

Celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday (*Mawlid Nabi*) by Muslim Community in Canberra

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Abstract

This essay observes the ceremony of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday celebration on the 12th of Rabi' al-Awwal 1409 Hijrah in Canberra by Indonesian Muslim community. Considering the congregational nature of the mawlid celebration I will employ the functionalist approach of Durkheim in analysing the celebration of the mawlid as religious ritual and a communal experience rather than an individual one. Through this perspective I wish to answer the question: What is the mawlid celebration serves (as a function) for Indonesian Muslim community in Canberra? In addition, I also utilize Geertz's perspective in theorizing religion as a cultural system that consists of a worldview and ethos. As such, mawlid ceremony as one of the most commonly held festival by Muslim communities all over the world provides spaces for revitalizing and strengthening Islamic identity (particularly for Muslim diasporas) and as a religious observance for spiritual rejuvenation by presenting the prophet Muhammad as a role model for all Muslims.

Key words: Mawlid Naby, Religious Ritual, Communal Experience, Islamic Identity, Indonesian Muslim Diaspora, Religious Worldview And Ethos

Introduction

The celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (commonly known as *mawlid* /*milad nabi* [Ar. the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad] or in many Indonesian

regions called *mulud*) is among the most popular festivals in the Islamic world since the pre-modern era up to the present time. This ritual usually takes place on the 12th of *Rabi' al-Awwal* (the third month) of Islamic calendar, although many times it may also be celebrated through the whole month of *Rabi' al-Awwal*.

The fact that this ritual is not considered as canonical and not prescribed by Islamic law does not prevent it to be carried out by many Muslim communities in the world stretching from North African regions, Middle East, South Asia to the outlying Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and even the so-called city state, Singapore.¹ In our today's era this kind of celebration is also performed by Muslim immigrants in the western secular countries, such as in Europe (Kaptein, 1993: 1), North America and Australia.

This marks the significance of the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday in Muslim communities across the world. Evidently, the widespread presence of this religious tradition across the Islamic world and the way it has been shaped and coloured by local cultural influences and even political interests had (*ibid.*, 30 and 42) contributed to the way it is performed, perceived and given meanings. This particularly becomes clear if we try to trace back the changing nature of the commemoration of this religious festival in the course of Islamic history (this will be explicated below in historical account of the *mawlid* festival).

As a matter of fact, the celebration of the Prophet's birthday has been a controversial issue among Muslim scholars since its early emergence up to the contemporary era (*ibid.* 74-75, and Schimmel, 1985: 148-149). Some are in favour of performing it maintaining that this ceremony has great benefits for tribute to Prophet Muhammad and taking lessons from his guidance and models to be emulated in Muslims' life on one hand, and as the implementation of God's command to honour and venerate His most beloved creature (the Prophet Muhammad), on the other. While, other groups are against this ritual arguing that it is an innovation that has no roots and basis in Islamic teaching and as such it is forbidden (*haram*) to be practised. This has been voiced by the so-called modernist Muslims under the influence of the 18th century *salafy* cum-*wahhabi* Saudi-based movement and doctrine (*ibid.*)

This essay considers the ceremony of the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad

on the 12th of Rabi' al-Awwal 1409 Hijrah in Canberra by Indonesian Muslim community. Considering the congregational nature of the *mawlid* celebration I will employ the functionalist approach of Durkheim in analysing the celebration of *mawlid* as religious ritual and a communal experience rather than an individual one. Through this perspective I wish to answer the question: What is the *mawlid* celebration serves (as a function) for Indonesian Muslim community in Canberra? In addition, I also utilize Geertz's perspective in theorizing religion as a cultural system that consists of a worldview and an ethos.

***Mawlid Nabî* in the Islamic World: A Brief History**

This part will deal with the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday in history; providing a brief historical account of this ceremony; its origins, main elements and socio-political context of its observance.

