

# HEGEMONIC ENCOUNTERS: CRITICISM OF SAINTS-DAY FESTIVALS AND THE FORMATION OF MODERN ISLAM IN LATE 19<sup>TH</sup> AND EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY EGYPT

BY

SAMULI SCHIELKE

*Mainz*

## *Abstract*

In late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Islamic saints-day festivals (*mawlid*s) became the subject of strong criticism. A festive tradition that until then had been central to the religious and communal life of Egypt was now increasingly criticised for being backward and un-Islamic. *Mawlid*s, popular festivals that combine the atmosphere of a fair with the ecstatic spirituality of Sufism, were not only problematic for the new models of nation and religion, criticising them was also functional for the demarcation of these. Constructs of this type are characteristic for the project of modernity that is defined through binary distinctions, with labels such as ‘backwardness’ and ‘un-Islamic innovations’ serving as distinctive markers of modernity and authenticity. This development was not a consequent continuation of an earlier Islamic tradition, nor was it a simple takeover of European colonial concepts and disciplining practices. It was the product of a creative and selective synthesis of the two, producing novel interpretations of both Islam and modernity that, in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have managed to gain a hegemonic position in much of the Middle East. This emergence of Islamic reformism and modernism from a synthesis with colonial discourses compels us to rethink a currently popular endeavour in Islamic studies: the study of Islam as a discursive tradition.

## **1. Introduction**

In the early 1880s, Egypt was in a state of turmoil. European powers were exerting increasing pressure on the Khedivial government, and escalating political conflicts were about to lead the country to the ‘Urābī rebellion and consequent British occupation. In this moment, a new kind of debate on religion and society emerged. Festive traditions and ecstatic rituals that were a central part of the religious and communal life of the country quite suddenly became the subject of intense criticism, accompanied by attempts to reform or to ban them. A key issue at stake were *mawlid*s, popular festivals in honour of the Prophet Muḥammad and Muslim saints.

In 1881, the debate culminated with the ban on the spectacular ritual of *dawsa* that used to conclude the *mawlid an-nabī* (birthday of the Prophet Muḥammad) festival in Cairo, where the *sheikh* of the Sa‘diyya Sufi brotherhood would ride a horse over his disciples (who were not injured, which was seen as a demonstration of God’s grace) and with attempts to curb the ecstatic rituals of Sufi brotherhoods and to impose strict state control upon them.<sup>1</sup> In the following decades, criticism of the festivals became a fixed topos in the discourse of modernity and Islamic reform, incorporating a variety of social, political and religious concerns. It was no longer just specific controversial rituals, but the festivities as such that were seen as a serious threat to the purity of religion and the progress of the nation.

This debate presented a significant departure from the earlier position of saints-day festivals as a central, albeit somewhat problematic, element of religious culture. It bears witness to a thorough reinterpretation of religion, society, and the individual that took place in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The question, now, is what exactly changed, and how this change came about. How did the historical traditions of Islam become associated with a modernising discourse of civilisation? Why did the criticism of popular festivals become a signifying element of this new cultural discourse? What was the role of European colonial hegemony in this development?

Based on historical material selected from a collection of newspaper articles and books published in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and amended by data and insights from secondary literature, I will put forward three arguments. First, this construction of distinctions and exclusions was the product of a creative and selective synthesis of European concepts and practices, and a part of the intellectual traditions of Islamic scholarship. Second, constructs of this type are characteristic for the modernistic and reformist project that is defined and marked through binary distinctions. *Mawlid*s, popular festivals that combine the atmosphere of a fair with the ecstatic spirituality of Sufism, were not only problematic for the new models of nation and religion, criticising them was also functional for the demarcation of these. Third, the way Islamic reformism and modernism emerged through the synthesis with

---

<sup>1</sup> See Meir Hatina, “Religious Culture Contested: The Sufi Ritual of *Dawsa* in Nineteenth-Century Cairo”, in: *Die Welt des Islams* 47, no. 1 (2007), pp. 33-62.

colonial discourses compels us to rethink a popular endeavour in Islamic studies: the description and study of Islam as a discursive tradition, in the singular.

Two key categories of this study need to be discussed in more detail before we can move to the historical data. First, since I will be speaking a lot about modernity in the following pages, it is necessary to specify what I mean by that term. Modernity, roughly speaking, can be taken to mean either a historically and structurally specific condition of societies, or, alternatively, a mode of temporality, ‘a geography of imagination that creates progress through the projection and management of alterity [i.e., oppositions such as modernity vs. tradition]’,<sup>2</sup> paired with the imagination of society as a system. The first reading of modernity is easily stricken by tautologies. While it can be argued that specific modes of production, technologies of power, and forms of social organisation characterise the modern era, there always remains a moment of circularity due to the normative and forward-looking connotations of ‘modernity’. To understand what makes these developments modern, rather than simply novel, I prefer to highlight the second reading of ‘modernity as a project’ as it has been phrased by Talal Asad.<sup>3</sup> Modernity, or modernism, in this sense is not a coherent ideology, however, and it would be mistaken to presume that the project of modernity would look the same all over the world. This does not mean that I intend to be involved in a discussion of ‘alternative modernities’, but simply that when we speak of modernism, or modernity, we must look at the specific constituents of the aspiration for progress in a given local and historical setting.

In Egypt, the aim to organise society and its individuals in a rational manner for the purpose of progress is very closely related to nationalism and the search for a religious, cultural, and moral foundation for the nation and its future. While there have been considerable conflicts

---

<sup>2</sup> Bruce M. Knauft, “Critically modern: An introduction”, in *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*, edited by Bruce M. Knauft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), pp. 1-51, here: p. 18. See also Mikael Karlström, “Modernity and Its Aspirants: Moral Community and Developmental Eutopianism in Buganda”, in: *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 5 (2004), pp. 595-619.

<sup>3</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 13.

throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century within this project, notably between liberal and Islamic understandings of individual freedom and obligations, and between socialist and capitalist models of development, a certain common ground based on the primacy of the nation and the need to reach a unity of progress and authentic normative foundations has seldom been seriously questioned.

This particular version of the project of modernity was the result of conflicts and contacts that set the scene for the kind of issues that could and needed to be solved, and offered a set of possible approaches to solving them. Two conflicts (there were more of them, of course) central for this study were that between European hegemony, especially British colonial rule after 1882, and new Egyptian middle classes and nationalist intellectual elites that had emerged in the course of the modernisation policies before and during the colonial period, and another in which the new *afandiyya* middle classes tried to distinguish themselves from the peasant and old urban populations while at the same time struggling for power against established social groups, such as the Turko-Circassian political elites, Sufi orders, merchant guilds, and rural landowners (even when they often originally came from these milieus).

This leads us to the other key category of this study: genealogy, that is, the conditions of the emergence and transformation of the intellectual traditions and administrative practices that make up the Egyptian project of modernity, especially concerning its relation to religion. Inspired in many ways by the work of Talal Asad but developing my argument in contradiction to his, I prefer to speak of the genealogy rather than the (discursive) tradition of modern Islam, just as I would rather not perceive genealogy as a primarily discursive one. After all, discourse, as a way of describing the kind of objects and kinds of practices that are possible in relation to them, is in itself a practice, and no dividing lines can—or should—be drawn between discourses and popular, administrative, and educational practices. At the end of this article I will return to Asad with an attempt of a critical revision of his focus on tradition, but at first, in order to provide some analytical grounding for the following historical enquiry, it is necessary to specify how an approach based on genealogy differs from one based on tradition.

‘Tradition’ is a very tricky concept from the historian’s point of view because it implies two very different relationships to a past that continues

up to the present: On the one hand, tradition can be understood as genealogy, as standing in the footsteps of certain persons, discourses, and customs. On the other hand, and this is perhaps the more common usage, tradition can be identified with heritage, the imagined and explicit reference to an authoritative past. This article, for example, stands in the genealogy of my socialisation in a professional practice, the texts I have read, the teachers I have studied with, and in turn their socialisation, teachers, and the books they have read and so on. Much of this genealogy is unknown to me, quite unlike the heritage of Foucauldian discourse analysis, hermeneutic philosophy of history, and relativist history of science to which I am explicitly referring, although I at times may be presenting statements that constitute a serious reinterpretation of, even a break with them.

An approach with a focus on tradition easily becomes trapped in this ambiguity, which is likely to result in an emphasis on systemic coherence and continuity because that is exactly what the discursive register of tradition-as-heritage is best able to produce. Such emphasis would be contrary to the aims of this paper. Not the coherence, continuity, identity, and—as has been credibly pointed out by some critics of Asad<sup>4</sup>—alterity of Islam are what concerns me but rather the complex interactions and exchanges that have contributed to the emergence of a hegemonic understanding of religion in our time.

Leaning on (but not necessarily faithful to) the work of Michel Foucault, I understand genealogy to be the enterprise of examining the formation of discourses and practices, that is, the ways of constructing objects by the means of studying, describing and sanctioning them, and of acting in a world inhabited by such objects. The key question of the enterprise of genealogy, therefore, is one concerning the relationships of power and knowledge that have made it possible and compelling to imagine and to realise in practice certain kinds of objects with certain kinds of relations between them. This, in consequence, implies a research programme of intellectual history that is constantly looking at the interplay of intellectual developments and social and political changes.

---

<sup>4</sup> Sindre Bangstad, "Contesting Secularism/s: Secularism And Islam in The Work of Talal Asad", in: *Anthropological Theory*, forthcoming.

