passionate spiritual love leads to deceitful illusion just like passionate sexual love leads to a forbidden mistress. It is necessary to respect the voice of reason first and last, this is what we have learned from our mighty book (i.e. the Qur'ān).'[328]

This story shows how strongly moments of uncontrolled, spontaneous emotion and inspiration are felt to be a threat to the religious truth which, in this view, can only be found through rational interpretation of the scripture. It reminds us of the criticism of *ḏikr* and music, and the fragile nature of the sacred in its intellectualised reading: ambivalence and emotional inspiration threaten the carefully constructed image of religion as rational interpretation of the Divine truth because they do not allow the world to be defined along clear, rationalised boundaries.

To understand why this should be a threat to reason, we must realise that reason in the sense used by al-Ġazālī is actually a rather dogmatic construct. Rationality in this context does not mean that all values of society are subject to rational critique, nor does it mean the rational choice of strategies to reach a known goal. Rationalism, in its contemporary Egyptian sense, is a habitus and mode of thinking based on the presentation of society and its values in the form of a coherent system of laws, regularities and deductive values. Critical debate of the axioms behind this system, most importantly the primacy of the nation, the prospect of progress, and the fundamental truth of religion, could destabilise the claim that these political and religious beliefs are entirely rational. Consequently, such debate is largely taboo. Both a mystical view stressing the moment of inspiration and a liberal secularist model of different fields of reason and faith could undermine the apparent rationality of the nation and its creed, which is why they are both problematic for the public definition of religion and modernity in Egypt.

Much of the suggestive power of 'reason' is due to its promise of progress. Progress, the idea of a linear development of society towards a better future, is central to every modernist project.[329] Unlike in earlier times when a slow decline was taken to be the natural state of a world waiting for judgement day,[330] Egyptians since the late 19th century have been expecting their society to constantly improve, and have expressed their discontent whenever they have felt that it does not. Because religion, in mainstream modernist discourse, serves a function in the path of the nation's progress, it is judged according to its ability to serve this task.[331] The reform of religion, inspired by an

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[328]al-Ġazālī, Muḥammad, *Dustūr al-waḥda aṯ-ṯaqāfīya bayn al-muslimīn*, Cairo: Dār aš-Šurūq, 1997.

[329]Progress can be defined in different ways. Islamic modernists often have a teleological concept of progress: not an indeterministic process of increasing complexity and improvement, but the movement from a present state of decline towards an ideal, perfect order of the world. The teleological concept of progress is not specific to Islamic modernism, however. Also the Marxist concept of progress, to name just one example, is strongly teleological.

[330]Winter, Michael, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt: Studies in the Writings of 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha'rānī*, New Brunswick etc.: Transaction Books, 1982, p. 74.

[331]This has been pointed out by Lila Abu-Lughod who argues that religion, after its public marginalisation in the Nasserist period, 'has become again an ideological hub of the public sphere, but with a certain form of the nation-state so entrenched and established that "the nation", and what is good for the nation, now forms the only legitimate ground for debates about religion'.

idealised past, is conflated with the development of society, inspired by a progressive utopia. The same happens to their opposites, false innovations and backwardness that become connected to each other through labels like 'ignorance' and 'superstition'.[332]

This synthesis of religion and modernity, authenticity and progress is a fragile construction and specific understandings of religion and modernity are necessary to uphold it. Modernity in its hegemonic Egyptian reading leaves no space for the relativity and disorientation of postmodernism. There *must* be a grand narrative. The Egyptian modernist narrative at the turn of the millennium, in rough outline, is one of nationalism, progressive development in harmony with authentic heritage, and religious and moral superiority, while the different parts of this narrative may be emphasised to different degrees.[333] In this narrative, everything is expected to have a purpose, to follow the same principles, to be part of the same system of the nation. Religion must be capable of being made part of this narrative of development: it has to be representable as a system of deductive values, an objectified codex of principles. Just as there is no space for the post-modern in Egyptian modernity, there is no space for the ambivalence of ecstatic states and utopian festivities in the hegemonic reading of religion.

To keep this discourse of modern society and religion from disintegrating, it has to be based on a perception of society itself based on universal boundaries that define the place and time of different fields of life and allow their treatment as discrete elements of a functional system. Such perception is, of course, never fully coherent, nor is it ever even nearly realised in practice. It is, nonetheless, powerful through the promise of progress it delivers and through its dissemination via state administration, school education, and public media. It is this common sense of how society is and should be structured that makes mawlids appear transgressing and reactionary in the same instance.

The perception of society as a rationalised system, and the emphasis on sober, constrained and rational habitus of the religious self are two sides of a coin. Both are based on the assumption of universal boundaries. To understand the far-reaching consequences of this assumption let us make a short excursion to Mikhail Bakhtin's interpretation of the European enlightenment: Bakhtin argues that enlightenment went hand in hand with the refusal of the ambivalence and laughter that had characterised the renaissance:

> 'In the new official culture there prevails a tendency toward the stability and completion of being, toward one single meaning, one tone of seriousness. The ambivalence of the grotesque can no longer be admitted.'[334]

The world of enlightenment, in Bakhtin's reading, is a coherent system that can only be understood by sober, rational meditation. The 17th-century enlightened critic has no taste

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Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood*, p. 190.

[332]This why also the radical Islamist utopia of return to the ideal society of the golden age of the Prophet is, although narrated into the past, in fact a progressive one, for it shall be reached in the future. Tomorrow will be better than today. Add to this that this belief in the progressive perfection of religion is accompanied by a strong faith in technological progress. It is not a coincidence that many of the staunchest adherents of the Islamist utopia have been trained in the sciences, medicine and engineering and have great trust in the power of human reason in systematically solving practical problems that lay ahead on the path to progress.

[333]See Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood.*

[334]Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 101.

for the grotesque because he 'is used to conceive being as something finished, stable, completed, clear, and firm. He draws a dividing line between all bodies and objects.' According to Bakhtin, this tradition continued until his time, and the ambivalent laughter of Rabelais remained incomprehensible to a 20th-century historian in whose perception 'truth can speak only in solemn tones. Neither does he perceive ambivalence.'[335]

Drawing sharp dividing lines between objects and bodies implies a shift in the relationship to ambivalence that is expressed in the mawlid by the emotions of love and joy, ecstatic bodies, multiple meanings of festivity, contingent use of festive space, and utopian festive time. In a world consisting of discrete elements, truth must speak in solemn tones, bodies have to be disciplined, everything has to have a clear meaning, space must be organised according to an abstract matrix of order, and time is uniform and does not allow for temporary utopias. What makes a mawlid so scandalous for a devout modernist is the collision of highly different understandings of space, time, the body and the self: contingent space versus spatial differentiation, temporary utopia versus linear progress, and ambiguity versus universal boundaries. What appears as an aura of sanctity over a festivity uniting all of human life in the overlapping circles of a mawlid becomes, in the modernist world view, a collection of profane, backward and ridiculous practices that taint the purity of the sacred sphere, undermine the order of the modern city, and divert the consciousness of the people.

Of course it would be mistaken to draw a direct parallel between European enlightenment and Egyptian modernity. Firstly, the world views, actors, and general historical contexts of 17th-century Europe and 20th-century Egypt were different in so many significant ways that a direct comparison would be absurd. Secondly and more specifically, the enlightened perception of the world was, relatively seen, a static one in which Utopia was imagined as a place rather than a time. The secular view of history as progress, as dynamic improvement of human society, did emerge with the enlightenment,[336] but only in the modernist discourses of the 19th and 20th centuries did progress and the prospect of future gain the central position they now have in the developmentalist projects of modernity around the world. In such a view of history and time, which is shared by Egyptian modernism, utopia is located in the future, and the festive time of the mawlid appears as a form of retrogression. Backwardness is thus not only an issue of backward practices that may be hosted by the festival. The very concept of qualitatively different festive time, of inverting the order of the everyday world once a year, is opposed to the way progress is expected to take place. What appears as a temporary utopia of a better world to the participants becomes an escapist regress, a form of false consciousness standing in the way of linear progress in the eyes of the modernist critics.

In this sense, mawlids in fact are opposed to the order of modernity and religion in their hegemonic interpretations, and vice versa: festive utopia is not progressive, and ambivalent festive joy does not follow the habitus of deductive rationalism. For the

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[335] *Ibid.*, pp. 109, 135, referring to Jean de la Bruyère (late 17th century) in the first quotation and to Lucien Febvre (1878-1956) in the second.

[336] Fabian, *Time and the Other*, pp. 2-21.

project of modernity, celebrating the utopia of a different world (instead of celebrating that of a perfect world like in the *ʿīd*) once a year is always wrong. From the point of view of a progressive grand narrative, a time beyond the ordinary, without a clear function or purpose, is simultaneously subversion and false consciousness.

# Chapter Five: Mawlids as an Other of modern Egypt

## 1. What will the foreigners think?

Mawlids are controversial not only because they transgress boundaries; they are also problematic because they do so in public. Mawlids are among the few occasions in which subaltern classes can demonstrate their vision of religion and society that may substantially differ from the view mediated in the public sphere. The logic commonly held by those who criticise mawlids of identifying habitus and visible order with inner states implies that the public image of mawlids has tremendous importance. And the image of Egypt in the eyes of foreigners (that is, Western foreigners) is indeed a great concern to those who view these festivities in a negative light. In their view, mawlids present a false image of Egypt as a nation and Islam as a religion, and this false image can be employed to defame both Egypt and Islam. For this reason some people whom I interviewed were highly suspicious of my research project, fearing that it may be part of an Orientalist plot to depict Islam as a backward, irrational and ridiculous religion. This sentiment is strongly expressed in the book of an Islamist author on Islamic festivities:

> 'When the enemy who always waits for us to meet with disaster sees the people who wave their bodies at mawlids under the pretext of *ḏikr*, he watches them with a wide open mouth. Drowning in laughter he searches from the depth of his mind for a way to describe what he sees. Thus have we become an object of ridicule in the eyes of our enemies. And at the same time we have insulted our Islam and dressed it in clothes that are not in its favour nor part of it.'[337]

The author goes on to express his distress about the copious amounts of sweets consumed on all major religious holidays, but what mainly concerns us here is his image of the enemy laughing at the sight of a mawlid. The image of religion being tainted by profanities and innovations is here mixed with a sense of being under attack and the feeling of humiliation at seeing one's religion represented by sweets and Sufi *ḏikr*.

This sense of being exposed to the foreign glance and an outsider's representation is based on key historical experience. Since the 19th century, mawlids have been a popular topic of colonial, Orientalist and tourists' representations of Egyptian culture, a fact that has often troubled Egyptian elites who would have preferred to present a very different image of Egypt. At the same time, Egyptians have measured their society through continuous comparison with Europe and, increasingly, the United States, be it as an ideal image of progress, an enemy and competitor to match, or an Occidentalist negative mirror image representing vice and decadence as opposed to Egyptian/Arab/Islamic virtue and civilisation. The intellectual and political elites of Egypt have continuously defined themselves in actual or imagined confrontation with Western dominance and representations.

The debate on mawlids is part of this definition. In this chapter I argue that it has developed into its present form through a confrontation with Orientalist representations of Egypt and European concepts of progress and piety prior to and during the colonial period. This encounter has significantly shaped the current hegemonic discourses of religion, nationalism and modernity, and has produced a specific way of defining their

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[337] Sulṭān, *Ru'ya mu'āṣira*, p. 7.

boundaries in which mawlids and other communal religious traditions play an important role.

## 2. Genealogy of the debate

### *2.1. The tractates against innovations*

Mawlids have been the subject of controversy from the very beginning. The earliest known reference to the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī mentions that it was prohibited (for only one year, as it turned out) in 1448 'because of the presence of sinful women'.[338] This was not an isolated event: The emergence of *mawlid an-nabī*, mawlids in honour of Muslim saints, and the spread of organised mysticism and ecstatic rituals was accompanied from the start by major controversy in the Muslim Middle East. Mawlids have remained part of this historical controversy ever since.

Between the 12th and 15th centuries, a genre of *fiqh* specialised in the discussion of *bidaʿ* emerged. This genre, which first appeared among Mālikī scholars in Andalusia but soon spread throughout the Islamic world, became part of a debate that developed in particular between the supporters and opponents of Sufi rituals. The most prominent representative of this genre, although not its creator, was Aḥmad ibn Taymīya (d. 728/1328), a highly controversial figure even in his lifetime.[339] Part of a current within Islamic scholarship devoted to the purification of ritual and morality, he followed the footsteps of earlier scholars such as aṭ-Ṭurṭušī (d. 520/1126), Ibn al-Ǧawzī (d. 529/1200), Abū Šāma (d. 665/1268) at-Turkumānī (14th century) and Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ al-ʿAbdarī (d. 737/1336).[340] The topics and arguments developed in *kutub al-bidaʿ* (the tractates against innovations) belong to a repertoire that became standard in the critique of ritual, and which gained new dynamics following the revival of Ibn Taymīya's writings upon the rise of Islamic reform movements beginning in the 18th century.

While issues that today form part of the debate on mawlids are prominent in the *kutub al-bidaʿ* mawlids do not appear as a discrete topic in them. The *kutub al-bidaʿ* discuss, among other things, the veneration of saints, Sufi *ḏikr*, instrumental music and, starting in the 13th century, the celebration of *mawlid an-nabī*. A related topic of controversy was the older and never solved debate on *samāʿ*, that is, the use of music for *ḏikr*.[341] The absence of mawlids in these tractates has two reasons: The first is that mawlids either did not yet exist or had not yet developed into a discrete custom by the 13th and 14th centuries when the *bidʿa* debate emerged. When mawlids emerged as a clearly

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[338]Mayeur-Jaouen, *Al-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī*, p. 15; Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, pp. 17-19.

[339]See al-ʿAẓma, ʿAzīz (Aziz al-Azmeh) (ed.), *Ibn Taymīya*, Beirut: Riyāḍ ar-Rayyis, 2000; Memon, Muhammad Umar, *Ibn Taimīya's Struggle against Popular Religion, With an Annotated Translation of his Kitāb iqtidāʾ aṣ-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm mukhālafat aṣḥāb al-jaḥīm*, The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1976.

[340]Fierro, 'The treatises against innovations', pp. 207-209.

[341]Shehadi, *Philosophies of Music*; Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform*, pp. 74-76. The opposition to *samāʿ* was not restricted to the opponents of Sufism: it also caused controversy between and within the Sufi orders that is manifested until today in the great variety of styles of *ḏikr*, ranging from purely vocal and seated recitation to highly impulsive movement in the tune of instrumental music.

distinguishable custom in the 15th or 16th century,[342] the genre of *kutub al-bidaʿ* had already developed its fixed standard topics and arguments, and mawlids were bulked together with shrine visitation, *mawlid an-nabī*, and other seasonal celebrations.[343] The second reason for the absence of mawlids as a discrete issue even in later debates on *bidaʿ* is that for the discourse of Islamic jurisprudence, individual practices such as kissing shrines, lighting candles, or moving to the tune of music are easier to grasp than complex festivities that contain numerous practices with different ritual and legal statuses.

In their treatment of public festivals, grave visitation, music, morality and the habitus of piety, the *bidaʿ* tractates already contained basic elements of the contemporary criticism of mawlids and are referred to for that purpose until today. They are characterised by an uncompromising demand for ritual purity and moral discipline, a clear and strong rejection of any syncretistic forms of piety, and a staunch opposition to overwhelming joy and laughter, extravagant culinary culture, liberal spending, and anything that has a taste of hedonism attached to it. In their insistence on clear and solid boundaries and a constrained and stern habitus (for example in their general criticism of popular festive traditions and the participation of women in public festivals, as well as their strict rejection of celebrations at graveyards and of food and music at religious occasions)[344] they clearly present a formative body of discourse whose aesthetic standards of piety and patterns of argumentation have significantly shaped the discursive common sense of Islamic reformism.

Yet this view did not remain uncontested. Ibn Taymīya faced massive opposition from his contemporaries,[345] and the views he and other authors of *kutub al-bidaʿ* represented remained marginal for centuries to come. At the end of the 15th century, the influential *ʿālim* Ǧalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī argued that *mawlid an-nabī* was in fact a praiseworthy innovation (*bidʿa ḥasana*),[346] and that there is nothing wrong with giving a banquet, expressing joy, or *samāʿ*, on the condition that the celebration is free of *munkarāt*.[347]

I return to this argumentation in chapter six on the defence of mawlids. For the moment it is sufficient to point out that the controversy did not diminish the success of mawlids. Critical views remained marginal, an intellectual counter-hegemonic

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[342]In the early phase of their development, mawlids of Sufi sheikhs were often celebrated on the date of the Prophet's birthday (most notably so the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī), and living Sufi sheikhs hosted annual or monthly celebrations also known as mawlids at their *zāwiya*. Any other occasion with a banquet and public invitation might also have been called a mawlid, as could an occasion where mawlid poetry in praise of the Prophet was performed. Winter, *Society and Religion,* pp. 179-180, 183; Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, pp. 118-126.

[343]Fierro, 'The Treatises Against Innovations'; Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, p. 17.

[344]See, e.g., al-ʿAbdarī, Ibn al-Ḥāǧǧ, *al-Madḫal*, Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-ʿāmira, 1320/1903, vol. 1, pp. 122-126, 142-175vol. 2, pp. 10-13, 151-157; at-Turkumānī al-Ḥanafī, Idrīs b. Baydakīn b. ʿAbdallāh, *Kitāb al-Lumaʿ fī l-Ḥawādiṯ wa-l-bidaʿ: Eine Streitschrift gegen unstatthafte Erneuerungen*, Subhi Labib (ed.), Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1986, pp. 76-96, 203-229, 293-302.

[345]al-ʿAẓma (al-Azmeh), *Ibn Taymīya*, pp. 481-491.

[346]The concept *bidʿa ḥasana* follows the legal qualifications developed in Mālikī and Šāfiʿī *fiqh*. See above p. 81 and Fierro, 'The Treatises Against Innovations', p. 206.

[347]as-Suyūṭī, Ǧalāl ad-Dīn, *Ḥusn al-Maqṣid fī ʿamal al-mawlid*, Beirut: Mu'assasat al-balāġ, 1987; Kaptein, N.J.G., *Muḥammad's Birthday Festival: Early History in the Central Muslim Lands and Development in the Muslim West until the 10th/16th Century*, Leiden: Brill, 1993, pp. 48-67.

discourse unable to mobilise wide political or popular support. In the period extending from the 14th century all the way to late 19th century, Sufism was central to Islamic piety in Egypt, to the degree that it is out of the question to describe Sufi practice during that period as popular Islam and its opponents as orthodox. The ruling classes were closely attached to Sufism. Sufism maintained close, though occasionally tense, contact with the tradition of scholarship embodied by al-Azhar, and until the 19th century most scholars of Islamic law were also affiliated to Sufi orders.[348] A combination of Sufism and *maḏhab*-based scholarship was the orthodox Islam of the time.[349]

Prior to the 20th century mawlids held a central place in religious, political and economic life.[350] They were celebrations not only for 'the people' but also for the ruling classes and religious dignitaries.[351] For Murtaḍā az-Zabīdī, one of the most influential scholars of 18th-century Egypt, the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī was an important occasion to build and maintain his extensive scholarly network.[352] As late as the early 20th century, sessions of the cabinet were delayed to allow ministers to attend the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī.[353]

The critical discourse on ecstatic rituals and festive culture never entirely disappeared, however, as is shown by ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān al-Ǧabartī (1753 - ca. 1825), a pupil of Murtaḍā az-Zabīdī and author of a chronicle famous for its account of the French occupation of Egypt. While al-Ǧabartī himself attended mawlids and did not question the position of saints, his description of the mawlid of al-Ḥusayn expresses indignation about the habitus of the dervishes:

> 'They would talk in ungrammatical phrases, believing them to be invocations, and repeat petitions. [...] Each gathered around him his likes, base people all. Then he would spend his night awake and greet the dawn dizzy and idle, believing that he had spent the night in devotion, invocation, and piety.'[354]

When and how did this counter-hegemonic discourse turn into the ideological hegemony it represents today? And is it really the same discourse? With the modernisation policies of Muḥammad ʿAlī (ruled 1805-1848) and his successors, European concepts of society and progress were imported into Egypt, further amplified by the British colonial rule that began in 1882, formally ended in 1922, and continued *de facto* until 1952.[355] During this period, the modernist, nationalist, Salafi and Islamist movements emerged and the

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[348]Homerin, Th. Emil, 'Sufis and their Detractors in Mamluk Egypt', in de Jong/Radtke (eds), *Islamic Mysticism Contested*, pp. 225-247.

[349]Hudson, 'Reading al-Shaʿrānī'; Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, pp. 12-15; Weismann, *Taste of Modernity*.

[350]Mubārak, *ʿAlam ad-dīn*, vol. 1, pp. 139- 163.

[351]al-Ǧabartī (al-Jabartī), ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān b. Ḥasan, *ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī's History of Egypt*, eds Thomas Philipp and Moshe Perlmann, Stuttgart: Steiner, 1994, vol. 2, pp. 175 f., vol. 3, pp. 35, 126, 451, 453, 502, vol. 4, pp. 2, 15.

[352]Interview with Stefan Reichmuth, expert on Murtaḍā az-Zabīdī, Copenhagen, 29 May 2005. See also Reichmuth, Stefan, 'Murtaḍā az-Zabīdī (d. 1791) in Biographical and Autobiographical Accounts: Glimpses of Islamic Scholarship in the 18th Century', *Die Welt des Islams* 39 (1999), 1, pp. 64-102.

[353]Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, p. 156.

[354]al-Ǧabartī, *ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī's History of Egypt*, vol. 3, p. 63.

[355]For a historical overview, see Daly, M.W. (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt, Vol. 2: Modern Egypt, from 1517 to the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998.

discourse of Islam and modernity as known today developed and gained a hegemonic position in the public sphere, the educational system, the institutions of the state, and the habitus of the middle classes. At first restricted to the intellectual elites, it has increasingly gained ground in the wider segments of society following the spread of state schooling and, since the 1970s, Salafīya-inspired Islamist movements.

## *2.2. The invention of society and the causes of its retrogression*

Sometime around 1880, a new kind of criticism of ecstatic rituals emerged.[356] It takes a closer look, however, to understand what made it new. Let us, for example, take an article by Muḥammad ʿAbduh in the newspaper *al-Waṭā'iq al-Miṣrīya* about the prohibition issued by the administration of public *awqāf* (religious endowments) on the *ḥaḍra* of the Saʿdīya order:

> 'When they stand up for *ḏikr* they lower the ugly voices of their many percussions with their disturbing noise, and begin to supplicate meaningless expressions. And as the wine of illusions grows stronger in their minds they become crazy as lunatics, and some of them take off their clothes and take pieces of burning charcoal from the fire, put them in their mouths and touch their bodies with them as a demonstration of the grace/miracle (*karāma*). And God forbid that all these violent movements and all this strange confusion be a miracle. It is their custom to show up with this kind of practice in the mosque of Sīdnā al-Ḥusayn during his mawlid. Then people gather around them and the spectators crowd and confuse the minds of the visitors. [...] There is not one Sunna [of the Prophet] that would permit this kind of forbidden things (*munkarāt*) carried out by the ignorant in the mighty houses of God. On the contrary, the pure *šarīʿa* prohibits associating the invocation of God with instruments of amusements generally and without exception, especially since no reasonable person doubts that their intention in beating percussions and basing the *ḏikr* on melodies is just amusement and delight that are prohibited by the Law.'[357]

This is an aesthetic argument very similar to those proliferated both in the mediaeval *kutub al-bidaʿ* as well as in the public debates of the early 21st century, describing the scenery as 'disturbing' and 'ugly' and phrasing the opposition of true religion versus false innovations as an opposition of wholesome pious habitus versus noisy amusement and dirty chaos. On the surface, this argumentation stays well in the tradition of the debates on *bidaʿ* and *samāʿ*, rejecting the use of musical instruments, the ecstatic behaviour of the Sufis, and the transgression of the boundaries that mark piety and amusement and the sacred and the profane.

But the argument is made in a new context and has a very different significance than that made by Muḥammad ʿAbduh's predecessors. It is conceived of as part of a wide-scale project of religious reform that 'will reach out from Cairo to the villages of the countryside'[358] to remove all errors and *bidaʿ* until a true, Islamic state of affairs based on

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[356] de Jong, Frederick, 'Opposition to Sufism in Twentieth-Century Egypt (1900-1970)', in de Jong/Radtke (eds), *Islamic Mysticism Contested*, pp. 310-323.

[357] ʿAbduh, Muḥammad, 'Ibṭāl al-bidaʿ min niẓārat al-awqāf al-ʿumūmīya', in Muḥammad Rašīd Riḍā (ed.), *Tārīḫ al-ustāḏ al-imām aš-šayḫ Muḥammad ʿAbduh*, 2nd ed., Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Manār, 1344 H (1924-25 A.D.), Vol. 2, pp. 133-136, here p. 135. First published in *al-Waqā'iʿ al-Miṣrīya*, 4 Ḏū l-Ḥiǧǧa 1297 (7.11.1880).

[358] *Ibid*, p. 136.

the Qur'ān and the Sunna is reached.[359] Muḥammad ʿAbduh was part of a movement among Egypt's political and intellectual elites searching for a way to modernise the nation and lift it from its perceived state of backwardness and ignorance. His argumentation is part of this emerging ideology of reform, progress and nationalism.

Why did these ideals crop up in the late 19th century? Reform movements aiming to purify ritual and beliefs already existed in the Muslim world in the previous century, most notably so Sufi reform movements in India[360] and the Wahhābīya in Naǧd.[361] But they had not had much impact on Egypt until it became clear in the late 19th century that Egypt lacked the technological, military and social capabilities of the European powers, and the elites of the country began to ask why this was so. It is only in this era that the key concepts of society, nation and progress emerged: Egyptian politicians and intellectuals began to speak of Egypt as a nation (*umma* in the contemporary idiom)[362] and a society suffering from a state of backwardness but striving to be equal to the European powers.[363] It is in this context that mawlids became a problem not only for the individual believer, but society at large.

An influential piece of this discourse on backwardness was a book published in 1902 under the title *The Present State of Egyptians, or the Cause of Their Retrogression*, written by Muḥammad ʿUmar, a civil servant employed by the Egyptian Post Office.[364] The book makes explicit reference to Edmond Demolins' *À quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-*

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[359]See also ʿAbduh, Muḥammad, 'Buṭlān ad-dawsa', in Riḍā (ed.), *Tārīḫ al-ustāḏ al-imām aš-šayḫ Muḥammad ʿAbduh*, Vol. 2, pp. 136-138, here p. 138. First published in *al-Waqā'ī' al-Miṣrīya*, 16 Rabīʿ II 1298 (18.3.1881).

[360]Baljon, J.M.S.: 'Shah Waliullah and the Dargah', in Troll, (ed.), *Muslim Shrines in India*, pp. 189-197.

[361]Peskes, *Muḥammad b. ʿAbdalwahhāb*.

[362]It is important to note that *umma* in late 19th- and early 20th -century Egypt primarily meant nation in the secular nationalist sense and only secondarily the community of all Muslims. This ambiguity in the Arabic use of the term has remained present until today.

[363]aš-Šilq, Aḥmad Zakarīyā, *Ru'ya fī taḥdīṯ al-fikr al-Miṣrī: aš-Šayḫ Ḥusayn al-Marṣafī wa-kitābihi 'Risālat al-kalim aṯ-ṯammān', maʿa an-naṣṣ al-kāmil li-l-kitāb*, Cairo: al-Hay'a al-miṣrīya al-ʿāmma li-l-kitāb, 1984, pp. 63-84; Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. revised ed., London and New York: Verso, 1991 [1983[1]]; Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, pp. 119-127; for the further development of nationalist narratives and imageries, see Gershoni, Israel / James P. Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930-1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995; Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood*.

[364]ʿUmar, Muḥammad, *Ḥāḍir al-miṣrīyīn aw sirr ta'aḫḫurihim*, Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Muqtaṭaf, 1902. The title page carries an English translation of the title. See also Roussillon, Alain, 'Réforme sociale et production des classes moyennes: Muhammad ʿUmar et "l'arriération des Egyptiens"', in Alain Roussillon (ed.), *Entre reforme sociale et mouvement national: Identité et modernisation en Egypte (1882-1982)*, Cairo: CEDEJ, 1995, pp. 37-87. It was speculated at the time that Muḥammad ʿUmar may be a pseudonym and that Aḥmad Fatḥī Zaġlūl (see below note 366), who wrote a preface to the book, was the real author (so, e.g., ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī*, p. 169). However the fact that the author proudly identifies himself as a civil servant employed by the Egyptian Post Office on the title page and relates to events at his work in a post office in Qalyūb (p. 253) indicates that Muḥammad ʿUmar may not be a pseudonym after all, at least not of Aḥmad Fatḥī Zaġlūl.

*Saxons,*[365] which had been recently translated into Arabic by Aḥmad Fatḥī Zaġlūl[366] and was well received in nationalist and reformist circles: Rašīd Riḍā, pupil of Muḥammad ʿAbduh and father of the Salafi movement in Egypt wrote a praising review of the Arabic translation, arguing that Egyptians had a lot to learn from the British.[367] Demolins (1852-1907), a French social scientist, saw the roots of British advantage as compared to the French in the racial superiority of the Anglo-Saxons and in a system of education that transmitted not only knowledge but also practical virtues, producing intellectuals with a pioneering spirit – in other words, teaching virtues through habitualisation. It was the latter issue that greatly impressed Egyptian nationalists, among them the author of *The Present State of Egyptians* who in his book set out to reveal the factors that prevented Egyptian society from developing. Muḥammad ʿUmar's approach is worth attention: not only does he make the opposition of progress and backwardness a leading theme of the book, he also presents Egyptian society as a system in which all parts are interdependent. Critical of the regional, ethnic and confessional classifications of Egyptian society dominant at that time, the author structures the book according to economic position: the rich, the middle classes, and the poor. The poor are problematised as a source of ignorance and moral decay, and their education and the reform of their life circumstances and customs appears as a necessary step for the development of the nation.

Among the many causes of retrogression presented in *The Present State of Egyptians*, mawlids appear as a destructive influence on the morals of the poor and, consequently, an obstacle to improving the moral and religious quality of the nation at large:

> 'These kinds of illusions that are so deeply rooted in the minds [of the poor] generally damage the morals and move them away from the foundation of correct belief, the example of virtue and the perfection of civilised manners (*kamāl al-adab*). These great state-sponsored mawlids are gatherings for different kinds of people with diverse shapes and with manifold intentions, most of which are harmful to the morals and manners [...] through a mixture of illusions with good faith and naive morals and characters. We ask God to send someone to renew the religion of the commoners and cultivate their minds and change their simple-mindedness and delusions into good creeds that will reform their morals and manners. If only that were realised it would be a mighty success and splendid accomplishment.'[368]

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[365]Demolins, Edmond, *À quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons*, 5th ed., Paris: Maison Didot, 1897.

[366]Demolins, Edmond (Edmōn Dēmōlān), *Sirr taqaddum al-inǧilīz as-saksūnīyīn*, Transl. Aḥmad Fatḥī Zaġlūl, Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Ǧāmmālīya, 1329 [1911]. The translator's introduction is dated 1899, but it is not clear whether this is a second edition or whether the translation remained unpublished in the meantime. Aḥmad Fatḥī Zaġlūl (1863 - 1914) was brother of Saʿd Zaġlūl who was to become the leader of the nationalist movement and belonged to the same intellectual circle as Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Qāsim Amīn. He translated several influential works of social theory from French into Arabic, including works by Demolins and Le Bon, Bentham's *Les principes de législation* and Rousseau's *Le contrat social*. Ahmed, Jamal Mohammed, *The Intellectual Origins of Egyptian Nationalism*, London etc.: Oxford University Press, 1960, pp. 44-46; Goldschmidt, Arthur Jr., *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Egypt*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2000, pp. 233-234.

[367]Sivan, Emmanuel, 'The Clash Within Islam', *Survival* 45 (2003), 1, pp. 25-44, here p. 35. A Turkish translation of the book found an interested readership among the Young Turk movement: Demolins, Edmond, *Anglosaksonlarin Esbâb-ı fâ'iqiyeti nedir?*, Transl. A. Fu'âd and A. Nâci, Istanbul: 1330 [1912].

[368]ʿUmar, *Ḥāḍir al-Miṣrīyīn*, p. 257.

The concept of civilised manners, as I have translated *adab* here, is central to this critical account. While in the older Islamic tradition *adab* was the habitus of an educated individual versed in arts, letters and fine social conduct (and thus by definition restricted to upper classes), it here shows striking similarity to the European concept of civilisation. *Adab* had thus become the collective quality of a society embodying an advanced state of social, moral and cultural development. Another, closely related, key feature of this account is its elitist perception of simple-minded and naive commoners in need of cultivation and enlightenment (a perception that has since been shared by most Egyptian modernists). The elitism of intellectuals and scholars is, of course, not new. But while mediaeval Islamic scholars like Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī and Ibn Rušd were concerned with protecting the commoners from the potential dangers of engaging themselves with complex esoteric knowledge,[369] in the modernist and reformist discourse elites and commoners are perceived as parts of an interdependent system: the nation. The early 20th century nationalists of the like of Muḥammad ʿUmar shared with their classical predecessors a strong elitist distinction from the masses but embedded it in a nationalist view of being one with the same commoners whom they wanted to distinguish themselves from. What could be a better role, then, than that of the avant-garde, a distinguished but progressive elite committed to civilising the commoners and lifting them from their perceived state of ignorance?[370]

The modernist image of mawlids subverting the pillars that support the nation as a whole – religion, reason, morality, and civilised behaviour – was developed further in the following decades, and mawlids and the cult of saints developed into a standard topic in modernist and reformist discourses on *bidaʿ* and backwardness. The criticism grew more radical as Islamic reformism developed from small intellectual circles into the wider religious movement of the Salafīya[371] by the 1920s and gained a political dimension with the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood, a movement holding to an outspokenly modernist, nationalist and moralist agenda and committed to a reformist/Salafi interpretation of Islam. In the first decade of the 20th century, critics of mawlids still expressed their hope that mawlids would be successfully turned into a positive part of the nationalist project, for example by developing them into modern trade fairs.[372] But it soon became clear how difficult it is to employ popular festivals for utilitarian purposes,

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[369]Bello, Iysa A., *The Medieval Islamic Controversy between Philosophy and Orthodoxy: Iǧmāʿ and Ta'wīl in the Conflict between al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd*, Leiden etc.: Brill, 1989, pp. 58, 70-72.

[370]Ryzova, Lucie, *L'effendiya ou la modernité contestée*, Cairo: CEDEJ, 2004, pp. 23-26

[371]The Salafīya was not, and has never been a single bloc. The Salafīya of the early 21st century, a large movement focussed on piety and morality and associated with political Islam, is different in orientation and social basis from the Salafīya of the early 20th century, a small intellectual movement in intensive contact with other parts of the modernist and nationalist circles. While Rašīd Riḍā, the editor of the journal *al-Manār*, is considered the father of the early, more intellectual Salafīya, the socially most active and influential part of the movement has been al-Ǧamʿīya aš-Šarʿīya (established in 1913) with a large network of mosques and social services. Another Salafi organisation, Anṣār as-Sunna al-Muḥammadīya, represents a strict Wahhābī orientation (De Jong, 'Opposition to Sufism', pp. 315 f., 321). The shift of the Salafīya into a popular religious movement with a close links to the Wahhābīya from the 1920s on has been labelled by some researchers as 'Neo-Salafīya' (see, e.g., Sedgwick, *Saints and Sons*, p. 232), but this term is not found in colloquial Egyptian use.

[372]*al-Ahrām*, 30.9.1901: Rašīd Saʿāda, 'Ra'y ḥamīd fi l-mawlid al-aḥmadī', p. 1.

and a more general rejection of mawlids and the veneration of saints gained ground in the public debates.

In this period, the critique of Sufism and popular religious culture moved from attacks on specific practices towards a general rejection of ecstatic and mystical piety. In 1927, a series of articles in the weekly *as-Siyāsa al-Usbūʿīya* reinterpreted the hagiography of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī and declared that he had in reality been a Shiite spy,[373] a claim that, although historically highly questionable,[374] has remained an important topos until today.[375] In 1929, another article in *as-Siyāsa al-Usbūʿīya* criticised the government for issuing permissions to celebrate mawlids and demanded their abolition and replacement with Qur'ān recitation at shrines.

> 'The government knows perfectly well that mawlids are nothing but superstitions, *bidaʿ* 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 (*šaʿb*). 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 civilised or on the way to civilisation, and that are the source of moral and religious corruption, and which furthermore are a cause for the contempt of the foreigners for us and an incentive to make us doubt religion and the authority of those who stand to it.'[376]

Here the modernist/reformist critical image of mawlids is articulated in its full spectrum: The festivity is taken to be a truthful image of moral deficiency, that is, the embodiment of a disposition of the mind. As such, it is a threat to Islam, the morals of the people, and the boundaries that structure civilised, that is, modern, society. Mawlids are a public problem that should draw the attention of the state. And last but not least, they are an open door to foreign domination. The article underlines the last point with the story of two Americans who wanted to visit a mawlid with their wives. The visit became a disaster as the women were severely harassed by the crowds:

> 'Then the pinching turned against them. They bore it for some time until they fled the crowd saying "Savages, savages!" And [one must know that] the word savages is the political expression for people who, according to the international law of the Western

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[373] *as-Siyāsa al-Usbūʿīya*, vols. 89, 90, 92 (November-December 1927), cit. by Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, pp. 79 f.

[374] The historical material on the life of Aḥmad al-Badawī is so thin that almost everything said about his biography must be treated as mythological, the more so if a topic has first emerged in the 20th century. See further Mayeur-Jaouen, *Al-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī.*

[375] See, e.g., *ar-Riyāḍī*, 28.6.2000: Ašraf ʿAbd aš-Šāfī, 'Mufāǧaʾa taṣdam anṣār al-ḫurāfāt: karāmāt as-Sayyid al-Badawī ukḏūbaʾ, pp. 63-65. A book that developed the theme of as-Sayyid al-Badawī as a Shiite conspirator further (Manṣūr, Aḥmad Ṣubḥī, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī bayn al-Ḥaqīqa wa-l-ḫurāfa*, Cairo: Maṭbaʿat ad-daʿwa al-islāmīya, 1982) was censored by the Islamic Research Academy of al-Azhar in the late 1980s, which shows that while the critique of mawlids has become very mainstream in contemporary Egypt, fundamental critique of important saints has not. *Taqrīr al-ḥāla ad-dīnīya fī Miṣr*, vol. 2, ed. Markaz ad-dirāsāt as-siyāsīya wa-l-istrātīǧīya bi-l-Ahrām/al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, Cairo: al-Ahrām 1998, p. 37; Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'islam*, pp. 320-324.

[376] *as-Siyāsa al-Usbūʿīya*, 21.12.1929: Ḥanafī ʿĀmir, 'al-Mawālid: ʿādāt yaǧib al-qaḍāʾ ʿalayhāʾ, p. 24.

nations, may be colonised and subjected under absolute rule.'[377]

This experience of being represented as savages or, more commonly, Orientals and hence legitimate subjects of colonisation is key to understanding the development of this critical view. The problem for the Egyptian nationalist of the late 19th and early 20th century was not just that parts of society were backward and uncivilised. The problem was that they were being seen and represented as such by Europeans and that this was used as a justification for colonial rule.

The encounter with European hegemony (which began long before colonial rule) was formative for the Egyptian modernist criticism of mawlids. Egyptian intellectual and political elites starting in the early 19th century became aware of the enormous technological and military advancement of European powers, and this awareness led to the modernisation policies of Muḥammad ʿAlī and his successors. These policies led to the creation of a centralised state apparatus with a growing number of tasks, a new understanding of public order[378] and the emergence of the *afandīya*, a civil service-based Egyptian Muslim middle class[379] that gained a central role in the nationalist movement.[380] At the same time, the growing European presence and British occupation in 1882 led to the emergence of a split between 'modern' or 'civilised' European culture and public order, and a 'backward' Oriental society. This division was key to the colonialist world view, the Orient serving as a negative mirror image used to construct Western self-image and an ideological rationalisation of colonialism.[381] It came to be strongly felt in Egypt with the dissemination of a Victorian understanding of education and public order, the development of a strong class divide between Egyptians and mostly European minorities, and the increasing exoticisation of local culture, most visibly marked by the construction of new European-style districts inhabited by foreigners and the new upper and middle classes.[382]

Part of the Orientalist and colonial world view and self-justification was the representation of Islam and the Orient as sensual and irrational. Part of this imagery, mawlids and ecstatic Sufi rituals came to appear as a form of recreation characteristic of the idle Oriental at best, and 'morbid and unwholesome deviations'[383] and religious fanaticism at worst:

> '[The young Egyptian's] recreation is the periodical *moulid*, or fair, or a quiet lazy evening outside the restaurant, sipping coffee and smoking the inevitable cigarette, enjoying a gossip with his neighbour. The warmth of the climate and his habits permit of no further

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[377] *Ibid.*, p. 24.

[378] See, e.g., Ener, Mine, 'Getting into the Shelter of Takiyat Tulun', in Eugene Rogan (ed.), *Outside in: On the Margins of the Modern Middle East*, London and New York: I.B.Tauris, 2002.

[379] Until the mid-19th century, Egypt was a society stratified by ethnic and confessional divisions. Most civil servants were Christians, while the higher ranks of the state apparatus were occupied by Turko-Circassians (Baer, *Studies in the Social History of Modern Egypt*, pp. 216-222). It is worth noting that the author of *The Present State of Egyptians* explicitly identifies himself with this new middle class.

[380] Ryzova, *L'effendiya*, pp. 21-28.

[381] This argument has been most prominently put forward by Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978; See also Fabian, *Time and the Other*; Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*.

[382] Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*.

[383] Rudolph, crown prince of Austria, cit. by Starrett,'The hexis of interpretation', p. 957.

exertion.'[384]

'Looking on makes one dizzy, and European blood runs cold at such sights. This height of fanaticism is appalling. Without moving an iota, in the same attitude these people turn with incredible rapidity. Their features are convulsed, their eyes turn out; the thin hands, and pallid cheeks set in their short beards, cut in Turkish fashion, betray all the painful signs of nerves disordered by depraved religious feelings.'[385]

It was not only *ḏikr* and mawlids but also Islamic rituals and traditions of learning in general that became part of the Orientalist/colonial image of the irrationality and backwardness of Islam and Muslims. European observers interpreted key rituals such as *wuḍū'* (ritual washing) and *ṣalāt* (ritual prayer) as mere form without any deeper meaning and depicted the education of Qur'ān schools (*kuttāb*) where pupils would sit on the ground around a sheikh moving rhythmically while memorising the Qur'ān as the very opposite of any real education, 'sensual, primitive, and antirational'.[386]

Gregory Starrett argues that this perception was based on the 19th-century European, and particularly the British Victorian self-image of rational, internalised piety that was expected to be expressed in a quiet and constrained habitus. In the context of colonialism, the Muslim body became a site of inscribing European hegemony. The bodily movement of dervishes in a *ḏikr*, worshippers performing *wuḍū'* and praying five times a day, and pupils in a *kuttāb* came to be represented as expressions of meaningless and blind ritual standing in direct opposition to philosophical, pious, moral disposition and, consequently, true civilisation.[387] Thus while the Victorian observers doubted whether ritual practice could lead to virtues, they certainly did believe in embodiment: They *saw* lack of true internal piety, and to prove this perception wrong was a key concern of Egyptian modernists.

If the irrational character of the Orient was a key issue in colonialist discourse, so did rationalism and rationalisation become the key to progress and respect in the eyes of the Egyptian elites. To stand equal to the challenge of colonialism, the nation (in itself a recent innovation)[388] had to display the same kind of virtues as Europe did (or was seen to display in the perception of Egyptians): rationalism, discipline, constraint, progress, and cultivation, while holding to core values that could make Egyptians not only equal but, at least in terms of morality and religion, superior to Europeans.

This became the central commonplace of all nationalist, modernist and reformist movements that emerged in this period, and it has remained so until the present day. Despite their substantial differences in other issues, the reformists and nationalist intellectuals and activists of the early 20th century not only shared significant common experiences and expectations but also moved in the same circles. The conflict line relevant for this study, namely that between reformists and Sufis, between the supporters and opponents of mawlids, ran across the political spectrum. It was not an issue of whether Egypt should be a religious or secular nation, an independent republic or a pro-

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[384]Cunningham, Alfred, *To-Day in Egypt: Its Administration, People and Politics*, London: Hurst & Blackett, 1912, p. 213.

[385]Rudolph, crown prince of Austria, describing a Sufi *ḏikr*. Cit. by Starrett,'The hexis of interpretation', p. 957.

[386]Starrett,'The hexis of interpretation', p. 955.

[387]*Ibid.,* p. 958.

[388]Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, pp. 119-127.

British monarchy, but a conflict between different sites of power: one dominated by Sufi orders, a large part of the religious establishment, and local networks of guilds and merchants, affirming the role of communal traditions that their power, in part, depended on, and another dominated by the Islamic reform movement, the new middle classes and sections of society in close contact with the colonial system, in the process of not only establishing different forms of public order and piety but also of conceiving the structure of society anew.

## *2.3. Selection and exclusion*

The modernist and reformist common sense of piety and modernity is not a simple takeover of European concepts; nor is it a simple continuity of Islamic traditions. Rather, it is an innovative and selective synthesis of the two. Egyptian modernism and Islamic reformism aimed to defend Islam and Egyptian culture by reshaping them into a form that could withstand confrontation with European hegemony. In confrontation with colonial rule, European and Islamic traditions were reshaped, reinterpreted and moulded together to create a new discursive formation.[389] But what was selected, and what excluded? And what were the criteria for inclusion and exclusion?

One of the most explicit and influential expressions of this synthesis and the subsequent exclusion of mawlids from the realm of true culture is Muḥammad Fahmī ʿAbd al-Laṭīf's book *as-Sayyid al-Badawī and the Dervish State in Egypt*,[390] first published in 1948 and reprinted in 1979 and 1998. A mixture between an ethnography and a polemic pamphlet, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī* is a study about and against the cult that developed around as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī and its effects on society.

ʿAbd al-Laṭīf contributed to the development of Egyptian folklore studies and wrote an influential study on Sufi music (which is the only part of mawlids and Sufi rituals that won words of appreciation from him).[391] His analysis is strongly influenced by social theories globally current in the first half of the 20th century, when concepts such as race and national character played a key role in the debate on why some nations grew powerful while others did not. While racial theories had little appeal for Egyptians, the concept of national character found a very positive response. ʿAbd al-Laṭīf makes explicit reference to Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931), a French social psychologist whose most influential work *Psychologie des foules* had been translated into Arabic in 1909 by the same Aḥmad Fatḥī Zaġlūl who had also translated *À quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons*.[392] Le Bon's most important contribution to the intellectual debates of his time was his

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[389]Such a relationship works in two directions, of course, and the colonial encounter shaped the coloniser as it did the colonised. The European side of this encounter, however, lies beyond the focus of this study. See van der Veer, Peter, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

[390]ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, Muḥammad Fahmī, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī wa-dawlat ad-darāwīš fī Miṣr* (Maktabat ad-dirāsāt aš-šaʿbīya; 30), Cairo: al-Hay'a al-miṣrīya al-ʿāmma li-l-kitāb, 1999 (1948[1]).

[391]*Ibid.*, pp. 166 f.

[392]*Ibid.*, p. 145; Le Bon, Gustave, *Psychologie des foules*, Paris: Félix Alcan, 1895; Idem (Ǧūstāf Lūbūn), *Rūḥ al-iǧtimāʿ*, transl. Aḥmad Fatḥī Zaġlūl, Cairo: Maṭbaʿat aš-Šaʿb, 1909. For the wider influence of Le Bon in early 20th-century Egypt, see Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, pp. 122-125.

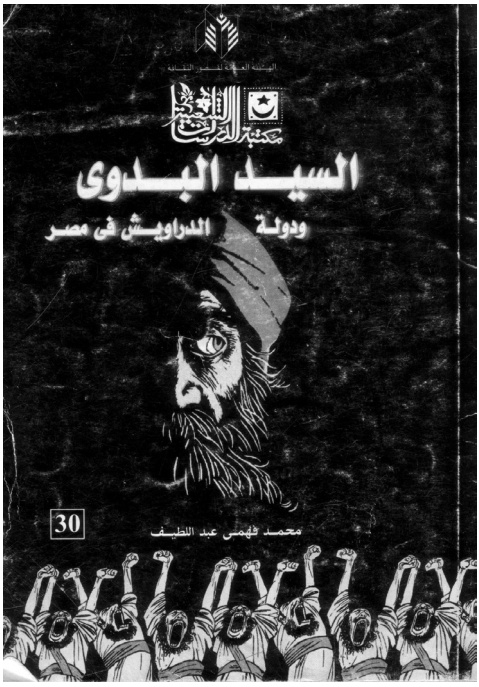


*Image 23: Cover illustration of the second and third edition of* as-Sayyid al-Badawī. *Muḥammad Baġdādī.*

development of the concept of the crowd. The crowd, according to Le Bon, is characterised by its irrational, impulsive and extreme behaviour based on the collective subconscious, which is also expressed in its religiosity and political actions.[393] Le Bon, like Demolins a supporter of the Anglo-Saxon educational system, believed that a civilised and powerful nation needed an elite with education and character to provide it with rational self-control to discipline the power of the subconscious.[394]

In *as-Sayyid al-Badawī*, ʿAbd al-Laṭīf presents the image of a world dominated by the ridiculous and irrational beliefs and rituals of dervishes who control the minds of the common people and a large part of the intellectuals and scholars of the nation. He depicts the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī as a site of crazy rituals, chaos and immorality, all ruled by dark irrationality not only incompatible with true (that is, Salafi)[395] Islam and the disposition of the modern, progressive citizen, but also 'an obstacle in the way of every reform and every awakening (*nuhūḍ*)'.[396] He conceives the mawlid as the expression of a religious consciousness of the 'people' (*šaʿb*) or the 'masses' (*ǧamāhīr*) who, very much like Le Bon's crowd, are led by their subconscious emotions that are inaccessible to reasonable argumentation.[397] The effects of this religious mass consciousness are disastrous:

> 'There is no doubt that this sentiment had the worst effect on the Egyptian society and the gravest contribution to damaging the authentic Islamic belief. For it filled the spirits

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[393]Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules*, pp. 11-47, 60-66.

[394]Le Bon, Gustave, *Les Opinions et les Croyances: Genèse – Évolution*, Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1911, pp. 45 f., 55-60; Idem, (Ǧūstāf Lūbūn), *Ǧawāmiʿ al-Kalim*, transl. Aḥmad Fatḥī Zaġlūl, Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa ar-Raḥmānīya, 1922; Idem, *Psychologie de l'éducation*, 13e édition augmentée de plusieurs chapitres sur les méthodes d'éducation en Amérique, Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1910, electronic document available at http://www.uqac.uquebec.ca/zone30/Classiques_des_sciences_sociales/classiques/le_bon_gustave/psycho_education/ psycho_education.html, viewed 13.9.2005; Idem,(Ǧūstāf Lūbūn), *Rūḥ at-tarbiya*, transl. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Cairo: Idārat al-Hilāl, undated [ca. 1922]. For an overview of Le Bon's work, see Touret, Denis, 'Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931): Une psychologie sociale réaliste' http://www.denistouret.net/ideologues/Le_Bon.html, viewed 15.7.2005.

[395]ʿAbd al-Laṭīf openly associates himself with the icons of Salafīya: Aḥmad ibn Taymīya, Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, Ǧamāl ad-Dīn al-Afġānī, Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Rašīd Riḍā. ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī*, pp. 152, 173.

[396]*Ibid.*, p. 181.

[397]*Ibid.*, pp. 8, 143-44.

> with submission and capitulation, it caused them to completely sink into their trust in God, to leave everything to fate and destiny, to let things take their course, and to put their trust in all matters in those dervishes and sheikhs. It led them to believe that [the Sufis] were able to repel the worst misfortune and to bring about the dearest fortune. Thus the worker doesn't work and the trader doesn't care for his business. The farmer doesn't tend to his field, the sick man does not worry about his illness and the oppressed doesn't try to overcome his oppression. They all believe that their needs will be satisfied by the miracles of the saints, and that nothing can harm them except by force of predestination, so that there is no need to make any effort or exert oneself.'[398]

This depiction of the cult of saints and anything that has to do with it as false consciousness bears witness to the developing conflict between the ambivalent self at the mawlid and the disciplined, fragmented modern self advocated by the reformist and modernist movements. Furthermore, it turns mawlids from merely a site of deviance into a subsystem within society, a cultural configuration representing the opposite of modern society and true Islam. This criticism of ritual and festive order produces the analytical lines necessary to define disciplined reason and uncontrolled subconsciousness, orthodox Islam and popular beliefs, progress and backwardness, nationalism and colonial domination. The festive culture of mawlids is objectified as a system of its own: a parallel false religion, both a threat to true religion and a marker of its boundaries.

> 'The mawlids that we see today are not a matter of religion: they are popular (*šaʿbī*) festivities whose appearances/phenomena (*maẓāhir*) and rituals have become mixed with the emotions of the people (*aš-šaʿb*) since ancient times and become rooted in the subconscious, as psychologists call it. And these phenomena, deep-rooted beliefs as they are, have the sanctity of religious rituals in their minds.'[399]

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were a key period for the discursive construction of new objects: religion as an ideological and rationalised system, nation as an organic whole of interdependent classes, rationality as a habitus and a visible matrix of order. This process of objectification, of presenting the social world as a rationalised ideological system, has been key to the project of modernity in general. The problem, however, is that social reality does not have objective boundaries to facilitate the separation of objects from each other: there is no *a priori* way to tell when *ḏikr* is a key element of Islam and when it is a popular custom, or to define whether people's devotion to saints is an expression of love or worship. Objects such as religion, nation and rationality have to be constructed from a mass of contingent and weakly structured data. Chaïm Perelman,[400] in his theory of argumentative rhetoric, shows that key concepts of philosophical theories are all constructed through the argumentative operation of dissociation. It is an operation that always creates two objects: a thing, and its opposite whose identity with the former is denied.

