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Egyptian mawlid in the context of contemporary Sufi spirituality

Abstract:

This paper deals with phenomenon of the mawlid (celebrations of Sufi saints, awliyā') in Egypt. Since their beginnings in 13th century, mawlid underwent considerable development from modest reminders of the great Sufi masters to the extensive celebrations which annually attract thousands of believers from all regions of present-day Egypt. The cult of saints belongs to the most controversial features of Sufi thought often criticized by the orthodox scholars, 'ulamā'. Muslim saints are categorized within the Sufi belief according to a hierarchical structure. At the top, there are the Poles or axial saints (qutb, pl. aqtāb). The axial saints are said to be four and two of them Ahmad al-Badawī and Ibrāhīm ad-Dasūqī were buried in Egyptian cities of Tantā and Dusūq and their monumental shrines became centres of the influential local cults. Popular Muslim belief knows a lot of ways how to express devotion and loyalty to a certain walī (Sufi saint). In the past (as today), many Muslims – either regularly or occasionally – performed ziyāra, a visit to the shrine of a holy person. Mawlid reminds the life and miracles of a saint that are made possible through his miracle-making force or blessing (baraka), the source of which is God (Allāh). In general, celebrations of mawlid 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 religiosity.

In the last decade, Islamic mysticism (Sufism, *tasawwuf*) has experienced unexpected—nevertheless undeniable—revival and activation, the fact which was so distinctively 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-‘ilm adh-dhawqī* (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 *walī* (plural *awliyā’*) commonly used for such personalities. According to *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*¹ term *walī* has a lot of meanings: *helper, supporter, benefactor, sponsor; friend, close associate; relative; patron, protector; legal guardian, curator, tutor; a man close to God, holy man, saint (in the popular religion of Islam); master; proprietor, possessor, owner*. This term is not used exclusively by Muslims; the very same word is employed also by Christians² and Jews³ living in Arabic countries for their own religious celebrations.

1. The provenance of *mawlids* and their interpretation

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 *walī*. 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”. J. W. McPherson, the author of the classical monograph *The Mawlid of Egypt*, defines *mawlid* as follow: *It is religious and local festival commemorated in honour of a saint of certain eminence*.⁴ Under the title of *saint of certain eminence* we can imagine a broad range of personalities, including prominent mystical scholars and writers, founders of prolific Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqa*) but also charlatans and impostors or deranged simpletons. Sometimes even a woman became the object of veneration (*walīya*). 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. Such enunciation does not apply only to dumpy-looking local *sheikhs* but as well to the most prolific figures of the history of Islamic mysticism as a whole. In this context we can mention for instance the famous sheikh Ibrāhīm ad-Dasūqī who is generally respected in Egypt as one of the four Poles (*qutb*, plural *aqtāb*) and whose legacy is annually commemorated by one of the most popular *mawlids* although his historicity seems to be more than questionable.⁵

Contemporary metropolis of 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-‘Askar and al-Qatā’i) 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 (*tābī‘ū as-sahāba*) in the country shortly after its conquest (639–641 A.D.). Naturally, we should keep in mind that a lot of their tombs are not real tombs but mere cenotaphs (and such an eventuality is often admitted even by the local followers of a respective saint). For instance, there is a tomb (*maqām*) of the famous early ascetic Rābi‘a al-Adawīya in southern part of Cairo “City of the Dead” called al-Basātīn (*The Gardens*)

1) Wehr 1976: 1100.

2) McPherson 1998: 360–370.

3) For more details see: Boušek, D. (2008): *Židovská pout’ a poutní místa na Blízkém východě v hebrejské cestopisné literatuře 12.–16. století*. Praha: Karolinum.

4) McPherson 1998: 65.

5) Helena Hallenberg, the author of inspired study devoted to sheikh Ibrāhīm ad-Dasūqī, frequently analyses historicity of her hero; for example in the Epilogue in words: *The answer to the question whether Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī existed, is that we simply do not know. I assume that there was such a man, who later was wrapped in so many garments that the original figure is completely obscured—to the extent that the fact about his life are blurred...—Hallenberg 2005–233.*

although the generally accepted conception locates all her life story to Iraq. Nevertheless, even the objectivity of Rābi'a herself seems to be rather questionable.

