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The Awakened and the Reconfiguration of Faith Practices:
Maulidi and Islamic Revival in Zanzibar

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Abstract

In this article, I examine *Maulidi* in Zanzibar to reconsider the dynamics of contemporary Islamic revival. Rather than approaching revival as a singular movement or doctrinal orientation, I analyse it as a multilayered reconfiguration of faith practices found in an evolving religious public sphere.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and historical analysis, I demonstrate that Maulidi operates simultaneously at the state, neighbourhood and individual levels. At the state level, it functions as a ceremonially structured public ritual that symbolically articulates political authority. At the neighbourhood level, it reproduces the moral order through reciprocity, the circulation of knowledge and communal participation. At the individual level, it provides a space where believers publicly express, negotiate or recalibrate their religious commitments.

In this layered configuration, a group identified here as the Awakened has become increasingly visible. Distancing themselves both from unreflective ritual enthusiasm and from rigid normative expectations, these individuals adjust their engagement in Maulidi according to personal ethical judgement. Their stance shows that in Zanzibar, Islamic revival cannot be understood as following a uniform trajectory. Rather, it involves the pluralisation of the religious public sphere, in which diverse orientations towards ritual practice coexist and are continuously reinterpreted.

By analysing Maulidi as a functional nexus linking state, society and subjectivity, I reconceptualise Islamic revival as the subjective reconfiguration of faith practices.

Keywords

Islamic revival, Maulidi, religious public sphere, faith practices, Zanzibar

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1. Introduction

Located in the western Indian Ocean, Zanzibar is a semi-autonomous archipelago that forms part of the United Republic of Tanzania (Figure 1). Historically, it prospered as a commercial centre linking the African mainland and the Arab world. In Zanzibar, Islam functions not only as a religious system but also as a normative order shaping social relations, ethical orientations and everyday practices.

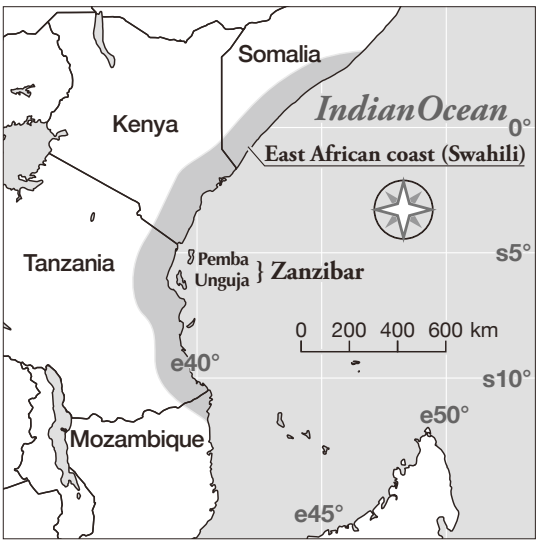

Figure 1. Zanzibar in East Africa

In recent years, one of the most visible developments in Zanzibari society has been the resurgence of Maulidi, the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. Today, Maulidi is performed at multiple levels, including state-sponsored ceremonies, neighbourhood festivals and family-based rituals. These diverse Maulidi celebrations exhibit multilayered forms and meanings. In this article, this transformation is not interpreted simply as a revival of tradition. Rather, the resurgence of Maulidi is situated in broader processes of reconfiguration of the religious public sphere in contemporary Zanzibar.

1.1 Islamic Revival and the Resurgence of Maulidi

Maulidi in Zanzibar has often been regarded as a traditional custom. However, the recent expansion and increased visibility of Maulidi celebrations should be understood in the broader context of Islamic revival. After the 1964 Zanzibar Revolution,(1) Maulidi celebrations experienced a period of decline. However, since the 2000s, they have regained public prominence. Today, they are organised at multiple levels, ranging from national ceremonies to neighbourhood gatherings and domestic rituals. This development does not represent merely the return of a ritual form; it suggests that relationships between religion and politics, as well as between communities and individuals, are being reorganised.

The concept of Islamic revival has been widely used since the 1970s to describe renewed religious activism and heightened public visibility in various Muslim societies. The 1979 Iranian Revolution(2) is frequently cited as a symbolic turning point in this regard. After this event, Islam emerged as a framework capable of restructuring modern political orders. As a result, debates concerning religious education and the implementation of *Sharīʿa*(3) intensified in many contexts. These developments have often been associated with Islamism.(4) However, Islamic revival should not be reduced to political movements or struggles for state power.

For example, Asef Bayat (2007) conceptualises transformations since the 1990s as "post-Islamism." He argues that there has been a shift in emphasis from religious duty to individual rights and personal piety. Bayat does not treat Islam simply as a political ideology; rather, he highlights changing forms of subjectivity, ethical reflection and everyday religious practices.

At the same time, religious dynamics along

the East African coast, including the Zanzibar archipelago, have unfolded under historical conditions distinct from those of Middle Eastern political movements. Therefore, the resurgence of Maulidi in Zanzibar should not be interpreted as an attempt to Islamise the state. Rather, it should be understood as a process in which religious practices are repositioned within existing social relations and public spaces. As part of this process, religious actors at the levels of the state, local community and individual believers (as religious subjects) reinterpret shared religious resources and assign different meanings to them in specific contexts.