ʿAbd al-Laṭīf thus demonstrates the trick to Egyptian modernity: there *is* an opposition between reason and faith after all, but the dividing line is drawn straight through the field of faith and devotion. The Egyptian modernist distinguishes between true rationalist religion and false popular beliefs guided by uncontrollable emotions and

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[398] *Ibid.*, pp. 150 f.

[399] *Ibid.*, p. 137.

[400] Perelman, Chaïm/L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *Traité de l'argumentation*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1958; Perelman, Chaïm, *L'empire rhétorique: rhétorique et argumentation*, Paris: Vrin, 1977.

exploited by charlatans. The same logic is applied to tradition: Egyptian modernity can only stand on the firm foundation of authentic heritage (*turāṯ*) on the condition that the actual historically transmitted culture of Egyptians is separated into true heritage on the one hand and false, backward customs and traditions on the other.

This selection and exclusion to dissociate 'true' from 'false' tradition favoured elements that could harmonise with each other. In late 19th- and early 20th-century Egypt, the hegemonic forms of European modernity were the moralist and pietist discourse of Victorian Britain, mainly represented by the colonial system, and French social theories that gained currency in nationalist intellectual circles. Late 19th-century French social scientists of the like of Demolins and Le Bon offered systemic and top-down explanations for the development of nations and advocated what they saw as the Anglo-Saxon model of education based on the habitualisation of a rational, active state of mind. They offered a response to Victorian pietism, showing that external practices like *ṣalāt* and *wuḍū'* might, through the habitualisation of virtuous practice, lead to virtuous inner states after all. They provided a way to reinterpret the Islamic tradition of *adab* and learning through bodily practice in a way that would conform with the Victorian view of the embodiment of virtue (and, consequently, civilisation) in quiet and constrained behaviour. Additionally, they provided the nationalists of the new *afandīya* middle class with a powerful ideology of progressive elitism.

On the other side of the bargain, the Islamic tradition of ritual reform with its scholarly social base, its rationalist tendency and strong fear of uncontrolled emotion, and its identification of piety with constrained bodily disposition and strict morality, was the most suited to stand equal to the European challenge. Hence it developed from the counter-hegemonic discourse of a small scholarly elite into a metaphysical foundation and perceived true heritage upon which a unity of authenticity and progress could be claimed. Other European definitions of modernity remained marginal to the emerging discourse of modernity and Islamic reform, and other definitions of Islam were increasingly marginalised and constructed as the expression and cause of the weakness that had so long kept 'true' culture from developing and flourishing.

*Wuḍū'* was reinterpreted to teach and express cleanliness and *ṣalāt* to teach and express order. What appeared frivolous to the Victorian observer was turned into a 'central sign of civilization'.[401] What is interesting about these cases is not so much the redefinition of the rituals themselves but the fact that religion came to be defined through its rationality and functionality.[402] In a similar manner, the *kuttāb* education was replaced by state schools with a very different kind of discipline and habitus, and a dramatically new concept of education. While the *kuttāb*'s primary purpose was to teach the Qur'ān, the modern school was conceived of as instrumental to the national project.[403] Finally, one part of the response was to admit that some of the practices singled out by the Orientalist representations were indeed terribly irrational and backward and were thus

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[401]Starrett, 'The hexis of interpretation', p. 961.

[402]Tayob, Abdulkader, 'Reading Religion and the Religious in Modern Islam', inaugural lecture at Radboud University Nijmegen, 10 September 2004, http://www.ru.nl/search/contents/pages/11712/ruoratietayobbinnenwerk.pdf, viewed 11.11.2005.

[403]Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, pp. 82-90, See also Fortna, Benjamin, *The Imperial Clasroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

denied having anything to do with the true shape of Islam and Egyptian culture.

This is what happened to mawlids: Reformist and modernist discourses excluded them from the realm of orthodox Islam and progressive modernity, and thus from the true substance of the nation, not because there was something inherently un-Islamic or irrational about them, but because their particular form of festive time, their order, and their habitus did not fit the newly constructed habitus of the authentic yet enlightened Muslim, nor did they comply with the new rationality of the progressive nation.

## 3. Dissociations and Distinctions

Recognising that the un-Islamic and backward character of mawlids claimed by the reformists and modernists is in reality an ideological construct resulting from a historically contingent political configuration has significant consequences for our analysis of the criticism of mawlids. In this light, the debate on mawlids appears as a marker of the modern self and society, a perception parallel to the Orientalist perception of Egypt. Mawlids, grouped in the debates on Sufi orders, the cult of saints and popular religious culture in general, serve as a negative mirror image to define modern Egypt and orthodox Islam.

Modernity in the Middle East (as anywhere else) has been a highly complex project, as is reflected by the research of an increasing number of scholars working in the field, notably Lila Abu-Lughod, Walter Armbrust, Timothy Mitchell, Afsaneh Nadjmabadi and Gregory Starrett.[404] They argue (and I follow their argumentation) that modernity in the 20th-century Middle East has not been a straightforward process of rationalisation and emancipation. Instead, the new concepts and practices of education, rationalisation and progress brought with them new practices of discipline,[405] accompanied by the exclusion of many practices from the legitimate realm of modern society because they appeared as incompatible with the discipline of the religious, rational, civilised human.

Constructs of this type are a characteristic feature of the modernist and reformist project. To be civilized is to embody the intellectual and constrained habitus of the authentic Muslim, and to implement the discipline and order of the rational citizen. But reality always falls short of such ideals. The fear of the countryside disrupting the order of the modern city, of ambivalent festivities tainting the purity of religion and the religious self, or of belief in saints and the experience of temporary utopia blocking the nation's development, all indicate how fragile these constructs are. The ideal order of the modern city is restricted to a few privileged districts of the capital and the coastal resorts. The ambivalence of everyday life makes it very hard to uphold the boundaries of the purified self. The nation's development has turned into a disappointment time after time. In the face of such troubling reality, exclusions produced by the means of dissociation

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[404] Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women*; Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism*; Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*; Najmabadi,'Veiled Discourse – Unveiled Bodies'; Starrett, 'The Hexis of Interpretation'.

[405] See also Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1977, pp. 24-30; Idem, 'What is Critique?', in James Schmidt, ed., *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 381-98.

are necessary for the discourse and image of modernity and orthodox Islam to persist. These exclusions work in ways very similar to those of the colonial city analysed by Timothy Mitchell:

> 'The identity of the modern city is created by what it keeps out. Its modernity is something contingent upon the exclusion of its own opposite. In order to determine itself as the place of order, reason, propriety, cleanliness, civilisation and power, it must represent outside itself what is irrational, disordered, dirty, libidinous, barbarian and cowed. The city requires the "outside" in order to present itself, in order to constitute its singular, uncorrupted identity.[406]

Oppositions of this kind are not restricted to the colonial period as Delphine Pagès-El Karoui has shown in her study of the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī. Today, urban citizens of Ṭanṭā define modern urban lifestyle partly through their criticism of pilgrims' behaviour and use of public space.[407]

This construction of colonial and post-colonial modernity through the exclusion and distancing of 'native', 'rural' or 'backward' culture is not only a spatial one. It is accompanied by what Johannes Fabian describes as the 'denial of coevalness,'[408] the construction and distancing of the Other by setting it in a time different from 'ours'. Classifications such as 'backward' or 'primitive' that regularly occur in the criticism of mawlids, but also the more ambiguous terms 'traditional', 'ancient', 'popular' and 'folkloric' all imply that whatever is described by these terms is a trace of the past and belongs to a different time, a reality that may be interesting to the historian or the anthropologist but which must not enter the progressive time of modern society.

With the end of the colonial period, the distinction between colonial and Oriental lost much of its power, and yet its logic has persisted in the Nasserist ideology of progressive nationalism and in the present-day construction of a globalised Egypt that continues to work, in part, through the exoticisation and exclusion of 'popular' culture.[409] In chapter seven on the mawlid as cultural icon I return to the strategies of exoticisation that allow the representation of popular culture as authentic on the condition that it remains marginal to the hegemonic project of modernity. Here I concentrate on how the dissociations employed in the criticism of mawlids serve to construct modernity, orthodox Islam, and middle-class status through the construction, criticism and exclusion of their opposite.

## *3.1. 'Consciousness'*

In the foregoing analysis of the criticism of mawlids, a number of key dissociations have emerged: progress vs. backwardness, consciousness vs. ignorance, rationality vs. uncontrolled emotion, solemn truth vs. mockery, knowledge vs. superstition, monotheism vs. *širk*, Sunna vs. *bid'a*, religion vs. charlatanism, religion vs. popular beliefs, universal boundaries vs. ambivalence, order vs. chaos, middle vs. low classes, city vs. countryside, modern city vs. popular districts. Such binary dissociations are essential

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[406]Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, p. 165.
[407]Pagès-El Karoui, 'Le mouled de Sayyid al-Badawî', pp. 256-260.
[408]Fabian, *Time and the Other*, p. 31 ff.
[409]de Koning, *Global Dreams*, p. 195.

for the construction of the true, good and proper image of society: Orthodox Islam is, in part, defined through the construction of *bid'a*, modernity through backwardness, knowledge through superstition, urban public sector middle-class habitus through the vulgarity of the lower classes and 'popular' middle classes.

The most common and powerful statement of exclusion concerning mawlids is one that bars them from religion. People who display an intellectual middle-class habitus have very often found it necessary to remind me that mawlids 'have nothing to do with religion'(*mā l-hāš ayy 'ilāqa bi-d-dīn*). Yet the very frequence, vehemence and categorical nature of this statement indicates that mawlids *do* in fact have a relation to religion. People never make such a statement about things that really have nothing to do with religion such as, say, football, because there is no need to do so. Denying that mawlids have any relation whatsoever to religion is a discursive act of demarcating true religion by dissociating it from the vast field of religious devotion to which mawlids belong much more so than football.[410]

This and other similar dissociations serve to imagine and demarcate modernity, religion and civilisation in their hegemonic reading. For one thing, they allow the embedment of the oppositions of reason vs. faith and tradition vs. modernity into the Egyptian modernist discourse without shaking the fragile union of authenticity and progress. The dissociation of religious devotion into Religion and its Other – which may be popular beliefs, charlatanism, or *širk*, depending on what exactly one means by religion in a given context – allows the Egyptian modernist to include criticism of religion – but only of false religion – into the modernist project. Hence the curious split in the theories of religion that Talal Asad has observed in Western anthropology of Islam but which is equally present in Muslim normative discourse on religion: while 'true' religion – that is, disciplined pious habitus presented as a part of a rationalised system and associated with high and middle classes – is described in quite Weberian terms as an acquired state of ethical consciousness, 'false' religion – that is, parts of religious devotion that fail to fulfill these criteria – is discussed in strikingly Marxist terms as escapism, false consciousness and opium for the people.[411]

Secondly and most importantly, to state that mawlids have nothing to do with religion is to participate in a hegemonic definition of religion. To say that Sufis and pilgrims at the mawlid have false consciousness is, following the logic of dissociation, to claim true consciousness for oneself. This is why the issue of liking or disliking mawlids is not considered an issue of legitimate difference of opinion: to go to mawlids is taken to be an expression of ignorance, of bare and simple lack of consciousness. In this critical view, if educated people do go to mawlids, they are assumed to do so only for material profit or as distanced spectators. The issue of criticising mawlids is represented as a very straightforward case of linear progress from ignorance to consciousness (*wa'y*):

> 'The mawlid gets smaller year by year, in the past 20 years at least by 50%. There has been ignorance, and people come to get *baraka* with their wife and daughter and son and sit around in a small place, that's all far from Islam. When the people gain more

[410]While a football match can be a very emotional and devotional affair, it is generally not conceived of as a way to get closer to God.

[411]Asad, Talal, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Occasional Papers Series, Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986, pp. 11-13.

consciousness they understand it's *ḥarām*.
U.M.: Does it have to do with the spread of the Wahhābīya?
'No, it has nothing to do with the Wahhābīya. It's about growth of consciousness; the people [begin to] understand. And so a small daughter tells her father: no I won't go to the mawlid, it's *ḥarām*.'[412]

What is striking about this account – and the many of its kind – is its bluntness in contrasting consciousness with ignorance. This is characteristic of the entire construction of middle-class modernism. We must remember that while participation in mawlids is not dependent on class, criticising them is very closely connected with displaying (or trying to display) an intellectual middle-class disposition. People of all social classes participate in mawlids, but opposition to them is a disposition associated with the distinction of urban professional middle classes whose status is based on higher education, modernist habitus and, often but not necessarily, public sector careers (heirs to the *afandīya*). But while many middle-class citizens are critical of mawlids, not all are, as is demonstrated by the many middle-class citizens who, temporarily dressed in *ǧallābīya* and turban, participate in ecstatic rituals at mawlids. Class distinctions, we must note, are not deterministic. Firstly, there are different ways to express a middle-class status, and not all of them require a critical view of popular traditions. Secondly, habitus can also be a strategic means of social ascent, meaning that progressive elitism is often an expression of wanting to be included in the middle classes rather than of already being middle class (students being perhaps the most important case in point). Finally, people express different opinions and styles at different times, which implies that a specific kind of class habitus is often a changing role rather than a fixed identity.

However, many people critical of mawlids with whom I discussed this issue insisted that there are absolutely no educated middle classes at mawlids except as distanced spectators. This selective perception is necessary to uphold their particular construction of middle-class identity. Recognising that a person going to a mawlid may very well have a sophisticated consciousness, even – as often is the case – profound knowledge of the Scripture, would compromise the carefully constructed distinction of those middle-class intellectuals who define their superiority towards the lower classes through 'consciousness', that is, the combination of Salafi religious discourse and progressive elitism.

'Consciousness' is, not by coincidence, *the* term of distinction for the three (mutually overlapping) categories in Egyptian society in which criticism of mawlids has highest currency: the public sector-based urban middle classes, the Salafi and Islamist movements, and the intellectuals. People who identify themselves with one or more of these categories often share the modernist/reformist grand narrative of nationalism, authenticity and progress. They use the higher education they have received to distinguish themselves from

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[412]Interview conducted by Umnīya Mihannā with a goldsmith in the Ḫān al-Ḫalīlī market during the mawlid of al-Ḥusayn, Cairo, 23 June 2003. Unlike most other shopkeepers and café owners in al-Ḥusayn district, the goldsmiths and souvenir sellers of Ḫān al-Ḫalīlī are heavily dependent on Egyptian upper classes and Arab and Western tourists, and make bad business during the mawlid. Economy is not the only reason for their critical view of the mawlid though, since some goldsmiths say that pilgrims do to some extent compensate for the absence of other customers. It is also worth noting that some hotel owners for whom the mawlid brings significant profit nevertheless hold a critical distance to the festival.

the lower classes and from 'popular' middle classes whose status is based on income, such as workshop owners, cash crop farmers, butchers, etc. They claim and to a significant degree command intellectual hegemony but (with the significant exception of people employed in the military and security apparatuses) their political and economic power is limited. This is why the criticism of mawlids is so specific to the middle classes and does not have the same currency in upper-class context. For most Egyptians from the urban upper and upper middle classes mawlids are totally exotic and do not constitute any considerable threat to their class status and view of society. Consequently, while members of the upper classes often share the modernist/reformist critical perception of mawlids, they rarely make an issue out of it.

These groups have played a key role in the development and dissemination of modernist and reformist discourse and share a strong sense of representing an elite responsible for the development of society. This sense is most strongly represented by the intellectuals (*muṯaqqafūn*), a somewhat ambiguous category defined by high educational capital and possibly but not necessarily intellectual production: not only authors and professors but also students, teachers and lawyers count as intellectuals. Progressive elitism, even in the face of the deteriorating quality of overcrowded state schools and universities, is central to being an intellectual in Egypt. The intellectual's task is to disseminate consciousness to 'the simple people' (*al-busaṭā'*), a strongly patronising term that implies that they not only lack formal education but also reflection and thus need to be guided by the intellectuals.

## *3.2. Nostalgia, rejection and fascination*

Yet many of Egypt's intellectuals were once themselves 'simple people'. Influential intellectuals and political activists of the early and mid-20th century like Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Ḥasan al-Bannā, Sayyid Quṭb[413] and many others came from a rural or small town milieu where Sufism was the hegemonic form of piety. For them, critique of rural religious culture was a way to demarcate personal advancement in society and a way to create a modern self-image through a break with communal traditions.

This distinction has often been a painful one. The same people who have shaped their habitus, religiosity, dress and understanding of society in a way that only has a place for mawlids as a negative mirror image of modern society have very often experienced some of the most exciting moments of their childhood and youth at mawlids. A key feature of many of their critical accounts of mawlids is that their criticism is mixed with feelings of nostalgia and aesthetic fascination.

One of the best expressions of such mixed feelings is ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim's (1935-1990) novel *The Seven Days of Man*,[414] the story of young ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's development as he grows up in a village, goes to school in Ṭanṭā, and

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[413]See, e.g., Quṭb, Sayyid, *Ṭifl min al-qarya*, Köln: Al-Kamel Verlag, 1999 [1946[1]]; Idem, *A Child from the Village*, ed. and transl. John Calvert / William Shepard, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004.

[414]Qāsim, ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm, *Ayyām al-insān as-sabʿa*, Cairo: al-Hay'a al-miṣrīya al-ʿāmma li-l-kitāb, 1996 (1969[1]); Idem (Abdel-Hakim Kassem), *The Seven Days of Man*.

increasingly loses faith in his society and its values. The narrative evolves around the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, recurring year after year in a different form. The young boy ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz adores his father and his friends who are preparing to travel to the Sayyid's mawlid and hopes to travel with them one day, but the teenager ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, now going to school in Ṭanṭā, grows disillusioned by the oppressive reality he perceives behind the kind and friendly surfaces of the people. The mawlid he once so longed to see now betrays its promise of love and spiritual community and appears to him a tragic self-deception of tired and impoverished people. *Seven Days of Man* is soft in its tone, dominated by a feeling of loss and alienation. It is the story (that carries many autobiographic traits)[415] of a young intellectual's break with what he perceives as an oppressive and stalled society, yet it is full of nostalgia for the communal spirit lost for him.

The fact that a great number of people have mixed feelings about mawlids and experience 'an inner conflict'[416] over them makes it necessary to draw a much more complex image of the debates than I have done so far. Egyptian society is not simply divided into those who wholeheartedly love mawlids and those who sternly oppose them. It should not be a surprise that the ambivalence characteristic to mawlids evokes ambiguous responses. The most striking case of this ambiguity is provided by the young men, often students (whom we encountered in chapter three) who combine a wild, rough atmosphere of celebration with a sarcastic distancing, often even a fundamental critique of the entire event. These people do not come from the old middle classes, and they are not Salafi activists or urban intellectuals. They are typically young men from the countryside or small towns who have some degree of higher education. Often they come from a milieu where Sufism has played an important role, and many of them come from devoted Sufi families. They tend to be ambiguous in their views, loving the mawlid but turning very critical when asked about it by a foreign researcher. While they generally do follow the lines of the reformist and modernist criticism, they do not make a connection between the cult of saints and the festive atmosphere. It is very typical for these young people to argue that mawlids are completely *ḥarām* and an expression of a backward mentality but in the next sentence to state that 'as a festival they are great.'[417] They often hold to a strictly Salafi view of worship and devotion while conveniently ignoring the strict moralism and purity so central to the Salafiya. They represent a form of criticising mawlids that reflects the popularisation of Salafi Islam and the expansion and impoverishment of the middle classes since the 1970s.

During most of the 20th century, the urban middle classes, Salafis and intellectuals were small but hegemonic groups. They dominated public debates, the educational system and a growing part of the religious establishment, but also the arts, modern cities, and the public image of the nation. Yet their power to actually disseminate their views of culture, society and piety among wider segments of the population remained limited largely because these views were connected to means of distinction that were not

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[415]Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, p. 220.

[416]Interview with Saʿd, student at the faculty of arts, and ʿImād, graduate of vocational education, mawlid of as-Sayyida Sukayna, Cairo, 7 August 2002.

[417]Interview with Sayyid, Cairo, 29 May 2003.

distributed with the same generosity of nationalist ideology. Since the 1970s, economic and religious changes have significantly altered the situation. The expansion of state higher education and the spread of Salafi Islam following the Islamic revival have made two key markers of middle-class distinction available to ever wider segments of society. But while the expansion of state education has made a university degree, a central marker of middle-class status, more easily available, its value has dramatically deteriorated. The public sector-based middle classes that emerged in the late 19th centuries have lost much of their economic status to the point that they are now only marginally better off than the lower classes[418] and often way behind new middle classes based on 'popular' professions. Yet young Egyptians continue to aim to enrol in state universities and public sector jobs because they, especially in the countryside, remain attached to high social status. This has led to the development of a rapidly growing lower middle class whose only effective means of distinction are educational capital and reformist religiosity or, following the popular idiom, 'consciousness'.

For the young men who wholeheartedly celebrate mawlids and at the same time criticise them, this criticism is a way to establish class-based hegemony in a world where they have few other means of distinctions available. They come from a rural or lower-class milieu, have no financial means to emancipate themselves from it, and have to watch how people whom they consider their inferior make money they can never hope to make. Criticising women doing *ziyāra* and ridiculing Sufis doing *ḏikr* is one of the ways they have to show that they are superior to their social background very much in the sense of the progressive elitism exhibited by the modernist intellectuals.[419]

The very bluntness and fury of these people calling mawlids a *bidʿa* is a sign of how fragile the distinction actually is. The youths who claim to possess consciousness often have less textual knowledge than many of the Sufis whom these youths claim to be ignorant and backward. Their 'consciousness' is transmitted by an official religious discourse and a school system that provide them with only a heavily simplified and dogmatic view of religion and society and do not support critical independent reasoning.

## *3.3. Hegemonic publics*

Where lies the power of this 'consciousness', then? Its appeal and credibility is only understandable if we view it in the wider context of social change and a shift of hegemony over the public definition of piety, civility and festivity. Lower Egyptian cities and villages[420] are currently undergoing far-reaching transformations that can be observed in changing patterns of economy, religiosity, dress, social distinction, etc. Rural local identities, networks and forms of publicness that have been closely related to a communal piety based on Sufism are giving way to a regional, increasingly individualistic

[418]This is what is meant by the common statement claiming that there are no middle classes left in Egypt. See, e.g., de Koning, *Global Dreams*, pp. 66-69.

[419]Cf. Jansen, 'Het offensief tegen de Zusters van de Broederschap', p. 523.

[420]In Upper Egypt this development has not taken place to the same extent, not only because it is a poorer and more conservative region, but also because of its different system of social hierarchies.

orientation and to forms and standards of publicness that are closer to those defined in modernist and reformist discourse. This transformation is accompanied by the redistribution of markers of middle-class status and a heavily simplified Salafi religiosity that are gaining an increasingly hegemonic position in rural and urban lower-class contexts.

I have often associated public debates and the public sphere with the concept of hegemony. For one thing, this is a fairly straightforward empirical statement. The critical discourse on mawlids has a hegemonic position in public debates, in other words: it sets the standards in the debates on mawlids as an issue concerning religion and society, that is, as a matter of public interest.[421] Most importantly, however, it implies a perspective on public debates that highlights the issues of inclusion and exclusion and relations of power.

Following the writings of Jürgen Habermas,[422] the concept of public sphere, a strongly spatialised translation of German *Öffentlichkeit*, has become highly appreciated in the social sciences. Although originally developed with reference to the emergence and decline of a bourgeois public sphere in 18th- and 19th-century Europe, the concept has also become increasingly popular in the anthropology of contemporary Muslim societies. Dale Eickelman and Armando Salvatore, two of the most prominent proponents of this line of research, have subjected Habermas' originally highly normative concept to a number of modifications to make it applicable to religious discourses in authoritarian societies like Egypt. They describe public sphere as

> 'the site where contests take place over definition of the "common good", and also of the virtues, obligations and rights that members of society require for the common good to be realized.'[423]

Two key features are shared by the public spheres of Habermas and of Eickelman and Salvatore. The first is that the public sphere is conceived of as more or less a singular, open field of debate of issues that concern the common interest. The second is that the moment of inclusion and the potential of empowerment through participation in public debates are highlighted. The public sphere in Muslim societies has, Eickelman and Salvatore argue, become accessible to a growing number of people who are increasingly able to question the traditional bases of religious authority.[424]

It cannot be denied that access to public debates has become easier for middle-class citizens with sufficient education and material resources, and that participation in public debates can have an empowering effect on the people involved, on the condition that their voices are actually heard.[425] However, the focus on the middle classes and the perception of the public sphere as a singular space that can be entered at will has often allowed researchers to conveniently overlook the exclusions that are an elementary part

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[421]See Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, pp. 12-13, 53-58.

[422]Habermas, Jürgen, 'The Public Sphere', *New German Critique* 1 (1974), 3, pp. 49-55; Habermas, Jürgen, 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere', in C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992, pp. 421-459.

[423]Eickelman, Dale / Armando Salvatore, 'Muslim Publics', in Armando Salvatore/ Dale Eickelman (eds), *Public Islam and the Common Good*, Leiden: Brill: 2004, pp. 3-27, here p. 5.

[424]*Ibid.*, Eickelman, 'Mass Higher Education'.

[425]Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 184.

of belonging to 'the public'. For one thing, participation in public debates is bound to certain requirements – education, habitus, access to the media – and thus not available to everyone.[426] Furthermore and most importantly, the public sphere is never only a locus of contesting hegemony: It is also a medium for the establishment and dissemination of it. A site of empowerment, it is simultaneously an instrument of power.[427] This means that the exclusive character of public debates is not only a pragmatic issue of having or not having the means to participate. It is, as Harold Mah has pointed out, based on the way the 'the public' and 'the common good' are established in opposition to particular interests. To be a part of 'the public' is to have the power to define one's particular views and interests as the normal, normative point of view, and to exclude other views and interests as particular or misguided.

> 'Analysis of the public sphere should begin [...] with a recognition that its location is strictly in the political imaginary. The public sphere is a fiction, which, because it can appear real, exerts real political force. The enabling condition of a successfully staged public sphere is the ability of certain groups to make their social group or particularity invisible so that they can they can then appear as abstract individuals and hence universal [...], while other groups are consigned to public performances that always undo themselves because those performances end up proclaiming their own identity, their social particularity.'[428]

Mah further argues that the public sphere (or, to be precise, that particular sphere of debate whose participants have gained the power to distinguish their actions and discourses as 'public') has a tendency, in the perception of the people involved, to transform from a field into a personified entity, 'the public'.[429] This personified or objectified subject of hegemonic truth may not be necessarily called the public. It can be also phrased as the common interest, the nation, or rationality, to name just a few examples. And we may add religion to this list, although it differs in character from the concept of the public, being conceived of as a transcendent truth exterior and superior to the collective will of the believers. Religion does, however, follow the same logic of objectified hegemonic truth that is inherent to the imaginaries of the nation and the public. To claim orthodoxy as opposed to deviations and innovations is a discursive act very similar to claiming to speak in the name of 'the public' as opposed to particular factions.

We can observe this in the way state education and popularised Salafi religiosity are employed by students and young graduates to establish a hegemonic position in relation to their rural and small town milieu and to progressively exclude and block other forms of publicness. When young men go to a mawlid and imitate Sufi *ḏikr* in exaggerated and obscene ways, what they try to do is establish hegemony. For them, the prospect of being part of the modernist and reformist imaginary of the nation, the religion, and rational

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[426]Abu-Lughod, 'Feminist Longings and Post-Colonial Conditions', Moors, 'Introduction: Families in Public Discourse', ; Idem, 'Representing Family Law Debates'; Najmabadi, 'Veiled Discourse – Unveiled Bodies'

[427]Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, pp. 183 f.

[428]Mah, 'Phantasies of the Public Sphere', p. 168.

[429]This transformation is not of permanent nature, however. Mah further argues that the personified public has a tendency to collapse again into the spatialised concept of a public sphere when the hegemonic claims of those who make up the public lose their credibility. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

modernity is a promise of empowerment. And in order to lay claim to inclusion in this imaginary, they not only need to embody its aesthetics of piety, civility and festivity but also have to demonstrate that other groups that lay claim to being the legitimate representatives of religion and the nation are in fact backward, ignorant, or swindlers. Under these conditions, the prospect of empowerment (and we must remember that material resources lacking, it often remains a prospect) for young Egyptians with middle-class aspirations is most easily available through the critique, exclusion and ridiculing of the communal traditions they themselves have often grown up with. To claim 'consciousness' is to put oneself in a position of authority, to grant oneself the right to speak in the name of religion, nation, and public interest. In turn, to present people with differing views or interests as 'ignorant' or 'backward' is to deny their competing claims.

In retrospect, it is clear that, at least in urban upper- and middle-class contexts, the reformist and modernist faction has turned victorious in the struggle over the power to define the values of society. With the spread of mass education (we should remember that teachers, underpaid progressive elitists, are among the strongest representatives of modernist common sense) and Salafi/Islamist discourse on religion and morality (for example, the market on religious books is almost completely dominated by them), the hegemony of the modernist/reformist discourse on festivity, piety and modernity has reached wider parts of society yet without ever losing its exclusive character. Its further dissemination can, however, lead to an inversion of the situation. If middle-class habitus and Salafi religiosity become common on all levels of society, they will lose their exclusive character, which, in turn, will deprive them of their power of distinction and promise of empowerment.

# Chapter Six: The defence of mawlids

## 1. Defending the ideal, criticising the practice

The critical discourse on mawlids is contested by several counter-arguments that come from various sources: people who participate in mawlids and defend their own festive practice, members of the religious establishment who are sympathetic to Sufism and the veneration of saints, and leftist and nationalist intellectuals who see mawlids as an expression of tolerance and national unity. Common to their arguments is that in most cases they work within the terms set by the criticism of mawlids, not questioning its premises but rather trying to prove that mawlids actually more or less fit them, or can be made to fit them. This recognition of and attempt to be included in modernist and reformist hegemony is a key feature of the apologetic discourses expressed in public debates. This is not necessarily the case, however, in informal discussions in which the standards set by the critical discourse may actually be subverted or openly questioned.

The debate on mawlids is by no means one between 'popular' Sufis and 'orthodox' scholars. As far as mawlids are concerned, there is in fact no such thing as a unified orthodoxy. While some scholars and imams take a position close to that of the Salafi doctrine, some remain close to Sufism, and many others cannot be clearly associated with either current. Fundamental criticism of Sufism is not acceptable in al-Azhar, and books condemning Sufism at large are sometimes censored by the Islamic Research Academy (*Maǧmaʿ al-buḥūṯ al-islāmīya*) of al-Azhar.[430] Rituals and customs related to Sufism remain a subject of controversy. Individual scholars are free to express their views and do so frequently, whereas al-Azhar, the Ministry of Religious Endowments and the *Fatwā* Office of the Ministry of Justice remain remarkably silent on such controversial issues as mawlids. There are very few official *fatwās* on mawlids,[431] and *Maǧallat al-Azhar* and

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[430]The Islamic Research Academy is entitled to censor publications if it sees them as opposed to Islam, which it does on a large scale. This censorship most commonly concerns the critique of religion and the religious establishment, and anything related to the Šīʿa, but also the fundamental critique of Sufism. *Taqrīr al-ḥāla ad-dīnīya fī Miṣr*, vol. 2, p. 37.

[431]The last *fatwā* on mawlids by a *šayḫ al-Azhar* was issued in 1965 by Maḥmūd Šaltūt who categorically condemned mawlids (Abu-Zahra, *The Pure and Powerful*, p. 205 f.). The homepage of al-Azhar, which contains a collection of *fatwās* by the *Fatwā* Council of al-Azhar and the *Fatwā* Office of the Ministry of Justice (http://www.alazhr.com/Ftawa/Default2.asp ), has one recent *fatwā* on the subject, issued in 1997 by Sheikh ʿAṭīya Ṣaqr, who approves of mawlids on the condition that the positive aspects of promoting religion outnumber any negative aspects (that, in his view, include most of the actual celebrations) (Ṣaqr, ʿAṭīya, *Fatwā* on the celebration of *mawlid an-nabī*, al-Azhar, May 1997, http://www.alazhr.com/Ftawa/Default.asp?Lang=a&ViewNo=&Action=View&Doc=Doc1&n=3849&StartFrom=3758&Total=110, viewed 16.7.2005). The *Fatwā* Office of the Ministry of Justice has issued recently at least two *fatwās* on the celebration of *mawlid an-nabī*, all in favour of it on the condition that the celebration consists of 'recitation of the Noble Qur'ān and plenty of prayers for the Prophet, God's blessings be upon him, and the organisation of scientific conferences that remind the Muslims of his, God's blessings be upon him, biography and struggle for the sake of God. [...] And these celebrations must be kept free of the mixing of men and women and of any chaos and confusion (*haraǧ wa-maraǧ*) that are opposed to the teachings of Islam, and no instruments of entertainment and music such as *miẓmār* and *ṭabla* and their like may be used in them.' *Fatwā* of the Muftī of the Republic Naṣr Farīd Wāṣil, nr. 752 of the year 2001. The other *fatwā* is: *fatwā* of the Muftī of the Republic ʿAlī Ǧumʿa Muḥammad, nr. 1272 of the year 2004. For

other official publications of al-Azhar do not discuss the subject at all 'because it is a subject of disagreement'.[432]

Since the beginning of the debate on mawlids, the critical view has been challenged by an apologetic discourse that has claimed that mawlids are fully in accordance with religion and morality, and that any possible deviations do not belong to the proper meaning of the mawlid. At the end of the 15th century, Ǧalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī wrote an influential *fatwā* to legitimise *mawlid an-nabī* celebrations on the condition that they remain within the limits of the *šarīʿa*, and the author of the most important collection of Sufi hagiographies until today, ʿAbd al-Wahhāb aš-Šaʿrānī (d. 973/1565) defended the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī against critics but at the same time drew a dividing line between proper and deviant celebrations.[433]

Today, a defence of mawlids accompanied by the explicit exclusion of any deviating activities is a standard topos in the apologetic discourse, so for example in a contemporary hagiography of as-Sayyida Nafīsa which, like many of its kind, devotes a passage to discuss the mawlid.

> '[...] Celebrating the mawlid of a saint [is legitimate, provided it takes place] in a way that is free of anything forbidden that would damage the good commemoration. [The celebration] must contribute to the good, as is the desired purpose of the recitation of the noble Qurʾān, preaching (*waʿẓ*), guidance, the dissemination of Islamic culture, and correct *ḏikr*. Commercial activity and social movement that accompany it do not limit the validity of the magnanimous principles of the *šarīʿa*. Hence, the celebration of the memory [of a saint] does not contradict any provision of the *šarīʿa*, and is to be seen as thanks for the grace of God (*niʿma*). For the rule is that not everything that did not exist in the earliest period [of Islam] is forbidden (*ḥarām*), for otherwise there would be nothing permissible (*ḥalāl*) left in our life. We should not fail to emphasise that celebrating the mawlid of the saints and the pious is not a form of worship (*ʿibāda*) but a praiseworthy custom that contributes to the good. And acts are based on intentions (*al-aʿmāl bi-n-nīyāt*), thus whatever forbidden (*marfūḍ*) things there are in these festivities, their abolishment should be through reform, not prohibition [of the festivals].'[434]

This quote contains two key arguments of the apologetic discourse on mawlids. The first argument states that although mawlids were not celebrated in the age of the Prophet, they are not a forbidden *bidʿa*, firstly because they are not opposed to the spirit of Islam, and secondly because they are a custom, not a form of worship:

> 'We have a *ḥadīṯ* in the Sunna of the Prophet, he said, blessings be upon him: "Who establishes a good custom in Islam, upon him is its reward and the reward of those who follow it after him, without anything being reduced from their reward. And who

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the text of an earlier *fatwā* published in *Maǧallat al-Azhar* in 1993, see Schussman, 'The Legitimacy and Nature of *Mawlid an-Nabī*', p. 218-221, 234.

[432]Interview with Dr. Munǧid as-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Ġanī Šādī, lecturer of Islamic *daʿwa* and culture at al-Azhar University, Cairo, 7 June 2003; interview with Sheikh ʿAbd al-Muʿizz al-Ġazzār.

[433]aš-Šaʿrānī, Abū l-Mawāhib ʿAbd al-Wahhāb b. Aḥmad, *aṭ-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā al-musammāt bi-lawāḥiq al-anwār fī ṭabaqāt al-aḫyār*, ed. Ḫalīl Manṣūr, Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-ʿilmīya, 1997, pp. 262 ff.; Idem, *Laṭāʾif al-minan wa-l-aḫlāq fī bayān wuǧūb at-taḥadduṯ bi-niʿmat Allāh ʿalā l-iṭlāq*, Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-ʿāmira, 1311 [1894], vol. 1, p. 251.

[434]Sirāǧ, an-Nabawī Ǧabr, *as-Sayyida Nafīsa karīmat ad-dārīn*, Cairo: al-Maktaba at-tawfīqīya, undated, pp. 40 f.

establishes a bad custom, upon him is its sin/burden (*wizr*)."[435] [...] And there is the *ḥadīṯ* that says that 'every innovation is an error and every error leads to hell', but the Prophet nevertheless also said: "Who establishes a good custom, upon him is its reward", so the meaning of the *ḥadīṯ* is that there will be novelties like the computer and internet and television and radio: these are of course all contemporary inventions [...] which can be either profitable or destructive for society. [...] What is intended with "novelties"[436] in the *ḥadīṯ* are novelties in Islamic Law, which are known to damage religion. Like for example, we cannot change a legal rule (*qāʿida fiqhīya*). But what is subject to change, by the way of analogy (*qiyās*) or reasoning (*istinbāṭ*) is custom.'[437]

Defining mawlids as a custom is a powerful argument because it inverts the critical argument claiming that mawlids are merely a custom and have nothing to do with proper religion. By asserting that mawlids belong to the realm of custom, however pious, the apologetics can effectively avoid the entire discussion of *bidʿa* because then mawlids are not an innovation in religion. The same logic of stating that the scriptural references used by critics do not apply to mawlids is also employed for the defence of pilgrimage. The *ḥadīṯ* restricting pilgrimage to the three mosques in Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem speaks only of travelling to mosques. Hence, argue the Sufi apologetics, it does not apply to visiting the burial sites of the pious. This argumentation is further used to legitimise the cult of saints, interpreted as a way to honour and commemorate some of the grandest heroes of Islam. As such, it is not a form of worship, and hence it cannot be *širk*.

The second key argument of the apologetic discourse states that mawlids have a positive social and religious function, promoting religiosity, charity, and the local economy. Any deviating, immoral or improper practices do not belong to the celebration of the mawlid and must be removed by means of reform.[438] This is a direct counter-argument to the claim that mawlids are opposed to the order, morals and consciousness of modern/Islamic society. But it also implies a radical redefinition of the festivity. What is strikingly absent in this defence of mawlids is any attempt to legitimise mawlids as they are. The differentiation of a mawlid into separate – positive or negative – aspects allows the Sufi and scholarly apologetics to defend mawlids in principle while being at the same time highly critical of the festive practice.

'On any great occasion not all people who celebrate are committed to the law and good manners (*ādāb*). We cannot take the action of individuals [as a reason to be] against the occasion and the person in whose memory it is held. It is not enough that you research

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[435]*Man sanna fī l-islāmi sunnatan ḥasana fa-lahu aǧruhā wa-aǧru man ʿamila bihā baʿdihi min ġayri an yanquṣa min uǧūrihim šayʾ. Wa-man sanna fī l-islāmi sunnatan sayyiʾa kān ʿalayhi wizruhā wa-wizru man ʿamala bihā min baʿdihi min ġayri an yanquṣa min awzāruhum šayʾ.* Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ: Kitāb az-zakāt, ḥadīṯ* nr. 69; Nisāʾī, *Sunan: Kitāb az-Zakāt, bāb* 64 (*at-taḥrīṣ ʿalā ṣ-ṣadaqa*); Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*: Vol. 4, p. 359, *ḥadīṯ* 19125.

[436]In the beginning of the *ḥadīṯ* 'Every novelty is an innovation etc.'

[437]Interview with Dr. Munǧid as-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Ġanī Šādī, Cairo, 7 June 2003.

[438]See, e.g., Ṣaqr, ʿAṭīya, *Fatwā* on the celebration of *mawlid an-nabī*; Abū l-ʿAzāʾim, as-Sayyid ʿIzz ad-Dīn Māḍī, *al-Iḥtifāl bi-mawālid al-anbiyāʾ wa-l-awliyāʾ muštaraʿ lā mubtadaʿ*, Cairo: Dār al-kitāb aṣ-ṣūfī, 1991; Ibrāhīm, Muḥammad Zakī, *al-Mašrūʿ wa-l-mamnūʿ fī qaḍāyā: al-qubāb, al-maḥārīb, al-masāǧid wa-l-qubūr, sadd ar-riḥāl, al-mawālid, ziyārat al-qubūr, masǧid ar-rasūl, at-tabarruk bi-ṣ-ṣaliḥīn .. wa-baʿḍ mā yataʿallaq bi-kull ḏālika*, Cairo: Maṭbūʿāt wa-rasāʾil al-ʿašīra al-muḥammadīya, 1996; Saʿd, Ṭāhā ʿAbd ar-Raʾūf / Saʿd Ḥasan Muḥammad ʿAlī, *as-Sayyida Nafīsa: nafīsat al-ʿilm wa-karīmat ad-dārīn*, Cairo: Maktabat aṣ-ṣafā, 2000; pp. 82 f.; *al-Liwāʾ al-Islāmī*, 12.7.2001: Muḥammad aš-Šandawīlī, 'al-ʿUlamāʾ fī s-sāḥa ar-riḍwānīya bi-l-Uqṣur: al-iḥtifāl bi-mawālid al-awliyāʾ mašrūʿ wa-tanqiyatuhā min al-bidaʿ wāǧib', p. 15.

the festivities which, in fact, are diverse. You also need to study the persons who are being celebrated. They are the source of morality, conduct (*sulūk*) and spirituality. This can lead to an understanding that is completely opposed to the understanding of the people who celebrate the mawlid.'[439]

The 'true' mawlid evoked in this account of a reformist Sufi sheikh is an occasion for following the pious example of the saint, proliferating religious knowledge, reciting the Qur'ān, gathering people together, and providing charity to the needy. These are all elements that are present in the festive practice and ideology of Sufi pilgrims. But it is striking how many other things are excluded from the realm of the true mawlid: amusements – not only those that are considered illegal or immoral but also swing-boats and bumper cars –, music in Sufi *ḏikr*, usually referred to as 'the use of *ṭabla*s and *miẓmār*s',[440] the mixing of men and women, emotional votive rituals at the shrine, and any kind of 'muddle' (*harǧala*) or 'chaos and confusion' (*haraǧ wa-maraǧ*).[441] Finally, love and joy – key elements of the Sufi mawlid – rarely feature in the apologetic discourse. Mawlids are represented primarily as an occasion of learning, obeying God and strengthening social bonds.

This apologetic discourse is strongly embedded in a suspicion of music, ambivalence, and festive joy. In its view of morality, festive order, and the habitus of piety, this defence of mawlids in fact looks very similar to much of the criticism of mawlids. This is not, as I argued in an earlier article, because the vocabulary and logic of Islamic scholarship would prevent other strategies of argumentation.[442] In fact, a defence of festive joy, even ambivalence, is very well possible within the framework of Islamic scholarly discourse:

'The origin of this custom is the celebration of the people of Medina upon the arrival of the Apostle of God from Mecca. They came out as one man (*'alā qalb raǧul wāḥid*), men and women, young and old, singing:

"The full moon has risen over us, from the passes of al-Wadā'
We owe thanks, for what a supplicant has prayed to God
Oh messenger among us, you brought the best commandment
You came to honour the creatures, welcome, oh best supplicant"[443]

[...] And did the Prophet say "Sit down sir, calm down madam, stop this nonsense"? No he didn't. He let them do so because he saw the extent of their affection for their prophet

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[439]Interview with Sheikh Aḥmad 'Abd al-Hādī al-Qaṣabī, sheikh of the Ṭarīqa al-Ḫalwatīya al-Qaṣabīya and member of the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders, mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2002.

[440]Unlike *ṭabla*, the *miẓmār* – an instrument similar to the mediaeval European shawm, the predecessor of the modern oboe – is nowadays hardly ever used in Sufi *ḏikr*. It belongs to the standard repertoire of critical discourse on music, however, and therefore keeps cropping up.

[441]Interview with a member of al-Ḥāmidīya aš-Šāḏilīya, mawlid of Sīdī al-Mursī Abū l-'Abbās, Alexandria, 24 July 2003; Ṣaqr, 'Aṭīya, *Fatwā* on the celebration of *mawlid an-nabī*.

[442]I had assumed that 'the tradition of Islamic scholarship, in its traditional as well as its modern form, especially seems to lack the idiom to express issues of festive joy and temporary utopia.' Schielke, Samuli, 'Habitus of the Authentic, Order of the Rational: Contesting Saints Festivals in Contemporary Egypt', *Critique. Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 12 (Fall 2003), Nr. 2, pp. 155-172, here p. 166, note 37.

[443]*Ṭala' al-badru 'alaynā min ṯanayāt al-Wadā' / waǧaba aš-šukru 'alaynā mā da'ā li-llāhi dā' / ayyuhā l-mab'ūṯu fīnā ǧi'ta bi-ḫayr il-muṭā' / ǧi'ta šarrafta l-ḫalīqa marḥaban yā ḫayra dā'*. See Ibn Kaṯīr (Ibn Kathīr), Imām Abū l-Fidā' Ismā'īl, *The Life of the Prophet Muḥammad: A Translation of Al-Sīra al-Nabawīya*, ed. Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Wāḥid, transl. Trevor Le Gassick, Reading: Garnet Publishing, 1998, Vol 2, pp. 177-178.

and guest.'
[...]
'There is one major positive side [to mawlids] because of which the state, especially in Egypt, does not hate mawlids, and that is that it relieves and lightens the minds of the people. Because if the people take the word "saint" or "mawlid" as a reason for recreation, then this is not a reason for concern as long as it is about recreation of the mind and no trouble occurs, and the state does not prohibit it. And this is based on the saying of the Prophet, peace and blessing be upon him, to Abū Hurayra: "Oh Abū Hurayra, recreate the hearts from time to time, for the hearts rust like iron rusts, and they are polished by the invocation (*ḏikr*) of God, Lord of the worlds."[444] And thence comes the proverb that says: "An hour for your heart and an hour for your Lord". The hour that is for your heart mustn't oppose or transgress religion.'[445]

This form of argumentation is possible and present but not common in the scholarly and Sufi defence of mawlids because it does not fit the strategy chosen by most Sufi-minded Azhari scholars,[446] the Sufi establishment, and certain Sufi orders to confront modernist and reformist critics with their own standards of argumentation. These various actors share in a discourse I call reformist Sufism, based on a partial redefinition of Sufi rituals while holding to mystical spirituality and charismatic organisation. Reformist Sufis defend mawlids, shrines, Sufi *ḏikr*, etc., but at the same time radically redefine them and criticise their contemporary forms.[447]

Reformist Sufism predates the Salafi reformist movement[448] and has been its breeding ground to a significant extent.[449] In the case of Egypt, however, we can observe that the rise of reformist Sufi discourse has been related to the rise of the new modernist and reformist understandings of piety and society. The key moment in the emergence of reformist Sufism in Egypt may have been the circular issued in 1881 – a year that was marked by substantial debate on Sufi rituals – by Sheikh ʿAbd al-Bāqī al-Bakrī, the freshly inaugurated head of the Sufi orders. In response to growing public criticism and Khedivial pressure, the circular called for a strict reform of Sufi rituals and tight administrative control of the orders.[450] The circular was followed by a Khedivial decree in 1895, amended in 1903, and laws on Sufi Orders issued in 1905 and, more recently, in

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[444]*Yā Abā Hurayra, arīḥū l-qulūb sāʿatan wa-sāʿa, fa-inna al-qulūb tasḍa' kamā yaṣda' al-ḥadīd wa-ǧalā'uhā ḏikr Allāh rabb al-ʿālamīn.* I have not been able to trace this *ḥadīṯ* in the collections available to me.

[445]Interview with Dr. Munǧid as-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Ġanī Šādī, Cairo, 7 June 2003. For the contemporary scholarly defence of festive joy within the limits of the *šarīʿa* see also *Bayān li-n-nās min al-Azhar aš-šarīf*, vol. 2., Cairo: al-Azhar aš-šarīf, 1984, pp. 373-378. For the use of the topic of *sāʿa wa-sāʿa* ('an hour and an hour', or 'from time to time') to legitimise laughter and amusement in the classical scholarly tradition see Ibn al-Ǧawzī, ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān b. ʿAlī (1116-1201), *Aḫbār al-ḥamqā wa-l-muġaffalīn min al-fuqahā' wa-l-mufassirīnwa-r-ruwāt wa-l-muḥaddiṯīn wa-š-šuʿarā'*, ed. Laǧnat iḥyā' at-turāṯ al-ʿarabī, Beirut: Dār al-ǧīl, Dār aṯ-ṯaqāfa al-ǧadīda, 1988, pp. 18-20.

[446]Even the Azhari scholar Dr. Munǧid cited above spoke at first in much stricter tones about the festivity and only after he saw that I was not intent on criticising mawlids for their festive atmosphere he moved to legitimise festive joy, music and the well-mannered mixing of men and women on the condition that the commands of religion are not transgressed.

[447]See Chih, *Le soufime au Quotidien*, pp. 141-153; Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform*, pp. 21-31, 70-74, 91; Sedgwick, *Saints and Sons*, pp. 195-219.

[448]Baljon, 'Shah Waliullah and the Dargah'; Sedgwick, *Saints and Sons*, pp. 27-49.

[449]See Weismann, *Taste of Modernity*, Hudson,'Reading al-Shaʿrānī'.

[450]De Jong, *Ṭuruq*, pp. 96-101; 194-200.

1975.[451] These regulations and laws created a bureaucratic framework to increase state control of Sufi orders and laid guidelines on proper rituals that have remained influential until the present. The tone of the circular from 1881 can be heard in all of them: discipline Sufi rituals and festivities, ban their colourful, ambivalent, uncontrollable, spontaneous elements, and make them comply with the new ideas of religion and society gaining currency at the time.

The circular, would it ever have been fully applied, would have effectively meant the end of popular mawlid festivals. It prohibited, among other things, the use of drums in public, religious assemblies in public thoroughfares, the establishment of new mawlids, all processions and ceremonies that had been established within the past 10 years, cafés near places of worship, and any vocal performance (most notably singing) at mawlids except prayers for the Prophet and God. The circular further ordered that all mawlids, ceremonies and processions must follow these rules, and that madmen (*maǧāḏīb*) 'must be arrested by the police and sent either to a hospital or a lunatic asylum'.[452]

The far-reaching demands of this manifesto have been partly implied at the most (see chapter eight), but they marked the beginning of a reformist turn in the Sufi establishment. The emphasis on learning and disciplined contemplation, often accompanied by a harsh criticism of ambivalent festive and ritual practice, has since become the leading tone of official, state-controlled Sufism as represented by the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders.[453] In the wake of this shift, several reformist Sufi orders emerged in the early 20th century. Among them were al-Ḥāmidīya aš-Šāḏilīya, al-ʿAzmīya and al-Ǧāzūlīya al-Ḥusaynīya whose attempts of ritual reform I discuss in chapter eight. These groups share a high emphasis on constrained, disciplined rituals, a nationalist ideology of activism and progress, and a centralised organisation[454] – all key issues to the discourse of modernity and Islamic reform, and hence markers of inclusion in the modernist and reformist public sphere. It would be misguided, however, to describe them as 'neo-Sufism',[455] a term that suggests that Sufi reform implies a departure from Sufi tradition, just as it would not be accurate to describe the reformist interpretation of Islam as 'neo-Islam'. Reformist Sufi orders represent a discourse of reform and purification within the Sufi milieu. On the level of individual trajectories and the dissemination of Sufi discourse there are no clear lines of demarcation between reformist and ecstatic Sufism.

When reformist Sufis speak in favour of mawlids, they defend their collective identity and base for mobilisation. Although love and joy often remain central to the festive experience of reformist Sufis, they are not part of the apologetic discourse because they do not serve the search for recognition in public debates, a key concern of reformist Sufis who attempt to prove that Sufism is actually very orthodox and modern by redefining

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[451]For the Khedivial decree and the Sufi Ordinance of 1905, see de Jong, *Ṭuruq*, pp. 201-214; for the law of 1975, see Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform*, pp. 257-292.

[452]De Jong, *Ṭuruq*, pp. 176-200.

[453]See, e.g., *Maǧallat al-Islām wa-t-Taṣawwuf*, February 1961: 'Iṣlāḥ al-mawālid wa-taṭwīruhā bayn mašyaḫat aṭ-ṭuruq aṣ-ṣūfīya wa-muḥāfaẓat al-Qāhira', pp. 26-28; *at-Taṣawwuf al-Islāmī*, June 2003: Ḥasan Šinnāwī, 'al-Mawālid: īǧābīyātuhā wa-salbīyātuhā', pp. 38-39.

[454]See Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi*, Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform*.

[455]For a critique of the concept, see O'Fahey, Rex Sean / Bernd Radtke, 'Neo-Sufism Reconsidered', *Der Islam* 70 (1993), pp. 52-87.

Sufi rituals – which, in the critical discourse, are taken to reflect the mystic's state of mind – to embody the reformist and modernist habitus. If Sufism is to be accepted as the inner truth of Islam, and if truth has to speak in solemn tones to a disciplined audience, then a 'true' Sufi mawlid must be based on the habitualisation of morals and piety and the dissemination of religious doctrine. It has to be a stern and formal affair. To make them acceptable for the discourses on piety and festivity, mawlids are re-defined from ambivalent festivals that express a stark contrast to daily life into constructive celebrations that have one clear meaning and where boundaries are enforced, not suspended.