Rather than positing the primacy of either, however, we need to think about intellectual discourse as political practice, and of administrative policies as conceptual imagination. From this perspective, the question concerning the intellectual history of modern Islam is how to conceptualise the conditions of emergence of the currently hegemonic configuration of Islam as a rational system, at once dependent upon and constitutive of the project of modernity in its Egyptian reading. Looking at the interrelationship of different traditions of intellectual production, administrative practice and political power, I will pursue this question by analysing traces of the complex interplay of pre-existing Islamic traditions and the influence of European intellectual discourses and colonial administrative practices. In doing so, I look at the history of modern Islam from a perspective that neither treats it as a hermetic, coherent entity nor depicts it as merely subaltern to Western (post)colonial power. Instead, what I narrate in the following pages is a dynamic exchange and encounter (albeit an unequal one) that has produced innovative and novel concepts and practices of religion, society and subjectivity. But to start, it will first be necessary to look back to earlier discursive formations that were present in Egypt before the changes which I am about to focus on took place.

## **2. The tractates against innovations**

Muslim saints-day festivals, since their emergence in 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., have always been characterised by an atmosphere of the extraordinary in which many of the norms and boundaries of everyday life have been temporary suspended or relaxed. A colourful mixture of pilgrimage, piety, ecstatic mysticism, amusement, and trade, they stand in a marked opposition to the regular order of things. While the formal occasion of the festival is religious, participants can give the festivity various, often mutually contradictory forms and meanings. This always makes them problematic to some degree to any forms of public order, morality and authority, and in fact *mawlid*s have been the subject of controversy ever since they were first celebrated. The earliest known reference to Egypt's biggest *mawlid*, held in honour of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī in Ṭanṭā, mentions that it was prohibited (for only one year,

as it turned out) in 1448 ‘because of the presence of sinful women’.<sup>5</sup> This was not an isolated event: The emergence of *mawlid an-nabī*, *mawlids* in honour of Muslim saints, and the spread of organised mysticism and ecstatic rituals was accompanied from the start by major controversy in the Muslim Middle East. *Mawlids* have remained part of this historical controversy ever since.

Between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, a genre of *fiqh* specialised in the discussion of un-Islamic innovations (*bidaʿ*, sing. *bidʿa*) emerged. This genre, which first appeared among Mālikī scholars in Andalusia but soon spread throughout the Islamic world, became part of a debate that developed particularly between the supporters and opponents of Sufi rituals. The most prominent representative of this genre, although not its creator, was Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328).<sup>6</sup> Part of a current within Islamic scholarship devoted to the purification of ritual and morality, he followed the footsteps of earlier scholars such as aṭ-Ṭurṭushī (d. 520/1126), Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 529/1200), Abū Shāma (d. 665/1268), at-Turkumānī (14<sup>th</sup> century) and Ibn al-Ḥājj al-ʿAbdarī (d. 737/1336).<sup>7</sup> The topics and arguments developed in *kutub al-bidaʿ* (the tractates against innovations) belong to a repertoire that became standard in the critique of ritual, and which gained new dynamics following the revival of Ibn Taymiyya’s writings upon the rise of Islamic reform movements beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.

While issues that today form part of the debate on *mawlids* are prominent in the *kutub al-bidaʿ*, *mawlids* do not appear as a discrete topic in them, partly because they had not yet developed into a clearly distinguishable custom at the time,<sup>8</sup> and partly because they consist of various practices with different legal statuses, which makes them difficult

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, *Al-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī: un grand saint de l’islam égyptien* (Cairo: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 1994), p. 15; Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 17ff.

<sup>6</sup> See ‘Azīz al-ʿAzma (Aziz al-Azmeh) (ed.), *Ibn Taymiyya* (Beirut: Riyāḍ ar-Rayyis, 2000); Muhammad Umar Memon, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Struggle against Popular Religion, With an Annotated Translation of his Kitāb iqtidāʾ aṣ-ṣirāʾ al-mustaqīm mukhālafat aṣḥāb al-jahīm* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> Maribel Fierro, “The treatises against innovations (*kutub al-bidaʿ*)”, in: *Der Islam* 69 (1992), pp. 204-246, here: pp. 207ff.

<sup>8</sup> See Michael Winter, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt: Studies in the Writings of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Shāʾrānī* (New Brunswick etc.: Transaction Books, 1982), pp. 179f., 183; Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d’un pèlerinage légendaire en Islam: Le mouled de Tantâ du*

to grasp with the conceptual apparatuses of *fiqh* scholarship. In their treatment of public festivals, grave visitation, music, morality and the habitus of piety, the *bida'* tractates already contained basic elements of the contemporary criticism of *mawlid*s and are referred to for that purpose until today. They are characterised by an uncompromising demand for ritual purity and moral discipline, a clear and strong rejection of any syncretistic forms of piety, and a staunch opposition to overwhelming joy and laughter, extravagant culinary culture, liberal spending, and anything that has a taste of hedonism attached to it. In their insistence on clear and solid boundaries and a constrained and stern habitus (for example in their general criticism of popular festive traditions and the participation of women in public festivals, as well as their strict rejection of celebrations at graveyards and of food and music at religious occasions)<sup>9</sup> they clearly present a formative body of discourse whose aesthetic standards of piety and patterns of argumentation have significantly shaped the discursive common sense of Islamic reformism.

Yet this discourse did not present the “orthodox” view of Muslim scholars. On the contrary, Ibn Taymiyya faced massive opposition from his contemporaries,<sup>10</sup> and the views he and other authors of *kutub al-bida'* represented remained marginal for centuries to come. At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the influential *'ālim* Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī argued that *mawlid an-nabī* was in fact a praiseworthy innovation (*bid'a ḥasana*),<sup>11</sup> and that there is nothing wrong with giving a banquet, expressing joy, or *samā'*, on the condition that the celebration is free of immoral practices (*munkarāt*).<sup>12</sup> For centuries to come, this view and others of its kind were to represent the authoritative point of view.

---

*XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle a nos jours* (Paris: Aubier, 2004), pp. 118-126. Fierro, “The Treatises Against Innovations”; Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Ibn al-Ḥājj al-'Abdarī, *al-Madkhal* (Cairo: al-Maṭba'a al-'Āmirā, 1320/1903), vol. 1, pp. 122-126, 142-175; vol. 2, pp. 10-13, 151-157; Idrīs b. Baydakīn b. 'Abdallāh at-Turkumānī al-Ḥanafī, *Kitāb al-Lumā' fi l-Hawādith wa-l-bida': Eine Streitschrift gegen unstatthafte Erneuerungen*, edited by Subhi Labib (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1986), pp. 76-96, 203-229, 293-302.

<sup>10</sup> al-'Azma (al-Azmeh), *Ibn Taymiyya*, pp. 481-491.

<sup>11</sup> The concept *bid'a ḥasana* follows the legal qualifications developed in Mālikī and Shāfi'ī *fiqh*. See above p. 95 and Fierro, “The Treatises Against Innovations”, p. 206.

<sup>12</sup> Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī, *Husn al-Maqṣid fi 'amal al-mawlid* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-balāgh, 1987); N.J.G. Kaptein, *Muḥammad's Birthday Festival: Early History in the Central Muslim Lands and Development in the Muslim West until the 10th/16th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), pp. 48-67.



And yet the key to the success of *mawlid*s did not lie in their scholarly justification. The actual festivities went way beyond the limits of what was considered legitimate by as-Suyūṭī and other scholars of Law. Major *mawlid*s were famous for their liberal atmosphere—they were the preferred occasion for young men and women to meet, and the *mawlid* of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, for example, was a major site of prostitution—, and the often very ecstatic forms that expressions of piety took at *mawlid*s were somewhat suspect to adherents of more intellectual styles of religiosity. But while the ambiguous and open-ended atmosphere of *mawlid*s continued to provoke the anger of some scholars and inspired occasional efforts to purge the festivals of what were seen to be immoral practices, it did not constitute a threat to the religious and social order of the time. People could cross the limits of religious commandments and everyday morality at *mawlid*s because they were living in a social order and in relations of power that allowed for temporary shifts and did not require (and was not capable of commanding) comprehensive control over the behaviour of the people. If some people used the *mawlid* as an occasion to drink and to fornicate, this was perhaps forgiven in the sacred occasion, and even if it was not, it did not threaten the validity of religion as the supreme site of social normativity.<sup>13</sup>

Hence, the controversy did not diminish the success of *mawlid*s. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *mawlid*s held a central place in religious, political and economic life.<sup>14</sup> They were celebrations not only for ‘the people’ but also for the ruling classes and religious dignitaries.<sup>15</sup> Murtaḍā az-Zabīdī, one of the most influential scholars of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Egypt, travelled several times to the *mawlid* of as-Sayyid al-Badawī, for him a great spiritual gathering and an occasion to build and maintain his extensive scholarly network.<sup>16</sup> As late as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, sessions of the cabinet were

<sup>13</sup> This view, meanwhile marginalised, was still present in the public debates of late 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example in ‘Alī Bāshā Mubārak, *‘Alam ad-dīn* (Alexandria: Maṭba‘at Jarīdat al-Maḥrūsa, 1299/1882), pp. 160-163.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān b. Ḥasan al-Jabartī, *‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī’s History of Egypt*, edited by Thomas Philipp and Moshe Perlmann (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1994), vol. 2, pp. 175f.; vol. 3, pp. 35, 126, 451, 453, 502; vol. 4, pp. 2, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Personal communication with Stefan Reichmuth. See also: Stefan Reichmuth, “Murtaḍā az-Zabīdī (d. 1791) in Biographical and Autobiographical Accounts: Glimpses of Islamic Scholarship in the 18th Century”, in: *Die Welt des Islams* 39, no. 1 (1999), pp. 64-102.

delayed to allow ministers to attend the *mawlid* of as-Sayyid al-Badawī.<sup>17</sup> Critical views remained marginal, an intellectual counter-hegemonic discourse unable to mobilise wide political or popular support. In the period extending from the 14<sup>th</sup> century all the way to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sufism was central to Islamic piety in Egypt, to the degree that it is out of the question to describe Sufi practice during that period as popular Islam and its opponents as orthodox. The ruling classes were closely attached to Sufism. Sufism maintained close, though occasionally tense, contact with the tradition of scholarship embodied by al-Azhar, and until the 19<sup>th</sup> century most scholars of Islamic law were also affiliated to Sufi orders.<sup>18</sup> A combination of Sufism and *madhhab*-based scholarship was the orthodox Islam of the time.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. The invention of the society

The critical discourse on ecstatic rituals and festive culture never entirely disappeared, however, as is shown by ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān al-Jabartī (1753—ca. 1825), a pupil of Murtaḍā az-Zabīdī and author of a chronicle famous for its account of the French occupation of Egypt. While al-Jabartī himself attended *mawlids* and did not question the position of saints, his description of the *mawlid* of al-Ḥusayn expresses indignation about the habitus of the dervishes:

They would talk in ungrammatical phrases, believing them to be invocations, and repeat petitions. [...] Each gathered around him his likes, base people all. Then he would spend his night awake and greet the dawn dizzy and idle, believing that he had spent the night in devotion, invocation, and piety.<sup>20</sup>

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century this was the minority view of a critical intellectual, but the situation was about to change dramatically. Sometime

<sup>17</sup> Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, p. 156.