As a popular story among Muslim people (disseminated through sermons and religious preaching, and introduced in the earlier stage of Muslims' upbringing), particularly in Indonesia, the origin of the celebration of *mawlid* is commonly associated with the political and military struggle of Sultan Salahuddin of Ayyubid dynasty in Egypt (known as Saladin in the West) during the Crusade in the 12th century to defend Islamic world from the Crusader's attack and invasion. In this regard, Saladin (reigned 1174-1193) had tried to utilize the celebration of the *mawlid* in which the life of the Prophet and his companions were recounted, particularly their bitter experiences in standing for the cause of Islam and their endless sacrifice for its sake, and for the victory of God's religion (Islam). The aim of this celebration, so the argument goes, was a means to boost his soldiers' spirit to fight against the Crusaders and defend Islamic lands (Jerusalem) from foreign incursion. The story of Saladin was among the well-known one in Islamic history (and to some extent in the West for his sense of cultured chivalry), particularly due to his crucial and critical role in fighting for Islam at the time of its supposedly decline and downfall in history. Saladin was considered as a Muslim hero that inspired Muslim people in their effort to get back to and recapture their past victory over the whole world.²

Based on historical reports on the origins of the *mawlid* celebration the above story is hardly accurate and reliable, because it only refers to the later development of this religious festival at the hand of Sunnite Islam under Ayyubid dynasty of Egypt

during the 12th and 13th centuries. In fact, it was Muzaffar al-Din al-Kokburi (a local ruler in Irbil, South-eastern Iraq under Saladin's control) who popularized the celebration of *mawlid* in the Sunnite circles that had been observed by the previous Sunnite Zengid dynasty (ruled the Northern part of Iraq and Syria during the 12th and 13th centuries) under Sultan Nur al-Din (1118-1178), a famous Syrian ruler (Kaptein, *ibid.* 45, Schimmel, *ibid.* 145). In this regard, it might be that Saladin, as one of Nur al-Din's viziers (who later on founded his own Ayyubid dynasty), took advantage on his behalf from al-Kokburi (in performing the *mawlid* celebration) who acknowledged the superiority of Saladin after Nur al-Din's death. Indeed, historical resources confirm that Nur al-Din's celebration of *mawlid* is the oldest one in Sunnite Islam and this religious festival had hardly any relation to Saladin's, except his central role in defeating and recapturing Islamic lands during the Crusade's times that has a great impact in attaching historic moment to such a great occasion as the Prophet's birthday festival.

Tracing back to the history of Islamic empire the celebration of *mawlid* was actually Shiite in nature (Kaptein, *ibid.*, 29). The beginning of this religious festival refers to the tradition of Shiite Islam which exalts and adores the prominence and excellence of the Prophet and his descendants in Islamic point of view. Shiite doctrine

holds that after the death of the Prophet Muhammad his religious and political authority upon Muslim people is handed down to his family (the *ahl al-bayt*) and descendants (*shia's imams*/religious and political authority) from his daughter

Fatimah with his son-in law, Ali ibn Abi Thalib. So, unlike Sunni Islam, Shiite rejected the legitimacy of the three previous caliphs (i.e. Abu Bakr, Umar Ibn Khattab, and Utsman Ibn Affan) maintaining that it was Ali Ibn Abi Thalib the true successor of Muhammad.

This right to the office of caliphate (religious cum-political authority) belongs to his line of lineage as Shia's *imams*, not other clans and tribes who were supposed to seize and grab their right and privilege. As such, spiritual uprightness, moral and socio-political status of the Prophet's family are uplifted, praised, glorified and acclaimed, even to the extent beyond human normal standard that leads to the form of cult. This idea and attitude have resulted in a wide range of rituals performed in Shiite Islam (other than holidays in which Sunni Islam and Shiite share together), such as *Ashura*

(commemorating Imam Husayn Ibn Ali's martyrdom), *Eid al-Ghadeer* (Celebrating Muhammad's announcement of the imamate for Ali) and so on. This is particularly the case with the celebration of *mawlid*.

In fact, it was the Fatimid dynasty (Shiite Islam) in Egypt (reign. 909-1171) known firstly in Islamic history which performed the celebration of *mawlid* under al-Muiz li Din Allah (reign. 935-975) and followed by Vizier al-Afdal ((1095-1121). Based on this historical account, it is argued that the *mawlid* celebration in Islam came into being in the 11th century. Even, during the rule of the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt there had been five other *mawlid* celebrations besides the *mawlid* of the Prophet. They were celebrations of the birthday of the Commander of the Believers, Ali ibn Abi Talib; the birthday of Fatima (the Prophet's daughter), the birthday of al-Hasan, the birthday of al-Husayn, the birthday of the Present Caliph (*al-khalifa al-hadir*). These festivals were performed, among others, to popularize the status of sultans as noble persons due to their blood relation with the Prophet, as well as for veneration of the Prophet and his family (*ahli bayt*). This tradition of the Fatimid Shiite (of Ismailia branch) dynasty continued to exist after the fall the dynasty in Egypt replaced by the Ayyubid dynasty which was embracing Sunni branch of Islam, but the only remained from these celebrations was the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad on the 12th of *Rabi' al-Awwal*.

