

The Egyptian Spirited Fairs (*Mouleds*)

Family Reunion

As noted earlier, the reason for the annual Ancient Egyptian festivals are renewals and rejuvenation of the life of the cosmos. Ancient and *Baladi* Egyptians do not categorize the activities at the festivals as sacred or mundane. As such, the gay and secular side to religious ceremonies is an essential part of the Egyptian festivals. The sports, games, theatres, shadow-plays, coffee booths, beer booths, sweet stalls, eating houses, the meeting of friends, the singing, the dancing, and the laughter, are as much part of a *mouled* as the religious processions and the visits to the shrines of the **Walis** (holy men).

The *mouled* is a family reunion between the spirits of the past—the **Walis**—and the spirits of the present—the visitors of all ages. The Ancient Egyptian texts and the wall reliefs draw a colorful and graphic picture of the way in which the deceased **Wali** and his visitors met in and near the shrines, which became *houses of the joy of the heart* on that occasion.

According to early writers such as Strabo, people from all classes and ages attended these festivals. Herodotus stated

that 700,000 people attended the joyful festival (*mouled*) of **Bast** (Bastet), right outside Zagazig in the Nile Delta.

In addition to the family reunion between the **Wali** and the people, the *mouled* allows for other various types of family reunions, such as:

1. Between the local mystic (Sufi) fellowship and other fellowships. Mystics come from various regions, near and far, to participate in the festivities/ceremonies.
2. Between various people from local, regional, and national regions who attend the *mouled*. All family members go to the *mouleds*.
3. Between old friends who have not seen each other for a while.
4. Between old foes who must resolve their animosities and start a renewed friendship in the name of the venerated **Wali**. People forgive past fights/disagreements and start a new page, i.e. the *mouled* reinforces and strengthens social fabric—again it is a social renewal.

The main objectives of these *mouleds*' attendants are:

1. Visiting the **Wali** at his shrine, in order to participate in the rejuvenation of the cosmic cycles.
2. To acquire a blessing and a friend and intercessor in the heavenly court, by vowing to donate goods or perform a service, on behalf of the **Wali**.
3. To recreate and refresh soul and body, with thankful joy, and to take part in the amusements.
4. To recruit for the mystical (Sufi) fellowships.

The Moulds' Overall Activities Scheme

Early Greek and Roman writers have confirmed the organized nature of the Ancient Egyptian festivals. Plato adopted the Egyptian model of festivities in *Laws VII* (798e-799b), where he states,

ATHENIAN: Well, can any of us find a better device for this purpose than that employed in Egypt?

CLINIAS: And what is that?

ATHENIAN: . . . First, the festivals must be fixed by compiling an annual calendar to show what feasts are to be celebrated, at what dates, and in honor of what deities, sons of deities, or spirits, respectively.

Next, certain authorities must determine what hymn is to be sung on the feast of each divinity, and by what dances the ceremony of the day is to be graced. *When this has been determined, the whole citizen body must do public sacrifice to the Destinies and the entire pantheon at large, and consecrate each hymn to its respective god or other patron by solemn libation. If any man tries to introduce hymn or dance into the worship of any deity in contravention of these canons, the priests of either sex, acting in conjunction with the curators of law, shall have the warrant both of religion and law in excluding him from the festival;*

All the elements and rules governing the Ancient Egyptian festival, as reported by Plato, are exactly applicable to present-day *moulds* with organized and detailed schemes.

Such traditions were present in Egypt long ago. Hepzefi's tomb from Asyut, dating from the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2000 BCE), contains ten documents specifying:

- The dates of several types of festivities. Some festivals are to be held annually, others are held seasonally, as well as some festivals that are observed centuries apart.

