POPULAR RELIGION IN EGYPT SINCE THE MAMLŪKS

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Methodological Remarks

A few definitions are in order.

1. Popular religion is Islam as practised by the common people in ways that diverge from orthodox, or normative Islam, as defined by the *ʿulamāʾ*, the religious scholars. Yet, although the *ʿulamāʾ*, as the authoritative representatives of orthodox Islam, usually criticize practices and beliefs of popular Islam, in reality the lines between the two are not always clear-cut, as I shall try to show below. Needless to say, it is not our intention to make any value judgments or to determine what is "true" Islam, but to present the *ʿulamāʾ*'s attitudes, as reflected in the Arabic and Turkish sources.

2. Popular religion in Egypt (and elsewhere) comes sometimes close to popular culture, but is by no means identical with it. Ethnographers, such as E. W. Lane in the first half of the 19th century, described and analyzed the rich Egyptian folklore, which often has nothing to do with Islam, and which is practised also by the non-Muslim minorities, the Christians and the Jews (Lane 1963). For example, the *nawrūz*, the feast of the Persian new year, belongs to this category. During the *nawrūz*, which was popular in medieval Egypt, people were masquerading, and the usual social norms and roles were reversed for one day[1]. Another famous example is the shadow theatre, *ḫayāl aẓ-ẓill*, which supplied entertainment throughout the ages before the appearance of the cinema and television.

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[1] This feast, among other manifestations of popular culture, has been recently studied by Shoshan 1993.

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3. Another methodological remark should be made about the relationship between Sufism and popular Islam. While many Sufi individuals and orders often practised, promoted, and defended various aspects of popular Islam, the two terms are not synonymous. Popular Islam was and is upheld by many men and especially women, who have nothing in common with Sufism; and on the other hand, one comes often across Sufis or writers sympathetic to Sufism who used very harsh words to denounce vulgar aspects of popular Islam. An outstanding example is the attitude of the great Egyptian historian ʿAbdarraḥmān al-Ǧabartī, who wrote in the beginning of the 19th century, who was very orthodox (to the extent of admiring the Wahhābīs!), but supported the Ḫalwatiyya, the orthodox Sufi *ṭarīqa*. Similarly, many of the leading *ʿulamāʾ* of 18th and 19th century Cairo, including those who held the post of *Šayḫ* al-Azhar, the chief *ʿālim* of al-Azhar, belonged to that Sufi order. al-Ǧabartī has only contempt and disgust for many innovations and "excesses" (*bidaʿ wa-munkarāt*) of popular Islam[2].

In the present paper I would like to discuss briefly aspects of popular Islam, namely those beliefs and practices which are clearly linked to Islamic symbols and customs, such as the visitation of saints' days (*mawālid*, plural of *mawlid*, or *mōlid* - the latter is the colloquial pronunciation).

Sources and Research

The Mamlūk period (1250-1517) is one of the richest in Islamic historiography generally and Islamic Egypt in particular. It is not surprising therefore that this period is comparatively well researched. One topic is still somewhat neglected, however. Annemarie Schimmel wrote in 1968 a brief but useful article on popular Islam under the Mamlūks. Since then, only modest progress has been made. Rich information can be found in the numerous chronicles, geographic works, travel accounts,

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[2] See Winter 1992: Chapter 5.

bureaucratic manuals and other sources that were written in late medieval Egypt.

The Ottoman period in Egypt (1517-1798, nominally until World War I) has not been as fortunate in historical sources generally, but surprisingly, there are a few excellent and detailed sources which teach us a great deal about popular Islam under Ottoman rule. In the 16th century, ᶜAbdalwahhāb aš-Šaᶜrānī (d. 1565), the famous mystic and historian of Sufism, was also very interested in popular Islam, although he was definitely an orthodox and *šarīᶜa* (Islamic law)-abiding Muslim. As a matter of fact, he is more interesting as an exponent of social and religious life in Egypt than as an original and profound Sufi thinker (see Winter 1982). Needless to say, neither aš-Šaᶜrānī, nor any other premodern writer, used the terms "popular religion" or "folk Islam".

