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# Mulids of Cairo: Sufi Guilds, Popular Celebrations and the "Roller-Coaster Landscape" of the Resignified City

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► **To cite this version:**

Anna Madoeuf. Mulids of Cairo: Sufi Guilds, Popular Celebrations and the "Roller-Coaster Landscape" of the Resignified City. D. Singerman & P. Amar eds. Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East, American University in Cairo Press, pp.465-487, 2006. halshs-01023614

**HAL Id: halshs-01023614**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01023614>**

Submitted on 14 Jul 2014

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“Mulids of Cairo: Sufi Guilds, Popular Celebrations and the “Roller-Coaster Landscape” of the Resignified City” in *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*, D. Singerman & P. Amar eds., Cairo, American University in Cairo Press, 2006, p. 465-487.

In Cairo as the month of Rabi` al-Thani begins, each person knows that the mulid or festival of Husayn is imminent.<sup>i</sup> This mulid commemorates the birthday of Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Fixed on the Islamic lunar calendar, the date of the celebration moves forward approximately ten days each year within the global solar calendar. Organized around the Cairo mosque that is dedicated to the man who is considered a saint by Sufis, this festive celebration brings together residents and pilgrims from the entire country, animating the whole quarter that bears Hussein’s name according to rituals of the mulid, recodifying and rhythmically reordering the space.<sup>ii</sup> In the context of increasingly heavy-handed attempts by Cairo city police and the national government to close down public space to hugely popular Sufi festivals as a way to repress any large-scale public gathering (particularly after large public protests in Cairo after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq), this chapter sets out to map out the special meanings, practices, and pleasures of the Cairo mulid. Although not expressly political, the mulid does continue to articulate alternative collective urban identities and solidarities, and to overpower conceptual, geographic, and religious attempts to contain it.

This chapter offers a reading of ways in which public space in Cairo is created, or at least expressively resignified, during the special circumstances created by these festivals or mulids.<sup>iii</sup> These events constitute particular, circumscribed, holy space-time occurrences because they are at once popular festivals and devout pilgrimages. In search of possible ways to interpret the nature of public space, I shall turn to Hannah Arendt’s laconic but allusive definition of public space as “the appearance of potential space between acting and speaking people,” while specifying that in the context of these festivals, language is not only that of the word, but is also composed of gestures, attitudes, codes, and staging (Arendt 1972, 57). In addition, these mulid

spaces are characterized not only through dialog and contact, but also through the remixing of categories, social types, spatial codes, and norms. Certain modalities of copresence—juxtapositions, situations, confrontations—are constructed only in mulids in the context of surging, celebrating crowds.

As far as the analytic side of our approach is concerned, we need to state the fundamental premises of this research project and underline certain cautions. We will neither, on the pretext of dealing with an exotic domain, track and highlight changeless and permanent features and relics, nor will we overemphasize the purely theological aspects of these collective, public practices. In this light, it would be illusory to try to sift what falls under "established religion" from what is considered "popular belief." We prefer to consider this field as one with intersecting and dovetailing aspects.

Similarly, it would be futile to strive to formally classify what is religious and sacred, and what is festive; to establish a dichotomy "disentangling" the elements of this composite set of inseparable situations and scenes. There is no mulid without a Sufi guild, just as there is no mulid without a fairground, attractions, and trade stalls. Furthermore, rather than attempt to separate the two aspects of the feast, we will view them as merged into one whole. True, there is a logic behind the spatial distribution of these two traits, and not every participant necessarily partakes of all dimensions of the festival. But the feast is a space, a system where no holds are absolutely barred and where flexible, shifting combinations are plotted by a variety of individuals and actors. We will deal with aspects of the festive and the sacred by presenting several different temporal and spatial sequences, drawing upon observations made mainly in the two largest mulids of Cairo—those of Husayn and Zaynab.

We will view the sacred place as a spatial structure built around the imagination of those who participate in the mulid—as a real place constituted by a collective process of active "imaginary" territorialization. We should stress the fact that the mulid does not come "from out of the blue," but is an event woven into neighborhood inhabitants' knowledge and practice of the territory. When the mulid celebrates a very important saint, such as Hussayn or Zeinab or Aisha, the knowledge and practices and participation of devotees from throughout the country stream into Cairo and come to bear on the constitution of the space. Residents, particularly women, know the saints or holy men and women of these neighborhoods and mark

their feast days on the calendar. For example, in her study of the alleyways of al-Sukkariyya, Nawal al-Messiri Nadim notes that the tombs of saints stand as some of the most significant elements that structure the feminine geography of Cairo (1979). If we view mulids as the space-time of vivid memory, it is necessary to recall that memory is a perpetually current phenomenon, a living link to the eternal present.