In this article, I approach Islamic revival in this broader sense. I do not describe revival as a simple return to fixed doctrines; instead, I analyse it as a dynamic process in which religious practices, social relations and public expressions of faith are reconfigured. By examining the resurgence of Maulidi, I aim to clarify how forms of religious engagement are being reconstructed in contemporary Zanzibar.

1.2 The Historical Development of Maulidi in Zanzibar

Along the East African coast and its adjacent islands, Islamic revival has followed historical trajectories different from those observed in parts of the Middle East. Rather than being driven primarily by state-led institutional reforms, Islamic revival in this area has often relied on sustained practices in local communities, families and madrasas.(5)

In the nineteenth century, Zanzibar developed as a major trading city under Omani rule. During this period, various Islamic influences spread through the region, and Sufi orders gained significant social authority (Bang, 2003). Maulidi became established in these devotional networks, while also functioning as a widely shared popular celebration.

After the 1964 revolution, religious institutions were reorganised under a socialist state system, and the public roles of religious practices changed substantially (Loimeier, 2009). According to interviews I conducted,(6) large-scale public Maulidi celebrations became less visible during the 1970s and 1980s, although smaller-scale practices continued in more private or localised settings. Thus, Maulidi did not disappear entirely; rather, its visibility and social positioning shifted.

From the late 1990s onwards, following the introduction of multiparty politics and the gradual expansion of religious freedoms, Maulidi celebrations once again became more visible in public spaces. Today, they take diverse forms, including state-sponsored events, neighbourhood-based gatherings and family-organised rituals. This diversity suggests that religious practices have not simply returned to an earlier configuration; rather, they have been repositioned under changing political and social conditions.

Accordingly, in this article, I do not frame the history of Maulidi in terms of a simple decline-and-revival narrative. Instead, I emphasise ongoing processes through which religious practices have been reorganised in response to shifting political environments.

1.3 Purpose and Analytical Perspective

The purpose of this article is to analyse the renewed visibility and diversification of Maulidi celebrations as part of a broader reconfiguration of the religious public sphere in contemporary Zanzibar. In it, I examine the roles and meanings of Maulidi at three interconnected levels: political institutions, local communities and individual believers.

As will be discussed in Section 4, this transformation is conceptualised as a process of

"subjective reconfiguration of faith practices." This phenomenon pertains not only to changes initiated by state authorities or religious elites but also to processes where individual believers reassess and reorganise their participation in specific religious practices according to their own ethical judgements.

In this context, I identify a group of believers who have become increasingly visible in recent years, calling them the Awakened (a term used analytically here rather than derived from a specific local label). Scholars have often emphasised a binary opposition between supporters of festive devotional practices and reformist Salafis,[7] who criticise these practices as religious innovation (Asada, 2018). However, field research reveals additional subject positions that do not fit this dichotomy.

The Awakened do not treat participation in Maulidi celebrations as a religious obligation. They do not fully align themselves with either festive enthusiasm or strict reformist rejection. Instead, they make selective decisions about participation in particular Maulidi celebrations based on personal reasoning and contextual considerations. This stance should not be interpreted as a weakening of faith. Rather, it reflects efforts to reconfigure the meanings and priorities of religious practices through individual judgement.

By focusing on the Awakened, I portray Islamic revival in Zanzibar not as a single, unified movement but as a multilayered process where multiple actors, practices and positions intersect in an evolving religious public sphere.

2. The Structure of Maulidi

In Zanzibar, Maulidi is not merely a commemorative event celebrating the birth of the Prophet; it is a religious practice characterised by a complex, multilayered ritual structure. While its basic orientation is shared with *mawlid* traditions in the wider Arab–Islamic world, Maulidi has developed in distinctive ways that reflect the historical experiences and social relations of Swahili society.

Although Maulidi centres on the twelfth day of the third month of the Hijri calendar,[8] in Zanzibar, it is not confined to a single day. In practice, celebrations continue until the end of the month and are held successively in different localities on each island of the archipelago. This continuity of festivity begins from a specific date in the religious calendar, but it extends social time beyond that single moment, transforming a calendrical date into a prolonged period of communal interaction. It also functions as a mechanism that links diverse communities across each island.

In other words, through its temporal and spatial dispersion and repetition, Maulidi continually reproduces religious affect and social relationships. In this section, I first analyse the constituent elements of the ritual; then, by examining differences among different organisers of Maulidi celebrations, I clarify how Maulidi contributes to the formation of a multilayered public sphere.

2.1 Components of the Ritual

In Zanzibar, Maulidi is a composite religious performance integrating Qur'anic recitation, devotional poetry, supplication, sermons and communal meals. Although the ritual's structure is relatively standardised, the composition of each Maulidi differs across occasions, as organisers determine the specific combination of its constituent elements.

(1) *Al-Fātiḥa* (Qur'anic Recitation)

The ritual begins with the recitation of the Qur'an. In particular, the recitation of al-Fātiḥa sacralises the space and incorporates participants into a religious framework. This opening segment

situates the subsequent poetic and emotional elements firmly in the sphere of orthodox Islamic practice.

