

The Ideology of the Expected MahdÊ in Muslim History: The Case of the Sudandese Mahdiyya, 1881-1898

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Abstract

Several works have been devoted to the description of the various Mahdist movements in different parts of the Muslim world, but little attention has been paid to the discussion of the MahdÊ ideology in a wider context of Muslim history. The present article attempts to address this ideology from a theological perspective and examine its implementation with particular reference to the set of social and political factors that led to the outbreak of the Mahdist revolution in the Sudan towards the end of the 13th century Hijra (19th century A.D.). The article is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the ideology of the Expected MahdÊ in both Sunni and Shiite literature; the second examines the case of the Sudanese Mahdiyyah (1881-1898) as the most eminent opposition movement in the 19th century Muslim world that used the ideology of the Expected MahdÊ to mobilize the support of the Sudanese notables and masses, and challenge the yoke of the Ottoman administration in the country; and the third part highlights the distinctive features of the Sudanese Mahdiyya, and investigates its political legacy in the pre- and post-independence Sudan.

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Introduction

The idea of a MahdĒ or a saviour of humanity is not only peculiar to the Muslim belief, but it is shared by other religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism. This abstract idea has been given a political and religious dimension by Muslims who believe that the expected MahdĒ will fight the wrong, remedy the evils and establish a new world order based on the Islamic teachings of justice and virtue. The history of the MahdĒ-claimants begins with Muġammad b. al-ġanafġyya (d. 81/700), who was proclaimed as a MahdĒ by his KaysĒnĒ followers who denied his death and claimed that he was in hiding at Jabal al-Raġwa and he would one day return to champion the cause of his adherents. From 9th century onwards there have been many examples of MahdĒ claimants, who led religious movements in their own territories for the revival of Islam and restoration of their power, such as Muġammad ŃUbayd Allah (d. 323/934), the first FĒtimid Caliph, who came to power through manipulation of both Mahdist expectations and Shii sentiment in North Africa; Muġammad b. ŃAbdallah b. TĒmart (d. 525/1130) who guided the *MuwalġdĒn* reform movement against the MurĒbilĒn dynasty¹; IsmĒŃĒl al-ŒafawĒ (d. 931/1524) who carved out for himself a kingdom in Iran and Iraq from which the modern Persian state (Iran) has evolved² and Muġammad Aġmad b. ŃAbdallah (d. 1303/1885) who overthrew the Turco-Egyptian administration (1237-1299/1821-1881) in the Sudan, and established an indigenous territorial state, given the name of the Mahdist State (1299-1316/1881-1898).³

The Ideology of the Expected Mahdi in Muslim History

The term MahdĒ (divinely guided one) has come to denote an eschatological figure whose presence will usher in an era of justice

1 See Abu Bakr ibn Ali al-Baydhaq, *KitĒb AkhbĒr al-MahdĒ ibn Tumart*, 2nd ed., (Algiers: Mu'assasah al-Wataniyah lil-Kitab, 1986).

2 See Ismail A.B. Balogun, *The Life and Works of 'Uthman dan Fodio* (Lagos: Islamic Publications Bureau, 1975).

3 See P.M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1881-1898: A Study of Origins, Development and Overthrow*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958); Muġammad IbrĒhĒm AbĒ SalĒm, *Al-Khuġuma fĒ Mahdiyya al-SĒdĒn*, (Khartoum: Markaz AbĒ SalĒm lil al-DirĒsĒt, 2004).

and true belief prior to the end of time. The origin of the word cannot be traced back to the Qur'Ēn, where in fact it is never mentioned, but rather to a strictly honorific title applied to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the Rightly Guided Caliphs by the earliest Muslims.⁴ The term first appeared in its meaning of the divinely guided one in 66/686 when the ShiĒna revolted in Kufa against the leadership of the Umayyads, and their leader al-MukhtĒr b. ŒUbayd Allah al-ThaqafĒ and his KaysĒnĒ followers proclaimed MuĒammad b. Œanafiyya as the MahdĒ.⁵ This revolt was suppressed by the Umayyads and actually brought to an end by MuĒĒab b. Zubayr who defeated and eventually killed al-MukhtĒr in 68/687. Before the death of al-MukhtĒr, Ibn al-Œanafiyya declined the title and the cause, and died in 81/700 without achieving any significant success. But many of his adherents denied his death as reality, and argued that he was in hiding at Jabal al-RawĒa from where he would eventually return and fill the earth with justice and equity, as it had been filled with injustice and oppressions.⁶ Similar beliefs arose around Muhammad b. Hanfaiyya's son, AbĒ HĒshim (d. 98/716), MuĒammad b. ŒAbdullahi al-Nafs al-Zakiyya (d. 145/762), JaĒfar al-ŒĒdiq (d. 148/765) and numerous other ŒAlids.⁷

The concern of this article is not to prove who is the right Hidden *ImĒm*, but to emphasize that the denial of the *ImĒm*'s death has popularized a number of religious aspects of the ShiĒni theory of the *ImĒm*, such as the explicit designation of the *ImĒm* by God's command and determination (*naĒĒ*), and the concealment

4 Jan-Olaf Blichfeldt, *Early Mahdism: Politics and Religion in the Formative Period of Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), pp.1-13; Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim, *Sayyid Abd Al-Rahman al-MahdĒ: A Study of Neo-Mahdism in the Sudan, 1899-1956* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2004), pp.1-5; "Some Aspects of the Ideology of the Mahdiyya", *Sudan Notes and Records*, Vol. LX, 1979, pp.28-29; Robert S. Kramer, "Mahdi", in: *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol.3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.18.

