The Formation of the Sudanese Mahdist State

Islam in Africa

Brill's *Islam in Africa* is designed to present the results of scholarly research into the many aspects of the history and present-day features of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa. The series will take up issues of religious and intellectual traditions, social significance and organization, and other aspects of the Islamic presence in Africa. It includes monographs, collaborative volumes and reference works by researchers from all relevant disciplines.

Editors
John Hunwick
Rüdiger Seesemann
Knut Vikør

VOLUME 11

The Formation of the Sudanese Mahdist State

Ceremony and Symbols of Authority: 1882–1898

By

Kim Searcy

BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON
2011

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Searcy, Kim.
The formation of the Sudanese Mahdist state : ceremony and symbols of authority : 1882–1898 by Kim Searcy.
p. cm. — (Islam in africa)
This book is the first analysis of the Sudanese Mahdiyya from a socio-political perspective that treats how relationships of authority were enunciated through symbol and ceremony. The book focuses on how the Mahdi and his second-in-command and ultimate successor, the Khalifa Abdallahi, used symbols, ceremony and ritual to articulate their power, authority and legitimacy first within the context of resistance to the imperial Turco-Egyptian forces that had been occupying the Nilotic Sudan since 1821, and then within the context of establishing an Islamic state. This study examines five key elements from a historical perspective: the importance of Islamic mysticism as manifested in Sufi brotherhoods in the articulation of power in the Sudan; ceremony as handmaids of power and legitimacy; charismatic leadership; the routinization of charisma and the formation of a religious state purportedly based upon the first Islamic community in the seventh century C.E.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-90-04-18599-9 (hardback : alk. paper) 1. Sudan—History—1862–1899. 2. Islamic renewal—Sudan. 3. Islam and politics—Sudan. I. Title.
DT156.5.S43 2010
962.4'03—dc22

2010041727

ISSN 1570-3754
ISBN 978 90 04 18599 9

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I appreciate all who have provided me with the support to complete this project. Many have contributed to this work in order for it to come to fruition. Among them are Suzanne Stetkevych and John Hanson, Zouhair al-Ghazzal who were very helpful and encouraging. I would especially like to thank my mother Phyllis Searcy, whose support was invaluable to the completion of this project. Finally, I would like to thank Almighty God.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout world history, religion and politics have been inextricably intertwined. The separation of church and state, a Western concept that achieved preeminence during the age of Enlightenment, was primarily inspired by the ethical thought of the Greek philosophers.[1] According to this concept, politics is the utilization of power in a region, territory, or society—especially the power to govern, to decide who controls the institutions of society and on what terms. From the perspective of those who have embraced the concept of church-state bifurcation, this power to govern has no relation to religion.

Historians such as Montgomery Watt contend that those who hold this view are misguided. Despite Western claims of a separation of politics and religion, when men are prepared to die for a cause they support, the two are in fact linked. There must be some deep driving force that propels people to this extreme position, and this force is usually supplied by religion.[2]

One reason for the inevitable relationship between the realms of religion and politics lies in the simple reality that power is not monolithic. Power in politics is always a compound of force, influence, and authority. Political power requires meaningful purpose and vision to be accepted as authority. People within or from beyond the boundaries of a political system will subvert, disobey, and resist force if they believe that a political system lacks, or threatens, a vision of meaning or purpose. In certain classical traditions in the West, a specific kind of ideal intelligence, "wisdom," is seen as a primary factor for conferring legitimacy on political governance. The ideal was governance by a philosopher-king. This dual role has always been awkward because there is, inevitably, an unequal balance between the use of wisdom and force.[3] Wisdom may guide the mind and force may affect the body, but seldom do wisdom and force—alone or together—fundamentally

---

[1] Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 25.

[2] W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968), 1.

[3] *Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. "Religion and Politics."

shape the heart or the will. For authority to be given legitimacy, qualities of commitment beyond the powers of the human mind and body must be involved. Wisdom becomes decisive authority only when it is transformed from philosophy into religion.

In most cultures and throughout most of human history, religion is the guarantor of legitimacy, and politics is the custodian of temporal authority. This link between politics and religion is made starkly manifest in Islam. The word *dīn*, which has often been translated as religion, and *dawla* (state), are conjoined within the meaning of Islam. Islam encompasses the spiritual and the political, the private and the public domains. To address Islam in terms of a church and state dichotomy is to divide Islam.