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- The course of the procession between different shrines and temples for each festival day, and the activities required at each shrine/temple.
 - What to do on every day of the festivities during its octave duration(s), such as performance of specific rituals and recitations, as well as the amounts and types of offerings at each shrine.
 - Time of day/night for each ritualistic activity.
 - The lighting scheme during the light vigil, and the ritual of kindling the light of torches, which are carried in the procession.
 - The festive atmosphere of music, dance, entertainment, games, sports, etc.

The present-day *mouled* is likewise a picturesque ceremony with merry sights and tonic atmosphere, even though all such activities are totally forbidden in Islam. The streets are crowded with happy and orderly people. Streets and shops are gaily decorated and brightly lit.

No two *mouleds* are exactly alike. In general, the primary activities in the Egyptian festivals (*mouleds*) are:

1. The opening ceremonies.
2. Ongoing rituals.
3. Visitation by the public to the shrine.
4. Public offerings.
5. Boy circumcisions (initiations).
6. A variety of booths for food, drinks, souvenirs, etc.
7. Lively entertainment.
8. Lively games and sports.
9. The climactic Octave Eve activities.
10. The closing ceremonies—the final procession.

1. The Opening Ceremonies

On the opening day, the present leader of the mystical (Sufi) fellowship that is associated with the celebrated **Wali**, leads a special procession towards the shrine of the **Wali**. This leader is frequently a spiritual or blood descendant (or both) of the **Wali**.

The Egyptian term for this procession is *zaffa* or *'urs*, which literally means a *wedding procession*, for the purpose of consummating a marriage. The term, *zaffa*, has a subtle reference to the unitive action—the inner marriage between the self (**Ka**)—the personage of the **Wali**, and his soul (**Ba**). This idea is expressed in Sufi poetry as sexual intercourse and becoming one, and hence the term *zaffa*—a procession to be wed.

The modern concept that the soul (**Ba**) visits the shrine (**Ka**) on specified days conforms to a well-known vignette in *The Book of the Coming Forth by Light/Day* (wrongly known as *The Book of the Dead*), depicting the soul (**Ba**) in the form of a bird, descending the shaft in order to unite with the **Ka** of the deceased or his/her relic. This concept is to be found in Egyptian religious texts of all periods.

The objective of the procession is to perform an inaugural ceremony to “awaken” the **Wali** through the inner marriage of his **Ka** (represented in a relic of his choice) and **Ba** (the soul).

The *zaffa* consists of members of the local mystical (Sufi) fellowship, who don't walk, but rather move in rhythmic dancing strides. They are accompanied by musicians, dancers, lantern bearers, incense bearers, etc.

Leading the *zaffa* is one of the most venerable of the fellowship, playing the Egyptian *nay* (a sort of flute). In An-

cient Egypt, the procession was also usually headed by a flute-player, according to Herodotus. Other members of the fellowship play other musical instruments. In these festivals music was required in ritual performances, just like modern times, and was, according to Apuleius, of a spiritual character. It was/is called **samaa**, which was/is an Ancient Egyptian term meaning *to unite through sound/music*.

The *zaffa* follows a specific route with specific rituals. It generally takes an average of two hours, but could be much longer. The route typically includes pauses at certain places and shrines in the district for recitations and other rituals at the shrines of the other **Walis**, to heighten the collective energies in the district. The processions may occasionally be punctuated by special exhibitions of ritual dancing, including the whirling (pirouette), usually with music, and at night with lanterns and many other illuminating devices.

Ancient Egyptian tombs show choirs of male and female singers approaching the shrine. The female singers wave sistra and necklaces; the male singers mark the measure by clapping their hands. The lord of the shrine awaits the choirs, which sing songs ending with special recitations.



The local mystical (Sufi) fellowship leads the procession to the shrine and circle it seven times. Then they enter the shrine, purifying it with incense, and recite certain formulas (spells). In their rituals, these mystical (Sufi) groups connect the past, present, and future through movements, gestures, and facial expressions, in addition to reciting of poetry, singing, and dancing. The intent is to facilitate the joining (inner marriage) of the **Wali's Ba** and **Ka**.