5 Douglas S. Crow, "Islamic Messianism", in: *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol.9, (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1987), p.478.

6 A Hadith with an *isnad* go back to ŒAbdullahi b. MasĒĒd says: "The Messenger of God said, 'Even if only a single day of the earth were left, God would send a man from us who will fill it with justice as it had been filled with oppression.'" . See, *Sunan AbĒ Daud*, HadĒth no. 3736.

7 See Blichfeldt, *Early Mahdism*.

(*ghā'ibah*) and expected return (*rajaÑh*)⁸ of the MahdÊ.⁹ The concepts of *ghā'ibah* and *rajaÑh* of the expected MahdÊ at the appropriate time became two central beliefs in the ShiÑi doctrines, and helped the Shiites to endure under difficult circumstances and to hope for reform pending till the return of the MahdÊ. They looked forward to the promised events accompanying the emergence of the Hidden *ImÊm* who would adjust the present unbearable historical circumstances in favour of the oppressed who remained loyal to the *ImÊm*. The *ImÊm* would be advised by God to conceal himself to avoid the aggression of his enemies. The best example can be presented here is that of the Twelfth *ImÊm*, Mułammad al-×asan al-ÑAskarÊ, who went into occultation in the year 261/874, and according to his followers, he will continue to live in this state for as long as God deems it necessary; and then He will command him to reappear and take control of the world in order to restore justice and equity. They argue that during this period of concealment the Hidden *ImÊm* is not completely cut off from his followers but has spokesmen in the person of jurists who can act on his behalf and guide the Shiites in their religious matters.¹⁰

This kind of ideological understanding leads us to argue that the idea of the expected MahdÊ was developed from a simple notion of a leader who would bring Islamic justice to the oppressed

8 As Goldziher argues, "the idea of the return did not originate among ShiÑÊs. Judaeo-Christian influence probably contributed this belief to Islam. The Prophet Elias, who was carried off to heaven and will at the end of time reappear on earth to establish again the rule of righteousness, is the most likely prototype of the Hidden *ImÊms* who have been taken from earth, live unseen, and will one day reappear as MahdÊs, saviors of the world". See Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, Eng. trans. Andras and Ruth Hamori, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 192.

9 Abdulaziz Abdulhussein Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of Mahdi in Twelver Shiism*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), pp.9-11. The term messiansim is derived from *messiah* (anointed), which originally denoted a king whose reign was consecrated by a rite of anointment with oil. In the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), *massial* is always used in the reference to the actual king of Israel during the intertestamental period. However, the term was applied to restore the future king, who was expected to restore the kingdom of Israel and save the people from all evils. For details see: Helmer Ringgren, "Messianism", in: *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 9, pp.469-72.

10 Blichfeldt, *Early Mahdism*, pp.1-14.

into complex theories and ideas that were largely institutionalized by *ImĒm* JaŃfar al-SĒdiq (148/765) as a way to firmly establish the legitimacy of the Imamate and acknowledge the concealment of the Hidden *ImĒm* until his full return at the appropriate time. In their writings, the Twelvers highlight the features of the Hidden *ImĒm* as follows: firstly, he is from the descendants of the Prophet MuĀammad (PBUH) and possesses final authority in both the temporal and religious spheres. Secondly, he derives his authority by an explicit designation by the previous *ImĒm* and not through an elective system of succession. Thirdly, he has the ability to understand both outer (exoteric) and inner (esoteric) meaning of the Qur'Ēn by the virtue of the MuĀammadan light which is passed along to each succeeding *ImĒm*. Fourthly, he has the authority of interpreting the Qur'Ēn's inner meanings because he is divinely inspired, sinless and infallible. To the Shiites, the belief in these features "is not supplementary" but "is an integral part of the profession of faith, inseparable from the highest truths of religion."¹¹ In other words, the acknowledgment of the expected MahdĒ is the fourth cardinal article of the ShiŃi faith, after the affirmation of the unity of God, belief in Prophecy, and belief in the Day of Judgment. To support their belief, the ShiŃi theologians listed a number of traditions attributed to the Prophet MuĀammad (PBUH), such as: the MahdĒ will be of the Prophet's family, he will bear the Prophet's name, and his father will bear the Prophet's father's name;¹² he will appear when the world has reached its worst state of affairs; his reign will be a time of natural abundance¹³; he will spread justice, restore the faith, and defeat

11 Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, p.182.

