

**MAWLIDUN-NABIYY CELEBRATION: An Islamic Tradition between The
Permissible and Non- permissible**

By

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Introduction

“Whosoever does not show happiness for the sake of Muhammad (Peace be upon him), has never seen the true happiness”¹ (Muhammad Khlid Thabit)

Mawlid is derived from the Arabic word *walada* which means to give birth, bear a child, and descent (online: Webster’s Arabic English Dictionary). Islamically, *mawlidun-nabiyy* connotes the observation of the birthday of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Although, the Prophet did not celebrate his birth, neither did he prevent the Muslim *ummah* from celebrating it, it has become a popular annual event in the Muslim world. This study is set to analyse the rudiments of *mawlidun-nabiyy* celebration in Nigeria with some other Muslim nations and the view of Islamic scholars on its permissibility.

It should be noted that Nigeria is a multi-lingual nation with over three hundred languages streamlined into three ethnic groups namely: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. This division has brought about a lot of disputes and misunderstanding from the very first day that the colonialists merged them in 1914. The independence of 1960 was meant to unite every group under this amalgamation, yet at 57 the nation is still battling with efforts to steer away the fear of division. As some groups clamour for economic independence, it becomes clear that one thing still pulls us together – the recognition and appreciation of individual culture exhibited by each group.

Without dwelling much on the exploration and expatiation of cultural values of other ethnic groups in Nigeria, this study focuses on the celebration of *mawlidun-nabiyy* as a cultural integration in Nigeria particularly among the Muslims.

Culture in Nigeria

Culture is simply identified as the customs, beliefs, arts, and way of life and social organization of a particular country or group (Hornby, 284). Culture is really the whole people's life style.² These affects our judgment, the way we communicate, the types of food we eat, the way we dress, and our perception which each society having its unique cultural identity. As there are marks of distinction among various groups, so do we find similarities. Culture does not remain the same forever; it is dynamic and changes as new ideas are introduced into the society by members of other societies.³

Nigeria became a nation owing to the efforts exerted by the imperialists in merging all ethnic groups around its region for easy control and accessibility to our economic values. This effort led to splitting Nigeria into three region – Western, Northern and Eastern. It should be known that Nigeria later got divide into twelve, nineteen, twenty-one, thirty and thirty-six states at some specific periods. All these transformations work towards uniting the various ethnic groups under one government, one law, one national interest, one frontier and one custom tariff (Konstantinor, 283). It is unfortunate however despite the much exerted efforts to unite these multi-ethnic groups, the rise in clashes and crises in the name of ethnicity and religion is on the increase on a daily basis. This chaos is so numerous starting from the first period of the amalgamation in 1914 to the present day with no visible solution.

For fifty-seven years, the Nigerian government has not got it right to achieve meaningful result in the facilitation of unity among these various ethnic groups, rather, the uproar for division reigns supreme in the camp of each ethnic group. If divided according to their opinion, each ethnic group will be able to provide for economics sustainability. It was assumed that each ethnic group is endowed with a natural resources that can take care of its economic values which has been mismanaged and fraudulently

consumed by the elites. This consumption continues to engender series of terrorist and militant groups across the country. The Boko Haram sect in the Northeastern part, the Movement for the actualisation of the sovereign state of Biafra (MASSOB) in the Eastern part, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Niger Delta Avengers both from the Niger Delta area among others. All these barbaric activities – killing, bombing, kidnapping and vandalization of oil and gas pipelines are weighing down the country and succeeding in sowing seeds of discord among the various ethnic groups.

Culture can be used to unify diverse opinions and ways of life and stem crises. Culture can be grouped into two: internal and external. Internal cultures are those passed down to a generation by their forefathers, which cover all aspects of their lives. The external one is generated from foreign tribes and accepted for assimilation. Both internal and external cultures are woven round the beliefs and religious of people. Basically, there religions (Islam, Christianity and Traditional Religions) are recognized in Nigeria and their cultural values are adopted by their various adherents.

