

FOLK ISLAM IN CONTEMPORARY EAST AFRICA

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Abstract

The Swahili Coast of East Africa is an area where Islamisation progressed soon after the emergence of Islam because of its historical connection with the Arabian Peninsula through maritime trade. Although Muslim society in this area once was underestimated compared with the imaginary 'orthodox' Islamic society, religious lives and values unique to the coast recently have attracted attention from scholars of Islamic studies. In this paper, I would like to discuss these religious lives and values from the perspective of Folk Islam. Studies on Folk Islam arose from debates that recognised this religion's universality and diversity. However, attempts to define universal Islam have sparked continuing debate, while a matter of concern now is the description of the actual Muslim state. The mainstream of Islamic studies depicts the modern Muslim world as being in the middle of a paradigm shift toward forefathers' traditions. In this framework, Folk Islam is considered to be in decline, branded as *bid'a* (i.e., 'deviation'). This case study focuses on *mawlid*, which are celebrations of the Prophet's birthday in Zanzibar, an island of Tanzania. I also examine the characteristics of Folk Islam in East Africa, as well as previous studies' claims. The present study's results suggest that the Islamic-revival phenomenon, which tended to be described monolithically as a movement aiming for a return to early Islam, occurred as Folk Islam in this region, and that Folk Islam itself comprises contradictory factors.

Keywords: *Folk Islam, Islamic Revival, Mawlid, Zanzibar, Swahili, East Africa*

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1. Introduction

Islamised nations collectively are referred to as the Islamic world, in which Islam is a shared philosophy, but the faith differs in content and form from region to region. Folk Islam is a perspective in Islamic studies, adopted to understand various Islamic activities, especially in the daily lives of ordinary people. East Africa, the focus of this study, is located on the periphery of the vast Islamic world, but this does not mean it is marginal in a qualitative sense. However, past studies on Islam included many discussions on which form of Islam was more orthodox by correlating geographical distances with qualitative purity. Thus, I conceived of a plan to re-evaluate Islam in East Africa by using the framework of Folk Islam.

In this paper, I would like to clarify the features of Islamic practices in East Africa from the perspective of Folk Islam. In the first part, I will outline the history of studies on Folk Islam, which is the framework for the discussion. In addition, I will trace the path of Folk Islam as a historical phenomenon and consider its present position. In the second part, I will introduce an Islamic festival held in Zanzibar, a Tanzanian island, as an example of Folk Islam in contemporary East Africa. I then will examine the characteristics of Folk Islam in this region in the context of the Islamic-revival movement, which has spread worldwide in recent years.

2. What Is Folk Islam?

2.1. Debates over Folk Islam

In the Muslim world, Islam is seen as a universal religion, but in practice, the Islamic way of life differs by region and society. The Folk Islam theory was raised to deal with this paradox. Until the middle of the 20th century, regional Islamic practices generally were viewed as being outside the mainstream. In particular, as the Middle East was considered to be the centre of the Islamic world, the term 'rural Islam' was assigned to Islamic practices that were observed in peripheral areas such as Africa, and they were explained as being the result of syncretism and acculturation. This was a product of the view that the religion in the Middle East is 'authentic Islam' and that African Islam is a poor replica.

However, in 1955, Grunebaum introduced the theory of the 'great tradition' and the 'little tradition' in his article, 'The Problem: Unity in Diversity' (Grunebaum, 1955: 27-31). The great tradition is the name given to 'official' Islam, which refers to religious norms and regulations, while the little tradition is its practical adaptation observed as local practices. Thus, the great tradition is conducted by intellectuals, such as religious scholars

of great learning, called '*ulamā*'¹. Conversely, ordinary people practice the little tradition; thus, it is seen as featuring Islamic practices that are more broad-minded. The theory provided an opportunity to avoid the arguments over purity and include the various practices observed in reality as elements of Islam. From that time to the present, the main argument over the theory of Folk Islam basically concerns how to adjust his framework to grasp reality.

El-Zein interpreted the great tradition and little tradition as, respectively, singular Islam beginning with a capital letter, and plural islams, in lower-case letters (el-Zein, 1977: 242–246). It was the first improvement to the theory of Folk Islam by the pluralisation of the little tradition and was intended to show the diversity of Islamic practices, but there is another point that is suggested. As long as the great tradition refers to the philosophy of official Islam, actual Islamic practices all could be included under the little tradition. As discussed later, philosophical concepts could never become materialised as they are. Thus, whether the actors are religious scholars or ordinary people, their performances would be sorted into the same category as various 'islams'.

