

Policing ambiguity:

Muslim saints-day festivals and the moral geography of public space in Egypt

ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore how the festive culture of *mulids*, Egyptian Muslim saints-day festivals, troubles notions of habitus, public space, and religious and civic discipline that have become hegemonic in Egypt in the past century and how state actors attempt to “civilize” mulids by subjecting them to a spectacular, representative order of spatial differentiation. I argue that habitus must be understood as a political category related to competing relationships of ideology and embodiment and that the conceptual and physical configuration of modern public space is intimately related to the bodily and moral discipline of its users. [*veneration of saints, festivals, habitus, public space, state, Islam, Egypt*]

Mulids, Egyptian Muslim saints-day festivals, are not what they used to be. Not that they ever have been easily characterized. The festive culture of mulids has a plural and dynamic character, and it has never been possible to tell what a mulid really is about or how it is going to develop. What has been fairly constant, however, since their emergence in the late Middle Ages, along with organized Islamic mysticism (Sufism) and the Muslim cult of saints, is the festivals’ atmosphere of the extraordinary, which allows various festive practices and experiences to come together in an ambiguous mixture that makes it virtually impossible to say with certainty whether the mulid is a religious pilgrimage, a community festival, or a public fair (see Mayeur-Jaouen 2005).

A mulid is a festival characterized by a profound ambivalence of experience and ambiguity of meaning: a time and a space for countless different celebrations, some of which overlap and others that never meet. A large mulid can cover entire neighborhoods that, for a few days, turn into cities of celebration. Each visitor makes his or her own mulid, depending on where he or she goes and what he or she does. The choices are many: read the Fatiha (the first chapter of the Qur’an) at the saint’s shrine, take a ride on a swing boat or the Ferris wheel, participate in a *dhikr* (a collective rhythmic meditation to musical accompaniment) and reach a state of trance, sit with Sufi brethren and friends in a *khidma* (usu., a tent, a rented apartment, or a carpet on the sidewalk at which one can find free food and lodging), hang around on the streets, make or fulfill a vow, play dice or roulette, listen to the performance of a religious singer (*munshid*), eat for free, go to a café or restaurant, have a good look at members of the opposite sex, study the biography of the saint, obtain *baraka* (God’s blessing and beneficial power, embodied by the saint), sit in front of one’s house and watch the changing scenery, go target shooting at a stand run by a pretty girl, donate food or drinks, beg, give alms, feel unified with God, sleep, cook, get high on drugs, earn money by selling cheap commodities, make fun of people, watch a sideshow, walk in or watch a procession, praise the Prophet, rush through the crowds, pick a fight, buy snacks and souvenirs, recite the Qur’an and religious

poetry, kiss the shrine and break into tears, laugh, ululate, distribute money and presents, listen to a popular singer, or shake hands with others and say, "May this day meet you well every year!"

In the past two decades, this cheerful, seemingly chaotic festive mixture has come under pressure from religious and political authorities, and the centers of major festivals, especially, have undergone a dramatic change. Public spaces that were once full of tents, stalls, and crowds are now surrounded by iron fences, partly closed to the public, and patrolled by the police. The festivities continue, but they have become fragmented, as tents and stalls have moved to the surrounding side streets. At the same time, visitors are bothered by the police force trying to control their movement, causing serious bottlenecks at the entrances to the largely empty main squares. These changes have been actively promoted by the religious establishment and reformist Sufi orders, public administration and the police force, and some of the people who participate in the festivals. In different ways, these groups attempt to introduce as a guiding value into the *mulid* precisely that quality whose absence has traditionally characterized the festival: clear, predictable functionality. The festival, they argue, should not be an occasion to let go and bend, even break, the boundaries that guide everyday behavior. Instead, it should be an occasion to learn and enact proper morals and authoritative knowledge. These critics do not, thus, demand the abolition of *mulids*, a demand shared by many Muslims of modernist and Salafi reformist orientation during the past century. Rather, they aim to civilize *mulids*, that is, to turn them from moments of disorder (or alternative order, depending on the point of view) that relativize the normal order of things into vehicles for hegemonic power that demonstrate and impose a universalist order of urban space, civic habitus, and morality.

In this article, I focus on the connection between two key conceptual categories at work in these attempts to reorganize, or "reform," popular festivals: those relating to habitus and those relating to public space. Both categories have gained significant currency in contemporary social sciences for largely similar reasons. They both point out the centrality of visible disciplining practices for religion and civic power, most crucially for the project of modernity, which, more than any other historical discourse on society, has posited the necessary interconnection between the progress of the nation and the ethical disposition of its individual citizens, on the one hand, and between that ethical disposition and its visible and measurable expression in habitus and the organization of public spaces, on the other hand.

The focus of this article is *Disuq*, a small town in northern Egypt that hosts one of Egypt's biggest Muslim saints-day festivals on the last Thursday of every October. The festival in *Disuq* as well as the state policies of "reform"

in evidence there are similar to others around the country, however, and I gathered a lot of data from locations other than *Disuq*. Although the fieldwork on which this article is based consisted largely of participant-observation and interviews with visitors, neighbors, and critics of the festivals, my focus here is specifically on the common sense of public order and appropriate religious behavior shared by members of the state apparatus. My discussion of state actors builds specifically on information gathered at interviews and informal discussions with a province-level director of religious endowments, a former police chief (by the time of the interview, a member of the parliament), a province governor, his secretaries, a province secretary-general, a mayor, and middle-ranking officers of police forces and State Security (*Amn ad-Dawla*).

The aim of "civilizing" *mulids* is not specific to the state, nor is it shared by all state actors. Especially among the urban middle classes, a determined opposition to *mulids*, articulated in terms of both modernity and Islamic authenticity, is widespread (for middle-class modernism and piety, see Deeb 2006). Some of the participants in the festivals— notably, members of the religious establishment and some Sufi groups—hold the aim of "reforming" *mulids* in high esteem and attempt to impose a civilizing order in their own celebrations to varying degrees (Frishkopf 1999; Schielke 2006:216–228). But the state—especially the security forces and the provincial administrations—has a privileged position in terms of the resources at its disposal, the scale of actual interventions, and the way supporters of the "reform" of *mulids* see it as responsible for the implementation of any effective reform.