Historical Evolution of *Mawlidun-Nabiyy*

Public celebration of *mawlidun-nabiyy* started four centuries after the death of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The sixth century marked the beginning of state-funded *mawlidun* celebration in a formalized manner.⁴ By the eighth century, in the city of Makkah, the commemoration of *mawlidun-nabiyy* was accorded with the transformation of the house in which Muhammad (SAW) was born into a place of prayer by al-Khayzuran, the mother of Harun al-Rashid, the 5th famous Abbasid caliph. Originally, it was a festival initiated by Shi'ah ruling class. According to scholars like al-Maqrizi, al-Qalqasyardi and author of "*al-Baits ala inkar al-Bid'a wal -Hwadits*" they viewed its establishment by the Fatimid Dynasty in Egypt.⁵ According to Hafiz Ather, most historians do not describe them as the

pioneers of *mawlidun*. The celebrations were more about their Prophet Muhammad (SAW). They commemorated every birth and event, most relating to *Ahl-al-Bayt* and their Shi'ah beliefs. The Fatimids celebrated a number of festivals. They include: the birth of the Prophet, the birth of Ali, the births of Hassan, Hussayn, and of Fatimah, the birth of the current caliph and *yawm Ghadir Kumm* and so on. Therefore, they were not celebrating *mawlidun-nabiyy* per se, rather, it was part of other celebrations that are Shi'ah based.⁶

Salah al-Din Ayyub was responsible for the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt.⁷ When he did so, he cancelled the numerous annual celebrations of the Shi'ah but maintained the *mawlidun* celebration on the ground than Shi'ah's. Had he perceived it as a Shi'ah event like *yawm Ghadir Kumm* he would have cancelled it also. Salah al-Din was of *Shafi'i Madhhab* and adopted Al-Ashari's *'aqidah* and a *sufi* by spirituality.⁸

The *sunni* in their own way, held their public *mawlidin-nabiyy* celebration. First in the 12th century in Syria during the administration of Nur ad-Din Zangi. The practice of this celebration was briefly halted by the Ayyubids when they came to power and made it an event confined to family. It however regained its status as an official events in 1207 when it was re-introduced by Muzaffar al-Din, the brother-in-law of Salah al-Din Ayyubi, in Arbil, a town near Mosul, Iraq (Encyclopeddia Britannica)??

The celebration of *mawlidin-nabiyy* spread throughout the Muslim world, assimilating local customs in places such as Cairo where folklore *sufi* practices greatly influenced it. And by 1588, it had spread to the court of Murad III, Sultan of Ottoman Empire (Encyclopedia of Islam??). In 1910, it was given official status as a national festival throughout the Ottoman Empire.

Today, a total of Forty Seven countries worldwide officially recognized the *mawlidin-nabiyy* as public holiday.⁹

- a) Africa: In Africa, we have Algeria, Benin, Burkina Faso, Comoros, Cameroun, Ivory Coast, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, guinea, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Tunisia and togo.
- b) Middle-East: In middle East, we have Behrain, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Syria and United Arab emirates.
- c) Asia: Afganistan, Bangladesh, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan, Fiji Island and Guyana.

Some of these countries are not Muslim dominated such as India, Fiji, Island, Sri Lanka, Mali? and Tanzania? yet they recognise the day as a special one to be honoured with public holiday.¹⁰

Manners of Celebrating *Mawlidin-Nabiyy*

The manner by which the *mawlid* is celebrated can be succinctly divided into the following among others:

- a) **The Shi'ah:** The Fatimid caliphs ruled Egypt from 362 - 567 A.H. i.e. 972 - 1171 C.E.¹¹ During this time, they used to commemorate *mawlid* by distributing food as *sadaqah* to the public and to the trustees of the *mizaars*. Abdul Mun'im Sultan writes in his book on the history of life in the Fatimid era in Egypt:

During the *mawlid* season, sweets would be distributed and all would gather in Al-Azhar (Cairo). Then, they would all proceed to the government palace to listen to speeches.¹²