Some researchers attempted to modify the great tradition. Waardenburg questioned the view of the great tradition as official Islam (Waardenburg, 1978: 327–329). In the Islamic world, there is no official institution that presents a unified view of true Islam. Therefore, from the perspective that Islam provides norms for Muslims, rather than an official doctrine, the great tradition has come to be understood as normative Islam. Furthermore, al-Azmeh pointed out that the great tradition itself was not, in fact, unified (al-Azmeh, 2009: xi–xv). Not only does the little tradition have multidimensional realities, but Islam, as a philosophy, also could be viewed as a collection of complex ideas. So, he tried to express Islam as 'Islams' because of its multiple norms. We could understand it as a natural consequence of the Islamic world lacking an official system that could provide a unified doctrine.

This led to more criticism directed at the little tradition. If the great tradition carries the norms and regulations, the little tradition should be the remainder. However, Otsuka pointed out that Folk Islam itself, which has been included in the little tradition, contains norms that must be obeyed in practice (Otsuka, 1989: 141–144). On this basis, the opposing axes of the great tradition and the little tradition, which can be considered norms and

¹*'Ulamā'* means knowledgeable scholars who are well-versed in Islamic doctrine and sciences. It is plural, the singular being 'ālim, but 'ulamā' is preferred in Islamic studies. They are sometimes known to be a group that is critical of Folk Islam.

realities, respectively, were shaken greatly, and boundaries became blurred.

A series of discussions by Ernest Gellner (Gellner, 1969, 1981) made a breakthrough in Folk Islam theory, which was stagnating at a dead end. His 'Pendulum Swing Theory' contends, through a Christianity analogy, that Islam has two poles, called 'characteristics C' and 'characteristics P' (Gellner, 1969: 130–131). The characteristics P group's attributes are Protestant or Puritanical, i.e., more rigorous and disciplined, while the characteristics C group's attributes resemble those of Catholics, i.e., more generous and popular. Gellner meant real Islam has swung between these two poles like a pendulum. This was an attempt to grasp the dynamic state of Islam (Gellner, 1969: 136–137). Needless to say, the characteristics C group here refers to Folk Islam, and his 'Pendulum Swing Theory' is a convenient way to explain the historical relationship between Islam and the populace.

2.2. History of Islam and the Populace

From the beginning of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula in the first half of the seventh century, the Muslim community, called *umma*, promoted Islamisation of adjacent regions after a series of wars against surrounding dynasties. When it comes to Islamisation, we have an image of the residents of an area being converted to Islam all at once, but this is not accurate. As long as Muslims were accepted as the rulers of a conquered society, non-Muslims were allowed to continue practicing their own faiths (Brodeur, 2004: 361–362). As a result, until around the 12th century, these populations maintained their traditional faiths in most Islamised regions.

While the Islamic world expanded, within Islam itself, the systematisation of doctrine proceeded, and Islamic sciences were developed. Systematised Islam institutionally came to support state power, and those who thought that this took the teeth out of the faith turned to ascetic training. This movement eventually became organised as *Sufism* and was integrated into the ideological framework of Islam (AWN, 2005: 8815–8816).

Muslim intellectuals' academic pursuits were in decline by the 12th century, and it was Folk Islamic practices, based on Sufism and the adoration of saints, that gained power. Sufis in the 12th century lived under the guidance of mentors while doing secular jobs. The emergence of Sufis who stayed at home made Sufism much more popular. Consequently, Sufism and saint adoration penetrated those who were socially Islamised, but had retained their old faiths and promoted their conversion. Some aspects of the Islamic world's expansion should be noted here. In Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan

Africa, the Sufi orders played the role of promoters of Islam, both socially and religiously (Trimingham, 1971: 9). As a result, Islamisation was achieved in these areas through Folk Islam from the beginning.