(2) Recitation of the Prophetic Narrative (Maulidi Texts)

Prose-poetic texts about the life of the Prophet—including his birth, lineage, virtues and exemplary deeds—are recited. Among the most commonly used texts are *Barzanjī*, *Ḥabshī* and *Daibaʿī*, which are named after their compilers. These texts circulate widely in Zanzibar, with *Barzanjī* being especially prevalent.

Recitation is conducted principally in Arabic, though Swahili translations are widely available. This bilingual mediation connects Arabic—the language of religious authority—and Swahili—the language of everyday life—thereby preventing the ritual from becoming an elite practice.

(3) *Qaṣīda* (Devotional Poetry)

Devotional poems in Arabic and Swahili praising the Prophet are performed. In many cases, children and young people educated in madrasas assume responsibility for these recitations. Their voices evoke religious emotion among listeners. Here, religious education, aesthetic performance and intergenerational transmission intersect.

(4) *Qiyāma* (Rising)

At the moment in the narrative describing the Prophet's birth, all the participants stand and chant a special qaṣīda. Incense is burned, and rosewater is sprinkled, which mobilises visual, olfactory and bodily senses. This moment constitutes the symbolic climax of the ritual, when narrative time and ritual presence are superimposed. The participants experience the presence of the Prophet's birth through embodied action.

(5) *Khuṭba/Waʿẓ* (Sermon)

The preacher cites Qur'anic verses in Arabic and addresses everyday ethical and social issues in Swahili. The sermon links emotional exaltation to moral instruction, and it translates festive elevation into ethical guidance.

(6) *Duʿā'* (Supplication) and Communal Meal

The ritual ends with a collective supplication, followed by the distribution of food. Communal eating is not a peripheral act but an important moment when religious solidarity is concretised into social reciprocity.

In sum, Maulidi is a composite performance that combines textual recitation, embodied action, sensory staging and social exchange. Its standardised format enables it to function as a public event while continuously renewing participants' religious emotions through repetition.

2.2 Classification According to Organising Bodies

The character of Maulidi varies significantly depending on its organisers. This section pertains to how Maulidi is reinterpreted at four levels: state, political party or organisation, neighbourhood and family.

(1) State-Sponsored Maulidi

Although nominally organised by the Miladi el-Nabii Association, in practice, this event functions as a state ceremony attended by the president of Zanzibar and cabinet members. The stage is oriented towards the VIP seating area, and the recitations are directed primarily at political elites. Therefore, in this case, religious devotion becomes an offering to political authority. The inclusion of the national anthem and political speeches transforms religious dedication into an enactment of state legitimacy. Long-term observation suggests that the general public's participation in this event has declined in recent years.

(2) Party- or Organisation-Sponsored Maulidi

In the past, the Civic United Front used Maulidi

as a means of mobilising supporters (Asada, 2017). Today, newer parties, such as the Alliance for Change and Transparency, appear to adopt similar strategies. Political messages are woven into the sermons and supplications, and the ritual contributes to the reinforcement of political support and the formation of alternative public spheres.

(3) Neighbourhood-Sponsored Maulidi

This is the most community-based form, and it is organised through residents' contributions and cooperation (Figure 2). Performances by local madrasa students are central, and the event is very much a festival fostering neighbourhood solidarity. In contrast to state-sponsored ceremonies, it tends to attract a large number of residents. Through communal meals, relations of reciprocity within the neighbourhood are reinforced, and religious education, entertainment and social cohesion converge.

Figure 2. Neighbourhood-Sponsored Maulidi

(4) Family-Sponsored Maulidi

This is a private ritual conducted at the level of extended families. It is often associated with specific commemorative dates or ancestral remembrance, and it carries no overt political character. It also serves to transmit family identity and educate younger generations. In the case of prominent families, it may attract well-known reciters and draw participants from surrounding areas.

2.3 Summary

As demonstrated above, Maulidi possesses a standardised ritual structure, but it also exhibits distinct functions based on who organises it. The state employs it as a device for staging legitimacy; political parties utilise it as a site of mobilisation; neighbourhoods deploy it to reproduce solidarity; and families position it as a space of memory and the transmission of family identity.

Crucially, these functions are not mutually exclusive; they coexist in a multilayered form in the same ritual. Therefore, Maulidi should be understood not as a fixed religious event but as a plastic public practice in which multiple actors continually reinterpret and reassign meaning according to their respective contexts.

In the next section, I examine how this structural multilayeredness generates concrete political, social and individual effects.

3. The Functions of Maulidi

Maulidi has often been understood primarily as a traditional festival or as a religious ritual. In practice, however, it encompasses multilayered social functions that extend beyond a simple act of faith, traversing state power, local communities and individual religious subjects.

Here, Maulidi is analysed at three interconnected levels. First, at the state level, Maulidi functions as an institutional mechanism that mobilises religious symbolic resources to stage and reorganise political legitimacy. Second, at the social level, through neighbourhood-based practices, it circulates knowledge, prestige and reciprocity, thus reproducing the moral order of local communities. Third, at the level of the subject, through embodied participation in the ritual and the selective choice of involvement, it provides occasions for individuals to render their faith visible and reposition themselves

religiously.

These three levels do not operate independently; rather, they intersect and shape the meanings of Maulidi as a religious practice. In this section, by clarifying this multilayered structure, I seek to develop a synthetic understanding of the public, social and personal dimensions of Islam in Zanzibari society.

