

# Women Remembering the Prophet's Birthday: Maulid Celebrations and Religious Emotions Among the Alawiyin Community in Palembang, Indonesia<sup>1</sup>

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In Palembang in South Sumatra, Indonesia, *Maulid* celebrations are considered an important religious event in the lives of many Muslims. Over the past twenty years, there has been an expansion of activities, the driving force behind which has been a young generation of *Alawiyin* in Palembang. *Maulid* celebrations organized by the *Alawiyin* in Palembang are separated along gender lines. In this paper, I show how female-only *Maulid* celebrations enable Muslim women, and especially the *sharifat*, to express their emotions and allow for bodily expressions during the actual *Maulid* event. I will argue that, in women-only celebrations, women express religious emotions which they wish to show but also which are expected from them as the expression of love for the Prophet Muhammad is part of the Islamic understanding internalized by the *Alawiyin*.

**Keywords:** *Alawiyin*; Islam; *Maulid*; Muslim Women; Religious Emotions



It is the Islamic month of *Rabi-ul-Awal* – the month of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. Everywhere in Indonesia Muslims celebrate this important event called *Maulid*. I have been invited to attend several *Maulid* events in Palembang, the capital city of the province of South Sumatra. As I arrive at the first location of *Maulid* celebrations, I can hear simple music and the beating of hand drums. Young women with face veils stand lined up to greet each individual visitor. The space is decorated with colorful curtains and posters with pictures from the two holy cities, Mecca and Medina, and with verses from the Qur'an. The stage is decorated with red and gold, the traditional Palembang colors, and with plants and small flags with the 99 names of Allah. More and more women, young and old, come and sit down in front of the stage. Around one thousand women attend this special celebration.

In the following paper, I focus on the celebrations remembering the Prophet Muhammad's birthday in Indonesia. I closely observe two *Maulid* celebrations held especially for Muslim women who claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad, and who are called *sharifat*, in Palembang, South Sumatra. As a

<sup>1</sup> A preliminary version of this article was presented as a conference paper at the 8th EuroSEAS Conference held at the University of Vienna in 2015.

female Muslim researcher, I was granted permission to attend two women-only *Maulid* events by the organizing committee in 2014. In the following, I will provide a short introduction to Islam and the *Alawiyin* group especially in Indonesia, and Islamic teachings and practices in Palembang in particular, before turning to the *Maulid* celebrations. My main argument in this paper is that female-only *Maulid* celebrations enable Muslim women, especially the *sharifat*, to express their religious emotions and allow for bodily expressions during the actual *Maulid* event. Furthermore, I would like to propose that *Maulid* events and specifically female-only *Maulid* celebrations are a means to strengthen *Alawiyin* identity and their interpretation of Islamic practices. However, further research needs to be conducted to support this hypothesis.

## ISLAM AND THE ALAWIYIN COMMUNITY IN INDONESIA

Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world. Around 200 million Muslims form 88% of the country's population. Located between the Indian and Pacific Ocean, the archipelago has been part of important trading routes for centuries, and thus part of translocal networks spanning the Indian Ocean long before the formation of modern nation states (Freitag, 1997; Freitag & Oppen, 2010). This resulted in a vibrant culture that accommodates six major religions, nowadays encompassed by the national ideology of *Pancasila*, which states the belief in "the one and only God" (*Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa*). Indonesia is also home to different local beliefs and syncretic forms of worship. It is known for its religious pluriformity in general and its Islamic pluriformity in particular (Houben, 2015; Seise, 2017). Especially since the *reformasi*, a period of transition after decades of authoritarian rule, this pluriformity has increased.<sup>2</sup> The diversity of Islamic practices in Indonesia ranges from syncretistic forms interwoven with non-Islamic traditions, rituals, and beliefs, to reformist Islam inspired by the Egyptian reform movement and the *Ikhwanul Muslimin*; and from fundamentalist forms of Islam like *Salafi* Wahabism, aiming at purifying Islamic practices from anything not in line with their interpretation, to political Islam in various forms ranging from moderate to radical. Additionally, the Indonesian decentralization reforms resulted in the implementation of *shari'ah* law in Aceh and in Bulukumba, South Sulawesi (Azra, 2013; Barton, 2004; Bruinessen, 2008; Bubalo & Fealy, 2005; Burhani, 2013; Burhanuddin & van Dijk, 2013; Hefner, 2013; Houben, 2015; Lukens-Bull, 2005).