The apologetic discourse on mawlids powerfully demonstrates the hegemonic power of reformist and modernist common sense. To publicly oppose it one has to accept its logic and fulfill its habitual criteria of inclusion and exclusion. It is a different question, however, to ask to what extent this apologetic discourse is taken seriously by its proponents and to what extent it is a public rationalisation for festive behaviour that is quite different in practice.[456] As we see in chapter eight, reformist Sufi groups and state actors do translate this discourse into a festive practice that can significantly change the order and atmosphere of mawlids. But individual experiences tend to be more complex than public discourses, and the same Sufi sheikhs who, in their role as members of the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders define mawlids as an occasion for learning may, in their role as fathers, take their children to the amusements area and have a good time there. And there is another, parallel discourse in defence of mawlids that does highlight love and festive utopia and, to a certain degree, questions the foundations of the critical discourses. Although it is rarely expressed in public debates in the press, religious literature, *fatwās* etc., it is strongly present in informal discussions I have had with people who participate in mawlids.

## 2. Defence of festive joy and subversion of orthodoxy

### *2.1. Good intentions*

In 1882, ʿAlī Mubārak Pasha (1823-1893), a prominent intellectual and politician of his time – best known as the author of *al-Ḫiṭaṭ at-Tawfiqīya*, a voluminous chronicle and geography of contemporary Egypt, he was also one of the first Arab Egyptians to become a minister in the Khedivial cabinet[457] – responded to a criticism that had gained currency in his time:

> '[The Englishman said:][458] I have seen some sheikhs speak about these mawlids, condemning them because of the violations of the *šarīʿa* that happen in them, and wishing their abolition for this reason. And I have seen some people say that even if there was no other harm in them, alone the fact that the people at [mawlids] suspend their work and

[456]See Chih, *Le soufisme au quotidien*, p. 143.

[457]Reid, Donald Malcolm, 'The ʿUrabi revolution and the British conquest, 1879-1882', in M.W. Daly (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt, vol. 2: Modern Egypt, from 1517 to the end of the twentieth century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 217-236, here pp. 222, 224; Goldschmidt, *Biographical Dictionary*, p. 131; Mubārak, *al-Ḫiṭaṭ at-tawfīqīya*.

[458]The text is narrated as a dialogue between an Englishman and a sheikh, embodying European and Islamic knowledge respectively.

usual affairs is reason enough [to call for their abolition], so how do you view that, professor?

The sheikh said: Whoever looks at the thing from one of its many sides and does not explore the whole of its circumstances and all of its specific features may judge it with condemnation or with praise based on that particular side. And if he would look at other sides he would change his judgement, and the same applies to those you mentioned who speak about the mawlid of as-Sayyid [al-Badawī] [...] Even if some of the people who gather in the mawlid of as-Sayyid undeniably do cause some affairs that violate the noble *šarīʿa*, [...] a thing may not be judged in itself based on one of its aspects, especially if its aspects are many. For you know that all times, all countries, and all generations are never free of some affairs that violate the Law and nature. But peoples, places and times are not judged in their entirety on the grounds of those among them who cause [violations of the Law]. And neither are the violations of the Law that happen specific to the mawlid of as-Sayyid, for they take place everywhere, as we have said. And the mawlid is not restricted to them, for it has countless and undeniable good deeds, invocations, prayers, and charities. So why close our eyes to the good and focus on the bad?

In this mawlid there are merits and profits that are not hidden from anybody, like the profit of the railways and those who offer animals and boats for rent for transport to and from the mawlid, and the profit of people who provide tents and carpets (*farrāšīn*), cooks and other craftsmen and of the people who rent apartments and sell goods, and the extensive trade in [the mawlid]. For we see that many of the merchants from Ṭanṭā and from all cities of Egypt are dependent on this mawlid for the payment of their debts and the running of their affairs, and look forward to this occasion for its abundance in selling and buying, and taking and giving. And the seller profits through the price of the goods he sells, and the buyer through the goods he buys. [...] And who goes to this mawlid with no intention of trade or the like, will not fail to bring profit to others. And as for his suspending his work and being idle for a few short days, it causes no damage to him or others. For if he does not work also when there is no mawlid, then he is idle himself and the mawlid doesn't make him any idler. And if he is busy with work and business, labour and toil when there is no mawlid, then the mawlid offers him an outing and a change of atmosphere, health and recreation that make him return afterwards to his work with new vigour, fresh desire, dedicated ambition, and unweary mind. Hence he compensates for what was left undone during the days of the mawlid. For human minds, if work and labour persist upon them, are overcome by fatigue, weariness and boredom. For this reason they need recreation from time to time to regain their vigour.'[459]

ʿAlī Mubārak's view, expressed by the literary character of a sheikh in dialogue with an Englishman, is remarkable in its recognition and acceptance of ambivalence: there are many sides to a mawlid, and one's judgement depends on what one looks at: even if there are some violations of the Law (*šarīʿa*), in general the mawlid is a positive occasion for devotion, trade and recreation. This argument is based on a sense of piety, festivity and society very different from that of the 20th- and 21st-century critics, and very similar to that shared by a large proportion of the people who participate in mawlids: there are times to work and times to celebrate and there is nothing wrong with devotion, trade and recreation coming together in the realm of the saint. The presence of some immoral practices is, if not accepted, then at least tacitly tolerated.

Today, this line of argumentation is not common in public debates but can be often heard from people who participate in mawlids, mainly Sufis and people sympathetic to Sufism. Not needing to stand in public debate against reformist critics, they take a

[459]Mubārak, *ʿAlam ad-Dīn*, vol. 1, pp. 160-163.

significantly different approach to defending mawlids based on three central premises not shared by the apologetic discourse of reformist Sufism:
– Mawlids are an expression of love.
– The festive atmosphere of mawlids is unproblematic as long as basic moral norms are observed.
– Mawlids cannot be judged by their appearance.
According to the first premise, mawlids are a fully legitimate expression of joy for and love of the family of the Prophet. To be opposed to mawlids is to lack the love that makes one celebrate the mawlid:

> 'There are people who are deprived of this gift (*'aṭā'*). He (i.e. someone opposed to mawlids) lives as a Muslim but doesn't know how to love. Love is not my property. The hearts are between the fingers of the Merciful who turns them around as He wills. [...] There is Law (šarʿ) and there is Truth (*ḥaqīqa*), but he is far from it, can't believe in the Truth.[...] In his state he can say what he wants. His job are the lines in the book, and our job is what is between the lines. [...] It's a job of the heart. My heart is relaxed, his heart is sick. He has the illness, and I have the cure. We follow the Law, apply all it tells us, but also follow the conduct/path (*sulūk*) of Truth, thus we have more than he. We can't fix him unless God goes with him. [...] He says to everything "why?" or "explain". What can I explain to him? It has to be experienced.'[460]

This account implies that celebrating or not celebrating mawlids is a matter beyond rational discussion: the critics are only concerned with the *šarīʿa*, the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) side of religion, and cannot be made to understand its inner (*bāṭin*) meaning unless God opens their hearts to it. Love is given by God and cannot be taught, hence there is no use in argumentation.

This mystical view is accompanied by more pragmatic responses trying to show that in fact there is nothing wrong with most of the things the critics pinpoint. So for example in the account of Muḫtār, engineer and a graduate of al-Azhar whom I met at the mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa. When I told him about my encounter with the teacher ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm (see above pp. 80-81) that had taken place earlier the same evening, he asked me to recount the points of criticism ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm had made so that he could reply to them. I mentioned the themes of dancing in the *ḏikr*, the mixing of sexes, not working, and the veneration of saints. This is his reply:

> 'Did you in your life ever dance in a disco? What is the disco based on? Music, isn't it? [...] When you dance disco it brings you relaxation. [...] It's the same way [with *ḏikr*]: When I go and do *ḏikr* like this and say "Allāh! Allāh!" it means that my spirit becomes clean, good and pure, plus that the physical movement also discharges the tension that is in me.' [...]
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> 'When he (ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm) speaks of mixing of men and women, he means, how come we as Muslims allow that one of us goes out with a woman, or a woman goes out with a man in the street. But that's a normal thing, of course she goes out. We have a whole lot of respect. You know, if someone would grab a girl, he would find the community of those who believe that there is no deity but God (*ummat lā ilāha illā llāh*) come down and beat him. [...] We have a clearly defined religion, you see. Religion clearly defines that it's forbidden (*ḥarām*). What is it that is forbidden? Mixing? Or adultery? Adultery and mixing are not the same thing. You must understand what mixing means. It doesn't mean that I can go and grab a woman in the corner and do adultery with her, no! It means that

[460]Interview with Fārūq, chief agricultural engineer in the public sector, mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 20 August 2002.

there can be ladies in the mawlid, ladies doing *ḏikr*. What's the problem with that? There isn't.'
[...]
'When you see all the people standing around here, eating and drinking and buying and selling, it doesn't mean that we are not working. If I want to go to celebrate your birthday, I take a holiday or go after work and come to visit you and celebrate you, what's the problem? It's not like the people here would be neglecting their work. I for example got my work done and then came here to see the people I love and do *ẓiyāra* [to as-Sayyida Nafīsa]. [...] And as for the people who eat at the *ḫidmas*, some come from work and are tired and hungry, and some others are sick or old and can't work. [...] I bring what I can from my pocket to assist them.'
[...]
'There is one who goes to visit as-Sayyida Nafīsa and speaks out a prayer (*du'ā'*) and recites the Fātiḥa and kisses the *maqṣūra* and says "Oh Lord, and Prophet and as-Sayyida Nafīsa, I want a water buffalo,[461] I want a car, I want to become rich, I want to become a doctor". And there is another one who's educated, who comes to read her the Fātiḥa and says that there are people who are close to our Lord and he wants to follow their example. Like for example if you'd say "I'd like to be like Dr. Muḫtār", is there anything wrong with that? And there is the first one who doesn't know to read or write and says 'Oh Lord give me wealth with the *baraka* of as-Sayyida Nafīsa', but his intention (*nīya*) is pure and correct, only he doesn't know how to express it.[462] He is in error though, doesn't understand, he's not able to express it correctly, but the purpose is that he prays to our Lord and recites the Fātiḥa.'[463]

Muḫtār wholeheartedly approves of the festive atmosphere of mawlids. This is the second commonplace of this discourse: As long as basic moral and religious commandments are observed, the relativisation of boundaries is not a problem. Music is a medium that can serve both profane and religious purposes. As long as there is no adultery, mixing is not a problem. If people work most of the time, why not spend a night in celebration sometimes?

But Muḫtār does not accept everything that happens in the mawlid. His discussion of *ẓiyāra* shows that he takes the accusation of *širk* (polytheism) seriously and adopts a reformist interpretation of the true meaning of *ẓiyāra*: following the pious example of the saint and reading her the Fātiḥa. But even when he criticises the behaviour of the pilgrims who do *ẓiyāra* for *baraka* he refuses to judge their intentions. This is the third central premise of this discourse in defence of mawlids: actions, or the *ẓāhir*, do not allow conclusions to intentions, or the *bāṭin*. Celebrating a mawlid is based on the intention of love, and 'everyone expresses his love in his own way. That is why the mawlid has

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[461]For the topic of shrines and water buffalos, see above pp. 90, 95-96.

[462]This is an argument well-founded in scholarly discourse, based on the principle of Islamic jurisprudence that actions are judged according to their intentions. So for example in a *fatwā* of the *Muftī* of the Republic:
'As for what the questioner mentioned about people who say "assistance oh Ḥusayn" or "assistance oh Sayyida Zaynab", [the ruling is that] actions are judged by intentions of the people who commit them, and who says so is responsible for his intention in doing so, and it is the exalted and sublime God who judges him, based on the saying of the Apostle of God, God's blessing and peace be upon him: "Actions are based on intentions" (*innamā l-a'māl bi-n-nīyāt*. Buḫārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ: kitāb bad' al-waḥy, bāb* 1.).' *Fatwā* of the *Muftī* of the Republic Naṣr Farīd Wāṣil, nr. 752 of the year 2001.

[463]Interview with Muḫtār, engineer and a graduate of al-Azhar, mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 22 August 2002.

many appearances.'[464]

Muḫtār's careful defence of *ziyāra* also shows how central the issue is for critics and adherents alike: The belief in miracles (*karāmāt*) of healing and success through the *baraka* of saints is a key motif both in the pilgrimage to mawlids and their reformist depiction as *širk*. For this reason, pilgrims are very keen to point out that their veneration of the saints has nothing to do with *širk*. In their view they seek closeness to God by the way of His friends but do not worship them. The miracles that happen[465] are not acts of the saint but of God: 'Going to a saint is like going to a doctor: It's not the doctor but God who heals me. But the doctor is the intermediary cause (*sabab*).'[466] In this discourse miracles play a double role acting simultaneously as a subject of defence and as proof:

> 'There are many poor people here, but in spite of their poverty they come here to spend for charity. That's proof that it's a spiritual thing, because it's for God. They have faith (*ʿaqīda*). And when they come to as-Sayyid al-Badawī they get healed from illnesses here. That is of course through the power of God, not through His servant.'[467]

This man working in a television crew sees the mawlid as a highly spiritual event for the same reason that provoked the outrage of a journalist in the leftist al-Ahālī (see above p. 100). The fact that poor people spend their little money on the mawlid here appears no longer as an expression of ignorance, but of true devotion. Most importantly however, this account brings miracles into the centre of focus, as a subject of defence and as a form of proof in one instance. Miracles, we are told, are true and legitimate because they are the work of God, not His servants. And if the Almighty heals the sick and helps the oppressed in the presence of the saints, then this should sufficiently prove that pilgrimage to the friends of God is fully legitimate.

The use of miracles as a form of proof includes not only the success of those close to the friends of God, but also the punishment of those opposed to them. This is a very established topic; it was used in the 16th century by aš-Šaʿrānī who reports at length how as-Sayyid al-Badawī severely punished people who criticised his mawlid.[468] But it is not only the critics of Sufism who are threatened by miraculous punishment. This topic also includes troublemakers who try to introduce *munkarāt* to the mawlid, and works as a powerful incentive to persuade people to undertake the pilgrimage.

> 'I have two colleagues at work, one is a long-bearded Salafi and the other is a Muslim Brotherhood activist. I always have arguments with them, but as a Sufi I'm relaxed because I know that I have the support of *ahl al-bayt* behind me. And really, once after they had made some very nasty comments, they got into serious trouble with the boss the very same day.'[469]

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[464]Interview with al-Ḥāǧǧ ʿĀdil, Sufi pilgrim to the mawlid of as-Sayyida Zaynab, Cairo, 28 September 2002.

[465]Most miracles do actually 'happen': they are experiences of success that may or may not be interpreted as divine intervention: getting healed from a serious illness, finding a lost wallet, winning a difficult lawsuit, having a problem unexpectedly solved. See above p. 21.

[466]Sheikh ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Bāqī al-Ḥabībī in a sermon to his followers at the mawlid of Sīdī al-Ḥabībī, Cairo, 15 August 2002.

[467]Middle-aged man working for a television production unit to broadcast the Friday prayer from the mosque of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 18 October 2002.

[468]aš-Šaʿrānī, *aṭ-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, pp. 262-264.

[469]Interview with Ašraf, a follower of al-Ḥāǧǧa Sihām, mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 1 June 2003.

> 'Sīdī Abū l-Ḥasan only allows those to his mawlid who have his approval. Those with a sincere intention find the travel easy, while others are prevented from coming here. A few years ago there was a guy who wanted to bring a truckload of beer to the mawlid. He had an accident and his truck exploded.'[470]
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> 'I should have gone to the mawlid of Sīdī Abū l-Ḥasan. I wanted to but I had no time, and I had a really bad day yesterday, with a lot of trouble. Sīdī Abū l-Ḥasan punished me because I missed his mawlid.'[471]

With its acceptance of ambivalence and its reference to miracles, the defence of festive joy can be quite successful in informal discussions. But it has less chance of success in the public debates dominated by reformist and modernist discourse because it subverts some of its central assumptions.[472] Yet it is not a subversive strategy: love, joy and invisible esoteric truth are not represented as an alternative to exoteric religion and modern civic order. In the eyes of the people who express these views, many of them middle-class professionals devoted to Sufism, they are fully compatible: there is a time to work and a time to celebrate, a time for exoteric religious obligations and a time for esoteric love, a time for rational arguments and a time for miracles. This view does become subversive, however, in the context of the reformist and modernist construction of piety and civility because it does not recognise the dissociations that define the latter.

## *2.2. The antinomian mawlid*

Sometimes the defence of festive joy can be openly subversive. Such an antinomian view that intentionally subverts or inverts exoteric religious norms (and not just the boundaries that mark them) is not common in everyday religious discourse, however. People may neglect or manipulate religious norms in their daily life, but they seldom question their actual validity. In Sufi context, however, there is a historical tradition of antinomian readings of religion. Take, for example, the mediaeval Malāmatīya, mystics who, in the belief that true piety can never be motivated by reward or public acceptance, consciously broke with exoteric norms.[473] Today, some Sufis hold that mystics sufficiently advanced on the mystic path may not need to fulfill their exoteric obligations. Sufi poetry makes frequent use of antinomian themes such as erotic love, wine, and the religious vocabulary of Christianity.[474] They are used as symbolic representations of

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[470]Interview with ʿAbd an-Nabī, a Sufi pilgrim from Idfū to the mawlid of Sīdī Abū l-Ḥasan aš-Šāḏilī, Ḥumayṭara, 17 January 2005.

[471]Interview with Ḥamdī, vegetable vendor from Kōm Ombō, Aswān, 20 January 2005.

[472]It does sometimes appear in the press and religious booklets in a non-polemic form that reproduces an ideal image of a beautiful festival full of spirituality and joy, however without open reference to the criticism of mawlids. See, e.g., *al-Ǧumhūrīya*, 6.12.1996: Sayyid Iskandarānī (text) / Ašraf Šaʿbān (photographs), 'al-Layla al-kabīra li-s-sitt aṭ-ṭāhira: milyūnā "murīd" aḥāṭū as-sayyida Zaynab', p. 13; *Ṣawt al-Umma*, 18.7.2001: Aḥmad Abū l-Ḥasan, 'Madad yā Ḥusayn madad', p. 20; Sirāǧ, an-Nabawī Ǧabr, *Manāqib al-imāmayn al-Ḥasan wa-l-Ḥusayn*, Cairo: al-Maktaba at-tawfīqīya, undated [ca. 1997], pp. 73 f.

[473]Schimmel, Annemarie, *Mystische Dimensionen des Islam: Die Geschichte des Sufismus*, Köln: Diederichs, 1985, pp. 130-132.

[474]Interview with Dr. Ibrāhīm ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ, folklorist, High Institute of Folklore, Academy of Arts, Cairo, 26 July 2003.

mystic experience,[475] but the ambiguity of these themes is obvious and intended.

The persistence of antinomian motifs in the Sufi tradition allows the interpretation of mawlids as an occasion in which sinners can be drawn to God. In this interpretation, participation in the mawlid despite its controversial character and the presence of immoral practices gains a very different quality:

> 'I'll tell you another, very strange story. One of the *ʿulamāʾ* comes and says to the [Sufi] sheikh: "What's this? Our lord sheikh, why do you put on the mawlid? That mawlid collects the garbage of society." The sheikh replied: "Why would I want the good ones? What would I do with them? I want the bad ones." The *ʿālim* asked: "Why?" The sheikh told him: "Just like that." The *ʿālim* stood up and said: "Alright, your excellency, what am I supposed to make out of this? You confuse me (or: you're making fun of me)." The sheikh said: "I don't want the good ones, I want the really bad ones. I'll give you a little example. Let's assume that you have a gangster in your street. What will happen? I'll take him from you for a week, and relieve you of him. I take him with me for a week and put myself into trouble and turn him into one like me. What do you think, should I leave him to you? In your street?" The *ʿālim* said to him: "Then I couldn't stay in my house. Alright, I agree with what you are doing, our lord Sheikh."'[476]

In this account, moving in the same milieu with 'the garbage of society' is not a cause of blame but a sign of the pious commitment of a true Muslim willing to spread religion to those gone astray. This is shown as more than just a pragmatic compromise. Seeking the company of the sinful is seen as proof of spirituality, courage and devotion that the exoteric scholars in their comfortably pious environment cannot boast of. A consequence of this view is that in doing so, one may break against the exoteric norms of the *šarīʿa*, and that the observance of these norms is not the starting point but the final goal of the process of winning over the sinner:

> 'Where else can I find the deviant (*munḥarif*) who drinks and gambles than here in the mawlid. I hunt here, take him step by step until he reaches purity. You can't go to someone in a bar and take him straight to the mosque to pray. If I tried to win over the *munḥarif* once and one hundred percent he would just run away. There can be no obedience before love, so we first make him love, and bit by bit he will become pure. We represent Truth (*ḥaqīqa*) together with Law (*šarīʿa*). The Law prohibits that I seek the company of the *munḥarif*. But I go to him to make him like me.'[477]

This line of argumentation can evidently also serve as a rationalisation that defines as pious a type of lifestyle that may otherwise be seen as deviant. This is a point of criticism made by other Sufis who argue that by opening the door to drug addicts and petty criminals, these Sufis end up being dominated by them.

> 'When I first came to this mosque I found a community split in competing groups and a scene dominated by criminals. There are youths who trade in drugs, and although they've been officially let in with the claim of leading them to good, it's them leading the

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[475]Explicitly stated, for example, in the verse often sung by *munšidīn*: 'The drinker of wine wakes up from his intoxication / while the drinker of love remains intoxicated his entire life.'

[476]Interview with the younger of two men in a Sufi *ḫidma* in the mawlid of as-Sāda aš-Šahāwīya, Šuhā, 19 September 2002.

[477]Interview with the brother of late Sheikh Ǧābir al-Madanī, mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 16 October 2002. Sheikh Ǧābir was also known as al-Ḥarāmī, 'the Thief' – a strongly antinomian choice of a title. Because of his charismatic personality and success in converting several people to Islam he was called 'the thief of hearts', but the connotation of *ḥarām* is evident and apparently intended. Hudā, whose *ḥaḍra* is described above on pp 101-103, is daughter-in-spirit of Sheikh Ǧābir.

people to bad.'[478]

## 2.3. 'Sunnīs'

Open to ambivalence as it may be, the discourse in defence of festive joy nevertheless needs dissociations and markers of exclusion of its own. Because this line of argumentation states an unproblematic unity of mysticism and orthodox Islam, ambivalent festivities and modern civic order, it has to explain why so many Egyptians claim the opposite. The solution to this problem is to depict the critics of mawlids and the opponents of Sufi rituals in general as extremists. In this view, Sufis represent the moderate middle ground of Islam threatened by extremist and terrorist movements that, based on a superficial understanding of religion, act against the true spirit of Islam.

The construction of extremists as the enemies of Sufism is a dissociation common to all discourses in defence of mawlids ranging from strictly reformist to strongly antinomian. The extremist Other appears with different titles that are always designed to point out that they are not true followers of the pious first generation of Muslims (*as-salaf aṣ-ṣāliḥ*): *suflīyūn* ('the lowlyists' – a word play from *salafīyūn*),[479] *mutamaslifa* ('Salaficists'),[480] and Ḫāriǧites, the oldest inner-Islamic Other.[481] But the most common labels used for this Other of Sufism are Wahhābīs and Sunnīs. Both labels are worth attention. Wahhābīs, proponents of a reformist movement that emerged in Naǧd in the 18th century, call themselves *muwaḥḥidūn* (monotheists), implying that others are not. The movement was labelled Wahhābīya (after its founder Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb) by its opponents to depict it as a sectarian movement.[482] The label 'Sunnīs' (*sunnīyīn* or *sunnīya*) is common in colloquial usage in which it is used as an inversion of the reformist self-image and does not refer to the distinction of Sunna and Šīʿa. The Salafi movement defines itself continuously through its heavy emphasis on following the Sunna of the Prophet and describes itself as true Sunnite Islam as opposed to the Šīʿa and other sects. In this context, the term Sunnī has come to denote a person holding to a strongly Salafi doctrine and/or radical Islamist ideology, observing a distinctive dress (men with long beards and white, short-hemmed *ǧallābīyas*, women in full veils covering the face and hands) and distinguishing him- or herself from society on the ground of his or her following the Sunna.

The character of the Wahhābī or the Sunnī represents everything opposed to moderate Sufi Islam: He (the typical Sunnī is depicted as a man with four wives whom

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[478]Interview with al-Ḫāǧǧa Sihām, Alexandria, 25 October 2002.

[479]al-Harāwī, Usāma, *Min awrād aṭ-ṭarīq: al-ḥāǧǧ ʿAlī aš-Šarīf*, Qinā, 2000.

[480]Ibrāhīm, *al-Mašrūʿ wa-l-mamnūʿ*, pp. 15-18.

[481]Abū l-ʿAzāʾim, as-Sayyid ʿIzz ad-Dīn Māḍī, *Islām aṣ-ṣūfīya huwa l-ḥall lā islām al-ḫawāriǧ*, Dār al-kitāb aṣ-ṣūfī, 1993. The Ḫāriǧīya emerged in the first century after Hiǧra as the first sectarian splinter group within Islam. The Ḫāriǧites were opposed to dynastic succession of the Caliphate and believed that any act of sin equals outright infidelity. Levi Della Vida, G., 'Khāridjites' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., Leiden: Brill, vol. 4, pp. 1074-1077.

[482]Peskes, Esther, 'Die Wahhabiya als innerislamisches Feindbild: Zum Hintergrund anti-wahhabitischer Publikationen in der zeitgenössischen Türkei', *Die Welt des Islams* 40 (2000), 3, pp. 344-274; Knysh, Alexander, 'A Clear and Present Danger: "Wahhabism" as a Rhetorical Foil', *Die Welt des Islams* 44 (2004), 1, pp. 3-26.

he keeps in seclusion) is a political extremist whose morality and religiosity are mere form without content:

> Younger man: 'They are mentally retarded/backward (*mutaḫallifīn 'aqlīyan*)[483]. I mean, they tell you that in the mawlids there is vice and I don't know what. I love the saint. I go to the saint and read the Fātiḥa for him, that's all. But there are other youths, for example someone who sits and smokes *ǧūza*,[484] and there is someone who goes out with a girl. I don't care about that stuff, I go to the saint. And their backwardness/retardedness also [becomes clear] in every ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*). When we pray, what do we say? "Oh God bless our lord Muḥammad and the family of our lord Muḥammad." Who are the family of our lord Muḥammad? They are the saints, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, as-Sayyida Zaynab [...] Thus I bless them in every prayer. So when I go to visit the shrine of one of them and recite the Fātiḥa and take their *baraka*, what is *ḥarām* about that? They tell you that it's *ḥarām*. [...] If he sees us sitting here like this he says: those are polytheists (*mušrikīn bi-llāh*), those don't have any idea of religion, those I don't know what. And also in their houses you find them very extremist. I mean, they allow for themselves to greet any woman on the street, but he won't allow you to greet his wife. Now how come you allow yourself to greet the women outside but forbid it from your friend in your house? [...] Those Sunnīs, in their homes, in a family of 10 or 15 there might be just one Sunnī, if you go in you find that one guy with a beard, and all the family far from him.'
>
> Older man: their name is not Sunnīs but *sū' nīya* (of bad intention) (laughs).
>
> Younger man: 'When they go out they might go after a pretty girl, although he makes himself out to be very fanatic and religious [...] He makes an appearance (*huwa 'āmil ẓāhir*) but inside it's a different story. [...] When I go to al-Ḥusayn, what's wrong with it, compared to if I sit in a cafeteria and smoke. What is better? Visiting al-Ḥusayn or sitting in a café and drinking and taking drugs? So why don't you fight the people who sit in cafes? Or those who go after women or steal or kill? So they suffer from backwardness/retardedness. But he will take his tour and get back again.'
>
> S.: 'Come back to truth, you mean?'
>
> Younger man: 'They will come back again, after they see that all the world got closed in front of them, from God's anger. Because they fight *ahl al-bayt*. That is their fanaticism, but they are people with no principles and no religion.[485] But we all go under the flag of "there is no deity but God"; there is no difference in that. We sit and recite *awrād*[486] and hymns, but we do all this under "there is no deity but God". We all are Muslims, we all know our Islam, why should we fight each other?'[487]

This depiction of the Sunnī as characterised by fake morality and bad intentions expresses a very different understanding of the relation of habitus and inner states than that shared by the critics of mawlids. Not only is habitus not a key to the state of the self; the heavy emphasis on appearance is taken to be suspect, a sign of a lack of true faith. In this view, doing pious deeds may help one become a pious person, and a good Muslim may eventually express a pious habitus, but adopting a pious habitus alone will never make one a good Muslim. On the contrary, it is seen to prevent the process of acquiring piety, as is argued by Rīhām, the daughter of a charismatic Sufi leader:

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[483]In popular usage the term *mutaḫallif* is a common insult, meaning both 'backward' and 'retarded'.

[484]Simple waterpipe that is often used to smoke hashish.

[485]To say that someone has no religion is a serious insult in Egypt.

[486]*Awrād* (sg. *wird*) are litanies consisting of selected verses of the Qur'ān and prayers. Reciting them, e.g. after the ritual prayer or as part of *ḏikr*, forms an important part of daily Sufi practice.

[487]Interview with two men in a Sufi *ḫidma* in the mawlid of as-Sāda aš-Šahāwīya, Šuhā, 19 September 2002.

'I didn't begin to wear a headscarf until last year. Not because I was opposed to it: I know that it is a religious obligation. But I did not want to do it for the sake of show. A lot of people do things just to show off and forget that what really matters is what is inside you.'[488]

*Image 24: The stereotypical Sunnī extremist with his beard, ǧallābīya, machine gun and secluded wife. Cover illustration of 'Azzām, May,* Anā Nādiya zawǧat amīr al-ǧamā'a al-islāmīya, *Cairo: Aḫbār al-Yawm (Kitāb al-Yawm; March 1999), 1999. Illustration Muṣṭafā Ḥusayn.*

The construction of Wahhābīs or Sunnīs as an extremist Other serves the same purpose as the construction of mawlids and related customs in the critical discourse as a backward and un-Islamic Other. It establishes a dramatic dissociation to construct and protect one's own collective identity against the contingence of everyday life. Just like people who go to mawlids are not only ignorant peasants or ruthless charlatans, people who criticise mawlids are not only long-bearded extremists. The criticism of mawlids is disseminated in circles much wider than the supporters of the Salafi and Islamist movements, and these circles have been able to increasingly marginalise Sufism and rituals related to Sufism in the public sphere. But to acknowledge this would undermine the Sufi self-image as the moderate mainstream of Islam and Egyptian society.

## 3. Alternative development, national unity, and hybrid discourses

The reformist and modernist critics of mawlids contend their subversive and transgressing character. Sufi apologetics respond that mawlids, properly understood, neither constitute a subversion nor a transgression of religion and the social order. But there is another, highly different argument in defence of mawlids claiming that it is exactly the ambivalence and even the subversive character of mawlids that makes them a positive factor in society.

Most often expressed by modernist intellectuals, this argument is all the more interesting because it is formulated largely in the same ideological setting as the critical view, with one significant difference. This argumentation can show the relativisation of religious boundaries in a positive light because it is attached to a leftist (and often Marxist) secularist vision of society in which, unlike in the mainstream secular modernist view that sees religion as a functional part of society, religion is seen as a potential problem for the modernist project.

A radical formulation of the view of mawlids as positive subversion is offered by

[488]Interview with Rīhām, daughter of al-Ḥāǧǧa Sihām, Alexandria, 24 February 2005.

ʿIṣām Fawzī, author of two articles on popular religiosity published in the 1990s.[489] Like in the critical discourse, here also mawlids appear as the expression of a wider field of religious culture distinct from official religion. According to ʿIṣām Fawzī, mawlids are embedded in a popular discourse on religion characterised by a pragmatic and subversive approach to norms and boundaries, an ironical attitude towards religious dignitaries, and an ambivalent relationship with the sacred, manoeuvring between devotion and manipulation.

This interpretation is in many ways similar to the critical discourse on mawlids. The difference lies in its normative assessment. Arguing from a Marxist perspective, Iṣām Fawzī shares with mainstream Egyptian modernists the search for progress and a progressive state of mind, but he does not accept the assumption that progress has to be based on authentic religion and morality. While the mainstream of modernists intellectuals, notably also many Marxists among them,[490] see mawlids as a medium of false consciousness, Iṣām Fawzī interprets them as a possibility to contest and subvert the false consciousness disseminated by the religious establishment and the Islamist movements. In this view, mawlids are rehabilitated from a cause and expression of backwardness to a possible source of alternative development, a site where ideological hegemonies of the state and Islamist movements can be contested.

ʿIṣām Fawzī's view of popular religiosity is embedded in a Marxist critique of religion and remains marginal in the public debates. But other, less radical formulations of this discourse are strongly present in the debates. Mawlids are often represented as an authentic national tradition expressing the tolerance central to 'true' Egyptian culture. I dwell on the reasons and consequences of representing mawlids as national heritage in the following chapter; for the moment it is sufficient to note that even people who think that mawlids are a *bidʿa* and part of a backward traditional society may at the same time view them as parts of authentic Egyptian culture. This does not mean a full rehabilitation of mawlids but it does imply that in certain contexts they can be viewed as a positive factor in society.

The most important positive role offered to mawlids is to be a site of tolerance in the face of radical Islamist movements and confessional tensions. Mawlids have become one of the sites where the image of peaceful and tolerant 'true' Egyptian society is projected. This representation shares the same Other with the Sufi apologetic discourse: the long-bearded extremist with no love and no tolerance. This image of extremists versus tolerant ordinary Egyptians received a significant boost in the 1980s and 90s, which were characterised by heavy and often violent confrontation between Islamists and their opponents. It appears to have lost some of its power with the recent trend towards de-radicalisation and integration of Islamist ideology in everyday piety and morality.

The view of mawlids as an expression of tolerance is essentially a secularist one based on the assumption that some relativising of religious norms and boundaries is necessary for a modern society to function. But unlike ʿIṣām's interpretation of mawlids as positive subversion, it is part of the mainstream nationalist and modernist discourse. Just like Salafi religiosity is not restricted to active Salafis, secularism in Egypt is not restricted to

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[489] Fawzī, 'Anmāṭ at-tadayyun'; Idem, 'Ālīyāt al-haymana wa-l-muqāwama'.

[490] E.g. Ṣiyām, Šiḥāta, *ad-Dīn aš-šaʿbī fī Miṣr: naqd al-ʿaql al-mutaḥāyil*, Alexandria: Rāmatān, 1995.

left-wing secularists. The hegemonic nationalist discourse on religion and society is not a coherent rationalised system; it speaks in different tones ranging from very Islamist to openly secularist in different contexts and at different times. It tends to go especially secular when the relationship of the Muslim majority with the Christian minority is discussed. In this context, mainstream nationalist discourse defines Egypt as a harmonic multi-confessional nation where religion is a private matter, as expressed by the slogan 'Religion is for God and the motherland is for all'.

Reality is less harmonious, however, and the past decades have witnessed several waves of confessional tension that have often resulted in violence. For this reason, 'national unity' – an euphemism for the lack of it – has become a key issue in public debates. Whenever confessional tensions arise, voices appear in the public sphere searching for proof of the harmonious coexistence of Christians and Muslims. The most prominent example of this quest is *The Seven Pillars of Egyptian Identity* by the urban planning expert Mīlād Ḥannā.[491] This book (which has gone through several reprints and has been published in English translation by the Egyptian General Book Organisation) depicts Egyptian national identity as a composite of historical and geographical layers reaching from Pharaonic times through the Roman and Christian periods to the Islamic era and from the Mediterranean across the Arab world to Africa. According to Mīlād Ḥannā these 'layers of civilisation' form a tolerant and harmonic whole in which also popular piety and festive culture have a role to play.

> 'All Egyptians have been accustomed to respect of the other and to abstainment from anything that may hurt the feelings of those with whom he shares the house. [...] For the field of shared [beliefs and values] in both religions is great [...], and both religions call to virtue, deeds, purity and virtuous conduct, compassion with the weak and defence of the truth, and to "love your next like yourself". [...] And until our present day we find that the Copts celebrate the Hiǧra New Year, and when I was a child I insisted on buying the "candy horse" like my sister Narǧis insisted on buying the "doll of *mawlid an-nabī*".[492] A friend of mine, a historian, told me that the custom of making a candy horse for the festival of *mawlid an-nabī* was taken from the horse of St. George of the Copts. And since the Copts have their mawlids and the Muslims have other mawlids, why shouldn't all children celebrate all mawlids. And this is in fact what happens all over the Egyptian countryside. And when there was a fire in the mawlid of the Virgin near al-Muḥarraq monastery in the district of al-Qūṣīya in Asyūṭ province, it turned out that the injured were an equal mixture of Copts and Muslims'[493]

In even more enthusiastic tone, an article in the leftist *al-Ahālī* describes the mawlid of St. George as an incorporation of national unity:

> 'Thousands of Egyptians – Muslims and Copts – undertake the pilgrimage to the mawlid of St. George (Mār Ǧirǧis) in the last week of August every year. There, in the village of Mīt Damsīs in [the province of] ad-Daqahlīya, true national unity is embodied, as the village with its Muslim majority hosts one of the biggest Coptic mawlids.'[494]

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[491]Ḥannā, Mīlād, *al-Aʿmida as-sabʿa li-š-šaḫṣīya al-miṣrīya*, 4. ed., Cairo: Dār al-hilāl, 1997.

[492]Such candy figures are a common part of festive traditions in Egypt, especially of *mawlid an-nabī*.

[493]Ḥannā, *al-Aʿmida as-sabʿa*, p. 50-51.

[494]*al-Ahālī*, 15.9.1999: Amīra aṭ-Ṭahāwī, 'Qaryat "Mīt Damsīs" bi-d-Daqahlīya tastaḍīf akbar al-mawālid al-qubṭīya: šay' li-llāh yā Mār Ǧirǧis'. See also aṭ-Ṭaḥāwī, Amīra, *ad-Dīn aš-šaʿbī wa-ṯaqāfat at-tasāmuḥ – al-ḥāla al-miṣrīya*, unpublished study at the Faculty of Economy and Political Science, Cairo University, 1996; *al-Ahālī*, 16.4.1997: Rifʿat as-Saʿīd, 'al-Mawālid .. wa-l-waḥda al-waṭanīya', p.

The fact that Muslims and Christians often attend each other's mawlids, share a common festive culture, and sometimes venerate each other's saints is elevated to an expression of their national unity as Egyptians. The syncretisms that appear as serious transgressions for reformist discourses (both Muslim and Christian) on piety and festivity[495] are presented as moments of mutual love and respect that effectively prevent confessional conflicts. This is a very idealised image, however. It stands in striking contrast to the trend among both Muslims and Christians to erase syncretisms and draw clear dividing lines between the two religions in all fields of society. It also conveniently avoids the question of why most communal violence takes place in Upper Egypt, the region where syncretistic forms of piety are more prevalent than anywhere else in Egypt.[496]

This image has an inner tension. Mawlids are represented as expressions of national unity usually when Muslims attend Christian mawlids but much less so the other way around. The same media that praise Christian mawlids may condemn Islamic ones. Between 1997 and 1999, the leftist al-Ahālī published a highly critical article on the mawlid of as-Sayyida Zaynab and two articles full of praise for the mawlid of St. George.[497] In 2004, the commercial daily *al-Miṣrī al-Yawm* published a full-page feature on mawlids in Egypt that was largely critical of Muslim mawlids but very positive about Christian mawlids:

> 'The phenomenon of mawlids in Egypt represents a popular and religious carnival with a strongly specific character. On the one hand, they are 'business'[498] and centres to attract tourism, and one of the purest and most spontaneous expressions of the unity of the Egyptian people – Muslims and Christians. On the other hand they are seasons for chaos, deviations, taking advantage of the minds of the simple people, occupation of the streets, traffic troubles, and making noise.'[499]

This ambiguity is partly due to the different status of Islam and Christianity in public debates. For a Muslim journalist, the issue of whether a Christian mawlid is a correct or wrong expression of piety does not arise the way it does when a Muslim saint is being celebrated. But ambiguity in the judgement of mawlids is also common to the entire debate. For many among the intellectual elite, mawlids may have some sympathetic moments of tolerance and some beautiful folklore, but they are definitely not the stuff a modern reading of religion, civil space, or citizenship should be made of. Students from provincial cities may define mawlids as an error and a *bidʿa*, but the mawlid of their hometown remains one of the best days of the year for them. As ʿAlī Mubārak correctly observed in 1882, one's judgement of mawlids depends on what one looks at. Mawlids are highly complex festivities and it should not surprise us that they inspire complex and contradictory interpretations.

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5; and in similar tone about another mawlid in honour of St. George in Upper Egypt, see *Aḫbār al-adab*, 3.1.1999, Fatḥī ʿAbd as-Samīʿ, 'Sirrak .. yā Mār Girgis .. sirrak'.

[495]See, e.g., ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī*, p. 138.

[496]I do not intend to imply that syncretism is a cause of confessional conflicts, and yet empirical evidence shows that it does not prevent them either. Syncretism is a complex and dynamic relationship with its own moments of conflict and domination. Werbner/ Basu: 'The Embodiment of Charisma', p. 20.

[497]*al-Ahālī*, 16.4.1997; 28.1.1998; 15.9.1999.

[498]In colloquial Arabic the English loan word *business* is strongly associated with corruption, grey economy and shady deals.

[499]*al-Miṣrī al-Yawm*, 24.11.2004, 'Mawālid al-muḥāfaẓāt: bīznis w-fawḍā wa-nḥirāfāt', p.4.

Especially when we move away from the public media to informal conversations, the views people express about mawlids are not only differentiated (such as liking music and amusements but disagreeing with the cult of saints, or liking the spirituality but disliking the noise and the crowds) but often also ambiguous and contradictory, combining elements of different discourses in unpredictable ways. Add to this that people are likely to express different views in different situations. The result are discourses with multiple layers and inner contradictions. A good example is the account of two middle-aged men who observed the mawlid of as-Sayyida Zaynab from their local café. They were highly suspicious of my intentions, which gave their talk an additional layer as they decided to act as representatives of Egypt, determined to provide me with 'correct information' so that I would not rely on 'some of the ignorant people around here':[500]

> 'The Qurʾān should be the source of your research. Those buried in the shrines are *ahl al-bayt*, the saints and the pious who reached a high degree of piety and ascetism. The shrine is a source of method (*nahǧ*), you take the method of the person buried in the shrine. Some ignorant people say that they take *baraka*. The purpose of the mawlid is celebration and benefit (*niʿm*) according to the manners and customs of the people of Egypt: *mizmār* and religious hymns, and the service of food. There are true and false customs. The true are ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*) and following the method of the saints. The false are those[501] on the streets and sidewalks, and inappropriate begging. But what is desirable, are things like [the distribution of] food, also in Ramaḍān in the *māʾidat ar-Raḥmān*. It's for God! We must stick to the correct way. Our way must be strict and clear (*gāmid*). There should be no disorder and fighting factions. [...]
>
> From the rosary you'll recognise the dervish. He is a divinely inspired madman (*maǧḏūb*); he was drawn to God and has left the world behind, he doesn't need anything; he is an ascetic in this world. [...]
>
> We are here in this café all the time. We are just spectators, we distinguish ourselves through critique. We are isolated from this atmosphere because it is not the method we should take from the prophet, and it is a reason for the decline of our country into a third world state. This is not the absolute true way worship should be. It should be calm, without disturbance in prayer. The people (*šaʿb*) are taken from the state of religiosity to a state of *bidʿa*. The submersion in *bidaʿ* leads to laziness and negligence. Worship becomes a service of food. [...] We sit here, drink tea, read Qurʾān, look at the things, but we know what the outcome of this will eventually be. [...]
>
> [The proper way is] to go to the people with the method of as-Sayyida, and the Prophet, and the Qurʾān. Every shrine is a declaration of monotheism. We criticise those who understand the noble Qurʾān wrongly, like those who kiss the shrine. It is forbidden because the shrine does not speak (i.e. the person buried in it is not a living being capable of reasoning and communication). The iron doesn't speak. The verse in the Qurʾān says: "Verily upon the friends of God rests no fear, nor do they grieve."[502] What is forbidden is worship [of the shrine], and not the shrine itself. Actions are based on intentions. Kissing the *maqām* out of love after not seeing it for a long time is acceptable by the natural disposition of the heart (*maqbūl bi-fiṭrit il-qalb*), if my intention is love. But if the shrine is taken as an object of a search for *baraka* or prayers are directed to it – which is only for God – then it's not allowed.

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[500]In the following quotation, they appear as one speaker because it was not possible to reconstruct from the notes with certainty who is speaking in each passage. They at no point disagreed with each other. Incoherence in the account is thus not caused by there being two speakers, but by both speakers continuously revising their view.

[501]It is not clear whether this refers to people or practices.

[502]10:62.

> [...] The celebration is about reviving the memory of *ahl al-bayt*. I revive it with the recitation of the Qur'ān, with prayer, attempting to follow the example of *ahl al-bayt*, and if I have the available means, I distribute sweets and meat to the people, because there are lots of poor people everywhere. The most important things in the mawlid are the worship of God and the method of *ahl al-bayt*. The [opening] celebration in the mosque begins with Qur'ān and supplications (*ibtihālāt*), and the performance of the obligatory prayer. That is the correct mawlid. The party hats and swing-boats and children – [it's] like Christmas in your place – are a good thing, they don't do any harm. People come from the provinces, they also want to celebrate, buy sweets, enjoy themselves, [these are all] good customs and traditions. [...] If your research is to be successful, it has to be one hundred percent what I said. The mawlid releases the people from their sufferings and worries. Playing and smoking waterpipes doesn't damage worship."[503]

Everything is everything in this popular interpretation of reformist discourse. The dervishes are true devoted mystics and ignorant people, serving food is a religious duty and a distraction from worship, kissing the shrine of the saint is *ḥarām* and acceptable, the only correct way to celebrate a mawlid is to follow the example of the saint and it is a legitimate occasion for joy, amusements and recreation. Elements of almost all lines of argumentation that I have analysed above can be found in this account. *Bidaʿ* and backwardness, a stern and rational habitus of festivity and piety, the reformist reinterpretation of the festivity, the affirmation of festive joy, and the national culture of Egypt all feature here. And in the middle of all this, 'our way must be strict and clear'.

One would be mistaken to try to find a hidden clue in this account. It is contradictory because everyday discourse is always contradictory to some degree, the more so when it is produced *ad hoc* in a discussion in which the speakers continuously revise their judgement of what the foreign researcher is up to and what he wants to hear. This account stands as a reminder that the discourses represented in this study in practice are often much less coherent than they appear in a work of discourse analysis. People mix different arguments and topics and make strategic use of them depending on their judgement of the situation. Much more than rationalised ideologies, the discourses analysed here must be understood as modes of action that are subject to manipulation and capable of containing a high degree of contradiction.

Recognising this, we face new problems. First, and this is the subject of the following chapter, if the discourse on mawlids tends to be ambiguous and contradictory, how does this ambiguity relate to the criticism and exclusion of mawlids? Second, and this is the subject of the final chapter of this thesis, if discourses are to be understood as modes of action, then there can be no analysis of the debates on mawlids without an analysis of how these debates enter festive practice.

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[503]Interview with Ǧamāl and Ismāʿīl, middle-aged men from the district of as-Sayyida Zaynab, mawlid of as-Sayyida Zaynab, Cairo, 26 September 2002.

# Chapter Seven: The mawlid as cultural icon

Muḥammad Fahmī ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, author of *as-Sayyid al-Badawī* (see chapter five) and a staunch critic of mawlids, was also an admirer of Sufi music and a founding figure of Egyptian folklore studies. A furious attack on the cult of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, his book is also a rich ethnographic study that contains some moments of honest fascination. Such ambiguity is not unusual. As seen in the preceding chapters, festive experiences and accounts of mawlids are often ambivalent and contradictory, combining and shifting between fascination, criticism, nostalgia and irony. This tension is even stronger among those who have no first-hand experience of mawlids. For them, mawlids are often at once an exotic, fascinating piece of traditional culture and a dangerous no-go zone. These moments of ambivalence are usually not translated into a revision of the criticism of mawlids, however. On the contrary, they are rationalised by redefining mawlids and representing them in a new context and with new meanings in a way that does not challenge and in fact often enforces the logic of criticism and exclusion.

An issue of debate, mawlids are simultaneously the subject of a rich body of historical, anthropological and folkloric research, artistic production, colourful photo essays and press features, and government propaganda. These practices of representation often show mawlids in a positive light and yet do not counter the criticism of mawlids. On the contrary, the exclusion of mawlids from the field of modernity and orthodox Islam contributes to a redefinition of the festivals that makes it possible to rationalise the ambivalence towards mawlids shared by many of their critics, balancing between refusal, irony, fascination and nostalgia. Stating that 'mawlids have nothing to do with religion' is not only a way to exclude them from the field of religion: in the following I argue that it is also a way to include them in the field of popular heritage and art.

In the preceding chapters I primarily analysed the construction of modern and Islamic culture, social order and subjectivity as mobilised *against* mawlids. Thus far, the product of modernist inclusions and exclusions might be described as an invented tradition much in the way suggested by Hobsbawm and Ranger.[504] The image becomes more complex, however, when we realise that the dissociation of custom into true and false tradition implies a redefinition of both as new objects in society. Not only 'true' tradition is invented: its margins and its Other also are. A striking feature of such invention through exclusion is that it makes it possible to analytically split its product into different elements, some of which can be viewed in a positive light. A case in point is ʿAbd al-Laṭīf's redefinition of mawlids as popular religion. It not only allowed him to exclude the cult of saints from the field of religion proper, but also enabled him to study and appreciate Sufi music as folkloric art despite his disagreement with Sufi spirituality.

In this chapter I argue that within the modernist and reformist imagery of society and nation there are two common ways to represent mawlids in a potentially legitimate role.

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[504]Hobsbawm, Eric / Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press, 1983. While Hobsbawm's and Ranger's analysis of the way nationalism needs to invent its own continuous past is well applicable to the invention of nationalism and the redefinition of religion in Egypt, they do not explicate what happens to those customs that are not included in the invented traditions of the nation.

One, parallel to the modernist exclusion of mawlids, is to define them as popular religion and folklore. The other, parallel to the reformist Sufi defence of mawlids, is to represent them as spectacles of religious education and state propaganda. Through these practices of redefinition and representation, mawlids can be partially (but never fully) included in the field of national heritage without challenging the dissociations that produce and uphold the imagery of modern Egyptian culture. The products of these public representations develop a dynamic of their own, increasingly separate from the original and resulting in an growing gap between actual festive practice and the public imagery of festivity. The further we move from festive practice into academic research, artistic production, public media, and the social imagination of the upper and upper middle classes with no firsthand experience of mawlids, the stronger the split between the mawlid as social practice and the mawlid as cultural icon.

## 1. The construction of popular heritage

Historical and social sciences in Egypt, as elsewhere, are often marked by a normative approach. The study of society, culture and history is a functional part of the nationalist project. Its task is to search for elements of national identity, potentials for development, and causes of underdevelopment.[505] The academic study of mawlids, their history, and their present form and place in society, is thus also a highly political enterprise. For this reason, academic representations are torn between two objectives: the construction of Egyptian national history and heritage, and a sociology of development that problematises communal customs and cultural values as obstacles on the way to progress. On the one hand, the construction of national heritage (*turāṯ*) is a necessary part of the nationalist and modernist project.[506] On the other, the same elements that may be a part of national heritage may also be problematised as causes of underdevelopment.[507]

In chapter five I argued that part of the modernist distinction produced through the criticism of mawlids is the exclusion of a large part of popular culture from the field of legitimate heritage. Why then is it now possible to state that through this very distinction mawlids are represented as heritage after all? This seeming contradiction is due to the differentiation between a high cultural, religious and intellectual heritage, and a lesser popular heritage, much in style of the distinction between 'great' and 'small' tradition that was once current in Western anthropology.[508] While the first is accredited with full validity as part of the nation's moral and civilisational core, the latter remains subordinate to the high heritage and confined to the role as a mere constituent of national identity.[509] This layered character of the concept of heritage makes it possible to represent mawlids as a part of popular heritage while maintaining their exclusion from

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[505]See, e.g., al-Ǧawharī, Muḥammad, ''Ilm al-folklōr: al-mawḍūʿ wa-l-manhaǧ', in Muḥammad al-Ǧawharī (ed.), *Dirāsāt fī ʿilm al-folklōr*, Cairo: ʿAyn li-d-dirāsāt wa-l-buḥūṯ al-insānīya wa-l-ǐǧtimāʿīya, 1998, pp. 13-77, here pp. 18-24.

[506]*al-Ahrām*, 29.1.1999: Muṣṭafā Ibrāhīm Fahmī, ''Ilm al-insān al-miṣrī: hal yaktašif waṭanahū li-nafsihī?'

[507]This is made especially explicit by Sayyid ʿUways, 'al-Izdiwāǧīya fī t-turāṯ ad-dīnī al-miṣrī'.

[508]See, e.g., Gellner, *Muslim Society*, p. 5.

[509]Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism*, p. 25.

the grand heritage of religion and civilisation.

This differentiation is, evidently, a modernist construct. What is popular heritage today may have been a largely unquestioned part of religious and communal life 150 years ago. To show how this distinction is constructed and what consequences it brings to the position of mawlids in the nationalist and modernist imagery is the task of the following pages.

## *1.1 Writing the history of mawlids*

The historiography of mawlids has been primarily one of a search for origins.[510] A field of discourse originally produced in Western and Egyptian academic publications, the issue of origins has become a recurring topic in the press and in everyday discussions. The historical origin of mawlids is usually traced back to the Pharaonic era and/or to the Fatimid dynasty that ruled over Egypt from 969 to 1171 A.D. Less commonly pronounced although historically better documented is a view relating the emergence of mawlids to the spread of Sufi orders in the Muslim world.

The concern for origins has two reasons. Firstly, it is based on an implicit assumption that popular culture is static in nature: once established, it remains essentially the same throughout centuries.[511] Secondly, the issue of origin plays an important role in the debate on the legitimacy of mawlids and the place given to them in the public image of Egyptian culture. Any theory of the origin of mawlids implies a normative judgement of their relationship to Islam and national heritage.

In the following I look at the historical debate from two angles. On the one hand, I discuss the historical evidence they are based on while, on the other, I analyse how these different theories carry implicit or explicit judgements of mawlids and their place in Islamic piety and Egyptian culture.