3.1 The Political Level: State Ritual and the Theatricalisation of Religion

Maulidi acquires its most explicit political significance in the annual, large-scale ceremony organised by the government. At this celebration, which is held at Maisara Ground on the outskirts of Stone Town, the attendance of the president of Zanzibar and leading political elites is taken for granted, and the spatial arrangement of the venue, as well as the progression of the ritual, is carefully designed to make visible the hierarchy of power. The reciters perform not towards the general audience but toward the VIP section, and religious dedication is transformed into a performative expression of political loyalty (Figure 3).

Figure 3. State-Sponsored Maulidi

In this ceremony, elements not typically found in neighbourhood Maulidi, such as the singing of the national anthem and political speeches, are present, and the president's entrance and departure mark the temporal structure of the event. Moreover, the moments when the audience is required to stand for the presidential motorcade share a bodily form with qiyāma, the collective standing that accompanies the narration of the Prophet's birth. Here, bodily gestures expressing religious reverence are superimposed on acts of deference to political authority.

Historically, Maulidi in Zanzibar has been closely connected to secular power. During the sultanate, the ritual was organised as a state ceremony symbolising royal authority; during the colonial era, it was maintained as a public event associated with social stability.(9)

After the 1964 revolution, religious practices underwent significant reorganisation. As Loimeier (2009) has observed, the new regime criticised popular religious rituals and sought to reconstruct religious activities under state control. This process should not be understood simply as the exclusion of religion from public spaces; rather, it involved its relocation in the structures of state governance. Interpretive authority and religious legitimacy, which had previously been exercised by *ʿulamāʾ* and Sufi leaders, were gradually incorporated into bureaucratic frameworks, and Islam was reorganised into a more textbook-based and institutional form.

Given this historical background, contemporary government-sponsored Maulidi should not be interpreted merely as an occasion when religion is unilaterally instrumentalised by the state. Rather, it constitutes an institutional interface where religious legitimacy and political authority mutually mediate one another. While the ritual symbolically reinforces the legitimacy of governance, the state simultaneously repositions itself in an Islamic moral order through religious forms.

This institutional reorganisation has not been uniformly accepted. The annual government

ceremony foregrounds political staging, and it tends to attenuate the festive and reciprocal dimensions rooted in local communities. Consequently, although conceived of as a national ritual, this type of Maulidi becomes a space where attitudes towards participation diverge according to political orientation and religious outlook.

3.2 Social Functions: Local Communities and the Reproduction of Reciprocity

Neighbourhood Maulidi celebrations differ markedly from the annual government ceremony and from politically charged party-sponsored events. They function as a social mechanism that reproduces the moral order of local communities. Crucially, this type of Maulidi is not only a festive occasion but also a site of social reproduction in which communal relationships are continually renewed through religious practice.

Figure 4. Madrasa Students Performing Qaṣīdas

First, there is the educational dimension. Madrasa teachers and students perform the recitations, and children publicly demonstrate the results of their daily learning (Figure 4). This performance is simultaneously a presentation of religious education and a ritual moment when the community acknowledges the emerging religious competence of the next generation. In this way, Maulidi makes visible the transmission of knowledge, and it represents a means to socially recognise the formation of religious authority. Through the ritual, religious knowledge is repositioned not as an event confined to the classroom but as a symbolic resource shared by the wider community.

Second, there is the dimension of reciprocity. The organisation of neighbourhood Maulidi relies on residents' contributions in the form of money, labour and food. This entails not only material exchanges but also the circulation of symbolic values, such as prestige, respect and belonging. Through acts of hospitality, the ritual's organisers embody religious virtue, while the participants reaffirm their affiliation to the community by receiving these offerings. These reciprocal interactions renew trust and moral expectations in the local society.

Furthermore, these practices generate a form of local publicness that is distinct from that of state ceremonies. Residents organise the religious space, and questions such as who recites, who delivers the sermons, and which narratives are recognised as authoritative are negotiated through practices. Neighbourhood Maulidi thus becomes a site where religious legitimacy is discussed and reconfigured in the community.

In this way, neighbourhood Maulidi circulates symbolic resources—knowledge, prestige and belonging—through a religious ritual, thereby functioning as a social foundation for the reproduction of the local moral order.

3.3 Personal and Religious Functions: Expressing and Positioning Faith

Maulidi also provides a setting where individuals embody their faith and position themselves socially. Participation in the ritual is not just habitual; it involves personal choice and ethical judgement.

For the reciters, standing before the audience constitutes a public display of religious competence.

Elements such as vocal modulation, volume and accuracy of memorisation are evaluated not only as technical skills but also as signs of piety. Recitation thus operates as a performative enactment of religious virtue and, through communal recognition, reinforces the individual's religious identity.

For the audience, Maulidi is a space where faith is experienced through sensory and bodily engagement. The smoke of incense, the fragrance of rosewater, and the collective standing and chanting during qiyāma separate religious time from everyday life, and they immerse participants in the narrative of the Prophet's birth (Figure 5). Here, faith is internalised not as abstract doctrine but as embodied repetition. Through these practices, individuals' sense of religious belonging is continually renewed.