Although often perceived as being located in the Muslim periphery by the rest of the Muslim world (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1990), Indonesia is seen as a center of Islamic knowledge by many Indonesian Muslims (Lukens-Bull, 2005; Seise, 2017; Srimulyani, 2012; Woodward, 2011). Various local Islamic scholars were known beyond Indonesia and especially in the centers of Islam in Mecca and Cairo (Azra, 2004;

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2 Different scholars have attempted to give names to the Islamic pluriformity found in Indonesia, among others Geertz (1976), Woodward (1989, 2001), Riddell (2001), Ali (2007), van Bruinessen (1999, 2008, 2009). The categories range from *santri* versus *abangan* to traditionalist vs. modernist, political versus cultural Muslim, fundamentalist versus liberal, great tradition versus little tradition, and local versus global Islam (Ali, 2007). Other categories include normative and mystically inclined Islam (Woodward, 1989). Woodward (2001) proposed that there exist five basic Islamic orientations: indigenized Islam, traditionalism, modernism, Islamism, and neo-modernism. Riddell (2001) suggests almost the same categories: modernism traditionalism, radical Islamism, and neo-modernism. Neo-modernism, similar to neo-traditionalist inclinations, aims to bridge traditionalism and modernism.

Laffan, 2011). It is in different places around Indonesia, especially in the thousands of local boarding schools, or *pesantren*, and informal study circles as well as in the family where Islamic knowledge is transmitted and learned (Bruinessen, 1994, 2008; Hadar, 1999; Lukens-Bull, 2005; Madjid, 1985; Srimulyani, 2012).

Palembang is the fourth largest city in Indonesia. It is located in the province of South Sumatra. Historically, we can find three different teachings of Islam in Palembang. The first were the *Shattariyyah* teachings, which were similar to those found in Java, which combined Javanese mysticism with Islam. The second consisted of the *Sammaniyah tarekat* and what Azra (2004) describes as neo-Sufism which, compared to the *Shattariyyah* teachings from Java, placed a stronger emphasis on the observance of *shari'ah*. These teachings, which included the thoughts of scholars like Al-Palembani (probably died 1789)<sup>3</sup>, and teachings that were largely based on the perspectives of al-Junayd (died 909/10), al-Qushayri (986-1072), and al-Ghazali (1058-1111), were sponsored by the Palembang Sultanate in the 18th century (Azra, 2004). They basically replaced the *Shattariyyah* teachings.

The third type of teachings of Islam found in Palembang are the teachings and practices brought by Hadhrami migrants, who claim to be descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, referred to as *Alawiyin*. They came to Palembang before the founding of the Indonesian nation in 1945, mainly in the 19th and early 20th century. However, migration on a large scale started already in the middle of the 18th century. With the founding of the nation-states, Hadhrami migration to Southeast Asia came to a halt (Slama, 2005). Until today, the Islamic practices and teachings observed by the *Alawiyin* are very similar to the Islamic practices found in the Hadhramaut in contemporary Yemen. These include annual Islamic festivities like the *Maulid* or *ziarah* (Alatas, 2008, 2014, 2016), as well as personal Islamic practices like *dzikir* and social practices like, for example, the strict separation of men and women and a gendered division of the public and domestic domains (Slama, 2012). It is important to note that historically, Hadhrami migrants played an “important role in the growth of the tradition of Islamic learning in the region”, and “encouraged the Sultans of Palembang to pay special attention to religious matters” (Azra, 2004, p. 112).

This influence of the Hadhrami migrants on the Sultans of Palembang resulted in the acceptance and spread of the *shari'ah* based neo-Sufism, which is very similar to the Islamic understanding adhered to by Hadhrami migrants and which, until today, is taught, learned, and practiced by the majority of Palembang Muslims. This is why the Islamic tradition of the *Alawiyin*, the descendants of former migrants, plays the second major role in established Islamic practices in the city of Palembang. For the *Alawiyin*, the religious and societal life in the Hadhramaut is regarded as religiously exemplary (Slama, 2005), and for the majority of the traditional, non-*Alawiyin* Muslim community in Palembang (excluding different reformist movements, like the *Irsyadis*), the *Alawiyin* are considered as religious examples. *Ustad* Taufiq Hasnuri, for example, a non-*Alawiyin* scholar in Palembang, always refers to his *Alawiyin* teachers

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3 Historically, Palembang is home to several well-known so-called *Jawi* scholars. The most famous of them is probably Shaykh Abdul Samad Al-Palembani, written as Al-Falembani in Arabic sources. His most famous work in the archipelago is probably his *Hidayah al-Salikin*, which was written in *Jawi* Malay (Malay with Arabic letters), and is an explanation and commentary of Imam Al-Ghazali's *Bidayah al-Hidayah*. His *Hidayah al-Salikin* is still read in different study circles around Palembang.

and praises their good character, piety, but also their lineage as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. *Ustad* Kailani, a lecturer from the Islamic State University in Palembang who passed away in 2017, expressed similar praise.