<sup>18</sup> Th. Emil Homerin, “Sufis and their Detractors in Mamluk Egypt”, in: *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, edited by Frederick de Jong and Berndt Radtke (Leiden et al.: Brill, 1999), pp. 225-247.

<sup>19</sup> Leila Hudson, “Reading al-Sha‘rānī: The Sufi Genealogy of Islamic Modernism in Late Ottoman Damascus”, in: *Journal of Islamic Studies* 15, no. 1 (2004), pp. 39-68; Mayeur-Jaouen, *Histoire d'un pèlerinage*, pp. 12-15; Itzhak Weismann, *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> al-Jabartī, *‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī’s History of Egypt*, vol. 3, p. 63.

around 1880, after decades of modernisation policies by Muḥammad ‘Alī (ruled 1805-1848) and his successors, and a growing influx of European concepts and administrative practices, criticism of ecstatic rituals rapidly gained ground among the new middle classes that had emerged in the course of the modernisation policies.<sup>21</sup> In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has increasingly gained ground among the middle classes (and those aspiring to join them) and today has come to represent a hegemonic “normal” point of view. But how did this discourse develop from the counter-hegemony of an intellectual elite to the “orthodox” point of view it is widely taken to be today? And is it really the same discourse?

Although apparently similar, the critical discourse on *mawlid*s after 1880 is in fact very different from al-Jabartī’s account. While some of the arguments it operates with are similar to those of earlier generations, its subject matter is different. Let us, for example, take an article by Muḥammad ‘Abduh in the newspaper *al-Wathā’iq al-Miṣriyya* about the prohibition issued by the administration of public *awqāf* (religious endowments) on the public gathering of the Sa‘diyya order at a major pilgrimage mosque:

When they stand up for *dhikr* (ritual meditation, in this case in the form of dance) they lower the ugly voices of their many percussions with their disturbing noise, and begin to supplicate meaningless expressions. And as the wine of illusions grows stronger in their minds they become crazy as lunatics, and some of them take off their clothes and take pieces of burning charcoal from the fire, put them in their mouths and touch their bodies with them as a demonstration of the grace/miracle (*karāma*). And God forbid that all these violent movements and all this strange confusion be a miracle. It is their custom to show up with this kind of practice in the mosque of Sayyidnā al-Ḥusayn during his mawlid. Then people gather around them and the spectators crowd and confuse the minds of the visitors. [...] There is not one Sunna [of the Prophet] that would permit this kind of forbidden things (*munkarāt*) carried out by the ignorant in the mighty houses of God. On the contrary, the pure *sharī‘a* prohibits associating the invocation of God with instruments of amusements generally and without exception, especially since no reasonable person doubts that their intention in beating percussions and basing the *dhikr* on melodies is just amusement and delight that are prohibited by the Law.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Frederick de Jong, “Opposition to Sufism in Twentieth-Century Egypt (1900-1970)”, in: *Islamic Mysticism Contested*, pp. 310-323; Lucie Ryzova, *L’effendiya ou la modernité contestée*, (Cairo: CEDEJ, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Muḥammad ‘Abduh, “Ibṭāl al-bida’ min niẓārat al-awqāf al-‘umūmiyya”, in: *Tārīkh al-ustādh al-imām ash-shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh*, edited by Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, 2nd ed.,

This is an aesthetic argument very similar to those both in the mediaeval *kutub al-bida'* and in the public debates of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, describing the scenery as 'disturbing' and 'ugly' and phrasing the opposition of true religion versus false innovations as an opposition of wholesome pious habitus versus noisy amusement and dirty chaos. On the surface, this argumentation stays well in the tradition of the debates on *bida'* and *samā'*, rejecting the use of musical instruments, the ecstatic behaviour of the Sufis, and the transgression of the boundaries that separate piety and amusement from the sacred and the profane.

But the argument is made in a new context and has a very different significance from that made by Muḥammad 'Abduh's predecessors. The improper behaviour of people at a mosque, Muḥammad 'Abduh further argues, is a matter of public concern, and prohibiting it a first step in the reform of public consciousness by education if possible, and by force if necessary:

[This prohibition] is to be considered the glorious basis of the prohibition of many illegitimate innovations (*bida'*). With it, a door to the good (*bāb min al-khayr*) has been opened and must be followed to the end, God willing. And that shall reach out from Cairo to the villages of the countryside. Thus the followers of the paths of illegitimate innovations (*turuq al-bida'*) have to give them up before the hand of Justice catches them and they are forced to do so.<sup>23</sup>

While basing his argumentation on references to the Islamic tradition, Muḥammad 'Abduh is in fact participating in a far-reaching redefinition of religion, morality and communal life. Muḥammad 'Abduh was part of a movement among Egypt's political and intellectual elites searching for a way to modernise the nation and lift it from its perceived state of backwardness and ignorance. His argumentation against ecstatic states is part of this emerging ideology of reform, progress and nationalism. In earlier debates on festive and ritual behaviour, Muslim scholars had been mainly concerned with the legal status of discrete practices and their implication on the salvation of the individual believer. While their concern was to determine how to act according to God's command-

---

vol. 2 (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Manār, 1344 H [1924-25 A.D.]), pp. 133-136, here: p. 135. First published in *al-Wathā'iq al-Miṣriyya*, 4 Dhū l-Hijja 1297 (7 Nov. 1880).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 136. See also Muḥammad 'Abduh, "Buṭlān ad-dawsa", in: *Tārīkh al-ustādh al-īmām ash-shaykh Muḥammad 'Abduh*, vol. 2, pp. 136-138, here: p. 138. First published in *al-Wathā'iq al-Miṣriyya*, 16 Rabī' II 1298 (18 March 1881).

ments, to develop a pious character, and, ultimately, to get to paradise,<sup>24</sup> the modernists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century spoke in very different tones. Abstaining from sin and the company of the deviant was no longer enough: society and religion as a whole had to be purified, reformed and modernised. Egyptian politicians and intellectuals began to speak of Egypt as a nation (*umma* in the contemporary idiom),<sup>25</sup> a society suffering from a state of backwardness but striving to be equal to the European powers.<sup>26</sup> The behaviour of people, perceived now as citizens of the nation, at public festivals became a problem of national scale, and reforming them a key to the nation's progress. At the same time, the critical discourse on festivals shifted from discrete practices, as had been the style of *kutub al-bida'*, to a systemic view of *mawlid*s 'as such', an issue that could be described and related to the wider system of society.

An influential piece of this discourse on progress was a book published in 1902 under the title *The Present State of Egyptians, or the Cause of Their Retrogression*, written by Muḥammad 'Umar, a civil servant employed by the Egyptian Post Office.<sup>27</sup> The title of the book is an explicit reference

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Muḥammad Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Ghazālī on Disciplining the Soul (Kitāb Riyādat al-nafs) and Breaking the Two Desires (Kitāb Kāsr al-shahwatayn): Books XXII and XXIII of The Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn)*, transl. T.J. Winter, 55-66 (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that *umma* in late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Egypt primarily meant nation in the secular nationalist sense and only secondarily the community of all Muslims. This ambiguity in the Arabic use of the term remains present until today.

<sup>26</sup> Aḥmad Zakariyyā ash-Shilq, *Ru'ya fi taḥdīth al-fikr al-Miṣrī: ash-Shaykh Husayn al-Marṣafī wa-kitābuhu 'Risālat al-kalīm ath-thamān', ma' a an-naṣṣ al-kāmil li-l-kitāb* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-miṣriyya al-'amma li-l-kitāb, 1984), pp. 63-84; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London and New York: Verso, 1991 [1983]); Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 119-127; for the further development of nationalist narratives and imageries, see Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995); Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood*.

