

The History of the Mawlid

Introduction.

This paper is not to justify the legitimacy of the Mawlid. Rather, it is to show how the Mawlid has evolved from the time when it first became a formal, official celebration. Otherwise, the legitimacy is a forgone conclusion amongst the overwhelming scholars of the Muslim Ummah, past and present.

A simple example can highlight this point. There is a book called *Tarikh al-Ihtifal bi Mawlid al-Nabi* (peace be upon him), written by an Egyptian scholar called Muhammad Khalid Thabit.

In it he charts the history of the Mawlid and then in detail, charts how the Mawlid is celebrated in Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, Sudan, Yemen, Tunisia, Morocco, Palestine, Jordan, Libya, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Malaysia, Ethiopia, Balkan states, Russia, Nigeria, Mali, Kenya, Spain, Ukraine, Holland, China, India, United Kingdom, Canada, France, Denmark, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, Bulgaria, Italy, Ireland, Australia, Greece, Senegal, Indonesia and the United States. Proof, if any were needed, that the Mawlid is truly a universal event.

On the front page, he has added a line which simply sums up the whole philosophy of the Mawlid, as well as indicates his own belief; *Whosoever does not show happiness for the sake of Muhammad (peace be upon him), has never seen [true] happiness.*

What are the earliest reports of the first official celebrations of the Mawlid?

1. The Shi'as.

The Fatimids ruled Egypt from 362 A.H./972 C.E. to 567/1171. For most part, the Fatimids were Shias.

During this time, there are reports that they used to commemorate the Mawlid.

Regarding the events of the year 517, the historian al-Maqrizi comments that that state would distribute food, sadaqa to the public and to the trustees of the Mizaars.

However, most historians do not describe them as the pioneers of the Mawlid. Why?

*Because the celebrations were more about their Shi'a beliefs than they were about Sayyiduna Muhammad (peace be upon him). The Mawlid can only be right when it is celebrated right.

*They commemorated every birth and event, most relating to the Ahl al-Bayt and their Shi'a beliefs. We know that the Fatimids celebrated: (i) New Years eve (ii) The birthday of the Prophet (peace be upon him) (iii) The birthday of Ali (iv) The birthday of Hasan (v) The birthday of Husayn (vi) the birthday of Fatima (vii) The birthday of the current caliph (viii) Yawm Ghadir Kumm and so on.

Therefore, they were not celebrating the Mawlid al-Nabi *per se*, rather it was part of their other celebrations that were Shi'a based.

*Salah al-Din Ayyubi put an end to the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt. When he did so, he put an end to these numerous annual celebrations of the Shi'as. He maintained the Mawlid, purely because he saw this as a Sunni event, not a Shi'a one. If he had seen it as a Shi'a event, like Yawm Ghadir Khumm, he would have ended this too. Salah al-Din was a Shafi'i in terms of Madhhab, an al-Ashari in terms of Aqidah and he was a Sufi in terms of spirituality.

*Dr. Abd al-Mun'im Sultan writes (in his book on the history of life in the Fatimid era in Egypt):

'During the Mawlid season, sweets would be distributed and all would gather in al-Azhar (Cairo). Then they would all proceed to the government palace to listen to speeches. But for most part these celebrations were Shi'a in nature.'

2. Al-Shaykh Umar al-Mulla

Al-Shaykh Umar al-Mulla (d. 570/1174) lived in the time of the ruler Nur al-Din Mahmud. Nur al-Din Mahmud himself was a great, pious leader who was often compared to Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz. He loved the Ulama and kept their company. Al-Shaykh Umar al-Mulla was a Sufi Muslim who had written many works on the biography of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Each year, he gave the Mawlid utmost importance, inviting the rich and the poor, the dignitaries, poets and the scholars. Abu Shama wrote:

He held a gathering each year during the days of the birth of the Messenger (peace be upon him), inviting the people of Mosul. Poets would attend to praise the Prophet (peace be upon him) during this gathering.

Many historians write that he was the first to commemorate the Mawlid in a formal manner.

3. Sultan Muzaffar.

Sultan Muzaffar of Irbil (d. 630/1232) lived in the time of Salah al-Din Ayyubi. He was a pure-hearted, brave and wise ruler. He was one of the first to turn the Mawlid into a formal event.

He would spend 300,000 dinars annually on the Mawlid. Additionally, he would spend 200,000 dinars on releasing Muslim prisoners held by the Europeans.

He also spent 300,000 dinars annually on looking after the two Harams and providing water along the routes to the two cities.

His wife reports that Sultan Muzaffar himself used to wear a garment of five dirhams. This period led to the first publication specifically on the Mawlid. Hafiz Abu al-Khattab Ibn Dihyah passed by Irbil in 654/1256, where he saw celebrations of the Mawlid. So he wrote the book *Kitab al-Tanwir fi Mawlid al-Bashir al-Nazir*. He was gifted 1000 dinars for his efforts by Sultan Muzaffar..