### *1.1.1. Pharaohs*

The theory of a Pharaonic origin of mawlids was developed in the late 19th century by European authors who attempted to trace Muslim practice back to pre-Islamic traditions, a common approach in Oriental studies of the time.[512] It was quickly taken over by Egyptian authors,[513] and gained currency in the early 20th century as the

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[510]See, e.g., Kaptein, *Muḥammad's Birthday Festival*; Muṣṭafā, *al-Mawālid*, pp. 69-93.

[511]Explicitly so, e.g., in the introduction to Sonbol / Atia, *Mulid!*

[512]See, e.g., Goldziher, *Mohammedanische Studien*, pp. 275-378. Goldziher was not the inventor of this theory but he was influential in disseminating it.

[513]The earliest Arabic reference to a Pharaonic origin of Egyptian festivals known to me is ʿAlī Mubārak's *ʿAlam ad-dīn*, which contains a dialogue between an Englishman and a sheikh who, each embodying their respective traditions of knowledge, reconstruct the history of festive culture in Egypt. Mubārak, *ʿAlam ad-dīn*, vol. 1, pp. 139-163. See also ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī*, pp. 136-138.

Pharaonic past was constructed as a constitutive element of Egyptian nationalism.[514] Today this theory can be found in academic studies, press features and informal discussions alike. The theory says, in short, that mawlids are a trace of Pharaonic festivities that were celebrated at the temples of local gods. As Christianity began to spread throughout Egypt in the first and second centuries A.D., the sanctuaries and festivities were taken over and dedicated to Christian saints and martyrs. With the Arab conquest of Egypt and the successive Islamisation of Egypt, the tradition of shrines, saints and their festivals was again reinterpreted in Islamic terms.[515]

The most prominent case in which both foreign and Egyptian observers tend to establish a link to a Pharaonic cult is the mawlid of Sīdī Abū l-Ḥaǧǧāǧ al-Uqṣurī (d. 642/1244), which is celebrated next to the Luxor temple and concluded by a procession that includes scale models of boats.[516] Both the location of the shrine and the inclusion of boats are commonly interpreted to be a direct continuation of the ancient cult of Amun in which a procession with boats also played a key role. The boats are interpreted as a trace of the Pharaonic past, an immediate piece of ancient Egyptian culture that has been superficially Islamised but remains essentially a procession of Amun. This interpretation is not restricted to Luxor. There is a widespread tendency to see mawlids in general as a trace of Pharaonic past, which has led to some highly innovative theories considering saintly figures who are seen as Christianised or Islamised Pharaonic deities.[517]

From a historical point of view, such theories are problematic on two levels. Firstly, they lack hard evidence. Although it is reasonable to assume that a process of renaming and reinterpreting gods/saints and holy sites has taken place to some extent, there is not one single case of positive evidence of a Pharaonic pilgrimage turning Christian and, later, Islamic. On the contrary, there is plenty of evidence for major ruptures in the history of sacred sites: the Coptic cult of martyrs and saints, for example, emerged in a violent confrontation with the old Egyptian and Roman religions.[518] And since the 7th century, the tradition of Coptic pilgrimages has developed parallel to the Muslim tradition, making it very difficult to determine the origin of syncretistic elements. Some Muslim shrines do share a location with ancient temples, most notably so the mosque of Sīdī Abū l-Ḥaǧǧāǧ al-Uqṣurī that stands on top of the Luxor Temple, or, to be more

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[514]This current, known as Pharaonism, reached its height in the first decades of the 20th century. Since then, the Pharaonic past of Egypt has become a standard element of its nationalist imagery (omnipresent, for example, on postal stamps and banknotes). See Reid, Donald Malcolm, *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I*, Berkley etc.: University of California Press, 2002, esp. pp. 205-212, 294. Denooz, Laurence, *Entre Orient et Occident: rôles de l'hellenisme et du pharaonisme dans l'oeuvre de Tawfīk-al-Ḥakīm*, PhD thesis, Liège: Faculté de Philosophie et lettres de l'Université de Liège, 2002, pp. 199-204

[515]Goldziher, *Mohammedanische Studien*, pp. 275-378; Muṣṭafā, al-Mawālid, pp. 69-92; Ḥannā, *al-A'mida as-sab'a* , pp. 49-51.

[516]For an image of the procession, see Sonbol / Atia, *Mulid!*.

[517]For example, Nadia Abu-Zahra argues that the cults of the Virgin Mary and as-Sayyida Zaynab represent a continuity of the ancient Egyptian cult of the goddess Isis. In a similar fashion, Georg Stauth tries to interpret the Muslim saint as a present-day heir of the ancient Middle Eastern god-king. Abu-Zahra, *The Pure and Powerful*, p. 125; Stauth, 'Skizzen'.

[518]Meinardus, *Coptic Saints and Pilgrimages*, pp. 25-27.

precise, on top of a church that was built into the temple in the 7th century A.D.[519] This case is an example of undebatable continuity in location, but it does not prove continuity of practice or meaning. Concerning practice, there is a gap, centuries long, in the religious use of the site: the church was built in the 7th century, long after the temple had fallen out of use. More importantly, the act of replacing a temple by a church, and a church by a mosque is a demonstration of discontinuity much more than it is an expression of continuity. It means to occupy a place that is recognised to be sacred and to change its meaning by physically (demolishing) or symbolically (building a mosque *over* a temple and a church) defeating the earlier tradition. The sanctity of the holy place may be continuous, but such continuity does not extend to the meaning of the site or the rituals performed there. And as Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen has argued in her study of the Muslim saints of Egypt, the boats are not much in the way of evidence either. In a country where the river Nile was the most feasible route of travel before the construction of the railway, the boat is a potent symbol of gratitude for good fortune and safe arrival. Boats can be found at festive processions all over Egypt and need not have any connection to the ancient cult of Amun.[520]

Furthermore, the search for 'traces' contributes very little to the understanding of the significance of these practices to the people involved. Sīdī Abū l-Ḥaǧǧāǧ is not 'really' Amun. For the people who put on the festival, he is a Muslim friend of God. Even if the boats of today could be traced back to the boats of Amun, and if the saints were heirs of ancient god-kings, this still would contribute little to an understanding of what mawlids are about.[521]

If one is to look seriously for pre-Islamic continuities in mawlids, then one should look not at the festive sites and rituals but at the much more diffuse field of festive culture. While a continuity in the sense of concrete 'traces' surviving to the present should be judged with utmost scepticism, there is credible evidence for a tradition of festive culture characterised by a dramatic reversal of the everyday and/or an ambivalent combination of piety and amusements documented in the critical commentaries of some contemporaries, for example by archimandrite Šenūda of Atripe who in the 5th century A.D. expressed his indignation with the pilgrims' behaviour in and around the church.

> 'To go to the shrine of a martyr, to pray, to read, to sing psalms, to be sanctified, to partake of the Eucharist in the fear of Christ is well and good... But to talk, to eat and to drink, to frolic, or rather, shall I say to fornicate, and to commit murder as a result of drinking and lewdness and brawls, with complete stupidity, that is lawlessness. While some are indoors, singing psalms, reading, taking communion, others outside fill the place with the din of trumpets and pipes... Ye have we made the house of God a place to sell honey in, and bracelets. Ye have we made the shrines into prowling grounds for your cattle, race tracks for your donkeys and your horses [...] There are many who go to the shrines for the purpose of polluting the temple of God and making the members of Christ harlot members, instead of keeping them holy and free from all defilement,

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[519]Haarmann, Ulrich, 'al-Uḳṣur' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 10, pp. 795-796; Großmann, Peter, 'Eine vergessene frühchristliche Kirche beim Luxor-Tempel', *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts – Abteilung Kairo* 29 (1973), pp. 167-181; Barguet, Paul, 'Luxor' in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, vol. 3, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1977, pp. 1103-1107.

[520]Mayeur-Jaouen, Catherine, 'Égypte', p. 71.

[521]*Ibid.*

whether it be a man or a woman... Do not make visits to the shrines of the martyrs the occasion of destroying your flesh in the tombs round about them, or in the buildings near by, or in the corners inside them..."[522]

Some six hundred years later, a document from the Cairo Geniza, paraphrased by Goitein, describes the restrictive measures taken, probably in the early 11th century, by the rabbis of the Jewish community to discipline the annual pilgrimage to Dammūh, expressed in a tone of some striking likeness to admonitions of behaviour exhibited or perceived to take place at present-day mawlids.

'1. All should attend solely for devotion. No merrymaking would be tolerated.
2. Marionette shows and similar entertainments are not permitted.
3. No beer should be brewed there.
4. No visitor should be accompanied by [a Gentile] (this and other additions and gaps are by Goitein) or an apostate.
5. No woman should be admitted except when accompanied by [a father, a husband,] a brother, or a grown-up son, unless she is a *very* old woman.
6. The synagogue building should be respected and revered like any other synagogue.
7. Boys, or a grown-up man together with a boy, should not [...], in order to expose themselves to suspicion and make for themselves for a bad name.
8. Both men and women should take utmost care not to desecrate the Sabbath in any way.
9. Playing chess and [...] is forbidden.
10. Likewise games like 'watermelon and clay', and [...].
11. Making noise by hitting something with a bang or clasping hands is disapproved.
12. No instrumental music.
13. No dancing.
14. On Sabbath water should be drawn from the well only when needed for drinking.
15. Men should not mix with women, nor come near them [...], nor are they permitted to look at them.
16. In the synagogue women should pray in the gallery upstairs and men in the hall downstairs, as is established by ancient custom, *sunna*."[523]

It is not clear whether this Jewish pilgrimage was a predecessor or successor of the Muslim cult of saints: Goitein assumes that this celebration was influenced by the Fatimid *mawlid an-nabī* celebrations, but this a problematic assumption because the Fatimid mawlid was largely a state celebration at that time. (see below pp. 164-165) What is certain, however, is that there were local pilgrimages in the Fatimid period and before it, and that they were characterised by a mixture of devotion and amusements. Whether this festive atmosphere was actually transferred from earlier pilgrimages to Islamic mawlids remains speculative, however. Such atmosphere is characteristic of pilgrimages in various locations around the globe,[524] and may have been reinvented several times in the course of history.

A third example is *nawrūz*, a festivity that is better documented and especially

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[522]Meinardus, *Coptic Saints and Pilgrimages*, pp. 67-68.

[523]The list is concluded by two more items regulating the behaviour of people at the site at times other than pilgrimage and control over the observance of these regulations. Goitein notes that the original document is fragmentary. Not all items present in the list could be reconstructed, and gaps remain in some items. Goitein, S.D., *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza, Vol. 5: The Individual: Portrait of a Mediterranean Personality of the High Middle Ages as Reflected in the Cairo Geniza*, London: University of California Press, 1988, pp. 21 f.

[524]Turner/Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, p.36.

interesting in terms of continuity because it declined in Egypt around the same time mawlids emerged. Held in early September when the Nile flood reached its peak (and thus possibly a predecessor of the later *wafā' an-Nīl*), *nawrūz* was a wild carnivalesque celebration displaying, among other spectacles, transvestites, a masquerade, and a false king.[525] It appears to have emerged in Egypt shortly before or after the Islamic conquest and flourished throughout the middle ages until its decline and disappearance in the 15th century.[526] The carnivalesque celebrations and the reversal of the everyday in the mediaeval *nawrūz* clearly reminds us of the craftsmen's processions in today's mawlids, but compared to the frantic and even violent celebrations of *nawrūz*, mawlids display (and always displayed) a different atmosphere in which a great deal of merriment and some degree of inversion of the everyday is legitimised and simultaneously limited by the sacred occasion and location of the festivity.

The available historical evidence suggests that the union of spiritual and carnivalesque elements typical to mawlids may well be a continuity of earlier festive traditions. But it would be a fallacy to conclude that mawlids themselves are a continuation of earlier festivities. Continuity in festive practice must be understood as a constant dynamic transformation that, from a historical point of view, makes it impossible to single out specific 'traces'. Like all culture, festive culture erases and rewrites pre-existing customs, leaving the historian with vague moments of likeness at best.

Nevertheless, the search for traces and continuities of ancient Egypt at mawlids remains a highly popular enterprise because it is a powerful way to give a specific meaning to the festivities. For one thing, the very idea of something being preserved by successive generations over thousands of years has great aesthetic and emotional appeal. Secondly, it goes hand in hand with the temporal distancing of mawlids and many other communal traditions that is central to their modernist exclusion (see above p. 127). Finally, in this interpretation, mawlids appear as an expression of an unchanging Egyptian identity: 'Mawlids are not a religious but a national custom. The national element is the core of the mawlid, while the religious element is subject to change.'[527] This interpretation allows the rehabilitation of mawlids as some of the most authentic Egyptian culture while maintaining their position as an Other of modern society: Because they are traced to the ancient past they are truly Egyptian and a part of national heritage, but only as long as they are confined to the role of a trace separated from the field of legitimate modern Islamic culture.

### *1.1.2. Fatimids*

The same logic applies to a second theory on the origins of mawlids, stating that mawlids were invented by the Fatimid dynasty. The Fatimids, of North African origin, belonged

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[525]Shoshan, Boaz, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993, pp. 40-51.

[526]*Nawrūz* is absent in pre-Islamic sources but abundantly documented in mediaeval sources from the early 10th (that is, before the Fatimid conquest) until the 15th centuries A.D. Shoshan dismisses the hypothesis that it was originally a Pharaonic tradition and suggests that the festivity was possibly of Persian origin, as also its name would indicate. *Ibid.*, p. 44-46, 49 f.

[527]Interview with Samīr Ramzī, author, Minyat al-Muršid, 21 February 2002.

to the Ismāʿīlī branch of Shiite Islam and had a missionary drive great enough to challenge the Sunnite Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad and establish a caliphate of their own, first in North Africa and then in Egypt.[528] Their ambitions of world domination were never realised, but the dynasty did rule Egypt for 200 years, long enough to leave a lasting mark on the country's culture and religion. According to the theory, the Fatimid rulers were determined to legitimise their rule in religious terms and to proselytise their interpretation of Islam, and one of the instruments that served this goal were public festivities. Following the cult of the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*) that is central to Shiite Islam, the Fatimids constructed shrines (one of which still stands[529]) and introduced celebrations to honour the Prophet, his family, and the ruling caliph. These mawlids were celebrated with a banquet, recitation of the Qurʾān, an appearance of the caliph, and the distribution of food to the commoners.[530] When Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn al-Ayūbī conquered Egypt in 1171, he erased the Fatimid dynasty, demolished their palaces, and banned their doctrine from the institutions of religious learning. On a popular level, however, the Fatimids left a lasting legacy in form of a widespread cult of *ahl al-bayt* and festive traditions, most importantly the birthday of the Prophet and mawlids of the saints.[531]

There is little doubt that the tradition of mawlids to some extent does date back to the Fatimid era. The strongest case in point is the mawlid of al-Ḥusayn, the third Imam and great martyr of Shiite Islam. His mawlid was among those celebrated by the Fatimid court, and after the transport of al-Ḥusayn's skull from ʿAsqalān to Cairo in 1156, his shrine quickly developed into a major pilgrimage site.[532] And certainly the love of *ahl al-bayt* that is so central to Egyptian Sufi Islam does have a recognisably Shiite flavour. But again caution is required, since the love of *ahl al-bayt* is a topos common to Sufi spirituality all over the world.[533] It is not clear to what extent it really is a local Fatimid continuity and to what extent it has been transmitted through the trans-local tradition of Sufism. After all, most mawlids were not established during the Fatimid era but much later. Even the mawlid of the Prophet may have been discontinued for some time before it was re-introduced in the 13th century as a Sunnite practice in Mecca, Irbil, and only later in Egypt.[534] Most importantly, however, the mawlids of the Fatimid era differed significantly from mawlids as we know them today. They were primarily celebrations of the court, made by and for the ruling class. Commoners participated, if at all, as

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[528]See Walker, Paul E., 'The Ismāʿīlī Daʿwa and the Fāṭimid caliphate' in Carl F. Petry (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt, Vol. 1: Islamic Egypt, 640-1517*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998, pp. 120-150.

[529]The *mašhad* of as-Sayyida Ruqayya (daughter of the 8th Imam ʿAlī ar-Riḍā), constructed in 1133, is located on al-Ašrāf Street in the district of al-Ḫalīfa in Cairo. Many other shrines – most importantly that of al-Ḥusayn – are presumably of Fatimid origin, but no parts of the original structure remain. Bannerth, *Islamische Wallfahrtsstätten*, pp. 22-24, 34 f.

[530]Kaptein, *Muḥammad's Birthday Festival*, pp. 28 ff.

[531]See, e.g., ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī*, pp. 110 f.; 138 f.; Mustafa, *al-Mawālid*, pp. 80-84; Ḥannā, *al-Aʿmida as-sabʿa*, pp. 49-50.

[532]Bannerth, *Islamische Wallfahrsstätten*, pp. 22-23.

[533]Schimmel, *Mystische Dimensionen des Islam*, p. 126.

[534]Kaptein, *Muḥammad's Birthday Festival*, pp. 28 ff.; de Jong, Frederick, 'Mawlid' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 6, pp. 895-897.

spectators and recipients of food distributed for the occasion.[535]

The Fatimids are exemplary of the complex nature of contemporary Egyptian nationalist readings of history. Historiography in Egypt (and elsewhere) is often anachronistic, projecting contemporary issues into history, searching for moments of success and causes of failure, defining heroes and villains. Due to the unavoidably contradictory nature of such anachronistic historiography, Fatimids, like Mamluks after them, have come to play the role of both heroes and villains: heroes that turned Egypt into one of the most important Islamic dynasties of the time, founded the city of Cairo and the university of al-Azhar, and introduced many contemporary Egyptian Islamic customs such as Ramaḍān lanterns, *mawlid an-nabī* festivities, and the veneration of *ahl al-bayt*, and villains that proselytised an Ismāʿīlī sectarian version of Islam, held the ordinary Christian and Sunnite Muslim Egyptians under their yoke, and left behind a range of *bidaʿ* that continue to influence the simple peoples' minds until today. This imagery has become a firm part of common knowledge that, due to its ambiguity, can serve both as part of a critical argument – as was done by ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm in his critical view of mawlids (pp. 80-81) – as well as a way to associate mawlids with the grand religious and civilisational heritage of Egypt – as was done by the men who described the mawlid of Fāṭima an-Nabawīya as the 'national day of ad-Darb al-Aḥmar' (p. 63).

### *1.1.3. Sufis*

If there is a precise moment of beginning at all for such a diverse and dynamic custom as mawlids, then historical evidence supports locating it in the period between the 14th and 16th centuries. Islamic mawlids similar to those we know today – popular festivals at a saint's shrine combining elements of pilgrimage and fair – are only documented from the 15th century on. Their rise went hand in hand with that of organised Islamic mysticism starting in the 13th century, which gave sainthood a new quality as the burial sites of founders of orders became sites of celebration and pilgrimage. These festivals were not Islamised Christian pilgrimages but developed parallel with the *mawlid an-nabī* celebrations from which they borrowed their name and many of their festive elements.[536]

The disadvantage of this theory, from the point of view of the modernist representations of mawlids, is that it's pan-Islamic and not specifically Egyptian. The assumption implicit in stating that mawlids are a 'national custom' of Pharaonic and/or Fatimid origin is that mawlids are a specifically Egyptian tradition not observed elsewhere in the Muslim world. Interestingly, the same assumption of locality is made about Muslim pilgrimages in other parts of the world as well, notably in the case of *ʿurs* celebrations in the Indian subcontinent that are commonly claimed to be heavily influenced by Hinduism.[537] In the *ʿurs*, pilgrims gather at the shrine of a Muslim saint in

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[535]*Ibid.*

[536]De Jong, 'Mawlid'; Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, p. 17; Chih, *Le soufisme au quotidien*, p. 263; Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, pp. 118-126.

[537]For a critical discussion of syncretism in Indian Islam, cf. Werbner, Prina / Helene Basu, 'The Embodiment of Charisma', in Idem (eds), *Embodying Charisma,* pp. 17-21.

a celebration combining vows, miracles, Sufi *ḏikr*, trade and popular amusements.[538] There is enough similarity between *ʿurs* and the Egyptian mawlid to question the exclusively local origin of these traditions. In fact, similar festivities are celebrated by Muslims around the world, only under different names: *mawsim* in Morocco, *ḥaulī* in east Africa and *ḥawl* in Indonesia.[539] Certainly all these festivities contain local innovations and influences, but this should not tempt us to ignore their common denominator, namely the pan-Islamic Sufi tradition with its high emphasis on sainthood and significant tolerance for syncretisms.

This view is not current in Egypt – and the same appears to be the case in many other Muslim countries where similar festive traditions exist – because it would cause significant problems to both the criticism of mawlids as a Shiite innovation or pagan trace and their affirmation as national heritage.[540] The historiographies of mawlids are an indication of their place in the imagery of the nation. To be legitimately represented in the public sphere, mawlids have to be Egyptian. Even as authentic heritage, however, mawlids are only allowed a legitimate presence in the imagery of nation in a specific position.

### *1.2. Studying popular beliefs*

The dissociations that exclude mawlids from the field of true culture also make it possible to redefine them in ways that might not have been possible otherwise. Once mawlids are removed from the field of orthodox religion and modern society, they can be presented and judged in terms that put them in a new light. The two most important and powerful (interrelated) ways to do so are the construction of mawlids as a part of popular, heterodox religion and their representation as folklore.

#### *1.2.1. The class of popular things*

The public image of mawlids in Egypt is strongly connected to class. While the Sufi pilgrims' festive ideology constructs a spiritual unity without regard to class boundaries, members of the modern middle and upper classes generally see mawlids as something that is specific to peasants and the urban poor. Mawlids, in the hegemonic public imagery, are generally categorised as 'popular' (*šaʿbī*), something specific to 'the people' (*aš-šaʿb*), lumped together with various other religious practices, beliefs and discourses under the label of 'popular beliefs' (*muʿtaqadāt šaʿbīya*) or 'popular religion' (*ad-dīn aš-*

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[538]Troll (ed.), *Muslim Shrines in India*; de Tassy, Garcin, *Muslim Festivals in India and Other Essays*, ed. and transl. M. Waseem, Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995; Saheb, S.A.A., 'A "Festival of Flags": Hindu-Muslim devotion and the sacralising of localism at the shrine of Nagor-e-Sharif in Tamil Nadu', in Werbner/Basu (eds), *Embodying Charisma*, pp. 55-76; interview with Ṯanāʾullāh, a Pakistani PhD student at al- Azhar and a devout Sufi and regular visitor of mawlids, Cairo, 13 August 2003.

[539]See 'Ziyāra' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

[540]For the very same reason, it is very well present in the Sufi apologetic discourse on mawlids. See, e.g., Abū l-ʿAzāʿim, *al-Iḥtifāl bi-mawālid*, p. 4; Idem, *Islām aṣ-ṣūfīya huwa l-ḥall*, p. 157.

*ša'bī*).[541]

These labels are commonly used as a scientific category for a number of beliefs, including those related to mysticism, the cult of saints, mawlids and other festivals, agricultural rites and rites of passage, magic, charismatic movements, etc.[542] It is not clear at all, however, what makes these things popular. While the attribute 'popular' clearly refers to class, it does so in a complex way that cannot be reduced to economic and social structure.[543]

Class, we must note, is a complex and ambiguous term that requires some clarification. First, we have a Marxist notion of class as a group of people sharing a specific position within the relations of production. While this is a very common definition of class, it is not directly relevant in the present context. Second, class can be defined, following Pierre Bourdieu, as the position, marked by habitus, of individuals and groups in the symbolic structure of society.[544] Third, class can be defined in a logical sense as a classification, the class of things sharing specific distinctive characteristics. Implied by but more specific than the second definition, this definition highlights the act of classification. In the following, I use the term 'class' to refer to symbolic position marked by habitus, and the terms 'class of' or 'classification' to refer to class in the logical sense.

The conceptual classification 'popular' emerged in Arabic usage in the first half of the 20th century. Earlier linguistic distinctions mainly differentiated between elites (*ḫāṣṣa*) and commoners (*'āmma*). Only with the rise of nationalism and the reception of French social theories (it is worth noting that *ša'bī* is almost exactly synonymous with French *populair*) did 'the people' and 'popular' develop into the complex category they are today. By 1948, in 'Abd al-Laṭīf's *as-Sayyid al-Badawī*, the category of popular beliefs appears fully developed as the class of heterodox religious beliefs that express the consciousness of the common people.[545] The term has become widely used in academic, artistic and daily usage since the Nasserist period when popular culture was constructed as a part of Arab nationalist identity and folklore emerged as a subject of academic research and public sector artistic production in service of the nationalist project.[546] Nevertheless the term has remained contested, and not everyone uses it, notably so Sayyid 'Uways (1913-1989), author of *Letters to al-Imām aš-Šāfi'ī*, which is frequently referred to as a standard work on popular religion.[547] 'Uways had good reason to avoid speaking of 'popular religion', for it is a vague and problematic category indeed. In fact, all models of popular beliefs fail to provide evidence for their existence as an objective field in society and religion.

The most common approach to popular beliefs describes it as a field of heterodox,

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[541]'Popular religion' indicates the existence of a coherent system in a way 'popular beliefs' does not, but in practice these two terms are interchangeable. The term 'popular Islam' favoured in Western scholarship is not used in Egypt.

[542]See, e.g., al-Ǧawharī, Muḥammad, *'Ilm al-folklōr*, Vol. 2: *Dirāsat al-mu'taqadāt aš-ša'bīya*, Cairo: Dār al-ma'ārif, 1980; Waardenburg, 'Popular and official Islam', pp. 313-341.

[543]See Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 106.

[544]*Ibid.*, p. 106.

[545]'Abd al-Laṭīf, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī*, p. 137.

[546]Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism*, p. 39; al-Ǧawharī,''Ilm al-folklōr: al-mawḍū' wa-l-manhaǧ', pp. 13-24.

[547]'Uways, Sayyid, 'Rasā'il'.

mystical and ecstatic piety of the lower classes that is attached to but not part of religion, "a system parallel to religion, a *parareligion*."[548] As such, this interpretation suggests, it is distinct from the scholarly and legalistic official religion, spontaneous, and anti-intellectual, and therefore especially attractive to subaltern classes often framed as 'the simple people'.[549] A more subtle reading of this view, presented for example by ʿIṣām Fawzī (see above pp. 76 and 152), focusses on socially embedded religious discourse and distinguishes between a scriptural, dogmatic and clearly defined discourse of 'scriptural religiosity' and a pragmatic and open 'popular discourse on religion'.[550]

The major problem of both approaches is that the classes of 'popular' and 'official' are themselves not problematised. 'The people' are taken to be a fixed category, but this is not substantiated by evidence. The description of a dichotomy between *ʿulamāʾ* and Sufis that continues to enjoy remarkable popularity among Muslim and Orientalist scholars alike is in fact falsified by historical evidence. The generalisation of the present-day conflict between Sufis and Salafis into a central fault line within Islam is a common but anachronistic enterprise. Recent scholarship on Islamic history indicates that despite tensions, a clear dichotomy has seldom existed. On the contrary, ecstatic mysticism and scholarship have often been closely interconnected, and remain so to date.[551] The description of popular beliefs as the piety of the poor and marginalised is based on a model of class that does not accurately describe the way such classifications work in practice. The image commonly offered by the media and intellectuals is that the typical Sufi, or participant in a mawlid, or pilgrim to a saint's shrine is a poor and illiterate villager. This image is not empirically accurate, however. Participation in religious rituals that are generally described as 'popular' shows only a weak correlation to income or place of origin, although it does have a high correlation to educational capital.[552] ʿIṣām Fawzī successfully avoids most of these problems by focussing on specific ways of speaking of and practising religion, and yet one key problem remains also in his work: What does it actually mean for a thing, a practice, a concept or a person to be 'popular'?.

The contradictions resulting from the scientific use of this commonsense term[553] become clear when we look at actual religious practice: People do not really distinguish between their practice of, say, mawlids and Friday prayers as belonging to different subsystems. Despite this fact, a mawlid is 'popular' and a Friday prayer is not, although the latter enjoys much wider popularity among Egyptian Muslims. Characteristic of almost all definitions of 'popular religion', 'popular beliefs', etc. is that they are

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[548] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[549] Goldziher, *Mohammedanische Studien*, pp. 275-378; ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī*, p. 125; Fahmī, ʿAlī, *Dīn al-ḥarāfiš fī Miṣr al-maḥrūsa*, Cairo: Mērīt li-n-našr wa-l-maʿlūmāt, 1999, pp. 13-19; Ṣiyām, *ad-Dīn aš-šaʿbī fī Miṣr*, pp. 9 f.

[550] Fawzī, 'Ālīyāt al-haymana wa-l-muqāwama'; Idem, 'Anmāṭ at-tadayyun'.

[551] Homerin, Th. Emil, 'Sufis and their Detractors'; Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, 21-23, 88 f.

[552] See Ḥasan, ʿAmmār ʿAlī, *aṣ-Ṣūfīya wa-s-siyāsa fī Miṣr*, al-Maʿādī: Markaz al-maḥrūsa, 1997, pp. 54, 157 ff., 233 f.

[553] See Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 169.

dissociated from many practices central to the religious practice of ordinary Muslims.[554] They go to Friday prayers, save money for a pilgrimage to Mecca and believe in Judgement Day and Paradise, but for some reason, none of this is popular. This contradiction was highlighted in a comment from the audience at a conference on popular religion: If there really was such thing as popular religion, wouldn't this imply the existence of two separate creeds (*'aqīdatayn*)?[555]

### *1.2.2. What makes beliefs popular*

If there is, from an empirical point of view, no such thing as popular religion, then what does the category actually refer to? The classification 'popular' has, of course, to do with 'the people', a collective entity by no means unequivocally defined. Much of the ambiguity of the classification 'popular' is due to the equivocal character of 'the people', meaning simultaneously the collective body of the nation and the non-elites.

First, the attribute 'popular' is part of the political idiom of parliamentary representation, suggesting the legitimation of political actors, institutions and policies through a reference to 'the people'. Second, the attribute 'popular' denotes mainly rural pre-modern traditional culture: traditional customs and proverbs, communal and mystic religious practice, folk arts, and the lifestyle associated with villages and historic urban districts. Third, the attribute refers to mainly urban contemporary lower-class culture and low quality: informal settlements, cheap domestic food, a genre of music favoured at weddings, boulevard press, domestic cigarettes.

To characterise something as popular is to associate it with a specific type of habitus. People who live in a popular district or village, speak a countryside dialect or an urban lower-class slang, demonstrate traditional communal values in their lives, or wear traditional Egyptian clothes don a popular habitus. The ambiguity of the popular habitus becomes clear if we compare it with another, related category, namely that of *ibn/bint al-balad*. Although 'popular' and *baladī* are synonymous in some cases, there are clear differences in the use of the two terms. To be an *ibn al-balad* is to practice a traditional urban way of life. The classification *baladī* gains its meaning through the schematic opposition of traditional Egyptian and modern Western-influenced (*afrangī*) lifestyle. This bestows the *ibn al-balad* with a solid degree of authenticity, not only as a positive self-description but also through the use of the term in modernist discourse in the sense of the raw material of nationalist high culture.[556] Unlike *baladī*, the category 'popular' has no fixed reference or clearly defined counterpart.[557] Characterised by a strong ambiguity, descriptive as well as normative, 'popular' is not necessarily related to

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[554]Diyāb, 'ad-Dīn aš-ša'bī', p. 16; Waardenburgh, 'Popular and Official Islam', pp. 317 f.; al-Ǧawharī, *'Ilm al-folklōr*, p. 29 f.; Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo*, pp. 67 ff.; Ṣiyām, *ad-Dīn aš-ša'bī fī Miṣr*, pp. 9-11; Fahmī, *Dīn al-ḥarāfīš*, pp. 17-19.

[555]*al-Ahrām*, 29.1.1999.

[556]Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism*, pp. 25 ff.; el-Messiri, Sawsan, *Ibn al-Balad: A Concept of Egyptian Identity*, Leiden: Brill, 1978, pp. 54 f, 104 f.

[557]The term *rāqī*, meaning 'refined', 'up-scale' or 'middle/upper class' is often used as a counterpart of 'popular', but other terms like 'official' are used as well. The counterpart of popular religion is religion itself.

traditional lifestyle the way *baladī* is. Thus it can mean 'authentic' at times and 'vulgar' at others, and it often means both at once.

Popular beliefs are a relational category defined along a number of schematic distinctions. Firstly, poor people are expected to have popular beliefs while the middle classes and the rich are not. This distinction, seemingly self-evident, is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition, however. Let us think, for example, of university students who might live in extremely poor conditions but who often are very eager to define mawlids as traditional and popular and themselves as modern and educated. The lack of economic capital becomes important only when connected to other distinctive characteristics.

Secondly, people who have low educational capital are expected to have popular beliefs. Due to their (alleged) lack of formal education and scriptural knowledge of religion, people visiting shrines and participating in mawlid festivals are described as 'simple people' (*busaṭā'*) lacking the consciousness that is key to middle class modernist habitus.[558] Oral traditions, but also heterodox interpretations of the scripture, tend to be popular because of their low symbolic capital vis-a-vis the established educational system (secular as well as religious) and the legitimate paradigms of reading the scripture. A case in point are intellectual movements within Sufism that are not considered popular although much of Sufi practice often is.[559]

Thirdly, women's religious practice is much more likely to be popular than men's. Egypt is a society with relatively strong gender segregation and many religious practices are predominantly male (prayer in the mosque, Qur'ān recitation) or female (shrine visitation, healing and fertility rituals). Since religious scholarship and leadership – and thus the production of religious truth – also happen to be male domains, typically female practices are very likely to become marginalised.[560] The same applies to practices that relativise gender boundaries, as is the case at mawlids.

Fourthly, popular beliefs are not modern–or to be precise, not modern the way Egyptian modernists would like it. The social milieu of popular beliefs is typically that of a village or an old city district. The bodily disposition of popular practices is ambivalent and emotional, and does not respect the boundaries central to the modernist or reformist habitus of the self.

Fifthly, popular beliefs are not heterodox vis-a-vis 'official religion', but rather plainly *religion*. Claiming that 'mawlids have nothing to do with religion' (see above p. 128) is a strong expression of this distinction. Religion, in the hegemonic reading, is a system that is coherent and rationalised, based on authoritative sources and consisting of pre-defined sacred rites, a precisely sanctioned habitus of religious self, and a metaphysical, ethical

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[558]See, e.g., *'Aqīdatī*, 29.6.1999: Ǧamāl Sālim/Mūsā Ḥāl, 'Karāmāt am ḫurāfāt fī aḍriḥat al-awliyā' (3): darwaša .. taqbīl al-aʿtāb .. al-buka' amām aṯar an-nabī .. wa-rukūb al-ḫayl fī mawlid al-Badawī!!', pp. 8-9; *al-Ahrām al-'Arabī*, 2.11.2002: 'Alā' al-Barbarī, 'Darāwīš al-aḍriḥa wa-ṭuqūs al-busaṭā'', pp. 44-45; Fahmī, *Dīn al-ḫarāfīš*, pp. 48 f.; Wielandt, Rotraud, 'Die Bewertung islamischen Volksglaubens in ägyptischer Erzählliteratur des 20. Jahrhunderts', *Die Welt des Islams* 23-24 (1984), pp. 244-258, here pp. 246 ff., 251 ff.

[559]E.g. *al-Wafd*, 25.7.1996: Ǧamāl Badawī, 'at-Taṣawwuf al-miṣrī min al-falsafa .. ilā d-darwaša'; *al-Wafd*, 31.1.1998.

[560]See, e.g., Ibrāhīm, *Bidaʿ wa-ḫurāfāt an-nisā'*; Tapper, Nancy / Richard Tapper, 'The Birth of the Prophet: Ritual and Gender in Turkish Islam, *Man* 22 (1987), 1, pp. 69-92.

and possibly political doctrine. Yet because religious practice is not actually shaped according to such a tight definition, the category of popular beliefs conveniently serves to remove syncretisms, innovation, incoherence, and problematic bodily dispositions from the field of orthodox religion.[561]

'Popular' is a relational category based on a general scheme of hegemonic, orthodox, 'high' culture as opposed to marginal, heterodox, 'low' culture.[562] 'Popular beliefs' is the class of all religious practices and conceptions that are perceived to be in a marginal and/or illegitimate position vis-a-vis public, hegemonic definitions of habitus, gender, civility and religion. This means that while popular religion is essentially defined as heterodox, not all heterodoxy is popular: Atheism, for example, is not, because atheist intellectuals fulfill other key criteria of inclusion in the public sphere. Following the same logic, popular beliefs are also not identical with the religiosity of peasants, urban poor, women or the illiterate. Insofar as their religious practice follows the scheme of the legitimate, hegemonic sense of religion–which often is the case–their's is plain religion, not popular.[563]

### *1.2.3. From a classification to a thing*

The attribute 'popular' in its commonsense use denotes the specific relation of a practice towards hegemonic social practices. Popular beliefs are neither a field nor a system, but a class of things that share a similar position in the symbolic structure of social space. As soon as this common sense is embedded into intellectual and scientific discourses we find that a tendency to reify this classification emerges. Although no one actually practices popular religion as a distinct practice with distinct logic, the term is nevertheless widely viewed as an objective, distinct category. Popular religion becomes an independent thing with a position in social space.

This moment of reification is only possible through a gaze from above. The term 'popular beliefs/religion' is, although used in all classes of Egyptian society, a classification produced through hegemonic practices of representation. Those who study, classify and describe popular culture do not themselves belong to the 'popular classes' (*ṭabaqāt šaʿbīya*). They are journalists, intellectuals, anthropologists, religious scholars, politicians, etc. who construct popular religion as a cultural and social Other. The choice for them is not between including or excluding mawlids, but between different forms of exclusion:

'The millions of people who believe in the miracles of saints and circle around

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[561]The relation also works in the other direction: The participation of persons with high economic or educational capital in a popular practice does not necessarily elevate its symbolic capital: Through the popular milieu of the practice, the middle- or upper-class participants temporarily take on a popular habitus.

[562]See Bourdieu, *Distinction,* pp. 168 ff.; *Theory of Practice*, pp. 15 ff.

[563]Schielke, Samuli (Ṣāmūlī Šīlka), 'Mā š-šaʿbī fī l-muʿtaqadāt aš-šabīya', *Fuṣūl* 60 (summer-autumn 2002), pp. 166-176; Salvatore, Armando: 'Staging Virtue: The Disembodiment of Self-Correctness and the Making of Islam as Public Norm', in: Stauth, Georg (ed.), *Islam – Motor or Challenge of Modernity* (Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam; 1), Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 1998, pp. 87-120, here p. 116.

> shrines and mawlids [...] express a religion that many call "popular religion" or the religion of the commoners and the simple people, while others see it as an embodiment of the elements of ignorance and backwardness in the Arab world."[564]

In this account, the option of these beliefs being simply a form of Islamic piety is not available. Whatever mawlids are, they are not the stuff true modern culture and piety are made of. The construction of mawlids as an expression of popular beliefs is one of the many dissociations constitutive of the imagery and habitus of modernism and reformism. This label is different from others (such as ignorance and backwardness), however, because of its normative ambiguity. It makes it possible to view mawlids as authentic heritage and to subject them to scientific study as folk culture while upholding their exclusion from the hegemonic definitions of religion and nation.[565] By their virtue of being popular, i.e. marginal, mawlids are denied becoming a full and legitimate part of the imagery of modern society. Only as long as they remain marginal and exotic may they be appreciated as traces of the ancient past, as part of a nostalgic image of village life, or as aesthetic spectacles.

This act of classification often goes entirely unquestioned in the representations of mawlids as popular religion, so for example in a photo book on mawlids whose author categorically states with a certainty typical to the middle-class modernist common sense that mawlids, of course, do not have anything to do with real religion:

> 'The mulid is often mistakenly labeled a Muslim religious event. It is actually more of a cultural phenomenon, a community ritual that has been continuously practiced in Egypt since pharaonic times.
> [...]
> The idea of patron shaykhs is foreign to mainstream, moderate Islam, whose precepts teach that there is no need for an intermediary, such as a saint or a priest, between human beings and God.
> [...]
> The shaykh's feasts that dot the average Egyptian's social calendar remain a mystery to wealthier, more modernised citizens of this ancient land, as well as to a growing number of urban and rural Muslims who have come to understand that such celebrations actually go against the grain of religion."[566]

This account bears witness to and simultaneously solves the ambivalence central to the perception of many Egyptians who find mawlids fascinating and troubling in the same instance. By defining mawlids as a 'community ritual', Tarek Atia is able to exclude them from the field of religion and bestow them with a potential of authenticity and cultural value at the same time. This does not automatically imply a positive judgement of mawlids – we must remember that the classification 'popular' first emerged as a term of exclusion in service of a critical discourse on mystical piety,[567] and until today much of

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[564] *al-Ahrām al-ʿArabī*, 2.11.2002: Maǧdī al-Ǧallād, 'Mawālid wa-karāmāt al-ʿarab', pp. 38-39. This article is part of a special feature that is unique among Egyptian representations of mawlids because it takes a pan-Arab perspective looking at not only Egypt but also Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan and Morocco. The reason for this is that *al-Ahrām al-Arabī*, a glossy magazine expensive by Egyptian standards, is produced mainly for international circulation.

[565] See, e.g., ʿAlī, ʿArafa ʿAbduh, *Mawālid Miṣr al-Maḥrūsa*, Cairo: al-ʿAyn li-d-dirāsāt wa-l-buḥūṯ al-īǧtimāʿīya, 1995, pp. 7 f.

[566] Sonbol/Atia, *Mulid!*, pp. 7-8. See also Ṣiyām, *ad-Dīn aš-šaʿbī*, pp. 210 f.; Fahmī, Dīn al-ḥarāfīš, p. 18; 'Uways: 'Rasā'il' pp. 306, 313–314.

[567] See above p. 123-124.

the research on mawlids is characterised by a critical, at times polemical tone.[568] But classification as popular beliefs effectively establishes popular things as separate objects that are, by definition, distinct from religion and modern society and can, hence, be studied and appreciated as such independently of their status regarding religion and modernity. This normative ambiguity of 'popular beliefs', often framed in academic studies as an analytical division into positive and negative aspects,[569] permits the view of mawlids as an element of popular heritage, that is, something with a positive function and purpose but subordinate to the construction of great heritage.

An important consequence of objectifying popular culture is that its public image, once dissociated from modern culture, grows increasingly exotic. Once-a-year spectacular events as they are, mawlids appear fascinating and exotic even for those who have grown up with them. But the exotic character of the festive experience is quite different from the exotic representation of the festivity. The exotic character of the mawlid as a festive experience is founded in its festive time that exists as a promise throughout months of everyday hard work and as a periodic climax of joy and celebration. It is exotic to non-festive daily practice but not to the overall life experience and social order it is part of. The situation is very different, however, in studies on popular religion and folklore, and in newspaper articles and the accounts of intellectuals who go to see mawlids as an interesting cultural artifact, a fascinating trace of the past.

> 'In this study I have aimed to present a comprehensive view of the reality in order to learn to know a world with the colours of the banners, flags, lights, legends, *maǧḏūb*s, sultans, *quṭb*s,[570] sessions of Sufi hymns, and a magnificent popular heritage!
>
> I travelled around in time and space, the heart impatient for a gaze, the mind thirsty for knowledge. How much there is to see in this magic and amazing world! And what I saw was more exciting and surprising than I could have imagined!'[571]

It is not a coincidence that this exotic view of mawlids as a time and place far away, waiting to be explored by the glance of the intellectual is especially popular in the English language press directed at foreigners and Egyptian upper classes. These usually glossy magazines regularly run features on mawlids, sometimes in more analytical tone[572] but often in a sensational, almost voyeuristic style searching for the extraordinary and

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[568]The polemic character of some of the academic publications on mawlids is assisted by the low level of differentiation between academic research and publicist writing in many academic and cultural journals. See, e.g., ʿAbd al-Hādī, Aḥmad, 'Mawālid Miṣr al-maḥrūsa', *Aḥwāl Miṣrīya* 5 (Summer 2002), 17, pp. 64-82.

[569]This search for positive and negative aspects is due to the normative mission of social sciences in Egypt. It is common for studies on mawlids and other subjects framed as popular beliefs to devote a passage to discuss the negative and positive aspects of the object of research and to consider ways to eliminate the negative aspects and utilise the positive ones. See, e.g., Muṣṭafā, *al-Mawālid*, pp. 275-289; Ḥasan, *aṣ-Ṣūfīya wa-s-siyāsa*, pp. 10 f.; al-ʿAlīmī, ʿĀdil, *aẓ-Ẓār wa-masraḥ aṭ-ṭuqūs*, Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-ʿāmma li-l-kitāb, 1993, pp. 149 f.

[570]A *maǧḏūb* is a person whose soul has been drawn to God so strongly that he or she has become mad in the ordinary sense. Sultan is a common title of Muslim saints. *Quṭb*s are the 'poles' of the Sufi chains of initiation: ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Ǧīlānī, Aḥmad ar-Rifāʿī, Aḥmad al-Badawī and Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī.

[571]ʿAlī, *Mawālid Miṣr al-maḥrūsa*, p. 7.

[572]E.g. *Cairo Times*, 19/2000; *Cairo Magazine*, 10-16.3.2005.

the scandalous.[573]

What is striking in the exotic representation is how it makes mawlids seem somehow removed from reality, as if taking place somewhere very far away, disconnected from modern urban life. This exotic image of mawlids is a direct consequence of their criticism and spatial and temporal exclusion. The political and intellectual elites of the country are often highly uncomfortable with the public presence of mawlids, and the policies of public mediation reflect this attitude. But as an exotic object, the mawlid is sanitised. The exotic mawlid is, much like the 'primitives' of early 20th-century anthropology, constructed by setting it apart in time and denying its coevalness[574] with contemporary society. It appears as a strange and different world inhabited by exotic and fantastic creatures, not at all part of modern time and life, and hence no threat to it – provided that it remains in its exotic, marginal position.

## 2. The product of representation

I have thus far concentrated on academic representations that try to rationalise the ambivalence in the perception of mawlids by defining them as a distinct object that can be analytically divided into positive and negative aspects. But the picture will not be complete without looking at practices of representation that, building on the distinction described above, reinvent the mawlid as an independent cultural artifact through its reproduction as folklore and art, and the publicly mediated image of state celebrations. These products of representation separate mawlids from their controversial and troublesome character, with the consequence that they begin to live a life of their own, increasingly independent of festive practice.

### *2.1. Folklore*

In its contemporary Arabic usage, the term folklore refers to popular (*ša'bī*) culture insofar as it can be reconstructed as artistic or civilisational heritage: various genres of popular music, colloquial epics, poetry, proverbs, puppet theatre plays, and rural arts and crafts. As folklore, they are collected and reproduced in books, films, theatre plays and public events, re-contextualised and redefined.

Mawlids are a major source of folkloric research, and often are defined generally as folklore. Yet the image of mawlids as folklore is quite different from their festive practice. Mawlid as folklore is an artistic and aesthetic spectacle consisting of traditional music, puppet theatre plays, acrobats and magicians, amusements, dancers and colourful lights. It contains many elements that have largely disappeared from contemporary mawlids, such as colloquial epics, female dancers and the *qarāǧūz* puppet theatre play, while other elements central to contemporary mawlids, such as pilgrimage, *ḫidmas*, and rowdy youths, are conspicuously absent.

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[573]See, e.g., *Middle East Times*, 41/1998: Leila Johnson, 'Pilgrims celebrate snake sect festival'; *Egypt Today*, May 2003: Cam McGrath (text) / John Samples (photographs), 'Devoted to revelry: a close-up look at Egypt's many moulids, where the sacred and profane rub shoulders', pp.72-79.

[574]Fabian, *Time and the Other*, pp. 31 ff.

Most importantly however, folklore is re-contextualised: Sufi music, puppet theatre and popular epics are reproduced for a public that won't go to mawlids but will go to the theatre and concerts. In their original context, epics, songs, and performances are part of a spectacle without footlights in which performers and audiences stand in close interaction and the aesthetic value of artistic production is not separated from the religious and moral content of the stories that are told, from the ritual in which they are embedded, or from the lives of the participants. As folklore, however, they are at once reduced and elevated to art. Even as folkloric art, however, mawlids are not included in the realm of 'real' high culture. The very definition of folklore implies that it is legitimate only on the condition that it remains in a culturally subordinate position.[575]

Folklore represents a strategy to handle the ambivalence so characteristic to all things 'popular', at one moment authentic and fascinating, the next vulgar and threatening. As folklore, mawlids can be appreciated as aesthetic items without having to appreciate the rituals, the lives and the morals to which they were originally bound. As art, they lose the disturbing impact that real life in popular districts often has on many members of the upper and middle classes. As a subject of study, they can be appreciated as national heritage regardless of their problematic status vis-a-vis hegemonic definitions of religion and modernity. Unlike the anthropological study of popular religion embedded in a number of political and religious conflicts, folklore is clearly located on the safe side of the nationalist mission of the social sciences, exploring the national heritage and identity in the relatively peaceful realm of art and literature.[576]

Yet folklore has not remained uncontested. Just like people who go to mawlids refuse to see their religiosity as popular, Sufi singers refuse to see their art as folklore. Well aware of the inherently marginal position of folklore, Sheikh Yāsīn at-Tuhāmī, Egypt's most prominent *munšid* who can be seen on national television mostly on the programme *Funūn šaʿbīya* (Popular Arts) stresses that his performance is a religious mission and not folklore.[577] From a different perspective, folklore is criticised by people who see it as a way to rehabilitate false cultural influences that pollute true Egyptian Islamic heritage. This point is most radically expressed by the Islamist intellectual Anwar al-Ǧundī (1917-2002) who views folklore as one of the many conspiracies against Islam:

> 'The call for the revival of popular heritage (folklore) belongs to the most dangerous calls for Westernisation, *šuʿūbīya*,[578] and the cultural offensive [against Islam] in the modern age. The forces of Zionism and colonialism have mobilised for it many pens, subsidised it with great sums of money, held for it conferences and meetings, and published about

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[575]See Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism*, p. 107 where he argues that 'folklore is safest as a relic, never to be shown as important in its own right, but to be represented as a picture of where the viewers (the modern folk) have come from.'

[576]Perhaps for this reason, many Egyptian academics whom I encountered in my fieldwork automatically assumed that I was doing research on folklore, implying that folklore is the only thing really worth researching at mawlids. For a contemporary Egyptian criticism of the encapsulation of folklore, see Fawzī, 'Ālīyāt al-haymana wa-l-muqāwama', p. 134.

[577]Interview with Sheikh Yāsīn at-Tuhāmī, Cairo, 10 October 2002 (interview in cooperation with Muḥammad Saʿd Šiḥāta).

[578]*Ṣuʿūbīya* was a movement in the early period of Islam which denied a privileged position to the Arabs (Enderwitz, S., 'Shuʿūbīya', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., Leiden: Brill, vol. 9, pp. 513-516). Al-Ǧundī uses this term as a denunciatory label for all intellectual currents that question the unity of Islam and classical Arabic language and culture.

> it books and papers. The scope of this call has extended to include the field of arts in their entirety (dance, narrative, and song) from the stance of colloquial word, naïve thought, and long past pagan customs that are opposed to the loftiness of the Islamic-Arabic heritage that is based on eloquent thought, clear expression and fundamental values.[579]

In a less radical tone, many Egyptian modernists affirm that while folklore is certainly legitimate national heritage, as far as mawlids are concerned, 'I don't recognise these things as real heritage';[580] 'they are not real popular folklore'.[581] This is a good reminder of the selective nature of categories such as heritage, folklore, or popular culture: although they are the product of modernist exclusion, they have to be exclusive as well to maintain their potential of authenticity. Categories such as 'vulgarity' serve to keep folk heritage clean of all the disturbing parts of popular culture: commercial mass culture, abusive language, the subversion of religion and morals, and a range of other things that for various reasons appear too troublesome to fit into the idealised image of popular heritage.[582]

## *2.2. Artistic production*

The most complex representations of mawlids can be found, not surprisingly, in the field of artistic production. Although the modernist tradition of progressive elitism has been strongly present among Egyptian artists and intellectuals throughout the 20th century, it has not lead to a uniform imagery of mawlids in works of art. This is partly due to the open, complex character of artistic production itself, and partly related to the gradual loss of modernism's hegemony as an artistic style since the 1980s.

The themes of the modernist criticism of mawlids and their re-invention as popular culture, are strongly present in artistic production. With this background, mawlids appear in a double role: on the one hand a colourful moment of festivity that brings together different people in an exotic/authentic popular setting, and on the other hand a projection of social problems. Yet in artistic production these themes often take on more complex forms than in the publicly mediated academic, religious and political debates.

Using the themes of mawlids and the veneration of saints to discuss social problems is most strongly present in literary fiction, in which the tradition of progressive elitism has also long been strongest. ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim's *The Seven Days of Man* (see above pp. 130-131) and *The Saint's Lamp*[583] (*Qindīl Umm Hāšim*) by Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī are perhaps the most prominent examples of this theme, bringing together autobiographic elements, concern for the progress of society, and the ambivalent experience of the modernised but

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[579]al-Ǧundī, Anwar, *Iḥyāʾ at-turāṯ al-ǧāhilī wa-l-waṭanī taḥt ism al-folklōr: at-turāṯ aš-šaʿbī*, Cairo: Dār al-Anṣār, 1980, p. 5; see also al-Ǧundī, Anwar, *as-Šubuhāt wa-l-aḥṭāʾ aš-šāʾiʿa fī l-fikr al-islāmī*, Cairo: Dār al-iʿtiṣām, 1995, pp. 213-215.

[580]Interview with Māhir, lawyer, Minyat al-Muršid (Kafr aš-Šayḫ province), 13 May 2003.

[581]Interview with Muḥammad, Minyat al-Muršid, 21 February 2002.

[582]See, e.g., al-Ǧawharī, ''Ilm al-folklōr: al-mawḍūʿ wa-l-manhaǧ', p. 24; Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism*, pp. 165-190.