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 head was supposedly buried 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 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib, called by common believers *Umm 'awājiz*, "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), Fātima an-Nabawīya (the daughter of the sixth imam Ja'far as-Sādiq), 'Ā'isha (the daughter of imam Ja'far 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 fourth Shiite imam 'Alī Zainul'ābidīn, whose *mawliid* belongs to the most popular in Cairo.

The significant set of *awliyā'* comprises great medieval Sufi masters and founders of important mystical orders or brotherhoods (*tarīqa*), among them only two Egyptian "Poles" (*qutb*, plural *aqtāb*), as-Sayyid al-Badawī, often called "national saint of Egypt", who was buried in the city of Tantā, and already mentioned Ibrāhīm ad-Dasūqī (buried in near-by Dasūq). Surprisingly, among the personalities venerated as Sufi saints we can find also imam ash-Shafī'ī, the prominent theologian and jurist, whose *mawliid* belongs to the most monumental ones and sheikh 'Umar ibn al-Fārid, the great mystical poet and author of the famous *Khamrīya*, whose tomb was built in the centre of al-Abagīya, 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 Sultān Qaitbai) and the like.

The subject matter of saints, their biographies and miracles assigned to them has enjoyed universal popularity since the period of the so called "Sufi encyclopaedists" in the 10th century.⁶ On the pages of appropriate treatises we can often find various clichés and stereotypes and in this context we will not exaggerate by saying: Names change but model stories remain. The reverence of believers to their masters was clearly reflected among others by the courteous titles ascribed to particular *awliyā'*. Perhaps the most universal title is *sheikh* (plural *shuiūkh*) which simply means the master (superior) of a Sufi brotherhood (*tarīqa*) and in broader sense polite address of any elder or honourable person. The majority of *awliyā'* belonged to the House of the Prophet and that is why they claim the title *as-sayyid* (for men) or *as-sayyida* (for women) which means "gentleman"

or "lady". In colloquial pronunciation (in Egypt and the Northern Africa) we mostly use the term *sīdī* (my master) or *sitt* (for lady).

Dealing with the origination and provenance of *mawliids*, we can only speculate because of the lack of reliable historical records. Muslim Tradition (*sunna*) mentions the Prophets habit of visiting certain tombs (*qabr*, plural *qubūr*) and contemplating in cemeteries (*maqbara*, plural *maqābir*). According to historical quotations, the custom practice of *ziyārāt* (visit of tombs of great Sufi masters) is without a doubt older than the origination of first Sufi orders as *al-qādirīya* or *ar-rifā'īya* during 12th and 13th centuries. Herein, we have to emphasize anticipated mutual interconnection between these practices of *ziyārāt* and origins of *mawliids*. From the same time we know the oldest existing records on celebration of the anniversary of the Prophet and in the 15th century we can easily observe a huge amount of evidences of the cult of Saints. During the Ottoman period in Egypt (16th–18th centuries), various activities of Sufi brotherhoods has undergone considerable institutionalization and such a formative tendency has continued until the present time.

2. Celestial hierarchy⁷

In general, Muslims understand the history of mankind as a meaningful linear process leading to certain fulfilment of the Divine intentions (*tadbīrāt*) through the medium of the chain of prophecy (*nubūwa*). Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, who stands in the end of this chain, is often called by Muslims *khātam an-nabiyīn* ("The Seal of the Prophets"). His death (632 A.D.) subsequently means the absolute enclosure of development of the whole Revelation (*wahī*). So, by his death the prophecy was irreversibly closed but the communication between the Creator (*Allāh*) and his Creation (i.e. mankind, *al-bashar*), as Sufis resolutely believe, herewith by far did not come to an end. Time after time, a certain extraordinary individual, who is able to interpret the hidden side of the Revelation