Besides the adoption of *Shafi'i fiqh*, one of the four legal schools of Islamic law, different Islamic rituals and practices are adopted from the tradition of the *Alawiyin* in Palembang and incorporated into everyday life. One example is the celebration of *Maulid*, the Prophet's birthday, which has been extended, consisting of festivities lasting over 40 days. Another important ritual introduced by the *Alawiyin* community is the *Ziarah Kubro*. While *Maulid* is a celebration in which men and women take part, although at separate events, *Ziarah Kubro* is traditionally for men only. *Ziarah Kubro* has been initiated by the *Alawiyin* community, but now involves different layers of society. It includes the visitation of the tombs of mostly local *ulama* who descended from the Prophet Muhammad, but also of non-*Alawiyin ulama*, and the Palembang royal family. *Ziarah Kubro*, like the *Maulid*, is an outreach *dakwah* (Islamic proselytization) activity by the *Alawiyin* community toward the general non-*Alawiyin* Palembang Muslim community. At the same time, it is an activity that unites Palembang Muslims through their religious heritage, the *ulama*, that shaped the Islamic teachings and interpretations found in Palembang. In addition, it is a strengthening and reinforcement of cultural practices from Hadhramaut, where *ziarah* and *hawl* (also *haul*, i.e. annual visits to the tombs and remembrance of the death of *ulama* and so-called saints) celebrations form established cultural and religious practices.

### CELEBRATIONS OF THE PROPHET'S BIRTHDAY

Celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday is a significant Islamic annual ritual in Muslim countries all over the world. Starting around the 13th century, the collective performance of the *Maulid* celebration has been widely practiced in Sunni Islamic countries. One of the main characteristics of this festival is the communal reading and singing of pious literature in both prose and verse. This literature is called *Maulid* and is the source of the festival's name. On a theological level, *Maulid* celebrations have been subject to harsh debate throughout the centuries. Until today, Muslim scholars debate whether celebrating the Prophet's birthday is permitted or not and whether it is an impermissible innovation that Muslims should refrain from. However, most mainstream Sunni scholars consider it to be a good innovation, also called *bid'ah hasana* (Gori, 2010). With regards to this tension, Holmes Katz (2008) remarks how one given ritual can be construed both as 'folk religion' and as following correct or 'orthodox' Islam by different groups of Muslim scholars and their followers. It thus reflects the different interpretations of Islamic orthodoxy as well as accepted Islamic practices. This discourse can also be found among the different factions of Islamic thought in Indonesia where *Maulid* is both vigorously defended as well as condemned as an unlawful innovation (*bid'ah say'iah*). One group that opposes the celebration of *Maulid* is the reformist organisation *Al-Irsyad (Jam'iyyah al-Islah wa al-Irshad al Arabiyyah*, or the Arabic Organisation for Reform and Guidance, founded in 1914), whose founders and members are Hadhrami Arabs who do not trace their genealogies to the Prophet Muhammad. They are not referred to as *Alawiyin* and criticize the *Alawiyin* for their traditional religious practices (Slama, 2005). A whole body of contemporary popular literature has developed around

this topic in Indonesia and regularly fills the pages of different Islamic magazines. In the case discussed below, the *Maulid* celebration is considered to be a good innovation and, at the same time, belongs unquestionably to the Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the majority of the Muslim population in Palembang.