### **Egypt's Festivals**

Festivals are cyclical celebrations that determine the rhythm of the year for many tied to agriculture, for those among Cairo's popular classes, and for the extensive and critically important "popular-class civil society actors" cum political-machine organizations, the Sufi brotherhoods of Egypt. At these sacred interactions, publics come together to celebrate the festival of the Prophet Muhammad and of the members of his family (ahl al-beyt), as well as the birthdays of other Muslim, Christian, and (in the recent past) Jewish saints or holy men. Attendance levels at these all-important festivals vary from tens to many hundreds of thousands of people. The most important festivals, besides those in the Delta region of Egypt (Sayyid al-Badawi at Tanta and Ibrahim al-Disuqi at Disûq), take place in Cairo. In Egypt, according to the minister of awqaf (Islamic charities), there are more than forty commemorations of saints and, according to the Sufi Counsel, at least eighty festivals for founders of brotherhoods. And tens of small festivals should be added to these census figures. The practice and the continuity of the festivals are evidently linked to the prominent popularity and social relevance of brotherhoods. At least six million men are members of Sufi orders in Egypt, distributed throughout more than 120 brotherhoods, of which seventy-three are officially recognized {?}. The brotherhoods are clustered within and affiliated with various orders, of which the principal ones are the Khalwatiyya, the Ahmadiyya, the Burhamiyya, the Chadhiliyya, the Rifa'iyya and the Qadiriyya (Luizard 1990).

Egypt's press estimates that a million visitors participate in the great festivals of Husayn and his sister Zaynab, a figure which is as aleatory as it is symbolic. Cairo residents come in great numbers to these festivals, but visitors also come en masse from all over Egypt, under the banners of the many Sufi brotherhoods. As objects of study, historians are especially interested in the festivals, principally in the interest of studying Sufism, the organization of confraternal groups, their social, political and cultural functions, and the mysteries of Sufi ecstasy and sanctity (Chich 2000,

Luizard 1993, Mayeur-Jaouen 1995). Here we focus on urban geographic and semiotic functions as a crucial, neglected dimension.

The modern literature on the mulid festivals may have begun with the *Khitat* by Ali Pacha Mubarak compiled at the end of the nineteenth century, or MacPherson's descriptive festival census (1941). The book of photographs commented upon by Biegman provides a variety of perspectives on the ensemble of Egyptian festivals (1990). Travelers' narratives sometimes include information on the development of certain celebrations in specific locales (Lane [1989], in particular, or de Nerval [1980]). Finally, contemporary Egyptian literature—in novels (Haqqi, Mahfouz, Qassem), and particularly in autobiographies (Hussein, Uways)—brings out the meaning and intensity of the social, personal, urban, and spatial bonds knit together within the mulid context.

However, an “urban geographic” reading of these events is lacking. Although in other countries, notably in the Maghreb under other forms and appellations (*moussems*), these festivals receive much attention, particularly in anthropological and sociological research. It should be noted that Sufism and its modes of mystical, celebratory, ecstatic exteriorization have been the object of virulent criticism by state, religious, and middle-class authorities since before the modern period. To be sure, since the arrival of Islamic reformism, this entire culture has been accused of obscurantism and a number of social practices have been represented as archaic, and therefore, in the process of disappearing. The festivals can be considered as forms of expression of a “traditional,” popular, syncretic, and perhaps antiorthodox Islam, ignored or sidelined as more researchers focus attention and concern on the more doctrinaire, middle-class and militant voices of “puritanical” political Islam. A paradox posed by the urban mulid festivals is that they are noisy, public, and religiously identified but relatively discrete, nonpuritanical, and apolitical events. In this chapter I argue that mulids, until recently, have been considered by the state to be neither a form of political resistance nor a public menace. Perhaps this is because they are contained within marginalized areas of Cairo's Old City and necropolises, and because they occur during an ephemeral and explicitly “counter-realistic” temporal framework. On the surface, they may not have impacted political agendas directly, yet they teem with potential inversions, solidarities, and subversions.

## **An Aesthetic and Practical System**

A mulid emerges and evolves in dialogue with the overall spatial, cultural, and contested character of its quarter. It reconfigures the space and takes on the form of a veritable stylistic exercise, based on eurhythmics: importing, arranging, and composing decorative and meaning-making elements. This staging, although often realized with a notable economy of means, nevertheless produces an arresting effect. The framework of the décor throbs with life, plugged into a recurring, polyvalent use of vivid wall-coverings and colored lighting. This repetitive web spans the ensemble. Houses and stalls complete and complement the ambiance with matching colors and patterns, creating a harmonious whole. The tall minaret-spires of the saint's mosque-mausoleum are garlanded with strings of colored blinking lights, and the dressed-up mosque takes on the name of the "bride" (*`arusa*) of the festival. The strings of lights stream off the mosque and zigzag over the streets and alleys and frame the geometries of neighboring buildings, creating a vibrating canopy of angular illuminations. Rectangular tents, draped over wooden frames, are made of thick fabrics whose reddish coloring is punctuated by geometric figures and interlacing designs. These occupy all possible spaces, from the eastern flank of the al-Husayn mosque or the square of the Zaynab mosque to the alleyways and courtyards of the surrounding residential areas. The large and beautiful tents, with internal suspended lights and floors covered by oriental rugs, belong to the brotherhoods themselves. Members of the brotherhoods find lodging inside these tents, and this is where the music and ceremonies take place. The tents are topped by banderoles whose color signifies, simultaneously, the affiliation of a confraternal Sufi order (black: Rifa'iyya; red: Ahmadiyya; green: Burhamiyya) and the geographic origin of the pilgrims within Egypt. As such, they attest to the presence of the rural provinces in the heart of the capital city: "Burhamiyya from Disûq," "Ahmadiyya from Miniya," etc. Also deployed are shelters made of raw canvas, for lodging other pilgrims, celebrants, entourages, and extended families. These groups camp in the middle of the streets, principally those around the mosque, or in stairwells, doorways, rooftops, sidewalks, or in virtually any place where a temporary installation is possible. Decorated stands offer pyramids of sweets and of dried chickpeas; ambulant carts carry pointed hats, masks, skirts, ornaments, jewelry, and good-luck charms. Other street stalls cater exclusively to children and include all kinds of toys and carnival games such as rifle shooting, but also offer dance, music, and puppet-