Figure 5. Incense Burners and Rosewater Sprinklers

Not all Muslims affirm this festive form. Some distinguish Maulidi from obligatory practice and maintain a certain distance from it.(10) For them, faith should be deepened through quiet study and inner cultivation, and participation in celebratory rituals is not essential. This attitude indicates not the decline of religion but the weakening of a single, normative model of practice, as well as the pluralisation of modes of religious expression.

What emerges here is not religious erosion but a process in which the selection of practice is entrusted to individual ethical judgement. Maulidi provides an occasion for the strengthening of faith and a space for its repositioning—through participation, distancing or reinterpretation. Individuals rearticulate their religious stance through the degree and form of their engagement with the ritual.

3.4 Synthesis

The above analysis shows that Maulidi is not a single ritual but a functional nexus traversing the state, society and individual subjectivity.

At the state level, Maulidi reorganises religious symbolism institutionally and makes the legitimacy of governance visible. Faith practices are articulated with the political order, and religious time is reconstituted in national time.

At the social level, neighbourhood Maulidi reproduces the local moral order through the transmission of knowledge, the circulation of prestige and the renewal of reciprocal relations. In this case, religious practice becomes a medium of social trust and a site where legitimacy is negotiated in the community.

At the level of the subject, Maulidi offers an embodied experience of faith while also enabling the choice of participation or distancing. Hence, it provides occasions for individuals to reposition their religious stance.

Crucially, these three levels coexist in a state of tension. As institutionalisation by the state advances, local communities and individuals do not necessarily align with it, but they reinterpret the meanings of religious practice at their respective levels. In this dynamic interaction, Maulidi persists not as a fixed tradition but as a continually reorganised social practice.

Therefore, understanding Maulidi requires moving beyond one-dimensional evaluations, such as "politicisation" or "festivity." The ritual is simultaneously a resource of governance,

a mechanism for the reproduction of moral community, and a space for the formation and repositioning of religious subjects.

In the next section, I will focus particularly on the level of subjectivity, examining the Awakened, who seek to reconfigure their faith practices while maintaining a certain distance from both state rituals and local festivities.

4. Discussion: The Awakened and the Subjective Reconfiguration of Faith Practices

This section is focused on a group of actors in Zanzibari society whose attitudes towards Maulidi cannot be reduced to the conventional binary framework of Sufi enthusiasm versus Salafi rejection. The Awakened hold a position that is distinct both from those who fervently endorse festive celebration and from reformist critics who condemn it as *bidʿa* (11)—religious innovation.

Their existence invites a reconsideration of the contemporary social meaning of Maulidi, and it offers an important perspective for understanding how the religious public sphere in Zanzibar is being reconfigured. Here, I conceptualise this development as the subjective reconfiguration of faith practices, and I examine its structure and theoretical implications.

4.1 Religious Consciousness and Self-Definition Among the Awakened

Scholars of Islam along the East African coast have often framed attitudes towards Maulidi in terms of a confrontation between Sufi-oriented currents that value festive devotional practice and Salafi-oriented currents that reject it as a deviation from the essentials of faith (Asada, 2018). This framing resonates with Gellner's (1981) model of the "great tradition" and the "little tradition." However, contemporary field research shows the presence of actors who do not clearly align with either camp.

One of my interlocutors remarked that Maulidi "is not a religious obligation like the five pillars (profession of faith, prayer, almsgiving, fasting and pilgrimage)," thus sharply distinguishing obligatory practice from festive ritual.(12) He further stated that during Maulidi, "people merely pretend to learn while making noise." Having already acquired what he regarded as sufficient religious knowledge, he felt no need to participate.

Crucially, these individuals have not lost interest in religion. On the contrary, they prioritise obligatory practices and locate the core of faith in quiet study and everyday ethical conduct. What they question is not religion itself but whether festive forms adequately embody the essence of faith.

Notably, although they partially employ a logic that overlaps with Salafi critiques, such as emphasising scriptural justification, they define themselves as "neither Salafi nor Sufi, but wishing to follow a middle path."(13) This self-definition of moderation indicates a deliberate effort to distance themselves from established camps and reposition their faith practices on the basis of personal ethical judgement.

The phenomenon examined here does not signify the privatisation or weakening of religion. Rather, it reflects a process in which the selection of religious practices is detached from what had previously been taken for granted within the community and reorganised through individual deliberation and evaluation. In this sense, the development observed in Zanzibar should be understood not as abandonment of faith but as the subjective reconfiguration of faith practices.

4.2 Dynamics of Critique and Acceptance: Selective Engagement and Distancing

The attitude of the Awakened is not one of simple rejection; rather, it entails a complex coexistence of critique and conditional acceptance.

First, there is scepticism towards Maulidi as a religious practice. Large-scale collective rituals are regarded as staged spectacles, and practices such as the use of perfume or certain bodily gestures are questioned for lacking clear Qur'anic foundations. Here, scriptural validity and intellectual coherence are prioritised over emotional exaltation.

Second, there is limited acceptance at the level of social action. While maintaining a cautious religious stance, some individuals participate in particular Maulidi gatherings for the purpose of sustaining social relationships or attending communal meals.(14) Religious evaluation and social practice are not treated as identical. The ability to differentiate between religious evaluation and social participation in specific contexts illustrates how faith practices are recalibrated situationally.

