



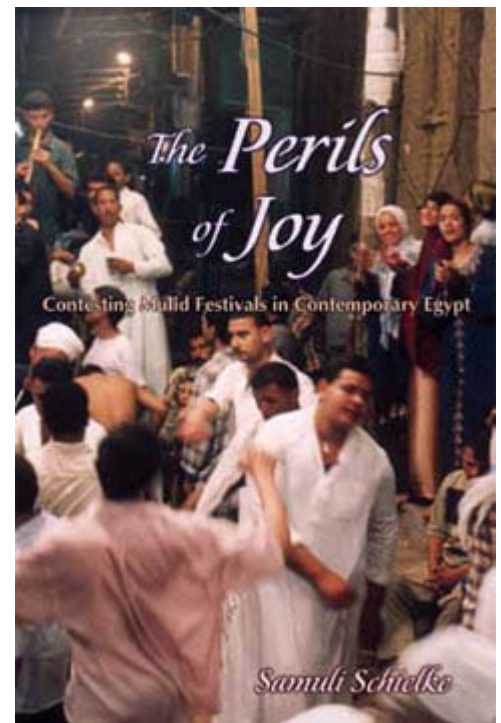
# The Perils of Joy. Contesting Mulid Festivals in Contemporary Egypt

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This book comes to life as a product of fifteen years of research in and about the festive culture of Mulids, Muslim festivals held in honour of the friends and family of God as well as the Prophet Muhammad. Going beyond an overview of contemporary opinions about festive practices, the strength of [\*The Perils of Joy\*](#) lies in offering a close reflective exploration of discursive formation, habitus and habituation in contemporary Egypt. Concepts such as society, modernity, religion, class, social order, moral subjectivity and the self are scrutinised through their intersections and transformations.

The first chapter introduces us to the purpose of the book, offering a balanced analysis of the pirouettes of the extraordinary and the everyday; addressing contestation of festive practices and everything in between, as a key cornerstone of reform and modernism in Egypt. Samuli Schielke's account goes beyond dichotomies such as Islam/Secularism, government/opposition, orthodox/popular, and challenges discursive formations and narratives.



*He looks at festivity as an issue in its own right and at its participants as the producers of festival meaning.*



Chapter two's attention focuses on Mulids' own order and ambiguity. It examines interpretations of "the habitus of celebration, the organisation of public spaces, class and conceptual boundaries, and the temporal structure of social norms" (p. 36), as the author directs us through the Mulid itself and its customary celebrations. The narratives included are fundamentally gathered at urban Mulids, yet a strong rural presence is certainly evident in the perspectives that shape Mulid understandings.

In chapter three Schielke turns to the Mulids' partakers in order to register festive experiences and ideologies embedded in the relations and intersections of different festive practices within the Mulid and their connection to daily life. A theoretical and critical account of temporality, joy, utopian worlds and transformation is developed through an increase in familiarity with Sufi pilgrims, community members in rural settings and young university students, who provide a sample of the diversity of the Mulid mosaic.



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Chapter four strives to provide a filtered compilation of modernist and reformist perspectives on Mulid festivities, ranging from issues of innovation and *haram* to what constitutes Salafi understandings of religion and modernity, philosophies of the self and hierarchical divisions of the mind. This section collects statements from (lower) middle-class to upper-class mandataries who plead for the abolition or reformation of Mulids and ascribe to various forms of criticism, placing Mulids as disruptive for their socio-cultural hegemonic. Yet nothing is simple and Schielke, once again, manages to communicate the problematic of steady and static conceptual boundaries.

Throughout the compelling chapter five, we approach the 'otherness' that Mulid festivals constitute for a segment of contemporary Egypt, based on modernist



visions of religion and society. From a historical viewpoint, the author interrogates the role of such critiques of Mulids as the key basis of social differentiation and cultural hegemony in contemporary Egypt. In order to accomplish that, Schielke looks at pre-colonial and colonial incursions of European concepts such as 'civilisation', 'rationality' and 'piety', as well as revisiting the concept of habitus and consequent habituation. Through the multiple shapes 'the orthodox' and 'the popular' have adopted since the twelfth century, the ethnographer debates selective and exclusive alliances between Egyptian modernism, Islamic reformism and European morals and their strategic roles in shaping the contestation of versatility.

*As a result of these assembles, a dissociation of 'true' and 'false' tradition (and religion) situates the critique of Mulids as essential in the construction of Egyptian modernity.*

Through a critical perusal of modernist constructs of 'the popular', its dissociation from 'the real', and Egyptian folklore and heritage hegemonic, chapter six states that the dynamic and strategic transformation Mulid continuity requires functions as a contrast to the normative judgements and social tensions of reform and modernity.

Critiques of Mulid practices are then balanced by supportive narratives in chapter seven. This section includes viewpoints and stances from Sufi leaders, practitioners, university teachers, other upper-class participants with Sufi backgrounds, and even those who criticise Mulids but partake in their celebrations. Divergent understandings of Mulid celebrations, habitus, the 'true' self, 'the other' and an outlook of Sufi reformism, decorates our limited comprehension with insightful approaches to the fragmentation of Mulids as a result of social change in Egypt.



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In chapter eight, reformism and the transformation of Mulid festivities and festivals are brought to a central focus through the debate on constructions of 'the public' and socio-politic hegemony in contemporary Egypt. The author wonders about what might constitute 'the public'. Socio-political representation and control, as a concept and in practice, are much more sophisticated and complex than mere simplistic oppositions of 'the state' and 'the public', governmental normality and exotic nature; while state control is predominantly aesthetic, one cannot neglect the implications of organisation and appearance for narratives of modernity in Egypt.

*Schielke's timely book challenges experiences and representations of the everyday and the extraordinary alike and encourages readers to move beyond easy oppositions and divisions to question the human condition in itself.*

In addition, in his analysis and theoretical accounts, Schielke moves far from functionalist approaches to the modern subject, and object, to propose a more subject-centred perspective that the complexity, fluidity and multiplicity of aspects the concept and practice of festivity entails. For anyone interested in Muslim festivities, Mulids, contemporary Egypt, the anthropology of Islam and the intersection and interconnections of these fields when advancing towards a more holistic understanding of the bodies of people and the social space they inhabit, this manuscript is a must.

**Schielke, Samuli. 2012. [The Perils of Joy: Contesting Mulid Festivals in Contemporary Egypt](#). New York: Syracuse University Press. Pp. 296. Cloth \$45. ISBN: 9780815633006.**