Some interesting information about our subject can be found in the travel account of the great historian and man of letters Mustafa ᶜÂlī, who described Cairo in 1599 (Tietze 1975). In the later 17th century, we have, apart from other sources, the detailed travelogue *Seyahatname* by the famous traveller Evliya Çelebi. Evliya was notoriously inaccurate as a source for political history, and his figures are grossly inflated, yet he took a keen interest in and had sensitivity for cultural nuances and local colour. He was fond of popular religion; according to one version, he was called "Evliya", "saints", because of his reverence for holy sepulchres. The tenth volume of his *Seyahatname* is a gold mine of information about popular religion in 17th century Egypt.

By far the best source for Egypt's political and social history in the 18th and early 19th century is the chronicle of the above-mentioned al-Ǧabartī (*ᶜAǧā'ib*), whose attitude toward popular religion is very different from that of Evliya.

E. W. Lane, who lived in Cairo under Muḥammad ᶜAlī's rule, was a great Arabist. One of his many works, *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, is an excellent guide for our subject, as the title of his book indicates. In the 1880s, ᶜAlī Pasha Mubārak, the educator and administrator, wrote his monumental topographic encyclopedia of

Egypt, *al-Ḫiṭaṭ at-Tawfīqiyya al-ǧadīda* which is of immense importance for the popular religion of Egypt, among other matters.

If one reads the descriptions of Mamlūk, Ottoman, 19th century, and sometimes 20th century sources, one is struck by the degree of continuity in Egypt's popular religion. This, however, should not be surprising if one remembers the country's special geographic features, its total dependence on irrigation by the Nile. This created strong and long cultural traditions going back to ancient Egypt. Indeed, many Pharaonic holy sites and customs have survived under Christianity and then under Islam.

Holy Tombs

Normative Islam, like normative Judaism, but unlike normative Catholicism, has never recognized the existence of saints and has no procedure of canonizing them. Yet saints (*awliyā'*, singular *walī*, literally "God's protégé") fill the world of popular Islam, where even living saints, which Christianity lacks, possess supernatural powers and the ability to perform miracles. The *awliyā'* were believed to be endowed with *baraka* (holy charisma) and had the ability to perform *karāmāt*, miracles. It is important to emphasize that according to the concepts of popular religion, *baraka* could be unrelated to *šarīʿa* (holy law) abidance or even to ethical conduct. Among the biographies in ʿAbdalwahhāb aš-Šaʿrānī's works, for example, there are lives of saints, whose religious and moral behaviour was outrageous and disgusted the author. They must have been included in his book alongside accounts of pious and learned Sufis because of the belief in their *baraka* and their existence on the fringe of Sufi society (see Winter 1982:112-116). It is also important to notice that according to popular belief, the saint's baraka does not cease with his death, hence his (or, seldom, her) tomb is considered as repository of the saint's *baraka*. Another observation: although *baraka* means literally "blessing", *baraka* of a *walī* can also cause harm.

Visitation of holy tombs has always been a widespread custom throughout the realm of Islam and beyond, and has been practised by

Christians and Jews as well. Yet, the Egyptians' extreme fondness to visit holy tombs and shrines has drawn the attention of many observers and travellers. At the end of the 16th century, Mustafa ᶜÂlī, the Turkish historian, writes:

"Every Friday, starting at the time of the morning prayer, a countless multitude of people, walking or riding appearing in the direction of the cemeteries, take the road toward the Qarafa [the famous cemetery of Cairo]. After having visited the graves of his sanctity al-Imam al-Shafiᶜi and al-Imam Layth ibn Saᶜd, they arrive at the grave of Sitt Nafisa. When the women go to the graves of their relatives, they always take some green plants and flowers along with them, they visit the tombs of the dead with fragrant herbs. But the Shaykhs go with banners, and chant litanies. They visit the graves and mausoleums, which are considered to insure the acceptance of prayers, with this crowd and then return" (Tietze 1975:33).

Three hundred years later, E. W. Lane's description (1963:243-245) shows that not much had changed. There was a mixture of religiosity, the wish to visit the shrines for the sake of paying homage to the saints and of obtaining their intercession with God, and have a social outing. Many women stayed at the cemetery for a whole day, or even overnight, if the family had a house there. Lane (1963:468) says: "Intrigues are said to be not uncommon with the families who spent the night in tents among the tombs", repeating suspicions raised earlier by Mustafa ᶜÂlī (Tietze 1975:41). It was inevitable that women would be accused of immodest behaviour, but it must be borne in mind that visiting the tombs of relatives or saints may have been the only chance many women had to go outdoors.