Was the Mawlid ever celebrated in the Hijaz (modern-day Saudi Arabia)?

There is ample evidence to suggest that the Mawlid has been marked by Muslims in Makka and Madina from a very early period, up to this very day...

The Sixth Century: Makka.

Ibn Jubayrs (540-614) writes in *Rihal* on the celebrations in Makka:

This blessed place [the house of the Prophet] is opened, and all men enter it to derive blessing from it, on every Monday of the month of Rabi al-Awwal; for on that day and in that month was born the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him).

The Seventh Century: Makka.

The eighth century historian and traveller Ibn Batuta writes:

On every Friday and on the birthday of the Prophet, the door of the Kaba is opened by the head of Banu Shayba (the doorkeepers of the Kaba). On the Mawlid the head judge of Makka distributes food to the shurafa (noble) and the people of Makka.

The tenth century, Makka.

These are accounts given by esteemed scholars, including Ibn Hajar al-Haythami.

*"Each year on the 12th of Rabi al-Awwal, after the evening prayer, the four qadis of Makkah (representing the four Sunni Schools) and large groups of people including the scholars (fuqaha') and notables (fudala') of Makkah, Shaykhs, zawiya teachers and their students, magistrates (ru'asa'), and scholars (muta' ammameen) leave the mosque and set out collectively for a visit to the birthplace of the Prophet Salla Allahu Ta'ala alayhi wa Sallam, shouting out dhikr and tahlil (la ilaha illa Allah).

*"The houses on the route are illuminated with numerous lanterns and large candles, and a great many people are out and about. They all wear special clothes and they take their children with them. Having reached the birthplace, inside a special sermon for the occasion of the birthday of the Prophet Salla Allahu Ta'ala alayhi wa Sallam is delivered, mentioning the miracles (karamat) that took place on that occasion. Hereafter, the invocation for the Sultan (i.e. the Caliph), the Amir of Makkah, and the Shafi'i qadi is performed and all pray humbly.

*"Shortly before the night prayer, the whole party returns from the birthplace of the Prophet Salla Allahu Ta'ala alayhi wa Sallam to the Great Mosque, which is almost overcrowded, and all sit down in rows at the foot of the Maqam Ibrahim. In the Mosque, a preacher first mentions the tahmid (praise) and the tahlil, and once again the

invocation for the Sultan, the Amir, and the Shafi'i qadi is performed. After this the call for the night prayer is made, and after the prayer the crowd disperses."

The eleventh century: Madina.

Mulla Ali Qari (d.1014/1605) writes that in al-Madina Sharif, Muslims would regularly attend Mawlid gatherings with great enthusiasm and sincerity.

The twelfth century. (Madina)

Ja'far ibn Hasan al-Barzanji (d. 1177/1764) was one of the greatest scholars of Madina. He was born in Madina in 1128 and took his early education from the wise scholars of the city. By thirty-one he was delivering lectures in al-Masjid al-Nabawi, as well as teaching Hadith, Tafsir, Fiqh, Usul al-Fiqh, Sarf and Nahv and many other disciplines. He could offer religious decrees for all the Madhhabs (though he was a Shafi'i himself). Later he became the Imam and Khatib of the Prophet's mosque. He wrote many important works on Islam. His best work was *Iqd al-Jawhar fi Mawlid al-Nabi al-Azhar*, more famously known as Mawlid al-Barzanji.

The thirteenth century (Makka)

Shaykh Yusuf ibn Ismail al-Nabhani (d. 1932) writes in *Jawahir al-Bihar* that on the eve of the Mawlid, dwellers of Makka would go to the birthplace of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) in enormous numbers.

The Mawlid today.

Here are the countries that have an official holiday on the occasion of the Mawlid.

- Africa: Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Comoros, Ivory Coast, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Tunisia, Togo, (In Africa, a total 25 countries out of 54)
- Middle East: Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestinian National Authority, Syria, UAE, 11 out of total 14 except Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.
- Asia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan.
- Fiji and Guyana also celebrate the Mawlid.
- A total of 47 countries officially recognise the Mawlid as a public holiday, some of them are not even Muslim-dominated, such as India, Sri Lanka, Fiji, Guyana, Tanzania, Mali and so on. (Source, Department of Awqaf, UAE).

Concluding remarks.

- *The sixth century marked the beginning of state-funded Mawlid commemorations in a formal manner. This does not mean the Mawlid did not exist before then.
- *It is wrong to assert that the Mawlid is a Shia event.
- *The Mawlid was always marked by acts of generosity and virtue.

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