

Middle East
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Pious Fun at Saints Festivals in Modern Egypt

Mawlid, traditional festivals in honour of saints, are among the most popular, but also the most controversial Islamic traditions in Egypt. Millions of people – even half of all the Egyptians, according to an unofficial estimate¹ – participate in these festivals. In the public sphere, however, Islamists and conservative men of religion often find themselves side by side with many secularists, both vehemently opposing what they consider a shameful deviation from proper Islamic and/or modern culture.

*Mawlid*s are celebrated annually at saints' shrines. People often travel to these festivals from long distances in order to pay respect to the saint, find a solution to a problem or a cure for an illness, meditate, meet friends and relatives, and just have fun. Islamic *mawlid*s – a number of Christian and Jewish *mawlid*s exist as well – are closely connected to Sufism: Sufi *dhikr* (meditation) and visits to the shrine of the respective saint, often a Sufi *shaykh*, are central to the festivities. Yet it is insufficient to describe *mawlid*s entirely in terms of mysticism and religious practice. These religious aspects are mixed with more profane ones: a *mawlid* is also an important social occasion that offers a great variety of commercial entertainment. On the 'great night', the final evening of a *mawlid*, people crowd the area surrounding the shrine, visiting tents with Sufi *dhikr* and merchants offering snacks and sweets, target shooting and circus performances.

The sacred and profane elements of the festival are mixed in a seemingly unorganized fashion. This impression is shared by the participants: *mūlid* (colloquial for *mawlid*) is a common metaphor for chaos. This mixture of apparently incompatible elements is an essential feature of the *mawlid*s and one of the main reasons why many people find these festivals highly irritating.

Antidote for modernity

Since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the veneration of saints has been a main target of modernist and reformist criticism concerned with traditional Islamic practices. The reformists, in their response to Euro-

pean claims of cultural superiority as opposed to the alleged backwardness, fatalism and superstitions of the Muslims, chose to dissociate true, authentic Islam from the popular religious traditions of the Muslims, the latter being held responsible for the retrogression of contemporary Muslim societies.

*Mawlid*s, perhaps the most visible expressions of saint veneration, became a central issue of this kind of criticism. They were regarded as both unauthentic, thus un-Islamic, and irrational, thus anti-modern: a mere expression of ignorance (*jahl*), an antidote for the reformist and modernist discourse.²

These arguments – equally popular among Islamists and secularists – are fairly well known to students of modern Islam. However, they fail to give a complete picture of what exactly makes *mawlid*s so offensive to some people. There is a third, seldom outspoken, but nevertheless very central criterion for the perception of the *mawlid* festivals; namely, the question concerning the aesthetic quality of modern Islamic culture. The importance of this question is revealed in the following.

The *mawlid* of al-Sha'rāwī

After the death, in June 1998, of the enormously popular television preacher Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī, a cult similar to the traditional cult of saints began to develop around him. His picture could be seen almost everywhere. Prayers related to him and books written by or about him flooded the newspaper stands, and reruns of his sermons were shown on television. The funeral of al-Sha'rāwī was a mass event, and soon a popular cult developed around his tomb in his native town Daqādūs in the Nile Delta. Consequently, the Shaykh's second son 'Abd al-Raḥīm organized a *mawlid* to commemorate the first anniversary of his father's death.

This *mawlid* took place in mid-June 1999 and the final evening was celebrated on the 17th of that month. The festivities centred on the Shaykh's shrine – at that time still under construction – located next to the Islamic Centre of al-Sha'rāwī, which is now presided by the Shaykh's son. A continuous stream of visitors passed by the shrine, paying their respects to the Shaykh and seeking his blessing (*baraka*). At the Centre, an official ceremony took place which was set to satisfy reformist standards: addresses were read, al-Sha'rāwī's religious heritage was discussed, local poets recited panegyrics on the Shaykh, and awards were granted for young authors from the region. The official programme was followed by the recitation of the Qur'ān.

On the street in front of the Centre, the more informal and significantly bigger part of the festival took place. In a large tent, *dhikr* was conducted. Along the street, chickpeas, snacks, sweets, amulets, funny hats and other inexpensive souvenirs were being sold. Steps away, target shooting stands, swing boats and merry-go-rounds had been set up next to a stage where a *munshid*, accompanied by a band, was chanting religious hymns.

Belly-dancing as well as the consumption of alcohol and hashish, which are among the more controversial practices of *mawlid*s, were absent from the festival in Daqādūs. The atmosphere was one of a communal gathering with neighbours, families, Sufis and followers of the Shaykh coming together. Especially for youths, the *mawlid* served not only for consolidating existing communal ties but also for creating new ones: facilitated by the relaxation of gender segregation during the festivities, young men and women used the occasion to see and be seen.