- b) **Shaykh Umar al-Mulla:** He lived in the time of Nur al-Din Mawmud. He was a sufi Muslim who wrote many works on the life and history of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Each year, he accorded the *Mawlid* utmost importance, inviting the rich and the poor, dignitaries and poets to praise Muhammad (SAW) the seal of the Prophets and the scholars to deliver lectures.¹³

c) **Sultan Muzaffar of Irbil (d. 630A.H./1232C.E.):** He was of Irbil, a town near Mosul, Iraq. He lived at the time of Salah al-Din Ayyubi. He was a pure hearted brave and wise ruler. He was one of the first to turn *mawlidin-nabiyy* into a formal event. He did spend 300,000 dinar annually on *mawlid*. He used to fill the table with 5000 well cooked goats, 10,000 chicken, 100,000 bowls of milk and 30,000 dinars on releasing Muslim prisoners held by European Imperialists, 300,000 dinars on looking after the two *Harams* and provision of water along the routes to the two of them.¹⁴

d) **Hijaz (Modern-day-Saudi Arabia):** There is enough fact to suggest that *mawlid* is being celebrated by Muslims in Makkah and Madinah form a very early period to the present time.

i) Makkah in the Sixth Century: Ibn Jubayr (540-614) writes on the celebration of *mawlid* in Makkah:

This blessed place (the house of the Prophet (SAW) is opened, and all men entered it to derive blessings form it every Monday of the month of Rabi' al-Awwal: for on that day and in that month was born the Prophet (SAW).¹⁵

ii) Makkah in the Seventh Century: The eight century historian and traveler Ibn Batuta writes:

iii) Makkah in the Tenth Century: Series of esteemed scholar's including Ibn Hajar al-Haythami gave the accounts that each year, on the 12th of Rabi' al-Awwal after the evening prayer. The four *qadis* of Makkah, representing the four *sunni* schools and large groups of people including scholars (*fuqaha*) and notables (*fudala'*) of Makkah, Shaykhs, *zawiya* teachers and their students, magistrates (*ru'asa'*) and scholars (*muta'ammameen*) leave their mosques and set out in congregation for a visit to the birth place of the Prophet (SAW) shouting out *dhikr* and *tahlil* (La ilaha illa Allah).

The houses on the route are illuminated with numerous lanterns and large candles and many people are out and about. They all wear special clothes for the occasion with their children with them. Having reached the birth place of the Prophet (SAW), a special sermon for the celebration of the birthday of the Prophet (SAW) is delivered, mentioning the miracles (*karamat*) that took place on the occasion. Thereafter, the invocation for the Sultan (Caliph), the Amir of Makkah and the Shari'i *qadi* is performed, and all pray with reference.¹⁷

Shortly before the night prayer, the whole party would return to the great mosque which is almost over crowded and all sit down in rows at the root of Maqamah Ibrahim. In the mosque, a preacher first mentions the *tahmid* (praise) and the *tahlil* and once again the invocation for the sultan, the Amir and the Shafi'i *qadi* is performed. After this, the night prayer is observed after which the crowd dispersed.

- iv) Madinah in the Eleventh Century: Mulla Alli Qari (d. 1014A.H./1605C.E.) writes that in al-Madinah, Muslims were regularly attending *mawlid* gatherings with great enthusiasm and sincerity.
- v) Madinah in the Twelfth Century: Ja'far ibn Hazan al-Barzanji (d. 1177C.E./1764C.E.) was of the greatest scholars of Madinah. He was born in 1128 and had his early education from the great scholars of the city of Madinah. By thirty-one years of age, he was delivering lectures in *al-Masjid an-Nabawi* as well as teaching Hadith, *Tafsir*, *Fiqh*, *Usul al-Fiqh*, *Sarf* and *Nahw* and many other disciplines. He could offer religious decrees (*fatawa*) for the *Madhabib* though a Shafi'i himself. Later he became the Imam and *khatib* of the Prophet's mosque.