7) For more details on the theme of the spiritual Way and the concept of sainthood in Islam see e.g.: Attar, Farid al-Din (1979): *Muslim Saints and Mystics*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Gilsenan, M. (1973): *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt. Essay in the Sociology of Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; Homerin, E. (1994): *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint*. Ibn al-Fārid, *His Verse and His Shrine*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press; Trimingham, J. S. (1971): *The Sufi Orders in Islam*. New York; Schimmel, A. (1975): *Mystical Dimension of Islam*. Chapel Hill; Abdel Qadir, A. (1962): *The Life, Personality and Writings of Al-Junaid*. London; Baldick, J. (1989): *Mystical Islam. An Introduction to Sufism*. New York; Chittick, W. C. (1989): *The Sufi Path of Knowledge. Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, New York.

6) Ostřanský 2008: 14.

(*bātin*), to accept the Divine Inspiration (*ilhām*) and to serve as a mediator between the God and mankind, appears and just such a character is called usually *walī*.⁸

Some prolific Sufi thinkers have developed the teaching on *awliyā'* into the concept of "Celestial hierarchy", where a saint (*walī*) as a Perfect man (*insān kāmil*) fully reflects the Muhammadian substance (*al-haqīqa al-muhammadiya*), i.e. a certain archetype of purity and indefectibility. The number of degrees of the whole system and also the amount of characters on each of them differentiate measurably according to particular doctrines of various Sufi authorities.⁹ The most influential mystical writer, grand sheikh Muhyiddīn ibn 'Arabī in his treatise *Istilāhāt as-sūfiya* (*The Nomenclature of Sufis*) mentioned some of them.¹⁰ There is *Qutb* ("Pole") on the highest degree which is sometimes called *Ghawth* ("Relief"). The hierarchy continues as follow: *Awtād* ("Pivots"), *Budalā'* ("Alternatives"), *Nujabā'* ("Nobles") and *Nuqabā'* ("Supervisors"). But there are completely different enumerations on the pages of different authors; some of them employed even ten or more degrees of the Hierarchy. The existence of such gradual systems undoubtedly meant a certain contribution either for creators of medieval hagiographical collections (*tabaqāt*) or for followers of particular *awliyā'* because a hierarchy like this reliably enabled to locate their spiritual favourite into a broader ("cosmic") framework and similarly in this manner to justify his exceptionality and historical importance.

3. The searching for *mawlid* in space and time

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 *mawlid*s is not easy and to find more universal principles for dating *mawlid*s 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. Such discrepancy has already caused numerous problems since Coptic (so called Dioclecians' era) and Muslim

(era of *Hijra*)¹¹ calendars are not mutually compatible. In the case when a Muslim *mawlid* fixed on Coptic calendar might fall on the date of any important religious festival (dating after calendar of *hijra*), certain inconveniences occur. At that time, given *mawlid* has to be postponed or precipitated. Whereas Muslim religious holidays (*'īd*) are unambiguously established, determination of majority of *mawlid*s is quite broad, in practice usually on a scale of months.

There are several considerable *mawlid*s still fixed on Coptic calendar in contemporary Egypt. The most famous of them, commemoration of as-Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawī, 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-Dasūqī is annually arranged in nearby Dasūq only several days after termination of al-Badawī's *mawlid*. Among less important celebrations we can mention e.g. *mawlid*s of Abū Huraira (coincide with the feast *Shamm nesīm*), sheikh al-Baiūmī (March) or sheikh Ismā'īl al-Imbābī (June).

The state of affairs is yet more complicated by another important factor. Majority of *mawlid*s are not fixed on the exact datum, but they have to fall on a defined day of the week. The following list draws near just some of them:¹² Sunday (sheikhs al-Kurdī, Jalāl and Mazlūm), Monday (as-Sayyida Fātima an-Nabawīya and Abū Huraira), Tuesday (Sālih al-Haddād, imam al-Husain, as-Sayyida Zainab), Wednesday (Imam ash-Shāfi'ī, as-Sultān al-Hanafī), Thursday (sheikhs al-Baiūmī, al-Imbābī, Damirdāsh), Friday (sheikhs Ismā'īl al-Laithī, Ma'rūf) and Saturday (imam Zainul'ābidīn). Some months are overfull by *mawlid*s (especially *rajab* and following *shā'bān*), but on another side in certain parts of the year such celebrations are thoroughly not allowed (namely on *ramadān*). There are only several *mawlid*s in Egypt distinguished by strongly determined data, e.g.: sheikhs al-Ashmāwī, ad-Dashtūtī (written also at-Tashtūtī), Bahlūl, al-Qināwī (famous festivities near to Luxor), Yūsuf al-Hajjāj (renowned feast in

