



## The Procession and Celebrations of the Prophet's Mohammed Birthday

### Zafat wa Ihtifalat Al Mawlid al Nabawi al Sharif

Muslims all over Sudan celebrate the birthday of Prophet Muhammad Peace be upon Him, which was on Monday 22 April 571 (12 Rabi Awal of the year of the Elephant).

The annual celebration begins with al *Zaffa* (the procession) on the last day of Safar, the eve of Rabi' Awal.

In Omdurman, the largest of the country's cultural cities, the procession, marking the beginning of the festival, leaves the Eastern Police Division of Wad *Nubāwi* in the afternoon and heads south until it reaches Omdurman Hospital. From there it marches west to *Mawrada* Street and turns left following the road to the Municipality Building where it takes 'Arḍa Street for a short distance to *Tijāni al Māhi* Roundabout. From there it takes *Arba'in* Street to 'Ābdīn fuel station where it turns west to al Fil Road that it takes back to *Mawrada* Street close to the Maternity Hospital. The long procession ends at the main gate of the *Khalifa* Mosque (Square) a few meters to the north of the Hospital. In *Bahri* Town (Khartoum North), the *Zaffa* starts at the Grand Mosque passing along al *Mazād* Street and ends up at the *Mawlid* Square in *Khatmīya* District. A similar *Zaffa* takes *Hurriya* Street to the *Mawlid* Square in al *Hilla al Jadīda* District of Khartoum.

Al *Zaffa* is organized and supervised by the Higher Committee for the *Mawlid* Anniversary which is also responsible for all the activities associated with this event. It is made of representatives from all localities, states and Sufi sects.

A musical brass and percussion band called *Kaita* precedes al *Zaffa* playing tunes that suite the great occasion. Residents of the neighborhoods where the procession passes line up watching and admiring the overwhelming spectacle. Major participants include a number of notables, government officials, army officers, Sufi men, the music corps and ordinary people. Al *Zaffa* signifies the official announcement of the festivities and is met with jubilation and free foods, dates, juices and water all the way to its destination at the *Mawlid* Square, just before sunset.

There, the flag is hoisted and Sufi groups head for their designated tents and pavilions to begin the eleven-day festivals.

Other participants include several Sufi sects' followers and admirers dressed in their distinctive attires and carrying banners that reflect their respective religious orders, all lovers of Prophet Muhammad, Peace be upon Him, men, women and children of all ages, social strata and ethnic backgrounds. Attendants also include students of *Khalāwi* – sing. *Khalwa* (Quranic schools), societies, Sufi dancers, official representatives of the localities or states and army and police forces. Just before evening prayer, Sufi adherents and families pour into the square and crowding up before the pavilions to watch the Sufi dance and listen to preaching and eulogy. Children stroll leisurely around carrying *Mawlid halwa* (sweets) made of sesame, hummus and peanut sweet bars or molded in various forms like al '*Arūsa* (bride) and the horse, all of which are products of local confectionary factories.

Celebrations continue throughout the evenings of the eleven-day occasion and last long after midnight. They range between citations from the Holy Quran to Sufi dance sessions with their distinctive *Nauba* (drum) beats and colorfully dressed dancers, to religious speeches and laudations praising the Prophet. There may also be some acts of charity and voluntary fasting. The twelfth of the month of Rabi' Awwal is the closing day of the *Mawlid* Anniversary (*Qaflat al Mawlid*). All activities related to the occasion are brought to an end leaving only the sweet vendors in their kiosks as a reminder of the great occasion.

The *Mawlid* Festival and the practices associated therewith are classified under the category of 'beliefs'. The occasion owes its holiness to its being the annual anniversary of Prophet Muhammad's birthday and a reminder of his life, which is highly regarded by Sudanese households. Families from different classes prepare themselves early for the visit to the *Mawlid* Square. They dress their children in the best of cloths, as they do in the two *Eids* (anniversaries) of Ramadan and *Adha* (*Courban Bairam*), and take them to attend the great event.

Some families consider al *Mawlid* days blessed and opportune to conclude wedding contracts. Old men and the sick are also seen beseeching consecration and cure from their illnesses. Some parents take their children to meet their religious order's sheikhs to bestow them with blessings and cite verses from the Quran over their heads to guard them against the perils of life. People believe that taking part in the procession and the rest of the ceremonies serving food to the attendants of the occasion bring them *Baraka* (sanctification). It is also believed that the more one makes food offerings, especially during *al Zaffa*, the more one demonstrates his love to the Prophet Peace be upon Him.