From the Middle Ages to the present, Folk Islam with Sufism has continued to evolve. In Cairo, almost all Muslim inhabitants were involved with a Sufi order by the 19th century. However, during this era, the Islamic world suffered from direct interference from European colonialism and was exposed to a wave of modernisation. In reaction to that, a movement developed among Muslim academics who thought that the Islamic world was trailing Europe because of conventionalism in its understanding of Islam and its sciences since the 10th century, as well as behaviours that deviated from the religion's original doctrine. They believed true Islam existed in the era when the Prophet Muhammad and his disciples lived. Because the reformers found their ideal in that age, they insisted on excluding practices that perhaps had been introduced in later generations, but had long been regarded as part of Islam (Bonnefoy, 2004: 1009). Thus, many elements of Folk Islam became targets, as *bid'a*².

The extreme attitude that aims to return to early Islam is often called Islamic fundamentalism in mass media. However, as a response to excessive popularisation, the idea of eliminating deviation from the essence of Islam is not a special case. Desires for a more faithful way of life in Islam are spreading not only among so-called fundamentalists, but also among ordinary Muslims. The rise of religious consciousness is currently progressing in various parts of the world in the form of an Islamic revival. In addition to terrorism, which attracts the attention of mass media, Islamic culture in a stricter form has emerged in various forms in daily life, such as Muslim women who had exposed their hair publicly in the past beginning to cover their heads with scarves (Alvi, 2013: 189).

Within this trend, it seems that Folk Islam gradually has been losing momentum (Akahori, 2008: 206–207). Using the 'Pendulum Swing Theory', this trend can be understood as follows. Early Islam had a more rigid and disciplined nature. Over time, the popularisation of Islam progressed, so more generous and popular traditions began to prosper. At present, the pendulum is swinging back in the direction of stricter practices. These mutual reactions constitute the history of Islam itself. There are two points to note here. One is that these two poles do not exist in entirely different

²*Bid'a* is used to describe actions and ideas that deviate from the essence of Islam. It is positioned as the opposite of the *Sunna*, which the Prophet indicated as the norms. What is *Bid'a* depends on the ideological background of those who judge it, but under it, Folk Islam practices often were denounced.

dimensions, and intermediate forms exist between them. The other is that both have existed in every era, changing power relations, and the friction between them continues today.

2.3. Summary of Folk Islam Theory

In the discussion on Folk Islam, there is a trend toward seeing Islam as comprising two different dimensions: the great tradition and the little tradition. The great tradition means the philosophy and norms, and the little tradition refers to actual practices. Folk Islam is positioned on the side of the little tradition, as opposed to 'official' Islam. However, difficulties have been encountered in strictly distinguishing the great tradition from the little tradition; thus, this framework came to be disputed.

On the other hand, there is another framework, 'Pendulum Swing Theory', that groups the widely diverse religious practices in the Islamic world into two paradigms: a rigorous type and a generous type. This was an attempt to grasp Islam dynamically rather than statically. Thinking through this framework, one can see that the results of the power game between these two paradigms have formed the history of practical Islam. Their interaction is not a past event, but is playing out in various places in the Islamic world as a present-day phenomenon.

3. Folk Islam in East Africa

3.1. What is Mawlid?

The 12th day of the third month of the Islamic calendar is believed to be the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. A festival called *mawlid* celebrates this day and takes place in various parts of the Islamic world. Mawlid also sometimes refers to celebrations of local Islamic saints' birthdays, as well as the Prophet's. In this case, the festival honouring Prophet Muhammad is distinguished by adding *al-Nabī* (the Prophet) or *nabawī* (prophetic) after mawlid. For a discussion on Folk Islam in East Africa, I would like to examine mawlid of the Prophet, which is held in Zanzibar, a Tanzanian island³.

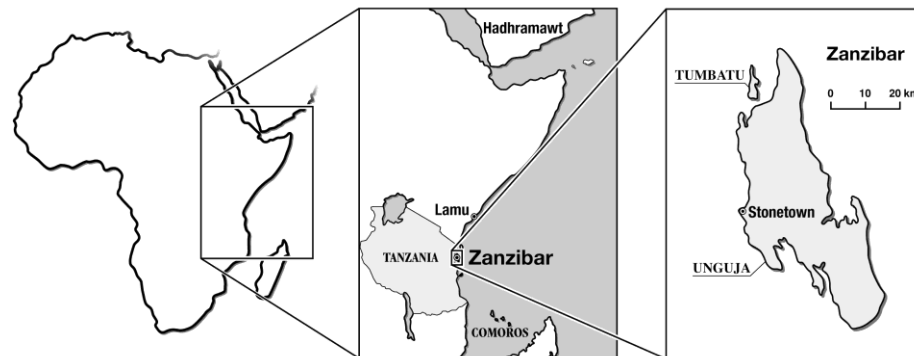
The earliest recorded celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday took place in Egypt, which was under the control of the Fatimid Caliphate (909–1171). Since around the 12th century, mawlid has developed as a festival for ordinary people in the Arab world, involving Islamic mystics, or Sufis (Eickelman, 1987: 5788–5789). Meanwhile, mawlid celebrations in