Third, there is distancing from political instrumentalisation. These individuals tend to avoid the political mobilisation of religion and are especially reluctant to participate in national ceremonies that are strongly associated with the ruling party. This reflects not only a desire for religious integrity but also a strategic effort to avoid political risk.

Taken together, these three stances demonstrate a practice of adjusting degrees of engagement across religious, social and political domains. What emerges is not a retreat into inward piety but a selective rearticulation of one's position in the public sphere.

4.3 Conceptualising the Process: The Subjective Reconfiguration of Faith Practices

The ethnographic observations above indicate that the Awakened are not merely reducing their involvement in Maulidi; rather, they are actively reconfiguring religious practices. I refer to this process as the subjective reconfiguration of faith practices.

In this process, individuals distance themselves from automatic participation grounded in established affiliations or customary rituals; distinguish between religious legitimacy, social relations and political context; and recalibrate their degree of engagement according to the circumstances. Decisions regarding participation, distancing and modes of involvement are shaped not by taken-for-granted communal norms but by individual deliberation and ethical evaluation.

Importantly, this development does not amount to the privatisation of religion. These actors do not withdraw religion into the private sphere; rather, they selectively reorganise forms of engagement in public spaces. Distancing oneself from festive enthusiasm does not signify a retreat from faith but a reordering of the priorities concerning where the core of faith is located.

The change observed here is therefore not an indication of religious decline but a sign of structural transformation in religious practices. Maulidi is no longer an unmediated communal custom; rather, it is an object of evaluation and choice. It is precisely this evaluative process that constitutes the core of the subjective reconfiguration of faith practices.

4.4 Regional and Theoretical Scope: Repositioning Religious Practices Along the East African Coast

The tendency towards subjective reconfiguration is not unique to Zanzibar. Similar processes have

been reported in other parts of the East African coast.

For example, Kresse (2007) demonstrates that intellectuals in Mombasa's Old Town reinterpret Islam not only as ritual participation but also as a practice of ethical debate and critical reflection. Loyalty to tradition coexists with autonomous reasoning.

Similarly, Becker (2008) describes how urban youth approach Islam not as a self-evident inheritance but as something to be consciously selected and reconstructed. For them, religion functions as a resource for self-formation, which is repositioned in social and political contexts.

These scholars do not mention a withdrawal of religion into private life. Rather, they show religion being redefined in public contexts, with forms of engagement being recalibrated accordingly.

Moreover, Bayat's (2007) discussion of post-Islamism is suggestive of a shift from the linear mobilisation characteristic of Islamism to the emergence of diverse actors who prioritise ethical practice.(15) Also, Kamali's (2015) theorisation of *wasaṭiyya* (moderation) allows for the conceptualisation of a subject who avoids doctrinal exclusivism and privileges reasoned judgement.(16)

In Zanzibar, the presence of the Awakened resonates with these debates, yet it cannot be reduced to any single intellectual current. The distinctiveness of these individuals lies in their recalibration of religious engagement within a regional configuration marked by festive enthusiasm and reformist rejection. Therefore, the present case should be considered as one instance of the broader repositioning of religious practices along the East African coast.

4.5 Reconfiguration and Pluralisation of the Religious Public Sphere

The practices of the Awakened extend beyond individual attitudes, and they contribute to the reconfiguration of the religious public sphere in Zanzibar.

Whereas Maulidi was once treated as a partially self-evident communal custom, and participation was understood as a normal expression of faith, participation, non-participation or selective engagement now make visible an actor's ethical stance. Ritual is no longer an unmediated, shared habit; it is an object of evaluation and choice.

This transformation does not signify the privatisation of religion. On the contrary, it indicates an intensification of plural forms of religious engagement and ongoing renegotiation of religious legitimacy in shared spaces. Festive enthusiasm, reformist rejection and selective distancing are not fixed camps but positions that intersect and coexist in the same public arena, sometimes in a tense manner.

What is significant here is not the collapse of a centre but the multiplication of centres. While the symbolic centrality once held by festive ritual has been relativised, no single normative model has replaced it. Instead, multiple modes of practice now coexist, each capable of articulating claims to legitimacy.

This pluralisation interacts with the three-layered structure identified in Section 3. The state incorporates religious resources into institutional frameworks; local communities reproduce reciprocal solidarity; individuals recalibrate their degrees of engagement in particular contexts. Through the overlap of these processes, Maulidi persists not as a static tradition but as a continually reconfigured public practice.

The transformation of Maulidi in Zanzibar

should therefore not be interpreted as religious decline or secularisation. Rather, it reflects a restructuring of faith practices through processes of evaluation, selection and repositioning. The subjective reconfiguration of faith practices identified in this section constitutes a key driver of this pluralisation, and it offers a theoretical lens for understanding the dynamics of contemporary Islamic societies.

In the next section, I synthesise the overall findings, and I consider the broader theoretical implications of the Zanzibar case for Islamic studies and the sociology of religion.

5. Conclusion: Synthesis and Theoretical Perspectives

In this article, I examined Maulidi in Zanzibari society by analysing its multilayered structure and functions, as well as the emergence of a new religious subjectivity represented by the Awakened. Through this analysis, I sought to clarify the dynamics of contemporary Islamic revival.