[583]Ḥaqqī, Yaḥyā, *Qindīl Umm Hāšim* (Iqraʾ; 18), Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-maʿārif, undated [1944]; Idem, *The Saint's Lamp and Other Stories*, transl. M.M. Badawi, Leiden: Brill, 1973.

alienated intellectual.[584] They are both also characterised by a mixture of criticism, nostalgia, and sympathy for the communal religious experience: in *The Seven Days of Man* through the strong feeling of loss that permeates the book, and in *The Saint's Lamp* through the end in which the hero finally manages to find a way to reconcile religion[585] with his European rationalist education. In a more distanced and satirical way, the topic of mawlids has also been used as a metaphor for entirely different social issues, so for example in Yūsuf ʿAwf's theatre play *Mawlid Sīdī al-Murʿib*[586] in which people mistake a displaced nuclear reactor for a saint's tomb and begin to celebrate a mawlid in honour of Sīdī Abū Ḏarra ('father of atom') with fatal results. *Mawlid Sīdī al-Murʿib* is a dark comedy in which ridiculing popular beliefs serves as a frame to criticise naïve trust in nuclear power and ignorance of its dangers.[587]

The use of mawlids for colourful, exotic scenery is especially common in cinema and photography. Often this very closely follows folkloric imagery, producing an exotic, colourful image of mawlids that is characterised by a clear distance to its subject. An outstanding example is the film *Mūlid yā dunyā*[588] (1975) in which a group of young petty thieves is re-socialised as a folklore troupe. The mawlid is reduced to dance and folklore, and it is striking how much the film follows the (then) hegemonic sense of popular culture, not only showing mawlid as folkloric art (in a style strikingly abstracted from the art that can actually be found at mawlids) but also showing folklore in the service of social development. But the mawlid in the cinema also has a more complex function: it can serve as the place and occasion in which different kinds of people can come together. This element is central to the beginning of *Driven from Paradise* (*Ṭarīd al-firdaws*, 1965)[589] when a Sufi sheikh (played by Farīd Šawqī) meets a dancer girl at a mawlid, dies of a heart attack while having sinful thoughts of her and, after being denied entrance to both paradise and hell, returns to earth to begin a new life. The mawlid in *Driven from Paradise* is set more realistically than in *Mūlid yā Dunyā* and has more layers: The mawlid is characterised by its open and complex character as the place where all elements of society come together in an atmosphere of piety and flirtation, virtually the only event in which a sheikh and a dancer might meet.

The predominant image of mawlids in photography is also that of a colourful and exotic parallel world characterised by striking colours and inhabited by eccentric people.

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[584]See also Wielandt, 'Die Bewertung islamischen Volksglaubens'.

[585]In *The Saint's Lamp* the conflict is not one between science and popular religion, as often indicated, but between science and religion in general. Ḥaqqī does not get involved in the debate of the Islamic legitimacy of the cult of saints, and when the hero's sister eventually is healed by the oil from the lamp at the shrine of as-Sayyida Zaynab after Western medicine failed, the author leaves the judgement of this event open.

[586]ʿAwf, Yūsuf, *Mawlid Sīdī al-Murʿib: masraḥīya fī faṣlayn wa-sabʿata ʿašar mašhad*, Cairo: 1996, ad-Dār al-miṣrīya al-lubnānīya.

[587]The nostalgia and empathy that are strongly present in *The Seven Days of Man* and *The Saint's Lamp* are absent in *Mūlid Sīdī l-Murʿib*, which is more strongly characterised by an already distanced view of communal religious culture.

[588]*Mūlid yā dunyā*, Ḥusayn Kamāl (director), with ʿAfāf Rāḍī, ʿAbd al-Munʿim Madbūlī et al., Egypt, 1975.

[589]Here and in following I refer to films with their international titles, if available. *Ṭarīd al-firdaws (Driven from Paradise)*, Faṭīn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (director), based on a story by Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm, with Farīd Šawqī, Samīra Aḥmad, Naǧwā Fuʾād et al., Egypt 1965.

This imagery is most strongly present in features published in glossy magazines and in the photo book by Sherif Sonbol *Mulid! Carnivals of Faith* (1999). These images, colourful and vivid as they usually are, do not actually bring the mawlid closer to the reader, however. On the contrary, they contribute to the distance of their object, constructed as an exotic world into which the reader, in almost voyeuristic manner, can peek without risking further involvement. This style is not the choice of all photographers, however.

*Image 25: Sherif Sonbol: The Rifāʿī procession. From Sonbol / Atia,* Mūlid! Carnivals of Faith *(colour original).*

The photographs of Niek Biegman, Nabīl Buṭrus and Nermine Hammam[590] show intimate and unspectacular imageries of mawlids. Not only do they demonstrate that the spectacular and exotic style of photographing mawlids is determined by a specific way of viewing them rather than related to the nature of the festivals themselves, they also show how the dynamics of artistic production can shift the focus of representation and the message carried by it.

The most important shift in focus does not originate in the field of fine arts, however, but in commercial mass culture. Artistic production in Egypt has been closely connected to modernism, which, as Walter Armbrust has shown, is not only a cultural discourse but also an aesthetic convention supported by public sector cultural institutions.[591] Since the 1980s, the hegemony of modernism in the field of artistic production has become contested by commercial mass culture with different aesthetics and a different political agenda. So for example in the action/melodrama film *Lost in the Moulid (il-Mūlid*, 1989)[592] in which the hero Barakāt (played by ʿĀdil Imām), the son of pious peasant parents, is kidnapped as a small child by a thief in the mawlid of as-Sayyida Zaynab, grows up as a petty thief and makes a career as a mafioso and businessman. After numerous adventures he discovers his true identity and decides to marry Amāra (played by Yusrā) after finding out that she is not his sister after all.

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[590]For the work of Niek Biegman, see Biegman, *Egypt*; Idem, *Egypt's Side Shows*, Amsterdam: Goose Press, 1992; for Nabīl Buṭrus, see Hamani, Laziz et al., *Impressions d'Afrique du Nord*. Paris: Institut du Monde Arabe, 1998; for Nermine Hammam, see Karnouk, Liliane, *Modern Egyptian Art, 1910-2003*, revised ed., Cairo: AUC Press, 2005, p. 247.

[591]Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism*.

[592]*il-Mūlid (Lost in the Moulid)*, Samīr Sayf (director), with ʿĀdil Imām, Yusrā et al., Egypt 1989.

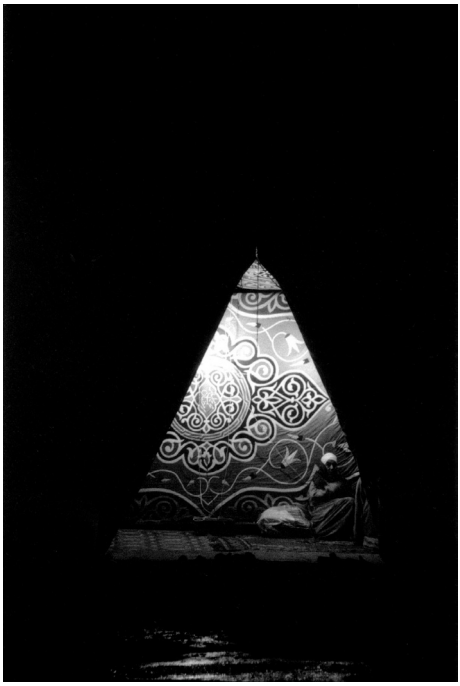

*Image 26: Nabīl Buṭrus: The mawlid of as-Sayyida Zaynab, 1992. From Hamani et al.,* Impressions d'Afrique du Nord *(black and white original).*

In *Lost in the Moulid,* the mawlid of as-Sayyida Zaynab stands as a complex image and metaphor. On one level, it carries the connotations of popular religion, while judgement of it is left open: Barakāt's mother, who, desperate to find her son again undertakes a pilgrimage to as-Sayyida Zaynab every year, fits well to the image of the simple and ignorant peasant woman visiting shrines. But in the end her prayers are answered and she does find Barakāt. On another level, the festival becomes a leading motif for the entire plot. In many ways similar to *Driven from Paradise*, the mawlid is shown as the place where the pious and the thief meet: where Barakāt is kidnapped from his simple but pious parents and where he, returning from Cyprus as a rich businessman, meets his (assumed) sister again. Finally, the mawlid is the turning point in the hero's identity: there he, as a child, loses his parents and even his name (the old thief names him Ibrāhīm and as a businessman he calls himself Ġarīb). In a vision, the hero sees his mother and hears the sounds of the mawlid. And at the end of the film, he associates the *baraka* of the mawlid with his return to a happy, honest and simple life.

*Lost in the Moulid* works with a complex scale of representations that includes the folkloric image but also goes beyond it: the mawlid is an ambiguous intersection, a point of crossing between countryside and the city, the pious and the criminal, and a point of transformation in the hero's life: from peasant child to adolescent in an urban slum, from criminal back to a (more or less) honest man. In a film that shows the new rich of the 1980s as unscrupulous crooks, the mawlid becomes part of a social vision different from that of ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim or Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī: Instead of being the metaphor for a problematic confrontation with traditional culture, the mawlid becomes the sign of the 'good life' Barakāt returns to after a lifetime of crime.

## *2.3. The many lives of The Great Night*

Yet not only the image an artist draws of mawlids is important for their public representation. The public mediation of this image is equally if not more important, as we can see in the case of the puppet theatre operetta *The Great Night* (*al-Layla al-kabīra*), written by Ṣalāḥ Ǧāhīn (1930-1986) and composed by Sayyid Makkāwī (1924-1997). First performed in the 1960s and an enormous success throughout the decades, *The Great Night* is the most famous piece of art depicting mawlids. Most Egyptians know parts of the

songs by heart. The play is still regularly performed by the Cairo Puppet Theatre, broadcast on television, and sold as cassette and video tapes.[593] In 2001, *The Great Night* entered the highest levels of the nationalist art world when a ballet adaptation of the play was debuted in the Opera House.[594]

Like a mawlid, *The Great Night* does not have a clear narrative structure: it is a cavalcade through the wonders of a mawlid, featuring children, pilgrims from the countryside, a blind *munšid*, vendors offering a vast range of merchandise and amusements, a Sufi procession, a beggar, a dancer girl, the *qarāǧūz*, a café owner and customers, a circus director, an overconfident youth, a popular singer, women with their children, and many others. The different voices of the mawlid come together as the central theme of the play:

*Image 27: Cairo Puppet Theatre performs* The Great Night. *Cairo, August 2003.*

Voices:
'Allāh! Allāh! Allāh!'
'Pastries with almonds!'
'Allāh! Allāh! Allāh!
'*Ṭa'mīya*!'[595]
'Allāh! Allāh! Allāh!'
'*Qarāǧūz*!'
'Allāh! Allāh! Allāh!'
*Qarāǧūz* & choir:
'It's the great night, uncle, and there are masses of people
The tents are full, papa, from the countryside and the cities
Those are from Delta and those from Upper Egypt
Those are from the Canal and those from Rosetta

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[593]*Ōbērēt al-Layla al-kabīra* [puppet theatre play], Ṣalāḥ Ǧāhīn (author), Sayyid Makkāwī (composer), performed by Masraḥ al-Qāhira li-l-'arā'is. Tape recording: Cairo: Sono Cairo, 1972. Video CD of television production: Cairo: Flash Video Film, [1999]; for text of the play, see Ǧāhīn, Ṣalāḥ, *al-layla al-kabīra wa-ḫams masraḥīyāt*, Cairo: Markaz al-Ahrām li-t-tarǧama wa-n-našr, 1992, pp. 9-17.

[594]*al-Ahram Weekly*, 3.1.2002: Amina Elbendary and Youssef Rakha, 'Night of nights: Al-leila Al-kabira comes to the Opera'.

[595]A dish similar to falafel but made of fava beans.

It's the great night, uncle, and there are masses of people'[596]

Like in the film *Lost in the Moulid*, the mawlid of *The Great Night* is not a marginal event. It stands at the centre of society, collecting all kinds of people from all around the country. Written by artists well-versed in the milieu of mawlids (Sayyid Makkāwī began his career as a *munšid* and Qurʾān reciter, for which he carried the title of sheikh throughout his life),[597] *The Great Night* is a fantastic and yet realistic depiction of the atmosphere of mawlids from changing perspectives, always funny but never arrogant. The mawlid shown in *The Great Night* is not exotic, and yet it can become so when it is detached from festive practice and turned into a cultural icon. Through its public mediation *The Great Night* has come to represent mawlids as an exotic form of traditional popular culture far from the world of the modern middle-class citizen.

*Image 28: The ballet version of* The Great Night *performed at the Cairo Opera. Cairo Opera Ballet Company, undated, ca. 2002.*

I came to be part of such public mediation in May 2003 when I received a phone call from a journalist working for Egyptian satellite television who wanted to interview me for *Ayyām miṣrīya*, a programme that features foreigners who live and work in Egypt. The interviews are recorded in places that are in some way connected to the life and work of the people featured. I suggested as-Sayyida Zaynab Square, host to one of Cairo's greatest mawlids and many of my favourite cafés and restaurants, but the journalist who prepared the interview with me considered it a not very suitable location and suggested that we go to Ḫān al-Ḫalīlī and al-Ḥusayn Square instead. I agreed and after some arrangements, the interview was recorded in al-Fišāwī, a famous café located in the Ḫān al-Ḫalīlī market, one of Cairo's main tourist attractions. In the interview we discussed my work, what had brought me to this line of study, what my relationship to Egypt was, which side I took in the national football league, and the like. Afterwards fill images were recorded in the alleys of the market and in front of al-Ḥusayn mosque. In the final feature, the interview was backed by fill images of the foreigner wandering through the colourful alleys of the market looking at merchandise with an expression of curiosity and interest, all to the tune of music every Egyptian would know: songs from *The Great Night*.

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[596]Quoted from the soundtrack of the theatre version.

[597]'Brief Biography of Sayyid Mekkawi', Zeryab Arabic Classical Music Forum, 28.1.2005, http://www.4allofus.net/zeryab/showthread.php?t=2030, viewed 13.9.2005.

The feature was well made, and in a fascinating way it managed to present mawlids without actually showing anything from a mawlid. The person speaking was a foreigner who discussed Egyptian popular culture with an Egyptian moderator who had never been to a mawlid herself. The soundtrack was the classicist Arabic music in the style of the 1960s, not the music or sounds one would actually hear at a mawlid. The space was that of Egypt's showcase piece of old city: colourful, clean and expensive, well-secured and organised to welcome tourists and upper class Egyptians. In short, the feature managed to present a foreigner who studies a colourful and strange part of Egyptian culture without showing anything that could possibly disturb the official image of Egypt as a modern, orderly and at times exotic country.

Of course there were pragmatic reasons for doing the feature in this way. The music of *al-Layla al-kabīra*, good and famous as it is, was a likely choice to say the least. The location of Ḫān al-Ḫalīlī, a place accustomed to the presence of tourists and cameras, was an easy place for a television crew to work – unlike places like as-Sayyida Zaynab where the presence of a television crew would immediately trigger the overwhelming curiosity of bystanders. But these pragmatic reasons actually point to much deeper forms of representation and distinction. Television features are produced by middle-class professionals with certain forms of first-hand knowledge and experience, combined with the professional aesthetics of what looks good on television. When a foreigner finds mawlids interesting the subject is elevated to a level of significance it might otherwise not have. *The Great Night* is music everyone knows, and although the songs of a *munšid* like, say, Yāsīn at-Tuhāmī, might give a better idea of the sounds of a mawlid, it would not trigger the same recognition effect among the people involved in the production (although it might have done so among some audiences). Ḫān al-Ḫalīlī is a place that is worth showing, and where one can move easily and safely, while the popular districts are full of noise, dirt and trouble. Representations such as the interesting and authoritative foreigner, folklore, and popular districts turned tourist-friendly heritage are so self-evident in the official imagery of nation and modernity and the daily life of parts of the upper and middle classes that the representations are no longer taken to be so.

Listening to *The Great Night* is not necessarily separate from the festive practice of mawlids. Youths who roam the streets of mawlids are often inspired to sing songs from it, and the crowded streets of mawlids and the songs and images of the puppet theatre flow together in their festive experiences. But for people with little or no first-hand experience of mawlids the situation is different. For them *The Great Night* is the only mawlid they know. So also for the journalist who prepared the interview with me. She asked me if I could show her the mawlid of al-Ḥusayn that was to begin the following week and I took her around during one of the first nights of celebration that are less crowded and thus more suitable for taking visitors. She was very interested to see the festivity, from a friendly distance, somewhat amazed by the people camping on the sidewalks and in tents, and positively impressed by the recitation of religious poetry. But at the sight of the swaying *ḏikr* she promptly noted that this kind of practice certainly has nothing to do with Islamic religion. Before the tour, I had asked her what she knew about and expected from the mawlid. What she knew, she told, was mainly from cinema and theatre: the images and sounds offered by *al-Layla al-Kabīra* and some films. She had never actually seen a mawlid with her own eyes:

> 'My idea of a mawlid was always that it's not a good place, my idea of a mawlid was crowds, and lots of people, and noise, and maybe thieves, [that kind of] people. So I never go [to mawlids], unlike the foreigner, who might see something of fantasia in it. He likes to learn to know it.'
> [...]
> 'I never went to mawlids because as a child and youth I was a daughter of a good family, thus a good girl, and wouldn't be allowed to go to mawlids which were infamous for harassment and the like. And later as a grownup, I got married to a respectable man who wouldn't go to a mawlid either.'
> [...]
> S: What do you expect to see in the mawlid?
> 'I expect to see... (laughs) to see swing-boats, to see many colours, coloured lights and stripes, to see many children, to see the phenomena of celebration: party hats and puppets, certain dishes, that kind of things.'[598]

It is not only the life experience of many middle-class Egyptians, especially women whose freedom of movement is more limited by class and modesty,[599] that makes *The Great Night* become the mawlid itself for them. The prominence of the work of art is part of the logic of exoticisation and exclusion at work in the public representation of mawlids. Artistic representations of mawlids are strongly present in the public media, and the ordinary mawlid thus becomes increasingly invisible as the product of representation is increasingly taken to be the original.[600]

## *2.4. The official festivity*

The gap between festive practice and its public representation is only partly due to the representation of mawlids as popular beliefs and folkloric art. Another, equally important side to the public mediation of mawlids is their press and television coverage, which is often characterised by a clear distance between the festive practices of mawlids and the world covered by the news media. This coverage combines the tendency to exoticise mawlids discussed above in the case of popular heritage and artistic production with the tendency to represent one specific part of the festivity – the official celebration – as the 'real' mawlid that can enjoy inclusion in the hegemonic imagery of the nation.

Mawlids are a recurring topic of press features, some of which are fortrightly critical[601] while others express a mixture of critical or sarcastic comments, positive appreciation, and a sense of amazement and fascination,[602] and yet others (fewer in number) are openly affirmative or apologetic.[603] But while mawlids are a common subject of press features and opinion articles, and sometimes may even appear on television in the programme *Funūn šaʿbīya* (Popular Arts), they hardly ever are perceived to have any news value. One

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[598]Interview with Āmāl al-Bannā, journalist, Cairo, 20 June 2003.

[599]de Koning, *Global Dreams*, pp. 162-182.

[600]See, e.g., Sonbol / Atia, *Mulid!*, p. 9.

[601]See above chapter 4.

[602]See, e.g., *al-ʿArabī*, 31.10.2001: Muḥammad ʿAbd ad-Dāʾim / Ṭalʿat Ḥassānayn, 'Milyūn murīd šaddū r-riḥāl li-"Umm al-ʿAwāǧiz"', *Rūz al-Yūsuf*, 5-11.10.2002, Ḥamāda Ḥusayn, "Aǧāʾib al-layla al-kabīra fī mawlid as-Sayyida Zaynab', pp. 40-47; *al-Ahrām al-ʿArabī*, 2.11.2002: 'Min aḍriḥat Miṣr wa-l-Maġrib.. ilā muʿǧizāt as-sūdānīyīn wa-bukāʾīyāt al-ʿIrāq wa-Lubnān: mawālid wa-karāmāt al-awliyā'' (several articles), pp. 1, 38-53.

[603]See, e.g., *al-Ǧumhūrīya*, 6.12.1996; *Ṣawt al-Umma*, 18.7.2001.

seeks in vain to find a reference in advance of any of the great mawlids of Egypt on television or in the national newspapers. While hundreds of thousands of visitors crowd the streets to celebrate Sīdnā al-Ḥusayn, as-Sayyid al-Badawī and other saints, national media often fail to mention them with a single word. Feature articles often appear weeks, even months after the mawlid took place, underlining a characteristic trait of much of the coverage of mawlids: While mawlids may be judged in different ways, they generally (with the exception of the provincial press in which mawlids play a role in establishing local identity[604]) appear as taking place somewhere very far away, as if disconnected from the modern life that is covered by news.

When mawlids do appear in the news, they do so in a curiously selective fashion. So, for example, in a news item by the semi-official *al-Ahrām*:

> 'Al-Ġarbīya celebrates the conclusion of the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī.
>
> Al-Ġarbīya province celebrated yesterday the concluding night of the mawlid of *al-'ārif bi-llāh*[605] as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī in a tent that had been erected in the extension of the Aḥmadī mosque in Ṭanṭā. [The celebration] was attended by governor Dr. Aḥmad 'Abd al-Ġaffār, Dr. Aḥmad 'Umar Hāšim, director of al-Azhar university and 'Abdallāh an-Naḥḥās, first undersecretary of state in the Ministry of Religious Endowments, who represented the minister of Religious Endowments Dr. Maḥmūd Ḥamdī Zaqzūq.'[606]

News of this kind hides more than it reveals. The largest public festival of Egypt is celebrated in Ṭanṭā, but the only relevant thing about it for media coverage is the presence of public dignitaries in an official celebration. The festivity on the streets and the people involved in it are completely absent. The world of the mawlid is effectively disconnected from the world that *al-Ahrām*, Egypt's leading newspaper, is covering. The television coverage of mawlids on regional channels on which mawlids occasionally appear as local news displays a similar selective glance. What can be broadcast are religious lectures, official celebrations attended by the governor, Friday prayers (during or following the *mawlid*) and folkloric arts (such as *mirmāḥ*, a traditional Upper Egyptian

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[604]The provincial press in Egypt is very weak and local papers usually appear monthly or irregularly, which puts them in a marginal position in the field of public media. In Ṭanṭā, host to the largest mawlid of Egypt (as-Sayyid al-Badawī), local papers often devote half- or full-page features on the mawlid in a style that is completely absent in papers produced for national circulation. The tone of the features is generally neutral, citing different voices and points of view, telling about the biography of the saint, reporting on the artists performing in the amusements area, and interviewing participants. They generally tend to highlight the character of the mawlid as a regional communal event based on religion even if the subject of some disagreement. In Upper Egypt, major local mawlids are regularly announced in local newspapers, but in the examples available to me, they usually concentrate on recounting the biography of the saint whose mawlid is about to be celebrated. For Ṭanṭā see *al-Ġarbīya al-Yawm*, October 2002: Fayṣal Zaydān, 'Mawlid al-Badawī ṭarīq al-ġalāba ilā llāh', p. 6; *al-Ġarbīya al-yawm*, October 2004: 'al-Layla al-kabīra' (several articles), p. 5; *Wafd ad-Diltā*, October 2004, Aḥmad 'Abd al-Fattāḥ (text) / Aḥmad al-Ḥaṭīb (photographs), 'Madad.. yā Šayḫ al-'Arab', p. 5; for Upper Egypt see *Aḫbār Qinā*, 11.3.2002: Fatḥī 'Abd as-Samī', 'Abū l-Ḥasan aš-Šāḏilī.. ḥaǧǧ al-fuqarā'', p. 7; *Ṣawt Qinā*, October 2002: Maḥmūd Ḥanafī: Sīrat al-quṭb al-kabīr munḏu mīlādih ilā maǧī'ih li-Qinā', p. 7; *Aḫbār Asyūṭ*, 15.7.2003: 'Manfalūṭ taḥtafil bi-ḏikrā aš-šayḫ 'Alam ad-Dīn al-Bawwāb', p. 7; Su'ād Aḥmad, 'Ṣāḥib miftāḥ aṣ-Ṣa'īd as-sulṭān al-Farġal wa-s-sīra al-'aṭira bi-l-barakāt', p. 8.

[605]A title given posthumously to mystics.

[606]*al-Ahrām*, 16.10.1999: 'al-Ġarbīya taḥtafil bi-ḫitām mawlid as-Sayyid al-Badawī'. In similar tone also *al-Liwā' al-islāmī*, 20.11.1997: 'Bad' iḥtifāl bi-mawlid as-Sayyida Zaynab. aš-šayḫ Sa'īd al-'Īlī yaḥtafil bi-mawlid as-Sayyida Zaynab', p. 2.

horse race). Neither the street festivities nor the Sufi *ḏikr* sessions[607] are shown.

"This image of mawlids that is limited to their official representation is an expression of a wider media discourse on and conception of public events shared by the state, the religious establishment, and most political groups and NGOs. Just how dramatically different this carefully orchestrated image is from the actual festive organisation of mawlids was exemplified by the festive opening of the Alexandria Library, an event that was a showcase model of spectacular public festivity. The library, a prestige project of the Egyptian government funded by UNESCO, was opened on 17 October 2002 with a large celebration attended by numerous international dignitaries. By coincidence, the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī was celebrated in Ṭanṭā the same day. The two festivities could have hardly been more different. While masses of people crowded Ṭanṭā, Alexandria was placed under curfew. Only the press and invited guests were allowed anywhere near the library to participate in a spectacle of artistic performances and prominent guests. The city itself was turned into part of the spectacle as only select citizens and cars were allowed to enter the Cornice Road in order to give Alexandria a modern, civilised appearance and to prevent any unpredictable popular gatherings. The largest public event in Egypt, the mawlid in Ṭanṭā, was completely ignored by the media with the exception of the local press. The library opening was omnipresent in the media: all national television channels broadcast it live, and all newspapers ran extensive features about it.

From the point of view of the government and the public media, the Alexandria Library opening was perfect. It had all the advantages a mawlid does not, and none of the disadvantages a mawlid has: the celebration was a perfectly staged spectacle in which everything served lifting the prestige of the government, the meaning of which was fully under state control, and from which the general public was safely confined to the role of a passive audience in front of their television screens.

There were practical reasons for the exclusion of the general public. The opening had been delayed by several months following anti-government demonstrations at the university campus right next to the library. The government, always highly alert at any public gathering, was keen to not allow such disturbances to occur during the festive opening. But more importantly, an exclusive top-down media spectacle is the way government actors and many of the participants in public debates conceive of public festivities. Festivity, in this understanding, is a spectacle with a clear distinction between performers and participants and with a clearly defined meaning. It serves a top-down flow of information and the establishment, demonstration and consolidation of power through public presence. The purpose of such festivity is to transmit a hegemonic truth to the audience, and truth, in the hegemonic understanding of the mind and body, has to speak in clear and solemn tones.

The Alexandria Library opening was the most prestigious case of a festive culture that has become omnipresent in the public sphere: It could be observed in the millennium celebrations in 1999/2000 and frames the openings of major infrastructure projects as well as smaller events in which the festive form of public conference has gained great

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[607]The performance of *munšid*s is sometimes shown, especially on Channel Eight, which is produced in Aswān, but in all broadcasts I have seen the camera has always been directed at the *munšid*, not the audience.

success. This festive culture is effectively promoted by television in which primary domestic news value is given to the presence of the president, ministers, governors, and other dignitaries holding a meeting, visiting public buildings, or speaking in a public conference.

Yet presenting festivity as an exclusive spectacle is not inherent to the nature of state celebrations. Both the presence of the state at public festivities and their coverage in the media have significantly changed during the 20th century, a transformation we can observe, for example, in the *mawlid an-nabī* celebrations in Cairo. Since the Mamluk era, the birthday of the Prophet Muḥammad has always been accompanied by a strong presence of the rulers[608] but until the early 20th century, the popular festivities and state celebrations were not strictly separate. The festivities that were held at Azbakīya Lake in the 19th century and in al-ʿAbbāsīya in the early 20th century featured a large tent of the Khedive and later the King, accompanied by ministers and high dignitaries, and surrounded by other festive tents in a large festive area open to the public. As an act of pious charity, food was distributed to the poor at the royal tent.[609] The newspapers of the early 20th century reported extensively on the celebration, giving attention to both the government and the public.[610] A similar style also prevailed in the coverage of major mawlids. Official receptions were at the centre of attention but street festivities were also covered, like in this news telegram on the mawlid in Disūq from the year 1908:

> 'The Disūqī mawlid.
>
> The number of visitors to the mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī doubled on Thursday and Friday, and brother forgot brother and father forgot son due to the overwhelming crowds and heat. The Railways Authority stocked up the train service and sent a train every half an hour. The mawlid ended well and safely without any disturbance of public order. As for the profit of the merchants, it was huge, and God returned (or: may God return) it to the celebrators in charity and blessings.'[611]

Since then, mawlids have become rare in the local news sections of national dailies, and the *mawlid an-nabī* celebrations have been split into a Sufi celebration at al-Ḥusayn Square and a televised state celebration held in a conference hall and attended by the president. The focus of the media has shifted to almost exclusively covering the state celebration.[612]

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[608]Winter, *Society and Religion*, pp. 15-17.

[609]*al-Ahrām*, 8.8.1930: 'al-Ḥāṣṣa al-malikīya wa-iṭʿām al-fuqarāʾ fī l-mawlid an-nabawī', p. 1; *al-Ahrām*, 7.8.1930: 'al-Fuqarāʾ fī ḥaflat ʿīd al-mawlid an-nabawī aš-šarīf', p. 1.

[610]E.g. *al-Ahrām*, 5.4.1907: 'al-Mawlid an-nabawī', p. 2; *al-Ahrām*, 7.8.1930: several news items on *al-mawlid an-nabawī*. The front page has three images of the celebrations: one of high-standing politicians present at the celebration, one of the gate to the festive grounds in ʿAbbāsīya, and one of the poor enjoying a free meal at the government tent.

[611]*al-Ahrām*, 3.6.1908: 'al-Mawlid ad-disūqī', p. 2. This news telegram refers to the small mawlid that was held in summer and is today no longer celebrated.

[612]see, e.g., *al-Ahrām*, 13.5.2003: 'Mubārak yadʿū ilā waqfa ṣarīḥa maʿa an-nafs nuwāǧih bihā wāqiʿanā wa-nataʾammal mustaqbalanā kay nanhaḍ bi-ʿālaminā l-islāmī', p. 1; Aḥmad Bahǧat, 'mawlid an-nabī', p. 2; 'ar-Raʾīs Mubārak fī l-iḥtifāl bi-l-mawlid an-nabawī aš-šarīf: ʿuẓmat al-islām taǧallat fī intišār qiyam at-taʾāḫī bayn al-bašar.. wa-sādat al-musāwāt wa-taʿālaat ṣayḥat al-ḥurrīya fī rubūʿ al-arḍ', p. 3; 'ar-Raʾīs Mubārak yashad ams iḥtifāl Miṣr bi-ḏikrā l-mawlid an-nabawī aš-šarīf: Mubārak yamnaḥ ṯamāniyat ʿulamāʾ wa-ʿāmilīn al-awsima baynahum wazīrā awqāf al-Imārāt wa-s-Sūdān.. wa 7 min aš-šibāb fī l-musābaqāt aṯ-ṯaqāfīya li-l-awqāf', p. 6; 'Abdallāh at-Taṭāwī, 'Bal kān mawlidan li-ḥuqūq al-insān', p. 10; Maḥmūd Mahdī, 'Ḏikrā l-mawlid an-nabawī: nurīduhā ḏikran

This shift is part of the development of the modernist public sphere and the redefinition of piety and festivity. In the early 20th century mawlids were, although controversial, still part of the public imagery of society. Step by step, less through criticism and scandalisation than through selective representation and exclusion, mawlids have been either sanitised or removed from the hegemonic imagery of the nation. This logic of exclusion is central to the modernist view of society. The image of Egypt offered by the cinema, state-controlled media, television programmes and advertisements, the school system etc. is often strikingly different from the life experience of most Egyptians. Like so many other things in Egypt, mawlids may not fit into the imagery of the modern nation and yet they are a part of it. The people who gather to celebrate the great night once a year are the people who crowd the buses, schools, offices and factories day by day. The exotic character or absence of mawlids in the hegemonic imagery is not given but produced through the binary dissociations that are employed to construct progressive modernity and orthodox Islam. The 'otherness' of mawlids and their urban settings, even when framed in positive terms as folklore and popular heritage, serves to uphold and protect the lifestyle and imagery of a progressive nation against the mess of everyday urban life.

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li-l-qiyam al-fāḍila', p. 24; Dār al-ōberā taḥtafil al-layla bi-l-mawlid an-nabawī aš-šarīf.. wa-l-funūn aš-šaʿbīya taḥtafil bi-l-mawlid an-nabawī, p. 25.

# Chapter Eight: Transformations

## 1. How to organise a mawlid

If we accept that the discursive construction of objects is a not only a mode of speech but also a mode of action and that the definition of objects in speech is not distinct from their treatment in practice, then we must, consequently, turn our attention to the question of how the description, judgement, classification, and representation of mawlids influence festive practice. Different understandings of piety and boundaries imply different festive habitus, and different models of public space and social order imply different modes of organisation.

The enactment of modernist and reformist commonplaces in festive practice is typically framed as reform. In the following, I adopt this term without implying normative judgement by doing so. Reform does not intrinsically connote improvement, but it does point at the interconnection of normative discourses and strategic action. Reform, transformation presented as improvement, is a mode of action guided by the normative understanding of its actors.

Although many voices call for the abolition of mawlids, this not a necessary consequence of the critical discourse. State-controlled media, a large part of the private press, state officials, the religious establishment, and the leadership of Sufi orders usually either remain silent about mawlids or represent an idealised and strongly selective image of them, emphasising forms of piety and festivity radically different from those dominant in the mawlid. Rather than abolition, the call is either – implicitly – to exclude mawlids from the dominant public order or – explicitly – to reform them in order to make them meet their publicly proclaimed ideal.

The organisation of mawlids provides many possibilities for interference in their form and atmosphere. Especially in large urban mawlids[613] that cover entire districts or even entire cities, centralised planning by local state institutions[614] is required in order to allocate space for Sufi orders' tents, market stands and amusements, to divert traffic, provide the festivity with electricity and supplies, enforce law and order, and clean up the streets afterwards. In the mawlid of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī in Ṭanṭā, the largest mawlid of Egypt, the festivity is planned and organized by a mawlid committee (*laǧnat al-mawlid*)[615] comprising various branches of administration. The tasks of this

[613]Smaller mawlids are usually organised by local networks or Sufi groups, and the state only plays a role through the presence of a police force and – if the mosque is subject to the authority of the Ministry of Religious Endowments – the maintenance of the shrine and mosque. In some rural mawlids the organisers also take care of security, making the state completely absent from the festivity. Due to their informal and low-key form of organisation, smaller mawlids often give the impression of taking place spontaneously, without any central planning. (Reeves, *The Hidden Government*, p. 113) This form of organisation of course has an impact on the festivities, which usually are much less, if at all, affected by the disciplinary measures enforced at large mawlids.

[614]Provinces, cities and rural districts in Egypt are directly subject to the authority of the central government. Mayors and governors, for example, are not elected but appointed by the state.

[615]There are actually two committees: one for planning, presided over by the governor of al-Ġarbīya province, and an executive committee presided over by the mayor of Ṭanṭā. The mayor and governor are not elected but appointed by the central government. *Yā Badawī*, Ri'āsat markaz wa-madīnat Ṭanṭā, Markaz al-maʿlūmāt wa-daʿm ittiḫāḏ al-qarār, Ṭanṭā, 2004.

administration are manifold: the preparation of the fields in Sīǧar for the pilgrimage, the organisation of garbage collection, drinking water, public toilets and additional electricity, the closure of main streets near the mosque for traffic, the removal of cafés, trade and amusements from certain streets and squares, the licensing of additional production of state-subsidised bread, and the construction of tents to house the official celebration and the following public services: police, military police, supplies, electricity, public relations, fire brigade, family planning, medical services, and veterinary medicine.[616] In this plurality of administrative branches, the security apparatus has the final say: Mawlids have to be licenced by the ministry of interior, and all practical measures to implement law and order in the festivity are undertaken by security forces.[617]

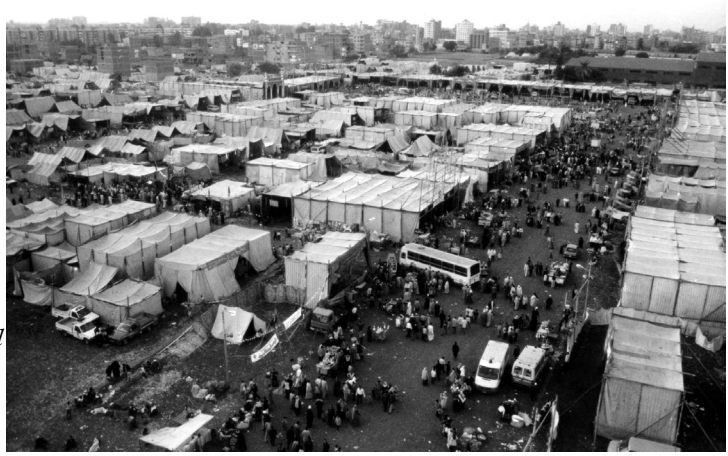

*Image 29: The temporary tent city in the fields of Sīǧar. Mawlid of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 7 October 2004.*

In a large mawlid like that in Ṭanṭā, the state provides the physical framework for the festivity but – with the exception of official celebrations organized by the Religious Endowments Administration and the Organisation for Cultural Centres (*hay'at qusūr al-ṯaqāfa*) – it does not produce the content of the festivity. Most of the actual celebrations are organized on a decentralised basis within the framework provided by the state. The commercial elements of the festivity – cafés, restaurants, amusements, small trade etc. – are run by countless private entrepreneurs. Most of the religious celebrations are organised by Sufi orders and Sufi-minded individuals. Last but not least, it is the participants who decide how the mawlid looks. Depending on the location of the festivity and the importance of the saint, a mawlid may be dominated to various degrees by Sufi pilgrims, inhabitants of the districts, or groups of youths.

The state is the most powerful actor in the reform of mawlids, but its power is restricted to the organisational framework of the festivals. Furthermore, state policies on mawlids have never been very straightforward. The reason for this lies in the complex

[616] *Ibid.*; Memo for administrative use concerning the organisation of the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā city administration, 2004.

[617] Interview with Brigadier-General Sayyid Aḥmad, member of the National Assembly (Maǧlis aš-Ša'b) from the district of Sīdī Sālim, formerly police chief of Fūwa, Cairo, 18 January 2003.

nature of mawlids and their relation to informal structures of power. From the perspective of state actors (governors, police officers, the religious establishment etc.) mawlids present an outright dilemma. On the one hand, mawlids are harmless because they have not historically been used as a site for political mobilization against the government, by Islamists or other actors. Moreover, mawlids can in fact be effectively made part of the clientele relationships that are essential to the functioning of the Egyptian state (for example, politicians use mawlids and other major festivities to offer services and demonstrate commitment to their constituency).[618] Major pilgrimage mosques also form an important source of income for the Ministry of Religious Endowments, which controls the distribution of the money donated as *nuḏur* at shrines. But on the other hand, mawlids are public demonstrations of concepts of piety and civility that constitute a serious embarrassment for the publicly proclaimed image of the modern city and nation. Furthermore, the informal networks that mawlids are based on (Sufi orders, local networks of power, tribal structures in Upper Egypt) are also problematic because they remain to a significant degree beyond state control. Mawlids are ruled by informal structures of power that, despite efforts to control them, have a significant degree of autonomy and practice a form of order very different from that of the state.[619] Although mawlids have not been sites of insurgency against the state in the 20th century, they have always been considered an unpredictable potential of disorder: The problem with mawlids, from the perspective of the state, is not so much that they could turn against the government as it is their being ungovernable, a parallel order beyond the control of the state.

In this chapter I argue that the solution to this dilemma, proposed in public religious and cultural debates and practised in state policies and reformist Sufi rituals, is to civilise mawlids, that is, to subject them to a spatial, temporal and moral discipline that makes them less transgressing and more controllable. Focussing on three lines of reform – the issue of habitus as embodied in public rituals, morality and hygiene, the attempts of the state to reorganise the festive space of mawlids, and reformist Sufi *ḥaḍra*s – I show that while the concrete measures taken in different festivities vary greatly, they all share a sense of 'civilising' the festivity through the enforcement of bodily, spatial and temporal boundaries. The reform measures are not based on a master plan but instead follow the discursive common sense of Egyptian modernism and Islamic reformism. This lack of a master plan, together with the complexity of the festivities themselves, complicates any attempts at reform. The transformations of mawlids – some planned, others unintended results of wider social transformations – are thus always partial and fragmentary.

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[618]See, e.g., Madoeuf, 'Les grand mûlid's', p. 169. It is also worth noting that some of these politicians have grown up in a Sufi milieu. They not only view mawlids as a strategic field of mobilisation, but they also remain emotionally committed to Sufi practice.

[619]Singerman, Diane, *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 132-138.

## 2. Policing morals, rituals and hygiene

### *2.1. The first wave*

Just as mawlids have been subject to debate throughout history, there have also always been attempts to purge them of some of their more scandalous elements. But there is no evidence of systematic attempts to control the behaviour of pilgrims in the Mamluk and Ottoman eras; the history of systematic festive reform only begins in the second half of the 19th century.

In the early 19th century, mawlids flourished in Egypt. They formed the most important markets of the country, were located at central places in the major cities, and were attended by the political and economic elites of the country. Some critical voices could be heard, for example that of the chronicler al-Ǧabartī, but in general mawlids were not only tolerated but were openly encouraged by the political and religious elites. The festive atmosphere was far more libertine and wild than anything that can be found at mawlids today. In Ṭanṭā, prostitutes, female dancers and transvestites crowded the streets and cafés, hashish was widely and publicly consumed, respectable scholars of al-Azhar who travelled to the mawlid saw no offence in the state of affairs, and the mawlid governor (*ḥākim al-mawlid*) appointed by the ruler was mainly concerned with ensuring a symbolic presence and preventing outbreaks of violence.[620] Georg August Wallin, a Finnish Orientalist who attended the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī with his Azhari friends in 1845, provides a vivid description of the festive atmosphere:[621]

> 'But not everyone is drawn here out of religious faith and pious love to this saint. In addition to the festivity and the accompanying religious ceremonies a fair is held here which definitely is the most important in this region and perhaps one of the biggest in the whole world. [...] Others are drawn here by the search for enjoyment and amusements, and they say that in the whole world there is not as much joy and delight as in Sayyid's festival. Women of all kinds,[622] both honourable matrons as well as younger wives and girls, use the occasion and opportunity of *ziyāra* to Sayyid in order to free themselves for this short period of time from all the heavy yoke and tight rein under which they are usually held. They stream here in large groups, partly accompanied by their husbands,

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[620]See Wallin, Georg August, *Georg August Wallins reseanteckningar från Orienten åren 1843-1849: Dagbok och bref*, Sven Gabriel Elmgren (ed.), 4 vols, Helsinki: Frenckell, 1864, vol. 1, pp. 40, 123; see also Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, pp. 173-186.

[621]Georg August Wallin (1811-1852) studied Oriental languages in Helsinki and St. Petersburg and left in 1843 for the Middle East with a travel grant from Helsinki University. He travelled extensively in Egypt, the Ḥiǧāz, Syria and Iraq until his return to Europe in 1849. Wallin stayed in Egypt for one and a half years, during which time he travelled in the Nile Delta with befriended Azhari sheikhs under whose guidance he was studying Arabic in Cairo. During one of these trips, in July-August 1844 he stayed for a week at the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī in Ṭanṭā and recorded detailed observations of the festivity and festive space. His account is a valuable source on mawlids because Lane, whose *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* is commonly quoted for ethnographic material from this period, did not personally attend the mawlid in Ṭanṭā. Wallin's account of the mawlid (originally written in Swedish) has so far remained largely unknown because only his diaries and letters from the Ḥiǧāz have been translated into English. Wallin, *Reseanteckningar*; Idem, *Tutkimusmatkoilla arabien parissa: Otteita matkapäiväkirjasta ja kirjeistä*, Jussi Aro/Armas Salonen (transl./eds), 3rd ed., Juva: WSOY, 2000 [1966[1]], pp. 5-16; Idem, *Travels in Arabia (1845 and 1848)*, Cambridge and New York: Oleander Press, 1979.

[622]Wallin, a bachelor in his early thirties, kept a steadily observant eye on women in his diary.

> partly without them with their agreement, and certainly attract with them a large amount of Egypt's fun-desiring youths. Here is the occasion for free *rendez-vous* between lovers, and for many a young man who has long yearned in vain to see the face of his beloved, that annoying veil is now lifted. Dancers, *ghawāzī*, singers, *ʿawālim*, and all other entertainer girls who in Cairo can only be found in greatest quiet and secrecy, practice here their art with the most unbound liberty. The streets are full of unveiled prostitutes who with fingers coloured with henna and eyes painted with kohl, with their pretty sheet-iron castanets in their red palms or a little *tambour de Basque* in their hands, try to charm men. It would be seen as an affront to as-Sayyid's saintly person or perhaps even a sign of distrust in his ability through his mediation with the Lord to give absolution for the little misdeeds that his pious visitors make themselves guilty of during the festivity, should one want to limit the freedom and licentiousness.'[623]

Wallin's account is moderate compared to many other 19th-century European accounts that often draw a picture of wild and pagan debauchery under the pretext of the sacred occasion.[624] However, such images must be treated with due caution. Many descriptions are strongly influenced by Orientalist harem fantasies and rumours amplified by the imagination of those who have not been there to see it with their own eyes. Nevertheless, we can be certain that a highly permissive atmosphere prevailed in Ṭanṭā, partly due to the specific association of as-Sayyid al-Badawī with virility and fertility,[625] but mainly because during this period the specific festive time of mawlids was still largely uncontested: In the vicinity of the saint different rules applied, and thanks to the mediation of the great saint, God would forgive whatever sins the participants may commit.

When Wallin attended the mawlid in Ṭanṭā in 1845, the first winds of change had already begun to blow. Eleven years earlier, the viceroy of Egypt Muḥammad ʿAlī had banned female dancers, who used to be a part of all public festivities, from Cairo to Upper Egypt. These measures never extended to Ṭanṭā, however, and after some years the ban was lifted in the capital.[626] In the following decades the mawlid flourished, supported by the construction of the railway from Cairo to Alexandria in 1856 and the cotton boom following the American Civil War.[627] The state was primarily interested in legitimation and symbolic presence at the mawlid. A large police force was present, but it was primarily employed to arrest thieves, to prevent outbreaks of violence, and occasionally to extract money from the pilgrims, but not to discipline the participants in general.[628]

The first wave of systematic reforms began around 1881, following the modernisation policies of Khedive Ismāʿīl shortly before the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 and simultaneous with the emergence of reformist and modernist criticisms of mawlids. The event that dramatically marked the beginning of reforms was the prohibition of the ritual

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[623]Wallin, *Reseanteckningar*, vol 1, pp. 121 f.

[624]Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, pp. 173-180.

[625]*Ibid.*, p. 173

[626]Wallin, *Reseanteckningar,* vol 2, p. 44; Lane, *Modern Egyptians*, p. 566, n.28; Fahmy, Khaled, 'Prostitution in Egypt in the Nineteenth Century', in Eugen Rogan (ed.), *Outside in: On the Margins of the Modern Middle East*, London and New York: I.B.Tauris, 2002, pp. 77-103, here pp. 78-82.

[627]Baer, *Studies in the Social History*, pp. 138 f.; Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, pp. 164, 187.

[628]Wallin, *Reseanteckningar*, vol. 1, p. 123; Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, pp. 140 f. What did occasionally take place in the 18th and 19th centuries was that governors and police chiefs harassed pilgrims in search of personal profit.

of *dawsa*. This ritual is still practised in some mawlids outside the capital,[629] but in the 19th century it was a central and spectacular part of the *mawlid an-nabī* celebrations in Cairo. In the ritual, the sheikh of the Saʿdīya order rode a horse over the bodies of his disciples. Despite the weight of the horse and its rider the disciples suffered no injuries, which was seen as proof of the *karāma* embodied by the sheikh.[630] The ritual aroused the curiosity and – often, though not unanimously – condemnation of Europeans, whose opinions did not go unnoticed among the political and intellectual elites of the capital. Following a wave of public criticism of the ritual and a *fatwā* by the *qāḍī l-quḍāt* (head magistrate) of Egypt, Khedive Tawfīq prohibited the ritual in 1881.[631]

The very same year, a circular penned by Sheikh ʿAbd al-Bāqī al-Bakrī (see above p. 140) was published and decreed wide scale restrictions of ritual practice. It became forbidden to practice snake-charming, pierce one's cheek, eat broken glass and the like, use musical instruments in *ḏikr*, wear strange or dirty dress, use flags and banners, allow women and children to participate in *ḥaḍras* and processions, and establish new mawlids. These regulations were reaffirmed in the Sufi Ordinance of 1905, and yet their enforcement remained largely unsuccessful.

The issue of Sufi rituals did not stand alone. State efforts at reforming mawlids gave equal, if not higher, priority to public morality and hygiene – both central issues for Islamic modernism.[632] In Ṭanṭā steps were taken to reduce the presence of prostitutes at the turn of the century. Prostitution was not at first outright banned, but rather the spectacular procession of prostitutes was separated from that of the *ḫalīfa*,[633] which it used to follow. Sometime between 1933 and 1940 this procession, at that time already significantly less explicit than it had been in the past, disappeared completely.[634][634]

Hygiene was a central concern of public debates and policy at the turn of the century. In Ṭanṭā, measures were takento build sewers, collect garbage and prevent epidemics during the festivity.[635] In the course of the 20th century, the issue of hygiene lost its centrality in public debates but remained a central concern for the local authorities. In

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[629]Biegman, *Egypt*, pp. 93-96.

[630]ʿAbduh, Muḥammad, 'ad-Dawsa', in Riḍā (ed.), *Tārīḫ al-ustāḏ al-imām aš-šayḫ Muḥammad ʿAbduh*, vol. 2, pp. 139-142. First published in *al-Waqāʾiʿ al-Miṣrīya*, 4 Ǧumādā l-ūlā (4.4.1881). Unlike the Moroccan order of Ḥamādša – the subject of a much-quoted study by Vincent Crapanzano (Crapanzano, Vincent, *The Hamadsha: a Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) – in which the rituals of self-mortification can take extreme forms, all rituals of this type in Egypt serve to demonstrate that a person with sufficient knowledge of the mystic path and a good deal of *baraka* from his sheikh is protected from pain and injuries. The most common practice of this kind is the use of a long steel pin (*dabbūsa*) that is pierced through the cheeks, without blood and apparently painlessly.

[631]ʿAbduh, 'ad-Dawsa'; Idem, 'Buṭlān ad-dawsa'; De Jong, 'Opposition to Sufism', p. 311.

[632]Reichmuth, Philipp, 'Es stinkt zum Himmel! Vorstellungen von Ordnung und Sauberkeit in einer mittelasiatischen Tageszeitung von 1912', in Stefan Conermann (ed.), *Islamwissenschaft als historische Anthropologie*, Hamburg, Eb-Verlag, 2006 (forthcoming).

[633]The *ḫalīfa* is the hereditary successor of as-Sayyid al-Badawī (or, to be more precise, of ʿAbd al-ʿĀl, the son-in-spirit of al-Badawī who himself had no children) and the symbolic head of the Aḥmadīya order. The mawlid is concluded by the procession in which he rides around the city on the Friday following the great night. See Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, p. 53.

[634]*Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.; McPherson, *The Moulids of Egypt*, p. 286.

[635]see *al-Ahrām*, 10.9.1900: 'al-Mawlid al-aḥmadī', pp. 1-2; *al-Ahrām*, 13.5.1930: 'al-Mawlid al-aḥmadī aṣ-ṣaġīr', p. 7; Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, p. 191.

a most recent step, the public circumcision booths that had been a central part of mawlids – especially that of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, a saint associated with fertility and virility – were prohibited in 1996.[636]

These three lines of reform – rituals, sexual morality, and public hygiene– all go hand in hand with the modernist and reformist criticism of the habitus of participants in mawlids. Their emergence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries reflects the spread of new concepts among the newly invented nation's elites: Rituals now had to express a rational disposition of piety, especially if they were seen by foreigners. The contingent and often quite filthy open space of the *sāḥa* was turned into the organised and controlled public space of the modern city. The temporal structure of morality was shifted from the time of the extraordinary when sins are forgiven in the presence of as-Sayyid, to universal moral boundaries valid at all times.

Yet the issues of public debate were not translated directly into administrative practice. Morality and ritual may have been an important topic in the public debates, but in administrative practice hygiene and public order were given priority, partly because they were seen as a key task of the state and a measure stick of the government's success or failure in the project of modernisation, but also because building infrastructure and policing public places is much easier than a direct discipline of people's bodies. The attempts to reform the rituals, morals and hygienic conditions of the mawlid-goers may have been inspired by the aim of a Foucauldian discipline of bodies, but their success in doing so has been limited.

## *2.2. The limits of reform*

Reform attempts to control the bodies of mawlid-goers fell far short of their declared aims throughout the 20th century. The story of Ǧamāʿat Abī l-Qāsim, a Sufi order established in the early 20th century, is a telling example. The Qāsimīya, as the group is also called, is known for liberal *ḏikrs* and rituals, most outstandingly so for their specific form of *ḫalwa*[637] in which a male and a female member of the group withdraw into seclusion together and are afterwards considered sister- and brother-in-spirit.[638] Whether these rituals are actually used as a pretext for libertine sexual relations is a matter of speculation. In any case, they have greatly stimulated the fantasising of journalists and given the order a very scandalous reputation. Around 1930, the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders published a ban on the group for promoting immorality. Shortly after the ban, however, the group was still visibly present at the mawlid of al-Ḥusayn, and over 50 years later, in the mid-1980s, the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders banned the group again. Today, Ǧamāʿat Abī l-Qāsim remains active and participates in mawlids around the Nile Delta, including one in honour of its founder, Sīdī Abū l-Qāsim.[639]

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[636]Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, p. 38.

