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## **Moulid** **A Religious and Secular Celebration**

**By Katrina Robinson**

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Every year, hundreds of festivals take place in the world, drawing thousands, sometimes millions, of people to special places to celebrate both religious and secular events. The massive *Kumbh Mela* religious festival, held in India every twelve years at a site where the rivers Jamuna and Brahmaputra meet, drew almost 12 million people in February 2001. Other well-known festivals are held every year – for example the religious fiestas of Spain, Italy and South America, and cultural festivals such as the ‘Merry Monarch’ Hula festival in Hawai‘i, carnivals in Trinidad/Tobago and London, Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Rio and Venice and Egypt’s *Mawalid*.

*Mawalid* (plural of Arabic ‘*moulid*’, meaning ‘anniversary’ or ‘birthday’) are held each year throughout Egypt to celebrate the lives of Muslim *awliaa* (‘saints’) and direct descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. The largest *moulid*, at Tanta, attracts millions of pilgrims from all over Egypt and the wider Muslim world. The Tanta *moulid* began in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (A.D.), some 600 years after the life of the Prophet Mohammed and set the pattern for today’s ‘type’ of *moulid*, where devotees visit a tomb and spend days in festive celebration. Pilgrims travelled from North Africa, the Middle East and India to pay their respects to El Sayed Ahmad El Badawi, a revered visionary and religious teacher whose life had taken him to Morocco, Mecca, Iraq and Egypt, where he died in Tanta in 1239. Many pilgrims from these places went to Tanta year after year to honour him,

and this annual event lit a spark: neighbouring towns founded *mawalid* in homage to local *awliaa* and sheiks and in Cairo important *mawalid* were established to honour the Prophet Mohammed’s grandchildren (El Hussein and Saida Zenab) and their children. Eventually hundreds of *mawalid* large and small were celebrated all over Egypt.

Most *mawalid* start with a *zaffa* or slow street procession winding to the mosque or tomb dedicated to the *awliaa* being commemorated, followed by processions leading up to a ‘*Leyla Kebira*’ (‘big night’) of celebration and closing with another procession, often after the dawn prayer (Robert Colville, *Cairo Today*, March 1989). Devotees from various Sufi *turuq* or Brotherhoods (Sufism is the mystical branch of Islam) set up hospitality tents where visitors receive tea and food and can join the chants and swaying movements (*zikr*) that enhance spiritual awareness and submission to God. At the same time there is a huge range of entertainments set up in small spaces, booths or enclosures. This mixture of fervent religious rejoicing and carnival-type elements is also found in the Roman Catholic festivals of South America, Italy and Spain. Robert Colville describes a predecessor of today’s *mawalid*:

“In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the *zaffa* was often a spectacular affair involving acrobats, burning torches and dancing girls (banned after 1834). Sometimes dervishes performed the *samaa*, their spectacular whirling dance tricks with

snakes and scorpions, swallowed broken glass and set themselves on fire. Nowadays the *samaa* is rarely seen outside Turkey and the *zaffa* is no longer an extravagant exhibition. Nevertheless, the opening *zaffa* of the biggest *moulids* [*sic.*] are still occasions of great rejoicing. Different Sufi *turuq* participate with their waving banners, flutes, drums and tambourines" (*Cairo Today*, March 1989).

For many frequent visitors and observers like Robert Colville, it is the smaller *mawalid* that express the essence of the festival – shared joy and devotion – through intimacies of scale and place.

"In many ways the smallest *mawalid* are the purest. The *moulid* of Saida Sekina, for example is celebrated around the saint's mosque in an unfashionable part of town. The *moulid* attracted perhaps two thousand people, almost all of whom paid a visit to the tomb to pay homage to the saint and receive her blessing. Outside along the narrow street four or five *zikr* circles were to be found. Other attractions included a lute player and his rather smart-looking band playing in a spacious tent filled with gilt-backed chairs; and another band, with a fine baladi woman singer dressed in black, a professorial-looking violinist, a fellah-like drummer and castanet-player. In a small square lay the chief secular attraction, a traditional Egyptian horse-dance accompanied by a Saïdi band. An impressive young stick-twister took over when the horses retired. A few stalls selling sweets and humous and that was the extent of the *Moulid* of

Saida Sekina, an almost entirely local affair.

"The two great Cairo *mawalid* of Sidna el Hussein and Saida Zenab are different altogether and may attract a million people for the *leyla kebira*. Thousands of people flock into Cairo and set up a city within a city. Small gas stoves brew countless glasses of tea and the poorest pilgrims simply curl up in the street oblivious to the passage of thousands of feet inches from their heads.

"As the *leyla kebira* approaches, *zikr* sprout from every clearing and reach new levels of intensity bands of all descriptions, sometimes with singers of religious odes; stick-dancers; funfairs; shooting galleries and thousands of stalls selling everything from Turkish delight to clay drums fill the spaces left free by the *zikr*. At the height of the *leyla kebira* it is almost impossible to move" (*Cairo Today*, March 1989).

Rural and urban dancers and their musicians add to the rhythm and excitement in their own booths or tents and in many households women and their friends, inspired by the atmosphere, will meet and dance together before joining the *moulid* and its vibrant energy.

Robert Colville's article captures brilliantly the religious and secular fervour of *mawalid* large and small – celebrations that must rank among the world's greatest festivals and as an unmissable experience for anyone interested in Egyptian culture.

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