³ In Zanzibar, the birthday festivals for local Islamic saints employ another word, *hawī* (anniversary). Therefore, simply speaking of mawlid there refers to the birthday festival of the Prophet Muhammad.

the coastal area of East Africa were introduced by Arab immigrants, called *Hadhramis*, from the Hadhramawt region in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula. Mawlid, as currently celebrated in these areas, was shaped by the Sufi order of Hadhramis at Lamu of Kenya in the 19th century (Bang, 2003: 149).

To grasp what mawlid is like, I now refer to a previous study on a tradition in Cairo, where the oldest case of this festival was recorded, and where the Prophet's birthday still has been celebrated in recent years (Otsuka, 2000: 152–161). This case study was done in the 1980s. In Cairo, a series of events that gradually evoked the mood of the festival take place one month before the Prophet's birthday. Sufis play a central role here. During this period, the Sufis gather in brotherhoods and recite the Qur'ān and poetry, as well as perform *dhikr*⁴, a Sufi ritual in which the name of God is repeated. During the afternoon of the day before Muhammad's birthday, Sufis march to the town, grouped by brotherhood. By the classical Islamic calendar, a new day begins at night, so the night of this day marks the beginning of Muhammad's birthday. Then the main event of the Prophet Birthday Festival in Cairo is held. In the plaza, tents for Sufis are pitched by the respective orders. Within each tent, recitations of Qur'ān passages and poetry, and rituals such as dhikr, are held for several hours around the mentors.

Figure 1. Map of Zanzibar in East Africa



⁴*Dhikr* means recalling the monotheistic God. It is close to the Christian litany and the most basic ritual in Sufi orders. Formalised short prayer phrases are repeated with unique breathing and vocalisation methods.

3.2. Structure of Mawlid in East Africa

Zanzibar, which is used for the present case study, is an archipelago belonging to Tanzania, an East African country (Figure 1). It is located tens of kilometres from the continent and occupies a central place in Islamic culture among the Islamic cities scattered along the coast of East Africa. The ethnic groups living in Zanzibar as locals are divided roughly into four categories: Africans, Arabs, Indians and others. Regardless of origin, they speak Swahili as their mother tongue in everyday life. Nearly all residents (98%) are Muslim, but denominations and schools differ according to ethnic group. Most belong to the *Shāfi’ī* school of the Sunni, while among Arabs, those of the families from Oman are *Ibādīs*⁵. Most Indians belong to *Shī’a*, but there are also many converts to Sunnis.

Table 1. Modern history of Zanzibar

Years	Events
1840	Becomes the capital of Oman.
1861	Gets separated from Oman.
1890	Becomes a protectorate of the U.K.
1963	Gains independence from the U.K.
1964	Zanzibar revolution occurs; the government imposes restrictions on Islam.
1980s	Islamic rituals resume publicly

Table 1 outlines the modern history of Zanzibar. It is remarkable that mawlid did not continue from the 19th century, when it was brought over from Lamu, Kenya, into the modern era. Actually, it was discontinued in the second half of the 20th century after the revolution of 1964 in Zanzibar, but it has resumed and has been practiced actively in recent decades.

⁵*Ibādī* is a sect that broke away from *Khawārij*, a group separated from *umma* in the early era of Islam. Historically, they have diverged from extreme factions in *Khawārij* and survive to the present day as a moderate group.

Figure 2. Recitation of Poetry During Mawlid



The mawlid festival currently practiced in this region is different from Cairo's in terms of the schedule. Both hold a big event for mawlid on the eve of the 12th day to celebrate the Prophet's birthday. However, the Cairo festival peaks on the 12th day, while in Zanzibar, this night is just the beginning of a series of events. After that, mawlid is repeatedly held almost every evening, with the venue moving to various parts of the island throughout the birthday month. At the end of the month, a large event is held for three days on Tumbatu Island, off the northwestern part of Zanzibar, then the mawlid festivities in this area come to an end.