<sup>27</sup> Muḥammad 'Umar, *Hādīr al-miṣriyyīn aw sīr ta'akkhurihim* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Muqtaṭaf, 1902). The title page carries an English translation of the title. See also Alain Roussillon, "Réforme sociale et production des classes moyennes: Muhammad 'Umar et 'l'arriération des Egyptiens,'" in: *Entre réforme sociale et mouvement national: Identité et modernisation en Égypte (1882-1982)*, edited by Alain Roussillon (Cairo: CEDEJ, 1995), pp. 37-87. It was speculated at the time that Muḥammad 'Umar may be a pseudonym and that Aḥmad Faṭḥī Zaḡhlūl (see below note 25), who wrote a preface to the book, was the real author (so, e.g., Muḥammad Fahmī 'Abd al-Laṭīf, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī wa-dawlat ad-darāwīsh fi Miṣr*, 3rd ed. (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-miṣriyya al-'amma li-l-kitāb, 1999 [1948]), p. 169). However the fact that the author proudly identifies himself as a civil servant employed by the Egyptian Post

to Edmond Demolins' *À quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons*,<sup>28</sup> which had been recently translated into Arabic by Aḥmad Faṭḥī Zaghlūl<sup>29</sup> and was well received in nationalist and reformist circles: Rashīd Riḍā, pupil of Muḥammad 'Abduh and father of the Salafi movement in Egypt, wrote a praising review of the Arabic translation, arguing that Egyptians had a lot to learn from the British.<sup>30</sup> Demolins (1852-1907), a French social scientist, saw the roots of British advantage in the racial superiority of the Anglo-Saxons and in a system of education that transmitted not only knowledge but also practical virtues, producing intellectuals with a pioneering spirit. It was the latter issue that greatly impressed Egyptian nationalists, among them the author of *The Present State of Egyptians* who in his book set out to reveal the factors that prevented Egyptian society from developing. His approach is worthy of attention: not only does he make the opposition of progress and backwardness a leading theme of the book; he also presents Egyptian society as a system in which all parts are interdependent. Critical of the regional, ethnic and confessional classifications of Egyptian society dominant at that time, the author structures the book according to economic position: the rich, the middle classes, and the poor. The poor are problematised as a source of ignorance and moral decay, and their education and the reform of

---

Office on the title page and relates to events at his work in a post office in Qalyūb (p. 253) indicates that Muḥammad 'Umar may not be a pseudonym after all, at least not of Aḥmad Faṭḥī Zaghlūl.

<sup>28</sup> Edmond Demolins, *À quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons*, 5th ed. (Paris: Maison Didot, 1897).

<sup>29</sup> Edmond Demolins (Edmōn Dīmōlān), *Sirr taqaddum al-injīlīz as-saksūniyyīn*, translated by Aḥmad Faṭḥī Zaghlūl (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Jammāliyya, 1329 [1911]). The translator's introduction is dated 1899, but it is not clear whether this is a second edition or whether the translation remained unpublished in the meantime. Son of a wealthy family of landowners from the Nile Delta, Aḥmad Faṭḥī Zaghlūl (1863-1914) was the brother of Sa'd Zaghlūl, who was to become the leader of the nationalist movement and belonged to the same intellectual circle as Muḥammad 'Abduh and Qāsim Amīn. He translated several influential works of social theory from French into Arabic, including works by Demolins and Le Bon, Bentham's *Les principes de législation* and Rousseau's *Le contrat social*. Jamal Mohammed Ahmed, *The Intellectual Origins of Egyptian Nationalism* (London etc.: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 44ff.; Arthur Goldschmidt Jr., *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Egypt* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2000), pp. 233f.

<sup>30</sup> Emmanuel Sivan, "The Clash Within Islam", in: *Survival* 45, no. 1 (2003), pp. 25-44, here p. 35. A Turkish translation of the book found an interested readership among the Young Turk movement: Edmond Demolins, *Anglosaksonların esbâbı fâ'iqiyeti nedir?*, transl. A. Fu'ād and A. Nâci (Istanbul: 1330 [1912]).

their circumstances of life and customs appears as a necessary step for the development of the nation.

Among the many causes of retrogression presented in *The Present State of Egyptians*, *mawlid*s appear as a destructive influence on the morals of the poor and, consequently, an obstacle to improving the moral and religious quality of the nation at large:

These kinds of illusions that are so deeply rooted in the minds [of the poor] generally damage the morals and move them away from the foundation of correct belief, the example of virtue and the perfection of civilised manners (*kamāl al-adab*). These great state-sponsored *mawlid*s are gatherings for different kinds of people with diverse shapes and with manifold intentions, most of which are harmful to the morals and manners [...] through a mixture of illusions with good faith and naive morals and characters. We ask God to send someone to renew the religion of the commoners and cultivate their minds and change their simple-mindedness and delusions into good creeds that will reform their morals and manners. If only that were realised it would be a mighty success and splendid accomplishment.<sup>31</sup>

The concept of civilised manners, as I have translated *adab* here, is central to this critical account. While in the older Islamic tradition *adab* was the quality of an individual, involving certain forms of habitus and knowledge proper for a given situation and social context, it here shows striking similarity to the European concept of civilisation.<sup>32</sup> *Adab* had thus become the collective quality of a society embodying an advanced state of social, moral and cultural development. In this view, an old (although throughout much of Islamic history marginal) Islamic tradition of suspicion towards ecstatic emotional states, ambivalent festive traditions, and anything that would compromise a rigid and purified state of the body and soul, comes together with the novel concepts borrowed from European intellectual traditions: society—the organic whole in which different ethnic, confessional and professional groups belong to an organic and interdependent system; nation—the ideological frame of such society; progress—the linear and rational development of the nation towards a growing perfection and power; and religion—the moral and metaphysical foundation of the society that was to be judged by its ability to serve the nation’s progress. (It is important to

<sup>31</sup> Umar, *Hādīr al-Miṣrīyyīn*, p. 257.

<sup>32</sup> See Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, “Introduction: Le corps et le sacré en Orient musulman”, in: *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 113-114 (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 2007), pp. 9-33, here p. 20.

note how central the entity of the nation-state soon became in spite of the competition presented by Ottoman loyalism and—until today—pan-Islamic solidarity.) Self-evident as these concepts may seem in our time, in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Egypt it was radically new to see elites and commoners, Turko-Circassians and Arabs, and Muslims and Christians as part of one organic whole, and even more novel was the propensity to measure religion by its functionality for a secular political programme.

#### 4. Hegemonic encounters

Muḥammad ‘Umar’s Egyptian remake of Demolins’ cultural vision is telling of the complex role that the encounter with European social science and administrative practice played in the emergence of a new view of society. The development of key categories such as nation, progress and civilisation, society, religion, and *adab*, owed clear allegiance to European models, yet as the case of *adab* especially well demonstrates, they were not simply borrowed from or imposed by the West, but developed in encounter with Western inputs. This encounter was, of course, a highly unequal one. The transfer of ideas, technologies, goods and administrative practices took place in a situation of economical, political, technological and military asymmetry. A consequence of this asymmetry of power was that in resisting European hegemony, Egyptians had to act upon the terms of the hegemonic power relations. This is not to imply that there would have been no agency left for those at the subaltern end of the power relationship. European powers and cultures were not a determining factor, but rather one of the key points of reference in an innovative process of redefining religion and society.

The reference to Europe is, in fact, central to the whole debate on popular festivals. Common to most of the critical accounts of *mawlid*s from this period is their concern about foreigners observing the festivals. The argument that *mawlid*s express and encourage immoral behaviour, thus keeping the nation off the path of civilisation, is directly paired with the claim that they serve as an open door to foreign domination. This is pointedly expressed in a 1929 press article that demanded the complete abolition of *mawlid*s, arguing that they

are nothing but various expressions of religious, moral and social vices and truthful expressions of the moral deficiency latent in the minds of a large group of



people. And those *mawlid*s incite them and assist them in increasing it (i.e., the moral deficiency). [...] Thus why not abolish these dangerous customs that let loose the bonds from all peoples civilised or on the way to civilisation, and that are the source of moral and religious corruption, and which furthermore are a cause for the contempt of the foreigners on us ...<sup>33</sup>

The author underlines his argument with the story of two Americans who wanted to visit a *mawlid* with their wives. The visit became a disaster as the women were severely harassed by the crowds:

Then the pinching turned against them. They bore it for some time until they fled the crowd saying "Savages, savages!" And [one must know that] the word savages is the political expression for people who, according to the international law of the Western nations, may be colonised and subjected under absolute rule.<sup>34</sup>

This experience of being represented as savages or, more commonly, Orientals and hence legitimate subjects of colonisation, is a key to understanding the development of this critical view. The problem for the Egyptian nationalist of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was not just that parts of society were backward and uncivilised. The problem was that they were being seen and represented as such by Europeans and that this was used as a justification for colonial rule.

The encounter with European hegemony (which began long before colonial rule) was formative for the Egyptian modernist criticism of *mawlid*s. Beginning in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Egyptian intellectual and political elites became aware of the enormous technological and military advancement of European powers, which led to the modernisation policies of Muḥammad 'Alī and his successors. These policies led to the creation of a centralised state apparatus with a growing number of tasks, a new understanding of public order<sup>35</sup> and the emergence of the *afandiyya*, a civil service-based Egyptian Muslim middle class<sup>36</sup> that

---

<sup>33</sup> Ḥanafī 'Āmir, "al-Mawālid: 'ādāt yajib al-qaḍā' 'alayhā", in: *as-Siyāsa al-Uṣbū'iyya*, 21 December 1929, p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Mine Ener, "Getting into the Shelter of Takiyat Tulun", in: *Outside in: On the Margins of the Modern Middle East*, edited Eugene Rogan (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Egypt was a society stratified by ethnic and confessional divisions. Most civil servants were Christians, while the higher ranks of the state apparatus were occupied by Turko-Circassians. See: Gabriel Baer, *Studies in the Social History of Modern Egypt* (Chicago etc.: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 216-222. It is worth not-

gained a central role in the nationalist movement.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, the growing European presence and British occupation in 1882 led to the emergence of a split between ‘modern’ or ‘civilised’ European culture and public order, and a ‘backward’ Oriental society. This division was a key to the colonialist worldview, the Orient serving as a negative mirror image used to construct a Western self-image and an ideological rationalisation of colonialism.<sup>38</sup> It came to be strongly felt in Egypt with the dissemination of a Victorian understanding of education and public order, the development of a strong class divide between Egyptians and mostly European minorities, and the increasing exoticization of local culture, most visibly marked by the construction of new European-style districts inhabited by foreigners and the new upper and middle classes.<sup>39</sup>

Part of the Orientalist and colonial worldview and self-justification was the representation of Islam and the Orient as sensual and irrational. Part of this imagery, *mawlid*s and ecstatic Sufi rituals came to appear as ‘morbid and unwholesome deviations’<sup>40</sup> and religious fanaticism at worst, and as a form of recreation characteristic of the idle Oriental at best:

[The young Egyptian’s] recreation is the periodical *moulid*, or fair, or a quiet lazy evening outside the restaurant, sipping coffee and smoking the inevitable cigarette, enjoying a gossip with his neighbour. The warmth of the climate and his habits permit of no further exertion.<sup>41</sup>

It was not only ecstatic rituals and festivals but also core Islamic rituals and traditions of learning in general that became part of the Orientalist/colonial image of the irrationality and backwardness of Islam

---

ing that the author of *The Present State of Egyptians* explicitly identifies himself with this new middle class.