Concerning the event of the *mawlid* celebration which took place at the daytime in the era of Fatimid dynasty and at night in the Ayyubid era (this occasion is similar with today's *mawlid* celebration in the Islamic worlds), during these earlier practices there were several elements that involved i.e. the appearance of the caliph accompanied by salutation ceremonies, sermons were delivered by religious scholar (*ustadz*) before the caliph and people, reciting of the Qur'an and the distribution of money and food for people; and presentations of the nobility, graciousness, and honorableness of the Prophet and his family. This last element was utilized by the Fatimid sultans to promote a cult for their close relationship with the Prophet and cultivate loyalty among people for them, by presenting poetries and hymns which demonstrated the Prophet family's holiness and greatness. In this regard, the *mawlid* celebration was employed for political and religious gains, for preservation of status quo on one hand, and for creating public loyalty on the other. This was the case under the Fatimid era and under Ayyubid

era in which this festival was celebrated by rulers, Sufis and the people.

In addition, the exact D-day of this celebration during the Fatimid and Ayyubid era was different one another. While in the Fatimid times, it was celebrated on 13th of Rabi' al-Awwal, in the Ayyubid era it was in the 12th and even for the whole month of Rabi' al-Awwal, as happens at the present time in Sunni Islamic world, such as in the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asian regions. While the celebrations under the Fatimid era took place at daytimes, during the Ayyubid period it was happening at night. Also, the time and duration of this festival was/is not uniform (Kaptein, *ibid.*).

In the contemporary era, the above said elements of *mawlid* celebration continue to exist during the festival, except the caliph replaced by the Muslim leader in respective Muslim country who decides that *mawlid* celebration as public holiday, and the distribution of money and goods substituted by providing meals for all participants. The recitation of portions of Quranic verses regarding the personality and the role model of Prophet Muhammad for Muslim people are chanted, sermons on the Prophet struggle and life experiences in disseminating message of Islam delivered by religious scholars (*ustadz*, *kiyai*), recital of *mawlid barzanji* or *qasida burda* (these two genres of poetry dedicated to praise and pay tribute to the Prophet Muhammad's highly respected status among human beings and his family's graciousness) performed by all participants (Hamim, 2005: 3).

In many parts of the Islamic world, the birthday of the Prophet was declared as a public holiday and celebrated through public gatherings in mosques expressing the profound love with the Prophet, or even in state's palace marked by the presence of the president and his officials, and prominent figures in Muslim community. The celebration is marked by sermons delivered by a Muslim scholar regarding the remembrance of the Prophet and his ethical, political, and social role and teachings to be emulated in Muslim socio-political life. This happens, for example in Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Afghanistan, Egypt, Morocco, and so on (Schimmel, *ibid.* 148). In this occasion cities and town are decorated with flags, banners, festoons and streamers that mark the festive appearance of this celebration. In spite of remembering life, struggle and great model of the Prophet's characters and excellence for Muslim the celebration of his birthday is believed to have a blessing power (Ar. *baraka*. Ind. *berkah*). When people recite the *mawlid* poetry there will be peace and

blessing for a whole year, disaster and thieves will not come near (*Ibid.* 155-156). The recitation of the *mawlid* would grant the listeners not only worldly but also heavenly rewards. Even, in many regions in Indonesia, the recital of *Barzanji* (Arabic poetry pays tribute to the Prophet) has been commonly used for healing purposes. It is also chanted during *selametan* occasions, such as marriage, circumcision, death and other important life cycles.³

Concerning the controversial character of the *mawlid* celebration as has slightly been suggested at the outset, this ritual has been considered as *bid'a* (bad innovation that has no basis in Islam) in the view of *Wahabi* and *Salafy* doctrine of Islam as maintained by the official ruling of the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah ibn Baz; and Muhammad Taqi Usmani, a Hanafi scholar from Pakistan. They maintained that this event was not celebrated by the Prophet and his companions, and they did not advise the follower to observe this birthday. However, there are number of Islamic scholars who view that this celebration is praiseworthy and beneficial for Muslims, mentioning a hadith that the Prophet recommended fasting on Mondays as that was the day he was born, and the day the prophecy descended upon him. Persons like Alawi al-Maliki, a well-known Maliki scholar of Saudi Arabia; and Yusuf al-Qaradhawi and other figures related to the Sufi Movement are in favor of this celebration. Al-Qaradhawi, among other states that "Actually, celebrating the Prophet's birthday means celebrating the birth of Islam. Such an occasion is meant to remind people of how the Prophet lived. Allah Almighty says: "Verily in the Messenger of Allah ye have a good example for him who looketh unto Allah and the last Day, and remembereth Allah much." (Quran, Sura 33:21) ...We need all these lessons and such celebrations are a revival of these lessons and values. I think that these celebrations, if done in a proper way, will serve a great purpose, getting Muslims closer to the teachings of Islam and to the Prophet's tradition and life. "