Although state interventions at *mulids* are similar around the country, no official state policy exists on the subject: All relevant decisions are made at the level of provincial and local administrations. This leaves province-level security apparatuses and province governors (who commonly have a background in the military or State Security) with a wide range of options, yet the choices they make—limiting the use of public space, establishing spectacular state presence in the center of the festival, and separating different elements of the festival from each other—show a striking similarity. This similarity in the absence of a master plan, I argue, is the result of a civil, religious, and administrative common sense and of professional training and experience that inform the kind of problems perceived to exist and the kind of responses deemed possible. In other words, a diffuse common sense exists of what the relationship of a public festival to the public order ought to be, how a religious celebration ought to look, what relation the sacred and profane ought to have, how citizens should behave, and how their behavior at public festivities can be policed. (Note the resemblance this common sense bears to the notions of "governmentality" and "governmental reason" described in Foucault 2007:115–120, 354.)

This common sense is fostered by the training received by the most powerful actors of reform and reorganization: officers of the security apparatus, who have the final say on the implementation of any policies. All who hold higher ranks in the various branches of the police, security forces, and State Security, are educated at the police academy, and throughout their careers they regularly attend training courses to acquire new techniques and strategies, including those for dealing with public gatherings such as demonstrations, football matches, and mulids. This training and the officers' (upper-) middle-class habitus and consciousness obviate the need for a master plan. A shared class habitus and centralized training provide security officers with a set of known problems related to administering a public festival as well as possible solutions to them. The officers' concrete solutions vary yet are all informed by the same discursive common sense influenced by their education, socialization, and training. In this article, I discuss how mulids trouble hegemonic middle-class discourses of religion and modernity and how powerful agents, in turn, attempt to impose their sense of proper order on the festivals.

Habitus and public space

The concept of "habitus"—learned and internalized bodily dispositions, styles, and aesthetic judgments that carry social or ethical significance—has been subjected to significant revision in the last two decades. Originally introduced into social sciences by Marcel Mauss (1950:365–372) and popularized by Pierre Bourdieu (1984:170) as the key to social distinctions, the concept of "habitus" has recently been reinterpreted as a political and ethical category. Saba Mahmood (2005), in her study of women in the Salafi piety movement in Egypt, criticizes Bourdieu for missing the point of habituation, the active acquiring of an ethical disposition by means of bodily habit. Habitus, according to Mahmood, involves the active capacity of forming and transforming the self through bodily practice.

One result of Bourdieu's neglect of the manner and process by which a person comes to acquire a habitus is that we lose a sense of how specific conceptions of the self (there may be different kinds that inhabit the space of a single culture) require different kinds of bodily capacities. In contrast, the Aristotelian notion of habitus forces us to problematize how specific kinds of bodily practice come to articulate different conceptions of the ethical subject, and how bodily form does not simply express the social structure but also endows the self with particular capacities through which the subject comes to enact the world. [Mahmood 2005:139]

The advantage of Mahmood's approach is that it allows one to think about the ways bodily practice is seen to pro-

duce attitudes and dispositions and, consequently, to understand better why habitus is such a crucial issue in debates on religion and society. If specific forms of practice are the keys to specific configurations of morality and civic ethics, then the outrage of many Egyptian modernists and reformists at the sight of pilgrims eating in a tent in front of the mosque, participating in ecstatic rituals, and shopping for chickpeas and sweets becomes more understandable. But Mahmood's approach also leads one a step further, beyond the scope of her analysis. She acknowledges, but does not focus on, the fact that different understandings of the self and different configurations of the relationship between habitus, subject, and community can (and, in the case of modern Egypt, do) coexist. It is this coexistence, often rich in conflict, that my analysis is concerned with. In this context, however, habitus gains a more complex character. Whereas Mahmood distances herself from the concept of "identity politics," which implies the use of signifying practices to distinguish a religious, ethnic, or political identity, I suggest that bringing identity politics back into debate, although in a slightly altered form, may be necessary.

"Identity politics" is perhaps not the most accurate label for the dynamic I consider here, however, because the political contestation of ideologies by means of habitus is not necessarily about identity. The politics of habitus, as I prefer to describe this contestation, is not distinguished by its subject matter but by the way it associates ideology with habitus and posits a mutual interdependence between the two. Although ideologies undoubtedly do become embodied, less clear is what that embodiment does to the bodies and ideologies involved. Gregory Starrett points this out in his study of the introduction of colonial concepts of order and learning in Egypt, in which he shows that the embodiment of ideology in habitus does, in fact, involve a change of perspective for the people involved:

Thus, rather than conceiving of hexis primarily as wordless, unconscious, and practical transmission of bodily habit, we might instead read "the embodiment of ideology in habit" as a set of processes through which individuals and groups consciously ascribe meaning to—or *learn to perceive meaning in*—bodily disposition, and establish, maintain, and contest publicly its political valence. [1995:954, emphasis added]

Starrett's approach implies that, when specific embodied practices become associated (or even identified) with specific ethical dispositions, both undergo a redefinition. It is precisely the contingency and dynamic nature of such associations that makes them political. Claiming and denying their self-evidence is a form of contestation over the values and public interest of a society and over the power to define

them. The contestation of habitus can be read as the embodiment of ideologies, but it also transforms them.

In consequence, one should not opt, a priori, for any specific perspective on the relation of bodily practice, ethical subjectivity, and political ideology. The relationship of habitus and ideology is not a given that can be determined by opting for a particular theoretical approach, be it Durkheimian, postmodern, or Aristotelian. Instead, one should look at the configurations of this relationship that are produced by people involved in social interactions and conflicts. Habitus, therefore, needs to be understood as a political category that stands for the specific relationships that people constitute between bodily habit and visible structures, on the one hand, and beliefs and attitudes, on the other hand, as well as the corresponding understandings of the kind of habits and attitudes that can possibly exist and of their position in a normative hierarchy of individual and collective morality.

The point that I make in the following discussion is that the embodiment and habituation of ideology are not confined to bodily hexis in the narrow sense. In the configuration that has become hegemonic in the public sphere and administrative policy of Egypt since the inception of modernity and Islamic reform, habitus is immediately related to the visible structures of public spaces, which, in turn, are understood to be productive and expressive of moral boundaries. This view has not always been hegemonic, however, and other practices of open (rather than public) space, notably those at work in the organization of *mulids*, neither require a connection between public spaces and individual dispositions nor rely on the same forms of order and power.