<sup>37</sup> Ryzova, *L’effendiya*, pp. 21-28.

<sup>38</sup> This argument has been most prominently put forward by Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); See also Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*.

<sup>39</sup> Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*.

<sup>40</sup> Rudolph, crown prince of Austria, cit. by Gregory Starrett, “The hexis of interpretation: Islam and the body in the Egyptian popular school”, in: *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 4 (1995), pp. 953-969, here p. 957.

<sup>41</sup> Alfred Cunningham, *To-Day in Egypt: Its Administration, People and Politics* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1912), p. 213.

and Muslims. In the earlier Islamic traditions of ethics, virtuous life and salvation in the hereafter were intrinsically linked to embodied practices of praying, ritual purity, recitation, etc. But these practices were not instrumental to anything (or, to be precise, not anything that could be gained in this world):<sup>42</sup> they stood for themselves as core elements of a normative order, which is why Europeans, expecting abstract virtues at the core, found them meaningless. Consequently, European observers interpreted key rituals such as *wuḍūʿ* (ritual washing) and *ṣalāt* (ritual prayer) as mere form without any deeper meaning and depicted the education of Qurʾān schools (*kuttāb*) where pupils would sit on the ground around a *sheikh* moving rhythmically while memorising the Qurʾān as the very opposite of any real education, ‘sensual, primitive, and antirational’.<sup>43</sup>

Gregory Starrett argues that this perception was based on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century European, and particularly the British Victorian self-image of rational, internalised piety that was expected to be expressed in a quiet and constrained habitus. In the context of colonialism, the Muslim body became a site of inscribing European hegemony. The bodily movement of dervishes in a *dhikr*, worshippers performing *wuḍūʿ* and praying five times a day, and pupils in a *kuttāb* came to be represented as expressions of meaningless and blind ritual standing in direct opposition to philosophical, pious, moral disposition and, consequently, true civilisation.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> This does not mean that religion would have been free of functional interpretations. Ibn Khaldūn, for example, sees religion as necessary and instrumental for the success of societies. But he does not undertake any kind of justification of religion the way Muslim elites in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries did in the face of a non-Islamic and often anti-Islamic colonial hegemony. For Ibn Khaldūn and probably even more for others of his time, the primacy of the hereafter stood beyond doubt and worldly politics appeared as secondary: ‘[A] religious polity is useful both for this and for the after life, for men have not been created solely for this world, which is full of vanity and evil and whose end is death and annihilation. And God himself has said: “Think you that we have created you in vain!” Rather, men have been created for their religion, which leads them to happiness in the after life, and “this is the path of God, who possesses Heaven and Earth”.’ (Ibn Khaldūn, *An Arab Philosophy of History: Selections from the Prolegomena of Ibn Khaldun of Tunis (1332-1402)*, translated and edited by Charles Issawi [Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1987], pp. 143ff.). It is likely that modern Islamists would, if asked, subscribe to such a view of a primacy of the spiritual over the temporal, but the determination and activism they show regarding temporal political matters implicate that the vanity of this world is hardly a guiding topic for them.

<sup>43</sup> Starrett, “The hexis of interpretation”, p. 955.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 958.

While the Victorian observers doubted whether ritual practice could lead to virtues, they certainly did believe in embodiment. They *saw* lack of true internal piety. And the belief in embodiment carries with it a flip side: the faith in habituation, i.e., creating attitudes and dispositions through bodily practice. And this is, in fact, what the modernising state and the colonial rule were busy with most of the time: establishing schools, administration, and positive law in European fashion, training experts for modern technologies, creating new kinds of urban structures, all legitimised by the claim to civilising Egyptians.<sup>45</sup> What we have at hand here is more complex, thus, than an opposition of an Aristotelian habituation of virtues versus Protestant/liberal inner values as Saba Mahmood has suggested.<sup>46</sup> It was not just the focus on bodily ritual that made Muslim religious practice and education appear meaningless to Western observers, but the fact that they did not seem to produce the virtues appreciated by Europeans and required for the administration of the colonial state.<sup>47</sup>

This is why *mawlid*s, in the view of Egyptian modernists, contributed to colonial domination: They expressed (and, following the logic of embodiment and habituation, produced) forms of religiosity, social organisation, and ethical dispositions that were backward and irrational from the point of view of Europeans, thus demonstrating Egypt's inferiority *vis-à-vis* European powers. Egyptian modernism was for a large part counter-hegemonic to this colonial project, and, following the logic of hegemonic power, it competed with European hegemony without being in a position of fully questioning the standards and the issues set by the latter. Thus, when Europeans claimed Egypt to be backward and Islam to be irrational, Egyptian modernists did not reply by questioning the categories of progress and rationality, but by trying to demonstrate the rationality of Islam and to initiate the progress of Egypt. To stand equal to the challenge of colonialism, the nation (in itself a recent innovation)<sup>48</sup> had to display the same kind of virtues as Europe did (or

---

<sup>45</sup> For an excellent document of this *Zeitgeist*, see Cunningham, *To-Day in Egypt*.

<sup>46</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>47</sup> For a more abstract development of this line of analysis, see Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (London etc.: Routledge, 2003 [1970]), esp. p. 158.

<sup>48</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, pp. 119-127.

was seen to display in the perception of Egyptians): rationalism, discipline, industry, constraint, progress, and cultivation, while holding on to core values that could make Egyptians not only equal but, at least in terms of morality and religion, superior to Europeans. What did not express these virtues had to be either made do so, or abolished.

## 5. Selection and exclusion

It is obvious that defending and promoting the progress of the nation and the glory of Islam on such terms could not take place without significant reshaping of the subjects of defence and promotion. In confrontation with colonial rule, various European and Islamic traditions were reshaped, reinterpreted and moulded together to create a new discursive formation.<sup>49</sup> But what was selected, and what excluded? And what were the criteria for inclusion and exclusion?

One of the most explicit and influential expressions of this synthesis and the subsequent exclusion of *mawlid*s from the realm of true culture is Muḥammad Fahmī ‘Abd al-Laṭīf’s book *as-Sayyid al-Badawī and the Dervish State in Egypt*,<sup>50</sup> first published in 1948 and reprinted in 1979 and 1998. Half an ethnography and half a polemic pamphlet, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī* is a study about and against the cult that developed around as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī and its effects on society.

‘Abd al-Laṭīf contributed to the development of Egyptian folklore studies and wrote an influential study on Sufi music (which is the only part of *mawlid*s and Sufi rituals that won words of appreciation from him).<sup>51</sup> ‘Abd al-Laṭīf’s analysis is strongly influenced by social theories globally current in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when concepts such as race and national character played a key role in the debate on why some nations grew powerful while others did not. While racial theories

---

<sup>49</sup> Such a relationship works in two directions, of course, and the colonial encounter shaped the coloniser as it did the colonised. The European side of this encounter, however, lies beyond the focus of this study. See Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>50</sup> Muḥammad Fahmī ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī wa-dawlat ad-darāwīsh fī Miṣr*, Maktabat ad-dirāsāt ash-sha’biyya; 30 (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-miṣriyya al-‘amma li-l-kitāb, 1999 [1948]).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 166ff.

had little appeal for Egyptians, the concept of national character found a very positive response. ‘Abd al-Laṭīf makes explicit reference to Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931), a French social psychologist whose most influential work *Psychologie des foules* had been translated into Arabic in 1909 by the same Aḥmad Faṭḥī Zaghlūl who had also translated *À quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons*.<sup>52</sup> Like Demolins, Le Bon was popular among Egyptian intellectuals because he offered ways to think about the civic virtues required for the development of nations and the forms of education required to create them, and several of his books were translated into Arabic.<sup>53</sup> Le Bon’s most important contribution to the intellectual debates of his time was his development of the concept of the crowd. The crowd, according to Le Bon, is characterised by its irrational, impulsive and extreme behaviour based on the collective subconscious, which is also expressed in its religiosity and political actions.<sup>54</sup> Le Bon, like Demolins a supporter of the Anglo-Saxon educational system, believed that a civilised and powerful nation needed an elite with education and character to provide it with rational self-control to discipline the power of the subconscious.<sup>55</sup>

In *as-Sayyid al-Badawī*, ‘Abd al-Laṭīf depicts the *mawlid* of as-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī as a site of crazy rituals, chaos and immorality, all ruled by dark irrationality not only incompatible with true (that is, Salafi)<sup>56</sup> Islam and the disposition of the modern, progressive citizen,

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145; Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1895); *Idem.*, (Güstāf Lūbūn), *Rūḥ al-ijtimāʿ*, translated by Aḥmad Faṭḥī Zaghlūl (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat ash-Shaʿb, 1909). For the wider influence of Le Bon in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Egypt, see Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, pp. 122-125.

<sup>53</sup> See previous note and Gustave Le Bon (Güstāf Lūbūn), *Rūḥ at-tarbiya* (Psychologie de l’éducation), translated by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (Cairo: Idārat al-Hilāl, undated [ca. 1922]); *Idem.*, *Jawāmiʿ al-Kalim*, translated by Aḥmad Faṭḥī Zaghlūl (Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa ar-Raḥmāniyya, 1922).