Cairo had the lion's share of tombs and shrines of Egypt's famous saints. The two large cemeteries (al-Qarāfatāni) had scores of the most venerated tombs, which constantly drew worshippers from the capital and Muslim visitors from other countries in great numbers. The saints buried in the cemeteries of Cairo can be divided into three main categories: *ašrāf* (descendants of the Prophet), *ᶜulamā'*, and Sufis. Cairo's most

sacred shrine is the tomb where the head of al-Ḥusayn, the martyred grandson of Prophet Muḥammad, is believed to be buried.

Several female descendants of the Prophet are interred in Cairo. They are *as-sittāt* (or *as-sayyidāt*) Nafīsa, Sakīna, Ruqayya, Zaynab and others. These sepulchres, that of Nafīsa, the great granddaughter of al-Ḥusayn in particular, play an immensely important role in Egyptian popular religion by adding a feminine quality to it and making it specially attractive to women[3]. Because of men's dominant role in normative Islam, women, to whom popular Islam was very attractive, were especially fond of the female saints. Since the orthodox often complained that men and women intermingled in the crowds during such visits, the authorities arranged special entrances for women at the tombs of the holy women (al-Ǧabartī, *ʿAǧā'ib* II, 6).

Most of the shrines of the Prophet's family were founded during Fāṭimid rule in Egypt (969-1171). The Šīʿī dynasty based its legitimacy largely on its real or assumed origin as the descendants of Fāṭima, the Prophet's daughter and ʿAlī's wife. When Saladin (Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn) overthrew the Fāṭimids, every Šīʿī trace was obliterated from Egypt. Yet the shrines of al-Ḥusayn and the women of his line continued to exist under the new (Sunnī) regime, but without their Šīʿī emphasis; that was easy, because Sunnī Islam venerates ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib and his descendants, but unlike the Šīʿa, does not deify them.

Of the tombs of famous *ʿulamā'*, the most important is that of al-Imām aš-Šāfiʿī. He was the only founder of a school of Islamic jurisprudence, *maḏhab*, who lived and died in Egypt, and his shrine became a symbol of Egyptian scholarly Islam. It was also venerated by the common people as a saint's tomb. Newly-appointed Ottoman governors (pashas) routinely visited the place upon their arrival in Egypt. It also became a rallying point for Egyptian emirs and soldiers during crises (Evliya Çelebi, *Seyahatname* 562).

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[3] See Lane 1963:243; al-Ǧabartī, *ʿAǧā'ib* II, 6; Evliya Çelebi *Seyahatname* 552, 557, 638; Kriss & Kriss 1960: I, 60.

The third category of saints' tombs - that of Sufi *šayḫs* - is very heterogeneous. It includes, for example, the tomb of ᶜUmar Ibn al-Fāriḍ, the 13th century poet, 16th century Sufis like aš-Šaᶜrānī and his generation and tombs of family orders, like the Bakrīs and Wafā'īs, two leading Sufi families since the later Middle Ages through modern times.

Many of the shrines are said to contain the remains of little known men or women. There are also places of worship named after "the forty men", "the seven" representing heroes of stories long forgotten, and shrines attributed to the *ṣaḥāba*, the Prophet's companions, who took part in the Arab conquest of Egypt in the 7th century[4].

The customs and beliefs related to veneration of holy tombs are too numerous to be mentioned here. A saint is often commemorated by an annual feast at the tomb, a *mawlid* (see below). Many saints have a *ḥaḍra*, a weekly gathering at night for prayer, Koran reading and *ḏikr*. Some customs seem to be survivals of Pharaonic times and are disapproved by orthodox Islam. These include visiting the tomb on particular days believed to be the time when the departed saint visits his tomb. Another custom was that of the visitor placing some of his or her hair, fingernails, or teeth near the grave. This usage originated in the belief that such objects contained "soul material" by which contact could be made with the saint (see Zwemer 1920:72; Blackman 1924-26:47-61). One of the most common customs was putting pieces of cloth on the grave or driving nails into the Zuwayla Gate in Cairo, where the *quṭb* (axis, the chief saint) was believed to reside (Blackman 1927:247; Kriss & Kriss 1960: I, 81).