This book examines the link between religion and politics in Islam through an analysis of the Sudanese Mahdiyya, specifically the ways in which the Mahdiyya's leaders employed religious symbols and ritual in order to shape, legitimate, renew, and inform their society. The study of the relationship between ritual, symbols, and political authority is not a novel one. European historians have long examined how ritual articulates power and authority, primarily directing their analysis to the context of ancient, medieval, and early modern European societies. Historians such as Paula Sanders and Roy Mottahadeh, who deviated from this European model and explored political authority and power within the context of Muslim polities, have done so in relation to established Muslim states, such as the Fāṭimid dynasty (969–1171) that ruled Egypt and regions of the Maghrib and the Levant, and the Būyid dynasty (934–1062) of western Iran, Iraq, and Mesopotamia.

This study is the first treatment of the Sudanese Mahdiyya from a sociopolitical perspective that analyzes the way relationships of authority were articulated through ceremony and symbol. The Mahdiyya began as a revolt and ultimately culminated in the establishment of a state. As a consequence, the book analyzes the evolution of the political culture of a movement that became a body politic. A core concern of this study is the insignias and symbols of the Mahdists: how did they imbue these with a meaning that was uniquely Mahdist and Sudanese. The Mahdists intended their message to be a universal one, but invested their symbols and ceremonies with meanings that could be understood only by those conversant in Sudanese religious lore. It was primarily through the use of symbols and ceremonies appropriated from the Sufi brotherhoods of mystical Islam and two Sudanese

Islamic polities—the Funj and Fūr sultanates—that the Mahdists articulated their claims to authority.

The Mahdist period (1881–98), from its very establishment, has received considerable attention. This is, perhaps, due to its timing: it began as an insurrection just as the European powers made their colonial penetration into Africa. In addition, it was rare for an indigenous movement to be militarily successful against a much more powerful foe.

Historians have largely focused on the events leading up to the formation and demise of the theocratic state of the Mahdists. These historians have a wealth of primary material to draw upon, as a great many of the proclamations, teachings, sermons, and judgments of the Mahdī are extant. These documents have been compiled into seven volumes and published by the contemporary Sudanese historian, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm, under the title *al-Āthār al-kāmila li-l-Imām al-Mahdī*. Abū Salīm also published an earlier one-volume version of this text entitled, *Manshūrāt al-Mahdī*. Ismāʿīl ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Kurdufānī, deemed to be the official Mahdist chronicler, wrote two important historical texts on the Mahdiyya. His first treatment, *Kitāb saʿādat al-mustahdī bi-sīrat al-Mahdī*, deals with the early period of the Mahdiyya from a chronological perspective. His second text, *al-Ṭirāz al-manqūsh bi-bushrā qatl Yuḥanna malik al-Ḥubūsh*, treats the military confrontations between the Mahdist state and Ethiopia, again from a purely chronological point of view.

One of the most important sources is Naʿūm Shuqayr's work treating the history and geography of the Sudan, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān al-qadīm wa-l-ḥadīth wa-jughrafiyyatuhu*. Shuqayr worked for the Turco-Egyptian intelligence department from 1890 to 1898, and as a consequence his treatment of the Mahdiyya is somewhat biased. Nonetheless, this work, which was first published in 1903, contains primary textual material from intelligence reports, eyewitness accounts, and personal interviews concerning the Mahdiyya.

The European perspective of the Mahdiyya is brought to the fore in the writings of European prisoners and British military intelligence reports. Two of the most well-known captives of the Mahdiyya were Rudolf Slatin and Father Joseph Ohrwalder. Slatin, an Austrian soldier who became governor-general of Darfur in 1881, surrendered to the Mahdists in 1883. His memoir on the Mahdiyya, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, was published in 1896 shortly after his escape from the

Mahdists. Father Joseph Ohrwalder, a Catholic priest, wrote *Ten Years' Captivity in the Mahdist Camp*; this was translated and published in 1892.