Mawlid festivities consistently are held in Zanzibar, with many structural similarities among various celebrations. In each venue, mawlid is conducted by following a timetable, i.e., all participants share a single programme. In this respect, it differs from Cairo, where each Sufi order conducts rituals under tents installed individually while only sharing a plaza. In Zanzibar, a stage is set up at the venue for professional performers. There are no tents for Sufis. Although the composition of the programme varies from place to place, the performances included in the schedule are common to the event.

Basically, at the beginning of Mawlid, *al-Fātiḥa*, the beginning chapter of the Qur'ān, is recited. It also is recited during daily worship, which is a duty of all Muslims, but during mawlid, it functions as a kind of prayer service. The

main performance during mawlid is the recitation of poetry, called *qaşida*, to honour the Prophet Muhammad and tell his story (Figure 2). The book containing these items is called the 'Mawlid of *Barzanjī*', which incorporates the compiler's name. The prose of the Prophet's story itself also is conventionally named after the editor. Besides *Barzanjī*, text compilers *Ḥabsī* and *Dayba'ī* also are famous. In East Africa, there are preferences concerning which text to use, depending on the region, and in Zanzibar, the book by *Barzanjī* is quite popular. Regardless of which book is used, it is during the basic flow of mawlid in East Africa when performers recite the Prophet's story and *qaşida* alternately on a stage set up at the venue.

Figure 3. Qiyāma During Mawlid



Because the Prophet's story is very long, during recent mawlid celebrations, it is common to recite only excerpts from the main chapters. However, the chapter dealing with the Prophet Muhammad's birth always is recited. When the birth scene is reached, the recitation on the stage is halted, and all participants in the plaza stand up (Figure 3). This is called *qiyāma*, meaning to stand and watch. During *qiyāma*, not only the performer on the stage, but also all participants recite a special poem honouring the Prophet. Also, during the recitation of poetry, staff members move around the venue while holding an incense burner containing agarwood and a pot of rose water, purifying each participant with the scent. When this ritual is over, everyone sits down, and the rest of the Prophet's story is recited.

The story of Muhammad is recited in Arabic, but the *qaşida*, written in Swahili, the mother tongue of the audience, sometimes are recited by performers in Swahili, too. In the mawlid of East Africa, various *qaşida* are recited, from classic poetry to modern works.

Figure 4. Playing *Duff* During Mawlid



Qaṣīda may accompany performances using musical instruments. Particularly during the mawlid of East Africa, drums called *duff* are used (Figure 4). They resemble tambourines and can be classified into eight different types according to size. The basic structure of a *duff* is a cylindrical wooden frame with goat leather. Three to four slit-like holes are made in the wooden frame, and several circular metal plates are fixed with wire in the holes. To adjust the tone by changing the tension of the leather, a knitted strap is inserted between the wooden frame and the skin with a spatula. The custom of using *duff* began at Hadhramawt in Yemen, and in the coastal area of East Africa, they first flourished on Lamu Island in Kenya. After that, they spread from Lamu to distant places, such as Comoros and Mozambique, and came to be used in mawlid festivities in each region. However, in the case of Zanzibar, the use of *duff* became common in recent decades. Before the revolution in 1964, even though performers came from the mainland, the instrument did not become popular. In the era before the revolution in Zanzibar, the power of Oman Arabs belonging to the Ibādī school was predominant, and it seems they did not allow musical instruments⁶.

The remaining elements in Zanzibar's mawlid programme comprise sermons and prayers. In the middle of the festival, there is always time for preaching, regardless of the festival's organiser. These sermons are named differently depending on the event, but what is done is the same: The preachers quote the Qur'ān in Arabic and speak with enthusiasm in the

⁶ Muḥammad Idrīs, personal communication, May 21, 2007.

native language of the audience. Similar preaching also is done at collective worship sessions at noon on Friday, and attending these is the duty of all adult-male Muslims. At the very end of mawlid, all participants say a *du'ā* (a prayer to God). The books of mawlid generally also contain *du'ā* as the final chapter. Although the festival ends after *du'ā*, some groups might hold special dinners.

3.3. Scale and Nature of Mawlid in East Africa

As mentioned earlier, in Zanzibar, mawlid is held not only on the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, but also repeatedly performed throughout his birth month. The size of each event varies depending on the organiser. Festivities can be categorised into four sponsorship groups: either sponsored by the government, political parties and organisations, town residents or specific families. In this paper, I focus on mawlid sponsored by the government and local residents, highlighting their differences.