12 AbĒ Bakr al-BazzĒr published in his *Musnad*, and at-TabarĒnĒ in his *al-Mu'jam al-KabĒr* and *al-Awsat* from Qurrah ibn Iyas, that he said, "The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, 'The earth will definitely be filled with tyranny and injustice, then when it is full of tyranny and injustice, Allah will send a man from my Ummah whose name is my name and whose father's name is my father's name. He will fill it with justice and equity, just as it was filled with tyranny and injustice. The sky will not hold back anything of its rain, and the earth will not store anything of its plants. He will remain among you seven, or eight or nine,' meaning years."

13 According to AbĒ SaŃĒd al-KhudarĒ, he "heard the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, saying, 'A man from my Ummah will come out speaking by my Sunnah. Allah, mighty and majestic is He, will send down the

enemies of Islam;¹⁴ and he will be generous and divide the wealth;¹⁵ and Jesus, after his descent from Heaven, will pray behind him.¹⁶

As Kramer argues, this ideology of the expected MahdĒ did not enjoy a similar recognition among Sunni Muslims who believe in consensus of religious scholars for authoritative decision-making. In general, “the Sunni notion of a MahdĒ came to represent more a restorer of faith than the ShiĒi incarnation of God, and one would be chosen for office rather than returning from hiding.”¹⁷ Two of the four fundamental collections of Sunni traditions, those of al-BukharĒ and al-Muslim, make no mention of the MahdĒ;¹⁸ preeminent theologian al-GhazĒlĒ (d. 505/1111) omits any discussion of the expected MahdĒ in his classic *ĪyĒ’ ŅulĒm al-DĒn* (Revivification of the Religious Sciences), alluding only to the Qur’Ēnic signs of the Hour (the Day of Judgment). At the same time, Sunni theologians accept the general belief in a Renewer, or Reformer (*mujaddid*), who appears every century in some part of the Muslim world and whose function as the reviver of the faith and the strength of the community partly parallels the role awarded to the MahdĒ.¹⁹ This Sunni sympathy seems to have

rain for him from the sky and the earth will bring out its blessing and the earth will be filled because of him with equity and justice as it had been filled with tyranny and injustice. He will rule over this Ummah seven years and he will dwell at the Bayt al-Maqdis’. ŅAbd al-Rahman Ibn KhaldĒn, *Muqaddimah*, (Beirut: Dar IhĒĒ’ al-ThurĒth al-ŅArabĒ, n.d), p.316.

- 14 A ×adĒth with an isnĒd going back to AbĒ SaŅĒĒ al-KhudarĒ says: “The Mahdi will come out at the end of my Ummah, and Allah will give him the rain to drink, and the land will produce its plants and he will give wealth free from defect, cattle will be plentiful, and the Ummah will be vast. He will live seven, or eight.”. *Ibid*.
- 15 A ×adĒth on the authority of JĒbir al-AnĒĒĒ and Abu Said al-KhudarĒ, spread in Madina probably in early MarwĒnid times, quoted the Prophet (PBUH) as stating that “at the end of my community there be a caliph who will pour the money without counting it”. See *Musnad Āmad*, HadĒth no. 10800.
- 16 For further details see: SaŅad MuĀammad ×asan, *Al-Mahdiyya fĒ al-IslĒm mudh Agdam al-ŅulĒr ĪatĒ al-Ōn*, (Cairo: DĒr al-KitĒb al-ŅArabĒ, 1373/1953).
- 17 MuĀammad ibn ŅŌshĒr, *TalĒĒĒt wa AnĒĒr fĒ al-Qur’Ēn wa al-Sunnah*, (Tunis: al-Sharikah al-Tunisiyya lil al-TawzĒŅ, 1985), pp.49-59, 109-150.
- 18 Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim and Ibrahim MuĀammad Zein, “TaĀawwur fikrat al-Mahdiyya fĒ al-ŌinĒŅa al-×adĒthiyya [The development of the Mahdist Ideology in ×adĒth Industry]”, *Islamiyat al-Ma’rifah*, Vol.1, No.4, 1996, p.21.
- 19 Crow, “Islamic Messianism”, p.479.

its roots in the message of the Prophet Muġammad (PBUH) and in his tradition that says: "At the beginning of every century Allah will send to this community who will renew [*man yudadid*] the religion." According to Sunni theologians, the Arabic phrase "*man yudadid*" does not mean a certain person, but means either one person or more persons. This enables them to argue that Muslims could have more than one *mujaddid* in any one age, and the phrase "at the beginning of every century" should not be taken as indicative of a cyclical pattern of *tajdĒd* on a strict hundred year basis. What the Sunni *ĤulamĒ'* understand from this *ĪĒdĒth* is that whenever necessity dictates, Allah inspires a person or persons who, through their lives and works, present the realities of belief and Islam to the people as they were meant to be, presented in a manner that accords with both the true spirit of revelation and the underlying needs of the age. The *mujaddid* in this sense will accomplish two extremely important things: Firstly, he re-reveals the Qur'Ēn to the people of his own time just as it was intended to be revealed, and indeed as it was revealed by the Prophet some fourteen hundred years ago; and secondly, he does so in a way that is accessible at the level of mind of the people in his own time, thus uncovering aspects of the Qur'Ēn that were hidden from the people of Makkah and Madinah in the 1st/7th century.