<sup>54</sup> Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules*, pp. 11-47, 60-66.

<sup>55</sup> Le Bon, *Les Opinions et les Croyances: Genèse—Évolution* (Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1911), pp. 45ff., 55-60; *Idem.*, *Psychologie de l’éducation*, 13e édition augmentée de plusieurs chapitres sur les méthodes d’éducation en Amérique (Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1910), electronic document available at [http://www.uqac.quebec.ca/zone30/Classiques\\_des\\_sciences\\_sociales/classiques/le\\_bon\\_gustave/psycho\\_education/psycho\\_education.html](http://www.uqac.quebec.ca/zone30/Classiques_des_sciences_sociales/classiques/le_bon_gustave/psycho_education/psycho_education.html), viewed 13 September 2005. For an overview of Le Bon’s work, see Denis Touret, “Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931): Une psychologie sociale réaliste” [http://www.denistouret.net/ideologues/Le\\_Bon.html](http://www.denistouret.net/ideologues/Le_Bon.html), viewed 15 July 2005.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Abd al-Laṭīf openly associates himself with the icons of Salafiyya: Aḥmad ibn Taymi-

but also 'an obstacle in the way of every reform and every awakening (*nuhūd*)'.<sup>57</sup> He conceives the *mawlid* as the expression of a religious consciousness of the 'people' (*sha'b*) or the 'masses' (*jamāhīr*) who, very much like Le Bon's crowd, are led by their subconscious emotions that are inaccessible to reasonable argumentation.<sup>58</sup> The effects of this religious mass consciousness are disastrous:

There is no doubt that this sentiment had the worst effect on the Egyptian society and the gravest contribution to damaging the authentic Islamic belief. For it filled the spirits with submission and capitulation, it caused them to completely sink into their trust in God, to leave everything to fate and destiny, to let things take their course, and to put their trust in all matters in those dervishes and sheikhs. It led them to believe that [the saints] were able to repel the worst misfortune and to bring about the dearest fortune. Thus the worker doesn't work and the trader doesn't care for his business. The farmer doesn't tend to his field, the sick man does not worry about his illness and the oppressed doesn't try to overcome his oppression. They all believe that their needs will be satisfied by the miracles of the saints, and that nothing can harm them except by force of predestination, so that there is no need to make any effort or exert oneself.<sup>59</sup>

This depiction of the cult of saints and anything connected to it as false consciousness bears witness to the developing conflict between an ambivalent moral subject uniting piety, ecstasy, fun, food and sexuality at the *mawlid* and a disciplined, purified (but in consequence also fragmented) moral subject advocated by the reformist and modernist movements.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, it turns *mawlid*s from merely a site of deviance into a subsystem within society, a cultural configuration representing the opposite of modern society and true Islam. This criticism of ritual and festive order produces the analytical lines necessary to define disciplined reason and uncontrolled subconsciousness, orthodox Islam and popular beliefs, progress and backwardness, nationalism and colonial domination. The festive culture of *mawlid*s is objectified as a system of its own: a

---

yya, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb, Jamāl ad-Dīn al-Afghānī, Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā, 'Abd al-Laṭīf, *as-Sayyid al-Badawī*, pp. 152, 173.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 143f.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150f.

<sup>60</sup> See Samuli Schielke, *Snacks and Saints: Mawlid Festivals and the Politics of Festivity, Piety, and Modernity in Contemporary Egypt*, PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2006, pp. 96-99, 105-110.

parallel false religion, both a threat to true religion and a marker of its boundaries.

The mawliids that we see today are not a matter of religion: they are popular (*shaʿbī*) festivities whose appearances/phenomena (*mazāhir*) and rituals have become mixed with the emotions of the people (*ash-shaʿb*) since ancient times and become rooted in the subconscious, as psychologists call it. And these phenomena, deep-rooted beliefs as they are, have the sanctity of religious rituals in their minds.<sup>61</sup>

The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were a key period for the discursive construction of new objects: religion as an ideological and rationalised system, nation as an organic whole of interdependent classes, rationality as a habitus and a visible matrix of order. This representation of the social world as a rationalised ideological system has been key to the project of modernity in general. The problem, however, is that social reality does not have objective boundaries to facilitate the separation of objects from each other: there is no *a priori* way to tell when *dhikr* is a key element of Islam and when it is a popular custom, or to define whether people's devotion to saints is an expression of love or worship. Objects such as religion, nation and rationality have to be constructed from a mass of contingent and weakly structured data. Chaïm Perelman,<sup>62</sup> in his theory of argumentative rhetoric, shows that key concepts of philosophical theories are all constructed through the argumentative operation of dissociation. It is an operation that always creates two objects: a thing, and its opposite whose identity with the former is denied.

ʿAbd al-Laṭīf thus demonstrates the trick to Egyptian modernity: The union of European-inspired civic virtues and authentic Islamic and Egyptian values works because a dividing line is drawn straight through the field of religious devotion and communal values. The Egyptian modernist distinguishes between true rationalist religion on the one hand, capable of forming the normative foundation of a modern, progressive society, and false popular beliefs on the other, guided by uncontrollable emotions, exploited by charlatans, and responsible for the shortcomings in the project of modernity. The same logic is applied to tradition:

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>62</sup> Chaïm Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *Traité de l'argumentation* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1958); Chaïm Perelman, *L'empire rhétorique: rhétorique et argumentation* (Paris: Vrin, 1977).



Egyptian modernity can only stand on the firm foundation of authentic heritage (*turāth*) on the condition that the actual historically transmitted culture of Egyptians is separated into true heritage on the one hand and false, backward customs (in other words, negative heritage) on the other.

This particular set of selections and exclusions to create 'true' heritage and to dissociate it from 'false' customs favoured elements that could harmonise with each other. It was the contingent product of a specific historical constellation, in which hegemonic relations of power made some choices more reasonable than others. The colonial situation did not determine the choices that were made by Egyptian intellectuals, but it did greatly influence the set of conflicts and significant problems to be discussed. The influence of the work of Demolins and Le Bon in Egypt, for example, depended largely on the personal engagement and preferences of Aḥmad Faṭḥī Zaghlūl. But these choices were made in face of specific urgent problems which made the translation of social theory and the edition of *kutub al-bidaʿ* a meaningful enterprise in the first place.

In late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Egypt, the hegemonic forms of European modernity were the capitalist expansion and administrative rationalisation of the industrial revolution—which in Egypt preceded the colonial period—the moralist and pietist discourse and aesthetics of Victorian Britain—mainly represented by the colonial system—, and French social theories that gained currency in nationalist intellectual circles. Late 19<sup>th</sup>-century French social scientists the like of Demolins and Le Bon offered systemic and top-down explanations for the development of nations and advocated what they saw as the Anglo-Saxon model of education based on the habituation of a rational, active state of mind. They offered a response to Victorian pietism, showing that practices like *ṣalāt* and *wuḍūʿ* might, through the habituation of virtuous practice, lead to virtuous inner states after all. They provided a way to reinterpret the Islamic tradition of *adab* and learning through bodily practice in a way that would conform to the Victorian view of the embodiment of virtue (and, consequently, civilisation) in quiet and constrained behaviour. Additionally, they provided the nationalists of the new *afandiyya* middle class with a powerful ideology of progressive elitism.

On the other side of the bargain, the Islamic tradition of ritual reform with its scholarly social base, its rationalist tendency and strong fear of

uncontrolled emotion, and its identification of piety with constrained bodily disposition and strict morality, was the most suited to stand equal to the European challenge. Hence it developed from the counter-hegemonic discourse of a small scholarly elite into a metaphysical foundation and perceived true heritage upon which a unity of authenticity and progress could be claimed. Other European definitions of modernity remained marginal to the emerging discourse of modernity and Islamic reform, and other definitions of Islam were increasingly marginalised and constructed as the expression and cause of the weakness that had so long kept 'true' culture from developing and flourishing.

*Wuḍū'* was reinterpreted to teach and express cleanliness and *ṣalāt* to teach and express order. What appeared frivolous to the Victorian observer was turned into a 'central sign of civilization'.<sup>63</sup> What is interesting about these cases is not so much the redefinition of the rituals themselves but the fact that religion came to be defined through its rationality and functionality.<sup>64</sup> In a similar manner, the *kuttāb* education was replaced by state schools with a very different kind of discipline and habitus, and a new concept of education. While the *kuttāb's* primary purpose was to teach the Qur'ān, the modern school was conceived of as instrumental to the national project.<sup>65</sup> Finally, one part of the response was to admit that some of the practices singled out by the Orientalist representations were indeed terribly irrational and backward but to deny their having anything to do with the true shape of Islam and Egyptian culture. This is what happened to *mawlid*s. Reformist and modernist discourses defined them as a specific issue (let us remember that in the pre-modern debates, only specific practices related to festivals, but not the festivals themselves, have been documented as subjects of discourse) and excluded them from the realm of orthodox Islam and progressive modernity, and thus from the true substance of the nation, not because there was something inherently un-Islamic or irrational about them, but because their particular form of festive time, their order, and their

<sup>63</sup> Starrett, "The hexis of interpretation", p. 961.

<sup>64</sup> Abdulkader Tayob, "Reading Religion and the Religious in Modern Islam", inaugural lecture at Radboud University Nijmegen, 10 September 2004, <http://www.ru.nl/search/contents/pages/11712/ruoratietyabbinnenwerk.pdf> (accessed 11 Nov. 2005).

<sup>65</sup> Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, pp. 82-90. See also Benjamin Fortna, *The Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

habitus did not fit the newly constructed habitus of the authentic yet enlightened Muslim, and did not comply with the new rationality of the progressive nation.