8) The theme of the Perfect man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) in the Islamic mysticism has been described and analysed in: Ostřanský, B. (2004): *Dokonalý člověk a jeho svět v zrcadle islámské mystiky. „Úradky Boží pro nápravu lidského království“ šajcha Muhjiddína ibn 'Arabího*. Praha: Orientální ústav Akademie věd ČR.

9) For example according to the sheikh Muhammad Wafā' (d. 1363), the celestial hierarchy of saints is as follows: "There is nothing like Him; He is the All-hearing and All-seeing." (42:11) In Him are the pole, the imam, the rescue (*ghawth*), the solitary (*fard*), the *khalīfa*, and the verifier (*muhaqqiq*). Those beneath, like the pegs (*awtād*) and the substitutes (*abdāl*), the nobles (*nujabā'*) and others, they exceed in numbers, and they persist in secrets... (McGregor 2002: 98).

10) Ostřanský 2008: 83–108.

11) Prophet Muhammad stressed importance of lunar calendar for religious life of the community of believers (*umma*) and shortly before death he explicitly forbade so called "incorporated month". So Muslims use purely lunar calendar that is shorter by approximately eleven days. Starting point of Muslim era is Thursday / Friday 15 /16 July of the year 622 A.D. according Julian calendar, i.e. the beginning of the year when prophet Muhammad together with his companions resettled (*hājara*, from here the term *hijra*, resettlement or emigration) from Mekka to Yathrib (later city of Medina).

12) McPherson 1998: 87–88.

Luxor) and of course prophet Muhammad (commemorated annually at the 11th day of the month *rabīʿ al-awwal*).¹³

Adherence of certain *mawlids* to solar calendar might indicate their possible pre-Islamic background (*jāhiliyya*). For example in the case of sheikh Ibrāhīm ad-Dasūqī, some hypotheses mention that his cult fluently continued in a spirit of quite older celebrations devoted to ancient Egyptian deities connected with the course of agricultural seasons.¹⁴ However, the proof for such a statement naturally lacks. In his memoirs, the famous British scholar Edward William Lane has remarked association between these religious festivals and some important regular fairs (!). We can conclude this passage by enunciation that economic factors indisputably played a relevant role in the process of *mawlid* determination.

Whereas temporal limitation of *mawlids* has induced (as seen above) a lot of difficulties, their location seems to be considerably easier. With the exception of prophet Muhammad's 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.¹⁵ The tomb of a *walī* usually became the core of mausoleum, called in Egypt generally as *maqām* (a modest and smaller object), *darih* (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, *ziyārāt*), *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 *walī*. On the one hand, we can admire the monumental burial complexes and mosques of as-Sayyid al-Badawī in Tantā and imam ash-Shāfiʿī in southern Cairo, but on the other hand, the majority of *awliyāʿ* 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-Gamāliyya and al-Khalīfa, the traditional quarters of Cairo.

The interiors of *maqāms* used to be unified to a certain extent. 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*). *Maqām* itself usually became an "embryo" of larger agglomeration of buildings currently called "Burial complexes" (e.g. that of Mamlūk rulers). The operating expenses were mostly covered from incomes of *waqfs* (plural *awqāf*), that is to say the charitable institutions where wealthy Muslims were used to bequeath a certain lot of their personal and real estates.

The tomb of a saint was not only real centre of the celebration of his "birthday" but objects like this gradually became the middle of various branched urban structures. In the framework of contemporary Egyptian cities and villages, we can find a lot of illuminating examples, e.g. the foregoing pilgrimage cities of ad-Dasūq and Tantā.