In contrast to this Sunni version, the Sufi scholars of the 7th/13th century, such as Ibn al-ĤArabĒ (638/1240), Ibn al-QusĒ (708/1308) and Ibn WĒĪil (697/1298), agreed with the *ImĒmi* doctrine about the identity of the MahdĒ and his concealment. It seems that this Sufi consensus had led Ibn Khaldun (808/1406) to argue that "most of our contemporary Sufis refer to the (expected) appearance of a man who will renew the Muslim law and the ordinance of the truth. They assume that his appearance will take place at some time near our own period. Some of them say that he will be one of the descendants of FĒĪimah."²⁰ For instance, in *al-FutĒĪĒt al-Makkiyya*, Ibn al-ĤArabĒ, described the expected MahdĒ as the Seal of the Saints, just as Muġammad had been the Seal of the Prophets.²¹ The MahdĒ would impose the *shariĤa* with

20 Ibn KhaldĒn, *Muqaddimah*, p.327.

21 *Ibid.*, p.324.

the sword and Jesus would be one of his *wazÊrs*. He would be infallible in his *IjtihÊd* (legal opinion) without relying on legal analogy, and the jurists of the schools of thought would be his opponents, while the Sufi saints would be his natural supporters. These views were further elaborated in the Sufi circles dependent on Ibn al-ÑArabÊ's thought and influenced by the 7th/13th century Muslims who began to believe that

.... at the end of time a man from the family of the Prophet will strengthen Islam and make justice triumph. Muslims will follow him, and he will gain domination over the Muslim realm. He will be called the MahdÊ. Following him, the Antichrist (DajÊl) will appear, together with all the subsequent signs of the Hour (the Day of Judgment), as established in the sound traditions of the *ŒaÊÊ* [authoritative collections of the Prophet's sayings recognized by the Sunnites].²²

This Sufi consensus gained considerable momentum in the middle of the 7th/13th century, when several Sunni scholars supported the *ImÊmÊ* belief that the Twelfth *ImÊm* was the expected MahdÊ. In 648/1250-1 the Syrian ShafiÑÊ traditionalist Mułammad b. YusÊf al-JandÊ al-QurahÊ composed a book on "*al-Bayan fÊ akhbÊr Êalib al-zmÊn*" in which he proved the MahdÊship of the Twelfth *ImÊm* relying solely on Sunni traditions. In the same year al-ShawkÊnÊ (d. 1250/1894) authored a book entitled "*al-TawliÊyÊ fÊmÊ TawÊtara fÊ al-Muntazar wa al-DajÊl wa al-MasÊÊ*" in which he discussed the issue of the expected MahdÊ, and the appearance of Antichrist and Jesus.

It seems that this wide spread of the idea of the expected MahdÊ came as a result of the rapid deterioration of socio-political and religious situation in the Muslim world, particularly after the destruction of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad by the Mongols in 656/1258, and the transfer of its seat to Cairo in 659/1260 under the patronage of the Mamluk sultans, who removed their Ayyubid masters from power and controlled the political scene in the region. This state of dissatisfaction generated a general tendency among Muslims that the time was ripe for the appearance of the expected MahdÊ who would fill the earth with equity and justice,

22 *Ibid.*, 311; Ibn KhaldÊn, *An Introduction to History: the Muqaddimah*, (trans. eds. by Franz Rosenthal and N.J. Dawood), (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1997), pp.257-58.

as it had been filled with oppression and tyranny. The same state of dissatisfaction repeated itself when the European colonial forces controlled the Muslim world and Muslims began to perceive European colonialism as a sign of the MahdĒ's appearance. Based on this perception three major *jihĒd* movements with Mahdist overtones were launched in West Africa, including that of Shehu ŃUthmĒn dan Fodio of Sokoto (1219/1804), Shaykh AĪmadu BarĒ of Masina (1234/1818) and al-Hajj ŃUmar Tal (1271/1854) of the Tukulor Sultanate.²³ Other MahdĒ claimants also rose in Egypt against both French occupation and corrupt Ottoman administration, and called for a return to the pristine purity of Islam, but they were suppressed by ruling authorities and their attempts ended in failure.²⁴