show performances. On occasion, small playgrounds with Ferris wheels and bumper cars complete the ensemble of amusements.

The noise and intensity of the festival varies by the day (increasing towards the last day of the festival period), hour (peaking around 11 P.M. or midnight), and by location within the sprawling space. The mulid is an auditory as well as luminary roller coaster: The crack of toy-rifle fire aiming for prizes, the squeak of swing-sets being carted in, the clash of cymbals and drums accompanying merry-go-rounds, the calls of merchants competing for customers, the sounds of whistles from bands of children, the cry of battling marionettes in shows, the steady chant of Quran recitations, and the bouncing lyrics of popular secular music, all mingle together with the rhythmic chanting of the Sufi dhikrs that flow from the tents and loudspeakers. One also hears the sound of swarms of mini pick-up trucks invading the quarter, loaded with material for setting up the tents, with carpets and chairs, generators, electric installations, sound equipment, as well as those necessary effects of daily life (food, table and bed coverings, kitchen utensils, etc.). The raising of tents, placement of equipment, and set-up of the fairgrounds lasts several days. The quarters hosting the mulids seem to almost disassociate themselves from the city and become a busy world unto themselves while settling into the rhythm of the festival.

When restaged and decorated for the mulid, that part of the city becomes less defined by its permanent built horizontal and vertical surfaces. The distinction between these two dimensions are suspended, producing a visual continuum, like a roller-coaster landscape of flows and flashes. A temporal continuum is also established: night and day are tied together by the delights and noise and flow of life. The mulid is inscribed as a nocturnal celebration and its date next year is proclaimed on the last night of the previous year's festival. Nights and days, although contrasted and differing rhythmically, invested and animated by different protagonists, are both equally dense. Seen from this angle, the mulid appears as a hybrid festival where one cannot formally isolate the sacred from the mundane. The general atmosphere of joy is created as much by fervor as by delight and playful exaltation. In this sense, the mulid is not magmatic. The spatial distribution of the elements that compose the mulid, as a function of their affiliation to sacred and profane registers, corresponds to the alternative coherent spatial and urban logic of the mulid. These are identifiable in the details and readable by all participants. In the same way, mulids are composed of ambivalences, of closed and open places, of zones of noise and meditation, of

expansion and of concentration. The mulid forms a territory. It has an epicenter and defines exposition places, which are well lit, noisy, and tidy, as well as side aisles, corners and nooks, cul-de-sacs, and lit and shadowy zones. Its edges melt into vagueness, in frayed spaces where only the halos (of sounds and lights) are prolonged as the mulid transitions into the ordinarily structured city.

Each mulid is unique, but they do have many common features. They are superimposed on a preexisting space, while absorbing it and partially blurring it. They present a range of dominant characteristics that create a climate that is at once unique and banal, a landscape as original as it is familiar. In this sense, when locals or pilgrims go to a mulid they may feel they are embarking on an ideal voyage toward a place that disconcerts and reassures simultaneously, is spatially and temporally predictable, but with possibilities for discontinuity and surprise built in. The possible modulations of the parameters of the landscape and festival arrangements remain infinite and subtly nuanced.

To promote disinhibition and a sacred ambiance, one may expect mulids to have a lighting scheme emphasizing shadows and muted illumination. However, the opposite effect prevails. Lighting is extremely intense: the light of multicolored bulbs, and above all, of neon lights, is both violent and raw. Light and noise seem to compete with each other to the point of finding a shared register and mingling in a paroxysmal fusion. Here, night is not a time that would be qualitatively opposed to an urban day. Rather, it reveals itself, by its amplitude, as an elaboration of the day: there are more people, more activities, more noise, and more lights than one finds during the daytime.

Who frequents the mulids? Evidently all kinds of people, especially those belonging to social categories that might be qualified as among the popular classes.<sup>iv</sup> The festival throws together provincial Egyptians and Cairene residents, hedonists and the pious, and provokes other possibilities for social mixing. However, the most manifest mixing, and the most evident in its nonevidence, is that of men and women. In this context, men and women find themselves side by side in a public space where, generally, the distance between the sexes is maintained, where physical contact and touching between men and women are minimized, and where the presence of women, particularly of young women, is tightly controlled.