This point of view is supported by verses of the Qur'anic announcement and prophetic tradition (*sunna*) on the prominence and high status of the Prophet Muhammad. For instance, "We had not sent you (Muhammad) but for the mercy for the worlds , "*rahmatan lil 'alamin*" (Sura 21:30); He is "verily a noble nature (Sura 68: 4), "Say: if you love God, follow me, the God will love you and forgive your sins" (Sura 3: 29), "Allah and His Angels send *Salat* (Blessings & Honours) on the Holy Prophet

(Muhammad). O you who believe! Send your *Salat* and *Salaams* on (Muhammad) [Sura 33: 56]"; "That (shall be so); and whoever respects the signs of Allah, this surely is (the outcome) of the piety of hearts" (Sura 22.32) [Nasr, 1988: 78-79]. This among the textual and theological basis of the celebration of *mawlid* in the Islamic world as it is commonly embraced in recent time. So, it is argued that from the Islamic point of view this sort of celebration is praiseworthy, valuable and valid for Muslim people. The diverse nature of the celebration all over the Islamic world would enrich the heritage of Islamic culture and civilization.

Celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday (*Mawlid Nabi*) by Muslim Community in Canberra

As a frequent practice in every year in the Islamic world, this year 2008 (March, 20th) or in compliance with 1429 H, Muslim people celebrated the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad on the 12th of *Rabi' al-Awwal*, or Indonesia it is likely that the whole month is devoted to the celebration. This solemn or, in part merry festival is not only observed in predominantly Muslim countries but also in minority Muslim-based countries, such as in the West by immigrant Muslim communities originated from Middle Eastern and South Asian regions like Egypt, Lebanon, Pakistan, India, and so on.

In this part I will deal with the celebration of the *mawlid* by Indonesian Muslim immigrants in the ACT (Australian Capital Territory/Canberra) region based on my personal participation and my informant explanation, named Andy, a student at the Australian National University with traditional (NU) background of upbringing.

Indonesian Muslim immigrants in Australia particularly in the ACT region held the celebration of the *mawlid* in Canberra on the 20th March 2008. As I saw from the list of the organising committee of this celebration, it consisted of all Muslim students and individuals, regardless of their background whether traditionalist (NU) or modernist (Muhammadiyah), or even those who had no clear-cut affiliation with this category had taken part and enjoyed the celebration by standing shoulder to shoulder in making this ceremony successful. They felt that the longing for togetherness as a family as was the case in the home country (Indonesia), had melted the restraints that arise from diverse background of race, origins, and social status.

Looking at the origins of the Indonesian Muslim community who participated in this celebration, it can be pointed out that they came from almost all over Indonesia, from western parts (Aceh, Padang, Palembang, Lampung), middle part (Kalimantan, Java [Javanese participants outweighed the number of others]), to the eastern part (Sulawesi and others). Most of them are students who pursue their tertiary education at the Australian National University or the University of Canberra; some are accompanied by their spouse and children. Besides, there were representatives from Indonesian Embassy in Canberra that added the feeling of Indonesia and seen as family member of Indonesian community overseas. On the whole the audiences were around 80 to 90 people; male and female. Due to the inadequate space, the room was loaded. With regard to the content or pattern of the ceremony, I saw that the celebration employed the traditionalist pattern, particularly in the session of reciting the *mawlid dibai* (a *mawlid* eulogy containing praise for and praying to God for the blessing toward the Prophet). Among the figure who had played an important role in proposing the way this ceremony should be held (whether it would adapt traditionalist or modernist way) were the senior participants who were largely originated from traditionalists such as, Habib Umar (a senior Indonesian man who have stayed in Canberra since many years ago as a correspondence of Indonesian News Press. From his first name (Habib), it can be said that he has familial link with the Prophet Muhammad) and Pak Slamet. It was Habib who led the recital of *Mawlid Diba'i* as preliminary part of the ceremony. Pak Slamet who is a PhD. Student at the University of Canberra who delivered sermon (*pengajian*) on *Mawlid* celebration recalling the life, characters and teaching of the prophet Muhammad.