[637]In Sufi practice, *ḫalwa* is generally a form of temporary spiritual retreat of the mystic, either through physical isolation or a period of intense meditation.

[638]*Rūz al-Yūsuf*, 8.8.1994: Wā'il al-Abrāšī, 'Faḍā'iḥ al-ǧinn wa-n-nisā' fī ṭ-ṭuruq aṣ-ṣūfīya'.

[639]*al-Ahrām*, 1.9.1930: Aḥmad al-ʿAskarī, 'Bi-munāsabat al-mawlid al-ḥusaynī: al-fatayāt ar-rašīqāt fī ḥalaqāt al-aḏkār: qarār al-maǧlis aṣ-ṣūfī al-ʿālī', p. 3; *Rūz al-Yūsuf*, 8.8.1994.

Amusements, similar to the case of Sufi rituals, have not been easily reformed. In the 1930s, dancing, gambling, alcohol, and to a lesser extent prostitution, remained common and visible, as observed by McPherson and documented by strongly critical articles in the Egyptian press.[640] In an atmosphere calling for moral and religious reform ('nothing against moral and religion' was a widespread political slogan at the time),[641] the Egyptian government introduced a series of restrictive measures in the 1930s and 40s. The main instrument of this policy was an indiscriminate police clampdown on festivities. Another was the prohibition of some mawlids, a measure that during World War II was employed in great frequency under the pretext of blackouts.[642] These measures, although imprecise, were so far-reaching that McPherson seriously feared they might cause mawlids to disappear altogether. They were not in fact very successful, however, and after the war, mawlids continued on in their old form although presumably somewhat weakened.

Only following the coup d'état of the Free Officers in 1952 did the situation change, as the new Nasserist government decided to place mawlids in the service of the revolution. Although the Nasserist government remained distanced from anything related to Sufism and played (despite its populist appeal) a crucial role in developing the image of popular culture as folkloristic and picturesque but also crude and backward, it also very well understood the propagandistic value of public festivals. The late 1950s and early 60s brought about a wave of reforms aiming to exploit mawlids for propagandistic purposes.[643] This policy was framed as a general improvement of the festivities, as we can read from the pages of the organ of the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders, *Maǧallat al-islām wa-t-taṣawwuf* (later renamed *Maǧallat at-taṣawwuf al-islāmī*). Mawlids are a recurring topic in issues of the journal from this period. Various articles and small news items discuss the legitimacy of mawlids, the need to reform them, and the success made in doing so, all framed in the language of the Nasserist ideology of Arab nationalism and socialist progress. How much this discourse actually reflected reality is questionable, however. In a news item on the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī in the year 1958, for example, the journal declares:

> 'The celebration was exemplary this year. It was free of dancing, amusements, percussion, musical instruments and *bidaʿ* that used to harm the glory and splendour of the commemoration.'[644]

Although it is likely that increased restrictions had been enforced that year it is unlikely that they extended beyond the immediate surroundings of the official celebration. There is a long tradition in Egypt of state declarations in general, and apologetic Sufi discourse in particular, presenting programmatic ideals as accomplished facts. Already in 1892, a press article had stated that the mawlid of al-Ḥusayn 'was free of any of the hashish dens, brothels, adultery and vice that [otherwise] pollute mawlids.'[645] Numerous statements of this kind have followed during the 20th century, only confirming that controversial

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[640]McPherson, *The Moulids of Egypt*, p. 6-28; *as-Siyāsa al-usbūʿīya*, 14.12.1929: Ḥāfiẓ Maḥmūd, 'Fī "mawlid" as-Sayyida Zaynab', p. 20.

[641]McPherson, *The Moulids of Egypt*, p. 16.

[642]*Ibid.*, pp. 14 f.

[643]Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi*, pp. 48-50; De Jong, 'Opposition to Sufism', pp. 319-321.

[644]*Maǧallat al-Islām wa-t-taṣawwuf*, November 1958: 'Mawlid as-Sayyid al-Badawī'.

[645]*al-Ustāḏ* 1 (December 1892), 18: 'Al-Mawlid al-ḥusaynī', p. 432.

practices have persisted in spite of news about their end. When Michael Gilsenan attended the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī in 1964, there was little to be seen of the above-mentioned 'exemplary celebration'. The real change, it seems, was the exploitation of the festivity for propagandistic purposes:

> 'Though the various *turuq* have tents here for members, the scene was dominated in 1964 by the marquees set up by the Arab Socialist Union and by the large firework[646] set piece of President Nasser. On the way to the display ground there were innumerable coffee tents crowded with people, and fair stalls and dimly lit booths offering everything from the wall of death and trials of strength to singers, the painted advertisements for whom had as little to do with religion as with art.'[647]

Only since the 1970s have the reforms of habitus and morals shown more far-reaching effects. Spectacular rituals such as snake-charming and cheek-piercing for which the Rifāʿīya was once famous have now been banned by the leadership of the order, and in the mawlid of Sīdī Aḥmad ar-Rifāʿī in Cairo inspectors frequent the *ḥaḍras* of the various Rifāʿī branches to ensure that the prohibition is observed.[648] At many shrines, stricter regulations have been introduced, most importantly to separate men and women and to prevent people from circumambulating the shrine. In Ṭanṭā, the space housing the shrine is mixed but women are not allowed to sit down (this regulation is often not meticulously observed, however). In Disūq, there is a fence separating men and women.[649] In Cairo, notably at the shrines of al-Ḥusayn and as-Sayyida Zaynab, fences also separate men from women. Until the late 1990s the fence at the shrine of as-Sayyida Zaynab was removed during the mawlid, but since then it has remained in place permanently. While many mosques remain open all night during the mawlid to offer pilgrims a place to sleep, an increasing number is now being closed between *ʿišāʾ* (evening) and *fağr* (dawn) prayers to prevent people from eating and sleeping inside the mosque.

In the field of amusements, a major shift has taken place. The sale of alcohol has heavily declined at mawlids and today it is often impossible to find a single bar at a mawlid — the city of Ṭanṭā even imposes general prohibition during the festivity. Prostitution has as much as disappeared from mawlids. Most recently, during the 1990s, female dancers have been banned from performing altogether at most mawlids. The tradition of transvestite singers and dancers that flourished in the 19th century[650] had begun to decline much earlier, so that McPherson assumed the dancer Ḥusayn Fuʾād, who in the 1930s enjoyed modest fame, was a unique representative of his profession.[651] In the mawlid of al-Ḥusayn a tent with transvestite shows persisted until its prohibition in the late 1990s.[652] Of all 'immoral' amusements, only hashish and gambling have

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[646]The fireworks were discontinued in 1967 following the Six-Day War. See below p. 201.

[647]Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi*, p. 49.

[648]Interview with Hudā, informal leader of a Rifāʿī branch, mawlid of Sīdī Aḥmad ar-Rifāʿī, Cairo, 7 August 2003. Hudā, whose *ḥaḍra* is described above on pp. 101-103, was clearly dissatisfied with these regulations.

[649]Until 2002 the fence was removed for the duration of the mawlid. Since then, it has remained in place during the mawlid but this has not led to a consequent enforcement of gender segregation. The two separate spaces at the shrine are both mixed to some degree during the mawlid.

[650]Lane, *Modern Egyptians*, p. 376 f.; Wallin, *Reseanteckningar*, vol. 1, p. 51.

[651]McPherson, *The Moulids of Egypt*, pp. 84 f.

[652]Interview with Jennifer Peterson, researcher and journalist, Cairo, October 2004.

persisted at most mawlids, the first in secrecy and despite its illegality, the second in public but with only a semi-legal status.[653]

Why has the reform of morals and habitus been more successful at the end of the 20th century? To answer this question, we must first note that even now, the success has been limited. Today, like one hundred years ago, music flourishes at mawlids, and the use of musical instruments in *ḏikr*, so often condemned by the Sufi establishment, seems to have actually increased,[654] influenced by the development of popular music and the availability of loudspeakers, which have helped to turn public *ḥaḍras* from small *ḏikr* circles into concerts with a mass audience. The suspension and inversion of boundaries is still the characteristic feature of the festive time of mawlids, although the boundaries and the extent of their suspension have shifted since the 19th century. The atmosphere in a Sufi *ḫidma* remains informal and the mixing of men and women usually tolerated. Pilgrims still kiss the shrine and some dervishes still wear eccentric clothes. At Sufi *ḏikrs* far enough from the control of the centres of the *ṭarīqa*, one can still see people piercing their cheek with a *dabbūs* or holding living snakes in their hands. Transvestites are still part of many a festive procession, although their shows now have a burlesque rather than a homoerotic character. Gambling remains a flourishing although low-profile business at most mawlids.

Several factors have limited the influence of attempts to reform the habitus and morals of mawlid-goers. First, there has often been a major gap between political decisions and their implementation, be it for the lack of will or resources, or the inertia of an inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy. A second and more fundamental limitation for the reform of morals and habitus lies in the nature of the festivity itself. Because the festive atmosphere is created in a decentralised pattern by the people who celebrate the mawlid, a top-down disciplining of the pilgrims' bodies has been easy to proclaim but hard to enforce in practice. As shown below, a particular Sufi order may successfully discipline its own gatherings, and the state may police central festive spaces, but in either case nothing even distantly resembling total control is accomplished.

How can we explain, then, that the festive time of mawlids in the 21st century is significantly less libertine than it was in the 19th? The answer is that this development is not simply a result of attempts at reform; it has followed wider changes in society. If mawlids were once a rare chance for young women to go out and flirt with the opposite sex, today they are facing increasing competition by Nile promenades, work floors, and universities. If in many cities police forces have successfully banned bars and dance tents from the local mawlid, it has only been after a growing sentiment of religious moralism has spread among the population – including the mawlid-going public – following the Islamic revival that began in the 1970s. Furthermore, as mawlids have become marginalised in the public sphere and in the lifestyle and religiosity of the upper and middle classes, the structure of amusements has changed. Mawlids are no longer centres of alcohol, dancing and prostitution partly because these trades and their customers have

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[653]Compared to establishments such as bars or dance shows, gambling stands have the advantage of mobility (which they share with the street trade in general). If raided by the police, the stands can be packed and removed within seconds.

[654]Interview with sheikh Yāsīn at-Tuhāmī, Cairo, 2 October 2002.

moved to less conspicuous and more profitable locations, for example Pyramids Road in Cairo.

> S: When exactly were dance shows prohibited in the mawlid [of as-Sayyid al-Badawī]?
> 'They were not prohibited, it's just that there has been progress with amusements. I, for example, don't go to the mawlid. I used to but I don't anymore because of all the confusion and trouble. There has been progress in science and technology and also amusements you see, so there have come to be ways of entertainment that are better than the mawlid. If I want to see belly dancing, I can see it on CD on computer, or by satellite dish or something like that. If I want to see a film I can see what I want. Why would I go to the mawlid, to wear myself down, with the dust and the crowds? It's a matter of supply and demand.'[655]

## 3. From open space to public spectacle

While direct discipline of the bodies at mawlids has turned out to be a very difficult enterprise, the indirect disciplining of mawlids through the regulation of space and time has been dramatically successful over the past ten years. During this time, the sites of almost all major mawlids that take place in urban environments have been substantially reconstructed by public authorities. These projects of 'beautification' (*taǧmīl*) and 'development' (*taṭwīr*) have effectively changed the general atmosphere and structure of the mawlids involved.

### *3.1. Ṭanṭā: enforcing boundaries*

The mawlid of al-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī[656] in Ṭanṭā is the largest and most famous public festival of Egypt, and has a long history of state involvement.[657] Due to the tremendous size[658] of this festivity, the old city district around the shrine of as-Sayyid al-Badawī cannot possibly house all of the celebrations. Thus the mawlid has three main spaces, stretching over the distance of some two kilometres from east to west: the surroundings of the mosque in the centre of the city, fairgrounds behind the railway line along Sīgar Road, and, behind that, the fields of Sīgar where a gigantic tent city houses most Sufi *ḫidmas* and celebrations. The focal point of the festive grounds is the 'pole' (*ṣārī,* an originally wooden, now steel mast on a brick foundation) of the mawlid,

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[655]Interview with Muḥammad, civil servant in the Ṭanṭā city administration, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2004.

[656]For historical and ethnographic studies, see 'Abd al-Laṭīf, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī*; Ḥilmī, Ibrāhīm, *Adabīyāt al-ma'ṯūr aš-ša'bī*; Reeves, *The Hidden Government*; Pagès-El Karoui, 'Le mouled de Sayyid al-Badawi', Mayeur-Jaouen, *Al-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī*; Idem, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage.*

[657]See, e.g., Wallin, *Reseanteckningar*, Vol. 1, pp 123, 135, 143; Martinovich, N., 'Prazdnik v Tante', *Mir Islama*, Vol. 1 (1912), pp. 517-522; Pagès-El Karoui,'Le mouled de Sayyid al-Badawî', pp. 258 f.; Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage.*

[658]The mawlid is commonly estimated to have two million visitors, but 500,000 is probably a more realistic estimate. See above p. 17, note 57; Reeves, *The Hidden Government*, p. 141; Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, pp. 208 f.

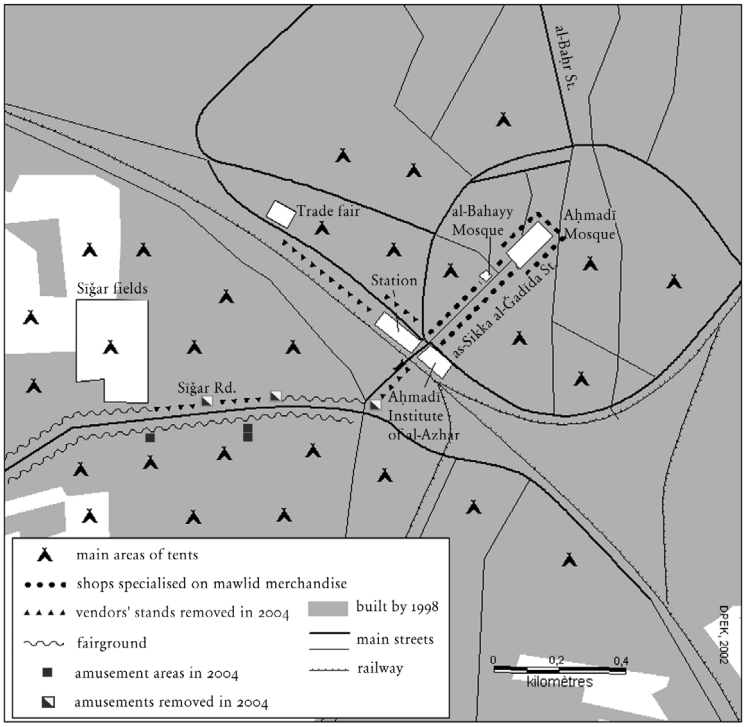


*Image 30: Map of the mawlid of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī in Ṭanṭā. Modified version of a map by Delphine Pagès-El Karoui in 'Le mouled de Sayyid al-Badawî à Tantâ', p. 248.*

symbolising the presence of as-Sayyid al-Badawī.[659]

The planning and use of public space became an issue in Ṭanṭā at the end of the 19th century, at the same time when morality and hygiene became issues in the policing of the mawlid. In 1886 and 1896, decrees were issued to ban the occupation of streets by tents and stalls during the mawlid and other festivals.[660] The implementation of these decrees seems to have been punctual at best, but they set an important precedent in the understanding of public order: the open space of the city – and the festivity – itself became a concern of public policy. Here, for the first time, we encounter a concept of open space that is explicitly not that of the contingent *sāḥa* but that of a public place defined for a specific use and policed by the state.

This development was part of the changing shape of the city at the time. In 1856 the railway connected Ṭanṭā with Cairo and Alexandria. Some years later, a new wide and straight street, as-Sikkā al-Ǧadīda, was broken through the old city to connect the newly enlarged mosque with the railway.[661] Until then, the state had promoted the construction

[659]This plan seems to have been introduced in either the second half of the 19th or the beginning of the 20th century. In 1845 the pole and the main tent city were still located on the northern side of the city. Wallin, *Reseanteckningar*, vol. 1, pp. 39-44, 132-137; Martinovich, 'Prazdnik v Tante'. For the contemporary spatial organisation, see Reeves, *The Hidden Government*, p. 123; Pagès-El Karoui, 'Le mouled de Sayyid al-Badawî', pp. 246-252.

[660]Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, p. 190.

[661]*Plan Général de Tantah, dressé à l'inspetion du Delta par Mohamed Rafat Ingenieur,* [Cairo]: Ministère des Travaux Publics, Direction Général du Tanzim, 1887, scale 1:2000.

*Image 31: The mosque of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī in Ṭanṭā, probably in the 1960s. Anonymous.*

of markets and caravanserais in the district surrounding the mosque.[662] The construction of as-Sikka al-Ǧadīda St. marked the beginning of the creation of spectacular public spaces that were to become the symbol of the modern city in the 20th century. In the following decades, a new, Western-style district was built northwest of the old city, and two types of urban structure began to drift apart: a 'modern' city characterised by wide streets and alleys, functional differentiation, and a middle-class population with a strong urban identity; and a declining 'Oriental' old city whose structures, although still functioning, came to symbolise chaos, backwardness and poverty – but also tradition and heritage – in the official imagery of the city.[663] Timothy Mitchell has argued that the creation of this polarity was essential for the structure and image of the colonial city: it was not only an issue of boulevards versus alleys, but also of hygiene versus filth, morality and intellectualised piety versus ecstatic and ambivalent festivities, and an abstract layout of functionally differentiated order versus the organic structure of old cities and villages.[664]

In the second half of the 20th century, this opposition shifted as the colonial districts of the provincial cities became increasingly proletarised and the upper classes moved to exclusive districts in Cairo and Alexandria.[665] But as shown in the following, the basic point of Mitchell's argument remains valid as public planning projects continue to define the city and its progress through planned and controlled spectacles of modernity that stand in dramatic opposition to the marginalised and/or exoticised popular districts.

In small steps, the government policies and the growth of the city have changed the structure of the mawlid in Ṭanṭā. Until the first half of the 20th century, the mosque of as-Sayyid al-Badawī was surrounded by a covered market that was eventually demolished to give space to a square in front of the mosque. In the 1960s, as-Sikka al-Ǧadīda St. was

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[662]Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, pp. 142 f.
[663]*Ibid.*, pp. 190-193.
[664]Mitchell, Timothy, *Colonising Egypt*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988, pp. 162-165.
[665]Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, pp. 222 f.

widened at the cost of what had remained of the covered market.[666] Either around the same time or in the 1970s, the square facing the mosque was widened. In 1979, with the support of president Anwar as-Sādāt, the mosque was enlarged, most importantly by two new minarets and an open extension in front of the mosque. In 1992, a part of the square in front of the mosque that used to host a market and a bus station was surrounded by a fence and turned into a sanctuary (*ḥaram*) physically and symbolically separated from the surrounding secular space – a structure of space previously unknown to mawlids.[667] Inside the area marked by the fence is a fountain and a vast open square. During the mawlid, large tents of the police, health service, fire brigade and some Sufi orders stand just outside the fence. The front extension of the mosque houses the official celebration and a temporary police station. The open area inside the fence is covered by pilgrims' carpets and temporary cafés.[668]

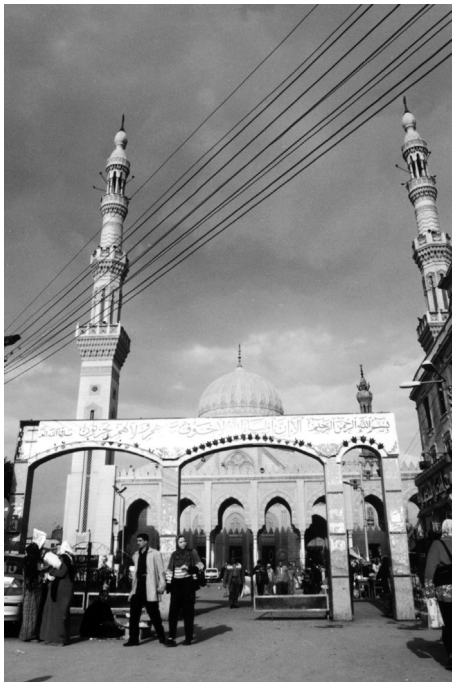

*Image 32: Entrance to the fenced square in front of the mosque of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, January 2003.*

In all parts of the mawlid, there has been continuous pressure to separate different elements of the festivity, most notably the sacred from the profane and the official from the popular. Amusements used to be largely mixed with the Sufi festivities in the Sīgar fields but have been increasingly confined to separate locations along Sīgar Street. Merchants have been more free to display their goods but have also been facing increasing limitations in past years. Furthermore, the state celebration has become increasingly dissociated from the Sufi festivity. In the 19th century, the highest ranks of government were present in the official reception that took place in a tent next to the *ṣārī*. The fireworks that used to conclude the state celebration[669] were suspended in 1967 following the defeat of the Arab armies against Israel in the Six-Day War.[670] By the late

[666] *Ibid.*, p. 225.

[667] Interview with regular Sufi visitors to the mawlid on 15 October 2002 in Ṭanṭā. Interview with Vivian Muḥammad, head of the public relations department, Ṭanṭā city administration, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2004.

[668] The use of this space has become increasingly restricted as well. In 2002, the use of gas cookers was prohibited for safety reasons, and in 2004 all cooking devices were banned, which effectively meant banning the temporary cafés from the square.

[669] The fireworks were already an important part of the mawlid by 1845 when fireworks were shot every evening from the tent of *ḥākim al-mawlid*. Wallin, *Reseanteckningar*, pp. 50, 55, 135.

[670] Once, at the end of the 1990s, there were fireworks for the occasion of the national day of al-Ġarbīya province, which is celebrated on October 7, some one week before the mawlid, but this remained a one-time experiment that was not continued. Interviews with civil servants in Ṭanṭā

*Image 33: The square in front of the Aḥmadī Mosque three days before the great night. On the bottom, tents for government services. In the centre, pilgrims' mats and temporary cafés. On top, the mosque extension with the official celebrations and a temporary police station, Ṭanṭā, October 2002.*

1970s, the official celebration had moved from the *ṣārī* to the present location in front of the mosque,[671] thus diminishing the prestige of the area surrounding the *ṣārī* while physically and symbolically separating the official reception from the rest of the mawlid.[672]

A most recent wave of restrictive measures followed in 2004. All stalls that used to crowd the front of the railway station, as-Sikka al-Ǧadīda Street, and the street parallel to the main square were barred from using these locations. Shops were not allowed to extend their stands beyond the sidewalk. On Sīgar Street, two of the four locations for amusement parks were closed, and on the end of the street facing downtown, no stalls were allowed at all.[673] These measures hit the merchants hard, and although officially their stalls were not banned from the mawlid but only ordered to move to the side streets, they were not offered alternative locations. Many pilgrims also suffered from this regulation as the space outside the fence of the square became unavailable for small carpet-based *ḫidmas*.

The reason given by various police officers for these measures was traffic. The mayor of Ṭanṭā argued along similar lines:

> 'You may have observed this year that there is a kind of good organisation (*tanẓīm*) for some streets where some tents used to hinder the movement of traffic and pedestrians. And that is why we banned these tents that hinder the flow of traffic and the movement of the citizens on the street. Also units of the public utilities police (*šurṭat al-marāfiq*)[674]

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city administration, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2004.

[671]For a map of the festive grounds in Sīgar in 1978, see Reeves, *The Hidden Government*, p. 124.

[672]This development was similar to the transformation of state presence in *mawlid an-nabī* in Cairo (see above p. 186). This tendency appears to have begun in the 1930s when, according to McPherson, a spatial distinction between official and popular festivities first appeared in major public festivals of Cairo. McPherson, *The Moulids of Egypt*, p. 11.

[673]Memo for administrative use concerning the organisation of the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā city administration 2004. The measures recorded in the memo and the measures actually taken are not entirely identical: It is likely that the security apparatus, as usual, had the last word in the implementation of the measures.

[674]The Egyptian police consists of numerous sections with specific tasks and fields of action. In the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī the central security forces (*quwwāt al-amn al-markaẓī*) had been responsible for policing the mawlid in the past. For some reason they were replaced by the public utilities police in 2004.

spread around [the city] in order to put a halt to any affairs that are considered to belong to the negative sides and which deviate from the basic purpose of the celebration of this occasion in favour of other purposes that may harm this noble celebration.'[675]

It is doubtful whether facilitating traffic was really the main reason for these measures. As-Sikka al-Ǧadīda St. is not a main thoroughfare and the traffic flow was not dramatically altered by the mawlid in previous years. Along Sīgar St. amusements were removed from locations where they had in no way hindered the flow of people or traffic. The mayor's reference to the 'basic purpose of this celebration' indicates that not only the movement of the people but also the meaning of the festivity was intended. 'Traffic' is an argumentative label for a wider spectrum of motives, especially maintaining control over the appearance of the central streets and directing the festivity towards the controlled form of a public spectacle.

The restrictive measures of 2004 did not come as a surprise: they followed a long-lasting debate on mawlids, a shift in their public representation, a long history of small steps of administrative measures, a transformation of the city and the dominant patterns of urban civility, and the state's increased concern with public spaces. Ṭanṭā is a case of the slow historical transformation of festive space from the model of overlapping circles of celebration in the presence of the saint towards an increasingly fragmented and functionally differentiated conglomerate of different festivities. This has been accomplished under the increasing pressure of local authorities to highlight the official and representative elements of the mawlid while marginalising the rest.

No radical restructuring has taken place, however. The reforms of the festive space have largely followed the pre-existing layout of the mawlid and have mainly resulted in a far more rigid differentiation between the divisions within the festival. In some other cities, however, efforts by the state to reform the local mawlid have led to much more dramatic changes, both in terms of the speed and determination with which the measures have been taken and in terms of the extent to which they are opposed to the pre-existing festive order.

## *3.2. Qinā: modernising the city, relocating the festivity*

Perhaps the most dramatic case of state-initiated transformation of festive space is found in the Upper Egyptian city of Qinā, home to the mawlid of Sīdī ʿAbd al-Raḥīm al-Qināwī.[676] This mawlid, one of the most important in Upper Egypt, had traditionally taken place in the immediate vicinity of the mosque, in the open square in front of the mosque and in the graveyard behind it. Sufi *ḫidmas*, trade, amusements and sports[677] used

[675]Interview with General Muḥammad ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān Naǧā, mayor of Ṭanṭā, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2004.

[676]See al-Ḥaǧǧāǧī, Muḥammad ʿAbduh, *Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm al-Qinā'ī al-muftarā ʿalayh*, 2. ed., Cairo: Maktabat ʿālam al-fikr, 1996 (1990[1]); Ǧāhīn, Fārūq Šākir, *Quṭb Qinā Sīdī ʿAbd a-Raḥīm al-Qinā'ī*, Qinā: Maṭbaʿat al-īmān, 2003.

[677]Sports, most importantly *taḫṭīb* (stick fight) and *mirmāḥ* (horse race), are an important part of Upper Egyptian mawlids. These sports are accompanied by music, and elegance and skill (rather than force and speed) are the criteria for a competitor's success.

*Image 34: Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm Square in Qinā after the restructuring, January 2003.*

to spread over this area, side by side. All this changed, however, when the city of Qinā experienced a large-scale development campaign after the new governor, State Security General ʿĀdil Labīb, assumed office in late 1999.[678]

Equipped with additional funding by the central government, General Labīb was assigned with the task of turning the poverty-stricken province of Qinā, base to much of the militant Islamist movement in the 1990s, into a representable case model of modernisation and development. Three years later, in October 2002 when I first arrived in Qinā, the development campaign (which was in many ways similar to measures that had recently been undertaken in Alexandria) was being celebrated as a unique success. In the festive speeches and articles in honour of the governor his work was described as nothing less than 'a miracle'.[679] Most of the campaign was cosmetic, however. Streets of the provincial capital were paved, houses were given fresh paint, and public spaces were cleaned up and widened. Fountains, photographs of president Ḥusnī Mubārak, statues and murals were positioned in important public places. These measures have granted the governor great popularity among the citizens even though the development of infrastructure, education and economy has not kept pace with the new cleanliness of the streets.[680]

One part of this campaign involved the restructuring of the pilgrimage site of Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm and the reorganization of the annual mawlid. The mosque in which the shrine is located was renovated and extended by an open extension in the front, similar

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[678] *al-Ahrām*, 1.11.1999: 'Taġyīrāt wāsiʿa bayn al-muḥāfiẓīn: taʿyīn 16 muḥāfiẓan ǧadīdan wa-naql 4 wa-baqāʾ 6', p. 1; *al-Ahrām*, 29.8.2002: 'Taǧribat muḥāfaẓat Qinā fī t-tanmiya al-maḥallīya namūḏaǧ fi idārat al-tamayyuz'; for details, see *Aḫbār Qinā*, November 2002: Muḥammad al-Bišlāwī et al., ''Ādil Labīb wa-ḥaṣād 3 sanawāt min al-inǧāzāt', p. 5.

[679] So, e.g., in speeches held at the official festivity of the mawlid of Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm al-Qināwī on 20 October 2002, and in a question by a local journalist in an interview with the governor. *Aḫbār Qinā*, November 2002: ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm al-Qāḍī / Aḥmad Bakrī, ''Ādil Labīb li-Aḫbār Qinā: šaʿb Qinā yastaḥiqq ḫayr li-annah naqī wa-lam yulawwaṯ baʿd', p. 4. See also *al-Ahrām*, 19.12.2002: Muṣṭafā an-Naǧǧār, 'Qinā.. zahra fī l-ǧanūb!', p. 23.

[680] E.g. for the poor state of the educational system, see *al-Miṣrī al-Yawm*, 30.9.2004: Muḥammad Ḥamdī: 'Sadd il-ʿaǧz fī al-madāris bi-ḥamlat ad-diblūmāt', p. 4.

in structure to the one added to the mosque of as-Sayyid al-Badawī in the 1970s. The open square around the mosque was extended 800 square metres by demolishing a part of the graveyard at the back. The open area created behind the mosque was then separated from the graveyard by a wall. The square in the front was surrounded by a fence and became accessible only by two gates facing the main street. Most of the square was turned into a park surrounded by an additional fence, permanently closed to the public. The old square that had hosted a small park and a bus stop on ordinary days and the mawlid once a year was replaced by a spectacular representative space carefully separated from its environment.

These measures of 'beautification and development' also extended to the organisation of the mawlid. During the mawlid, no tents or stalls are allowed inside the passage marked by iron fences (one to separate it from the streets, the other to separate it from the park). The merchants' stalls have thus wandered to the streets parallel to the fenced-in main square while *ḫidmas* have had to move even further away to the side streets. The amusements, most of which had been located in an open space in the graveyard, were moved to the stadium some half a kilometre away. The graveyard, which had hosted much of the *mawlid* in the past, was largely cut off from the rest of the festive grounds and has come to host only smaller *ḫidmas*. Further fragmentation of the festive space is – at least for the time being – off the agenda since a proposal to remove the cemetery to the desert and use its site for new buildings was withdrawn after protests by influential families whose graves would have been involved.

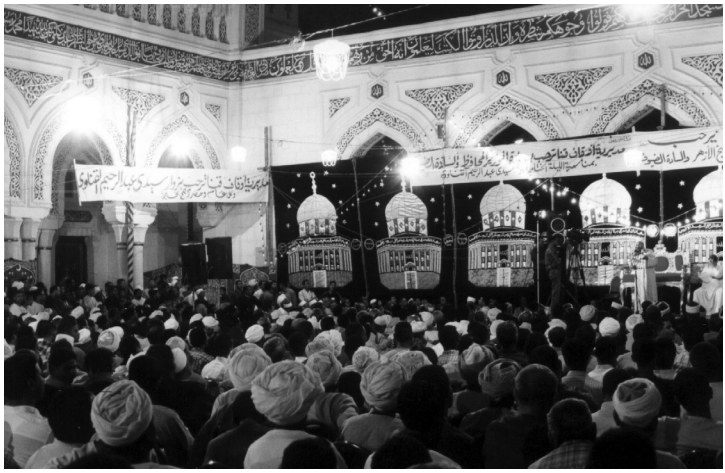

*Image 35: The official celebration. Mawlid of Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm al-Qināwī, Qinā, 20 October 2002.*

The most dramatic change, however, was brought by the official festivity held in front of the mosque on the great night. There is nothing new about an official festivity in itself: Major mawlids have always been accompanied by official receptions attended by the political, religious and economic elites of the region. What was new in Qinā was the way the official celebration came to exclusively dominate the centre of the mawlid. This celebration, primarily held on the occasion of the Middle of Šaʿbān[681] and only

[681]The Middle of Šaʿbān is commonly interpreted to commemorate the changing of the *qibla* from Jerusalem to the Kaʿba. See Rispler-Chaim, 'The 20th Century Treatment of an Old *Bidʿa*'.

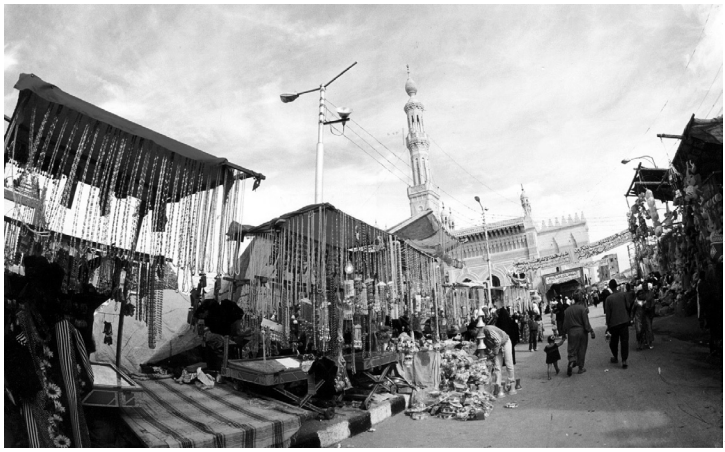

*Image 36: Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm Square in Qinā during the mawlid in the late 1990s. ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm Ḥamza.*

*Image 37: Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm Square in Qinā during the mawlid in 2002.*

secondarily on the occasion of the mawlid, is attended by the governor, high-ranking local politicians, religious dignitaries, persons of public prominence, and honorary guests (*šayḫ al-Azhar* in 2002, former governors of Qinā in 2004). Before the arrival of the governor (usually at the time of *maġrib,* or sunset, prayer) the entire area inside the fences is closed to the public, which regularly leads to heated exchanges of words between policemen and citizens wanting to pray in the mosque. For some two hours, the centre of the mawlid is inaccessible but for a small number of invited guests and those among the general public who have arrived well on time to secure a seat. The imagery of the festival is dominated by the brightly lit and almost completely empty central square, standing in stark contrast to the surrounded streets crowded with people and merchants' stalls. Even after the governor leaves and the general public is allowed to enter the mosque again, this image remains in force through the shining emptiness of the park that occupies most of the square.

The reactions of the mawlid-going public in Qinā have been twofold. People generally agree that the square in its new form is clean and beautiful, in the same way they generally appreciate the new cleanliness of the city. But they also complain that the festive grounds

have drifted too far apart, and that the streets around the mosque are too packed because there is too little space left for the festivity. Many Sufis complain that their *ḫidma*s have become cut off from the crowds and are thus able to draw fewer visitors than in the past. Not everyone is unhappy though. People who run the amusements consider the new amusement area at the stadium a good location although some complain about the higher fees collected by the local administration. The new location of the *mirmāḥ* (Upper Egyptian horse race) that had to move away from the graveyard after the street where it was held was paved in 2003, is generally considered much more suitable because of its larger size allowing the jockeys to undertake more spectacular manoeuvres.

Officials of the local administration of course hold to very positive assessments of the new form of the pilgrimage site and the mawlid. The secretary-general of Qinā province[682] argues that these measures have turned the mosque and the mawlid of Sīdī ʿAbd al-Rahīm into a beautiful and modern Islamic pilgrimage site:

> 'Now the place has come to be considered one of the very important pilgrimage sites, that is, it [already was] an important Islamic pilgrimage site but [now] its aesthetic form has come to show dignity and respect for his Eminence Sheikh Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm.'
> –What was the reason for the relocation of the amusements to the stadium?
> 'The amusements [have been restricted to] the stadium [...] because, for the sake of development and beautification and dignity and respect, respect of the place, and considering that it's a mosque; it's not allowed that there are any transgressing activities (*aʿmāl muḫilla*).'
> –So the market and amusements are transgressing activities?
> 'And all [such] activities and gambling and so on. We refuse that, since the place is supposed to be for people to perform *ziyāra* and to listen to religious hymns and lectures and the life story of Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm and his pupils who learned from him.'
> –And was it also for this reason that the park was closed to the public?
> 'That was to keep it in an aesthetic shape for the people to enjoy: a green open area. And there is additionally a large open area behind the mosque which is as big as the area that used to be in the front. That is, the change that took place is that earlier people used to sleep and sit on the ground in the open area in front of the mosque. Now we have cleaned it up and reshaped it and turned it into a park which suits the place. And the extension [of the square] was completed in the back [of the mosque] for the use of the public, but without there being any amusements or transgressing activities.'

The secretary-general's account is exemplary of the modernist and reformist discourse on festivity: The sacred is in need of protection, the mawlid should be an occasion of learning and discipline, and the ideal festivity is a public spectacle. Qinā is, in fact, perhaps the most striking example of setting modernist critical discourse on mawlids to work. The restructuring measures not only express the concern for clear boundaries and solemn truth; they also contain the same modernist logic of representation and exclusion.

On a wall next to the mosque, a colourful mural – one of the many that have been spread around the city as a part of the development campaign – represents the mawlid. A mosaic in folkloric style, it shows a colourful procession with musicians, Sufis, children, women and men in traditional costumes passing to a mosque along a flourishing Nile valley landscape. The contrast is striking. The procession that functions as the overarching storyline of the mural was prohibited in the mid-1990s following

[682]Saʿīd Marʿī, Qinā 15 January 2003.

outbreaks of tribal violence.[683] The different elements of the mawlid are allowed to persist in the mural as representations of colourful folklore, while in the square facing the wall, they have been suppressed or pushed to the margins. No tents or stalls stand in front of the mural. The mawlid is not allowed to interfere in its representation.

*Image 38: Mural representing the mawlid on Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm Square (detail), Qinā, January 2003.*

This tension of folkloric representation and excluded festive practice is part of a spatial arrangement that, in a way analogous to the nationalist project of society in general, has not led to a general disciplining of the festivity but rather to the creation of a spectacular presence carefully dissociated from the popular festivity. The dramatic involvement of the state in the spatial organisation of the mawlid in Qinā has not been accompanied by measures to discipline the rituals and morals of the visitors as has been the case at many other mawlids. The shrine remains mixed not only during the mawlid but throughout the year, and in the amusement areas dancing and gambling flourish. This is a sound consequence of the logic of 'beautification and development': The proper public festivity is created by dissociating it from the popular celebrations that, once they cease to influence the public image of festivity, are left on their own.

## *3.3. Control and spectacle*

Similar measures have been undertaken at most major mawlids in Egypt, for example in the mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm al-Disūqī in the city of Disūq, the second biggest mawlid in the Nile Delta region.[684] In 2002, by order of the province governor ʿAli ʿAbd al-Šakūr,[685]

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[683]The tribe of al-Ašrāf, which traces itself to Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm al-Qināwī, claimed a privileged position in the procession, which was not accepted by other tribes. The conflict escalated and led to gunfights during the procession. Interview with Fatḥī ʿAbd as-Samīʿ, Qinā, January 2003.

[684]For the biography of Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī, see Hallenberg, *Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī*; al-Ǧāʿfarī, Rağab aṭ-Ṭayyib, *Šayḫ al-islām ad-Disūqī: quṭb aš-šarīʿa wa-l-ḥaqīqa*, Cairo: Maktabat Umm al-Qurā, 2001; al-Qāḍī, Saʿd, al-ʿĀrif bi-llāh Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī, Cairo: Dār al-Ġarīb, 2001.

[685]In a twist of fate, the governor died of a heart attack on 5 November 2002, (*al-Wafd* 6 November 2002: 'Wafāt al-mustašār ʿAlī ʿAbd aš-Šakūr muḥāfiẓ Kafr aš-Šayḫ', p. 1) only five days after the mawlid, which many Sufis immediately interpreted as divine punishment for his restrictive measures.

it was forbidden to put up any stands or tents at all in the vast square facing the mosque of Sīdī Ibrāhīm during the mawlid.[686] As a result, the square was only sparsely crowded during the festival, and the celebrations moved to the crowded side streets. The emptiness of the central square was further underlined by an unusually heavy security presence.

The pilgrimage sites and mawlids of Alexandria have undergone similar restructuring but the most radical interference has concerned the temporal rather than the spatial side of the organisation. Mawlids usually continue until *fağr* prayer, sometimes even until 8 a.m., but in Alexandria loudspeakers have to be turned off between 12 and 1 a.m., and police units assure that this regulation is observed.[687]

In Cairo, also, such measures are mainly concerned with the central, visible spaces of the mawlid. Since 1998, all major pilgrimage sites at prominent locations have been

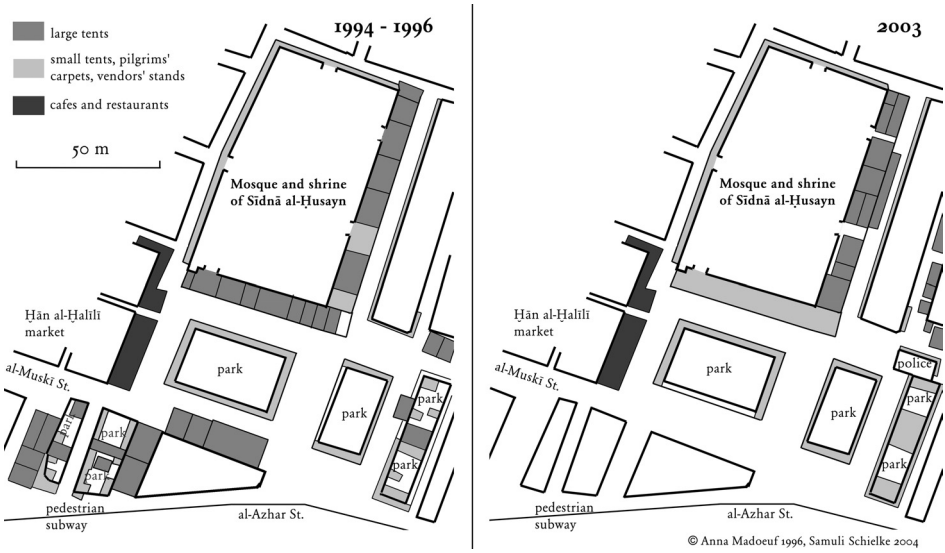


*Image 39: Changes in the use of open space in al-Ḥusayn Square during the mawlid of Sīdnā al-Ḥusayn, Cairo, 1994-1996 and 2003. Data on 1994-1996: Madoeuf, Anna,* Images et pratiques de la ville ancienne du Caire: les sens de la ville, PhD thesis, Tours: Université de Tours, URBAMA, 1997.

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[686]This square was expanded to its present size in the mid-1990s. Since then, the spacious new square had hosted the main part of the mawlid. The tents of the Sufi orders had stood in front of the mosque and the rest of the square had been filled with trading stands and pilgrims' carpets. The amusements were located in a nearby street where they have remained since the restructuring measures. Interview with Brigadier-General Sayyid Aḥmad, member of the National Assembly and former police chief of Fūwa who has many years of experience in the mounted police at the mawlid in Disūq, Cairo, 18 January 2003.

[687]This measure is part of the modernisation and cleanliness campaign initiated by the governor General Muḥammad ʿAbd as-Salām al-Maḫğūb (in office since 1997) that served as a blueprint for the modernisation campaign in Qinā. However it is probably also related to the location of the Alexandrian mawlids. Unlike in most other cities where mawlids are connected to old city districts, the major mawlids of Alexandria – most notably that of Sīdī al-Mursī Abū l-ʿAbbās – are celebrated in middle-class neighbourhoods whose inhabitants are often less tolerant towards a very loud festivity lasting until the morning.

reorganized to some degree, most recently in the context of the government-initiated Ahl al-Bayt Project designed to attract religious tourism from abroad.[688] Mosques have been either enlarged or demolished and replaced by new ones. Surrounding open spaces have been restructured, typically by creating parks and open spaces separated by iron fences. At the mawlid of al-Ḥusayn tents have been banned from the central square since 1999, save for a small fenced enclosure next to the mosque.[689] The mosque of as-Sayyida Zaynab has been vastly enlarged and the surrounding square has been fragmented by numerous fences. Again, the Sufi tents have been confined to a small fenced enclosure and the side streets during the mawlid. In the mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, tents and stalls were banned in 1999 from the square facing the recently expanded mosque.[690] The mawlid of Sīdī Aḥmad ar-Rifāʿī has gone through the severest changes: it is practically cut into three isolated parts since the entire mosque was surrounded by fences and tents and stalls were banned from the street and square facing the mosque. Also in Cairo, the year 2004 saw a wave of new restrictive measures. Following the appointment of a new governor, police presence at mawlids was upped, what remained of vendors' stalls in front of mosques was banned, and early closing hours were enforced in smaller mawlids.[691] Most processions have been confined to much shorter routes than in the past, and in summer 2005, security officials prohibited the procession of as-Sayyida Nafīsa citing the risk of demonstrations and the proximity of presidential elections.[692]

*Image 40: View over al-Qalʿa Square to Maḥmūd Bāšā Mosque during the mawlid of Sīdī Aḥmad ar-Rifāʿī, Cairo, 12 March 1987. Niek Biegman.*

All these attempts at reorganisation result from an understanding of public space and the sacred that opposes the traditional model of mawlids based on *baraka* of the shrine and overlapping circles of celebration. State authorities tend to organize mawlids increasingly on the basis of a model of separate spheres. In Ṭanṭā, this is done by sharpening the boundaries of the existing spatial arrangement, in Qinā through the radical relocation of the festivity, conceived of as part of the modernization of the entire

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[688] *ʿAqīdatī*, 10.2.1998: 'Iʿādat taḫṭīṭ maydān as-Sayyida Nafīsa', p. 2; *al-Liwāʾ al-Islāmī*, 29.5.2003: ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Aḥmad, 'Taṭwīr wa-tanmiyat mazārat āl al-bayt ḍimn mašrūʿ siyāsī kabīr', p. 5.

[689] *al-Ǧumhūrīya*, 20.7.2001: Ṣalāḥ Faḍl et al., 'Fī l-layla al-ḫitāmīya li-mawlid al-Ḥusayn: tamṯīl ramzī li-ṭ-ṭuruq aṣ-ṣūfīya li-sabab ḍīq al-makān', p. 15.

[690] Schielke, Samuli, 'Policing Mawlids and their Meaning', in Diane Singerman and Paul Amar (eds), *Cairo Hegemonic*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006, forthcoming.

[691] *al-Qāhira*, 28.9.2004: Bayyūmī Qindīl, 'Ḥadaṯ fī l-layla al-kabīra li-l-iḥtifāl bi-mawlid raʾīsat ad-dīwān wa-ġafīrat Miṣr', p. 8; *Cairo Magazine*, 10-16.3.2005.

[692] The year 2005 saw an unprecedented amount of anti-government demonstrations. The state's strategy has been to isolate demonstrations through a massive police presence and prevent them when possible.

*Image 41: View over al-Qal'a Square to Maḥmūd Bāšā Mosque during the mawlid of Sīdī Aḥmad ar-Rifā'ī, Cairo, 7 August 2003.*

city. In other cities, such as Disūq and Cairo, the measures have been mainly concerned with creating an empty representative space in the centre of the festivity.

Turning the mawlid into separate spheres of celebration involves much more than merely changing the location of some tents and stalls. The formerly contingent space of the mawlid is restructured in accordance with a functionally differentiated system of order. In this new order, the sacred and the profane and the official and the popular celebrations are separated. Everything (i.e. everything that the planners consider important) has its distinct place. The state symbolically takes possession of the mawlid by creating an empty, representative space in its centre. Participants often describe these changes as a loss of space although the squares around the main pilgrimage sites of Egypt have been, in purely quantitative terms, vastly expanded during the 20th century. But while the squares have grown in size, the use of this space has become increasingly restricted. The contingent space of the *sāḥa* has been replaced by the functionally differentiated, controlled and presentable space of the public square. The centres of mawlids have been placed under control (both symbolic and physical) of the state, most visibly through the empty spaces of the central squares. Iron fences and green areas closed to the public have become a characteristic feature of public places in Egypt since the 1990s.[693]

Fences and empty spaces are instruments of visible order and domination that are not restricted to mawlids. They represent a general trend in urban planning favouring spectacular spaces, vast green areas, wide streets, motorways, bridges, prestigious construction projects, functional differentiation of space, and the development of 'new cities' created in the desert according to this pattern of order.[694] At most public places, ornamented iron fences regulate the movement of pedestrians, preventing them from entering green areas and forcing them to follow certain routes.[695] When these measures are implemented in old urban spaces, they tend to create a strong contrast to the surrounding streets, underlined by the policy of giving a fresh paint to buildings around a newly restructured site while leaving anything away from the central area untouched.

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[693]Drieskens, *Living with Djinns*, p. 247.

[694]*Urban Development in Egypt*, [Cairo]: Ministry of Housing, Utilities and Urban Communities, undated [ca. 2001].

[695]These routes can mean significant detours, which is why people either climb over the fences or sooner or later someone breaks a gap into the fence to make a shortcut.

A prominent case of these measures has been the restructuring of Cairo's Ramses Square, whose crowded and chaotic shape had inspired a journalist to compare it to a mawlid in a critical article in 1999.[696] In 2004, its minibus and bus stations were moved to a new site behind the railway station and their previous sites were turned into green areas surrounded by iron fences and wide sidewalks. Because a second line of fences separates the sidewalks from the streets many of them effectively lead nowhere. These measures give the impression of being planned by people who do not actually use this space, who do not walk or take the bus, and consequently see no problem in making pedestrians take long detours, or in replacing or simply removing[697] a bus station. A bus station, in their perception, is a source of disorder, and creating a representative space more important than, for example, having the bus and metro stations connected.

What is the purpose of these fenced spaces, then? What kind of public order do they represent? The secretary-general of the Qinā provincial administration cited above offers us an important clue when he argues that Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm Square, in its new 'aesthetic shape', was there 'for the people to enjoy'. In this context, 'to enjoy' obviously does not mean to use the space but to view wide green areas in which no one is allowed to sit (to prevent them from spoiling it and filling it with garbage), vast spaces organised in geometric patterns, with different areas specified for different uses: park, street, sidewalk, fenced enclosure of a mosque, parking lot, etc. 'To enjoy' means to be the spectator of an aesthetics of spectacular public space that is identified with a specific kind of order and discipline. It is striking how often the attributes 'organised' (*munaẓẓam*) and 'beautiful' appear together in the accounts of state officials and religious dignitaries who describe these spaces. Public order, in this understanding, is an aesthetic quality, and imposing it is not separable from beautification, and hence the connection of 'beautification and development' so common in the official discourse on public planning. The key concepts

*Image 42: Former site of minibus station in Ramses Square after the restructuring. Cairo, November 2003.*

[696] *al-Ahrām*, 20.7.1999. See above pp. 102-103.

[697] After the opening of the al-Azhar tunnel in 2001, the bus stop at al-Ḥusayn was closed, and the buses to and from ad-Darrāsa had to take a new, significantly longer route via Bāb aš-Šaʿrīya. This measure has not eased traffic in the area because the buses have been replaced by numerous taxis that cause serious traffic jams.

here are *niẓām,* meaning the habitus or quality of order, discipline and organisation in people and things, and *tanẓīm*, meaning the practice of ordering, disciplining and organising. *niẓām* and *tanẓīm* are the opposite of what mawlids are perceived to be by their reformist and modernist critics. They stand for clear differentiation between spaces and practices, embodied in a restrained and educated upper or middle-class habitus, and accompanied by the aesthetics of embodiment and habitualisation, identifying an appearance of order with moral improvement and social progress.[698]

This form of order is a powerful tool of practical and symbolic domination of urban space. Fences and empty green areas turn previously contingent urban squares into demonstrations of state presence. In doing so, these spaces serve two purposes: representation and control. They should give the image of Egypt as a modern, clean and well organised country (remember how sensitive Egyptian elites are about the image of Egypt abroad), and they should provide a matrix of order, helping to control the movement of citizens.

As the case of Ramses Square shows, this order very often turns out to be highly dysfunctional. So also at mawlids. The new spatial order of the mosques and the surrounding areas looks prestigious and is suitable for official ceremonies. However, it is dysfunctional for the large crowds that attend the festivities. Fences and police roadblocks often cause worse bottlenecks than tents and trade ever could. Moving the celebrations to the margins actually makes it more difficult to control them. Do these measures really serve to control festivities or only to establish symbolic domination? Or do decision makers take the one for the other? What does control actually mean here?

This tension is based on the very way control and public order are conceived of and practised by state actors. To control the mawlid is not only about the movement of people and the form of space. It is about controlling the meaning and public image of festivity and social order. The contingent and ambiguous space of a mawlid is turned into a prestigious, (apparently) well ordered space in an (apparently) modern city (apparently) inhabited by well disciplined citizens as apparently conceived by planners of such projects.[699] It is no coincidence that the projects to 'beautify and develop' the space of pilgrimage sites go hand in hand with forms of festivity that emphasize official representation and didactic discipline. All attempts to reform mawlids, most strongly so those concerning public space, are involved in moving the power of definition and representation from the hands of the mawlid-goers into the hands of religious and political elites. State officials, accompanied by some elements in al-Azhar and, as shown in the following section, the Sufi establishment, are trying to turn mawlids from a source of chaos – or alternative order, depending on the point of view – into a vehicle of ideological hegemony, that is, framed in the language of the hegemonic discourses, consciousness and correct knowledge.

This is how the restructuring measures are framed by many state functionaries, among

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[698]Interview with Saʿīd Marʿī; interview with General ʿĀdil Labīb, governor of Qinā, and his secretaries, Qinā, 15 January 2003; interview with Fuʾād ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Muhammad, director of Religious Endowments Administration in Kafr as-Šayḫ province, Kafr aš-Šayḫ city, 21 January 2003.