Working on colonial and postcolonial Calcutta, Sudipta Kaviraj (1997) argues that the understanding of a public, as opposed to private, space was only made possible through the advent of the colonial city and of colonial administrative power, which implied a new kind of relationship between the state and its subjects, of which “civilized” appearance was a key component.

Colonial rule introduced the conception of disciplining everyday conduct to give shape and form to the body politic. Rules were introduced to produce order and govern everyday behavior. Sovereignty over society meant that social groups sharing the sovereigns’ world had to be made to relate to the world according to the rules of elite imagination, not their own. As part of this social arrangement, it was necessary to obtain the obedience of the poor to a bourgeois conception of what it meant for a space to be a modern city. The ideology of colonial modernity posited a duality between the city and country in which the city was seen as orderly, hygienic, scientific, technologically superior, and “civilized.” As opposed to the loose disorder of the village, conduct in the city was more stan-

dardized. To institute such regimentation of conduct, the colonial administration had to employ certain standardizing techniques. [Kaviraj 1997:84]

Public spaces of the modern city differ from the open spaces of the village and the older city, which were (and, to a significant extent, still are) characterized by a contingency of use and meaning. In contrast, the public space, ideally a square, a park, or a wide, clean street, is essentially functional. It is an element in a configuration of power in which society is seen as an interdependent system with functional parts that (this is a normative expectation) have to serve a purpose to be considered of value (Kaviraj 1997:88). “Public” carries a specific political connotation, promising the potential inclusion of all but going hand in hand with strict criteria of inclusion and exclusion that often are framed by the label “civilization” (Mah 2000; Meyer and Moors 2006:4–6).

In Egypt, much as in India, the order of the modern city and the ideal of the modern citizen emerged partly as a product of colonial administration and partly as the outcome of counterhegemonic nationalist contestation of colonial rule. European concepts of public order came together with local practices of religious rituals and morality, leading to a novel synthesis of the two based on the reinterpretation of some elements of Islamic and Egyptian concepts and practices and the demonstrative exclusion of others according to new kinds of criteria (Mitchell 1988; Schielke 2007). Ever since the emergence of these modernist constructs, not only society but also religion has been measured by their rationality and functionality, and society’s progress is believed to be necessarily dependent on the authenticity of the civilizational heritage on which it is based. In this view of society and religion, shared by a wide spectrum of middle-class citizens, especially those who build their distinction on intellectual production in the widest sense (doctors, lawyers, engineers, civil servants, white-collar employees, teachers, students, and intellectuals), the world is (or should be) characterized by purity and clear, universal boundaries: between the sacred and the profane, between piety and fun, between the city and the countryside. This imperative of universal boundaries implies not only an order directed at the creation of clear differentiation and control of public space but also an understanding of habitus and the self in which a solemn, purified state of mind is taken to be the condition of religion, morality, and social order. In a further step, that purified state of mind is expected to correspond to forms of behavior that are unambiguous and that keep different spheres of practices clearly separated. Religion, most importantly, must be kept strictly clean of any kind of profanity. This kind of habitus, in the idiom of Egyptian modernism and Islamic reformism, is “dignified,” “civilized,” and “educated.”

These connections are central to the projects of modernity and Islamic reform, which, despite significant differences in other fields of contention, together form a largely unquestioned common sense concerning the nature of society and religion and the necessity of their rational and progressive character. In other words, the individual moral disposition of every citizen and believer is a necessary element of the nation's progress and the religion's purity. Furthermore, the way citizens-believers behave, dress, and spend their work and free time, and, significantly, the visible structure of the cities and public spaces they live in, are taken as expressions of that moral disposition and of the way in which it can be disciplined by means of education, policing, and public planning (see Reichmuth 2006; Schielke 2006; Starrett 1995). The problem of mulids is that they go hand in hand with forms of morality and public order that allow for ambivalence and that undermine the clarity, functionality, and predictability required by their modernist critics.

The order of ambiguity

Although they may seem chaotic at first sight, mulids represent a specific form of order, which, however, stands in striking contrast to the (ideal) order of the modern city. These two forms of organization are important because of their functionality for rather different configurations of power, morality, and social order.

A mulid festival is made up of a vast number of individual and collective celebrations that, together, create the event as a whole in all of its different ambiances. Urban mulids stand in close relationship to the urban structure of the old city quarters, where the shrines and the festivals held around them form central public spaces. Public space, as defined in this context, however, has a meaning quite different from the liberal concept of "public versus private" (Kaviraj 1997). Mulids represent a way to structure the open space that was once common in the cities of Egypt but has since become either exoticized as traditional or rejected as backward by the discourses and imageries of modernity. The *saha*, the open space around a saint's shrine, is a contingent and ambiguous form of space that is traditionally defined by its accessibility to all people and its multiple uses (for a market, bus stop, mulid, etc.). The key organizing principle of such space is *baraka* (blessing, charisma, and beneficial power) emanating from God and transmitted by the Qur'an, the prophets, and the saints. In a site that has a major share of *baraka*, the sacred is not protected against the profane world because it is not in need of such protection; on the contrary, the holy shrine is a source of power and protection that extends to the surrounding profane area. The *saha* facing the shrine is an intersection, a particular form of open yet protected space in which an

aura of sanctity allows the blending of different spheres of life (Gilsenan 2000:175).

The concept of "baraka" allows the inclusion of various practices in one festival, which, despite its plurality, is in its entirety protected and legitimized by the saint's shrine. Although some elements of festivity are spatially concentrated (large, wealthy Sufi groups put up their tents near the mosque for maximum prestige and *baraka*, amusement stands gather together to facilitate business, etc.), there is no strict spatial differentiation between different parts of the festival (see Figure 1). Sufi orders' tents, vendors' stalls, amusements, pilgrims' carpets, and cafés stand side by side, all framed by the continuous movement of the crowds across a temporary landscape of the extraordinary. A festival structured in such a way can be best described as a field of overlapping circles of celebration, all revolving around the shrine, the symbolic and geographic center of the festival.