The biggest festival in terms of number of participants and programme content is held on the eve of the Prophet's birthday. The festival organiser officially is the Prophet Birthday Association, but the actual organiser is the state government of Zanzibar. It is held at a sports field on the outskirts of Stonetown, part of the capital city, to accommodate a large number of participants. Everyone can participate in this event, and TV broadcasts also take place. Also, as part of this programme's festival, many parts of the Prophet's story are recited, while *qaşida* are inserted between each chapter, making this event into something special.

As noted earlier, Zanzibar experienced a revolution in 1964. Since the revolutionary government has long restricted Islamic activities, religious events such as mawlid had not taken place publicly until the end of the 20th century. The ruling party has not changed, but strangely, the government now hosts mawlid celebrations at which high-ranking officials, including the president of Zanzibar, are present. Although the Qur'ān is recited at the beginning of normal mawlid, the state anthem and political speeches are held first during the governmental version of the festival. The opening and closing of mawlid happen upon the president exiting and entering his car, and at that time, all participants stand up and show respect. Thus, the governmental mawlid works as both a political event and a religious festival. The same goes for the opposition party. It also organises its own mawlid festival, which also draws a large volume of participants.

Figure 5. Mawlid by Town Residents



On the other hand, for mawlid festivities that are also held in each town and village, both the organisers and participants are local residents (Figure 5). Open spaces such as parking lots are used as venues. This is an event with a homemade feeling, e.g., attendees bring their own furniture from home. The festivals are held in various parts of Zanzibar, such as rural areas across the island, in addition to urban areas, and the programmes for mawlid include local features based on the location. Residents of the district participate in on-stage performances, not performers known throughout Zanzibar, as is done during the government's mawlid. Qaşıda are recited during governmental mawlid and are usually written in Arabic, but works in the local language, Swahili, also are commonly performed at festivals held by town districts and villages. In addition, even the story of the Prophet Muhammad sometimes is recited in both Arabic and residents' mother tongue. Mawlid in this category are designed in a way that ensures ordinary Muslims without Arabic knowledge can enjoy the event. Shouts from the audience in response to a particularly great performance are also characteristic of mawlid in towns and villages, coming in the form of calls to the Prophet. This mechanism, which shapes the sense of unity between the on-stage performers and the audience, represents the nature of mawlid hosted by local residents.

3.4. Summary of Mawlid

Mawlid is the festival that celebrates the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. The birthday of the Prophet is the 12th day of the third month of the Islamic calendar, but his festival is held the night before that day. In Zanzibar, mawlid festivals are held repeatedly almost every evening throughout the birthday month, with the venue moving around after the first event. The festival's organisers are different for each venue, and the nature of the event reflects their tastes.

The governmental mawlid is held on the eve of the Prophet's birthday, and it is the biggest event in Zanzibar in terms of programme content and number of participants. However, while it has the appearance of a religious event, several elements resemble those that would be seen at a political rally. In addition to the government, the opposition party also hosts large-scale events.

In contrast, mawlid hosted by towns and villages are festivals for ordinary Muslim residents. Area residents are both participants and performers, and they manage venue decorations and operations at the facilities. The events are designed for Muslims who cannot understand Arabic and display ingenuity in creating an atmosphere of unity across the whole venue. It is understandable that mawlid in this category incorporate popular elements of Islam.

4. Discussion

4.1. Comparison with Arab Region

Both mawlid festivities in Zanzibar and in the Arab Islamic world have the same goal. So, could we simply conclude that mawlid in Zanzibar was an East African version of the festival of Arab origin? In Cairo, mawlid is viewed as a festival linked to the activities of Sufis. It has a structure that gradually excites the populace about the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. The main actors during the event are Sufis and their orders. They put up tents for each brotherhood in the venue and carry out their usual rituals, such as dhikr, in public.

Meanwhile, mawlid in Zanzibar begin on the eve of Muhammad's birthday and are repeatedly carried out throughout his birth month. The peak of the event happens during the last few days of his birth month. In addition, mawlid content is such that all participants follow one programme, during which dhikr is not seen, nor are other Sufi rituals, but the recitation of poetry honouring the Prophet and the story of the Prophet are principal elements.