Different places throughout the Muslim world celebrate the Prophet's birthday differently, often incorporating local culture(s) and traditions and special needs of the practitioners. A study by Holmes Katz (2008) of *Maulid* performances by women in Sanaa, Yemen, reveals that women have special demands in their expression during the celebrations. An interesting account of the incorporation of local traditions in a *Maulid* is also given in Hamdani's (2012) article about the celebration of *Maulid* in Cirebon, West Java, where *slametan* (ritual feast) and *sekaten* (traditional festival) form important parts of the celebration, similar to the official *Maulid* celebrations held by the *Kraton* – the Sultan's palace – in Yogyakarta. Sila (2015) provides another detailed account of local *Maulid* celebrations in South Sulawesi and links them to the spiritual inclination of the local *Alawin* community to *tasawwuf* (sufism) and argues that they celebrate *Maulid* to obtain union with Allah. According to Sila (2015), the celebration of *Maulid* in South Sulawesi can be traced back to the historical figure of Sayyid Jalaluddin al-'Aidid from Hadhramaut, whose descendants still live in Cikoang and Ujung Pandang in South Sulawesi and Jakarta. The link to *tasawwuf* could also be observed in the celebration of *Maulid* in Palembang, especially among people belonging to the *Ba' Alawi tarekat*.

The most widespread, and according to van Bruinessen (1998) “the most popular text throughout the archipelago, second only to the Qur'an itself” (p. 1), is the *Maulid* text known as *Barzanji*. It is read not only in celebrations of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday on the 12th of the Islamic month *Rabiul Awal*, but it is also used for other important occasions throughout the Islamic year as well as life cycle ceremonies. There are, however, numerous other *Maulid* texts, some more popular than others, including the *Syaraful Anam* (written by Syihabuddin Ahmad al-Hariri), *Ad-Dibai* (written by Abdurrahman ad-Diba'i), *Al-Azabi* (written by Mohammad al-'Azabi), and *Simthud Durar* (written by Habib Ali bin Muhammad al-Habshi). All of these texts can be seen as united by their shared description of the prodigies that are connected to events before and immediately after the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. In addition, they recount certain episodes from the Prophet's biography, for example the miraculous night flight from Mecca to Jerusalem and the ascent to heaven known as *Isra Miraj*. Other indispensable elements are the praises to the Prophet in the form of so called *sholawat*. In addition, Gori (2010) argues that *Maulid* texts convey a “very refined theological message” (p. 52), which is the assertion that the light of the Prophet Muhammad was created by Allah before the entire universe was created. After the creation of the world, the light of the Prophet Muhammad passed through several generations of different Prophets until it was finally manifested in the Prophet Muhammad himself.

### CELEBRATING MAULID IN PALEMBANG

Traditionally, the center of the *Maulid* celebrations has been the *Mesjid Agung*, the main mosque in the administrative and economic center of Palembang. Celebrations of *Maulid* among the *Alawiyin* have existed side by side with the centralized celebration in the mosque. However, for over 20 years, *Maulid* celebrations have been held at

various locations, mosques, and private homes over a period of 40 days<sup>4</sup>. The driving force behind this extension of festivities is the young generation of *Alawiyin* living in Palembang through their organization *Majelis Maulid Arba'in*. Translocal connections with their ancestor's homeland in Yemen play a crucial role in the valorization of *Maulid*. The *Majlis Maulid Arba'in* organizes the *Maulid* celebrations for both men and women. Women usually gather in the morning before noon, while men celebrate in the evenings. Celebrations are strictly divided according to gender lines, and as I will explain in the following, this imposed separation is the only way for many women, especially the *sharifat*, to partake and express their religious emotions during these celebrations. As a hypothesis, I also suggest that celebrations serve as a tool to safeguard traditional *Alawiyin* identity.

In Palembang, the community of *Alawiyin* claim to be 39th or 40th generation descendants of the Prophet Muhammad via their paternal lineage and consider themselves as belonging to the *ahlul-bait*, or the family of the Prophet Muhammad. For the 'Arab community' in Palembang, which is how they are referred to by the local population, the month of the Prophet's birthday is a time of reverence, remembrance, and intense community activity. For them, apart from being a religious and spiritual ritual, celebrating *Maulid* bears the meaning of their special relationship to the Prophet Muhammad and his family. Commemorating *Maulid* is a way to express their love and longing for the Prophet as well as a way to strengthen the spirit of their Islamic practice. It is likewise a time for the community to come together and to enjoy the festive atmosphere. However, these celebrations are also used to express *Alawiyin* identity.