This form of spatial organization is interwoven with a festive time that makes it possible to temporarily relativize, invert, or suspend boundaries of daily life. In the atmosphere of cheerful piety, the sacred and the profane do

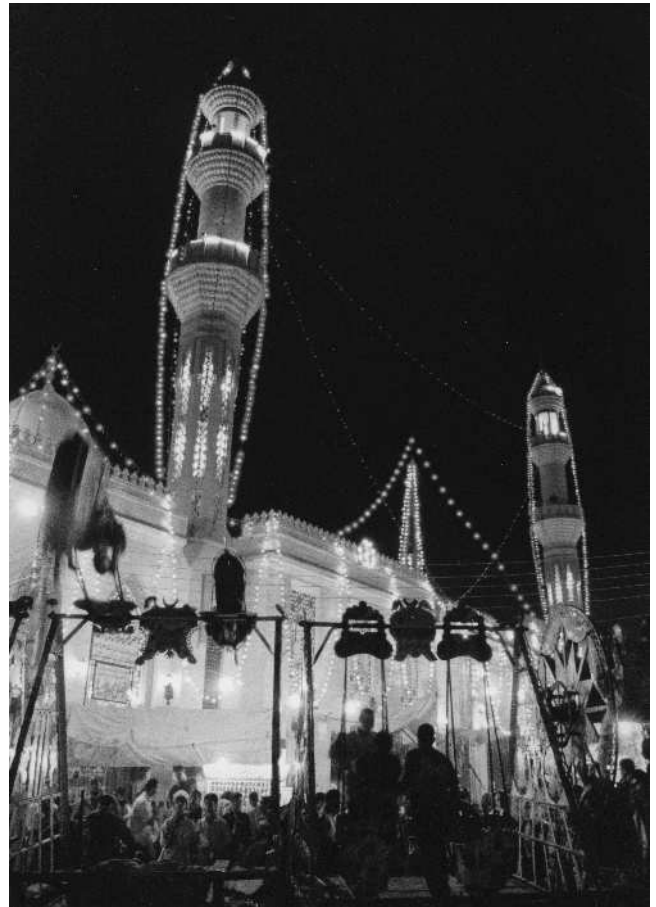


Figure 1. Swings in front of the mosque at a mulid in northern Egypt in 2003. Photo by S. Schielke.

not appear as strictly separate, religion becomes fun, and entertainment and trade enjoy their share of the baraka of the religious celebration. Gender boundaries are eased, as young women from the district dress up and go for a legitimate outing, and, in Sufi tents, men and women often share space and rituals. With families sitting on the sidewalks and celebrations extending to the side alleys, the distinctions between house, alley, and open street lose significance. At large mulids of regional or national importance, the city is invaded by the countryside when pilgrims from Upper Egypt and the Nile Delta crowd the streets. Night becomes day because the mulid sleeps in the daytime and festivities only begin with sunset and then continue until dawn prayer. Finally, even the boundary between the living and the dead is far from clear in the time of the mulid. The buried saint, people believe, is not really dead but conscious and perceptive, even capable of action. Further, many mulids take place in the middle of graveyards, where the dwellings of the dead host celebrations of the living (see Drieskens 2008; Madoeuf 2001; Mayeur-Jaouen 2005; Pagès-El Karoui 2005).

This contrast to everyday life is strongly present in the accounts of participants. They describe the festival as a temporary better world, one of joy, love, and community far from daily worries and constraints. At the mulid, one can “get a breath of fresh air” and “see strange, new things.” For young men and women, the mulid is a chance to “empty your head and enjoy, to forget all your worries and live in the moment.” For Sufi pilgrims, the mulid is a world ruled by spiritual and altruistic principles: “It’s a congregation of love, without any material interests, higher than any form of worship.” For many inhabitants of the old-city districts, it is the time when the community rejoices in celebration: “For me, it’s a moment of joy! People come from other places if they are originally from here. It’s beautiful, a good day, people all gather together.”¹

One is easily tempted to stamp this festive time either as a popular form of resistance to hegemonic norms or as mere “bread and games” to keep people happy and passive. Both views overlook the fact that mulids are embedded in a social order that can allow for ambivalence and temporary reversal of boundaries because it is based on clientelistic and tribal loyalties that do not require (and cannot command) certainty and functional differentiation (Reeves 1990:169–178). Hence, what may be viewed normally as a transgression is seen during the mulid as a legitimate expression of festive joy. In this sense, the mulid is utopian in character, a vision of a better and more beautiful life. As such, it is always, in some ways, opposed to daily order, but this opposition does not imply that either festivity or the norms of daily life should be abolished for good. Unlike the political utopias of the 19th and 20th centuries, the mulid utopia is not located in the future but is actually lived, over and over, thus both helping people to endure the hardship,

moralism, and boredom of daily life and reminding them that a different life is not only imaginable but also possible (see Bakhtin 1968).

In a widespread Sufi discourse on the mulid, the festival is an expression of joy (*farah, bahga*) and love (*mahabba*), but each person expresses love and joy in his or her particular way. This emphasis on spiritual emotion informs an understanding of piety and virtue in which a believer’s true intentions are hidden—even a person with eccentric habitus who engages in counternormative behavior may turn out to be a true mystic (*arif bi-llah*). In consequence, the mulid is open to everyone. In fact, this inclusivity is a central element of the festive utopia, as reflected by the participants:

All people, all societies come here: the respectable, the mystic, the criminal—the [whole] society!

To those for whom all other doors are closed, the door of *ahl al-bayt* (the Prophet Muhammad’s family and descendants) remains open.

In a khidma you’ll find a famous actress eating next to a poor beggar, and there is no difference between them.²

It is precisely this openness, ambivalence, and utopian vision of mulids that challenge the understandings of religion, public space, and morality current in the contemporary discourses of Islamic reform and modernity. Mulids are not controversial simply because they emerged in the Middle Ages and, thus, have no precedent in the *sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad. Numerous other customs and institutions that are today considered to be a legitimate part of orthodox Islam also originated in eras postdating the time of Muhammad. There is nothing un-Islamic or backward per se about mulids. Instead, the potential of mulids for controversy lies in the way they express (and are seen by critics to produce) an understanding of religion, social order, and moral subjectivity that allows for ambiguity and temporary shifts of boundaries and that does not recognize a necessary connection between visible habitus and ethical disposition or between the disposition of the individual and the moral and civilizational quality of the nation. Most crucially, people celebrating mulids generally do not respect the imperatives of purity, solemnity, and discipline so central to the habitus of modern society and Salafi reformist Islam.

Civilizing festivals

Not surprisingly, mulids have been the subject of considerable debate as well as objects of numerous attempts at abolition and reform during the past century. From the beginning, attempts at disciplining the participants’ habitus have gone hand in hand with the restructuring of festive spaces.