Maulidi functions simultaneously as a stage for the performance of state power, a mechanism for reproducing communal cohesion and a public space where individuals make visible their religious positioning. These functions are not mutually exclusive; rather, they intersect in layered ways that shape the relationship between religion and politics, as well as that between faith and everyday life, in Zanzibar.

5.1 The Multifaceted Functions of Maulidi and Their Reconfiguration

A defining feature of Maulidi is how distinct dimensions of meaning—political symbolism, social reciprocity and personal faith practices—are folded into what appears to be a single religious ritual. In the state ceremony, religious offering is intertwined with political loyalty; in local communities, communal meals and donations reproduce social solidarity; at the individual level, recitation and participation serve as expressions of one's religious stance.

As demonstrated in this study, however, this multilayered structure is not fixed. In recent years, attitudes towards Maulidi have markedly diversified, and modes of participation are being reconfigured. What was once a customary ritual in which the entire community was expected to participate has increasingly become a practice where the degree of involvement is determined through individual judgement.

This transformation does not dissolve social cohesion; rather, it provides an occasion for recalibrating the relationship between communal solidarity and individual religious evaluation. Maulidi is thus shifting from a device of communal integration to a stage on which different positionalities become visible.

5.2 The Reconstitution of Religious Authority and Social Identity

The presence of the Awakened, as examined in this study, highlights transformations in the structure of religious authority. Traditionally, Maulidi was maintained through a vertical relationship in which religious elites led and the wider population followed as participants. However, with the expansion of religious education and changes in the informational environment, an increasing number of individuals now assess the legitimacy of faith practices by themselves.

The self-definition "Neither Salafi nor Sufi, but following a middle path" reflects an attempt to avoid uncritical affiliation with established currents and reposition faith on the basis of reasoned judgement. What emerges here is not the simple

erosion of religious authority but the dispersal and renegotiation of legitimacy.

As a result, Maulidi has become a space where participation or non-participation symbolically conveys one's religious positioning. The ritual is being reconstituted as a site for the expression and differentiation of religious identity.

5.3 Repositioning Islamic Revival: Religion as Reconfiguration

The findings of this study extend beyond the specific case of Zanzibar and have implications for understanding Islamic revival in contemporary Muslim societies.

Islamic revival has often been framed as either a return to tradition or a movement of religious purification. The dynamics observed in Zanzibar paint a different picture. Here, multiple actors—the state, local communities and individuals—reinterpret and reposition religious resources according to their respective interests and ethical judgements.

This phenomenon resonates with Bayat's (2007) discussion of post-Islamism and with studies by Kresse (2007) and Becker (2008), who describe the subjective reconfiguration of religious practices along the East African coast. However, the present case does not indicate religious decline or the privatisation of religion. Rather, it shows that the configuration of religious practices in the public sphere is being reorganised. Accordingly, Islamic revival should be understood not as a singular ideological current but as a dynamic reconfiguration of faith practices.

5.4 Conclusion: The Dynamics of the Subjective Reconfiguration of Faith Practices

In contemporary Zanzibar, Maulidi signifies more than the revival of a traditional celebration; it serves as an indicator of broader social transformation. Government-sponsored, theatricalised rituals, neighbourhood Maulidi characterised by reciprocal solidarity, and the Awakened, who practise distancing and reinterpretation, all occur in the same ritual space. The coexistence of these distinct trends encapsulates the dynamics of contemporary Islamic society.

The results of this study show a layered reality where enthusiasm and restraint, as well as politics and faith, coexist in a single ritual, each asserting its own claim to legitimacy. Islamic revival should therefore be understood not as a simple return to fixed doctrine but as a process in which faith practices are subjectively reconfigured in evolving social relations.

The concept of the subjective reconfiguration of faith practices developed in this study offers an analytical framework not only for Zanzibar but also for the study of shifting Islamic public spheres more broadly.

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Notes

(1) On 12 January 1964, an armed uprising led primarily by African residents broke out in Zanzibar. This uprising overthrew the sultanate, which had gained independence from Britain the previous year, as well as the ruling system dominated by Arab elites. After the revolution, the People's Republic of Zanzibar was established. In April of the

same year, the republic united with Tanganyika to form the present-day United Republic of Tanzania. In the context of this article, the revolution represents a historical turning point. The revolutionary government marginalised and suppressed Maulidi celebrations that had been closely associated with the sultan and Arab intellectual elites, and it promoted socialist-oriented secularisation in public life.

(2) In 1979, a revolution took place in Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. The revolutionaries overthrew the pro-American Pahlavi monarchy and established an Islamic republic governed under the doctrine of the guardianship of the Islamic jurist. This revolution challenged development models that equated modernisation with secularisation, and it demonstrated that Islam could function as a powerful ideological framework in modern politics.

(3) The term *Sharīʿa*, derived from an Arabic word meaning "the path to a water source," is commonly translated as "Islamic law." It refers to a comprehensive body of legal, ethical and religious norms derived from the Qur'an and the practices (Sunna) of the Prophet Muhammad, which Muslims are expected to follow. Since the 1970s, in the context of Islamic revival, Sharīʿa has been discussed not only as a legal system but also as a moral framework guiding individual inner life and everyday practices.