The Fulani *jihĒd* of ŃUthmĒn dan Fodio is prominent from the other movements mentioned by virtue of its literary output and later influence on the patterns of events in the Sudan. Shehu conveyed an indirect message to the Sudanese about the approaching time of the MahdĒ, and indicated that his followers would be the vanguard of the MahdĒ's cause. Accordingly, his son MuĪammad Bello wrote:

The Shehu sent me to all his followers in the east among the people of Zanfara, Katsina, Kano, Daura ... I conveyed to them his good tidings about the approaching appearance of the MahdĒ, that the Shehu's followers are his vanguard, and that this *jihĒd* will not end, by God's permission, until it gets the MahdĒ. They listened and welcomed the good news.²⁵

This passage leads us to argue that the influence of the Sokoto Sultanate on the rise of the Sudanese Mahdiyya was mainly intellectual due to the fact that the Mahdist beliefs were transmitted from the Fulani-land to the Sudan through the ambitious emigrants who would have liked to take key positions in the administration of

23 Robert S. Kramer, *An Annotated Translation of the Letter of Ahmad al-Azhari in Denunciation of the Sudanese Mahdi*, unpublished Master's Thesis, The centre for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Chicago, 1984, p.19.

24 For further details see, J. Spencer Trimingham, *A History of Islam in West Africa*, 2nd ed., (London, New York: The University of Glasgow, The Oxford University Press, 1962).

25 Muhammad Bello, *Infaq al-Maysur*, quoted in: Robert S. Kramer, *An Annotated Translation*, pp.4, 30.

the forthcoming Mahdist state in the Eastern Sudanic Belt. In one of his letters dispatched to followers, Muḥammad Bello instructed the concerned follower to send troops into Wadai and Darfur to seek news of the Maḥdī, since “our Sheikh informed us that his community will emigrate to these regions to meet the Maḥdī and pay homage to him.”²⁶ These good tidings of Shehu and his son Muḥammad Bello encouraged people to emigrate towards the Nile in anticipation of the event. As Kramer argues, the best example is that of ḤAbdullah al-TaḤshī (later the Khalīfah ḤAbdullahi), whose family had emigrated from Wadai to DĒr TaḤsha in Darfur, where he settled and married into indigenous dignitaries. Having been spared by al-Zubayr Pasha after falling captive in his hands, ḤAbdullahi wrote to him telling him about a vision in which he had seen that al-Zubayr was *al-Maḥdī al-Muntazar*.²⁷ Al-Zubayr rebuffed this claim, but this did not apparently drive him to despair. In his first meeting with Muḥammad AĪmad (al-Maḥdī) he declared that he had seen in him signs of the Expected Maḥdī. Despite the question of accuracy, these accounts reflect “a prevalent mood of expectation that imbued the country”,²⁸ whereupon the people complained bitterly about their grievances and assumed that these grievances would be settled at the hands of the Expected Maḥdī, who would rid the world of all injustice and establish the rule of peace and righteousness.

The Outbreak of the Madhist Revolution in the Sudan

Most Westerners learn about the Mahdist revolution in the Sudan as being staged against the western Christian rulers, probably because of the events leading to the death of a British general, Charles George Gordon, who was killed in Khartoum in 1303/1885 after a year-long siege by the Maḥdī’s forces. It is true that the Maḥdī moved against western influences; but what most people miss is that his movement was originally aimed against the ostensible Ottoman rulers of the time. The Maḥdī’s rationale of

26 Ibid., p.31.

27 NaḤum Shuqayr, *Jughrāfiyat wa Tārikh al-Sudān*, 2nd ed., (Beirut: Dar al-ThaqĒfa, 1967), p.683.

28 Muhammad Mahmoud, “Sufism and Islamism in the Sudan”, in: David Weterlund and Eva Evers Rosander, eds. *African Islam and Islam in Africa: Encounters between Sufis and Islamists*, (London: Hurst & Company, 1997), p.173.

declaring *jihâd* against the Ottoman administration in the Sudan was that the country's leaders were no longer "real" Muslims, and hence no longer had any right to rule. The Westerners were drawn into this conflict partly because they were accused of supporting the "apostate leaders" in their deliberate effort to undermine and eventually destroy the Muslim identity.

Thus the outbreak of the Mahdist revolution in the 19th century Sudan was a result of various internal and external factors that shaped the political landscape in the country, and facilitated the spread of Mahdist tendencies. At the apex of these internal factors one can point out the corrupt administration of the Turkish rulers, who were accused of brutality and injustice, and their religious conviction was seriously contested by the Sudanese. Throughout the sixty years of their administration they took several measures that aroused the opposition of powerful religious and tribal groups against their administration, and later, led them to unite under the banner of the Expected Mahdî, who would release them from Turkish oppression and tyranny. In 1291/1874 for example, the conquest of Darfur by the Turks and their Sudanese clients led to resistance not only from the Kayra ruling family, but more importantly from the Baqqâra nomads of southern Darfur, who realized that they had exchanged the light and intermittent suzerainty of Sultan Ibrâhîm for a detested and tax-collecting bureaucracy.²⁹