The celebration took place at Anton Albert Room at Toad Hall, one of on-campus student accommodations. It lasted for six hours from 5 pm to 10 pm on Thursday night, so the celebration was held during night time. Before the beginning of the celebration, team work (most of them are students) had prepared all the things needed for the accomplishment of the ceremony, such as preparing the venue for public gathering, sound system, food for the consumption, and most importantly confirming that the agenda run well as was planned.

The preparation of the celebration begun from morning on that day, particularly with regard to consumption section which provided food for the coming celebration.

The food was also collected from the contribution of the wives of Indonesian Embassy staffs as well as from the spouses of the students.

The ceremony begun at 5 o'clock PM by reciting *Mawlid Diba'* led by Habib Umar opened by offering reward of recital (*pahala bacaan fatihah*) of *sura al-Fatiha* (the first chapter of the Qur'an) for the Prophet and his family, Muslim scholars (*ulama*), Sufis, audiences and the families and for all Muslims, alive or died. Here, prayer to God for realizing worldly intentions and salvation for all participants and the family. This then followed by chanting together kitab *Mawlid Diba'i*, named after the author's name of the text namely Syaikh Abdurrahman ibn Ali al-Diba'i, a Yemeni Arab religious scholar. This text along with others, such as *Mawlid al-Barzanji*, *Mawlid Burdah*, and *Mawlid Simt al-Durar*, are among the well-known *mawlid* texts in Indonesia. The *Mawlid Diba'* opened with reciting prayer to God for blessing and salutation to the Prophet, which reads:

O God, shower blessing to Muhammad (Ar. *Yarabbishalli ala Muhammad*) O

God, shower blessing and salutation to him (*Yarabbisalli alaihwassallim*) O

God, deliver him intercession (*Yarabbiballighulwasilah*)

O God, favor him with preeminence (*Yarabbikhussahbilfadhilah*)

These four lines of poem are chanted with rhythm that raise a feel of longing and honor to the Prophet, and like in a song they become refrain to be repeated at the end of each verse. This chanting lasted around 15 minutes and followed by reciting some Quranic verses alluding the respected status and venerable characters of the prophet Muhammad, which state: "We have bestowed upon you (O Messenger) a great victory. Whereby GOD forgives your past sins, as well as future sins, and perfects His blessings upon you, and guides you in a straight path. Additionally, GOD will support you with an unwavering support." (Sura 48:1-5) Lo! Allah and His angels shower blessings on the Prophet. O ye who believe! Ask blessings on him and salute him with a worthy salutation. (Sura 33:56). The recital of these of Quranic verses by the leader then closed by reading the prayer to God that the celebration would be graced and bring about safe, mercy and benevolence for all Muslims, particularly the participants for all their good intentions and relationship here in Australia as immigrants.

This session then followed by small talk by the leader of the *Mawlid Diba'* recital (Habib Umar) on the meaning and explanation of what had been recited, what it all

about. Habib explained that this *Mawlid Diba'* text was aimed at expressing prayer and salutation to the Prophet and his family. He then alluded and interpreted the teaching of the prophet in the context of Indonesian community lived overseas, such as Australia. "For Muslims here", he maintained, "we should demonstrate the uprightness and virtue of Islam not by imposing people about our point of view, but by showing our good conduct and behavior, such as honesty, hospitality, kindness and generosity towards other people". He then read the Islamic text (*tafsir*) which talked about the attitude of the Prophet toward people who hated him, stating that the Prophet did nice even to his adversaries. Habib recalled the story of the Prophet when he did prayer (*salat*) at the Ka'aba (square stone as the direction towards which Muslims face when doing prayer), the Meccan pagans threw camel dung over him but he was not angry, instead he prayed to God that may He guide them because they were ignorant.

This was the prelude of the ceremony, the other agendas are recital of the Qur'an, religious sermon, and ended by entertainment and the time for enjoying the meal. The recital of the Qur'an was done by Muksin, an Acehnese student. With beautiful voice he read the Qur'an sura 33: 21 which means "Verily in the Messenger of Allah ye have a good example for him who looketh unto Allah and the last Day, and remembereth Allah much." During this recital I witness the audiences were solemn and contemplated towards the recital and no other activities emerged except all focussing the to the recited Qur'an. It seems they pay attention although not all understood the meaning of the recited Qur'an.