[699]Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, pp. 79-81.

them the director of the Religious Endowments Administration in the Kafr aš-Šayḫ province who found the restructuring of the mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī a great step forward in creating a true Islamic mawlid:

> 'The square of the mosque of Sīdī Ibrāhīm this year [2002]: a wonderful square! Before, you wouldn't have been able to walk there [because of the crowds]. And some disturbances could happen because of people who have no morals. But now, in agreement with the security apparatuses which played a magnificent role, and in agreement with the religious establishment, it has become a place where religious people go to acquire scientific and cultural knowledge. It has become easy for them to move there and to gain knowledge; and they have begun to transmit it to others. So thank God, there is progress in this practice, and the broad base of the sons of the Arab Republic of Egypt increasingly understands the true meaning of the mawlid. In my view, we have eliminated as much as 90% of the errors that are committed in the mawlids.'[700]

This is the mawlid as the state institutions would like to show it: a well organised and precisely orchestrated festivity for the propagation of official religious discourse. Religious dignitaries, not the ordinary visitors, are the focus of attention. The festivity is turned into a medium of religious propaganda, possibly enriched with some elements of folklore.

In this form, the mawlid finally corresponds to the hegemonic representations of festivity. But we should keep in mind that similar statements have been repeatedly made throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Is the mawlid really under control? In the centre, it evidently is. Unlike the disciplining of bodies, the restructuring of festive space has been successful albeit with a significant limitation: this transformation only concerns the visible centre of the festivity. As the state attempts to organise the mawlid according to a model of separate spheres, the mawlid in its old shape does not disappear. It is merely moved out of sight.

> 'The mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm was beautiful and very organised/disciplined (*munaẓẓam*) this year. Compared to previous years it was much less chaotic and crowded.'
> S: But some merchants complained about the measures.
> 'The merchants' interest is in the chaos, the chaos brings people who buy. Now that the square is empty of stands and there are less people they of course make less money. The interest of the merchants is not the interest of security and order. The mawlid was organised this way so that there will be less crowds in the centre, in the square in front of the mosque and in the main streets, and it was very successful. In previous years the square was very full and so were all streets. Now the centre was closed for traffic, cars had to pass by the ring road, and the crowds were moved to the side streets. So there is now much more space and a beautiful view.'
> S.: But the crowds are still very bad in the side streets, what about them?
> 'That's intended. The point is to reduce the pressure in the places of vital importance: main streets and the square in front of the mosque by moving the crowds into the side streets.'[701]

By symbolically occupying the centres of prominent, visible festivities, the state demonstrates its version of civic order while simultaneously allowing the margins of the festivities to follow an order of their own. This is a matter of both resources and will. Brigadier-General Sayyid Aḥmad, the police officer and parliamentarian speaking in the above quote, is a person committed to Sufi tradition and attends the mawlid of Sīdī

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[700]Fu'ād ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Muḥammad, in an interview in Kafr as-Šayḫ, 21 January 2003.
[701]Interview with Brigadier-General Sayyid Aḥmad, Cairo, 18 January 2003.

Ibrāhīm on his free time. Although there certainly are other persons in authority who profoundly dislike mawlids,[702] for Brigadier-General Sayyid it is a matter of finding a balance between two legitimate interests: control and representation on the one hand, and a festive atmosphere on the other:

> 'We could make the mawlid even more ordered. We could go to the side streets and organise them the same way [i.e. restrict trade and amusements and decrease the pressure of the crowds], but that would make the mawlid lose its flavour. It's the crowds that make the mawlid (*il-mūlid fī zaḥmituh*).'

The same logic applies to the organisation of mawlids that are out of sight, that is, festivities that do not occupy central visible locations in the capital or the provincial cities. In Cairo, mawlids that are located in the alleys of the old city or in the suburbs are subjected to significantly less pressure by the authorities. The mawlids in the countryside hardly gain the attention of the state:

> 'Similar measures are not necessary in smaller mawlids because they are not such mass occasions like Sīdī Ibrāhīm with large crowds and people coming from different parts of the country and important visitors such as the governor who comes to pray on Friday [following the great night] with the director of Religious Endowments Administration and others, and the television broadcasting it.'[703]

It is not just the lesser crowds in the countryside but the representative presence of state functionaries and television in urban mawlids that makes government involvement necessary in the city but dispensable in the villages.[704]

Why this process of restructuring mawlids is increasingly taking place since the 1990s – since the general clampdown of the 1930s and 40s there have been no other attempts to suppress mawlids – is related to two factors: availability of international loans for infrastructure projects including the restructuring of streets and squares, and the way the Egyptian state is redefining its role in society, moving from the Nasserist social contract

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[702]For example the governor of Qinā General ʿĀdil Labīb who in an interview underlined to me that he never attends mawlids (and pointed out that his presence in the official celebration is different from attending the mawlid) and expects them to decline and disappear. Interview in Qinā, Qinā 15 January 2003.

[703]Interview with Brigadier-General Sayyid Aḥmad.

[704]This does not necessarily have anything to do with the size of the festivity: In Qinā, the provincial administration has hardly shown interest in reorganising the mawlid of Mār Girgis (St. George), the second largest mawlid in a province with a large Christian population:
S: Have there been measures to reorganise other mawlids in the province, like that of Mār Girgis [St. George] in Ruzayqāt?
'Ruzayqāt is far from Qinā. It belongs to the province [of Qinā], but it's far from the city.'
S: So how is it organised?
'It's in the countryside so it's a different issue of administration, while Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm is in the middle of the city. And the square is a very important place. And it's a place of trade, and all people go to the mosque and it's a place with lots of crowds so there must be organisation (*tanẓīm*).'
Of course, there is trade and lots of crowds in the mawlid of St. George, too, and organisation would be needed there as well. But because it is in the countryside – that is, out of sight – the local administration does not see the need to interfere in it the way it does in the province capital. The fact that it is a Christian mawlid may also play a role. Whether it is organised according to modernist and reformist ideals may not have as much importance for a Muslim governor. (Interview by Fatḥī ʿAbd as-Samīʿ and the author with secretaries of general ʿĀdil Labīb, the governor of Qinā, Qinā, 15 January 2003).

towards providing spectacles of global modernity.[705] These spectacles – new cities, up-scale districts, flyover bridges, socially exclusive spaces, spectacular public projects – are a spatial expression of the definition of modern Egypt and orthodox Islam through the exoticisation and exclusion of a social reality that falls short of its ideal image.

Like its colonial predecessor, the hegemonic city of the early 21st century is marked and defined through its opposition to the popular districts and the countryside. But through the policies of 'beautification and development', this opposition enters popular districts and provincial cities as the state inscribes its presence in central public spaces in the form of spectacles that stand in a striking contrast to the surrounding streets and alleys: new mosques, wide squares and parks, iron fences, empty spaces, a strong state presence and restrictive measures at mawlids and other public festivities.[706] Neither the will nor the resources exist to subject mawlids – or any other parts of the popular districts and villages – to full civilising discipline. Instead, the distinctions between up-scale and popular Egypt are reproduced and reinforced in the festive space and time of mawlids. Other definitions are pushed to the margin but not erased.

It is this logic of spectacular, distinctive presence that has lead to the conflation of control and representation. Control of public space in present-day administrative practice is a complex form of power that extends not only to the movement of citizens but also the meaning and the representative image of that space. It implies anti-insurgency planning designed to prevent uncontrollable movements of crowds even at the cost of everyday functionality, but it also involves a more profound power over the use and appearance of space. In a way similar to the modernist understanding of the self and habitus, this power of definition is conceived in aesthetic terms, along oppositions such as cleanliness and filth, order and chaos, or calm and noise. A public place that falls short of these aesthetic criteria is out of control because it is not functional in the imagery and structure of the hegemonic modern city. But it is the same logic that also makes this control incomplete. Because it is so much conceived of in aesthetic terms of spectacular presence, it cannot be total. The margins, by definition, cannot and need not be subjected to the same order and discipline the centre is.

## 4. The reformist ḥaḍra and the respectable mawlid

Sufi gatherings, especially Sufi *ḏikr*, have been the focus of criticism throughout the 20th century. It is thus no wonder that the Sufi establishment and many Sufi orders have given the reform of these gatherings high priority. How exactly these reforms ought to look, however, has not been very clear. The circular of sheikh ʿAbd al-Bāqī al-Bakrī from

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[705] In the Nasserist system, the state was a provider of services: subsidised groceries, free education, public sector jobs. Today, these services have dramatically deteriorated and are increasingly being replaced by prestigious projects that are mostly directed to a small globalised segment of the society. See, e.g., Amin, Galal, 'Globalisation, Consumption Patterns and Human Development in Egypt', ERF working paper 9929, [1999], http://www.erf.org.eg./uploadpath/pdf/9929.pdf, viewed 11.11.2005.

[706] For example in the Šamm an-Nasīm procession in Port Said that has been under heavy pressure from the state in recent years. *al-Ahālī*, 3.5.2000: 'Imād Fuʾād / Ḥamdī Ǧumʿa, 'al-Iṯnayn al-aswad fī Būr Saʿīd', pp. 1, 4.

1881 (see above pp. 140 and 193) that marked the rise of Sufi reformism in Egypt was highly detailed concerning the practices that were to be abolished but rather vague on how a proper *ḥaḍra* actually ought to look:

> 'It is necessary that the "zikrs"[707] be performed with due reverence, respect, and quietness as becomes the presence of Almighty God and to refrain from bad behaviour and everything contrary to religion such as joking, indecent words and the like; and in short, "zikrs" must be restricted to the praise of God.'[708]

But what does it mean, in practice, to perform a *ḥaḍra* 'with due reverence, respect, and quietness'? This ideal of ritual embodying a constrained and conscious state of mind has become a central issue for reformist Sufi orders that attempt to enter the debate with the very weapons of Islamic reformism and modernism: discipline, rationality and authenticity. As shown in chapter six, involvement in this debate has very often meant the acceptance of the underlying commonplaces concerning civility, piety and festivity, and consequently a radical redefinition of Sufi rituals and traditions. In the following I argue that this takeover of reformist standards is not confined to the level of apologetic discourse. For reformist Sufi groups, collective ritual is an essential part of their response to modernist criticism.

In many cases the Sufi apologetic discourse on these issues remains on the level of mere declarations, but often enough Sufi groups have actually set out to implement this discourse in practice by enacting the rationalist habitus of piety. The most prolific proponent of ritual reform is the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders.[709] In reality, however, the Council has only limited influence on the actual course of *mawlid*s; it acts primarily as a vehicle for a reformist Sufi discourse.[710] Actual reforms of festivities and rituals are implemented by reform-minded Sufi groups.[711] And just as there are different Sufi groups with different social and ideological backgrounds, there are many different ways to make a Sufi *ḥaḍra* fit the requirements of hegemonic religious discourses.

Reformist Sufi gatherings vary greatly depending on the goals and constituency of their organisers. Some try to attract a specifically middle- and upper-class public while others seek a wide social spectrum of adherents. While some are satisfied with creating a degree of discipline, others go further and aspire to be included into the hegemonic imagery of public festivity. Common to all is their tendency to intellectualise the content and prioritise discipline over emotional, ecstatic and ambivalent elements in order to give the whole event an organized, morally respectable, and modern appearance.[712]

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[707]Sic. De Jong quotes a contemporary English translation of the circular. The Arabic original is not available.

[708]De Jong, *Ṭuruq*, p. 196.

[709]Luizard, 'Le rôle des confréries soufies' pp. 29-31.

[710]Interview with Sheikh ʿAlāʾ Abū l-ʿAzāʾim, sheikh of the ʿAzmiyya order and a member of the Supreme Sufi Council, who complained that the government authorities would not take seriously the Supreme Sufi Council's proposals to eliminate deviations from mawlids. Cairo, 17 February 2002.

[711]It is common for living Sufi sheikhs to have no formal order of their own, only an informal circle of friends and disciples. For an analysis of the *ḥaḍra* of one such group, see Schielke, Samuli, "On Snacks and Saints: When Discourses of Order and Rationality Enter the Egyptian *Mawlid*", in Stauth (ed.), *On Archaeology of Sainthood*, pp. 173-194, here p. 186.

[712]See Frishkopf, *Sufism, Ritual and Modernity*, pp. 1035-1076.

## *4.1. Al-Ḥāmidīya aš-Šāḏilīya: the 'Soviet model farm'*

One of the earliest, and until today most prominent, representatives of reformist Sufism is the Ṭarīqa al-Ḥāmidīya aš-Šāḏilīya. This order, established in 1927 by sheikh Salāma ar-Rāḍī (1867-1939),[713] follows a consciously modernist and reformist agenda not only concerning its rituals but also its doctrine and administrative structure.[714] For this reason it has long served as something of a showcase Sufi order, and has become the probably most intensively studied Sufi group in Egypt.[715] It is not really representative for Egyptian Sufism though, as Michael Gilsenan, author of the standard work on the Ḥāmidīya, *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt*, has pointed out: In the Nasserist 1960s it was, in fact, the only Sufi order he was allowed to research at all, a kind of 'Soviet model farm'.[716]

The Ḥāmidīya, though well known, is not the most innovative reformist Sufi group. Their mawlid *ḥaḍra*[717] stands in a long tradition of more stern and contemplative Sufi gatherings that have always existed side by side with more ecstatic and spontaneous ones. The *ḥaḍra* begins with collective recitation of religious poetry and invocations, followed by a collective *ḏikr* in rows, led by a *munšid*. No musical instruments are used, and women and children are forbidden from participating. There are no speeches or lectures. The gathering is based on *ḏikr*, ecstatic but disciplined through the collective, orchestrated form of the gathering.

What distinguishes the Ḥāmidīya is not so much the form of its *ḥaḍra* as the way it is embedded in a socially distinctive setting.[718] The *ḫidmas* of the order stand out at mawlids. They are large and elaborately decorated, and have doormen guarding the entrance to the tent and refusing entrance to women, children and potential troublemakers. This exclusive character is also reflected in the way some members of the order distinguish themselves from other Sufi groups, claiming to be the more or less sole representatives of true – i.e. ethical, disciplined, intellectual and refined (*rāqī*) – Sufism:[719]

'There is a clear difference between an educated [sheikh] who has a *murīd* who follows the

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[713]Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi*, pp. 11-19, 35-41.

[714]See ar-Rāḍī, Sīdī Salāma, *Qānūn aṭ-ṭarīqa al-Ḥāmidīya aš-Šāḏilīya*, Cairo: Dār mašyaḫat wa-siǧǧādat aṭ-ṭarīqa al-Ḥāmidīya aš-Šāḏilīya, 1965.

[715]See, e.g., Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi*, Ḥasan, *aṣ-Ṣūfīya wa-s-siyāsa*, Frishkopf, *Sufism, Ritual and Modernity*; Muṣṭafā, Fārūq Aḥmad, *al-Binā' al-iǧtimā'ī li-ṭ-ṭarīqa al-Ḥāmidīya aš-Šāḏilīya fī Miṣr: dirāsa fī l-anṯrōbōlōǧiyā al-iǧtimā'īya*, Alexandria: al-Hay'a al-miṣrīya al-'āmma li-l-kitāb, 1980.

[716]Interview with Michael Gilsenan, Leiden, September 2001.

[717]It is important to distinguish between *ḥaḍras* at the *zāwiyā* of a group, which have a more intimate atmosphere, and those held at mawlids, which function as a public display and mobilisation site. Depending on the group, the mawlid *ḥaḍra* can be more spontaneous and open to all, or very strictly organised to transmit a 'correct' public image. Chih, *Le soufisme au quotidien*, p. 254; Frishkopf , *Sufism, Ritual and Modernity*, pp. 171 f,; 263-332.

[718]To be precise, this is only accurate for one of the two main branches of the order. The Ḥāmidīya was always active in recruiting members from the upper and middle classes, but has also remained rooted in the popular milieu of Cairo's oldest working class district Būlāq Abū l-'Ilā where the first *zāwiya* of the order stands. In the 1970s a new, more socially distinctive *zāwiya* was built in the up-scale district al-Muhandisīn, which effectively led to a split between the Muhandisīn branch and the Būlāq branch. Gilsenan, *Regognizing Islam*, pp. 236-240.

[719]It is likely that this distinctively elevated (*rāqī*) habitus has also been instrumental in making the Ḥāmidīya a showcase piece of Sufism the Egyptian government thinks can be shown to foreigners without compromising the image of Egypt as a modern nation.

path to God and the Law of the Prophet, God's blessings and peace be upon him, and that someone who goes to a sheikh and says: "Read the Fātiḥa for me and heal my calf."[720] [...] This point may be the fundamental difference between the Ḥāmidīya aš-Šāḏilīya and any other Sufi order: the only *ṭarīqa* that teaches *sulūk* (the conduct and disposition of a mystic; mystic path[721]). [...] Part of the *sulūk* of a person who belongs to the *ṭarīqa* is that he expresses the Law of Muḥammad in society. There's no way that I could be a dervish, no, we don't have *ǧaḏb* (state of divinely inspired madness), and neither do we have dervishdom. With us, the murīd has to be conscious, committed to his daily work, to live from the income of his work. At the same time, his heart is with the powerful and exalted God.

[...]

It's unlike the mawlids that are basically about dance and percussion. You feel the difference when you go down to the square. Look: The *ḥaḍra* here is *munaẓẓam* (organised/disciplined). The people are very organised/disciplined.

[...]

Another important point that is important for you to know: all the classes that belong [to the order] are intellectually refined classes (*fi'āt rāqiyat al-fikr*) That is, judges, officers, engineers, civil servants, high intellectual levels, not commoners.[722] There is not one commoner, and even if there is someone without education, Sīdnā [Salāma ar-Rāḍī] ordered them to learn the Qur'ān. [...] This you will find in no other *ṭarīqa*.'[723]

The reinterpretation of *sulūk* to include the acquisition of a modern, civilised and educated disposition, the emphasis on organisation/discipline (*tanẓīm*), and the strong drive towards social distinction (framed as knowledge distinction), are common features of most reformist Sufi orders, most of which consciously try to attract educated middle- and upper-class followers. As a result, their gatherings often stand out from the general

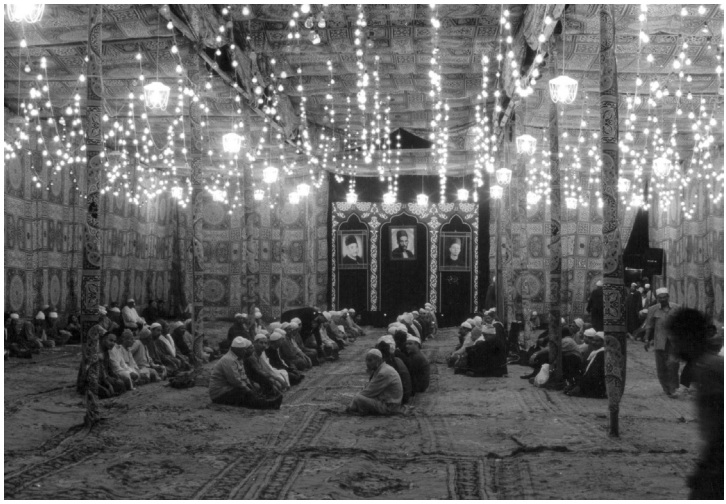

*Image 43: Members of the Ḥāmidīya aš-Šāḏilīya order gather to recite the* Burda *of al-Buṣayrī before the ḥaḍra. Mawlid of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 7 October 2004.*

[720]Again, the animal body is emblematic of the criticism of the cult of saints. For the related topic of the fertility of water buffalos, see pp. 90 and 95-96.

[721]For a discussion of *sulūk* as a concept for mystical habitualisation of piety, see above p. 98.

[722]Associating the term *rāqī* (refined, upper-class) with an intellectual disposition is, as shown above on p. 151, a key element of middle-class distinction. It is worth noting that the class described by this list of professions is not the neo-liberal upper middle class based on private profit, but the old Nasserist one based on public sector and intellectual self-image.

[723]Interview with a member of al-Ḥāmidīya aš-Šāḏilīya, Alexandria, 24 July 2003.

lower-class milieu of mawlids. Just like criticism of mawlids is a form of social distinction for students with rural backgrounds, the intellectual atmosphere of reformist *ḥaḍras* is a strong marker of class distinction. Some groups go further than the Ḥāmidīya and combine a constrained, intellectual atmosphere with material symbols of class distinction: seating people on chairs and offering individual meals framed by symbols of restaurant service. Other Sufis often show a mixed relationship to these gatherings, admiring them for their orderly character and rich material resources but also criticising them for their exclusivity. They are not only associated with the outspoken criticism of the more ecstatic and emotional forms of Sufi practice, but also the clear statement of class difference they make is opposed to the temporary suspension of class distinctions, a central motif of the Sufi mawlid.[724]

## *4.2. Al-ʿAzmīya: the mawlid as conference*

Other reformist Sufi groups are not satisfied with representing a disciplined and sober *ḥaḍra*. They radically reshape their festive practice to distinguish themselves from the general atmosphere of mawlids and to approach the hegemonic imagery of public festivity. An outstanding example is the mawlid of the Ṭarīqa al-ʿAzmīya.[725] The order, founded in 1933 by the prominent anti-colonial activist Muhammad Māḍī Abū l-ʿAzāʾim, is known for its radical anti-Salafi polemics and outspokenly modernist orientation. The ʿAzmīya, with a social base mainly in rural and small town middle classes, defends mawlids vehemently against Salafi criticism while simultaneously calling for a reform of the celebrations.[726]

The mawlid of *al-imām al-muǧaddid* (as he is considered to be by his followers) Muhammad Māḍī Abū l-ʿAzāʾim is consciously organized as an exemplary instance of a true and correct mawlid and in clear contrast to an ecstatic Sufi gathering. The entire festivity consists solely of a religious-political public conference. There are no amusements, no public *ḏikr*, and no trade save for a stand selling photographs of successive generations of sheikhs.

The mawlid lasts four days. In 2002, the first day was devoted to a conference discussing the contribution of Sufism to religious discourse. On the second day, which was also the day of *al-isrāʾ wa-l-miʿrāǧ*, a celebration was held in the order's mosque involving a short *ḏikr* – seated and without musical instruments – followed by some learned and many highly nationalist speeches. The main public celebration took place on the two following nights, first in a tent in front of the mosque, and in the final night in a theatre. During the public celebrations on the last two nights of the mawlid, all of the people were seated on chairs. Women were allowed to attend the celebration but were

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[724]Interviews with Ašraf ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Fayṣal, son and prospective successor of a Sufi sheikh, mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī, Disūq, 1 November 2002; and with sheikh Ḥasan ad-Dirīnī, mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī, Disūq, 30 October 2002.

[725]The order is formally a branch of the Šāḏilīya but does not make reference to it in its banners.

[726]McPherson, *The Moulids of Egypt*, pp. 140-144; Luizard, 'Le rôle des confréries soufies', p. 37; Abū l-ʿAzāʾim, *al-Iḥtifāl bi-mawālid*; Idem, *Islām aṣ-ṣūfīya huwa l-ḥall*; interview with Julia Schlösser, anthropologist, Cairo, 13 October 2004.

*Image 44: Performance of the orchestra and choir in the mawlid of Imam Abū l-ʿAẓāʾim, Cairo, 4 October 2002.*

separated from men by a metre-high wall. In the final celebration in the theatre, women were seated in the balcony and men on the floor. There was also a clear separation between the seated audience and the order's dignitaries, who were seated on the podium.

The atmosphere of the entire festivity was very formal. There was no *ḏikr* during the public celebration and the first part of the celebration consisted entirely of speeches and poetry praising the founder of the order and discussing political topics (mostly sharp attacks on Israel and Jews in general, and Saudi Arabia and Wahhabis in general). Awards were given to outstanding members of the order and persons of public prominence. Music finally followed the three and a half hours of speeches. Performed by an orchestra and a uniformed choir, the music was much softer and more elaborate than the music performed by most *munšids* at mawlids. It represented the officially recognised and more orchestral form of religious music that can be appreciated as high art and broadcast on the radio.[727] The only opportunity for public participation was through applause.

This gathering was organized in conscious opposition to traditional mawlids and did not even look like a mawlid. It did look very much like the many official political and religious gatherings shown on Egyptian television, however. In fact, it represents a clear attempt to fulfill the norms of the modern official public sphere: the form is that of a conference, the public is disciplined and passive and the content is intellectual, educational and rationalistic. It is not intended to be fun.

Its form of celebration notably exhibits an important feature of most reformist gatherings: the prevalence of rhetorical speech. While most Sufi *ḥaḍras* (also some reformist ones, notably those of the Ḥāmidīya) mainly make use of ritual speech (prayers, recitation of Qur'ān and liturgic text, etc.) and vocal performance, most reformist gatherings contain a great deal of rhetorical speech, that is, speeches, lectures, and preaching, characterised by an argumentative or suggestive character. This follows a central topic of reformist Sufi discourse: the interpretation of mawlids as occasions of learning and education. Following the example set by state celebrations and conferences, learning is conceived of as a top-down relation between authoritative speakers and a passive audience.

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[727]Frishkopf, 'Inshad Dini'.

This mawlid is thus a successful attempt to be included in the hegemonic public imagery of religion and festivity. Despite its small size – the total number of visitors does not exceed one thousand – it is one of the very few mawlids that regularly get extensive (and always positive) coverage in semi-official newspapers such as al-Ahrām.[728] Successful as this form of festivity may be in terms of public representation, however, it remains problematic in terms of mobilisation. Sufi groups have always used mawlids to attract new members, and offering a good, spiritually and aesthetically appealing *ḥaḍra* has been instrumental to this purpose. Compared to most public Sufi gatherings, the mawlid of the ʿAzmīya is extremely formal and vapid, and despite its visible location[729] and public prominence, it only draws a small number of participants.

## *4.3. Al-Ǧāzūlīya: some emotion, some discipline*

A very different solution is presented by the Ṭarīqa al-Ǧāzūlīya al-Ḥusaynīya aš-Šāḏilīya. The order, established in 1951, adopts a highly innovative approach to making Sufi gatherings more in tune with the dominant religious discourses while at the same time offering a festive and emotional atmosphere in its gatherings.

The Ǧāzūlīya, established by Sheikh Ǧābir Ḥusayn Aḥmad al-Ǧāzūlī (1913-1992) and now led by his son Sālim, has been built on significantly different premises. The organisation of the *ṭarīqa* is based on the absolute power of the sheikh over disciples who are largely equal among each other. The brotherhood does not have any of the detailed regulations or administrative and spiritual hierarchies of the Ḥāmidīya. More noticeably, however, the rituals of the *ṭarīqa* show a unique mixture of reformist discipline together with an ecstatic atmosphere and extensive use of melodic and emotional music.[730]

The Ǧāzūlīya organises *ḥidmas* at most major mawlids in Egypt and also has a significant presence in Upper Egypt where other reformist groups have had difficulties gaining ground.[731] The *ḥaḍras* of the Ǧāzūlīya are carefully staged to make them attractive to participants and bystanders alike. In Qinā, for example, the tent housing the *ḥaḍra* is surrounded by a low fence that separates participants from bystanders but also offers the latter a good view of the first. The space for these gatherings is brightly decorated and balloons and strips of coloured paper underline the festive atmosphere. At mawlids,

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[728]See, e.g., *al-Ahrām*, 6.12.1996:' al-Iḥtifāl bi-mawlid al-imām Abī l-ʿAzā'im', Friday supplement, p. 11; Another mawlid that enjoys similar public prominence is celebrated in honour of Dr. ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd, former *šayḫ al-Azhar*. The celebration is very similar to that of Imam Abu l-ʿAzā'im, also in terms of size. *al-Ahrām*, 28.8.1998: ''Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd .. al-ʿālim wa-l-faqīh al-ḥaqq', Friday supplement, p. 2; *ʿAqīdatī,* 24.7.2001: Islām Abū l-ʿAṭṭā, 'Ḏawābiṭ ṣārima li-iḥyā' ḏikrā l-imām ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd: al-iḥtifāl .. yawmān faqaṭ wa-yaqtaṣir ʿalā qirā'at al-Qur'ān al-karīm wa-mu'tamar dīnī wa-ǧamāhīrī', p. 15.

[729]At the crossing of Maǧlis aš-Šaʿb and Port Said streets in the district of Bāb al-Ḫalq in Cairo.

[730]Interview with Kazuhiro Arai, anthropologist, Cairo, 13 October 2004; Frishkopf, *Sufism, Ritual and Modernity*, pp. 375-391.; 542-621; Hoffman, *Sufis, Mystics and Saints*, pp. 147, 152, 247; Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform*, pp. 82-88.

[731]In Upper Egypt, a region characterised by conservative values, strong local identity, and a different structure of class distinctions, ecstatic Sufi *ḏikr* enjoys higher social esteem than in Cairo and Lower Egypt. For example, Channel 8 (Aswān) is the only state TV channel that regularly broadcasts Sufi *inšād*.

female members of the order are seated outside the tent and merely watch the *ḥaḍra* without actively participating in it. In *ḥaḍras* held at the *zāwiyā*[732] of the Ǧāzūlīya, however, women do participate. The most outstanding feature, however, is the uniform dress of the participants, which is unusual in an Egyptian mawlid. There are white *gallābīyas* and caps for normal *murīds*, green caps for the performers, and blue caps for *nuqabā'* (sg. *naqīb*), 'representatives' who organise and run the *ḥidma*. A member of the order wearing a green cap explained that the dress code is adopted 'so that there is some kind of organisation/discipline (*tanẓīm*),'[733] so that different functions are clearly distinguished and members of the order are distinct from the crowd.

The *ḥaḍra* itself consists of a mixture of speeches and different styles of *inšād*. The speeches are short and the emphasis lies on the *ḏikr*. *Munšids*, accompanied by a band consisting of tambourines, *ṭabla*, flutes, and *'ūd*, perform in styles that vary from traditional Sufi *inšād* to elaborate melodies similar to those of commercial pop music.[734] Some members of the order participate in performing the *inšād* while others, seated on the carpet in rows, participate in the *ḏikr*. Bit by bit, the atmosphere slowly gains intensity and many of the participants clearly fall into an ecstatic state. Sometimes the music gets faster, the melody less elaborate and the rhythm stronger, following the style of traditional *inšād*. Then some people spontaneously rise to participate in a standing *ḏikr* of rhythmic movement. After a while the music changes or a speech follows, and people sit down again. As a result of this arrangement, the atmosphere is far more emotional and ecstatic than at other reformist Sufi gatherings, however there remains a clear sense of discipline created through the carefully orchestrated appearance of the event, the seating arrangement that is only for short moments interrupted by individual ecstatic movement, and the functional differentiation based on the uniform dress.

Unlike the 'Azmīya, which abandons popular mawlid celebrations in order to be included in the hegemonic public sphere, the Ǧāzūlīya deliberately targets the mawlid-

*Image 45: Ḥaḍra of the Ǧāzūlīya al-Ḥusaynīya order, mawlid of Sīdī 'Abd ar-Raḥīm al-Qināwī, Qinā, 20 October 2002.*

[732]A building containing a mosque and other premises of a Sufi group. In rural context this is also known as *sāḥa*.

[733]In the mawlid of Sīdī 'Abd ar-Raḥīm al-Qināwī, Qinā, 20 October 2002.

[734]Frishkopf, *Sufism, Ritual and Modernity*, p. 573.

going public and does so with great success. Its gatherings are always full of *murīdīn* and draw large crowds of bystanders. They have enabled the Ǧāzūlīya to garner a wide spectrum of supporters from different regions and social classes.[735]

The *ḥaḍras* practised by the Ǧāzūlīya are a successful attempt to act out an aesthetics of order and discipline while being festive and ecstatic at the same time. This is an innovative solution to a central problem common to all Sufi gatherings but more urgent to those keen on presenting a 'correct' appearance: reform-minded Sufis must strike a balance between the aim of presenting a 'pure' and disciplined gathering and the expression of festive and ecstatic tendencies that are central to the individual spiritual experience and instrumental for mobilisation. This tension between ecstatic states and group discipline, which is present in every Sufi *ḏikr*, has been analysed by Michael Gilsenan as the polar tension between 'freedom and control, between unrestrained emotional ecstasy and formal regulation, between the individual and group experience which must be one, though the first always threatens the second.'[736]

## *4.4. Strategies of adaptation*

It would be too simplistic to describe this balancing act in terms of the opposition between 'popular' vs. 'orthodox' or 'neo-' Sufism.[737] Different styles of ritual have always existed side by side in the Sufi milieu, even within the same *ṭarīqa*.[738] All the groups described above stand in the tradition of the Šāḏilīya,[739] a *ṭarīqa* that has been associated with urban middle classes and constrained rituals throughout its history. The Šāḏilīya, distinctive though it has often been, has never been separate from the wider Sufi milieu,[740] and some of its other branches are very ecstatic and inclusive.[741] The reformist orders share the same Sufi cosmology and doctrines of more ecstatic groups, venerate the same saints, go to the same mawlids, and are rooted in the same Sufi milieu, even if some of them try to dissociate themselves from it. The limits are not, and have never been, fixed. Many ecstatic Sufi gatherings based on open musical *ḏikr* include elements of rhetorical speech in the beginning of the *ḥaḍra* to frame spiritual experience with educational goals. Many smaller *ḥaḍras* attended by the middle-class public combine the intellectual habitus of reformist gatherings with the informal atmosphere of the Sufi

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[735]Interview with Kazuhiro Arai, Cairo, 13 October 2004. Urban middle classes nevertheless form the main constituency of the Ǧāzūlīya. Frishkopf, *Sufims, Ritual and Modernity*, pp. 469-471.

[736]Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi*, p. 174.

[737]As suggested, for example in Rahman, *Islam*, p. 128-166; Gerholm, Tomas, 'The Islamization of Contemporary Egypt', in Westerlund/Rosander (eds), *African Islam and Islam in Africa,* p. 143; Sirriyyeh, Elizabeth, *Sufis and Anti-Sufis: The Defence, Rethinking and Rejection of Sufism in the Modern World*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1999.

[738]Sedgwick, *Saints and Sons*, e.g. pp. 123-131.

[739]The Šāḏilīya, like most of the major Sufi orders (e.g. Aḥmadīya and Burhāmīya), is not an organisation but a conglomerate of independent branches that share allegiance to their founding sheikh Sīdī Abū l-Ḥasan aš-Šāḏilī.

[740]See, e.g., Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, p. 88.

[741]Although Šāḏilī groups have the general reputation of being more intellectual and constrained while, for example, Rifāʿī groups are associated with a rural milieu and spectacular rituals, there is no necessary link between the affiliation of a group to one of the large orders and its rituals and social base. There are plenty of ecstatic Šāḏilīs and reformist Rifāʿīs.

*ḫidma*.[742]

In academic studies on Sufism in Egypt, reformist groups have received much more attention than 'traditional' ones.[743] One reason for this focus is that reformist groups more often have a strict formal organisation that corresponds to the researcher's expectations of a mystical order. The Sufi milieu is full of groups loosely organised around charismatic personalities, but these are not orders in the organisational sense and have remained largely outside the focus of research on Egyptian Sufism, with the notable exception of Valerie Hoffman's *Sufism, Mystics and Saints in Modern Egypt*. Another factor is the common but seldom substantiated assumption that while Sufi orders generally are in decline, reformist groups have been able to adapt to modernity. While it is true that Sufism has lost its centrality in Egyptian society and that reformist orders have created successful 'adaptive strategies' (Frishkopf)[744], we need to remain aware that this is only valid for certain levels of society.[745] Reformist Sufi orders typically try to attract an urban middle- or upper-class constituency, and to do so they have shaped their doctrines and rituals according to the hegemonic cultural discourses that are so central to middle-class habitus. Only a few reformist groups have been able to compete with ecstatic Sufi orders and Salafi movements in the countryside, among the urban lower classes, or in Upper Egypt. Furthermore, as Michael Gilsenan has noted in a revision of his earlier research on the Ḥāmidīya, the creation of a centralised bureaucratic organisation so emphasised in research on reformist Sufi orders[746] does not guarantee its success:

> 'The tacit attempt at an *embourgeoisement* of sectors of street Sufism in alliance, or what is seen to be an alliance, with the state largely disqualified itself. It failed, and it seems to me that the members were implicitly refusing that kind of incorporation into an ideology and form of Sufism that was alien to them and the position in the social order that the vast majority of them occupy.'[747]

The focus on reformist groups has often concealed the continuity and dynamics of ecstatic Sufi rituals and communities. While it is true that many Sufi orders based on rural networks are in decline, this does not apply to all ecstatic Sufi rituals and charismatic Sufi leaders. There are many Sufi groups that organise highly successful and innovative gatherings based on an informal atmosphere and ecstatic rituals open to all to participate in. So for example the *ḫidmas* of al-Ḥāǧǧa Laylā (held in the name of the late Sheikh Maḥmūd al-ʿAzm) and al-Ḥāǧǧ ʿAlī aš-Šarīf[748] that stand at prominent

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[742]So, for example, the gatherings of al-Ḥāǧǧa Sihām at the mawlids of Alexandria. See above p. 87.

[743]For example, Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi*, Muṣtafā, *al-Binā' al-iǧtimāʿī*, and Ḥasan, *aṣ-Ṣūfīya wa-s-siyāsa* on al-Ḥāmidīya; Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform* on al-Āšīra al-Muḥammadīya; Chih, *Le soufisme au quotidien* on al-Ḫalwatīya; Frishkopf, *Sufism, Ritual, and Modernity* on al-Bayyūmīya (not a reformist group), al-Ḥāmidīya, al-Ǧaʿfarīya and al-Ǧāzūlīya.

[744]Frishkopf, *Sufism, Ritual, and Modernity*, passim.

[745]*Ibid.*, p. 1074.

[746]See, e.g., *Ibid.*, p. 1074 f.

[747]Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam*, p. 241

[748]al-Ḥāǧǧ ʿAlī (1934-1998) stood out by the fact that he did not take an *ʿahd* from a living sheikh. According to a hagiography written shortly after his death, he received an *ʿahd* directly from the Prophet. Al-Ḥāǧǧ ʿAlī has been succeeded by his son-in-spirit Sayyid aš-Šarīf (despite the identical family name, they are not close relatives) who has successfully continued the *ḫidma* and constructed a shrine for al-Ḥāǧǧ ʿAlī in Ḥumayṯara next to the shrine of Sīdī Abūl-Ḥasan aš-Šāḏilī.

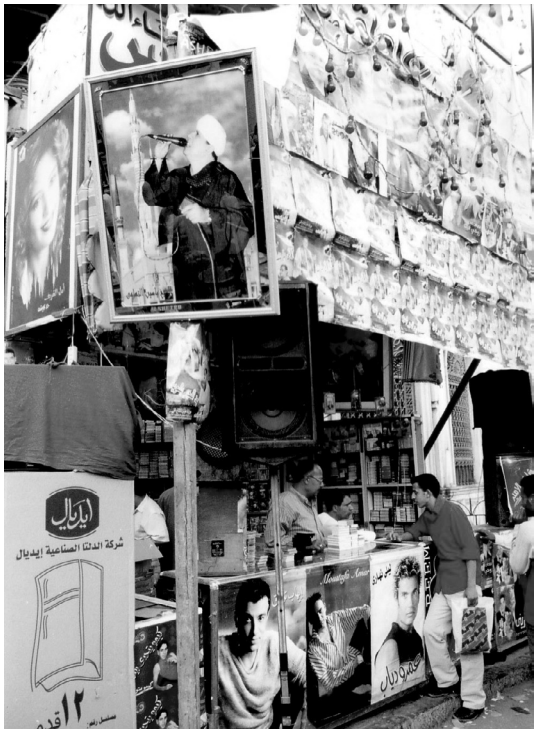


*Image 46: Poster portraying Sheikh Yāsīn at-Tuhāmī at a music store in Ṭanṭā during the mawlid of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī, October 2004.*

locations in most major mawlids of the country. Both these gatherings have included speeches and lectures to introduce the *ḥaḍra* but have otherwise remained strongly attached to the atmosphere of mawlids. They stand out, however, through the fact that neither *ḥidma* is officially affiliated to a Sufi order. Their mobilisation and success are based on their charismatic leaders and strong presence at mawlids where they feature famous *munšids* and offer large scale services of free food.[749]

The most impressive case in point, however, is Sheikh Yāsīn at-Tuhāmī, the uncontested superstar of Sufi *inšād* whose *ḥaḍras* draw audiences reaching several thousand. For many people, the *ḥaḍra* of Sheikh Yāsīn is the ultimate culmination of the mawlid.[750] At mawlids his concerts always take the form of an ecstatic public *ḥaḍra*. Sheikh Yāsīn, usually accompanied by a band of violin, flute and percussion, is not only the star of an artistic performance, however: he is simultaneously a charismatic sheikh leading a mass *ḏikr*. This *ḥaḍra* is not bound to any given Sufi group. Sheikh Yāsīn is a professional *munšid* who sings for various customers at various events: mawlids, private celebrations, and even concerts in Cairo and abroad. He is also one of the very few *munšid*s who can be seen on state television.[751]

Sheikh Yāsīn's fame is not based on the standards reformist groups so meticulously strive to fulfill. He is well educated and sings very highbrow classical Arabic poetry[752] but he has always remained committed to the melodic and ecstatic tradition of Sufi *inšād*. His art is recognised and loved both in the popular Sufi milieu and among middle-class

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Al-Harāwī, Usāma, *Min awrād aṭ-ṭarīq*.

[749]At the *ḥidma* of al-Ḥāǧǧa Laylā in the mawlid of Sīdnā al-Ḥusayn, 120 people eat at a time in shifts of little more than five minutes. Food is served over several hours, so that there are thousands of people eating for free on one day.

[750]And they may stay one day longer only to see him. Sheikh Yāsīn's fame has reached the extent that at major mawlids he usually does not sing on the great night because it would lead to total chaos. At least at the mawlids of al-Ḥusayn, Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī, as-Sayyid al-Badawī and Sīdī al-Farġal, Sheikh Yāsīn's *ḥaḍra* concludes the mawlid on the *layla al-yatīma* (the night following the great night) on a stage right in front of the mosque.

[751]Frishkopf, Michael, 'Tarab'.

[752]Lawyer by training, Sheikh Yāsīn is best known for interpreting the poetry of ʿUmar ibn al-Fāriḍ, but he also performs poems by other mediaeval Sufi authors.

*Image 47: Audience in the ḥaḍra of Sheikh Yāsīn at the mawlid of as-Sulṭān al-Farġal, Abū Tīǧ, 19 July 2003.*

*Image 48: Audience at a Ramaḍān concert of Sheikh Yāsīn at the Bayt al-Harāwī cultural centre, Cairo, November 2004.*

intellectuals. Sheikh Yāsīn's unique success in combining religious authority with the fame of a superstar[753] is based on three factors: the choice of texts he sings (classical Sufi poetry that can reach both Sufi and intellectual audiences), his extraordinary artistic talent, and his ability to adapt to different audiences. It is the latter factor that makes Sheikh Yāsīn at-Tuhāmī more successful than any reformist Sufi group. At mawlids, he is the leader of an ecstatic *ḏikr*, his music rhythmic and fast. At Ramaḍān concerts in distinguished locations such as the Opera House and the Bayt al-Harāwī cultural centre in Cairo, he is the gifted interpret of mystic poetry.

Al-Ḥāǧǧ ʿAlī, al-Ḥāǧǧa Laylā, and Sheikh Yāsīn are all very modern figures with innovative and successful strategies of adaptation. Sufi groups that are not able to develop such successful strategies do in fact decline, but successful strategies are not

[753]For the transformation of religious authority through mass mediation and celebrity cult, see van de Port, Mattijs, 'Priests and stars: Candomblé, celebrity discourses and the authentication of religious authority in Bahia's public sphere', *Religião e Sociedade* 25 (2005).

necessarily contingent on the standards set by reformist Sufi discourse. While reformist Sufi groups have been successful in reforming their own gatherings, they have not replaced others. They have made a difference, however: With their tendency towards social distinction and their criticism of ecstatic rituals, they have contributed to an increasing fragmentation of the Sufi festive experience.

## 5. Transformation, decline and dynamics

All attempts to reform mawlids give a somewhat incomplete, inconsequential impression. There are moments of strong pressure and times of great lenience. Concrete measures often fall short of the goals set by public declarations. Measures taken at different mawlids share a same sense of civilising the festivity but vary greatly in their details. This is a consequence of the way the reform of public festivals works in Egypt. Just as there is no official opinion on mawlids (state religious authorities prefer to remain silent on mawlids because they cannot agree on them) there is also no master plan and no central government policy concerning them. All relevant decisions concerning the organisation of mawlids are taken on the province level; there are no guidelines issued by the central government. The same goes for other actors who influence the course of mawlids: Sufi orders shape their own rituals, merchants base their trade on supply and demand, and individual participants are free to choose how they celebrate the mawlid, if at all.

Still, the general similarity of the measures is striking: as if there were a master plan after all, not one dictating what to do, but all the same informing what kind of objects exist and what kind of actions are possible. This phenomenon is not specific to the debate on mawlids in Egypt. It is inherent to the general way discourse is enacted as practice. Various actors behave according to a diffuse common sense of the meaning of the mawlid, how a religious festivity ought to look, what relation the sacred and profane ought to have, and how a public festivity is to be organised.

This is best demonstrated by the training of the most powerful actors in the game of reform and reorganisation: officers of the security apparatus who have the final say on the implementation of any policies. All higher ranks of the various branches of police, security forces, state security etc. are educated at the Police Academy, and throughout their career they regularly attend training courses to acquire new techniques and strategies, including those concerning mass public gatherings such as demonstrations, football matches, and mawlids. Add to this that they are also bestowed with the habitus and class consciousness of the middle classes,[754] and there is no need for a master plan. The shared class habitus and central training provide security officers with a set of known problems and possible solutions for how to administer a public festivity. Their concrete solutions vary, and yet they all express the same discursive common sense influenced by their education, socialisation and training.

Modernist discourse is thus articulated as administrative and festive practice, but with some delay and in unpredictable ways. All three fields of reform – habitus, festive space and Sufi gatherings – have fallen short of their declared aims. And yet the criticism of

[754]With the difference, compared to most other civil servants, that they belong to the most powerful, privileged and best paid segment of the public sector.

mawlids has brought dramatic changes to the festivities. Partly following the reform of morals and habitus, and partly following a general development in Egyptian society, the festive time of mawlids has shifted. It is still characterised by the suspension of boundaries, but it is far less permissive and wild than it was in the 19th century. Partly following the effect of reformist Sufi gatherings and state intervention in festive space, and partly due to the increasing number of participants who do not believe in sainthood, mawlids have become increasingly fragmented. They have always been characterised by a multitude of different celebrations, but it is now clear that the physical separation of different spaces of festivity, the development of official and reformist festivities that are openly opposed to other forms of festivity, and the growing number of participants who like the festivity but distance themselves from the beliefs it is based on, all contribute to a growing distance between different festive experiences.

The discourses and practices of reform have been effective in transforming mawlids only when they have been connected to popular discourses and wider transformations in society. In fact, conscious reforms are only a part of the complex transformations mawlids have undergone since the 19th century.

Although mawlids at the beginning of the 21st century still gather huge crowds, they went through a substantial decline during the 20th century. While the amount of people attending mawlids was stable or slowly growing throughout the century, the population of Egypt was growing at an explosive speed.[755]

Sufism and communal religious and festive traditions have lost the central position they once had in Egyptian society. Just as it is impossible to estimate how many people really go to mawlids, it is also impossible to quantify this decline. One also needs to be careful with accounts that tell of a past glory and present-day decline, because nostalgia often makes the past look grander than it actually was. Nevertheless, a clear trend of decline is evident, and since the 1990s also in terms of absolute numbers. This is most visible at small mawlids, some of which have dramatically decreased in both size and duration: less people come to the mawlid, and those who come stay a day or two instead of a week.

This process of decline is related to several factors. It is not possible to quantify the importance of individual factors, and only in a few cases, most notably trade and class distinctions, is it possible to establish a direct relation between these factors and festive practice. The following list should be thus taken at face value: a tentative list of probable reasons for the decline of mawlids:

– *Changing structure of trade*: Since the end of the 19th century, the importance of mawlids as markets has been declining. The changing structure of trade has deprived the seasonal fairs of the significance they once had.[756] Today, the mawlid is still a time of flourishing trade in places like Ṭanṭā or Disūq but this trade is of primarily local significance.

– *Changing forms of religiosity and class distinction*: With the emergence and successful hegemonic reach of Salafi Islam, mawlids have lost much of their credibility as a pilgrimage. With modernist habitus and simplified Salafi piety also gaining ground as forms of distinction in rural and urban lower-class milieus, mawlids are losing much of

[755]Mayeur-Jaoeuen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, pp. 162, 208.
[756]*Ibid.* p. 204 f.; Baer, *Studies in the Social History*, pp. 145, 176.

their former constituency. In many families a clear generation gap can be observed between Sufi parents and children who distance themselves from Sufi spirituality and communal traditions. If this trend continues, which is likely, it will lead to a simplified and selectively applied Salafi doctrine becoming the popular Islam (if one is to take the term 'popular' on its face value and measure it on popularity) of Lower Egypt while Sufism will increasingly become the individual choice of a devoted few. In consequence, the display of a rationalist and constrained habitus of the religious self will lose its distinctive character. If everyone has it, then it is no longer useful to establish modernist middle-class identity through the exclusion of backward countryside and lower classes.
– *Cultural and social change in the countryside:* It needs to be questioned to what extent the spread of modernist/Salafi disposition is the cause and to what extent a result of the decline of festive traditions. In rural settings, not only mawlids are in decline but also other communal traditions (*ʿīd* celebrations for example) that have never faced any significant opposition from the modernists. With changing social structure (individualisation, a move towards the nuclear family, increasing mobility etc.) some older communal traditions are losing their importance and power, which is often experienced as alienation and loss by the people involved. A modernist/Salafi disposition allows the interpretation of the felt loss as an accomplishment.[757]
– *Individualisation of the pilgrimage*. With the decline of communal traditions, a growing number of people no longer see participating in mawlids as a collective duty but an individual choice. Even people who are principally sympathetic to mawlids may not feel the necessity of attending.[758] Increasingly an affair of the devoted few, mawlids remain dynamic but are becoming smaller and changing in character.
– *Changing forms of entertainment*: On the level of amusements, mawlids face heavy competition from popular music, cinema, television and computer games. This process began in the 1920s when the emergence of the modern music industry made mawlids lose their centrality as a venue for popular music.[759] In provincial cities, mawlids remain an important source for amusements, but in Cairo they have largely lost their significance as amusement areas.
– *The economic crisis*: Since 2000 Egypt has undergone a serious economic crisis that has hardest hit those who already are poor. This has not only had an effect on trade, which suffers from stagnating income, but also on Sufi *ḫidmas* that require donations to be able

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[757]Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen has argued that this development is actually more important than the spread of Salafi Islam, the latter often serving as a retrospective rationalisation for social change. Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, pp. 209-220.

[758]So for example Muṣṭafā, son of a devout Sufi father (in an interview in Cairo, 7 August 2003):
'I heard you were in the mawlid yesterday. My father was also yesterday in the mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, and he'll be today in ar-Rifāʿī wearing a *baladī* style *ǧallābīya*. He loves mawlids very much.'
S: But you didn't go?
'I didn't go, I had other things to do, had to help a friend and anyway, I don't go much to mawlids.'
S: You don't believe in them? (*miš muqtaniʿ bihā*)?
'Yes I do believe in them, but they are not my passion (*hiwāya*) like they are my father's passion. My passion is computers. Maybe it has to do with a difference of generations and age.'

[759]ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī*, p. 167.

to offer their services free of charge, and on the pilgrimage that can be a relatively expensive affair for the people involved.

– *Reforms*: The attempts to make mawlids more acceptable for modernist and reformist discourses make mawlids less attractive to many of their participants. For the pilgrims, the spiritual experience is often troubled by administrative restrictions. For many of those who are primarily interested in amusements and a taste of the illicit, the mawlid becomes boring: 'They've spoiled the mawlid. In the past everyone knew it was *the* place to meet girls and see dancers. Now it's become just a little bit of chickpeas.'[760]

Amidst all this decline it is important to point out the persistence of mawlids. Despite their substantial decline they are a dynamic custom that has demonstrated a high ability to adapt to changing circumstances.[761] Many craftsmen and small businessmen of old city districts and small towns are still prepared to spend their money on organising a communal celebration because it remains an effective way of proving commitment to their local community. Sufi orders have proven able to mobilise members in changing circumstances, and they will not give up their most important occasion of mobilisation and self-representation. Although mawlids are certainly losing their centrality in Egyptian religious culture they are not going to disappear; they are, however, definitely going to change.

Predicting the future of mawlids is a hazardous enterprise. In the 1930s, many observers either feared or hoped that mawlids would soon disappear altogether. In the 1960s it was commonly assumed that Sufism and mawlids were in a process of unavoidable decline. Towards the end of the 1990s, just as the news that Sufism and mawlids are not in a state of decline after all reached the world of Western research,[762] mawlids entered a new phase of decline, this time not only in relative but also in absolute numbers.[763] Still, keeping the many surprises of mawlids in mind, it is possible to predict that the future of mawlids is closely connected to the general development of religious and cultural discourses, the economic situation, and the development of class distinctions, especially those that mark the middle classes.

As long as these factors remain in their present state mawlids will further decline but not disappear altogether. They will increasingly lose their importance as communal traditions and become events for committed individuals, naturally fewer in number. The extent of this decline will be related to the economic situation. Mawlids will not suffer so much a loss of visitors – people will keep going to mawlids for the fun of it even if they think they are *ḥarām* – than of organisers who are ready and able to spend time and money on the event. Small mawlids without a strong foundation in one or several Sufi groups will disappear after losing their base of organisation and mobilisation. With growing state pressure, some festivals may face outright prohibition. In the mawlids remaining, the festivities will concentrate in the side streets and there will be an increasing gap between Sufis for whom mawlids are a part of their spiritual practice and spectators for whom the festivity is a curious, even ridiculous piece of amusement and

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[760]Interview with Muḥammad, Arabic teacher, Cairo, October 2004.
[761]Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, pp. 237-239.
[762]See, e.g., Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints*, pp. 16 f.; Biegman, *Egypt*, p. 7.
[763]See Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, p. 209.

folklore.