Holy tombs were believed to have the power of protecting a fugitive[5]. The function of a holy shrine as a trusted guardian of goods is well known, especially among the Bedouins (ᶜAlī Mubārak, *Ḫiṭaṭ* X, 93). Most important of all, the people believed in the healing power of holy tombs and their capacity to cure women of infertility. Women

[4] See, for example, ᶜAlī Mubārak, *Ḫiṭaṭ* II, 34, 40, IV, 19, 23, 27, 44, 45, 127; V, 75; VIII, 112; XV, 4, 76; Kriss & Kriss 1960:116-118.

[5] See, for example, al-Ǧabartī, *ᶜAǧā'ib* I, 306, IV, 64.

would come to the tomb, bring votive offerings, pray, and perform a ritual[6].

Mawlids (Saints' Days)

The word *mawlid*, literally a birthday, is a classical product of what is called "popular Islam". Even the Prophet's *mawlid*, held on the 12th of *rabīʿ al-awwal*, which by now is considered as a part of orthodox Islam, is an innovation, which according to the available scattered information, did not appear before the 12th century (6th century of *hiǧra*). As any innovation (*bidʿa*) it was regarded in suspicion by several theologians, in particular the stricter or more "fundamentalist" ones. Finally, it was accepted as a *bidʿa ḥasana*, a praiseworthy innovation, which is really a contradiction in terms[7]. If the approval of even the Prophet's *mawlid* encountered opposition at the beginning, it is hardly surprising that *mawlids* of Sufi *šayḫs* and sometimes of people who had a reputation as possessors of *baraka*, but as we have seen, could have been men or women whose behaviour was below the accepted standards of religion and morality, were fiercely attacked by the *ʿulamāʾ*. The range of personages who had *mawlids* is very wide. It starts with the Prophet himself, as we have seen, then men and women who were his descendants, Sufis, *ʿulamāʾ*, but many lunatics and charlatans who were reputed to be saints[8]. Many *mawlids* were very old and there is no record how and when they were created. In some instances, however, the chroniclers provide information about the origins of a *mawlid*. These are invariably *mawlids* of *ʿulamāʾ* and Sufis, and most of them were established in the Ottoman period (1517-1798) or under Mamlūk rule (1250-

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[6] See, for example, Blackman 1924-26; Kriss & Kriss 1960: I, 211, 217.

[7] See ʿAlī Mubārak, *Ḫiṭaṭ* III, 131; McPherson 1941:29; Grunebaum 1958:73-76.

[8] The fullest description of Egypt's *mawlids* can be found in McPherson's above-mentioned book. It is, however, uncritical and nostalgic.

1517) at the earliest[9]. It has been mentioned above that the Fāṭimids created *mawlids* of *ahl al-bayt*, members of the Prophet's family, but there is no precise information about that. Similarly, there are Sufi traditions about the creation of the *mawlid* of Sīdī Aḥmad al-Badawī in Tanta, but there is no trustworthy historical evidence (ʿAlī Mubārak, *H̱iṭaṭ* XIII, 50). Aḥmad al-Badawī, a semi-legendary Moroccan Sufi saint, who came to Egypt and was active in the mid-13th century, is by far Egypt's most popular saint. These Sufi traditions are highly suspicious, since as we shall presently see, the *mawlid* is clearly a continuation of an ancient, Pharaonic, festival.