He wrote many important works on Islam. His best work was *Iqd al-Jawhar fi Mawlid an-Nabi al-Azhar*, famously known as *mawkid al-Barzanji*.¹⁹

- vi) Makkah in the 13th Century: Shaykh Yusuf ibn Islamil al-Nabhani (d. 1932) writes in "Jawahir al-Bihar" that on the eve of *mawlid*, dwellers of Makkah would go to the birth place of the Prophet (SAW) in great number.²⁰
- e) **The Tijaniyah and Qadiriyyah Sufi Orders:** Aside from the celebration in Makkah which has since been discontinued as the Wahabiyyah have taken over the spiritual affairs of the peninsular, with the aim of eradicating these activities not practised by the Prophet and his companions. The Tijaniyyah group which forms the largest *Sufi* order in West Africa celebrates *mawlid-nabiyy* in all its religious centres around the world on the 12th *Rabi' al-Awwal* every year. The largest one that attracts hundreds of thousands of followers is attended at Kawlack in Senegal.²¹
- Unlike the Makkan method of celebration which starts from *Maghrib* and ends at *Ishai*, the Tijaniyyah group starts theirs from midnight and ends it shortly after dawn. At this period, they are engaged in *dhikr*, chanting of poetry and making speeches about the life of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Shaykh 'Allamal Yekeen Alawiye²² confirmed this act and also argued in favour the night that Allah (SWT) gives more preference to prayers and suplications observed in the night. He acknowledged the efforts of a reknown scholar, sulayman Jasuli, who collected over 400 different *salawar* and published it in a book known as *Dalailul-khayrat* (manial of fortune). This book is recited during the course of the celebration by the Tijaniyyah group. Beating of drum (*bandiri*) differentiated the Qadiriyyah group form the procedure of

celebrating *mawlidin-nabiyy*, as other process is done in the same way.²³

- f) *Mawlidin-Nabiyy* celebrates in Nigeria: Nigeria is one of the countries in the world public awareness about *mawlidin-nabiyy* is very high. The factor that contributes to this is the annual declaration of public holiday by the Federal government to mark the occasion. The whole country is agog for the sake of the birth of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and majority of the Muslims are overwhelmed with joy and happiness as festivity mood fill their circle.

The whole month of Rabi'u al-Awwal features different modes of *mawlidin-nabiyy* celebrations among Islamic organisations, Islamic professionals, Muslim clerics and so on. Some state governments also deem it fit to organize state celebration of the birth of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). One of such states' is Oyo, since the inception of the regime of Ishaq Abiola Ajimobi in 2012. The programme has since been held at the government house annually.

The programme of events mainly featured prayers, lecture, goodwill messages and meriments. Osun state also celebrates the event annually.

Among the Islamic organisations tht celebrate *mawlid* is Islahudeen Nigeria Missionary Association at its headquarters at Iwo in Osun State. The society started the celebration in 1950 but had to discontinue shortly before the death of its founder, Shaykh Abdul Baki Muhammad.²⁴ Representatives of the society in all its branches nationwide always attended the programme which held after Ishai till dawn. Students of Islahudeen Arabic School, Iwo, would gather at the Chief Missioner's house would walk in procession, singing and drumming through the streets to the Oluwo's palace, the permanent venue of the occasion for many years. The programme always took off with opening prayer, to be followed

simultaneously by the reading from the Glorious Qur'an, Hadith and the welcome address of the national chairman of the association.²⁵

These will be followed by the students' presentations which featured among other things – *Siratul-Nabiyy*, to be rendered in Arabic, Yoruba and English Languages, drama in relation to the life of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), reading and interpretation of memory verses and series of other educative Islamic displays. The programme was always ended with a lecture usually delivered by the Chief Missioner. The celebration of *mawlidin-nabiyy* at the National Headquarters of the society would open the floor for all its branches as each followed suit in their respective domains throughout the month of Rabiul-Awwal.²⁶

Permissibility of *Mawlidin-Nabiyy* in Islam

Any cultural practice that does not contradict the teachings of Islam is accepted and allowed as a part of 'Urf (local custom) and 'adah (tradition or norm) and recognized in Shari'ah and celebrated in the Muslim World so far that its celebration does not go beyond the Shari'ah provision.