Another internal factor that flamed the opposition against the Turco-Egyptian administration was related to the efforts by Khedive Ismâîl to establish an effective administration over the non-Muslim southern Sudan, predominately controlled by the riverian traders. The Khedive's endeavour to suppress the slave trade also intensified the resistance of these traders, and provoked the opposition of other two main groups. The first group included certain nomadic tribes, such as the Baqqâra of Southern Kordofan-Darfur and the Kabâbbîsh, who used to help the slave traders in transporting slave caravans through tribal lands up to the northern Sudanese borders with Egypt. The second group was composed of the riverian farmers who were affected by the suppression of slave

29 See R. S. O'Fahey, *State and Society in Dār Fūr* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1980).

trade that caused a sharp rise in the prices of domestic and agricultural workers.³⁰

The third factor was associated with the appointment of religious scholars in the administration of the governmental mosques and judicial institutions at the expense of traditional religious leaders who subsequently voiced their rivalry against the Turco-Egyptians agitating against the loss of a wide range of their judicial, teaching and arbitration functions in the pre-colonial Sudanese kingdoms. The nomination of a large number European Christians in key posts over a vast majority of Muslims also triggered the anger of this group and led it to lose its faith in the Ottoman administration and subscribe to the ideology of the Expected Mahdî.³¹

This edgy political situation encouraged the discontented Sudanese to think loudly about the time of the Expected Mahdî, who would resolve their grievances. On this issue YusËf MËkhË'Ël tells us how the people of Kordofan in western Sudan complained bitterly about their grievances and waited for the deliverance at the hands of a Mahdî. Even the children of al-Ubayyid (capital of Kordofan province) played "Mahdists versus Turks".³² These accounts reveal how the idea of the Expected Mahdî had spread widely among the Sudanese and proved to be highly potent ideology in mobilizing and directing their energies against the Turco-Egyptian regime on the one hand and towards constructing a salvation history on the other.

In this context, a Sufi Shaykh with a reputation for piety and integrity, proclaimed himself to be the Expected Mahdî. This man was Mu'ammad ibn ÑAbdullahi (1844-1885) who had originally been a disciple in the SannËniyya Order, following the grandson of al-Shaykh A'ammad al-Ûayyib al-BashËr, who introduced the SannËniyya in the Sudan. As John Voll wrote:

30 P.M. Holt & M.W. Daly, *A History of the Sudan from the Coming of Islam to the Present Day*, 4th edn. (London and New York: Longman, 1989), p.88.

31 *Ibid.*, pp.88-89.

32 YusËf MikhË'Ël, *MuzakkirËt YusËf MikhË'Ël Ñan al-Turkiyya wa Mahdiyya wa al-ukm al-ThunË'Ë fË al-SËdËn*, ed. Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk, (Omdurman: Markaz ÑAbd al-KarËm MËrghanË al-ThaqËfË, 2004), pp.44-45.

Muhammad Ahmad was inspired by a vision of a truly Islamic society and was deeply offended by what he felt was the infidelity of the [Turco-] Egyptian rulers. As he grew older, he became convinced that his mission was to purify the Sudan. He travelled about in the central and western parts of the country, where he won many supporters. This support and the visions confirmed in him the conviction that he was the MahdĒ.³³

In MuĀarram 1299/June 1881 he dispatched letters from the Island of AbĒ in the White Nile, informing the notables of the Sudan that he was the Expected MahdĒ. He argued that his MahdĒship was declared in a prophetic assembly attended by the Prophet (PBUH), the four Guided Caliphs, the Prophet al-Khilir, and princes of the faith, where the Prophet (PBUH) informed him that he was the Expected MahdĒ. He then supported his claim by quoting Ibn al-ĀArabĒ who says in his commentary on the Qur'Ēn that "the knowledge of the MahdĒ and that Hour none knowth but Allah Most High",³⁴ emphasizing that the nomination of the MahdĒ lies outside the scope of human capacity. The previous MahdĒ-claimants were illegitimate due to the assumption of AĪmad b. IdrĒs that the MahdĒ will come forth from a place that nobody knows and in a condition which the people will refuse to acknowledge.³⁵ In this sense MuĀammad AĪmad legitimized his claim and declared *jihĒd* against the "infidel Turkish rulers" in the Sudan and for the sake of liberating the Muslim world from European colonial hegemony. His call for *jihĒd* attracted various socio-political and religious groups, which had a common interest in overthrowing the Turco-Egyptian regime. The Sudan itself was divided into two abodes: the abode of Islam (*dĒr al-IslĒm*) and that of war (*dĒr al-Āarb*), and the MahdĒ's followers were urged to cease the payment of taxes and wage *jihĒd* against their rivals. The responses to the MahdĒ's call gradually transformed into a nationwide revolution that led to the overthrow of the Turco-Egyptian administration, and the establishment of the Mahdist state in 1303/1885. Khartoum was deserted and branded as the capital of

33 John Obert Voll & Sarah Potts Voll, *The Sudan: Unity and Diversity in a Multicultural State* (London: Westview Press, 1985), p.40.