A scene observed during the last night of the mulid of Fatima al-Nabawiyya, around ten o'clock at night, serves as an example: on a busy street, a mother who is seated



in a chair at the doorstep of her apartment building and her daughter (about twenty years old) are arguing. The young woman, who is dressed up and made up with dyed-blond hair, is manifestly disposed to go out, and her mother is not allowing it. The mother, who is shouting, addresses those who observe the scene (neighbors and passers-by) rather than her daughter, who cries and protests. In fact, the mother is raising her daughter alone and cannot accompany her this evening; therefore, she prefers that her daughter does not go far. Then some neighbors intervene: "But we are all there, all of the quarter is there, let her go out this evening for the mulid," they say. Despite the shouts, tears, and negotiations the scene remains relatively calm. After some reticence, the mother gives in; the young woman, accompanied by a friend, goes off; the mother will await, from the doorstep, her daughter's return. Thus, the neighborhood is witness to the mother's firm attitude, to the daughter's obedience, to the display of principles regulating the mobility and freedom of young women. But it will also act to caution this outing, which is rendered possible—even imposed—by the evocation-invocation of confidence, the transfer of responsibility, and by the exception that this festival day represents. The return, like the permission and departure, will also be effected in public and in the same place, in front of the apartment building.

### **The Mulid: a Festival and an Object**

How does one apprehend a mulid as a geographic object? How does one capture and analyze the perpetual movement contained in a finite space-time configuration? Festivals only a few days in duration offer the researcher little real time to construct an analysis. The evanescent character of the festival drives a researcher's quest for fragments. During a festival, everyone seems to live and act in an accelerated way and it is impossible to grasp the simultaneity of situations and scenes. Thus we have experimented with adapting sociogeographic methodologies to the roller-coaster landscape of the mulid, instantaneously capturing data created during aleatory, virtiginous peregrinations. We have chosen to accept the immediacy of the mulid and adapt research tactics—impressionistic, sampling—to its constraints. However, a broader field of more empirical analysis is also open to the researcher, because the festival is also a long-term product of less-ephemeral social, state, and urban organizing patterns, and cultural-political contestations; a mulid is debated, decided upon, struggled over, programmed, permitted, policed, and organized. Although the

analysis we offer in this chapter does not take these aspects into account, we recognize that future research on these phenomena would complement this chapter's semiotic and sociogeographic accounts. By choosing the ephemeral, we have been quite selective, serendipitously isolating the mulids.

Here, then, are exposed and transcribed some scenes captured by chance on the occasion of erratic journeys taken during the mulids, sketches presented like unframed images, which, owing to this fact, may appear as happenings (actions deliberately produced with the immediacy of the moment). These allow us to envision the ways in which microambiances are created, and to peel away the outer shell of large-scale events. This style of reading the city can lend to these event-moments a "performance" character, selectively taking into account the most recurrent situations and locating them in their meaningful context.

### **The City during the Mulid: Forms, Situations, and Labile Practices**

The space of a city neighborhood during the mulid's implantation appears to be full of possibilities, interpretations, and multiple microterritorializations. It is constituted as an infinity of "little corners," occupied and signified through labile practices—i.e. adaptable, recombinable, and mutating. During the mulid, the presence of visitors materializes through a deployment of objects placed in the streets, against walls, on the curbs of the sidewalks, etc. In observing, in detail, exposed places as well as hidden recesses, one notes a multitude of objects and effects. If al-Husayn square (situated in front of the great mosque) is not accessible to people, it is quite open to things. Inside the inaccessible perimeter, along the low wall surmounted by the grates that delimit it, there appears a veritable deposit area for baggage: a line of suitcases, sacks, shopping bags, bundles, and packages, left there and taken in passing, simply by reaching over the enclosure. Even the central (dry) fountain is filled with visitors' effects. The spikes on the gates to the al-Husayn mosque are used as coat hangers, each one piled with clothes and suspended bags. The base of the gates serves as a sideboard for teapots, glasses, plates, goblets, etc. The windowsills of the same mosque are stacked with scaffoldings made of many layers of packaging, bags, and bundles. The few trees of the quarter are also used as supports and their branches are covered with bundles. Around the feet of the streetlamps, bags are also placed. The sidewalks and edges of the streets, delimited on the ground by mats and occupied by distinct groups, are covered by gear used for

eating and sleeping. In the same way, the corridors and hallways of apartment buildings serve as lodging and storage areas.

Public and private distractions are partially blurred and blended and the functions of places are redefined. The quarter is encumbered, but things are organized, and people specifically placed. Other forms of signposting include banners stretched on the façades of religious or residential buildings where confraternal Sufi groups reside or hang from windows and balconies, or dangle across streets behind loudspeakers—these banners function as visual and sonorous markers, bearing witness to the location of diverse brotherhoods. To this are also added advertising banners for businesses and businessmen from the quarter.