The celebrations at a mulid are organized on a decentralized basis by commercial entrepreneurs, Sufi groups and

Sufi-minded individuals, and the participants who attend the festival. But the physical and administrative framework for the festival is provided by the state, except in the case of smaller, rural mulids. At large, urban mulids that cover entire districts or even entire cities, centralized planning by local state institutions is required, which provides many opportunities for government interference in the form and atmosphere of the festival. At the festival of as-Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi in Tanta, the largest mulid in Egypt, the festival is planned and organized by a mulid committee (*lagnat al-mulid*) comprising various branches of administration (Ri'asat markaz wa-madinat Tanta 2004a). The tasks of this administration are manifold: the preparation of the fields in Sigar for the pilgrims' tents; the organization of garbage collection, drinking water, public toilets, and additional electricity; the closure of main streets near the mosque to traffic; the removal of cafés, trade, and amusements from certain streets and squares; the licensing of additional production of state-subsidized bread; and the construction of tents to house the official celebration and public services, including police, electricity, public relations, fire brigade, family planning, medical services, and veterinary medicine (Ri'asat markaz wa-madinat Tanta 2004b). In this plurality of administrative branches, the security apparatus has the final say: Mulids have to be licensed by the Ministry of Interior, and all practical measures to implement law and order at the festival are undertaken by security forces.

State policies on mulids have never been very straightforward (Mayeur-Jaouen 2004; Reeves 1990:153). The reason lies in the complex nature of mulids and their relation to informal structures of power. Some state actors, most notably, members of the parliament, are often openly supportive of mulids and organize large-scale distribution of free food to demonstrate their commitment to their constituencies. Like mulids, electoral politics in Egypt are embedded in clientelistic structures of power, and, in practice, the main task of a parliamentarian is often not so much to represent his or her voters as to act as a mediator to provide them services. The security apparatus and agencies of the state administration—which have much more power than members of parliament do—often show a more repressive approach toward mulids and all other public gatherings that are not under clear and comprehensive control of the state.

From the point of view of the state administration and security apparatus, mulids present a dilemma. On the one hand, mulids are harmless because Islamists and other actors have not historically used them as sites for political mobilization against the government. Moreover, the same clientelistic relations that members of parliament reinforce at mulids are, in many ways, essential to the functioning of the Egyptian state, in general. Major pilgrimage mosques are also important sources of income for the Ministry of Religious Endowments, which controls the distribution of the

money donated as *nudhur* (vows) at shrines. On the other hand, mulids are public demonstrations of an alternative set of piety and civility that runs counter to the values that are constitutive of Egypt's publicly proclaimed image of urban modernity. Furthermore, the same informal networks on which mulids are based (Sufi orders, local networks of power, and tribal structures in Upper Egypt) and that can be put in service of electoral politics and ensuring political loyalty are also problematic because they remain, to a significant degree, beyond the control of other state agencies (Reeves 1990:167–179; Singerman 1995:132–138).

What, from the point of view of electoral and clientelistic politics, appear as complex but well-functioning networks of allegiance, friendship, and dependency, appears, from the point of view of the security apparatus and executive administration, as a chaotic conglomerate of people potentially out of control. The problem with mulids, from the latter perspective, is not so much that they could turn people against the government as it is their ungovernability, their creation of a parallel order beyond the control of the state.

The solution to this dilemma, proposed in public religious and cultural debates and practiced in state policies, is to civilize mulids, that is, to subject them to a spatial, temporal, and moral discipline that makes them less transgressive and more controllable. The attempt to “reform” mulids, that is, to impose predictability, clarity, and clear hierarchies on them, is part of a wider project of organizing society and the dispositions of citizens. And, although the concrete measures taken at different festivals vary greatly, they all share this sense of “civilizing” the event through the enforcement of bodily, spatial, and temporal boundaries.

It is not easy, however, to reform something that has no central program and no decisive ritual momentum and that is open to participation by everybody without restriction. The attempts at systematic reform can be traced back to the year 1881, when a wide debate on Sufi rituals emerged, accompanied by the prohibition of some spectacular rituals in Cairo. In the wake of this debate, the Sheikh of Sufi orders, 'Abd al-Baqi al-Bakri, issued a circular that banned, among other things, the use of musical instruments in public, the use of flags and banners, the participation of women and children in *hadras* (Sufi gatherings) and processions, religious assemblies in public thoroughfares, the establishment of new mulids, all processions and ceremonies that had been established during the preceding ten years, cafés near places of worship, and any vocal performance (most notably, singing) at mulids except for prayers for the Prophet and God (De Jong 1978:176–200). At major mulids, most notably, that in Tanta, efforts were undertaken to control public morality, space, and hygiene. Like the expression of morality and religiosity in habitus, the issues of hygiene and spatial order have been central ones for Islamic modernism (Reichmuth 2006). Their emergence in the late

19th and early 20th centuries reflects the spread of new concepts among the newly invented nation's elites. Rituals from that point on had to express a rational disposition of piety, especially if they were seen by foreigners. The temporal structure of morality was shifted from the time of the extraordinary, when sins are forgiven in the presence of as-Sayyid, to universal moral boundaries valid at all times. Finally, and most successfully, the contingent and often quite filthy open space of the saha was turned into the organized and controlled public space of the modern city.

The efforts to prohibit controversial practices have proven largely unsuccessful. The story of Gama'at Abi l-Qasim, a Sufi order established in the early 20th century, testifies to this failure. The Qasimiya, as the group is also called, is known for liberal dhikrs and rituals, most outstandingly for its specific form of *khalwa* (temporary spiritual retreat, either through physical isolation or a period of intense meditation) in which a male and a female member of the group withdraw into seclusion together and are afterward considered sister- and brother-in-spirit (al-Abrashi 1994). Whether these rituals are actually a pretext for libertine sexual relations is a matter of speculation. In any case, they have greatly stimulated the fantasizing of journalists and given the order a scandalous reputation. Around 1930, the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders published a ban on the group for promoting immorality. Shortly after the ban, however, the group was still visibly present at the mulid of al-Husayn (al-'Askari 1930). Over 50 years later, in the mid-1980s, the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders banned the group again (al-Abrashi 1994). Today, the Qasimiya remains active and participates in mulids around the Nile Delta, including one in honor of its founder, Sidi Abu l-Qasim.