al-Ǧabartī's account of the creation of the *mawlid* of ʿAbdalwahhāb al-Marzūqī is typical of the negative attitude of the religious elite toward the *mawlids*. al-Marzūqī was a modest Sufi, who died in 1172/1178. After his tomb was damaged by a flood, his followers built around the grave a *maqṣūra* (enclosure), *maqām* (a structure) and a dome, and the shrine became a place of pilgrimage, during which men and women mingled. Then the Sufis established an annual date for a celebration and invited visitors from all over the land. Many tents, poles, kitchens and coffee stalls were set up there during the *mawlid*. The occasion attracted fellahin from neighbouring villages, as well as jugglers, singers, prostitutes and snake charmers. For more than ten days the crowds kindled bonfires, and fouled the graves; they fornicated and danced, drum and flute music was played day and night. Even *ʿulamāʾ* erected their own tents, as did prominent emirs and merchants. al-Ǧabartī blames the *ʿulamāʾ* for not censuring such behaviour, thereby letting the common people believe that the participation in this *mawlid* was a pious deed (al-Ǧabartī, *ʿAǧāʾib* I, 220). One can clearly see how a legitimate way (from the orthodox point of view) of commemorating a good man of religion deteriorated into an abominable event of the lowest social strata, which the elite was unable or unwilling to stop.

Many *mawlids* were celebrated according to the Muslim calendar, but others, including some of the most important ones were held

[9] See, for example, Evliya Çelebi, *Seyahatname* 472, 476; al-Ǧabartī, *ʿAǧāʾib* I, 220.

according to the Coptic solar calendar. The *mawlids* of the latter category were fairs and were related to the agricultural seasons and the rhythm of the Nile. Therefore, it is obvious that they could not be celebrated according to the Muslim calendar which is a lunar one, and which would move them around along the whole year, as it does with the Muslim holidays (such as the *ramaḍān* and the two canonical Islamic festivals). There are many indications that many such *mawlids* are continuations of feasts of ancient Egypt which were Islamized.

al-Ǧabartī (*ʿAǧāʾib* IV, 3) aptly defined the four features of the *mawlids* as a visit to a holy place and the religious ritual performed there (*ziyāra*), commerce, outdoor entertainment and dissolute behaviour. Obviously not all four ingredients existed in every *mawlid*, nor were they visible in the same degree.

The main religious rituals during a *mawlid* were: 1. A visit to the shrine. This includes usually saying the *Fātiḥa* (the first chapter of the Koran) and circumambulating the tomb. 2. Koran reading. 3. Recitation of Sufi litanies. 4. Recitation of praises of the Prophet or the saint. 5. *ḏikr*: repetition of certain formulas to achieve a religious experience. 6. Processions: the colourful Sufi processions. The Sufis carried banners (and torches at night), chanting their *ḏikr* as they went. Often musical instruments were played. 7. Private religious and pseudo-religious ceremonies.

The commercial side of *mawlids* was not only a natural outcome of many people gathering in the same place, but was a chief objective of the feast. This emerges clearly from al-Ǧabartī's definition and even more so from ʿAlī Pasha Mubārak's description of Aḥmad al-Badawī's *mawlid*: "It is a large fair known as the *mawlid* of Aḥmad al-Badawī, where many people from all over the country convene, only God can count them. They don't come there merely for the sake of commerce,

but for that purpose and also in order to seek a blessing in the saint Sīdī Aḥmad al-Badawī".[10]

All the sources comment on the merry, carnival-like atmosphere of the *mawlids*; the festivals gave the fun-loving Egyptians the chance to enjoy themselves. Jugglers, snake charmers, shadow plays, story tellers, singers and various shows entertained the public. The *mawlids* in the country and the provincial towns also included horse and camel races and other equestrian shows performed by bedouin Arabs (see ʿAlī Mubārak, *Ḫiṭaṭ* XIV, 123; McPherson 1941:74-83).

The *mawlids* fulfilled an extremely important role by providing food for the poor. The food was donated as charity by rich people, but in most cases was supported by *waqf* foundations established for this purpose. The *mawlids* were spread all over the year (with the exception of the month of *ramaḍān*) and many of them lasted up to eight days, it is possible that they proliferated because they served to a large degree as unofficial agencies of welfare and charity (see Winter 1982:182-183; ʿAlī Mubārak, *Ḫiṭaṭ* XI, 7).