All surfaces are exploited, thanks to the many practical gimmicks employed by necessity, but also according to unbridled inventiveness and imagination as urban space is appropriated in its multiple dimensions, volumes, and structures. These appropriations draw from the city's resources, but also imagine new ones, making the space more dense, refashioning it and creating new perspectives. Also, a multitude of minute urban objects (windowsills, various corners, sidewalk steps, etc.), are restylized and individualized, becoming signifiers and other supports for the mulid. These objects, which are “nothing” during ordinary times, when one does not even notice them, are diverted from their usual function by the festival. Thus, a thousand and one ways of being positioned, placed in a niche, and blended with surroundings are tested. Of all the possible uses of the city, all the outlined and realized gestures, let us concentrate on one of the most common—the staking of a small claim to a corner of a sidewalk: When a person unfolds a square of fabric, lays it open, and places it on a sidewalk, it may not seem like a very impressive trick. But the cloth must conjure some magical power, for a family of six people will spend the length of a week (days and nights) reinventing their gender/urban/class/spiritual identities, eating, drinking and sleeping, maintaining dignity and renegotiating boundaries, and experiencing the mulid as the year's greatest pleasure, all while occupying a square of fabric on the concrete sidewalk!

### **Tightrope Walkers Here and There: Movements, Installations, and Stabilizations**

During the days of the mulid, Cairo's urban life does not stop. People come, go, attend to their own affairs, and work, passing through and beside the space of the

festival. This space is not absolute, but a watchful presence, suggested or traced here and there by décor, sceneries, and attitudes that are deliberately inscribed in the festive register. As Pierre Sansot recalls, “The public space hesitates between the daily and the festive” (2003, 41). This hesitation is translated by the porous quality of this urban universe and of mulid attitudes. People walk, but others sit or lie down; some talk, sleep, eat, and drink; others laugh, watch, or do nothing; but all are there together, tied to the mulid world-making process of the city. How can one be connected to one scene or to one action, and then disconnect from it in order to involve oneself in another story that is unfolding in parallel? Simply by turning from one place, either by looking elsewhere or by leaving it physically. In this way, many levels of integration are combined in one or many scenes, simultaneously or not, from exclusive to disparate, from subjugation to indifference, from intense to the dilettante experience.

One afternoon during the mulid of Husayn (June 2003) on the eastern edge of the mosque, an open café welcomed an orchestra. Seated on chairs with velour cushions, the first row of clients (who seem to be habitués of the establishment) reward the orchestra with ten-pound notes; the singer thanks them returning the compliment, to which the café-owner adds his voice. All around, there are other consumers, seated on wooden seats. Behind are rows of standing spectators, interested as much by the music as by the distribution of people, who excite commentary among them. Beyond the café is the encumbered street where, from time to time, vehicles pass by. Each car that expertly manages to pass through captures the attention of some of the spectators, certain customers get involved, guiding the car. It is often the intermezzo created by a vehicle that will eclipse or determine the retreat of certain participants who, after the distraction, leave to pursue or to take up their own way again. In the same manner, during the mulid a number of audiocassette vendors settle in and diffuse music. There are many people who, while crossing these spheres, will manifest their passage by whistling, dancing a step, or snapping their fingers. In this way, many individual peregrinations are constituted, woven together or swept clear by an infinitely variable succession of facts, scenes, and ambiances that take on meaning over the trajectory of each person, according to the intensity of the solicitation, but especially according to the receptivity and time afforded by those who participate in these travels. Thus, sequences in the city are

developed that are at once oriented and disoriented. During a mulid, modulations are produced by the jostling and aspirations of perpetual unpredictability.<sup>v</sup>

The mulid crowd is a specific social formation distinct from the “mobs” of old sociology, or the “collectives” of social-movement studies. The mulid crowd joins anonymity with identity, and allows for simultaneous exhibition and the dissimulation of participants. It also allows one to visit and socialize intensely or, just as intensely, to completely forget about the presence of other people. [See also Battesti in this volume for his discussion of the ways in which the crowds that visit the Giza Zoo on holidays celebrate its density, arguing that people give the breath of life (a soul) to the place.] The “sleepwalker,” a certain kind of flâneur (one who strolls) character interpreted by Isaac Joseph in *Le passant considérable*, is constructed as a social individual who nourishes his urban identity and longings by immersing himself or herself in public space and the crowd (1984). From inside the mulids, another recurring, metaphoric figure emerges, which is that of the “tightrope walker”: s/he enters into universes according to a halting trajectory marked by hesitation, solicitation, and risky choice-making. The tightrope walker is also a balancing specialist whose progress is often aided by a balancing pole, parasol, or some other object that helps him or her maintain the necessary movement and define unfolding action. The objects that mulid participants carry help them in their balancing acts immersed in these crowds; these objects act as reminders or evocations of a certain role, attitude, or process of social, spiritual, sexual, or spatial articulation, as we shall see later in this chapter.

