Egyptian mawlids in the context of contemporary Sufi spirituality

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In the last decade, Islamic mysticism (Sufism, *tasawwuf*) has experienced unexpected – nevertheless undeniable – revival and activation, the fact which was so distinctly manifested in varying degrees practically throughout the whole “Islamic world”. Spiritual heritage of Sufism does not include only the framework of teachings and doctrines of great ancient masters of this discipline often presented on the pages of medieval writings under so symptomatic label *al-ْiَلْم حَذَىَحْقَيْ ذِيْلْم* (i.e. science of experienced). The relevant and for non-Sufi public by far the most visible aspect of *tasawwuf* comprises various manifestations of so called “folk religiosity”, such as diverse festivities, superstitions, manners and customs. Since its “Golden age” in the Middle Ages the position of Islamic mysticism within Islam has undergone considerable changes. Their descriptions and analyses still remain subject of numerous controversies among Muslim scholars and Western experts on Islamic studies, history and other relevant specializations. One of the most frequent critical arguments against Sufism targets so-called “cult of saints” (*‘ibādat al-awliyā’*), it means social phenomenon distinguished by adoration of certain personalities (either dead or alive, either sages or simpletons). Such devotional practices come to light on various occasions and the celebration of *mawlid* is just one of them.

The Arabic word *mawlid* (plural *mawālid*) means simply birthday, birthplace or anniversary, or – in the strict sense of the word – the anniversary of a Muslim “saint”. Here, we should stress that Islamic creed does not recognize a personage of saint in Christian way of understanding, it means as a mediator and intercessor in the front of God (not only on day of the Last Judgement) and that is why we use the phrase “Muslim saint” just because of the absence of a more adequate English term to the Arabic word *wāli* (plural *awliyā’*) commonly used for such personalities. This term is not used exclusively by Muslims; the very same word is employed also by Christians and Jews living in Arabic countries for their own religious celebrations. In the religious meaning, we can express by the word *mawlid* either the celebration of a Sufi saint or – in the strict sense of the word – birthday of the prophet Muhammad and just in this occasion we use the phrase *al-mawlid an-nabawī, mawlid an-nabī* or simple *al-mawlid* or *al-mawlūd*.

In this paper, our attention will be paid to the former example, i.e. the celebration of a certain *wāli*. These festivals were usually commemorated on the anniversary of a saints’ death, or (as Sufis generally believe) the day “when he was born for Heavens”. Besides historically recorded personalities, people in numerous places throughout the “Islamic world” celebrate also semi-legendary persons or even completely fabricated (!) heroes of popular religious imagination. Contemporary Cairo exceeds by a number of Sufi saints, their tombs (*maqām*) and festivals held on their honour. In general terms, this fact has two main reasons, partly time-honoured history of the city which absorbed elder Islamic metropolises of Egypt (i.e. al-Fustāt, al-ْسَكَر and al-Qatā‘i‘ī) during its development since the 10th century as well as the presence of many members of the family of the Prophet (ahl al-bait), Companions of the Prophet (sahāba or ashāb) and their Followers (tāḥī‘ū as-sahāba) in the country shortly after its conquest (639–641 A.D.).

Among individuals venerated as saints we can find very diverse kinds of personalities. A part of them even does not belong to the Sufi background. First of all we have to mention several members of Prophets’ family, especially imam al-Husain, the grandson of Muhammad, whose tomb lies directly in the mosque (next to the venerable al-Azhar) entitled
by his name. A lot of women from “the House of the Prophet” were buried just in ground of Cairo; let us remember among other as-Sayyida Zainab (the daughter of imam ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭalib, called by common believers ʿUmm ʿawājīz, “The Mother of the handicapped”), as-Sayyida Sukaina (the daughter of the third imam al-Husain, whose tomb is located next to the mausoleum of Shajaratuddurr in the quarter of al-Khalīfa), Fāṭima an-Nabawīya (the daughter of the sixth imam Jaʿfar as-Sādiq), ʿĀʾisha (the daughter of imam Jaʿfar as-Sādiq and the sister of as-Sayyida Fātima) and as-Sayyida Nafīsa. In this brief enumeration we should not forget also the great-grandson of the prophet Muhammad and the forth Shiite imam ʿAlī Zainulabīdīn, whose mawlid belongs to the most popular in Cairo.

The significant sign of awliyāʾ comprises great medieval Sufi masters and founders of important mystical orders or brotherhoods (tariqa), among them only two Egyptian “Poles” (qub, plural aqībāb), as-Sayyid al-Badawī, often called “national saint of Egypt”, who was buried in the city of Tantā, and Ibrāhīm ad-Dasqūqī (buried in near-by Dasūq). Surprisingly, among the personalities venerated as Sufi saints we can find also imam ash-Shafiʿī, the prominent theologian and jurist, whose mawlid belongs to the most monumental ones and sheikh ʿUmar ibn al-Fārid, the great mystical poet and author of the famous Ḳhamrīya, whose tomb was built in the centre of al-Abagiya, the most beautiful (as I dare to claim) part of the City of the Dead. Some common believers worship even the memory of certain Mamlūk rulers (e.g. mysterious personality of Sultan Qaitbai) and the like.