When I asked *Habib* Mahdi why *Alawiyin* in Palembang celebrated the *Maulid* for 40 consecutive days while traditionally it is celebrated on the Prophet's birthday only, his first explanation was that the number 40 has a special significance in Islam:

In Islam the number 40, as some Muslims have understood it, can be considered a sacred number (*angka kermat*). And there exist many signs from the Prophet that the number 40 has indeed a special meaning. For example, one *Hadith* explains the stages through which a fetus develops in the mother's womb. It is in steps of 40 days. In addition, there are several *Hadith* that explain that any good deed that is done consecutively for 40 days will become a part of that person (*akan meresap ke dalam dirinya*). This inspired our young people and their teachers to conduct the 40 days of *Maulid*. . . . Most of the attendees of the nightly *Maulid* celebrations are young people, usually around one thousand of them. So, with the 40 days of *Maulid* celebrations, listening to the life story of the Prophet Muhammad again and again, we hope that the Prophet will become the idol, the model example (*Uswatun Hasanah*) to our young people. . . . Our goal is packaged in the form of these celebrations, so that it is more appealing.

*Habib* Mahdi continued to explain that what I translate as 'goal packaging' is actually something taught by the *auliyah* (the friends of Allah) and earlier Islamic scholars. By packaging one's goal in an interesting event, *Habib* Mahdi argues, it is easier to attract the young generation. While religious seminars, discussions, or study circles

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4 According to local sources, it was *Habib* Umar bin Ahmad Syahab who instructed his student *Habib* Muhammad Rafiq Al-Kaff to start conducting the 40 day *Maulid* celebrations in the year 1995. Interestingly, the 40 day *Maulid* celebration has spread to other parts of Indonesia as well.

are less frequented, well-packaged *dakwah* activities reach not only the younger generation but most lay Muslims in Indonesia.

### WOMEN CELEBRATING MAULID

Throughout the centuries, *Maulid* celebrations have always attracted women to participate. Because of the traditionally strict gender separation in many Muslim majority countries, Muslim women used to celebrate *Maulid* amongst themselves, often in domestic ceremonies. In Syria, for example, the observance of a women's *Maulid* can be traced back to the 15th century (Holmes Katz, 2008). *Maulid* celebrations, Holmes Katz (2008) argues, "sidestepped issues of ritual purity and mosque access [and this] provided a religiously meaningful framework for women's sociability" (p. 468). Apart from issues of ritual purity, I argue, that women-only celebrations open up the possibility for a less restricted freedom of movement in terms of covering the *aurat*<sup>5</sup> as well as bodily expressions that would usually be considered inappropriate in mixed gender celebrations in an Islamic environment. Therefore, the importance of a religious space of their own incorporates the need for spiritual, emotional, and physical expressions within an environment that exists within the boundaries of *shari'ah* compliance and established traditions. I argue that, similar to how Saba Mahmood (2012, p. xv) describes pious subjects and the relationship between outward bodily acts (including rituals, liturgies, and worship) and inward belief (state of the soul), the women who attended the female-only *Maulid* celebrations in Palembang could express the state of their soul and their emotions because the outward prerequisites of being screened from any male attention enabled them to express that state through bodily actions.

In Palembang. The taxi follows a long muddy road. It has rained, and part of the lane is flooded. To my right and left the rainwater has formed small lakes. The taxi driver grumbles that this place is where the *jin* dispose of their children. This is a common expression in Palembang for a place that we might describe as being somewhat at the end of civilization. At the end of the lane is an archway bearing the phrase '*Rubath Al Muhibbien*'. This is the entrance to an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) founded by a local *Alawiyin ulama* with the name *Habib Umar bin Abdul Aziz*. This is the first location for this year's celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday among the *Alawiyin* community. It is the 15th of January 2014, the 13th day of the Islamic month of *Rabiul Awal* and one day after the actual birthday. Today marks the *Maulid* celebration reserved especially for women. No men are allowed. It was the day before that men flocked to the *pesantren* to celebrate their Prophet's birthday. While women were allowed, their celebrations were confined to a separate building.