Compared with the Prophet's birthday festival seen in the Arab region, such as in Cairo, mawlid in Zanzibar have a common purpose — to celebrate the Prophet's birth — but the Sufis' involvement is not seen publicly within the framework of the festival. It has a unique configuration as an organised event.

4.2. Application of Folk Islam Theory

Here, I would like to discuss Folk Islam theory once again, based on the case of mawlid in East Africa. Despite shared Islamic philosophy, there is a diversity of activities in the real Islamic world, which has sparked debate. In other words, under the same umbrella of Islam, there is both a very strict and disciplined lifestyle and a flexible and generous way of life (i.e., Folk Islam). Imagine both as different-coloured paints placed at opposite ends of a palette, in which we could observe various stages of mixing the two colours in the centre of the palette. The actual Islamic world is a kind of palette for mixing these two colours, and the ways of life are the various colours produced.

These two colours, or paradigms, have existed from the beginning of Islam to the present, but the dominant one has changed, depending on historical period and social context. Since the seventh century, when Islam began, to around the 10th century, when Islamic doctrine and sciences were systematised, the more rigorous side became stronger. After that, from the 12th century, Islam penetrated the general populace through the rise of Sufism, and its generous side started thriving. However, since the 19th century, self-criticism of Islamic practices was prevalent, accompanied by a sense of crisis, as the Islamic world was lagging far behind Europe socially and technologically. As a result, the demand for a return to early Islam gradually gained steam, and the more disciplined side gained strength again. Increased Islamic consciousness among Muslims has been visible worldwide as an Islamic revival, and this trend continues to the present day. This phenomenon has been likened to the movement of a pendulum: After swinging far toward one direction, it swings back to the other side.

According to this model, we are looking at a pendulum swinging back from Folk Islam to the disciplined stream of Islam. In fact, even in contemporary East Africa, criticism of Folk Islamic behaviour appears alongside concrete actions and the assertion that the initial form of Islam is ideal. For example, on the mainland of Tanzania, I once saw a group calling for a return to the early traditions of Islam. They were running a store selling religious books near a great mosque. Such activists are called *Wahhābīs* in the Islamic society of East Africa. This is derived from the name of Muḥammad ibn 'Abd

al-Wahhāb, a reformist thinker of the 18th century⁷. Wahhābīs themselves like the name *Salafī*. The word *Salafī*, the root of Salafī, refers to the first few generations of people who were instructed directly by the Prophet Muhammad, and the belief that their version of Islam is the correct one is called Salafism.

Most of the religious bookstores near the great mosque sold books by Sufi orders, but the Wahhābīs (or Salafīs) did not consider Sufism to be part of the original doctrine of Islam. Thus, they pressured the bookstores to stop selling such books. Looking at this case, it seems that the stricter and more disciplined lifestyle is beginning to spread among people in contemporary East Africa and worldwide. So, is the Prophet Birth Festival of mawlid, which we have examined in this paper, also in danger of entering a period of decline because it has been exposed to criticism?

4.3. Revivalism Based on Folk Islam

The answer is no. As briefly mentioned earlier when discussing the modern history of Zanzibar, mawlid in this nation officially were discontinued for a period in the mid-20th century. After decades of silence, from the end of the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century, mawlid gradually was revived and is now quite visible in public life. This corresponded with the momentum of Islamic revivalism around the globe. It means that while the call for a return to early Islam was gaining steam in other parts of the Islamic world, in Zanzibar, the Islamic revival entailed activating Folk Islam. Of course, the reason why mawlid faded at one point in the 20th century was the climate during the regional revolution, which put political pressure on Zanzibar. However, presently, the government itself, which initially restricted Islamic rituals, has been organising mawlid to meet the people's demands, as discussed in this paper, so Folk Islam's momentum is growing.

In addition, although it is beyond this paper's scope, folk medicine, undertaken in the name of Islam, also has become popular now. It is a kind of alternative medicine that practitioners claim is based on the practices of the Prophet Muhammad, but it actually exists in different forms, just like Islam itself. In recent years, therapy using a CD of Qur'ān verses has been practiced actively. In this way, customs that did not exist in early Islam continue to be produced constantly.