This new understanding of religion and society cannot be reduced to either the pre-existing Islamic traditions or the colonial hegemony. It was an innovative synthesis of both, attempting to reform society and its religion to stand against the European challenge, and in doing so, creating a new and dramatic split between 'orthodox' and 'popular' Islam and 'modern' and 'backward' culture. When European observers claimed Islam to be a backward and irrational religion, Muslim intellectuals replied with a twofold strategy: reinterpreting part of the religious and cultural traditions as the true, authentic heritage that would match European standards and serve as the moral foundation of the nation's progress, and excluding other parts from the modernist project by labeling them backward superstitions at worst, popular religion and folklore at best, but never equal to the true, at once authentic and modern culture.

## 6. Critique and distinction

The voices quoted in this study are characterised by a strong elitist perception of simple-minded and naive commoners in need of cultivation and enlightenment (a perception that has since been shared by most Egyptian modernists). Peasants, petty traders, artisans and, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, urban working classes, appear here in a curious double role. In one role, they appear as easy prey to false consciousness and moral vices, a potential danger and a subject of distrust and contempt that allows the emerging middle classes to posit their own supremacy. In another role, they are middle class citizens in becoming, 'the raw clay with which cultural elites [...] could mold an image of the modern Egyptian'<sup>66</sup> and cultivating them becomes the task (and therefore justification) of the intellectual middle classes. The elitism of intellectuals and scholars is, of course, not new. But while mediaeval Islamic scholars like Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd were concerned with protecting the

---

<sup>66</sup> Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 29.

commoners from the potential dangers of engaging themselves with complex esoteric knowledge,<sup>67</sup> in the modernist and reformist discourse elites and commoners are perceived as parts of an interdependent system: the nation. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century nationalists the like of Muḥammad ‘Umar shared with their classical predecessors a strong elitist distinction from the masses but embedded it in a nationalist view of being one with the same commoners whom they wanted to distinguish themselves from. What could be a better role, then, than that of the *avant-garde*, an elite at once distinguished from ‘the masses’ and committed to their uplifting?<sup>68</sup>

By reconfiguring religion to serve the newly invented nation, members of the emerging *afandiyya* middle classes claimed power for themselves, and denied other groups in society this power: peasants, the urban poor, guilds, mystical brotherhoods, and the Turko-Circassian political elites. Taking the role of the *avant-garde*, nationalist intellectuals (in the widest sense, including not only authors and academics, but also students, civil servants, teachers, engineers, doctors and free professions) could claim the unity of the nation while excluding other contenders from the power to define it. For this purpose, it was necessary not only to create a reading of Islam and modernity that would stand the European challenge, but also to exclude other readings as backward, superstitious, immoral and erroneous. To construct true orthodox Islam and modern Egyptian society, a significant part of Muslim piety and Egyptian culture was excluded as another, an expression of false and backward popular customs.

In this light, the debate on saints-day festivals appears as a marker of the modern self and society, a perception parallel to the Orientalist perception of Egypt. These exclusions work in ways very similar to those of the colonial city analysed by Timothy Mitchell:

The identity of the modern city is created by what it keeps out. Its modernity is something contingent upon the exclusion of its own opposite. In order to determine itself as the place of order, reason, propriety, cleanliness, civilisation and power, it must represent outside itself what is irrational, disordered, dirty, libidinous,

---

<sup>67</sup> Iysa A. Bello, *The Medieval Islamic Controversy between Philosophy and Orthodoxy: Ijmā‘ and Ta’wīl in the Conflict between al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd* (Leiden etc.: Brill, 1989), pp. 58, 70ff.

<sup>68</sup> Ryzova, *L’effendiya*, pp. 23-26.

barbarian and cowed. The city requires the “outside” in order to present itself, in order to constitute its singular, uncorrupted identity.<sup>69</sup>

The findings of this study do, however, suggest a different interpretation than that offered by Mitchell. Mitchell focuses on colonial modernity primarily as a hegemonic project of European powers, imposed upon Egypt and increasingly taken over by Egyptian middle classes and political elites. In contrast, I posit that the project of modernity and Islamic reform must be understood as a counter-hegemonic enterprise which, trying to overcome the exclusions and distinctions of colonial power relations, imposed new, similar but not identical ones to structure the fabric of the newly invented society. Being counter-hegemonic, this project also implied a promise of power and success, which it partly did fulfil (even though many other promises remained unfulfilled) in the course of national independence and the successful reach of the *afandiyya* middle classes for intellectual hegemony in the nationalist project. The project of modernity is powerful through the prospect of hegemony it offers to those willing and capable of participating in it. It is this combination of aspiration and distinction that has made it so spectacularly successful in transforming the common sense of religion and community among the middle classes and those hoping to join them.

And indeed the search for distinction has been characteristic for the aspirants of modernity in Egypt from the very beginnings of the modernisation policies, as was noted by Georg August Wallin, a Finnish Orientalist who in 1844 met ‘one of those scamps whom the Pasha has sent to Europe for study, this one a mechanician, and who have returned half-educated and thousand times worse than before.’ In the house of a German family in Cairo where both were invited, the discussion turned to the *maḥmal* procession, a colourful parade which used to mark the transport from Cairo to Mecca of a new *kiswa* to cover the Ka’ba prior to the *hajj*, and Wallin who had greatly enjoyed the procession the same day, was annoyed to hear the Austrian-trained mechanic ‘condemn and ridicule these customs of his religion, and calling them nonsense’.<sup>70</sup> More than a century later, the distinction through criticism

<sup>69</sup> Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, p. 165.

<sup>70</sup> Georg August Wallin, *Georg August Wallins reseanteckningar från Orienten åren 1843-1849: Dagbok och bref*, edited by Sven Gabriel Elmgren (Helsingfors: Frenckell, 1864), vol. 2, p. 265.

of festive traditions that was undertaken by a member of this (at the time very small) professional class was to become the 'normal' point of view concerning religion and society to the degree that its novelty and innovativeness have become invisible, and its adherents able to claim their point of view as the self-evident orthodox Truth.

## **7. Imagined histories and the limits of 'discursive tradition'**

Islamic reformism and nationalist modernism, in their shared attempt to bestow religion and society with a rational and progressive spirit, were never based on a simple takeover of European concepts but rather developed in confrontation with and inspired by them, just as they, in their construction of true authentic heritage, never were based on a simple reference to the past but rather invented and interpreted it anew. Its sources of inspiration included the older Islamic tradition of ritual and moral reform, colonial administrative practice, Victorian piety and ethics, and French social theory, but the outcome of this selective reinterpretation was historically new, and cannot be reduced, in causal or structural terms, to any of the traditions it drew upon by evoking or opposing them.

The genealogy of the debate on *mawlid*s cannot, evidently, be reduced to any specific line of transmission. In this study, I have pointed to three concrete links for which good evidence is available: an Islamic tradition of ritual and moral reform, the Victorian moralist view and colonial administrative practice of internalised and embodied piety and rationality, and French social theories standing in the rationalist and systemic tradition of European enlightenment. Future research is likely to provide evidence of further links, but more crucial than the exact links is the way the transmission has worked. What we have at hand is not so much a transmission of theories and ideas (although, in the case of the reception of the works of Ibn Taymiyya, Demolins and Le Bon, that has happened as well) but of discursive constructions of objects, (for example, what religion is, what a nation is, what qualities they require to flourish, etc.). European discourses served a double role as a hegemonic order that imposed its logic upon its opponents, and as a source of inspiration for attempts to counter and overcome that

hegemony. Acting within and against this hegemony, modernist and reformist movements have been engaged in the active redefinition of religion and society that, rather than providing concrete answers and strategies, have come to determine the kind of questions that can be asked, the kind of arguments that can be made and the kind of measures that can be taken.

The genealogy of modern Islam presents a major paradigmatic shift that cannot be grasped by the concept of 'discursive tradition' introduced by Talal Asad in his paper *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*<sup>71</sup> in 1986. Without aiming to deny the advantage of 'discursive tradition' as compared to earlier approaches in the anthropology of Islam, I find it necessary to point at the limitations of the concept. While it can be very useful for understanding the continuity and persistence of certain topics, it is not very helpful for grasping transformations, especially when they occur in a global context that exceeds the scope of the preceding tradition.

Critical of both nominalist and essentialist notions of Islam, Asad argues that Islam should be understood as a tradition consisting of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. [...] An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to the conceptions of the Islamic past and the future.<sup>72</sup>

Describing Islam as a discursive tradition has become highly popular in recent years because it promises a way to say what Islam 'is' without falling into the trap of essentialism. It connects the historical sources of Islam with their contemporary interpretation and recognises the heterogeneity and contingency of such tradition while still offering something concrete for the researcher to grasp.

Empirically, describing Islam as a discursive tradition is as equally accurate as it is to say that Islam is a religion. Normative discursive traditions of the kind sketched by Asad can be found in all religions, as well as in the arts, sciences, and political ideologies. The epistemological range of the concept is restricted, however. This is of course the case

---

<sup>71</sup> Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Occasional Papers Series, (Washington / DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986).

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

with all scientific concepts and theories, and yet when a concept becomes 'trendy' in academic discourse, researchers are tempted to apply it indiscriminately in fields where it may or may not have the heuristic value it had in its original context of application. This is what has happened to the concept of discourse analysis since its popularisation in the 1980s and 1990s, and the same process appears to be taking place with Asad's concept of discursive tradition. This is not so much to criticise Asad (who in his work has demonstrated an outstanding ability to trace historical transformations of both the subtle and the dramatic kind) than the inflationary use of 'discursive tradition' as a conventional way to speak of Islam as 'something' even when it would be more useful to subject the formation of that 'somethingness' to closer scrutiny.