Simple music and the beating of hand drums can already be heard. Outside of the actual location of the celebration is the only place where some men can be seen, directing visitors and cars. Closer to the location young women with face veils stand lined up to greet each individual visitor. . . . Most of them wear

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5 *Aurat* is the part of the women's body that has to be covered according to Islamic teachings. This is usually everything except face and hands. According to the *Hanafi* school of law, feet are also excluded. The covering of the face with a veil or *niqab* is subject to debate across the different schools of law and thought.

a black dress with a colorful headscarf. I, instead, wear a long beige dress and a light rosé colored headscarf. One of my male informants, a lecturer at the local university who is closely affiliated with the *Alawiyin* community, has told me that it is proper to wear white during the *Maulid* celebration.<sup>6</sup>

The atmosphere is rather informal and women are still chatting with their neighbors and distributing snacks among the children. But suddenly, all women rise to their feet, raising their hands in a prayer pose, some still holding the small recitation book, some holding a little child. It is the climax of the celebration. Praises to the Prophet Muhammad (*sholawat*) as well as prayers are recited for about five minutes. Some women sway right and left, some raise their hands above their head, while others close their eyes and sway back and forth. Whereas some women were still talking earlier, in these moments full concentration is given to the text, as every moment is cherished. Some women have tears running down their cheeks. It is a very special moment, the love for the Prophet Muhammad flowing into the unseen, and also touching my heart.

I argue that these moments were a time of controlled ecstasy during which women were able to express their religious emotions, their love for the Prophet, or simply their sympathy for the musical rhythms of the ceremony without the worry that they would displease Allah by opening their *aurat* in front of men outside of their family, or with physical movements that are otherwise frowned upon in the public sphere. Only due to the historically cultivated practice of gender separation, which is still widely practiced among the *Alawiyin* community in Palembang, did the female attendees feel comfortable to express their inward state and emotions through bodily expressions. *Ibu*<sup>7</sup> Sara, an attendee at the *Maulid*, confirmed: “I feel very comfortable here at the *Maulid*. I can move freely. Only women are here. That is why I feel comfortable to dance a little bit (*Karena itu saya enak joget-joget sedikit*).” Another woman, *Ibu* Maja, told me that: “Here at the *Maulid* are only women. I don’t have to feel ashamed (*malu*) to express my true feelings”. She further explained that she is not used to attend events where men and women gather together. “In our tradition we don’t mix (*tidak campur*)”, she added. When I asked her why, *Ibu* Maja explained that Allah does not like us to mix with non-relative men. In addition, I could observe that several women who had arrived at the *Maulid* celebrations with their faces covered removed their *niqab* after they felt safe that no man could see them.

The peak of the *Maulid*, which was marked by the standing up (*qiyyam*) of the attendees in honor of the Prophet’s birth, was at the same time the ceremony’s closing point. After the singing of the *Maulid*, the female students of the *pesantren* performed a short play telling the story of Asma, the daughter of the Prophet’s companion Abu Bakr. A woman next to me explained that the story of Asma was supposed to remind the women that even in difficult times one should always turn to Allah. Before the meal was served an *Ustadzah*<sup>8</sup> talked about the importance of the *Maulid* celebrations and their significance for a person’s spiritual growth.

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6 It seems that my informant was not aware of the fact that it is only men who wear white during the celebration, and that women traditionally wear black, following the example of the Prophet’s daughter Fatima.

7 The Indonesian term *Ibu* (literally mother), is used to honorably address elderly women.

8 *Ustadzah* is the female form of *Ustad* and stands for a person considered an Islamic teacher or scholar.

The second *Maulid* celebration I attended was held in a huge private home in the center of Palembang owned by an *Alawiyin* family. The building reflected the wealth of its residents. The sequence of events was similar to the first celebration except that the play was omitted. The women whom I met during this event were the same as at the first location. Three elderly women were reading the *Surah Yasin*, the part of the Qur'an that is considered to be its heart and that is traditionally read in Indonesia at different life cycle ceremonies, on Thursday nights, and at other important events. It is supposed to bring special blessings (*barokah*) to the attendees as well as to the event. During this *Maulid*, I could observe an additional ritual that was not practiced during the previous *Maulid* celebration. During the *qiyam* (standing up), several young women distributed perfume and small fragrant cut flowers to the visitors. Upon my inquiry, a fellow visitor, *Ibu Tini*, explained that the *qiyam* is the peak of the *Maulid* and at the same time is the deepest expression of love for the Prophet Muhammad. Further, because the Prophet Muhammad is known to have particularly liked fragrant perfumes, it is good *adab* (good etiquette) to apply perfume while reading *sholawat* and performing *doa*.