Many *mawlids* were notorious for the violence and immorality that were associated with them. In the Mamlūk period the *ʿulamāʾ* had advised the sultan to proscribe the *mawlid* in Tanta because they considered it immoral (Goldziher 1880:310). Early in the Ottoman period, *šayḫ* Muḥammad aš-Šināwī outlawed the practice of residents of Tanta robbing outsiders who had come to celebrate the *mawlid*, claiming: "This is Sīdī Aḥmad al-Badawī's region and we are his *faqīr*s (Sufis)"[11]. Yet the most frequent accusation concerning the *mawlids* were and still are

[10] ʿAlī Mubārak, *Ḫiṭaṭ* XIII, 45. In this the *mawlids* resemble the English fairs of the 17th century, which were likewise related to saints. Many fairs in Christian lands are ofen named after saints, but have lost their religious nature.

[11] Winter (1982) citing aš-Šaʿrānī's *aṭ-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* II, 57.

directed at the common people's dissolute behaviour and the filth that is observed in the sites of many *mawlids*[12].

To conclude, among the numerous manifestations of popular religion in Egypt, the *mawlids* were by far the most important and had more participants than any other form of "folk Islam". As has been indicated, the *mawlids* covered nearly the whole year. They also spread over the entire country. Cairo had scores of *mawlids*, but the villages throughout Egypt had their local saints, whose *mawlids* were general, like the Prophet's birthday, others were regional. We have seen that the *mawlids* offered a wide range of activities where the various social classes could find a place or interest.

Seen historically, *mawlids* were created in every period starting with the Fāṭimids, but it seems that the Ottoman period contributed a disproportionally high number of *mawlids*. This must be related to the strengthening of Sufism, which was, of course, active in Egypt centuries before the Ottoman conquest, but for reasons which I have discussed elsewhere, gained much ground since the 16th century[13].

J. W. McPherson, writing in 1941 his nostalgic *The Moulids of Egypt*, laments on every page the decline of the *mawlid* phenomenon and even the disappearance of many *mawlids*. His assessment is not entirely wrong, although it is exaggerated and premature. Later studies, such as that of Kriss, writing in 1960 and M. Gilsenan, writing in 1973 provide evidence that although many *mawlids* may have disappeared, the famous *mawlids*, such as those of Aḥmad al-Badawī's in Tanta, Abū l-Ḥuǧǧāǧ in Luxor and ᶜAbdarraḥīm in Qena are as popular as ever.

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[12] In modern times, especially after the 1952 Revolution, the authorities have attempted to civilize the mawlids and to improve their hygenic conditions. From what can be learned by reading Egyptian papers (and from personal observation) it is doubtful whether the government has been successful in implementing this policy. State authorities in Mamluk and Ottoman times were not as powerful as today's regime, but the crowds were not as large as they are today.

[13] See Winter 1992: Chapter 5, esp. 129-131.

Conclusion

The dividing line between popular and normative Islam is sometimes unclear. As in every living religion, there were within Islam tensions between orthodox and unorthodox, or popular, religion. Sometimes the confrontation was between fundamentalism or orthodoxy and mysticism, but again the popularity which Sufism enjoyed among the *ʿulamāʾ* themselves, especially in Egypt, proves that the picture is much more complex. In 1711, a famous incident occurred in Cairo, when an unnamed Turkish popular preacher incited a Turkish crowd against the cult of saints and their tombs, calling it infidelity. He caused violent clashes between his followers and the Sufis at Bāb Zuwayla in Cairo. Interestingly, the Azharī *ʿulamāʾ*, who were without a doubt the most authoritative representatives and interpreters of orthodox Islam, sided with the popular feeling and issued a reasoned *fatwa* to this effect, opposing the preacher's theological interpretation (see Winter 1992:157-159). This incident makes it abundantly clear that the formula orthodoxy-*ʿulamāʾ*-elite versus Sufism-popular attitudes-the common people is too simplistic. It is true, however, that usually the *ʿulamāʾ*, who were often supported by the rulers, defended the norms of the *šarīʿa* against popular deviations and excesses. Yet, the same motives and forces that have always enhanced the developments of mysticism have worked for the spread of popular religion, namely the scholasticism and dry erudition of the *ʿulamāʾ*, the emphasis on the mechanical performance of the ordinances rather than on feeling and personal guidance, the difficulty of the common man and woman to regard religion through abstract notions and their need to worship or at least relate to something concrete like a grave, a holy rite, a holy tree, etc. The spread of education, including state-sponsored religious education, may finally weaken the appeal of folk-Islam, making normative Islam more easily available to the common people through education and the media.

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