Several factors have limited the success of attempts to reform the habitus and morals of mulid-goers. First, there has often been a major gap between political decisions and their implementation, be it for lack of will or resources or the inertia of an inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy. A second and more fundamental limitation on the reform of morals and habitus lies in the nature of the festival itself. Because the festive atmosphere is created in a decentralized pattern by the people who celebrate the mulid, a top-down disciplining of the pilgrims' bodies has been easy to proclaim but hard to enforce in practice. A particular Sufi group may successfully discipline its own gatherings, and the state may police central festive spaces, but in neither case is anything even distantly resembling total control accomplished.

Many of the changes that have taken place in the atmosphere of mulids should be attributed to wider social changes. If mulids once offered rare chances for young women to go out and flirt with members of the opposite sex, today they face increasing competition in this regard from Nile promenades, workplaces, and universities. If, in many cities, police forces have successfully banned bars and dance tents from the local mulid, they have done

so only after a growing sentiment of religious moralism spread among the population—including the mulid-going public—following the Islamic revival that began in the 1970s. Furthermore, as mulids have become marginalized in the public sphere and in the lifestyle and religiosity of the upper and middle classes, the structure of amusements has changed. Mulids are no longer centers of alcohol consumption, dancing, and prostitution partly because these activities and those who provide them have moved to less conspicuous and more profitable locations, for example, Pyramids Road in Cairo. Of all the “immoral” amusements, only gambling still visibly flourishes at most mulids.

Thus, the success of moralist reform has been limited. Today, as it did 100 years ago, music flourishes at mulids (see Peterson 2008), and the use of musical instruments in dhikr, so often condemned by the Sufi establishment, seems actually to have increased, influenced by the development of popular music and the availability of loudspeakers, which have helped to turn public hadras from small dhikr circles into concerts with mass audiences. The suspension and inversion of boundaries is still the characteristic feature of the festive time of mulids, although the boundaries and the extent of their suspension have shifted since the 19th century. The atmosphere in a Sufi khidma remains informal, and the mixing of men and women is usually tolerated. Pilgrims still kiss the shrine, and some dervishes still wear eccentric clothes. At Sufi dhikrs, one can occasionally still see people piercing their cheeks with a steel pin or holding living snakes in their hands. Transvestites are still part of many a festive procession, even if they sometimes have to play cat and mouse with the police.

From open space to public spectacle

If a Foucauldian disciplining of bodies has proven difficult to realize at mulids, another line of reform has been much more successful recently: the restructuring of public space. Although not immediately directed at individual participants' behavior, it is nevertheless conceived of as a tool to increase the “consciousness” of attendees and to purge the festival of what are seen to be errors and immoral practices.

A strong case in point is what has occurred at the mulid of Sidi Ibrahim ad-Disuqi, which is celebrated in the northern Egyptian city of Disuq annually at the end of October. It is by no means the only case illustrating this trend, and at various mulids around the country, notably in Alexandria, Tanta, Cairo, and Qina, similar, at times more far-reaching, measures have been imposed.

The mosque and shrine of Sidi Ibrahim ad-Disuqi, the founder of the Burhamiya Sufi order who lived in the 13th century C.E. (see Hallenberg 1997), stands at the center of the medium-sized provincial town of Disuq. The mulid, which takes place in the square facing the mosque, in the surrounding streets, and on the nearby banks of the Rosetta

branch of the Nile, is the most important festive event that takes place in the city, bringing in vast numbers of visitors, mainly from the surrounding countryside but also from Cairo and the entire Nile Delta region. The trade associated with the mulid has made Disuq famous for its sweets and salted fish (*fisikh*), and the area around the mosque is dominated by large shops specializing in one or the other of the two local delicacies.

The central place of the city, Sidi Ibrahim Square, has been subject to numerous phases of construction and restructuring. It was fairly small until the early 1990s, when entire blocks of buildings were demolished to create a square approximately 300 meters long and between 50 and 120 meters wide between the mosque and the river. This square mainly consists of a park, partly accessible to the public. The square used to serve as the natural center of the mulid, hosting the tents of the large Sufi orders and the stalls of the vendors. The amusements were and still are located in a street to the southeast of the mosque.

This layout lasted only a few years, however, and in 2002 the province governor, 'Ali 'Abd ash-Shakur, ordered a wide-reaching reorganization of the festival. All tents and stands were banned from the main square, the entrances to the square were barred by police roadblocks, and there was an unusually heavy police presence at the festival. The empty central square was a striking contrast to the crowded side streets that now had to host all the stalls and tents (see Figures 2 and 3). In the following years, further disciplining measures have been taken, most importantly inside the mosque. Previously, men and women mixed in the space around the shrine during the festival. Now, a fence that separates men and women at the shrine during the rest of the year remains in place during the festival.

These measures significantly changed the atmosphere of the festival. What had previously been the crowded center of the festival became a relatively empty but spectacularly representative space, an island of order and calm in the

midst of the crowded, narrow alleys. And yet, the measures taken at Disuq were relatively moderate compared with what has happened in other cities, most dramatically in Qina, where the central square has been completely closed to the public. In Disuq, people are still free to picnic in the park, and, during the mulid, carpets and small temporary cafés fill the park's lawns.

The participants in the Disuq mulid were generally disappointed with the new shape of the festival. Young men with whom I attended the mulid in 2002 complained that the mulid was "spoiled" and "all government" (in Egyptian colloquial idiom, *government* primarily denotes the police forces and State Security). Sufi friends of mine told me that, just a few days after the festival, the provincial governor died of a heart attack as a divine punishment for his restrictive measures. (The story is true insofar as the governor did, in fact, die on November 5, 2002, five days after the mulid. See *al-Wafd* 2002.) Merchants complained that they incurred heavy losses compared with previous years because fewer people came to their shops on the side streets. All in all, people missed the Sufi singers, the market stands, and the crowds in the central square.

The politicians and representatives of the religious establishment I interviewed about these measures expressed a very different point of view. They argued that the reorganization of the mulid was an important step toward achieving better public order and consciousness. So, for example, said the director of the Religious Endowments Administration in Kafr ash-Shaykh province, who found the restructuring of the mulid of Sidi Ibrahim ad-Disuqi a great step forward in creating a true Islamic mulid:

The square of the mosque of Sidi Ibrahim this year [2002]: a wonderful square! Before, you wouldn't have been able to walk there [because of the crowds]. And some disturbances could happen because of people who have no morals. But now, in agreement with the



Figure 2. Sidi Ibrahim Square in 2002. Photo by S. Schielke.