### **Effects and Facts of the Crowd: the Last Evening of the Mulid**

It seems that in the case of the mulids, when one fills up a densely shared space, some may feel latent apprehension. Each individual confronts a situation that does not always depend on his or herself, but that, instead, depends on who and what one is—a woman, or, perhaps, a vulnerable person. During that last night of any mulid, particularly in the great squares of Husayn and Zaynab, the hesitations and reticence of some (men and women) are obvious, while the delectation of others is just as evident. In this way, actions and figures crush together with an almost systematic character, fusing “complementary” roles—those who touch and the touched, jostlers and the jostled. These instantaneous forms of contact are consented to or imposed, accepted or not, but they serve to determine the circulating fluctuations that delimit

relatively stable groups (families, young men, groups of pilgrims, etc.). It seems that each one makes an intuitive reading of the crowd, of its composition, and of the stratifications that flow from it—a rather immediate interpretation that results in individuals placing themselves in passageways and directing themselves according to these logics, and not according to their estimation of the shortest distance between one point and the other. In the crowd, levels of depth, immersion, and orientation, are measured and distinguished according to concrete points of reference (distance or proximity of walls, sidewalks, etc.).

Despite the press and the crush, this distribution functions relatively well and everyone seems to adapt to it. However, certain narrow places or passages blur this order and generate confusion: the bottlenecks are, from this point of view, chaotic places where everyone mixes in confusion, as they leave or enter the square. At these obligatory, difficult passages, police are placed. They try to manage the flow and even deliver some baton blows, not at random but in a way that tends to target young men, obliging them to advance and pass quickly, using their arms as protection, in order to dodge the blows. The object of this violence is to temper their vague desires to touch and dissuades those who attempt to linger there. At these places, young men, who act as a particular kind of lookout, effectively wait for the passage of young girls in order to rush after them. The girls hesitate, laugh, shout, go there, do not go there; the jostle intensifies.

During other important mulids, in similar topographic contexts, the role played here by the police may be filled by civilians, who act according to the same procedures. During the last night of the Sayyida Zaynab mulid, ambulant merchants keep their carts at the edges of the crowd and stand on crates, scrutinizing the movements of the crowd and intervening, coming to the aid of women who are being bothered. Drawing water from their jars with goblets, they spray the culprits (with generally good aim), while shouting to those men and women who were attempting to leave the crush, suggesting to them the path to take to reach the edges of the square and the easiest points of passage.

Another manner of maintaining or creating distance is enacted during the last night of the Fatima al-Nabawiyya mulid, toward eleven o'clock at night. Around an orchestra, comfortably placed on the platform of an open-air café, some fifty people are dancing. It is difficult to be precise about the exact nature of this dance; the songs are by reference religious, the music is by those who accompany the dhikr. But the

dhikr is, in principle, a collective, codified exercise. Movements of the body, men and women together, ample and supple, are essentially created by lateral swaying in a dhikr; legs are straight, arms swinging, as the head moves from side to side. Other masses of people outside the carpeted open-air dance zone are dancing in more individual ways, without worrying about the others, while keeping themselves in harmony with the shared rhythm. Even if their movements are clearly related to another register of expression, their gestures and attitudes are impregnated with the dhikr. Among the participants, many are women, of which some are young. Around them, spectators press to watch and many men direct their gaze at feminine anatomies exposed and animated by dance movements. But these women, certain ones of whom have strained faces and others, expressions of ecstatic delight, all have their eyes closed. Whether real or feigned, their indifference appears to be absolute: there is not any coquettishness in their gestures, nor any deliberate suggestiveness in their postures, nor exhibitionism. This scene, evolving with a partial and continuous renewal of protagonists, will last for hours. Although this situation is out of the ordinary, since women dance without restraint in the street all night long, there may not be any exchange of glances. The context is that of the mulid, and the music that provokes the dance is of religious inspiration. It is also true that exposed feminine bodies are not objects of indifference, so much more so because they are at once static—in place and observable at one's leisure—and animated—visible from various angles and in various positions. These women move their bodies, but do not show themselves off; they do not permit any possible hold on their bodies, defusing as such any possible contact.

Reading these mulids may contribute to thinking about the city as an animated space, a place notably invested spiritually and symbolically, but also full of a material and tangible presence, those of décors, bodies, and objects. Cairo's mulid spaces are intermediary zones where contacts are made and practiced between people, but also between objects and positions. Because of this fact, it is appropriate to extend one's attention to places and individuals, towards objects, whether fixed or tended. Objects in these festival urban contexts are active, they move people, provide impulses to action. Innumerable worry beads wrapped around wrists are ceaselessly caressed; handles of teapots are gripped by men and women ceaselessly serving and offering tea to friends and passers-by; sides of women's dresses or headscarves are clutched by children who are either carried or walking on

their own. In terms of the density of the crowd, imposed proximity is intense. But it is the consensus of those at the mulid to further intensify this density by holding each other close—arm-in-arm, or hand-in-hand, or embracing a comrade around the shoulder as they move around in groups of two, three, or in lines. Is contact with others reduced, attenuated, or enabled when one is submersed within this gender-mixed crowd? Squeezing the arm of one's family member or companion, is it a show for the others, against the vertigo experienced by the individual in the middle of the crowd? Or is this a paradoxical attempt to escape, by a demonstration of linkage, from the non-sense of being alone among a multitude of other beings? Or is this a way of integrating oneself into this collective gathering of bodies while affirming oneself through a concrete touching gesture?