If there is a change in the hegemonic patterns of religiosity and/or class distinctions, then a rediscovery of mawlids as a communal tradition is possible. Mawlids would then be conceived of as a matter of local identity and national pride, and the question of them being *ḥalāl* or *ḥarām* would move to the background, which would diminish the gap between different festive experiences. There are signs of such development,[764] however they are currently limited to small intellectual and activist circles. Should this development eventually take place it would lead to a repositioning of mawlids in the symbolic structure of class society, which in turn might lead to wide-reaching and unpredictable transformations in the festive atmosphere.

[764]The most recent example is an anti-government demonstration organised on 15 June 2005 by an opposition group that, drawing on the high status of as-Sayyida Zaynab in Muslim piety and the rite of sweeping the dust from a saint's shrine as an act of devotion, organised a demonstration in front of the mosque of as-Sayyida Zaynab, holding brooms (reinterpreted to imply the cleanup necessary in the state) and invoking as-Sayyida Zaynab, also known as 'Mother of the Weak' (Umm al-ʿAwāǧiẓ), against oppression. See ʿArafa, Muḥammad Ǧamāl, 'al-Muʿāraḍa al-miṣrīya "tiknis is-Sayyida" ʿalā n-niẓām', Islam Online, 13.6.2005. http://www.islamonline.net/Arabic/news/2005-06/13/article09.shtml, viewed 21.6.2005; Idem, 'Miṣr: iḥtiǧāǧ "al-miqaššāt" fī s-Sayyida Zaynab', Islam Online, 15.6.2005, http://www.islamonline.net/Arabic/news/2005-06/15/article15.shtml, viewed 21.6.2005.

# Chapter Nine: Conclusions

In the first pages of this thesis I phrased a question to guide the analysis: Why do some people criticise mawlids, and why is it a matter of importance to them? In the course of the analysis, this seemingly straightforward question has turned into a complex and far-reaching one involving the organisation and use of urban space, the temporal structure of moral norms and social boundaries, the relationship of festive time and the everyday, the concept of the self, the relationship of aesthetic criteria of behaviour and public order with ethical dispositions, the redefinition of religion and the invention of society and nation in the 19th and 20th centuries, the emergence of professional urban middle classes and their struggle for hegemony, the construction of cultural and civilisational heritage, the role of the state in society, and the transformations of urban space and festive practice.

In consequence, the answers that this thesis has delivered reach further than the original question. They do not stop at showing the points of conflict that feed the debate on mawlids; they also concern its emergence, functionality and implications: How criticising mawlids is a distinctive part of the modernist project, how attempts to defend mawlids have to work within the terms set by the critics, how the exclusion of mawlids from the field of religion and modern society makes it possible to redefine or reinvent them and show them in a very different light, and how the debate on mawlids has shaped attempts to reform the festivities.

## 1. Festivity and the everyday

In this thesis I have taken an approach on festivities that emphasises the contingency of their relationship with daily life. Festivities are created by the people who participate in them and have no 'true' meanings prior to festive practice. Festive traditions do, however, have their own dynamics that cannot be manipulated at will, at least not in a short period of time. The openness and ambivalence of mawlids and many other pilgrimages enables, as Eade and Sallnow have argued in the context of Christian pilgrimages, the coexistence (albeit often troubled) of highly different festive practices and ideologies. But this is not merely an inclusive capacity; it is in itself a characteristic feature of mawlids – and other similar festivals and pilgrimages – that clearly sets them apart from other festive traditions and the rhythms and routines of the everyday. This is why its openness notwithstanding, the mawlid is not an empty vessel that can contain any number of forms of festivity. The openness of mawlids and their character of the extraordinary are not compatible with attempts to employ them in the service of public education and discipline. The attempt to impose clear hierarchies and a central programme of public representation upon mawlids changes their character, making them less open and ambivalent, more exclusive and fixed, and, consequently, festivities of a different kind.

Through their stark contrast to the everyday, festivities like mawlids always stand in implicit, and often explicit, tension to the social and moral order of the everyday. It is this tension that has compelled me to analyse the festive time of mawlids through the concept of festive utopia, the imagination and temporally limited practice of a better world free of some of the restraints and imperatives of the everyday. While it would be

mistaken to depict festive utopia as a purposeful resistance or subversion of hegemonies – it can, after all, play an important role in establishing and maintaining clientelistic and charismatic power –, the fact that so many Egyptians view mawlids as a threat should persuade us that a functionalist model of festivity as a way to keep society in balance also fails to explain the complex relationship between festivity and social order.

The relationship of festivity and the everyday is a political one, subject to negotiation and struggle and dependent both on the character of the festivity *and* on the hegemonic order of the everyday. In other words, the meaning of a festivity cannot be detached from the meanings that are given to its social world in general. A given form of festivity can have very different implications for forms of social order. In a given situation, a festivity can be functional for the stability of society, or a serious and real threat to hegemonic practices of public order and morality, or – most often – an ambiguous factor comprising something of both. The relationship of a festivity to the daily order of society is never a given; it is continuously negotiated as social order and festive culture transform.

Festivities that, like mawlids, are characterised by a marked contrast to daily life, are always to some degree problematic to most forms of religiously legitimated moral and social order. However, mawlids are much more problematic for some forms of social order than they are for others. Mawlids are embedded in practices of piety and social order that were once hegemonic in Egypt but, during the past century, have become increasingly marginalised by new hegemonic forms of religion and society. The Islamic spirituality of Ottoman Egypt was able to handle the ambivalence of mawlids because it was itself embedded in a communal concept of religion and a vision of society in which times of celebration appeared as legitimate moments in the circle of life. But for a discourse promoting top-down modernisation and development in the footsteps of colonial rule and in confrontation with it, festivities must have a constructive function and serve the progress and education of society. It is in this context that ambivalence and the time of the extraordinary become a threat to social order.

Mikhail Bakhtin has argued that festive time should be understood as a time in its own right with no utilitarian purpose.[765] This claim (unlikely as it may sound to those of us accustomed to a commonsensical form of functionalism) is supported by the findings of this thesis. A key to the success of mawlids throughout the centuries and the problem they constitute for the project of modernity and reform is precisely the fact that mawlids, open to different people and festive practices, elude definite categorisation and clear functionality. While the people at mawlids can give them various purposes, it has turned out to be very difficult to employ them for any great project of development or reform. Hence the people celebrating mawlids have come to appear as idle when they should be productive, restless when they should be calm, subversive when they should be conservative, and reactionary when they should be revolutionary.

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[765]'The feast has no utilitarian connotation (as has daily rest and relaxation after working hours). On the contrary, the feast means liberation from all that is utilitarian, practical. It is a temporary transfer to the utopian world. The feast cannot be reduced to any specific content (for instance to the historical event commemorated on that day); it transgresses all limited objectives.' Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 276.

## 2. The politics of habitus

The potential of mawlids for controversy lies both in their character as festivities with a stark contrast to many of the boundaries of daily life and in the crucial importance of these boundaries to a specific understanding of religion and society. The festive atmosphere of mawlids is not in itself un-Islamic or uncivilised. It has only become so since the emergence and increasing hegemony of a discourse on society, religion and the self that I have referred to as modernist and reformist. The debate on mawlids cannot, therefore, be understood within the often cited opposition between Islamist and secularist currents. Both these movements share a significant common ground in the way they conceive of religion and modernity as interdependent, based on the unity of rational progress and authentic ethical and civilisational heritage. That heritage, however, first needed to be constructed to fit the project of national progress. And it is this construction of 'true' heritage as opposed to 'false' traditions that has made mawlids so significant. Mawlids became an Other of the modernist project, criticising them a distinctive marker of modernist and reformist disposition.

The debate on mawlids is embedded in the struggles over hegemony that surfaced in the past century and in the way these struggles have been projected onto and carried by the bodies of citizens/believers and the visible structures of the society they live in. The debates and attempts of reform surrounding mawlids and other communal religious and festive traditions are primarily concerned with appearances and rituals. This is not merely because they can be seen and thus easily subjected to practices of censorship and reform; appearances and rituals matter because they are equated with beliefs and attitudes. For pilgrims, sitting in a tent and sharing a plate of food provides a moment of spirituality (see p. 36). People critical of the festivities point at the people in the tent and refer to the scenery as 'beliefs' (that is, the enactment of false beliefs – see p. 103). Government officials order removal of the tent to the back streets and phrase this measure as raising the sophistication of the citizens' consciousness (see p. 214).

The forms of festivity, piety, and social order that are practised at mawlids matter especially to the modernist and reformist view of society because the modernist and reformist project, since its emergence in the late 19th century, has been directed at elevating and developing the nation through the disposition of its citizens and believers. While its emphases have shifted throughout the 20th century (for example the 'liberal age' in the 1920s and 30s, the emergence and rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Nasserist socialist experiment, the Islamic revival, and the current politics of economic liberalisation and public morality), the hegemonic modernist project has always been concerned with the appearance of citizens and the society they live in because this appearance has been seen both as an indicator of the civilisational and moral quality of the nation as a whole and as a way to improve it. The relationship of snacks and saints is a grave issue because it marks some of the boundaries that are constitutive of the hegemonic practice of social and religious normality and with it, the development of the nation.

This form of struggle over the structure and values of society – and the power to determine them – through the bodies of people and the social space they inhabit can be described as the 'politics of habitus': the association of ideology with embodied practice,

and the contestation and redefinition of the two as interconnected fields. On this point, the results of this thesis support the findings of Saba Mahmood, who has argued that habitus should be seen as way to form the self and its ethical dispositions through bodily habit.[766] However, they point in a somewhat different direction, calling attention to the contested nature of habitus.

Both the associations between specific practices and dispositions and the kind of relationship between embodied practice and ethical dispositions are subjects of contestation. These issues are of crucial political importance because they also imply (or follow from – it is not within the scope of this study to determine the causal relation) specific kinds of social order and power. The communal or Sufi view that is constitutive of the festive atmosphere of mawlids is based on a vision of social and moral order in which boundaries are subject to temporary change, the sacred is an inclusive force that can contain and legitimise temporary shifts of boundaries, and appearances do not allow conclusions to be drawn about inner states. The form of power that goes with this view is one based on clientelism, personal allegiance and shared communal practice. This view presumes a model of the self based on an ambivalent coexistence of *rūḥ* and *nafs* (spiritual and animal soul), which in turn corresponds with an understanding of piety exemplified by the mystic path (*sulūk*): to reach an esoteric, mystically enlightened state of mind one has to start by fulfilling exoteric religious requirements although the spiritual progress of a mystic is not necessarily reflected by his or her appearance. Thus while virtues can be learned through habitualisation, appearances do not allow conclusions to be drawn about ethical states, and are, thence, not central to social order, and nor is disciplining them an effective instrument of power.

This view is (often successfully) contested by a modernist and reformist view stating that the boundaries that mark social and moral order are universal and valid at all times, that the state of a society is either one of progress or retrogression, that the sacred is an exclusive, transcendent sphere that is inherently connected to its rational interpretation, and hence incompatible with the profane, and that appearances do in fact allow conclusions to be drawn about inner states. This view implies a model of power in which visible practices of order are markers of and constitutive of the moral and civilisatory discipline of the people. The corresponding model of body and self is one of a disciplined but usually fragmented self whose piety is expressed through rational, constrained worship and moral uprightness. While there are different interpretations as to whether and how such a virtuous, disciplined state of mind is reached through virtuous practice,[767] the appearance (especially an unvirtuous or ambiguous one) of a believer and citizen is taken to be a truthful expression of his or her state of mind. Displaying a disciplined and rational habitus is, in this view, to have 'consciousness', and failing to do so is to lack it.

Consciousness, in its Egyptian modernist reading, is an aesthetic disposition. This is why I have preferred to translate *wa'y* as 'consciousness' rather than 'awareness'. Having consciousness implies more than active knowledge: it is a disposition that is opposed not

[766]Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, pp. 134-139.

[767]These views have been excellently analysed by Saba Mahmood in her study on the Salafi piety movement in Egypt. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

only to being 'ignorant' but also to being 'simple' (that is, incapable of critical reflection). Consciousness, in the Egyptian debate on mawlids, is a moral and rational capacity based on the ability to perceive a specific kind of relationship between ideologies and attitudes on the one hand, and embodied practices on the other. Embodying this aesthetics of consciousness is what marks the 'religious, rational, civilised human' (see pp. 80 and 105) who is so central to the reformist and modernist project.

Perhaps most central feature of the aesthetics of being 'conscious' is a general tone of seriousness combined with the search for definite, authoritative and clear truths. Truth, for the 'conscious' taste, must speak in clear and solemn tones, while fun and ecstatic emotion are considered mere distraction that, legitimate though it may be, should be kept strictly separate from the realm of truth. Thence the scepticism of middle-class reformists and modernists towards ambivalence and their search for strict and clear boundaries, their indignation about chickpeas, sweets and children's play at religious occasions, and their need to state that they 'have nothing to do with religion.'

Yet this 'consciousness' is a fragile construct because it is based on two contradictory demands. On the one hand, it is an element of the modernist and reformist mission to transform the nation and elevate its citizens, as a collective, to a sophisticated level of consciousness and thus to new power and glory. On the other hand, it is a marker of distinction that legitimises the modernist and reformist claim for hegemony, thus offering a promise of empowerment and social ascent to those who cultivate it. If everybody did, in fact, have 'consciousness', it would cease to be a marker of distinction and a means of empowerment.

This inherent contradiction of the modernist and reformist programme can be seen in a number of issues that extend beyond the debate on mawlids and communal/Sufi religious practice. Very similar problematics can be observed in the debates on, representations of and attempts to reform Upper Egyptian tribal society, urban informal settlements (*'aśwā'īyāt*), or rural culture. Their otherness is needed to mark the limits of orthodox Islam, the modern city, and middle-class urban civility, but it also threatens to compromise the universal validity that is key to the legitimacy of the modernist and reformist project. While the people who celebrate mawlids seldom openly defy the hegemonic structures of debate and practice imposed by the nation-state and modernist and reformist discourse, through their practice they continuously demonstrate different, often competing configurations of power and legitimation.

## 3. Whose hegemony?

During the 20th century, modernism and reformism have gained a hegemonic position in the definition of festivity, piety and modernity, while mawlids, along with the forms of piety and social order that are constitutive of them, have become increasingly marginalised. For those who attempt to defend mawlids against their critics, this means that they have the choice between taking over the reformist criteria of reverent and civilised behaviour and trying to prove that the real mawlid would actually be perfectly in line with them, or remaining excluded from the public debates in which the hegemonic definitions of religion and society are determined. But the criticism of mawlids has also opened the way to reinterpret and appreciate them through their

exclusion. The same people who criticise mawlids for being un-Islamic and backward often express fascination with and appreciation for them, but instead of taking this as an occasion to question the criticism, they redefine mawlids as something that is distinct from religion and modernity and thus potentially valuable in its own, separate, context as popular heritage. The criticism of mawlids does not, after all, mean that one cannot like mawlids. It only means that mawlids, the way they are being celebrated, may not be recognised as what their organisers and many of their participants claim them to be: true expressions of piety and joy, and equalitarian gatherings for all people of society.

A number of researchers, among them Timothy Mitchell, Afsaneh Nadjmabadi, Lila Abu-Lughod, Annelies Moors, Kamran Ali[768] and others, have pointed out that the projects of enlightenment and emancipation so celebrated in the nationalist narratives and sometimes uncritically reproduced in academic studies, cannot be accurately described as one-dimensional movements of inclusion, emancipation and empowerment. The findings of this thesis clearly support their line of argumentation, while casting doubt on other lines of research that, currently centring around the labels of civil society and the public sphere, focus on the search for a counter-hegemony against the power of authoritarian states (such as Egypt) and established religious institutions (such as al-Azhar) and emphasise the empowerment of those who are involved in it.[769] Such approaches, my findings indicate, are based on problematic divisions that may not accurately describe what is actually going on. 'Counter-hegemony' implies a claim for power, not the questioning of hierarchic relations of power. 'Empowerment' does not mean that relations of power are abolished, but that previously hegemonic relations of power are replaced by new ones. Instead of asking how participation in 'civil society' or 'the public sphere' challenges or fragments the power of authoritarian states and traditional religious institutions, we must ask how shifts in the public definition of religion and society are related to changing configurations of power.

Rather than a site to contest hegemonic power, the public sphere is, as Talal Asad has put it, 'a space *necessarily* (not just contingently) articulated by power' (emphasis in original).[770] And civil society is not necessarily 'counter-hegemonic' or opposed to the state. In fact, the hegemony of reformism and modernism in Egypt is civil as much as it is state-based. Although state actors are the most powerful when it comes to the dissemination of modernist common sense and the reorganisation of mawlids, it would be mistaken to place the modernist and reformist hegemony in a dichotomy of state vs. society. State and society are not separate spheres, at least not in contemporary Egypt with its centralistic system of governance and socialist legacy of a large public sector that employs, among others, many of those who belong to 'civil society'. State and civil actors

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[768]Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*; Najmabadi, 'Veiled Discourse'; Abu-Lughod, 'Feminist Longings and Postcolonial Conditions'; Moors, 'Representing Family Law Debates'; Ali, Kamran Asdar, *Planning the Family in Egypt*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002.

[769]See, e.g., Eickelman / Anderson, 'Redefining Muslim Publics'; Eickelman, 'Mass Higher Education'; Ibrahim, Saad Eddin, 'Civil Society and Prospects of Democratization in the Arab World', in Augustus Richard Norton (ed.), *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Leiden etc.: Brill, 1995, pp. 27-54; Zaki, Moheb, *Civil Society & Democratization in Egypt, 1981-1994*, [Cairo]: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Ibn Khaldoun Center, 1995.

[770]Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 184.

are overlapping categories. When a province governor initiates reforms to 'civilise' mawlids, he does so not only in his position as a functionary of the state, but also on the basis of a discursive common sense of what it means to be civilised. Conversely, not all modernists and reformists act in the framework of the state apparatus, and while they claim and often have a degree of cultural hegemony, their political power in the state apparatus can be very limited.[771]

The hegemony of modernism and reformism is a cultural one, focussing on the signifying symbols and values of society as a key to power. While it is shared by many of the most powerful state actors and plays an important role in the official project of development, it has also been tremendously important for groups with limited access to political and economic power. The criticism of mawlids is part of the cultural hegemony (and the claim for political hegemony) that is practised by a large proportion of the intellectuals (in the wider sense), professional middle classes, and Salafi-oriented religious movements. Being part of "the public", that is, speaking in the name of religion, reason, and the common good by the virtue of having 'consciousness' is a way to claim (not necessarily to have) a share of this hegemony. Not an opposition between state and civil society, nor a division between Islamists and secularists, but rather the competition between different forms of power and social order forms the central line of conflict in the debate on mawlids.

This emphasis on competing forms of power rather than on divisions such as authoritarian state vs. civil society or traditional authority vs. public sphere also implies a critical revision of two assumptions associated with these divisions and which have become current in the recent debates on Islam: the privatisation of religion and the fragmentation of authority.[772] The invention of the religious, rational and civilised Muslim citizen has not led to a privatisation of religion. While it has led to a shift from communal towards individual religious practice, the focus and significance of religion have moved from individual salvation towards the moral quality of the (imagined) collective. Religion in a secular (but not necessarily secularist) Middle Eastern state is a matter of public concern. Furthermore, the struggle over the configurations of power, including the power to determine the religious Truth, has not lead to a fragmentation of religious authority but to a shift within it. In Sunnite Islam, religious authority has always been fragmented, and while in the 20th century it has shifted from the monopoly of a professional class (the *ʿulamāʾ*) to become a domain of intellectuals and political activists, this has not necessarily meant that Muslims have become more free to interpret their religion. While the professional monopoly of the *ʿulamāʾ* has been weakened (but never abolished), two tendencies have actually contributed to a partial de-fragmentation of authority: the codification of *šarīʿa* as positive law (which is beyond the focus of this

[771]It is also worth noting that not all state actors participate in this hegemonic discourse. Members of parliament use mawlids as a site of mobilisation and legitimation along the lines of clientelistic and communal politics. So for example Ḥasan at-Tūnsī, member of the National Assembly from the district of al-Ḫalīfa who on 12 February 2005 tried to intervene in affairs when the police ordered the mawlid of Sīdī at-Tūnsī to be closed at midnight. Although he failed to convince the police officers, this brought him applause from his constituency. See *Cairo Magazine*, 10-16.3.2005, p. 18.

[772]See, e.g., Eickelman / Anderson, "Redefining Muslim Publics".

thesis),[773] and the reinterpretation of Islam as a rationalised, ideological system by contemporary social movements (which is a central issue of this thesis), both which have diminished the plurality of religious judgement that was norm throughout the preceding centuries.

## 4. The Christian debate

I have insisted on the link between Islamic reformism and Egyptian nationalist modernism, and one question this raises has so far remained unanswered. To what extent, one might ask, is the criticism of mawlids specific to Islam? Are, as could be argued, saint veneration and ecstatic rituals much more problematic for the strict monotheism of Islam than they are for other religions? To answer these questions, we must take a brief excursion to a parallel debate taking place among the Christians of Egypt and see whether similar or parallel lines of argumentation are being used.

At first glance, Christian saints-day festivals seem less controversial than Muslim ones. Christian mawlids generally receive very positive coverage in the press. Sainthood and miracles are officially sanctioned by the Coptic Orthodox church, and pilgrimages to Christian saints are much less associated with lower-class habitus than local Islamic pilgrimages.

On a closer look, however, it turns out that Christian pilgrimages, too, have been subject to criticism and wide-scale attempts at redefinition and reform. Protestant missionaries have questioned the fundamentals of sainthood and successfully established a growing Coptic Protestant community whose relationship to the cult of saints varies from distanced indifference to open hostility. But even among Orthodox Copts for whom the veneration of saints has never stood in question, the festivities in their honour have also been subject to debate. In the early 20th century, the same period when the criticism of Islamic mawlids gained momentum, some modernist Christian intellectuals began to speak out against what they saw as undignified and immoral behaviour incited by the festivals.[774] The direction of this criticism and consecutive reforms have been somewhat different than in the case of Muslim festivals, though. Among Orthodox Copts, only the form and atmosphere of the festivities has been subject to a great deal of debate, not pilgrimage itself.[775]

The most important issue in the debate on Christian mawlids has been the elimination of syncretisms, beginning with the name of the festivities. The term 'mawlid', many Christian Egyptians argue, has been borrowed from Islam and should not be used for the commemorations of the death of Christian martyrs and saints:

> 'The only mawlid there is in Christianity is the birthday of Lord Christ. The term "mawlid" is an Islamic influence, a compromise to society. The proper term is *ʿīd niyāḥ* (feast of passing) or *ʿīd istišhād* (feast of martyrdom).'[776]

The renaming of mawlids as festivals of martyrs is part of a wider redefinition and

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[773]See Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, pp. 205-256.

[774]*aš-Šaʿb*, 30.10.1998: Ibrāhīm ʿAbd as-Sayyid, 'al-Mawālid "al-masīḥīya" ayḍan bidʿa wa-mahzala!!'.

[775]Meinardus, *Coptic Saints and Pilgrimages*, pp. 67-69.

[776]Interview with Fāʾiq, lawyer, Cairo, 25 September 2002.

reorganisation of Christian pilgrimages. Shrines that previously had attracted both Muslim and Christian visitors have been distinctively Christianised in the last decades, most typically by building churches and monasteries around them. Christian mawlids have been clearly separated into a religious festivity within the walls of a church or a monastery and a fair outside. The festivities themselves have been subjected to increasing moral discipline along similar lines to those taking place at Muslim mawlids. While the mixing of men and women is seen as much less problematic among Christians, the same kind of measures concerning alcohol, gambling and dancing have been imposed at both Christian and Islamic festivals.[777]

The Christian debate on mawlids in Egypt is characterised by the same key issues as the Muslim debate: the rejection of ambivalent festive time and habitus, the attempt to impose clear, universal boundaries through the bodily discipline of pilgrims and a visible matrix of order, and a social distinction undertaken by parts of the middle classes through the criticism of communal festive traditions. There are two clear differences, however, that make Christian mawlids less controversial and more attractive for middle- and lower-class audiences alike.

The first difference is based on the minority status of Christianity in Egypt. As occasions where Christians can gather in large numbers and demonstrate their presence and identity, Coptic pilgrimages play a key role in the construction and celebration of communal identity. For this reason, they have in fact experienced a revival following the growth of confessional tensions since the 1970s. Christian mawlids are powerful markers of confessional distinction that are capable of overriding the power of class distinctions that might otherwise be expressed through the criticism of popular festive culture.

The second difference is related to the different confessional structures of Islam and Christianity in Egypt and their correspondingly different hierarchies of authority. Neither Sufism nor Salafism have a sectarian character in Egypt, although both sides tend to accuse their opponents of sectarianism. The absence of an institutionalised authority that might define the limits of 'normal' Islam once made it possible for Sufi orders to become a central element of Islamic piety in Egypt and today has made it easy for Salafis to proliferate their interpretation of Islam as being the true orthodox mainstream. Christianity in Egypt, on the other hand, consists of clearly demarcated confessions that all have their own distinct hierarchies. The only Christian group opposed to the cult of saints is the Protestant church, which, although it has had some success in recruiting support in urban middle-class contexts, has not been able to seriously challenge the hegemony of the Coptic Orthodox church. Because Protestantism is a distinct confession clearly outside the framework of Coptic Orthodox Christianity, it lacks the power that Islamic reformists have and which allows them to more credibly claim to present the mainstream of Islam. To oppose sainthood is, in the Egyptian Christian context, to identify with a sectarian minority. Although many Orthodox Christians might disapprove of the habitus and atmosphere of Christian mawlids, such critique of popular festivals is much less powerful if it is not supported by a critique of beliefs.

In following, there is indeed a specifically Islamic element in the Muslim debate on mawlids and yet it is not located in the position first suggested. The veneration of saints

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[777]Mayeur-Jaouen, 'Le corps entre sacré et profane'; Idem, *Pèlerinages d'Égypte*, pp. 345-376.

is not inherently alien to Islam, just as it is not inherently a part of Christianity. The atmosphere of popular pilgrimage has been a problem and a marker of distinction for 20th-century reformists of both faiths. What *is* specifically Islamic about the debate, however, is that through the absence of confessional boundaries or a strongly personified religious authority, the 19th-century Islamic orthodoxy of *maḏhab*-based scholarship and *ṭarīqa*-based Sufism was not able to withstand the dynamics of rationalist, anti-mystical reformism the way the Coptic Orthodox church was. With its primary reference to scripture and individual charismatic and intellectual authorities, and neither clear hierarchies nor an institutionalised authority like the patriarchy to give a definite final word,[778] Sunnite Islam is capable of containing dramatically different currents that, under other circumstances, might have developed into separate confessions. It is this plurality of religious authority and truth in the framework of a unified confessional identity that has facilitated successive waves of redefinition and reform throughout the history of Sunnite Islam, of which the Sufi wave in the late mediaeval period and the contemporary scripturalist-rationalist wave are just two examples.[779]

## 5. Genealogies of reform

The focus of this thesis has been on conflicts and transformations rather than shared anticipations and continuities. This is why I have not, although it would have been a likely choice, employed Talal Asad's concept of discursive tradition that in recent years has gained great popularity in the anthropology of Muslim societies. In fact, the findings of this study suggest that the concept of discursive tradition is more useful when it comes to grasping continuities than to understanding transformations.

Asad's paper *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*,[780] presented in 1986, has since gained great currency in the study of modern Islam, and it has become commonplace among researchers to refer to Islam as a discursive tradition. Critical of both nominalist and essentialist notions of Islam, Asad argues that Islam should be understood as a tradition consisting of

> 'discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. [...] An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to the conceptions of the Islamic past and the future.'[781]

Describing Islam as a discursive tradition has become highly popular in recent years because it offers a way to say what Islam 'is' without falling into the trap of essentialism. It connects the historical sources of Islam with their contemporary interpretation and recognises the heterogeneity and contingency of such tradition while still offering

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[778]Al-Azhar is often depicted as such an institutional orthodox authority, but as shown in chapters one and six, different Azhari scholars put forward very different opinions on contested issues.

[779]I am indebted to Frank Peter for this idea, which he developed upon a reading of Foucault, Michel, *Sécurité, territoire, population: cours au Collège de France*, Paris: Seuil, 2004.

[780]Asad, Talal, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Occasional Papers Series, Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986.

[781]*Ibid.*, p. 14.

something concrete for the researcher to grasp.

Empirically, describing Islam as a discursive tradition is as equally accurate as it is to say that Islam is a religion. The epistemological range of the concept of discursive tradition is restricted, however. This is of course the case with all scientific concepts and theories, and yet when a concept becomes 'trendy' in academic discourse, researchers are tempted to apply it indiscriminately in fields where it may or may not have the heuristic value it had in its original context of application. This is what has happened to the concept of discourse analysis since its popularisation in the 1980s and 1990s, and the same process appears to be taking place with Asad's concept of discursive tradition.

Although Asad's discursive tradition clearly bears some similarity to Foucault's discursive formations,[782] the two show one significant difference. While Foucault primarily focussed on contradictions and discontinuities,[783] Asad's emphasis lies on continuity. Asad states that the study of Islam as a discursive tradition should

> 'seek to understand the historical conditions that enable the production and maintenance of specific discursive traditions, or their transformation – and the efforts of practitioners to achieve coherence.'[784]

But although transformation is mentioned here it remains secondary, notably so in the phrasing chosen by Asad but more importantly in the overall problematic that the concept of discursive tradition is designed to solve. To ask what Islam 'is' means, by the logic of the question, to search for continuities, the factors that contribute to the 'maintenance' and 'coherence' that make it possible for Muslims and non-Muslims to identify things as Islamic throughout history. In this context, the fairly obvious statement that Islam as a discursive tradition 'has' a history becomes very problematic. If we interpret it to mean that a tradition exists throughout history and through contemporary reference to its past, as Asad seems to suggest, then we must take this history to be a more or less continuous process, even in its transformations. But if we interpret 'having' history as the construction of heritage according to the expectations and circumstances that prevail in a contemporary setting, then tradition falls apart into discontinuous discursive formations that, despite shared textual references, elude the analytical scope of 'discursive tradition' in the singular. Asad is, of course, well aware of the discontinuities of history, as his sharp analysis of the secularisation of law in 20th-century Egypt shows. But it is worth pointing out that in that analysis, Asad's own concept of discursive tradition is only featured in secondary role.[785]

While the concept of discursive tradition may be very valuable in explaining the persistence of certain topics and forms of argumentation in Islamic piety and scholarship, it is not very useful when it comes to accounting for change. Certainly, we can recognise discursive traditions, in the plural, for example in the tradition of ritual and moral reform that is evoked by contemporary Salafis who, to put forward their interpretation of what is Islamic, refer to select passages from the Qur'ān and the Sunna, the mediaeval genre of *kutub al-bida'*, the 18th-century Wahhābī reform movement, and the Salafi modernists of the 19th and 20th centuries. But recognising that we indeed have

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[782]This similarity has been pointed out by Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, p. 115.
[783]Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, pp. 155-160.
[784]Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, p. 17.
[785]Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, pp. 205-256.

a discursive tradition here – and I must underline that it is only one of many competing traditions within the wider, highly heterogenous field of Sunnite Islam – does not really add to our understanding of what has happened to it. On the contrary, discursive formations have a tendency on the one hand to erase the transformations that lead to their emergence (for example by projecting a contemporary understanding of religion onto the past), and on the other hand to construct dramatic breaks where there were actually gradual shifts (for example in the Sufi genealogy of Islamic reform). The strong scriptural references of contemporary popularised Salafi Islam, to stick with the example, should not mislead us to ignore how much it involves a thorough reinterpretation of religion, society, and the self, a reinterpretation that has been as equally inspired by the older Islamic traditions of legal scholarship and mystical spirituality as by colonial and post-colonial political and social conflicts, the discourses of rationalism and Victorian pietism, and the development of modern technologies of power.[786] Neither should the contemporary image of a struggle between scripturalist orthodoxy and ecstatic mystic heterodoxy make us overlook the shifts in orthodoxy that have occurred throughout the history of Islam. In other words, the discursive traditions of Islam are often to a significant degree invented, and it is this invention, and the shifts and contradictions that become invisible in the invented tradition, that we have to focus on if we are to understand how traditions change.

Taking contradictions and transformations as the primary analytical focus, this study presents an approach to the study of Muslim societies that does not contradict Asad's concept of discursive tradition but rather points in a somewhat different direction. It is concerned with the formation of discourses that leads to the invention and re-invention of traditions and the consolidation of the products of invention as objective, authoritative Truth. This is why the issue of genealogy – that is, the conditions of emergence and transformation of discursive formations – rather than discursive tradition has been central to my analysis of the critical debate on mawlids.

The genealogy of the debate on mawlids cannot, evidently, be reduced to any specific line of transmission. In this study, I have pointed to three concrete links for which good evidence is available: an Islamic tradition of ritual and moral reform, the Victorian moralist view and colonial administrative practice of internalised and embodied piety and rationality, and French social theories standing in the rationalist and systemic tradition of European enlightenment. Future research is likely to provide evidence of further links, but more crucial than the exact links is the way the transmission has worked. What we have at hand is not so much a transmission of theories and ideas (although, in the case of the reception of the works of Ibn Taymīya, Demolins and Le Bon, that has happened as well) but of discursive constructions of objects, (for example, what religion is, what a nation is, what qualities they require to flourish, etc.). European discourses served a double role as a hegemonic order that imposed its logic upon its opponents (similar to the way the logic of reformism has found its way into the defence of mawlids), and as a source of inspiration for attempts to counter and overcome that hegemony. Acting within and against this hegemony, modernist and reformist movements have been engaged in the active redefinition of religion and society that,

[786]See Tayob, 'Reading Religion'.

rather than providing concrete answers and strategies, have come to determine the kind of questions that can be asked, the kind of arguments that can be made and the kind of measures that can be taken.

In this light, we need to critically question one enduring theory on the nature of Islamic reform. The Salafi wave in Sunnite Islam has often been parallelled to the emergence of Protestant Christianity in 16th-century Europe, and it has become a popular enterprise to search for an Islamic Reformation in analogy to the Christian one.[787] Such trans-historical comparisons are always at risk of being stricken by anachronisms, but in any case I am interested not in structural similarities but the question of genealogy. As this thesis has shown, the common sense – of which Protestant conceptions of piety, ethics and reverent behaviour were, in some cases, a part – of colonial officials, Christian missionaries, and social scientists whose work was translated into Arabic, did in fact play a key role in the discursive shift that took place at the turn of the century. This common sense was not always a Protestant one, however, and some of the most powerful impulses may have come from different directions.

Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen has suggested[788] that it was the tradition of Catholic counter-Reformation transmitted through missionaries and, in a secularised version, French social theory that, in Arabic translation, formed a major source of inspiration for the emerging discourse of Islamic reform. The Islamic reformist project does, in fact, show some striking similarities to the counter-Reformation: notably the opposition to carnival and the attempts to 'purify' pilgrimages and rituals and the emphasis on strict segregation of men and women and separation of the sacred and the profane. Most importantly, however, the counter-Reformation turned the souls of the believers into an issue of social order. Unlike the privatisation of religion that, perhaps anachronistically, has been associated with Protestantism,[789] counter-Reformation implied the sanctification of society according to an understanding of the sacred very similar to that of Islamic reformists: in need of protection from banality and profanities, but omnipresent as a moral discipline of the everyday.[790]

This is not to suggest that we should opt for a counter-Reformation analogy instead of a Protestant one. Firstly, the links of transmission are too many and too diffuse to allow for any direct analogy. Secondly, Islamic reform and nationalist modernism, in their 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, were never based on a simple reference to the past but rather invented

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[787]See, e.g., Loimeier, Roman, 'Is There Something Like "Protestant Islam"?, *Die Welt des Islams* 45 (2005), 2, pp. 216-254; Browers, Michaelle / Charles Kurzman (eds), *An Islamic reformation?*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004; Eickelman, Dale, 'Inside the Islamic Reformation', *The Wilson Quarterly* 22 (1998), 1, pp. 80-89;

[788]In an e-mail correspondence, 4 August 2005.

[789]In some of the discussions on whether there is an Islamic Reformation, there appears to be a degree of anachronism at play, projecting contemporary secularist imagination onto earlier periods of Christian history.

[790]See, e.g., de Boer, Wietse, *The Conquest of the Soul: Confession, Discipline, and Public Order in Counter-Reformation Milan*, Leiden etc.: Brill, 2001, pp. 324-326.

and interpreted it anew. No matter what its sources of inspiration, then, the outcome of this selective reinterpretation was historically new, and cannot be reduced, in causal or structural terms, to the traditions it drew upon by evoking or opposing them.

What this alternative genealogy does suggest, however, is, firstly, that we should withstand the temptation to associate reform and Reformation with the liberal agenda of reason, freedom and democracy.[791] Religious and moral reform, the counter-Reformation analogy reminds us, is a rigorous exercise of discipline, and projecting the agendas of democracy and human rights onto Islamic reform and Christian Reformation does not do justice to their complex character. Secondly, it implies that the parallels that we can observe in the debates on and reforms of pilgrimage may be genealogical rather than structural. Popular pilgrimages that unite spirituality, communal experience and entertainment are not specific to Egypt, and neither are the controversies surrounding them. If we look at the debates on communal festive traditions around the Muslim world we very often find that similar traditions are being criticised and represented as local customs based on pre-Islamic – Pharaonic, Christian, Hindu, Animist – cults. The critique of ambivalent festivities and ecstatic rituals and the definition of religion and society through rational discipline of the self and progressive development of the nation unites Muslim modernists around the globe. And if we broaden our scope further we see that saints-day celebrations have also been commonly subject to debate and attempts at reform in, for example, Christian contexts in which a number of confessions have emerged and defined themselves, in part, through their opposition to sainthood, while Catholic and Orthodox pilgrimages and festivals have been subject to waves of criticism and disciplining measures. It is not within the scope of this thesis to establish how and why the search to discipline the souls of believers through the regulation of their festive and ritual behaviour and the visible structures of their society has developed such dynamics in the past centuries. But the fragments of evidence offered by this thesis suggest that this development has been a trans-confessional and trans-religious one (thence not specifically "Protestant") that, often but not always aligned with the projects of enlightenment, colonialism, and modernity, has offered new kind of questions to ask about religion and society in different confessional settings.

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[791]See, e.g., Dallmayr, Fred, 'Conclusion: An Islamic Reformation? Some Afterthoughts', in Browers / Kurzmann (eds), *An Islamic Reformation?*, pp. 178-183.

# List of Illustrations

*Images by the author unless otherwise indicated*

*Front cover*: The young lawyer Maḥmūd serves cinnamon tea as a "service for the sake of God" (*ḫidma li-llāh*) at the mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 2 June 2003.

*Back cover*: Map of the mawlid of Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, 2-3 June 2003. Based on *Guide Map of Medieval Cairo, Map 2: al-Azhar to Sultan Hasan*, Cairo; SPARE Society for the Preservation of the Architectural Resources of Egypt, 1995.


1. Map of Egypt. p. xv
2. The mawlid of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī. p. 15
3. Crowds in front of the mosque in the mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa. p. 16
4. The shrine of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī. p. 21
5. The opening procession of the mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya. p. 23
6. The *ḫidma* of Sheikh Ḥasan ad-Dirīnī. p. 24
7. *Ḏikr* in the *ḫidma* of Sheikh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Fayṣal. p. 26
8. Popular singers in a café. p. 27
9. The gathering of Sheikh Ḥasan ad-Dirīnī. p. 28
10. Amusements in at-Tabbānā Street. p. 30
11. Members of a family sitting in front of a shop. p. 31
12. Brigadier-General Sayyid Aḥmad, member of the National Assembly in a *ḫidma*. p. 40
13. Parallel centres, overlapping spheres and main streets of celebration in the mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya. p. 43
14. Henna procession. p. 55
15. The procession of as-Sayyida Nafīsa. p. 64
16. Procession cart representing a boxing ring. p. 65
17."Mr. President" leading the *mawlid an-nabī* procession. p. 65
18. Men of the Šiḫāta family in the hotel they lodge in. p. 68
19. Young men dancing at the side of a Sufi ḏikr. p. 71
20. Amusements on the Nile banks on second day of *ʿīd al-aḍḥā*. p. 73
21. The *ḥaḍra* of al-Ḥāǧǧa Sihām. p. 87
22. The *ḥaḍra* of Hudā. p. 88
23. Cover illustration of *as-Sayyid al-Badawī*. Muḥammad Baġdādī. p. 123
24. The stereotypical Sunnī extremist. Muṣṭafā Ḥusayn. p. 151
25. Sherif Sonbol: the procession at the mawlid of Aḥmad ar-Rifāʿī. Sonbol / Atia, *Mūlid! Carnivals of Faith* (colour original). p. 178
26 Nabil Buṭrus: The mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, 1992. Hamani, et al., *Impressions d'Afrique du Nord* (black and white original). p. 179
27. Cairo Puppet Theatre performs *The Great Night*. p. 180
28. The ballet version of *The Great Night*. Cairo Opera Ballet Company. p. 181
29. The temporary tent city in the fields of Sīǧar. p. 189
30. Map of the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī in Ṭanṭā. Modified version of a map by Delphine Pagès-El Karoui in 'Le mouled de Sayyid al-Badawî à Tantâ' (p. 248). p. 199
31. The mosque of as-Sayyid al-Badawī in Ṭanṭā, probably in the 1960s. Anonymous. p. 200
32. Entrance to the fenced square in front of the mosque of as-Sayyid al-Badawī. p. 201
33.The square in front of the Aḥmadī mosque during the mawlid. p. 202
34. Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm Square in Qinā after the restructuring. p. 204
35. The official celebration. Mawlid of Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm al-Qināwī. p. 205
36. Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm Square during the mawlid in the late 1990s. ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm Ḥamza. p. 206
37. Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm Square during the mawlid in 2002. p. 206
38. Mural representing the mawlid on Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm Square (detail). p. 208
39. Changes in the use of open space in al-Ḥusayn Square in the mawlid of Sīdnā al-Ḥusayn, 1994-1996 and 2003. Data on 1994-1996: Anna Madoeuf. p. 209
40. View over al-Qalʿa Square to Maḥmūd Bāšā Mosque during the mawlid of Sīdī Aḥmad ar-Rifāʿī, 12 March 1987. Niek Biegman. p. 210

41. View over al-Qalʿa Square to Maḥmūd Bāšā Mosque during the mawlid of Sīdī Aḥmad ar-Rifāʿī, 7 August 2003. p. 211
42. Former site of minibus station in Ramses Square. p. 212
43. Members of the Ḥāmidīya gather to recite the *Burda* of al-Buṣayrī before the *ḥaḍra*. p. 219
44. Performance of the orchestra and choir in the mawlid of Imam Abū l-ʿAzāʾim. p. 221
45. *Ḥaḍra* of the Ǧāzūlīya. p. 223
46. Poster portraying Sheikh Yāsīn at-Tuhāmī at a music store. p. 226
47. Public in the *ḥaḍra* of Sheikh Yāsīn in the mawlid of as-Sulṭān al-Farġal. p. 227
48. Public at a Ramaḍān concert of Sheikh Yāsīn at Bayt al-Harāwī cultural centre. p. 227

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—'Qul lā asʾalukum ʿalayhim min aǧrin illā l-mawaddata fī l-qurbā': 42:23
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—'Wa-iḏā saʾalaka ʿibādī ʿannī fa-innī qarībun uǧību daʿwat ad-dāʿi iḏā daʿāni': 2:186.
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—Aḥmad, a man in his twenties sitting in a café with his friends, mawlid of Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān ibn ʿAwf, Qalyūb, 14 July 2003.
—Sheikh Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Hādī al-Qaṣabī, sheikh of the Ṭarīqa al-Ḫalwatīya al-Qaṣabīya and member of the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders, mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2002.
—Aḥmad al-Farmāwī, imam of a mosque, mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 1 June 2003.
—Sheikh ʿAlāʾ Abū l-ʿAzāʾim, sheikh of the ʿAzmīya order, Cairo, 17 February 2002.
—ʿAlī Muḥammad, from Sōhāǧ, and Ḥasan Abū Rawāš al-Ǧundī, from Gīza, visitors of the mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 20 August 2002.
—Āmāl al-Bannā, journalist, Cairo, 20 June 2003.

—Ašraf, a follower of al-Ḥāǧǧa Sihām, mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 1 June 2003.
—Ašraf ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Fayṣal, son and prospective successor of Sheikh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Fayṣal, mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī, Disūq, 1 November 2002.
—Sheikh ʿAṭīya ʾAbdallāh al-Ḫālidī from the province of al-Buḥayra, mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 22 August 2002.
—Barbara Drieskens, anthropologist, Cairo, May 2003.
—Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, historian (e-mail exchange), 4 August 2005.
—Fāʾiq, lawyer, Cairo, 25 September 2002.
—Fārūq, chief agricultural engineer in the public sector, mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 20 August 2002.
—Sheikh Fārūq, mawlid of Sīdnā al-Ḥusayn, Cairo, 22 June 2003.
—Fatḥī ʿAbd as-Samīʿ, poet and journalist, Qinā, 19-22 October 2002.
—Idem, Qinā, January 2003.
—Fuʾād ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Muhammad, director of Religious Endowments Administration in Kafr as-Šayḫ province, Kafr aš-Šayḫ city, 21 January 2003.
—Ǧamāl and Ismāʿīl, men in their middle ages from the district of as-Sayyida Zaynab, mawlid of as-Sayyida Zaynab, Cairo, 26 September 2002.
—Ḫalaf, *ṭabla* player and dervish from Qinā, mawlid of Sheikh Muḥammad Mutawallī aš-Šaʿrāwī, Daqādūs (Daqahlīya province), 19 June 2003.
—Ḫalīl, French teacher, mawlid of Sīdī Ibraḥīm ad-Disūqī, Disūq, 31 October 2002.
—Ḥamdī, vegetable vendor from Kōm Ombo, Aswān, 20 January 2005.
—Ḥamīs, graduate of al-Azhar, and his friends, Sufi pilgrims to the mawlid of as-Sulṭan al-Farġal, Abū Tīǧ, 18 July.
—Sheikh Ḥasan ad-Dirīnī, mawlid of as-Sayyida Zaynab, Cairo, 28 September 2002.
—Idem, mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī, Disūq, 30 October 2002.
—Idem, Cairo, 6 January 2003.
—Idem, mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 29 May 2003.
—Idem, mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 6 August 2003.
—Hudā, informal leader of a Rifāʿī branch, mawlid of Sīdī Aḥmad ar-Rifāʿī, Cairo, 7 August 2003.
—Ḥusayn ʿAbd al-Munʿim from al-Minyā, Sufi pilgrim to the mawlid of as-Sayyida Zaynab, Cairo, 29 September 2002.
—Dr. Ibrāhīm ʿAbd al-Ḥāfiẓ, folklorist, High Institute of Folklore, Academy of Arts, Cairo, 26 July 2003.
—Jennifer Peterson, researcher and journalist, Cairo, October 2004.
—Julia Schlösser, anthropologist, Cairo, 13 October 2004.
—Karīm, 12 years old, visiting his grandparents' house in the graveyard near the mosque of as-Sayyida Nafīsa. Mawlid as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 21 August 2002.
—Karīm, a teenager working in a *ḫidma* during the mawlid of Sīdnā al-Ḥusayn, Cairo, 23 June 2003.
—Kazuhiro Arai, anthropologist, Cairo, 13 October 2004.
—Laylā from Zaqāzīq, mawlid of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2002.
—Māhir, lawyer, Minyat al-Muršid (Kafr aš-Šayḫ province), 13 May 2003.
—Maḥmūd, a young lawyer serving cinnamon tea to passers-by in the mawlid of Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 2 June 2003.
—Maḥmūd, Sufi pilgrim to the mawlid of as-Sulṭān al-Farġal, Abū Tīǧ, 18 July 2003.
—Marwa, young woman running a temporary café in the mawlid of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 17 October 2002.
—Michael Gilsenan, anthropologist, Leiden, September 2001.
—General Muḥammad ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān Naǧā, mayor of Ṭanṭā, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2004.
—Muḥammad, Arabic teacher, Cairo, October 2004.
—Muḥammad, school inspector of philosophy, Minyat al-Muršid, 21 February 2002.
—Muḥammad, civil servant in Ṭanṭā city administration, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2004.
—Muḫtār, engineer and a graduate of al-Azhar, mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 22 August 2002.
—Dr. Muḫtār al-Mahdī, imam of al-Ǧamʿīya aš-šarʿīya li-l-ʿāmilīn bi-l-kitāb wa-s-sunna, Egypt's

oldest and largest Salafi organisation, Cairo, 17 Dember 2002.
—Idem, Cairo, 11 January 2003.
—Dr. Munǧid as-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Ġanī Šādī, lecturer of Islamic *daʿwa* and culture at al-Azhar University, Cairo, 7 June 2003.
—Muṣṭafā, son of a devout Sufi father, Cairo, 7 August 2003.
—Rīhām, daughter of al-Ḥāǧǧa Sihām, Alexandria, 24 February 2005.
—Saʿd, student at the faculty of arts, and ʿImād, graduate from vocational education, mawlid of as-Sayyida Sukayna, Cairo, 7 August 2002.
—Saʿīd Marʿī, secretary-general of Qinā governorate, Qinā, 15 January 2003.
—Ṣalāḥ, white-collar employee in a petroleum company, Cairo, 10 January 2003.
—Idem, commenting on the procession of the mawlid of as-Sayyida Sakīna, Cairo, 23 July 2003.
—Samīr Ramzī, author, Minyat al-Muršid, 21 February 2002.
—al-Ḥāǧǧa Sihām al-Ḫalīfa, charismatic leader of a Sufi group in Alexandria, mawlid of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 21 August 2002.
—Idem, Alexandria, 25 October 2002.
—Brigadier-General Sayyid Aḥmad, member of the National Assembly (Maǧlis aš-Šaʿb) from the district of Sīdī Sālim, formerly police chief of Fūwa, Cairo, 18 January 2003.
—Sayyid, teacher, formerly leftist poet and now active Sufi, Quft (Qinā province), 21 October 2002.
—Sayyid, student from the district of ad-Darb al-Aḥmar, mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 29 May 2003.
—Sayyid, butcher, Cairo, 5 August 2003.
—Stefan Reichmuth, expert on Murtaḍā az-Zabīdī, Copenhagen, 29 May 2005.
—Ṯanāʾullāh, Pakistani PhD student at al-Azhar, a devout Sufi and regular visitor of mawlids, Cairo, 13 August 2003.
—Umm Nūrā, mawlid of Sīdnā al-Ḥusayn, Cairo , 22 June 2003.
—Vivian Muḥammad, head of the public relations department, Ṭanṭā city administration, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2004.
—Waǧdī, member of the Sufi circle around Dr. Aḥmad Ḥalaqa, mawlid of as-Sāda as-Šahāwīya, Šuhā (near al-Manṣūra), 18 September 2002.
—Sheikh Yāsīn at-Tuhāmī, Egypt's most popular *munšid*, Cairo, 10 October 2002 (interview in cooperation with Muḥammad Saʿd Šiḥāta).
—Zaynhum, interior painter who participated in the procession of as-Sayyida Nafīsa, Cairo, 13 August 2003.

## *8.2. Anonymous, by date*

—Muslim members of the Abū Ḥaṣīra tribe, Gaza City, June 1999.
—Leading activists of the Muslim Brotherhood in a village in Kafr aš-Šayḫ province, 21 February 2002.
—Two men in a Sufi *ḫidma* in the mawlid of as-Sāda aš-Šahāwīya, Šuhā, 19 September 2002.
—State security officer, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2002.
—regular Sufi visitors to the mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2002.
—Students in a café near the university, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2002.
—Brother of late Sheikh Ǧābir al-Madanī, mawlid of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 16 October 2002.
—Middle-aged man working for a television production unit to broadcast the Friday prayer from the mosque of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, Ṭanṭā, 18 October 2002.
—Member of al-Ǧāzūlīya al-Ḥusaynīya aš-Šāḏilīya, mawlid of Sīdī ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm al-Qināwī, Qinā, 20 October 2002.
—Man from Qinā, Qinā, 22 October 2002.
—Man working at a Ferris wheel, mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqi, Disūq, 30 October 2002.
—Student of medicine at al-Azhar, mawlid of Sīdī Ibrāhīm ad-Disūqī, Disūq, 31 October 2002.
—Secretaries of general ʿĀdil Labīb, governor of Qinā, Qinā, 15 January 2003 (Interview in cooperation with Fatḥī ʿAbd as-Samīʿ).
—Egyptian academic, Cairo, 23 January 2003.

—Male Sufi pilgrim to the mawlid of as-Sayyida Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 26 May 2003.
—Family sitting in front of their house, mawlid of Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 2 June 2003.
—Group of men sitting in chairs in front of a house during the mawlid of Fāṭima an-Nabawīya, Cairo, 3 June 2003.
—Goldsmith in the Ḫān al-Ḫalīlī market, mawlid of Sīdnā al-Ḥusayn, Cairo 23 June 2003 (Interview conducted by Umnīya Mihānnā).
—Male teenagers at the mawlid of al-Ḥusayn, Cairo, 24 June 2003.
—Man from Bāb aš-Šaʿrīya, mawlid of as-Sulṭān Abū l-ʿIlā, Cairo, 26 June 2003.
—People who saw or participated in the processions of as-Sayyida Sakīna and as-Sayyida Nafīsa in July and August 2003.
—Woman running a fish restaurant, mawlid of Sīdī al-Mursī Abū l-ʿAbbās, Alexandria, 24 July 2003.
—Member of al-Ḥāmidīya aš-Šāḏilīya, mawlid of Sīdī al-Mursī Abū l-ʿAbbās, Alexandria, 24 July 2003.
—Bookseller, Cairo, August 2003.
—Civil servants in Ṭanṭā city administration, Ṭanṭā, 15 October 2004.