

# Celebrating The Saints' Birthdays In Egypt:

## Transforming Nights Into Illuminated Days

> Cairo - Mouchira and Mounir El Fishawy

The Egyptians are ingenious in organizing festivities for religious occasions, especially the saints' birthdays. The most important is Mawlid the birthday of Prophet Mohammed celebrated throughout the country. This is followed by the birthdays of Imam Hussein Ben Ali Ben Abi Taleb, grandson of the Prophet (the grandson from his daughter Fatimah) and of Zainab, Nafissa and Aisha. The festivities take place in Cairo's streets in front of the saints' mosques. They are followed in importance by the birthdays of Sayed Al Badawi, in Tanta, in the Western Province, located 97 kms from Cairo and Sayed Al Morsi Abu Al Abbas in Alexandria, 230 km from Cairo.

**M**ost Egyptian villages and towns, have saints, sheiks or Imams who are well respected by the people. They have been honoured with burials in mausoleums, sanctuaries, mosques or zawias, bearing their names. People visit their tombs to profit from blessings and their gifts, as a sign of recognition for the services rendered to Islam.

### Fatimides traditions for Islamic festivities

The celebration of Mawlid and the various Islamic festivities have a specific original character in Egypt which creates joy and gaiety in the hearts of the people. The Egyptians are attached to the Fatimid traditions which are common to all Islamic celebrations in the country.

In Egypt the special dishes are prepared for specific events. On the morning of 1st Moharrem, the first day of the New Hegira Year, the Egyptians take



The people flock to Hussein Square on Imam Hussein's birthday  
ميدان الحسين يكتظ بالمحتفلين في ليلة مولد الإمام الحسين (ع)

breakfast with “el mahlabiya”, a dish containing rice, milk and sugar, hoping the New Year will be as white as milk and as soft as sugar. During the month of Ramadan, they consume enormous quantities of pastry cakes: “el kanafa” and “el qataef”, containing flour, stuffed with dried grapes and other ingredients, covered with honey or sugar syrup. With the approach of Eid El Fitr (the end of the Ramadan festival), Egyptians devote themselves to the preparation or purchase of wafers covered with frozen sugar, a cake called “el ghribiya” and biscuits.

Two weeks before the festival of the birthday of Prophet Mohammed thousands of cakes, made especially for this occasion, are sold. The most popular are various types of disc-shaped, white cookies including a sesame cookie known as “assamsamiya” al folfoliya made from Sudanese beans, “al hommossiya” made from chick peas and “aqrass al alaf” made from sesame seeds, beans and chick peas.

There are also numerous disc shaped cakes: “al halqoum al moulabban”, “al jazriya”, “achakarlama” and “alladida”, prepared with coconut, honey and various local ingredients. The most magnificent cake, in the shape of a bride, is made from pure sugar and decorated with shining papers.

### Aspects of the celebration of Mawlid

The festivities of Mawlid are preceded by preparations which start about fifteen days earlier. Volunteers from each district and followers of the wali (holy person) proceed to decorate the holy places with multicoloured lamps and banners - expressions of praise for the wali. Large tents are erected for people of limited means coming from other provinces and for meetings of Dikr, where popular singers invoke the qualities and good deeds of the wali, accompanied by popular folkloric musical instruments, such as rababa a (single string instrument), mazamir (a kind of trumpet) nay (a flute, with six

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Dhikir

إحدى حلقات الذكر



Children enjoying the celebration

الأطفال يعيشون بهجة الاحتفال بالمولد



The Rababa player



عازف الربابة Dhikir

إحدى حلقات الذكر

holes representing the musical scale), drums and dofouf. They create an environment of joy and make the audience happy. Some of the followers transcend into a self induced trance through various sufi rituals and lose consciousness completely.

There are many other festive activities including plays performed by men and women, rifle shooting (with the "al melabban" cake as a reward), power games, such as weight lifting and pushing a metal box to explode the small bomb located at the end of the line), dances with sticks which create the sound of music and cockfights. Horses also dance to the sound of popular

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music instruments such as the mazamir. The impressive and multicoloured lights transform the nights into illuminated days.

During these noisy festivities, itinerant salesmen do all they can to sell rosaries, carpets, toys and leather products. One also finds many stalls with various cheap popular meals such as "al kochari" (containing rice, macaroni and lentils mixed with a reddish sauce and spices), broad beans and falafel, chick-peas, "el mehlabiya", "el jili", rice pudding, "el basbousa", "el kanafa" and "el baja" (the head and limbs of the sheep), sheeps' intestines stuffed with rice etc  
Shops stalls, cafes and restaurants ▶



The ice cream cart



People getting ready for a holy birthday celebration

عربة الآيس كريم الشعبية جانب من أحد الميادين أثناء الاحتفال باحد موالد آل البيت

remain open until morning. The eating places are packed: some customers prefer fresh drinks, such as fresh juices "el korkodiya", of turmeric and others typically Egyptian drinks, in addition to tea and coffee and "shisha" seasoned with different flavoured tobacco, sugar cane, apple, banana and other fruits. The celebrations of the birthdays of the walis are transformed into popular festivals; the poor are happier than the rich who capitalise on these occasions to offer food, clothes and money to the less fortunate. Everyone is happy; all the party goes forget their concerns and come together in a sense of solidarity when the various mawlid are celebrated.

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