Although Asad's discursive tradition is clearly indebted to Foucault's genealogy of discursive formations,<sup>73</sup> the two show one significant difference. While Foucault primarily focussed on contradictions and transformations,<sup>74</sup> Asad's emphasis lies on continuity and coherence. Asad states that the study of Islam as a discursive tradition should

seek to understand the historical conditions that enable the production and maintenance of specific discursive traditions, or their transformation—and the efforts of practitioners to achieve coherence.<sup>75</sup>

But although transformation is mentioned here it remains secondary, notably so in the phrasing chosen by Asad, but more importantly in the overall problematic that the concept of discursive tradition is designed to solve. To ask what Islam 'is' means, by the logic of the question, to search for continuities, the factors that contribute to the 'maintenance' and 'coherence' that make it possible for Muslims and non-Muslims to identify things as Islamic throughout history. In this context, the

---

<sup>73</sup> This similarity has been pointed out by Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, p. 115. But Asad's concept of tradition is also influenced by the work of Alisdair MacIntyre who emphasises the moment of embodied continuity in a way Foucault does not. See Alexandre Caeiro, "The Shifting Moral Universes of the Islamic Tradition of Ifta': A Diachronic Study of Four Adab al-Fatwa Manuals", in: *The Muslim World* 96, no. 4 (2006), pp. 687-706. David Scott, "The Tragic Sensibility of Talal Asad", in: *Powers of the Secular Modern. Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, eds. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 134-153.

<sup>74</sup> Foucault, Michel, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 155-160.

<sup>75</sup> Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, p. 17.



seemingly obvious statement that Islam as a discursive tradition ‘has’ a history becomes very problematic. If we interpret it to mean that a tradition exists throughout history and through contemporary reference to its past, as Asad seems to suggest, then we must take this history to be a more or less continuous process, even in its transformations. The problem, however, is that history is not ‘had’ in such a straightforward manner. It only exists in the form of traces—texts, material objects, etc.—woven together by a historical narrative and embedded in a wider historical imagination of the world. Just like it is crucial to differentiate between the tradition-as-heritage which we refer to and the tradition-as-genealogy we are indebted to, we must be careful to distinguish between the past, which is everything that has happened and of which people attempt to make sense by reconstructing it as an intelligible narrative, and of history, which is the practice and outcome of that attempt.<sup>76</sup> All discourses do, of course, have a past, but past and the reference to history are two different things. ‘Discursive tradition’ works on the level of that reference. ‘Having’ history in this sense means the construction of and reference to a heritage according to the expectations and circumstances that prevail in a contemporary setting. In consequence, the history of a tradition depends more on its present than the other way a round, and ‘tradition’—that is, tradition-as-heritage—, in the retrospective, falls apart into discontinuous discursive formations that, despite shared textual references, elude the analytical scope of ‘discursive tradition’ in the singular.

Asad is, of course, well aware of the discontinuities of history, as his sharp analysis of the secularisation of law in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Egypt shows. But it is worth pointing out that in that analysis, Asad’s own concept of discursive tradition is only featured in a secondary role.<sup>77</sup> There is a certain ambiguity in Asad’s work between a genealogical approach highlighting the conditions of historical change, and the concept of discursive tradition. This is probably so for a good reason, and we should beware of trying to harmonise the two approaches. They serve very different analytical purposes: While the concept of discursive tradition is very valuable in explaining the persistence of certain topics and

<sup>76</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Histoire et vérité*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964 [1955]).

<sup>77</sup> Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, pp. 205-256.

forms of argumentation in Islamic piety and scholarship, as well as in understanding the authoritative power of a particular ‘orthodox’ point of view in a given historical setting, it is not very useful when it comes to accounting for change and for encounters and exchanges that exceed the scope of a particular tradition. Certainly, we can recognise discursive traditions, in the plural, for example in the tradition of ritual and moral reform that is evoked by contemporary Salafis who, to put forward their interpretation of what is Islamic, refer to select passages from the Qur’ān and the Sunna, the mediaeval genre of *kutub al-bidaʿ*, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Wahhabi reform movement, and the Salafi modernists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. But recognising that we indeed have a discursive tradition here—and I must underline that it is only one of many competing traditions within the wider, highly heterogeneous field of Sunnite Islam—does not really add to our understanding of what has happened to it and where it came from. On the contrary, discursive formations have a tendency on the one hand to erase the transformations that lead to their emergence (for example by projecting a contemporary understanding of religion onto the past), and on the other hand to construct dramatic breaks where there were actually gradual shifts (for example by overlooking the Sufi genealogy of Islamic reform).

A striking example of such erasure is the position of Ibn Taymiyya in Salafi discourse. While he is repeatedly referred to as an authority, I found it impossible to purchase any of his books at Salafi bookstores in the Cairo book fair.<sup>78</sup> While present-day Salafis see Ibn Taymiyya as a key authority in their project of religion, his works are actually much more complex than the heavily simplified Salafi reading of Islam, and refer to a rather different moral and social universe, making his writings in fact very unsuitable for the Salafi project of ‘knowledge’, that is, of representing religion as an ahistoric, systematic and simple set of rules to follow. The strong scriptural references of contemporary popularised Salafi Islam should therefore not mislead us to ignore how much it involves a thorough reinterpretation of religion, society, and the self, a reinterpretation that has been as equally inspired by the older

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibn Taymiyya’s work is, however, easily available at bookshops that offer a less coherent and more intellectual programme varying from radical booklets over Sufi hagiographies and political programmes to classics of jurisprudence and Islamic sciences.

Islamic genealogies of legal scholarship and mystical spirituality as by colonial and post-colonial political and social conflicts, the discourses of rationalism and Victorian pietism, and the development of modern technologies of power.<sup>79</sup> Neither should the contemporary image of a struggle between scripturalist orthodoxy and ecstatic mystic heterodoxy make us overlook the shifts in orthodoxy that have occurred throughout the history of Islam.

In other words, the discursive traditions of Islam are often invented to a significant degree, and it is the dynamics of invention, and the shifts and contradictions that become invisible in the invented tradition, that we have to focus on if we are to understand how traditions change. It is perhaps misleading, however, to speak of ‘invented’ tradition since it easily carries a tone of denunciation. There is no ‘authentic’ tradition that would be obscured by the invented one. A discursive tradition is always a tradition-as-heritage, an imagined relationship to a history created through the reference to a past, and all such traditions are invented: without invention there would be no heritage, no history, only a diffuse mass of traces from the past. Instead, ‘invention’ should be understood in the sense of scientific, technical and artistic innovation: a conceptual change that makes the world and the objects inhabiting it appear in a new shape, offering new kinds of solutions and new kinds of problems to solve.<sup>80</sup>

To elaborate this point, it is useful to look at a work dealing with conceptual shifts of a similar kind. Thomas Kuhn who in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* developed the famous concept of paradigms, devoted considerable attention to the ‘invisibility of revolutions’,<sup>81</sup> meaning that while the historical process of science is characterised by revolutionary conceptual shifts that can change both the tasks of science as well as the conceptual world it is located in, practitioners of science usually perceive

---

<sup>79</sup> See Tayob, “Reading Religion”.

<sup>80</sup> It is partly for this reason that Terence Ranger, in a critical revision of his own contribution to the concept of invented tradition, has suggested that rather than invention, we should speak of the imagination of traditions. See Terence Ranger, “The invention of tradition revisited: The case of colonial Africa”, in: Terence Ranger and Olufemi Vaughan (eds.), *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth Century Africa. Essays in Honour of A.H.M. Kirk-Greene* (Basingstoke, London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 62-111.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1996), chapter 11.

to be working in an evolutionary cumulative process that has always followed the same tasks and dealt with the same kind of universe.<sup>82</sup> In a similar manner, a discursive formation, by creating its own ‘past, present, and future’, constructs its own world of possible references, statements and actions, and becomes blind, or at least very short-sighted, to other configurations, and to its own conditions of emergence.

These conditions of emergence should, however, be a concern of the historian. And to understand them, we have to look at those aspects that are invisible in a specific discursive formation of a religion, but are very well visible in the wider social, economical and political context under which that formation emerged and existed. This said, I do not intend to discredit the value of the study of discursive traditions. I only try to highlight the risk involved in studying highly complex historical developments with a conceptual tool that focuses on the historical references of a discourse and their authoritative power from within. Such an approach, as valuable as it may be for some research projects, can lead to the fallacy (of which Asad, I hope, is innocent) that tradition, through its ‘past, present, and future’ has an inherent dynamic drive that makes it possible to predict which way it will turn in different historical circumstances. I suggest that it is this promise of determinism without essentialism that has made the concept so popular lately. Obviously this is true insofar as not everything and anything can be Islamic. The expectations of the audience do limit (but never exhaustively determine) the range of possible things that can be said and claimed in the name of a specific tradition. One cannot credibly call football bets *ijtihād*. And yet we see that key religious concepts are radically redefined and, more importantly, key practices take on entirely new meanings. There is an inherent element of contingency—which is not to be mistaken for coincidence—that needs to be accounted for. There are many different audiences, we must remember, and their expectations can vary and shift. Especially in times of crisis otherwise unlikely ideas can become plausible, allowing new traditions to emerge (aside of Salafi modernism, let us think about organised Sufism in the mediaeval period

---

<sup>82</sup> A trick of this analysis is, however, that since Kuhn’s concept of paradigms has become popular in science textbooks, revolutions no longer are invisible, at least not to the degree they were in the 1950s when Kuhn wrote his book.

and, most lately, international Jihadism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century) with new and previously unpredictable references to the scripture, in other words, with a novel past that is only understandable through the present in which it emerged.

While we can study these new formations as discursive traditions in order to understand how they justify and establish themselves, we cannot understand the conditions of their emergence, nor the innovations that formed their particular reference to 'past, present, and future' without looking at their often invisible genealogies. This is by no means the only possible approach, and we certainly should not fall into the trap of just replacing one 'magic word' by another. It does, however, call into our attention that intellectual history should be aware of both the traditions and continuities it deals with, as well as of their often subtle and invisible transformations and reinventions.