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WOMEN'S *MAWLID* PERFORMANCES IN SANAA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF "POPULAR ISLAM"

Muslim women have often cultivated ritual activities that fall outside the framework of normative Islam as defined by elite male scholars, activities that are frequently characterized as "popular" Islam. Although it proves problematic to define "popular Islam" as a rigorous analytic category, it is important to recognize that different groups of Muslims (including the uneducated, the poor, rural populations, and women) have had differential ability to assert their religious practices as "correct" Islam. The idea of popular Islam has played an important role within Islamic tradition as scholars strove to stigmatize practices such as the *mawlid* (celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday) as customs of the unlettered masses. In contemporary Sanaa, Yemen, professional female *mawlid* chanters take different approaches to affirming the religious value of the *mawlid* celebration, one of which casts it as "folk Islam" in the context of a newly valorized national heritage.