The next agenda was religious sermons. Although this part was seen as a main element of the *mawlid* celebration in recent times, particularly in urban Muslim community it is sometime not really exciting especially for the young Muslims, due to monotonous and unattractive method used by the preachers. So, in this regard, the creativity of organising committees to choose which *ustadz* or *kiyai* (preacher) to be invited in delivering their *ceramah* (sermon) was badly needed based on their attractive method in conveying the message, for example by communicating it in humorous and interesting way. This was case with the sermon in this *mawlid* celebration here in Canberra. The *ceramah hikmah mawlid* (sermon on lessons form *mawlid*) was delivered by an *ustadz* called Pak Slamet. After talking with him concerning several religious issues, it seems that he comes from traditionalist (NU) background. Pak Slamet was an

appropriate preacher at that moment because he fulfilled the criteria of an interesting preacher. Besides being knowledgeable in Islamic teaching, he also communicated with the audiences in humorous manner. He was able to connect the ideal and historical figure of the Prophet Muhammad to the recent phenomenon Muslims' life in modern era, particularly for Indonesian Muslim immigrants in Canberra.

Among other things that he talked was about the role model of the Prophet Muhammad for Muslims in all aspects of life; from community leader, commander in the battle field, to household matters. Pak Slamet recounted the story of the Prophet Muhammad doing house household chores by himself. He did not burden to his wife.

He himself sew his torn clothes. Pak Slamet linked this story to the present phenomenon of the feminist movement, maintaining that Islamic teachings do not degrade and put down women as commonly perceived. Instead, Islam puts women in the high position compared to other previous traditions and civilizations.

He also recalled the history of the Prophet since his childhood, prophethood period up to the time of his death, by highlighting several important watersheds of his life that might be taken as a lesson for people to be emulated. One interesting part of his sermon is where invited audiences to sing Indonesian religious song (*qashida*) entitled "*Rindu Kami Padamu*" (Our Longing for You) by Indonesian Music group called *Bimbo*. This song expressed feeling of nostalgia and longing for the Prophet Muhammad although thousand of years had passed. The feeling that the Prophet was present here and right now. And the love of the Prophet upon mankind was limitless. Pak Slamet asked the audiences how to repay the Prophet's love, and he replied by himself stating that the best way to repay it was by praying to God that He may bestow blessings and salutations to the Prophet. Another way according to Pak Slamet was to follow his teachings and examples in everyday life.

The sermon of Pak Slamet lasted for one hour. It was seen to be a spiritual splash for the audiences who were thirsty of religious wisdom as they were far away from home country, Indonesia. Although the audiences were comprised of all ages from children, teenagers to adults. Most of them were young or in their early and middle thirties who were students in the first or second semester. They felt that this celebration could reduce feeling of loneliness toward hometown, family, food, and atmosphere where people interact each other with one mother tongue: *Bahasa Indonesia*.

The opportunity and place which was away from home which enable them to meet and greet one another that brought about the feeling of togetherness and shared the same destiny for pursuing tertiary education overseas for the sake of Indonesian development and progress once they return back to the beloved country, Indonesia.

The above feeling was attached with joyful, cheerfulness, and happiness when the agenda was started, that was entertainment along with enjoying the food which was specially cooked for this occasion. Here, I saw the meal was not seen as the center of the ceremony as was the case with *selamatan* in Java portrayed by Geertz in his "the Religion of Java". This can be understood as the patterns in which *selamatan* has changed considerably over time. For example, this celebration of *mawlid* was a mixture between the modernist pattern (which emphasized on the textual and literal characteristic of Islam that sought the appropriateness of this ritual with Islamic doctrine, and this many times insisted on the intellectual facet of religion) and traditionalist patterns (which maintained emotional-spiritual nature of religious experiences). What emerged with regard to the meal here was the desire to have Indonesian meal, because here in Canberra having Indonesian meal is not as easy as in Indonesia. So, the participants of the *mawlid* celebration (who were students) here felt that besides having an opportunity to meet and be acquainted with other Indonesian people, they were particularly excited with the Indonesian food provided by the organizing committee. Consuming Indonesian meal in such a great occasion with the variety of food and Indonesian taste was a rare experience. Accompanied by the entertainment session performed by kids of TKA Ceria-Canberra (Qur'anic teaching institution for children) with their *rebana kasidah* group (musical performance with tambourine as the main instrument). They performed several religious songs which had been familiar in Indonesia called *nasheed* (previously, these songs took the form of acappella, but later on it was accompanied by musical instruments although in a minimalist way). They firstly performed the *salawat* (salutation to the Prophet) song and Indonesian religious pop song familiarized by Indonesia music band "Ungu" entitled "Andaiku Tahu" (If I knew). This song was so interesting that the whole audience sung together and feeling relax, pleased and comforted. This latter song contains the message of a man admitting his guilt and sins towards God, fearing Him of the sins has done and repent to God; and asked