Figure 3. Crowds in a side street during the mulid of Sidi Ibrahim ad-Disuqi in 2004. Photo by S. Schielke.

security apparatuses which played a magnificent role, and in agreement with the religious establishment, it has become a place where religious people go to acquire scientific and cultural knowledge. It has become easy for them to move there and to gain knowledge; and they have begun to transmit it to others. So thank God, there is progress in this practice, and the broad base of the sons of the Arab Republic of Egypt increasingly understands the true meaning of the mulid. In my view, we have eliminated as much as 90% of the errors that are committed in the mulids.

This is the mulid as state institutions would like to show it: a well-organized and precisely orchestrated festival for the propagation of official religious discourse. Religious dignitaries, not the ordinary visitors, are the focus of attention. The festival is turned into a medium for civilization and moral education, possibly enriched with elements of folklore.

Dividing the mulid into separate spheres of celebration involves much more than merely changing the location of some tents and stalls. The formerly contingent space of the mulid is restructured in accordance with an order ostensibly free of ambiguity. In this new order, the sacred and the profane and the official and the popular celebrations are separated. Everything (i.e., everything that the planners consider important) has its distinct place. The state symbolically takes possession of the mulid by creating an empty,

representative space in its center. Participants often describe these changes as a loss of space, although the squares around the main pilgrimage sites of Egypt have been, in purely quantitative terms, vastly expanded during the 20th century. Whereas the squares have grown in size, the use of these spaces has become increasingly restricted. The contingent space of the saha has been replaced by the functionally differentiated, controlled, and presentable space of the public square.

Iron fences and green areas closed to the public are not specific to mulids. Since the 1990s, they have become characteristic features of most public places in Egypt (Drieskens 2003:247; Elshestawy 2006). Vast spaces organized in geometric patterns, with different areas specified for different uses—park, street, sidewalk, fenced enclosure of a mosque, parking lot, and so on—express a specific aesthetic of public space. They are designed to serve the function of public spectacle that is identified with a specific kind of order and discipline. It is striking how often the attributes “organized” (*munazzam*) and “beautiful” appear together in the accounts of state officials and religious dignitaries who describe these spaces. Public order, in this understanding, is an aesthetic quality, and imposing it is not separable from beautification—hence, the connection of “beautification” and “development” so common in the official discourse on public planning. The key concepts here are “nizam,” meaning the habitus or quality of order, discipline, and organization in people and things, and “tanzim,” meaning the

practice of ordering, disciplining, and organizing. “Nizam” and “tanzim” are the opposite of what mulids are perceived to be by their reformist and modernist critics. They stand for clear differentiation between spaces and practices, embodied in a restrained and educated upper- or middle-class habitus and accompanied by an aesthetics of embodiment and habituation that identifies an appearance of order with moral improvement and social progress.

This form of order is a powerful tool of practical and symbolic domination of urban space. Fences and empty green areas turn previously contingent urban squares into demonstrations of state presence. Emptied and fenced off, these spaces serve two purposes: representation and control. They are meant to convey an image of Egypt as a modern, clean, and well-organized country (Egyptian elites are particularly sensitive to the image Egypt has abroad), and they provide a matrix of order, helping to control the movement and, consequently, the ethical dispositions of citizens.

This order very often turns out to be highly dysfunctional. The new spatial order of the mosques and the surrounding areas looks prestigious and is suitable for official ceremonies. However, it is dysfunctional for the large crowds that attend the festivities. Fences and police roadblocks often cause worse bottlenecks than tents and trade ever could. Moving the celebrations to the margins actually makes controlling them more difficult. Do these measures really serve to control festivities or only to establish symbolic domination? Or do decision makers infer the one from the other? What does control actually mean here?

This tension is based on the very way control and public order are conceived of and practiced by state actors. Control of the mulid is not only about controlling the movement of people and the form of space but it is also about controlling the meaning and public image of festivity and social order. The contingent and ambiguous space of a mulid is turned into a prestigious, apparently well-ordered space in an apparently modern city apparently inhabited by well-disciplined citizens, as apparently conceived by planners of such projects (see Mitchell 1988:79–81). Not coincidentally, the projects to “beautify and develop” the space of pilgrimage sites go hand in hand with forms of festivity that emphasize official representation and moral discipline. All attempts to reform mulids, especially efforts concerning public space, aim to move the power of definition and representation from the hands of the mulid-goers into the hands of religious and political elites. State officials, accompanied by some elements in al-Azhar University (Egypt’s most important institution of Islamic religious learning) and the Sufi establishment, are trying to turn mulids from a source of chaos—or alternative order, depending on one’s point of view—into a vehicle of ideological hegemony, that is, framed in the language of hegemonic discourses, consciousness, and correct knowledge.

Afterword: The center and its margins

But is the mulid really under control? At its spatial center, it evidently is. Unlike the disciplining of bodies, the restructuring of festive space has been successful, albeit with a significant limitation: This transformation only concerns the visible center of the festivity. Outside the main square in Disuq, crowds are heavy, Sufi rituals are ecstatic, and there is no trace of systematic efforts of control. In fact, until 2005, Disuq was one of the few mulids at which dancing shows, which are otherwise becoming rare at mulids, still flourished. In the amusement areas, a long row of gambling stands faced a tent with dance shows, and at spots near the bank of the Nile and behind the mosque, at least two bars did excellent business during the mulid. In the park, temporary cafés were happy to add a piece of hashish to the tobacco in a water pipe in exchange for an extra tip.

As the state attempts to organize the mulid according to a model of separate spheres, the mulid in its old shape does not disappear. It is merely moved out of sight. As in many other cities, the measures in Disuq have been mainly concerned with creating an empty representative space in the center of the festivity. This is a sound consequence of the logic of “beautification and development”: The proper public festivity is created by dissociating it from the popular celebrations, which, once they cease to influence the public image of festivity, are left on their own. This was apparent from a conversation I had with police officer and parliamentarian Brigadier-General Sayyid Ahmad.

Sayyid Ahmad: The mulid of Sidi Ibrahim was beautiful and very organized/disciplined [*munazzam*] this year. Compared to previous years it was much less chaotic and crowded.

Samuli: But some merchants complained about the measures.