'Who will stop this mockery?'

The *mawlid* of al-Sha'rāwī caused a storm of protest in the religious media. Although the sacralization of al-Sha'rāwī was greatly encouraged by the pro-government conservative religious current, most of its representatives were certainly not willing to accept the *mawlid*.

They pointed out that the Shaykh would never have accepted such an occasion (in fact, al-Sha'rāwī's comments on *mawlid*s had been quite ambivalent) and that *mawlid*s were un-Islamic and immoral. 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 its entertainment and commerce. In this sense, the weekly religious newspaper *Aqīdatī* commented disapprovingly: 'The *mawlid* of al-Sha'rāwī turned into an amusement centre of dervishes and a festival of chickpeas, sweets and children's play.'⁴

Any other *mawlid* would have received only a routine condemnation, if any at all. But al-Sha'rāwī's importance as an icon of the conservative religious current caused a serious clash between the ideal of Islamic culture and living Islamic tradition. According to these critics, al-Sha'rāwī's memory should be celebrated, but not in such a shameful, un-Islamic way.⁵

Islam and chickpeas

Now what is so shameful and un-Islamic about chickpeas? In fact, chickpeas are a central symbol when describing a *mawlid*. 'Leaving the *mawlid* without chickpeas' is a common expression for doing something while missing the actual point or use of it. Chickpeas – just as sweets and games – stand as an archetype for the commercial and entertaining aspects of a *mawlid*.

This by itself would not be offensive. But in a *mawlid*, chickpeas are part of a religious event. Sacred aspects are so closely connected to profane ones that one cannot meaningfully distinguish between the two. For the visitors to a *mawlid*, the festival is both: entertaining religion and pious fun. It is this synthesis of religion and entertainment that makes a *mawlid* so attractive to some and so offensive to others.

Condemning the *mawlid*s is, to a great extent, an aesthetic judgement; the festivities fail to fulfil a modernist ideal of rational, constrained, pious, cultivated, well-organized and well-controlled culture. Based on this criterion of dignity, the modernist/reformist discourse insists that occasions of

higher importance – not only religious, but also social, political and private – must be characterized by purity, dignity and educational value. Everyday popular culture may be tolerated, but should definitely not be allowed to enter the sphere of ideal modern Islamic culture.

This modernist aesthetics of culture can be found in a variety of other issues. Commercial mass culture is opposed to the sublime ideal of educational and politically constructive high culture.⁶

Or, to give another example, the discussion on the 'modern city' is preoccupied with issues such as cleanliness, order and organization, representing itself in the dichotomy between educated, civilized citizens walking along wide prospects on one side, and a chaotic *mawlid* in the narrow alleys of a slum on the other.⁷

In a similar way, the apologetic discourse on female circumcision centres around the concepts of beauty and purity and the problem of control.⁸

At this point, more questions arise than can currently be answered. However, two general remarks can be made. Firstly, in contemporary cultural criticism in Egypt, arguments based on aesthetic quality are common and apparently share some identical premises. Secondly, this theoretical ideal of beauty, purity, dignity and order often finds itself in grave contradiction to reality – a reality which is not as similar to modernist clarity as it is to the proverbial meaning of *mawlid* as cheerful chaos. ♦

Girl in a swing-boat in the *mawlid* of Shaykh al-Sha'rāwī in Daqādūs, Nile Delta.



PHOTO: SAMULI SCHIELKE, 1999.

Notes

1. Diyāb, Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ (1999), 'al-Dīn al-sha'bī, al-dhākirawa-l-mu'ash', *Suṭūḥ* 30, pp. 16-18.
2. A good example of this argumentation is 'Abd al-Laṭīf, Muḥammad Fahmī (1999, first 1948), 'Al-Sayyid al-Badawī wa-dawlat al-darāwīsh fi Miṣr', *Maktabat al-dirāsāt al-sha'biyya* 30, Cairo: al-Hay'a al-miṣriyya al-āmmali-l-kitāb.
3. *Aqīdatī* (22.6.1999), p. 6.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 10-11. See also *al-Liwā' al-Islāmi* (24 June 1999), pp. 4-5.
6. Armbrust, Walter (1996), *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 165-197.
7. See e.g. 'Ba'd an ikhtalaṭ al-ḥābilbil-nābil. Fawḍā fi maydān Ramsīs', *al-Ahrām* (20 June 2000).
8. Wassef, Nadia (2000), *Medical Discourses on the Practice of Clitoridectomy: A Comparative View*, Congress paper at the 7th IAMES Congress, Berlin 5-9 August 2000.

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