34 "Letter from the Mahdi to his beloved ones in faith" in: Muhammad Ibrahim Abu Salim, ed., *al-ŌthĒr al-KĒmila lil ImĒm al-MahdĒ*, (Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1990), Vol.1, pp.91-92.

35 *Ibid.*

the “infidels” and the Mahdists set up the headquarters of their new Mahdist government in Omdurman on the western bank of the Nile.

The Mahdî, as a head of the state and the sole legitimate successor of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), advocated a literal return to the idealist model of the first Islamic State in Madinah. Consequently, he named his senior military officers after the four Rightly Guided Caliphs, appointed a group of judges to hear civil, criminal and personal cases according to the Qur’ân, the Sunna and Mahdist proclamations, and established a treasury, known as *bayt al-m’l*, to manage state revenues (i.e., booty, zakât, etc.). The measures marked the end of the Turco-Egyptian administration and laid the foundations of the Mahdist social and political order.

The above discussion underlines that the comparative approach of Max Weber’s conceptual model of charismatic leadership can be used as an analytical framework to discuss certain aspects of the Sudanese Mahdiyya.³⁶ These aspects include the relationship between the Mahdî’s formative experiences and his subsequent behaviour that proposed him a revolutionary leader; the interaction between his religio-political message and the crisis that was facing the Sudanese society; and the marginality of the Mahdî’s adherents in the pre-Mahdist process of decision-making and how it motivated them to lead the struggle against their Turkish opponents and their clients. With emphasis on these aspects, one may easily observe the factors that contributed to the Mahdî’s success during the revolutionary period, and understand how the Mahdî’s early death had undermined the power of his successor, the Khalîfa ‘Abdullahi, to comprehensively transform the spiritual and political Mahdist mission into action.

The Global Mission of the Mahdiyya

Before examining the foreign policy of the Mahdist State, it is advisable to first highlight that the Mahdist revolution had occurred in a most crucial era in world history, where the Black Continent (Africa) was about to be divided among European

36 Richard H. Dekmejian and Margaret J. Wyszomirski, “Charismatic Leadership in Islam: The Mahdi of the Sudan”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 14/2, March 1972, pp.193-214.

imperial forces. Portuguese annexed huge domain of Angola and Mozambique; the Italians took over Somali-land and Eritrea on the Red Sea and later conquered Ethiopia; the German established colonies in East Africa, and in the Cameroon and Togo on the west coast, along with a desert area that came to be known as German Southwest Africa; and the French controlled most of West Africa, from Algeria across the Sahara and the French Sudan (Senegal and Mali) to various points on the Guinea coast. The ultimate plan of the French was to establish a solid French belt across Africa from Dakar to the Gulf of Aden, while their British rivals would like to set up an African-British colony from Cairo to Cape Town.

These imperialist scenarios seem to have been misinterpreted as signs for the appearance of the Expected Mahdî and the Mahdî himself directed his attention towards the assurance of his followers that he would pray in Egypt, Damascus, Constantinople and Makkah. After the liberation of Makkah “the world would enter a Mahdist era of complete justice and peaceful harmony, when wolves would play with sheep and children would play with scorpions”.³⁷ Warning letters were dispatched to the Khedive Tuafîq of Egypt, Queen Victoria of Great Britain and King Yohannes IV of Ethiopia in order to show their submission to the leadership of the Mahdist State. In his warning letter to King Yohannes, for example, the Mahdî asserts that Islam had not fulfilled its universal mission because

... religion fell into the hands of the rulers of the earth such the Turks ... who replaced it by infidelity (*kufî*). They annulled the laws of the Merciful and revived the ways of Satan after their own inclinations. When Allah determined to cut short such a state of things, he called me forth as Mahdî ... Allah has manifested His goodness to you in causing you to be present at this age of prophecy in which we have appeared as a successor to our Prophet Muhammad. If you become a Muslim you be get benefit of the two worlds ... If not ... you will undoubtedly fall into our hands, as we promised the possession of the all earth, and Allah will not change His promise.³⁸

The Mahdî's unexpected death before achieving these eschatological promises put his successor, the Khalîfa ÑAbdullah,

37 Shuqayr, *Jughrāfiyat wa Tārikh al-Sudān*, p.975.

38 “Letter from the Mahdi to Yohannes, Emperor of Abyssinia” in: Abu Salim, *al-ŌthĒr al-KĒmila.*, Vol. 6, 1992, p.235.