Whereas the exact local determination of mawlid does not make any difficulty, the same can not be mostly stated with regard to its temporal limitation. To ascertain exact dates of the most mawlids is not easy and to find more universal principles for dating mawlids in general seems to be even more (!) problematic. The majority of these religious celebrations dates back to the Muslim lunar calendar, however some of them – including several of the most important ones – follow Coptic solar calendar. There are several considerable mawlids still fixed on Coptic calendar in contemporary Egypt. The most famous of them, commemoration of as-Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi, the founder of Badawīya brotherhood and “national saint of Egypt” takes place in the city of Tantā situated in Nile Delta at the Coptic month bābih, i.e. our October. Another important (and I dare to claim competitive) festival of as-Sayyid Ibrāhīm ad-Dasqūqī is annually arranged in near-by Dasūq only several days after termination of al-Badawīs mawlid. Adherence of certain mawlids to solar calendar might indicate their possible pre-Islamic background (jāhilīya).

Whereas temporal limitation of mawlids has induced a lot of difficulties, their location seems to be considerably easier. With the exception of prophet Muhammads´ birthday which is commemorated practically everywhere throughout the Muslim world, each local mawlid has its own natural centre, that is to say supposed burial place of appropriate saint. The tomb of a wali usually became the core of mausoleum, called in Egypt generally as maqām (a modest and smaller object), darīḥ (usually more imposing building) or zāwiya (this is also the term which is used for Sufi hospice). In another regions of Dār al-islām (“The world of Islam”), varying appellatives are employed: Mashhad (the place of a martyr, shahīd), mazār (the place of pious visits, ziyārat), qubba (i.e. a dome) or even qasr (palace). The shape of such buildings and their decorations notably differ according to the standing and prestige of appropriated wali. On the one hand, we can admire the monumental burial complexes and mosques of as-Sayyid al-Badawī in Tantā and imam ash-Shafiʿī in southern Cairo, but on the other hand, the majority of awliyāʾ have to content themselves with every modest but picturesque maqāms glued-on sides of neighbourhood buildings as we can clearly observe in large numbers for instance in al-Gamālīya and al-Khalīfa, the traditional quarters of Cairo.

The interiors of maqāms used to be unified to a certain extend. There is a single sepulchre as a rule separated from the rest of the space by trellis and glass in the middle of the room. As we can see in the case of any medieval Muslim tombstones, the caste of deceased
was reflected by headwear made of stone or gypsum and situated on the side of his head. In both internal and external sides of mausoleums, two colours clearly prevail: Green is the colour of Islam, colour of eternal life and first of all colour of al-Khidr (or al-Khadir), mysterious benefactor of Sufis. On the other hand, the blue colour – as common Muslims usually believe – can repel demons (jinns) which might be very useful especially if the maqām is located directly at the cemetery (maqbara).

Mawlid – in the same way as any other religious celebration – naturally comprises two aspects: profane and spiritual. The religious side of the festival is formed by various manifestations of folk religiosity devoted to appropriated wali. Islamic devoutness knows a lot of ways how to demonstrate respect and loyalty to the saint, starting with single visit of his tomb, prayers and meditations next to this place, its circumvention (tawwāf) as far as good turns (ihsān) accomplished in honour of deceased master. His miraculous power clearly expressed itself during his life. Nevertheless, common Muslims believe that such a capacity can survive even wali’s death. This phenomenon approves itself among others through medium of the visionary dreams (ruyā).

The main motivation for the majority of visitors of mawlids is craving for baraka. Baraka means the blessing and – according to the common reputation – it can be acquired quite physically, e.g. by means of kissing trellis of the tomb, touching the sepulchre itself or even by handshake of living sheikh. The course of celebrations is entirely unimaginable without dhikr, the repetition of so-called the Beautiful names to God (asmā’ Allāh al-husnā). Particular Sufi brotherhoods mutually differ as for ways and frequency of its implementation.

Speaking on the profane aspect of the mawlid, we should start with his social functions. All celebrations attract not only members and followers of various orders but also the general public from a broad neighbourhood. They usually come to the place of mawlid either to express their devoutness and loyalty to particular wali or (and mostly first of all) to enjoy profane aspect of the celebration. In general, mawlids are unimaginable without the festive parades (zaffa or mawkib) held by followers of various brotherhoods. In this point, we should stress that each tarīqa prefers different colour (prevailing in their flags and banners and in the past also in their clothing) the fact which gives certain charm to most of mawlids.

Mawlids – as many-sided religious and social phenomenon – have a long and uninterrupted tradition within Islam. Since uncertain beginnings which can be traced back to the 13th or 14th centuries until the present times their participants have been put together by the identical common motive – the will to express their respect, devoutness and loyalty to a certain saint (wali). Using the popular Muslim parable describing the pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj), we might to state that ways and manners of wandering are different, but the Aim is just one. On the example of these religious celebrations we can clearly illustrate to what a degree Islamic mysticism and Muslim folk religiosity are closely interwoven until it is quite impossible study both of them separately (!). In general, celebrations of mawlids connect both religious and profane aspects and up to the present day belong to the most significant sources for our study of the contemporary popular Muslim (not only Egyptian) religiosity.