forgiveness from God. It also expressed human weakness to face God's punishment in the hereafter. In this regard, the feeling of solemnity and joyfulness mixed together with Indonesian atmosphere. While enjoying Indonesian food the audiences were entertained with religious entertainment that relieves their homesickness and loneliness in a foreign country like Australia. This entertainment ended the celebration of the *mawlid* in Canberra. The participants returned to their own residence and said good bye to one another.

Analysis

The Celebration of *Mawlid* and Maintaining the notion of *Umma*

When I asked my informant about what the meaning of celebrating the *mawlid nabi* here in Canberra, away from home Indonesia. Andy answered that when we are away from home we are feeling of loneliness and longing for creating spaces and places that enable us to express and materialize our primordial feeling of origins and background, in particular. This effort enables people to establish „group commitment through effervescence’, to borrow Durkheim’s terms. In this respect, through Durkheimian perspective it can be argued that Muslim’s celebration of the Prophet’s birthday is more an occasion to create Islamic solidarity that takes form in the concept of *umma*. The notion of *umma* is commonly refer to the membership of Muslim community based on theological consideration i.e. religion of Islam. It is a kind of „an imagined community’ (in Anderson’s term) tied by the common idea of religious principles.

In this way, the idea of *umma* can bridge the diaspora of Muslim communities around the world through performing and conducting religious practices, rituals and ceremonies, such as „*Ied al-Fithr* (the festival of fast-breaking) and the *mawlid* celebration. Whenever and wherever they are Muslim people are bound together in a single „community of believers’ (Buitelaar,1993: 83-85).

Here, Indonesian Muslim community in Canberra conceived the notion of *umma* as a means to generate feeling of solidarity and belonging to their Indonesian fellow Muslims in the home country and at the same time to the whole Muslim in the world. In the case of *mawlid* celebration, it appears that the function of religious beliefs or

practices serve as a strong bond that bring people together to come to experience a shared spirit, good feeling and happiness, confidence and well-being. These phenomena can be seen throughout the ceremony of *mawlid* here, when all participants actively engaged in the ceremony from the beginning to the end. In this regard, Durkheim idea that religious belief „provides a form of social cohesion, the glue of mechanical solidarity’ could materialize (Durkheim, 2002: 16). Thus, it „binds people into moral communities.’ In addition, through recounting the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his excellence characters through singing, and reciting the scripture in public gathering; the *mawlid* celebration functions as a means to revitalize and boost the spirit of the masses who participated in the ceremony (Bowen, 2005:16-17, Paden, 1992: 31). In this respect, the ritual is an activity that emerges through “the assembled groups to uphold, maintain, support, and re-create certain psychological states of those groups (Durkheim, *ibid.*).” So, joining the *mawlid* celebration could bring about the feeling of closeness with the Prophet Muhammad, his family and companions during the early period of Islamic religion; creating an atmosphere that might revive divined spirit and devoutness towards God.

Moreover, this celebration provides an egalitarian space and time for everyone regardless of their social status, gender and origins to participate and take advantages from it. Here, social status and stratum dissolve and turn to an equal atmosphere and shared common destiny as a particular socio-religious community.

Looking at the ritual of *mawlid* as an „innovated and created ceremony’ long time after the Prophet’s time i.e. during the Fatimid period in the 12th century from Durkheimian perspective we can also draw the idea that religion is „natural expression of society, society’s moment of reflecting on its own transcendent power’. In this respect, society was a system of collective forces which have influenced or even created cultures, civilisations and religions (Pals, 1996: 88-89). Here, *mawlid* celebration was innovated and established, in some way, for creating a cult in Shiite Muslim communities in the past, besides being a political instrument to popularized the image of sultans as descendants of the Prophet family (*ahli bayt*) and preserve the status quo. Or as a medium of expressing and enhancing religious solidarity in the contemporary era. This certainly is not equivalent to the idea of Durkheim on the notion that religion is society or vice versa. But the point is that the ritual *mawlid* in one way or another, has

been shaped and understood according to social structure in which it is celebrated. The various forms of *mawlid* celebration in Indonesia from *Gregbeg mulud* in Yogyakarta, *Panjang Jimat* in Cirebon (West Java), to *mawlid* celebration in Cikoang (South Sulawesi) confirm this idea.