in a real political dilemma. Particularly, when he realized that it was mandatory for him to deal with the external threat caused by the clash of European imperialism over his territories, and to translate the eschatological expectations of the Mahdî into action. Influenced by these two factors the Khalîfa entered a series of wars that had isolated the Sudan, alienated its people and exposed them to a permanent state of wars against Egypt, Ethiopia and finally Britain. These wars undermined the economic and political institutions of the Mahdist state, and eventually paved the way for the European penetration into the region. In 1312/1894 the Italian occupied Kassala in eastern Sudan, strengthening their influence in Ethiopia and Eritrea. As a consequence of the fall of Kassala, the Khalîfa called for an urgent meeting for his military council in Omdurman. The meeting substantiated him to declare *jihâd* against the Italian in Kassala, and send military reinforcements to his northern borders with Egypt. "At 3 O'clock on the morning of 13 March 1896 Kitchener received a telegram informing him that the British government authorized an advance by the Egyptian army to ÑAkÉsha in the Mahdist territory." ³⁹ By this move the British attempted to give their Italian allies an upper hand in the region and weaken the French influence in Ethiopia and the Red Sea. The French reaction resulted in the support of the Ethiopians in their wars against the Italians, who were terribly defeated at the battle of Adowa in 1314/1896. This success led Menelik of Ethiopia to contact the Khalîfa in Omdurman, asking for a political alliance against the British and the Italian. The records of the public treasury of the Mahdist State show that in May-June 1897/1315 an Ethiopian delegation landed in Omdurman and was well received by the Mahdist dignitaries. ⁴⁰ YusËf MËkhÉ'Ël said that the head of the Ethiopian mission had provided the Khalîfa with a French flag and requested him to "raise it on the frontiers of his kingdom for the sake of being an independent king and enjoy the French protection."⁴¹ The Khalîfa seems to have been

39 Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, p.204.

40 Ahmad Ibrahim Abushouk & Anders Bjorkelo, eds. trans., *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), pp.47-48, 85.

41 MËkhÉ'Ël, *MuzakkirÉt YusËf MikhÉÉ'l*, pp.193-94.

oblivious of the scale of threat surrounding his state. Therefore, in September 1896/1314 he wrote to his Ethiopian counterpart:

As regards your desire for the conclusion of peace between us and you, be it known unto you that there is no incentive to any European to come to our Islamic territories for the profession of buying and selling or on the pretext of travelling. There is only war between us and them. If you are thus and you forbid all Europeans to enter your country, except in war, so that there is no connection between you and them, as it with us, on this condition peace may be concluded between us and you.⁴²

This passage illustrates the Khalîfa's short-sighted policy, and his blurred understanding of how to deal with the scenarios of European imperialism in the region. His rejection to the Ethiopian invitation to some extent facilitated the destruction of the Mahdist forces at the battle of Kararî (Omdurman) on 2nd September 1898. Sanderson accurately describes the battle of Kararî as "a triumph of technology over heroism: the *AnîÊr* were martyred in thousands as they repeatedly strove, with superb courage and devotion, to pierce Kitchener's lethal curtain of musketry and fight at close quarters."⁴³ The Mahdî's tomb and grave were later destroyed by the invading forces, and a year later the Khalîfa was hunted down and killed. The two first decades that followed the overthrow of the Mahdist regime witnessed a series of political and military measures that were carved out to eradicate all the signs of the Mahdiyya in the Sudan.

Conclusion

The above discussion emphasizes that the idea of the Expected Mahdî had functioned as a potent ideology that directed the energies of the Sudanese Mahdists towards the overthrow of the Turco-Egyptian administration in 1303/1885, and aspired them to establish a territorial Mahdist State. However, the eschatological promises of the Mahdiyya generated a real political challenge to the Mahdî's successor, who failed to understand the external pressure caused by the clash of imperialism in the region, and

42 Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, p. 209.

43 G.N. Sanderson, "The Mahdist Under Khalifa Abdallah, 1885-1898", *The Cambridge History of Africa*, Vol.6, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p.640.

entered in a series of unsuccessful wars that largely contributed to the breakdown of the Mahdist State in 1316/1898. It is true that the Anglo-Egyptian invasion forces had succeeded in destroying the Mahdist institutions, but the spirit of the Mahdiyyah remained alive in the hearts and minds of the Mahdî's followers. The evident feature of this legacy manifested itself in the establishment of the AnîÊr religious movement under the leadership of the Mahdî's posthumous son, ÑAbd al-Raïman (1885-1959), and the Umma Party in 1945 under his political and religious patronage. A patron-client relationship was established between the leadership of the AnîÊr and the Umma Party, where the party derives its chief support from the former Mahdist strongholds in Kordofan, Darfur and the White Nile states, and the AnîÊr entertain the idea of "the puritanical reestablishment of the Mahdiyya" and regard "themselves as purer and more representative of true Islam" than other socio-political groups in the Sudan. They consider their political struggle as part of their religious commitment, and the political manifesto of their Umma Party as a blueprint for the establishment of a modern Islamic state in the Sudan.⁴⁴

44 Warburg, Gabriel, "AnîÊr", in: *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol.1, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp.92-94.