4. Profane and spiritual aspects of the *mawlid*

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 *walī*. 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 *walī*'s death. This phenomenon approves itself among others through medium of the visionary dreams (*ruyā*).¹⁶

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 (*asmāʿ Allāh al-husnā*). Particular Sufi brotherhoods mutually differ as for ways and frequency of

13) McPherson 1998: 77–78.

14) Helena Hallenberg offers such an explanation: In both Ahmad al-Badawī and Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī many features of ancient deities of spring and harvest have merged together, but they cannot be said to be a direct continuation of any specific cult. In analyzing the different aspect, or as she calls them, 'the avatars', of al-Badawī, Mayeur-Jaouen discards the idea of the cult of al-Badawī as being a direct, uninterrupted continuation of pharaonic or Christian cult, since no archaeological evidence has been found. No pilgrims are known to have gone to Tantā before the Islamic era... In Hallenberg 2005: 216.

15) For more details on the Sufi tombs and the Islamic funeral architecture in general see: Ostřanský, B. (2009): *Smrt je jen stín—hroby, smrt a záhrobí ve středověkém muslimském Egyptě*. In: Maříková Vlčková, P.: (Ed.): *Hroby, hrobky a pohřebiště starých Egyptanů*, pp. 366–395. Praha: Nakladatelství Libri.

16) For more details on Medieval Arabic interpretation of dreams see: Ostřanský, B. (2005): *The Art of Medieval Arab Oneirology*. *Archiv orientální* 73: 407–428.

its implementation. Some orders (e.g. naqshbandīya) prefer its silent form (i.e. believer retraces the Names just in his mind), another (e.g. foregoing badawīya) recommend its loud way. *Dhikr* can proceed collectively, although some Sufis prefer its individual practice. For the majority of believers, *dhikr* means the most reliable procedure how to reach the state of ecstasy (*wajd*) and approach to God in order to accomplish the mystical Union and Annihilation (*fanāʿ*). Unfortunately in such an effort, some Sufis make improper use of drugs or alcohol although offences like this were often criticised by orthodox Muslim jurists and theologians in former times.

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 *walī* 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 *tariqa* prefers different colour¹⁷ (prevailing in their flags and banners and in the past also in their clothing) the fact which gives certain charm to most of *mawlids*.

The contemporary Egyptian *mawlids* are more and more facing considerable logistic problems. Each greater gathering of people can involve potential safety risks and in the case of *mawlids* danger like this might be extreme. Here, we should keep in mind that number of visitors of the greatest *mawlids* (such as that in Tantā or as-Sayyida Zainab) can be denominated in the rank of hundred thousand or even millions.

Since the Ottoman period in Egypt (1517–1798), a certain “umbrella institution” mediating between the state and Sufi environs has been established.¹⁸ Originally, two prominent dynasties, al-Bakrī and al-Wafāʿī families, served in this position but later (in the half of the 20th century) this function has been entrusted to the Highest Council for Sufi Orders which is residing in the historical and religious centre of Cairo, just next to al-Azhar.

Besides the followers and members of various brotherhoods and pilgrims from all sides of the country, a lot of people attend *mawlids* because of throughout profane reasons. Among them, we can mention sellers of diverse “religious souvenirs” such as prayer beads (*sibha*, *tasbīh*), prayer rugs (*sajjāda*) or Sufi booklets but also common goods of everyday use (and of course their consumers), entrepreneurs of various attraction and so on. But all the time, we should keep in mind that these colourful mundane

aspects of the *mawlids* belong to socio-anthropological sphere of research rather than to classical Islamic studies.

Conclusion

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 (walī). 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.

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17) For details on symbolism of colours in Islamic mysticism see e.g.: Hallenberg 2005: 198–203.

18) For more details on Sufism in the Ottoman period in Egypt see: Winter, M. (1992): *Egyptian Society under Ottoman Rule 1517–1798*. London and New York: Routledge.