The *mawlid* festival can also be seen as manifestation of religion as a cultural system that consists of a worldview and an ethos that combine to reinforce each other. In this regard Geertz defines religion as a cultural system in a heavily packed sentence: “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivation in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the mood and motivation seem uniquely realistic.”

As such religion means “just about anything that carries and conveys an idea or ideas which are not purely private matters” (“but public in which they exist outside ourselves”); and they (the ideas) lead people to feel things and want to do things (Pals, *ibid.*, 244). In many *mawlid* ceremonies the poetic text (*Barzanji*, *Diba'*, etc.) recited or sung (often with musical instruments) to glorify and venerate the great personality and symbolic figurehead and excellence of the prophet Muhammad and his family which renders a feeling of divine and being blessed by God on Muslims' part who celebrated it. This spiritual achievement facilitates them the gate toward closeness to God which is the ultimate goal of every Muslim, seeker of the Truth (*salik*). This provides a feeling of joy or an inner peace containing the spirit which is not always easy to define but it is experienced by people who held the ritual; and more importantly religious ceremony as cultural practice provides an ultimate meaning and explanation of the world. That is, when people face sufferings and burdens they cannot bear, or problems they cannot comprehend religion serves as an elixir expected to overcome it.

In this regard, as Geertz puts it, there lies two cores of religion: worldview and ethos. The first (a general order of existence) is a set beliefs people have about what is real, what God exists, or in this regard; the Prophet Muhammad is a messenger of God with excellence characters and a model to be emulated by Muslims. This worldview supports a set of moral values and emotions (that is the ethos, the second one), which guide people as they live and thereby confirm the beliefs. The worldview regarding the great personality of Prophet Muhammad as a role model in everyday life of Muslim was

emphasized in the celebration of *mawlid*. This emphasis and insistence were linked to God's blessing and His rewards in the hereafter, and lead to the feeling of religious obligation to follow the best model of the Prophet. So, from the recital of *Mawlid* text in poetic and rhythmic way by all participants and the explanation of its meaning by the leader or *ustadz/kiai*, the masses arrived at a certain mood and emotions that lead them to in their life, and as such confirm their religious belief. In this regard, *mawlid* celebration as religious ritual links *a model of* (a worldview) and *a model for* (an ethos), that is the image of the eminent personality of the Prophet Muhammad as mentioned in the holy Qur'an and the prophetic tradition (*sunna*) lead Muslim people to honour and venerate him through ritual of celebration. This celebration provides an occasion for Muslims to revitalize their religious or spiritual (moods) emotion and set moral values for their model to live their life in this world and the hereafter.

Conclusion

The celebration of the Prophet Muhammad birthday has been among the popular and important festival in the Islamic world since the pre-modern times up to the contemporary era although its observance remains controversial. It was carried out by Muslims all over the world, including those who are immigrants in Western countries. Indonesian Muslim immigrants in Australia held the celebration of *mawlid* to create an atmosphere and occasion that bring about the sense of solidarity as a Muslim community away from home country: Indonesia; relieving the feeling of loneliness and homesick for the beloved country. It also has resulted in the enhancement of religious revival and spirit in the country that totally differs from and contrasts with the home country with regard to socio-religious and political circumstance.

Besides, the celebration of *mawlid* in this regard, provides a worldview concerning the pre-eminence figure and great personality of the Prophet Muhammad and his position as a role model for Muslims that inspire them to live their live.

Endnotes:

¹ The existence of significant number of Singaporeans with Arabic descendant/linked to the Prophet's line of family (particularly Yemenites) contribute partly to the preservation of this important religious festival in this modern cosmopolitan city state.

² The type of story is the well-known one in Indonesian context because it is conveyed on the informal occasions of religious sermons for encouraging and enhancing religious spirit of the mass, urging that if Muslim want gain victory in the world, they should follow the way the prophet in his struggle for Islam.

³ Here, the *mawlid* recital is not only performed on the occasion of the Prophet's birthday, but almost in every life cycle such as marriage, circumcision, death, and for healing purposes.

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