(4) "Islamism" refers to movements and intellectual trends that seek to redefine Islam not only as a matter of personal faith but also as a comprehensive ideology regulating social, political and economic institutions. The Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928, is often regarded as an early example of this phenomenon. Since the 1970s, Islamism has attracted attention primarily as a political movement seeking to capture state power and implement Islamic law. More recently, scholars have also emphasised forms of Islamisation that operate in civil society and everyday practices, including voluntary public engagement and the embodiment of Islamic values through personal lifestyles (Göle, 2002).

(5) The term *madrasa*, meaning "a place of learning" in Arabic, refers to an educational institution for Islamic studies. Historically, madrasas developed as institutions of higher learning in many parts of the Islamic world. Along the East African coast and its adjacent islands, however, the term often refers to primary-level institutions where children learn Qur'anic recitation, basic literacy in Arabic and foundational religious practices. In Zanzibar, madrasas function not only as educational institutions but also as important community centres. They train reciters for Maulidi celebrations and are supported by local residents. In this sense, they play a central role in the reproduction and transmission of religious culture.

(6) This statement is based on an interview conducted on 1 May 2007 with a leading figure of a major Sufi order in Zanzibar. This man had collected and studied religious materials from the pre-revolutionary period and was locally recognised as an independent historian. He is now deceased.

(7) Salafism is a current of thought that idealises the doctrines and practices of the "pious predecessors" (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*)—the earliest generations of Muslims—and seeks to eliminate later religious innovations (*bidʿa*). In this context, *salaf* refers specifically to the Prophet Muhammad and those who directly received his teachings, rather than to later jurists or Sufi scholars. In contemporary contexts, individuals identified as Salafis tend to criticise popular religious practices such as Maulidi celebrations, arguing that they constitute bidʿa and compromise the purity of monotheism.

(8) The Hijri calendar is the Islamic lunar calendar, which begins in 622 CE with the Prophet Muhammad's migration (Hijra) from Mecca to Medina. Because it is a purely lunar calendar, its year is approximately eleven days shorter than the solar (Gregorian) year, and the corresponding dates shift forward each year. In Zanzibar, the third month, during which Maulidi is celebrated, is widely recognised as a period of heightened religious festivity. Because celebrations are held successively in different localities within each island, many residents are able to attend multiple gatherings.

(9) Based on an interview with the aforementioned local historian (1 May 2007). According to his account, during the sultanate and the colonial period, Maulidi was refined not only as a popular festival but also as a stage on which rulers performed their legitimacy. He also noted that at the time, the venue was Mnazi Mmoja rather than Maisara.

(10) Based on an interview conducted on 16 September 2024 with a man residing on the outskirts of Zanzibar and working as a manager at a long-term accommodation facility in the city. Although not a religious professional, this man is widely regarded as a devout Muslim and always wears traditional, formal attire. According to him, it is important to maintain distance from both "politicised rituals" and "popular enthusiasm," as well as to prioritise

silence and personal study. His stance represents a typical example of the Awakened.

(11) An Arabic term meaning "innovation" or "novelty." In Islamic jurisprudence, it refers to practices or doctrines that lack precedent in the time of the Prophet Muhammad or the early pious generations (salaf). Reformist Salafis frequently cite the hadith stating that "every [religious] innovation is misguidance, and misguidance leads to the Fire" when condemning later celebratory rituals, such as Maulidi, as illegitimate innovations that compromise *tawḥīd* (divine unity). In contrast, in some Sufi-oriented currents, a distinction is made between harmful and beneficial innovations.

(12) Interview conducted in Stone Town, Zanzibar, on 15 September 2024. The distinction between "obligation" and "festivity" is characteristic of the reasoning of the Awakened, who seek to distance themselves from emotional enthusiasm and cultivate an autonomous religious life. According to this interviewee, popular Maulidi gatherings prioritise food and sociability over serious learning; therefore, they are not appropriate for those who already possess sufficient religious knowledge.

(13) This statement was made during the interview mentioned in note twelve. The interlocutor defined himself as "following a middle path," having neither a traditional *ṭarīqa* affiliation nor a reformist Salafist one. This reflects a subjectively grounded attempt to regulate one's faith through critical evaluation, rather than through uncritical adherence to established camps.

(14) Interviews conducted on 16 September 2024 with the aforementioned interviewee and a colleague. While critical of government-sponsored ceremonies, these individuals sometimes choose to attend Maulidi gatherings organised by acquaintances or relatives to maintain social ties. When this occurs, engagement is oriented more towards post-ritual commensality than towards immersive ritual participation. This illustrates the layered differentiation between religious correctness and the maintenance of harmonious social relations.

(15) As discussed in Section 1, Bayat (2007) characterises post-Islamism as a shift from emphasising religious "duty" to recognising individual "rights and piety," which marks a departure from doctrinally packaged and singular, authoritative visions of faith towards pluralism and reasoned judgement.

(16) Kamali (2015) defines *wasaṭiyya* not as a compromise but as a moral virtue embodied by enlightened subjects who seek balance in personal and social life, and these subjects transcend scholastic disputes and prioritise essential religious values.

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