The manifestation of Islam became visible with the birth of Muhammad (SAW) who was given the baton of prophethood at the age of forty years. He received direct revelation for twenty three years and lived an exemplary life which made Allah to attest to his goodwill in many verses of the Qur'an. His conduct, deeds and speeches were sacred and became the second primary source of the Islamic law. The success he attained in delivering divine message made Allah to confirm his mission in the Qur'an thus:

“... this day, I have perfected your religion for you, completed my favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as (your) religion ...”
(Q.5:3)

Allah also informs the Muslims that:

Now hath come unto you a Messenger from amongst yourselves: It grieves him that you should perish: Ardently anxious is he over you: To the Believers is he most kind and Merciful. (Q.9:128)

Part of the mission of the Prophet is the explanation of the verses of the Qur'an with his actions and words. He prevented his companions on many occasions from giving him excessive respect. This was done to erase confusion from his followers who might exaggerate his personality in a bid to magnify him. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) commanded the companions thus:

"Do not praise me in the fashion that Christians praised Isa bn Maryam"

He, rather promotes humility, obedience to Allah and respect for other peoples' rights. Counting on these virtues prevented him from celebrating his own birth. The relevance or rather, the permissibility of celebrating *mawlidin-nabiyy* can be observed when Allah declared in the Qur'an that:

Allah and His Angels send blessings on the Prophet: O you who believe! Send your blessings on Him and salute him with (all) respects. (Q.33:56)

In another verse, Allah states;

Say: "In the bounty of Allah, and in His mercy - in that let them rejoice: that is better than the (wealth) they hoard. (Q.10:58)

Explaining the favours and mercy of Allah that makes the believers rejoice,

Allah says:

Allah did confer a great favour on the believers when he sent among them a messenger from among themselves, rehearsing unto them the signs of Allah, sanctifying them, and instructing them in scripture and wisdom, while before that, they had been in manifest error. (Q.3:164)

There abound several verses of the Qur'an that encourage Muslims to love and pray for the Prophet. Some of authentic traditions attested to the humility of the prophet and his respect for other prophets. Some of these traditions include the following:

Abu Qatadah Ansari reported that Allah's Messenger (SAW) was asked about fasting (the day) when I was born and revelation was sent down to me.²⁷

Narrated Urwa; Thuwaiba was the freed slave girl of Abu Lahb whom he manumitted, and then she suckled the Prophet. When Abu Lahb died, one of his relatives saw him in a dream in a very bad state and asked him, "What have you encountered?" Abu Lahb said, "I have not found any rest since I left you, except that I have been given water to drink in this (the space between thumb and other fingers) and that is because of my manumitting Thuwaiba.

'A'ishah, wife of the Prophet (may peace be upon him) reported that the Quraysh used to observe fast on the day of 'Ashurah in the days of ignorance and the Apostle of Allah (may peace be upon him) used to fast in the days of ignorance. When he arrived at Madina, he observed the fast that day and ordered the people also to do likewise. When the fasts of Ramadan became obligatory, these alone were made obligatory and the 'Ashurah fast was abandoned. Hence whosoever likes may fast that day and whoever likes may omit to do so.²⁸

The contents of the three traditions quoted above revolve round the rewards attached to loving and obeying the prophet (SAW) and his mission. Notable scholars were not left out in seeking the permissibility for *mawlidin-nabiyy*. Imam Jalaludin as-Suyuti is quoted to have said:

The birth of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) is a great blessing for us and his death is very saddening for us too, however, the shari'ah has ordered us to rejoice and thank Allah with

blessings, whereas on calamity it has taught us to have patience while hiding it ...

Hence, in the light of rulings prescribed by the shari'ah one should rejoice in Rabi'ul al-Awwal on the birth of our beloved Prophet (SAW).²⁹

Ibn Taymiyyah is also quoted to have said:

To celebrate and to honour the birth of the prophet and to take it as an honoured season, as some people do, is good and in it there is a great reward, because of their good intentions in honouring the Prophet (SAW).³⁰

From the analysis given above, it can safely be affirmed that *mawlidin-nabiyy* is permissible in Islam. Although, the Prophet (SAW) may not have celebrated his birth, he has practically taught his followers the way to go about celebrating it in a manner that will be pleasing to the creator. Celebrating *mawlidin-nabiyy* also has positive effect on unbelievers as Abu Lahb was relieved on the grave for being happy at the birth of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). If therefore means that, the precursor of the celebration of *mawlidin-nabiyy* is qualified for rewards including all those that participated in it. However, any group or individual who exhibits an attitude contrary to the teaching of Islam under the guise of celebrating *mawlidin-nabiyy* will face the wrath of Allah.