#### RELIGIOUS EMOTIONS, HAYA, AND EXPRESSIONS OF ALAWIYIN IDENTITY

Religious emotions and the bodily expressions connected to them played an important part in the *sharifat's* celebration of the *Maulid* in Palembang. In their book *The Sociology of Religious Emotion*, Riis and Woodhead (2010) argue that scriptural and theological traditions include religious emotions in the central objectives of religious life. This implies that religious emotions belong to a believer's religious reality. Moreover, they argue, that "neither the Bible nor the Qur'an – nor the Hebrew scriptures – draws the typically modern contrast between reason and emotion, or subordinates the latter to the former" (p. 3). Riis and Woodhead (2010, p. 2) speak of the Qur'an as an

emotionally self-aware and self-reflective source [that] repeatedly insists on the importance of feeling, and contains intra-textual prompts on the emotions that it is intended to inspire. 'Believers', it says, 'are those who, when God is mentioned, feel a tremor in their hearts, and when they hear His signs rehearsed, find their faith strengthened, and put (all) their trust in their Lord' (see Qur'an 8: 2).

Religious emotions such as those described above, like love for the Prophet Muhammad, and the bodily expressions connected to it, such as tears and closed eyes while swaying back and forth, belong to the religious reality, tradition, and teachings of the Muslim women who attend the *Maulid* celebrations in Palembang.

In further reference to Riis and Woodhead (2010), the love for the Prophet Muhammad that was expressed during the *Maulid* celebrations described above in the form of ecstatic praying (*doa*), tears, heartfelt praising of the Prophet (*sholawat*), and the use of fragrance can be linked to the Islamic principle expressed in the Islamic teachings about loving the Prophet. It is said that a Muslim should love the Prophet Muhammad more than his or her father, mother, or children and even more than

him- or herself; this love brings a believer closer to Allah.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the different emotions that were expressed and felt by the women during the *Maulid* celebrations were just as personal as they were expected from them by the emotional regime inherent in the Islamic teachings they have internalized.

I further argue that the need for a women-only environment to be able to express these religious emotions reflects the deeply inculcated sense of piety (*taqwa*) and value of modesty/shyness (*haya*) among the women present at the *Maulid* celebration. Women like *Ibu Sara* or *Ibu Maja*, who have grown up in the tradition of the *Alawiyin* community and who consider the strict segregation of men and women (which in Indonesia traditionally is not practiced to such an extent) as belonging to their special status and identity as descendents of the Prophet Muhammad, would arguably behave much more reservedly and with much more *haya* in a mixed gender gathering. More likely, I assume many of them would not even attend such a gathering. Therefore, to hold a *Maulid* especially for women enables these *sharifat* to act without the feelings and embodiment of *haya* and piety expected of them in public spaces or at mixed gatherings. For example, I noticed that on the occasion when I and my husband visited an *Alawiyin* home, the women of the house would not join us for tea and snacks. Rather, they would hand the tea and snacks to their husbands through a curtain. It was the husband who then entertained us as guests. This again illustrates the strict understanding of *haya* that is expected of the *sharifat*.

The women at the Palembang *Maulid* acted out the religious norms and values which they have come to internalize. This is somehow different from what Saba Mahmood (2012) discussed in her study on the *Politics of Piety* about how *haya* is acted out and embodied by the subjects in her study in order to cultivate and display a more pious self. The women studied by Mahmood chose to actively learn how to embody religious norms and especially *haya* in order to become more pious Muslims. The *sharifat* at the *Maulid* gatherings in Palembang, however, chose to attend a female-only event in order to avoid having to embody the *haya* expected from them by the *Alawiyin* interpretation of Islam. In a mixed male and female gathering they would be obliged to embody the *haya*. Attending a female-only *Maulid* celebration therefore meant that they were able to protect their piety while still expressing their religious emotions through bodily expressions. They did not feel obliged to conform to the strict *haya* expected of them in mixed gender gatherings. Therefore, unlike the women in Mahmood's study who learned how to embody *haya*, the *sharifat* in Palembang chose the female-only *Maulid* event in order to avoid having to conform to the expression of *haya* expected of them. Furthermore, I argue that to hold female-only *Maulid* celebrations is in itself a sign of the strict *haya* and piety expressed by the

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9 These teachings are based on narrations traced back to the Prophet Muhammad: (1) Narrated via Abu Huraira: "Allah's Messenger said, 'By Him in Whose Hands my life is, none of you will have faith till he loves me more than his father and his children.'" (*Hadith* from the collection of Sahih al-Bukhari); (2) Narrated via Anas: "The Prophet said 'None of you will have faith till he loves me more than his father, his children and all mankind.'" (*Hadith* from the collection of Sahih al-Bukhari). The importance of loving the Prophet Muhammad is also derived from the following Qur'anic verse: "Tell them, (O Prophet): 'If your fathers and your sons and your brothers and your wives and your tribe and the riches you have acquired and the commerce of which you fear a slackening, and the dwellings that you love, if they are dearer to you than Allah and His Messenger and striving in His cause, then wait until Allah brings about His decree. Allah does not guide the evil-doing folk.'" (surat 9, ayat 24)

*Alawiyin* community, while at the same time allowing for the personal expression of women's religious emotions.