It seems that we could conclude that the Islamic revival in East Africa is only increasing Folk Islam, but this is not true. As we saw earlier, the main

⁷ It is another matter whether people called Wahhābīs are really proponents of this reformist. In East Africa, the word is often used when labelling someone as an intolerant fundamentalist.

actors in the 1980s mawlid in Cairo were Sufi orders. On the other hand, the performance of mawlid in Zanzibar did not include Sufi rituals such as dhikr, which was performed actively in Cairo, but the programme consisted of the recitation of the Prophet's story and poetry. However, it does not mean that the populace is doing mawlid without passion. Indeed, they are 'very excited' because the mother tongue of those who participate in the festival is used, and mawlid are held repeatedly throughout the region, so any residents could join in. In short, Islamic revivalism in this region has a structure in which the importance of the Sufi during the festival is declining, but the share of popular participation is increasing.

4.4. Tentative Conclusion

This paper's purpose was to discuss the features that appear when one observes Islamic practices in East Africa from the perspective of Folk Islam. One notable point is that Folk Islam, which generally was viewed as being in decline, actually is increasing in power in this area. However, as seen from the elimination of Sufi elements from mawlid festivities, it was accompanied by qualitative change. Therefore, we also could see that the old structure inside Folk Islam is being deconstructed and replaced by a new configuration.

5. Further Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Multiple Facets of Islamic Revivalism

The above is fine as an answer to the question presented at the beginning of this study, but I would like to deepen the discussion a little more at the end. As the case in East Africa shows, it is quite difficult to generalise the Islamic-revival phenomenon because the facts include diverse realities in each region. Interpreting contemporary Islamic revivalism as a one-way movement from Folk Islam to a disciplined lifestyle can lead to focusing on only one aspect of this diverse situation. This means we would come up against the same problem as the old debates over the great tradition and the little tradition. Also, we need to look at the diversity within Folk Islam itself. It has been pointed out that various elements such as festivals, Sufism, saint adoration, music, folk medicine et al. are regarded as falling under the category of Folk Islam, but simply listing these practices is insufficient when describing what it is. As we saw from the decrease in Sufi elements and the increase in popular participation in mawlid in Zanzibar, power games are happening within Folk Islam, too.

If we expand the discussion further, I must point out that such competition occurs not only in specific areas and societies, but also among Muslim individuals. Unlike Islamic intellectuals who engage in the academic pursuit

of Islamic doctrines, we could see conscious and unconscious deviations from such norms in the daily lives of the Muslim populace. I mentioned activists called Wahhābīs or Salafīs, who view Sufism negatively. In fact, they criticise mawlid, as well as Sufis' activities. However, they do not directly interfere with the festivals. Some of them even participate in mawlid festivities while criticising them. Thus, even a single person may follow two contradictory movements, i.e., the intermingling of strictness and tolerance is a phenomenon that arises on various levels, from micro to macro.

An interesting point is that these diverse realities are explained as the word of Islam, or the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad from individual viewpoints. Even though Wahhābīs criticise Sufi orders' activities as non-Islamic, the Sufis have said, 'Wahhābīs may insist on their idea, but according to the guidance of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.), Islam is so-and-so, and we are just following it'⁸. In other words, each sect's adherents believe they are proper Muslims adhering to the true norms or system of Islam.

5.2. Conclusion: A Perspective for Grasping Diverse Activities

In the first half of the paper, I mentioned the idea of making Islam plural (i.e., *Islams*), so we could envisage various norms, but actually, Muslims themselves do not think there are multiple Islams. For them, as a principle, there is only one Islam, and in their daily lives, people have certain rules to follow that derive from that. However, the true concept of Islam itself cannot be perceived as if it were materialised. Of course, in Islam, there are invariant texts: the Qur'ān and the *Ḥadīth*. The *Ḥadīth* is a collection of the Prophet Muhammad's words and deeds, and gives followers guidance on the right way to live. Nevertheless, the answers to all problems that modern Muslims encounter cannot be found merely in these scriptures.

As evidenced by the cases of mawlid in Egypt and East Africa, local traditions also are observed through activities for the same purpose under one Islamic umbrella. This is because each Muslim must interpret Islam based on his or her particular social situation, i.e., it is ordinary Muslims — the populace — who give observable substance to Islam by construing and practicing it. This structure has created diverse Islamic realities. If Folk Islam theory could be positioned in Islamic studies with this perspective, it would be possible to avoid useless arguments about 'authentic Islam' and 'rural Islam', and instead conduct more fruitful research in the future.

⁸ Shaykh Bā 'Abduh, personal communication, April 30, 2007.

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