The question of permissibility or otherwise of *mawlidin-nabiyy* came to light with the arguments of some groups and individual scholars like Albani, Abdulazeez ibn Baz, al-Jazairi, Mashhur Salman, Uthaymin among others who reasoned that since the companions of the prophet and those that succeeded them refused to celebrate his birth, engaging in it is a nullity. They also indicated that prophet Muhammad (SAW) had in his tradition, forewarned that every innovation shall be in hell.

As for Ibn Taymiyyah, he opines that whoever loves the Prophet and decides to exhibit it should simply follow his sunnah practically rather than engaging in what he did not do.³¹ He alludes to a verse of the Qur'an that states thus:

Say, if you really love Allah, follow me (Muhammad). Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. (Q.3:31)

He premised his view on a statement of the prophet specifying the two 'eids of *'al-fitr and al-Adha* as the only two feasts for the Muslims.³²

His thought and of others like him is that since the Prophet never celebrated the birth of any of his predecessor Prophets, it makes celebration of his birth by any of his follower an innovation which is condemnable.

However, care must be taken in the interpretation of texts of *ahadith* that seem contradicting to one another. An example is on imitation of Jews and Christians which some texts of *ahadith* expressly condemned. One should not lose sight of some Jewish and Christian cultures adopted by Prophet and his companions.³³

A general and fundamental rule in the principles of Islamic jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) means that anything that belongs to the category of social transactions (*Mu'amalat*) as opposed to the prescribed religious worship (*'ibadat*) or creed (*'aqidah*) is governed by the general rule which states that "Everything is permissible except what is prohibited" by clear and explicit textual evidence of the Qur'an or authentic tradition, or if it contradicts definite objectives (*maqasid*) in shari'ah.³⁴ In other words, whatever is not prohibited by clear evidence is in fact permissible. What is prohibited for a Muslim to imitate in others is whatever contradicts the teachings of Islam, or in what is a distinctive religious worship (*'ibadah*), creed (*'aqidah*) or symbol of religious identity. If however such imitation is

purely in areas of *mu'amalat* such as science, technology, commerce, language, culture, education, agriculture, security, medicine, etc. there is no prohibition in this. If it is beneficial and promotes the objectives (*maqasid*) of Islam, such imitation is actually respected and encouraged irrespective of which culture (*'urf*) it emanates from, whether native or foreign, Muslim or non-Muslim.³⁵

Therefore, since there is no clear evidence prohibiting *mawlidin-nabiyy* either in the Qur'an or in the prophetic tradition, it is considered permissible in Islam. Many Islamic scholars have also debated the issue of innovation in the tradition and came to the conclusion that there are excellent innovation and innovation of misguidance. Imam Shafi'i categorised innovation into two: the praise worthy and the blameworthy. He explains that whatever conforms with the dictate of the prophet is praiseworthy and whatever contravenes it is blameworthy.

A very good example of praiseworthy innovation is *salat al-Tarawih* which was initiated by caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattab and confirmed to be innovation that is rewardable. The fact remains that, whatever that is good and which contributes to the development and wellbeing of a people should be encouraged as long as it does not adversely affect the teachings of Islam. *mawlidin-nabiyy* celebration is considered along this line.

Conclusion

This paper examines culture and its effects on Nigerian's unity despite its diverse cultural beliefs and religious practices. Pockets of clashes and crises have been identified by all to be political and on which efforts are ongoing to be permanently taken care of.

The acceptability of the celebration of *mawlidin-nabiyy* by different organisations across the country, has to a large extent, united the Muslims and cemented love for one another. Though opinions differ among scholars on the authenticity or otherwise of *mawlid* celebration, however the Qur'anic texts as well as prophetic traditions are brought to fore to establish the validity of its celebration.

The prominent opinion for its permissibility is that of Shaykh Suyyan Ath-Thawri who canceled that the doing of a thing upon which there is difference of opinion of scholars is permissible. However, refused to engage in the celebration cannot adversely affect one's faith.

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