**“It Was the Festival and Now It's Over! That's Life! What Did You Think It Was?”<sup>vi</sup>**

The extraordinary festive time is a period when control of the family/society and one's surroundings abates, and full rein can be given to attitudes that would be castigated or concealed outside the mulid context. The mingling, the crowd, and the exceptional circumstances confer some degree of anonymity. Such moments when one is more prone to mind one's own business lead to variations in behavior. Many deeds perpetrated in public remain unknown or are tolerated: they become acceptable under such fleeting moments and within this closed space, the ideal and arguably necessary place for transgression, exception, and deregulation, under cover of religious celebration. Thus, it is possible to directly accost young girls who may on such occasions be strolling unaccompanied, a daring act that goes unnoticed under anonymous circumstances but which would be hard to accomplish in surroundings where she is known. The same goes for carnal contact and dance, consumption of alcohol and drugs, choosing fancy dress, and the parody and derision of “institutions” such as marriage, class and state icons, and normative sexual identity. At Sayyida 'Aicha, the local young men organize a cart procession on the afternoon of the last day. On these carts, they act out various scenes featuring the café waiter, the police officer, the thief, and men disguised as women, some mimicking and parodying marriage, and suggesting illicit forms of sexual intercourse. We should however point out that such entertainment is neither systematic nor is it present in all mulids. Each generates its own mood. Such peculiarities are



determined solely by spontaneous local initiatives. The mulid, an occasion for exteriorization, is an important moment in the life of the neighborhood, enabling various social groups to express and assert themselves. The young men in drag and in costumes of different “types” who file past in the cart procession unquestionably display provocation. Café waiters (the real ones, along the parade route) seize free-speech rights by grabbing loudspeakers and bark out commentaries on costumes and on the street show while also vaunting their businesses. Children, in the spotlight, become temperamental and are spoiled. Families, in their full numbers, come on an outing while young girls turn on their seductive powers and spend lavishly on hairdressing and makeup, highlighting and displaying their strong points. Mulids are important moments in the life of Sufi guilds. The ecstatic rituals that they foster strengthen the cohesion of disciples and encourage people to join the brotherhood. Major celebrations serve—at various levels—as public forums and representatives. In tents privileged to be mounted on the square itself, official representations, the Sufi Council and the prestigious Sufi guilds—those with the most charismatic and influential sheikhs—are very conspicuous.

### **Politicization of Mulids in Today’s Egypt: Will That Stop Them?**

Unable to ban and much less organize such gatherings, the authorities may try to use them for political ends. In December 1994, the mulid of Sayyida Zaynab was used as an electoral campaign platform. Its distinguishing feature was the great number and lavish display of lights and perpetual fireworks, attributed to the extravagance of Fathi Sourour, the local district’s member of Parliament. The portraits and banners in his name at the festival signaled his intention to run in the forthcoming legislative elections billed for autumn 1995. It further affirmed the state’s presence and involvement in the neighborhood, since Fathy Sourour was also president of the People’s Assembly.

During a clash with the police, three Islamists had been killed in the same Sayyida Zaynab neighborhood in February 1994. But the politician’s contacts and his political base in Sayyida Zaynab assured that the “show went on” despite insistence from elsewhere within the state that the district be put on lockdown. A luminous and more-splendid-than-ever mulid followed a year later (December 1995), proving Sourour’s success in the earlier elections. Further proof was the banner, heartily congratulating Sourour, hoisted by local traders and notables who gave the neighborhood a treat by

financing the lighting. Such patronage obviously translated into their increased personal prestige and publicity for themselves and their businesses. As interface between public and private feast, the mulid not only benefits many protagonists through interactive links, but also offers them potential profits, and a degree of protection that sometimes, if not always, assures the public celebration's survival.

After the repression in Cairo of large protests against the American invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2003, the government asserted a much greater degree of control over the great square in front of the al-Husayn mosque. The square was permanently occupied by police battalions. During the mulid that followed (June 2003), the large open public space in front of the mosque was confiscated. Not a single tent, attraction, cart, or café-restaurant terrace was tolerated there. One could no longer settle in the space for rest or prayer; one could only pass straight through. Owing to the closing of the great open space that the al-Husayn square had been, and on which the most visible confraternal groups used to gather, the mulid had to sprawl out, snaking through the streets and alleyways—dispersing not disappearing. This eviction from the center toward the peripheral areas, from opulent to cramped space, gave the mulid a more confused, less coherent aspect. The mulid seemed deconstructed. Exiled to decorated alleyways, Sufi orders' installations were rendered nearly invisible. But they insistently proclaimed their presence through their audibility, by means of the installation of loudspeakers oriented toward the square. Over the duration of the mulid, the forces of order (approximately twenty policemen permanently present in a constant ring) did not cease to dissuade those people attempting to sit down or to lean against the grates of the square, who were relieved during the afternoons by a water cart spreading water on the hot sidewalks. In the same way, the police prohibited people from parking their cars there. Tables, chairs, tablecloths, and dishes from cafés and restaurants that were set up in violation of the new rules were confiscated and thrown together in trucks. Owners had to pay a fine to retrieve them. However, each day, as the evening gradually advanced, and the mulid neared the last night, these restrictions and repressive actions became more difficult to apply and less and less firm. During the last night, despite police reinforcements, the people overcame the prohibitions, with the exception of the one concerning access to the central square during prayers, which was maintained by a police cordon.