SA: The merchants’ interest is in the chaos, the chaos brings people who buy. Now that the square is empty of stands and there are less people they of course make less money. The interest of the merchants is not the interest of security and order. The mulid was organized this way so that there will be less crowds in the center, in the square in front of the mosque and in the main streets, and it was very successful. In previous years the square was very full and so were all streets. Now the center was closed for traffic, cars had to pass by the ring road, and the crowds were moved to the side streets. So there is now much more space and a beautiful view.

S: But the crowds are still very bad in the side streets, what about them?

SA: That’s intended. The point is to reduce the pressure in the places of vital importance: main streets and the square in front of the mosque by moving the crowds into the side streets.

By symbolically occupying the centers of prominent, visible festivities, the state demonstrates its version of civic order while simultaneously allowing festivities along the margins to follow an order of their own. This is a matter of both resources and will. Brigadier-General Sayyid Ahmad is committed to Sufi tradition and attends the mulid of Sidi Ibrahim during his free time. Although other persons in authority profoundly dislike mulids,³ for Brigadier-General Sayyid the mulid calls for finding a balance between two legitimate interests: control and representation, on the one hand, and a festive atmosphere, on the other hand: "We could make the mulid even more ordered. We could go to the side streets and organize them the same way [i.e., restrict trade and amusements and decrease the pressure of the crowds], but that would make the mulid lose its flavor. It's the crowds that make the mulid." The same logic applies to the organization of mulids that are out of sight, that is, festivities that do not occupy central, visible locations in the capital or the provincial cities. According to Brigadier-General Sayyid Ahmad,

Similar measures are not necessary in smaller mulids because they are not such mass occasions like Sidi Ibrahim with large crowds and people coming from different parts of the country and important visitors such as the governor who comes to pray on Friday [following the great night] with the director of Religious Endowments Administration and others, and the television broadcasting it.

Why the process of restructuring mulids has increasingly taken place since the 1990s—since a general clampdown that took place in the 1930s and 1940s, no attempts to suppress mulids have been made until the last 20 years—is related to two factors: availability of international loans for infrastructure projects, including the restructuring of streets and squares, and the way the Egyptian state is redefining its role in society, moving away from the Nasserist social contract toward providing spectacles of global modernity. In the Nasserist system, the state was a provider of services: subsidized groceries, free education, and public-sector jobs. Today, these services have dramatically deteriorated and are increasingly being replaced by prestigious projects that are mostly directed to a small, globalized segment of the society. These spectacles—new cities, upscale residential and shopping districts, flyover bridges, socially exclusive spaces, and monumental public projects—are spatial expressions of the definition of modern Egypt and orthodox Islam through the exoticization and exclusion of a social reality that falls short of its ideal image (Amin 1999; Singerman and Amar 2006).

Like its colonial predecessor, the hegemonic city of the early 21st century is marked and defined through its op-

position to the popular districts and the countryside. But through the policies of "beautification and development," this opposition enters popular districts and provincial cities as the state inscribes its presence in central public spaces in the form of spectacles that stand in striking contrast to the surrounding streets and alleys: new mosques, wide squares and parks, iron fences, empty spaces, and a strong state presence and restrictive measures at mulids and other public festivities (e.g., the spring festival Shamm an-Nasim; see Fu'ad and Gum'a 2000). Neither the will nor the resources exist to subject mulids—or other parts of popular districts and villages—to full civilizing discipline. Instead, the distinctions between upscale and popular Egypt are reproduced and reinforced in the festive space and time of mulids. Other definitions are pushed to the margin but not erased.

Control of public space in present-day administrative practice is a complex form of power that extends not only to the movement of citizens but also to the meaning and the representative image of that space. It implies anti-insurgency planning designed to prevent uncontrollable movements of crowds, even at the cost of everyday functionality, but it also involves a more profound power over the use and appearance of space. Underpinned by the modernist understanding of the self and habitus, this power of definition is conceived in aesthetic terms, incorporating oppositions such as cleanliness and filth, order and chaos, and calm and noise.

The debates surrounding and attempts to reform mulids are concerned with visible practices only partly because they can be seen and, thus, are easily subjected to practices of censorship and reform; appearances and rituals also matter because they are equated with beliefs and attitudes. This understanding of habitus and space is key to the power of a modernist state administration and security apparatus because, unlike the fragile and complex negotiations of clientelist power, it suggests that it is possible to "see," and consequently police, citizens' minds.

With its openness and ambiguity, the utopia of inclusive love and joy celebrated at mulids expresses a different logic of habitus and public space, clear and functional for the clientelist networks of mystic brotherhoods and electoral politics but opaque for the vision of a modernist state apparatus. Mulids, thus, not only transgress the modernist and reformist ideals of order and discipline but they are also ungovernable. Turning the mulid into a spectacle of state presence means not only shaping it according to modernist and Islamic reformist aesthetic sensibilities but also making it "legible" (Scott 1998), functional in the imagery and structure of the hegemonic modern city, and, therefore, governable.

Yet the attempt to "civilize" mulids by means of a spectacular control of public space is in itself an ambiguous



Figure 4. Sidi Ibrahim Square in 2006. Photo by S. Schielke.

enterprise. Because it is so heavily conceived of in aesthetic terms of spectacular presence, it cannot be total. It works by creating an opposition between a center of clear order and margins of ambivalence and disorder. The margins, by definition, cannot and need not be subjected to the same order and discipline as the center (see Scott 1998:130, 224–225). But this incompleteness of the spectacular order can make other forms of control more attractive, and this is what, in fact, appears to have happened in Disuq after 2004. Although some Sufi dhikrs and vendor stands have been admitted into the central square again (see Figure 4), this relative lenience concerning use of public space has been accompanied by a stricter policy regarding law and order. Again, full discipline has not been imposed on the festival, but a shift has occurred to a different emphasis of control. Such partial successes, it seems, are all that can be accomplished by any attempt to police something so complex and unpredictable as festive culture.

Notes

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1. The preceding comments are those of participants of different mulids in Cairo, Tanta, and Disuq in 2002 and 2003.

2. The preceding comments are those of participants at the mulid of as-Sayyida Nafisa in Cairo, August 21, 2002.

3. For example, the governor of Qina, General 'Adil Labib, underlined to me in a 2003 interview that he never attends mulids (he is present only in his official capacity) and that he expects them to decline and disappear.

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