Al *Mawlid* is unique in several aspects. It is characterized by the scores of banners waving above the tents of the different Sufi sects. The tents themselves come in colors that distinguish every

individual Sufi order from the others; it is green for the *Qādirīya* is green, black for *Rufā'īya*, white, yellow and green for the *Burhānīya*... etc. Scull caps, and garments too take colors that include white, red and green, each color reflecting the person's allegiance. Dervishes walk around clad in garments patterned with colorful rags sewn in and long dangling rosaries and clusters of amulets. Some carry their ablution pitchers ready to wash when prayer time comes. Some sheikhs are seen seated or walking gracefully leaning on specially crafted sticks that signify their religious status. A number of the Sufi tents and pavilions display descriptive posters that guide the reader on certain religious jurisprudential aspects, exhibits that explain to onlookers the particulars of the specific *Tarīqah* (order) , and images depicting its successive caliphs. They may also distribute some instructive booklets and pamphlets detailing worshipping methodologies. These tents are furnished with carpets, prayer mats and chairs for visitors who come to listen to the religious speeches and eulogy, or to follow what is considered the essence of *Mawlid* celebration, the practice of remembrance and supplication performed in rhythmic patterns to the captivating beats of the *Nauba*. Some Sufi orders serve 'Aṣīda (thick sorghum paste soaked in gravy) and *Fatta* (chopped bread soaked in gravy), favorite Sudanese dishes which guests and followers take with welcoming appetite.

Other features unique to the occasion include street vendors who erect tables that offer all kinds of toys and others displaying *Mawlid* candies at affordable retail prices. Women are also increasing in number and lately female sheikhs started to make their appearance in the *Zaffa* and the tents of their respective Sufi orders.

Religious occasions, like the *Mawlid* festival, play vital roles and serve social functions for the Sufi orders involved. They refresh the collective memory of the sect's members and remind them of the phases that their religious call have been through strengthening their faith and inspiring them to hold fast to their belief and the values it calls for and to follow the example of the righteous predecessors. Furthermore, these occasions strengthen the brotherly relations between members of the same order and motivate them to show exemplary attitude before other sects.

The social, political, religious and scientific roles played by the Sufi orders in Sudan helped a great deal in bringing Sufism closer to the hearts of the common people. The roots of the Sufi practice in Sudan are traced back to a social dimension that was instrumental in gearing the Sudanese character towards such values as tolerance, asceticism, solidarity and peaceful coexistence. It also provides the practitioner with inner spiritual peace and satisfaction for being part of a group or sect that shares the same ideas, beliefs and practices and cements his allegiance to the order. In a broader sense, all Sufi orders are unified under one umbrella, which is the love of the Prophet Peace be upon Him. This is clearly evident in all aspects of the celebration of the Prophet's birthday.

*Mawlid* celebrations in Sudan have, for some time, become the subject of a conflict between followers of the Sufi orders and some religious groups that object to the practice from their jurisprudence point of view calling for the festivals to stop. The *Salafis* (fundamentalists), known in Sudan as the *Wahhābīya*. Nevertheless, the majority of the Sudanese people continue to attend the festival and cherish it as an event of great value citing the tacit encouragement of tolerance between the different Islamic sects. They denounce the violence and extremism that began to show between the Sufis who erect their tents and pavilions as they used to do, and the fanatic *Anṣar al Sunna* (Sunna advocates) who began lately to install their tents on the festival grounds as well, to dissuade the participants from taking part in the event which they dismiss as a "heresy" that lacks support from the Quran and Sunna.

Apart from the existing religious controversy around these celebrations, they have a discernible social role. They create an atmosphere of joy and happiness in the community and are considered one of the greatest national occasions that provide spiritual recreation, psychological rehabilitation, moral refreshment and a change in monotonous rhythm of everyday life.

The continuity of the *Mawlid* celebration is ensured through transmission from generation to generation. It is apparent that parents are keen to take their sons and daughters to the *Mawlid* to familiarize themselves and enjoy the formalities of the great event. Otherwise, they buy them the *Mawlid halwa*, 'Arusa for the girl and the horse for the boy. Such happy experiences stay with the youngsters as they grow and ensure the smooth transmission of the occasion. Sweet vendors, too, play an important role in this respect. They keep their stalls open for as many months as feasible to secure themselves a regular income. Leaders of the Sufi orders are enthusiastic advocates of the celebrations, which commemorate the Prophet and keep his memory alive.

In spite of the changes and intrusions that affected the structure of the festival, the viability of al *Mawlid* is an indisputable fact, thanks to the viability of the event in the minds of the Sudanese people. In addition to that, the media plays a vital role in ensuring the preservation and continuity of the festivals. Every year the occasion is thoroughly covered and transmitted to the public. TV programs and documentaries discuss al *Mawlid* as an important religious event of prominent cultural value. Printed information media follow it closely and publish relevant articles and interviews. Several poets have addressed al *Mawlid* in a number of renowned works, the most noticeable of which is probably *Lailat al Mawlid* by Muhammad al Mahdi Majzūb, which went on to become one of al Kably's most popular songs. The above reasons, among others, stand witness to the anticipated viability of al *Mawlid* festivals as a major religious activity that is highly regarded by the Sudanese people.

Efforts are also underway to classify the square of the Khalifa Mosque as a cultural space and register it as one of the cultural sites that need to be preserved to ensure its continuation and to maintain its cultural value for the coming generations.