By the call to evening prayer, on the Friday preceding the last night of the Husayn mulid (19 June 2003), the mosque was filling. The overflowing crowd settled in front of the southern entrance alongside the mosque. The lack of space pushed some men to climb the grates of the square and to take off their shoes to pray on the lawn. The first groups of them were stopped by the dozen police who stood guard. They attempted to push the men back, then gave up as they noticed the increasing numbers of arrivals. Many rows of people praying were forming. Some of the police then joined the prayer, which, finally, took place in the public square, which filled up despite the fact that the state had ordered it closed and evacuated. After the prayer, everyone left, except for the police. The same scene was reproduced the following days, until the last evening.

### **Conclusion**

Big mulids provide the necessary forum for the rural, urban, provincial, Cairene and other communities to meet around shared representations and pleasures that strengthen the cohesion and identity of the social groups present. They also help to create occasions for affirming the feeling of belonging to layers of communities (Sufi brotherhood, village, Cairo neighborhood, business network, etc.), and occasions for suspending norms of social control, and for perpetuating spiritual, spatial, and friendship rites. Mulids stand as essential periods for the individual and the community. The mulid is also a space-time with boundless opportunities for spiritual intercession (madad), and to articulate new wishes, desires, and hopes. It is presupposed that the Prophet is present and mention is made of his diverse miracles. Contrary to many recurring events whose past is often steeped in nostalgia, mulids are seen by their practitioners as perpetuated in a continuity that precludes any comparative description. Thus, by definition, a mulid is always a success and is generally always appraised as “very good this year, as always.”

Will Cairo’s mulid publics—tightrope walkers in a roller-coaster landscape—survive the new waves of repression and policing? Popular classes’ insistence in the mulid’s continuity, their growing investment in the power of celebration, festival, and prayer, and their adaptive world-making practices offer proof that the mulid is perhaps irrepressible.

### **Captions**

- 6.a.1. Map of mulids in Cairo
- 6.a.2. Mulid night in Sayyida Zaynab (photo by Jean Pierre Ribiere).
- 6.a.3. Children riding bumper cars during the Sayyida Zaynab mulid (photo by Jean Pierre Ribiere).
- 6.a.4. A member of a Sufi brotherhood performing in a tent at the Sayyida Zainab mulid (photo by Jean Pierre Ribiere).
- 6.a.5. Banners outside of Sayyida Zaynab Mosque during the mulid (photo by Jean Pierre Ribiere).
- 6.a.6. Young men dress up as women during a procession of carts in the Sayyida 'Aicha mulid (photo by Jean Pierre Ribiere).
- 6.a.7. Tables set up for meals in Husayn Square during the mulid of Husayn, before the Egyptian government declared the square off-limits to mulid participants and activities in 2003 (photo by Jean Pierre Ribiere).

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<sup>i</sup> This festival is known as a mulid in Egypt (mawlid (birthday) in the plural, mawalid). But beyond marking the anniversary of a precise event (birth or disappearance (both cases exist)—the mulid simply marks the day that is consecrated to the saint.

<sup>ii</sup> The literature in French and English on the veneration of holy women and men and descendants of prophets in Sufi Islam and parallel Jewish practices often refers to these figures as “saints” (see Beigman 1990; Schielke 2003; MacPherson 1941). This term offends some orthodox sensibilities, since neither Judaism nor Islam revere an order of saints as does Christianity. But maintaining orthodox distinctions is not the priority of Sufi mysticism, or mulid syncretism. In this light we will alternate between the use of the term “saint” and “holy woman/man” to describe the spiritual patrons of mulids and the sacred persons buried in the shrines visited by mulid pilgrims.

<sup>iii</sup> This chapter is based on fieldwork in Cairo during the festivals of Husayn and Zaynab (the most important festivals), but also during those of Yûnis al-Sa’adi, Abû ‘Ela, Fatima al-Nabawiyya, and ‘Aicha al-Nabawiyya, between 1998 and 2003.

<sup>iv</sup> In particular, an unscientific but nevertheless revealing indicator of purchasing power may be found in the shoes of the participants: a large part of them (men, women, and children) wear open shoes (sandals with molded plastic or leather straps), which belong to the bottom of the shoe hierarchy

<sup>vi</sup> A lucid remark made by an acrobat to the hero of Sept jours de l’homme (Qassim 1998, 170).