According to my observations, traditional non-*Alawiyin* religious events in Indonesia, even the *Maulid*, are oftentimes held for both men and women simultaneously. However, inside the gathering, seating arrangements usually separate men and women. Therefore, I propose an understanding of the embodiment and expression of *haya* and piety in the separation of the genders during the *Maulid* celebrations in Palembang as a marker of *Alawiyin* identity. This does not mean that this expression of *haya* and piety does not exist in other groups and places across Indonesia. However, in Palembang, it appears to be both internalized (embodied) and instrumentalized by the *Alawiyin* in the course of establishing and maintaining their unique identity. This hypothesis opens up a field of further research, which I will shortly touch upon below.

Unlike the majority of *Maulid* celebrations around Indonesia that read *Barzanji*, a new *Maulid* text from the above-mentioned *Habib* Umar bin Hafiz was read at the *Maulid* celebration which I attended in Palembang. This shows a shift from the traditionally read *Maulid* texts to lyrics composed by a contemporary *ulama* that is of the same descent, stressing the re-discovery of the *Alawiyin* identity. Essential to the *Alawiyin* identity is their reference to the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter, Fatima, his son-in-law, Ali, and his two grandsons Hasan and Husein. As was explained to me by a woman who attended the *Maulid* celebrations, *Alawiyin* tradition dictates that *Alawiyin* women wear black dresses during *Maulid* celebrations, whereas men usually wear white. Both dress codes were seen as following the *sunnah*, the transmitted practice, of the Prophet Muhammad. However, *Alawiyin* women put greater stress on the example of the Prophet's daughter Fatima who, they explained, used to wear black as well as a *niqab* – a face veil. That is why black is preferred, especially during the celebrations of the Prophet's birthday, as a form of love and respect. Important in connection with the expression of the *Alawiyin* identity among *Alawiyin* descendants, is the rising consciousness about the unique identity of the *Alawiyin* among non-*Alawiyin* members of the Muslim society in Palembang. This includes following the *Alawiyin*'s tradition, taking them as religious role models, and taking part in their religious events such as the *Maulid*, the *Ziarah Kubro*, or even going on *ziarah* to the Hadhramaut to visit the tombs of famous saints or scholars.

## CONCLUSION

I have shown that *Maulid* celebrations initiated by the *Alawiyin* community are an essential part of Islam as it is practiced in Palembang. Women-only celebrations are held separately from those for men and serve the need for expression of religious emotions in an environment that makes women feel comfortable to express these emotions in ways that are acceptable in terms of *shari'ah* regulations or, in the words of an *Alawiyin* woman, "what is liked or disliked by Allah". I have also argued that women-only celebrations appear to support the expression of women's religious emotions, but which are also expected from them as one of the central components in their understanding of Islam, since the expression of love for the Prophet Muhammad is part of the Islamic practice internalized by the *Alawiyin*. The *sharifat* in Palembang

chose the female-only *Maulid* events in order to avoid having to conform to the expression of *haya* expected from them in mixed gender gatherings by the *Alawiyin* interpretation of Islam and female piety. I further argue that to hold female-only *Maulid* celebrations is in itself a sign of the strict *haya* and piety expressed by the *Alawiyin* community, while at the same time giving space for the personal expression of women's religious emotions.

In future research, it would be interesting to further look into how the *Maulid* and especially the women's celebrations of *Maulid* in Palembang also serve to build and strengthen the *Alawiyin* identity. It also seems that religious celebrations, such as the *Maulid*, held by the *Alawiyin* community in Palembang serve to reinforce their special status as religious role models among the Muslim population in this city, which they have inherited through their status as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. Finally, the *Maulid* also serves to promote *dakwah* among both *Alawiyin* and non-*Alawiyin* Muslims in Indonesia. How this form of *dakwah* further shapes *Alawiyin* identity in relation to the broader Muslim society in Indonesia is also a question for further ethnographic research.



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