Sir Reginald Wingate, a British military intelligence officer, translated the memoirs of Slatin and Ohrwalder from the original German into English. Wingate, who ultimately served as director of military intelligence during the British campaigns to reconquer the Sudan from 1896 to 1898, also wrote a book detailing the rise of the Mahdī and the early stages of the Mahdiyya (*Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*, published in 1891). These accounts are unquestionably biased against the Mahdists, who were essentially portrayed as a fanatical mob manipulated by corrupt and cruel leaders. Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi, the Mahdī's successor, received the brunt of this polemical blow, delivered primarily by Slatin, who depicted the Khalīfa as a man solely governed by his personal quest for worldly power. Despite the anti-Mahdist tone of these accounts, they provide useful information, as the authors witnessed the early stages of the revolt and subsequent state formation. In addition to these accounts, there are other anti-Mahdist European works written by men captured by the Mahdists' forces. For example, the German merchant Charles Neufeld was taken prisoner in 1887, and spent twelve years in captivity. Upon his release he wrote about his time as a captive and the Mahdist state during his imprisonment. Neufeld's account, *A Prisoner of the Khaleefa: Twelve Years' Captivity at Omdurman* (published in 1899), is important because he was an eyewitness to the development of the Mahdist administration in Omdurman.

The followers of the Mahdiyya were known as Anṣār al-Mahdī (the Mahdī's helpers). Some of these Anṣār composed memoirs that provide a useful counter to those of the European chroniclers. *Taʾrīkh ḥāyatī*, written by Bābikr Bedrī, an early adherent of the Mahdiyya, is an autobiography that paints a detailed portrait of the social and economic conditions of the Mahdist state, in addition to treating the religious aspects of the Mahdiyya. The memoir of Yūsuf Mikhāʾīl, a Sudanese Copt who joined the Mahdiyya in 1883, and who worked in the public treasury and served as the commander of the Coptic standard of the Mahdist army at the battle of Kararī, provides useful information concerning the administration of state policy during its formation. His memoirs were published in 1934 under the title *Mudhakkirāt Yūsuf Mikhāʾīl ʿan awākhir al-ʿahd al-Turkī wa-l-Mahdiyya bi-l-Sūdān*. The published memoirs of ʿUthmān Diqna, the leader of the Mahdists'

forces in the eastern Sudan, relates his military battles and provides information on a number of important personalities of the period.

However, it was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that scholars began to extensively use the large amount of published and unpublished primary textual material on the Mahdiyya to present a chronological account of the major political events as well as the structure of the state governed by the Mahdī and his second-in-command, Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi. These historians have approached the Mahdiyya with a variety of analytical methods. The Sudanese scholar ʿAbdallāh ʿAlī Ibrāhīm treated the Mahdī's ideological battles with the religious scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*). Muḥammad Saʿīd al-Qaddāl, also a Sudanese historian, conducted a study on the economic history of the Mahdist state. Robert Kramer, an American, is the most recent scholar to treat the Mahdist state; in his dissertation he analyzed the social and political structure in the capital, Omdurman. The most thorough of these historical works is that of the British Arabist, P. M. Holt, who wrote *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*. Holt's work, published in 1958, was the first history of the Mahdiyya to engage in an analysis of the political and administrative history of the movement and subsequent state using primarily Arabic sources. Holt, however, gives only a cursory glance at the relationship of ritual and symbol to the articulation of power and authority. The work that comes closest to exploring ritual and symbols of authority during the Mahdiyya is Abū Salīm's *al-Adawāt al-ḥukm wa-l–wilāya fī-l-Sūdān*. In this study, Abū Salīm describes the various accoutrements of power used by Sudanese rulers and religious leaders. But his work offers no analysis on the relationship between these accoutrements and the sociopolitical forces implicit within these symbols of power.

This book, unlike other treatments of the Mahdiyya, uses primary textual material to explore the formation of the theocratic state within the context of an analysis of the myriad ways in which the leaders of the Mahdiyya articulated their claims to authority using symbols, insignia, ritual, and ceremony. The study is concerned with the question of how these men utilized religious ritual to shape the constellation of interests that produced constructs of such pervasive power.

The first chapter offers an overview of the political and religious history of the Sudan leading up to the Mahdiyya. Chapter 2 traces the specific symbols, ceremonies and rituals employed by the Mahdists and places them squarely within the Prophetic and Sudanese Islamic tradition in order to illustrate how the use of these symbols resonated

within the social and religious consciousness of the populace, which, in turn affirmed the Mahdī's legitimacy.

Chapter 3 analyzes the concept of charismatic authority in relation to the Mahdī. The fourth chapter continues this discussion on personal authority and political legitimacy within the context of the reign of the Mahdī's successor, Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi. The central question in these two chapters is what distinguished the reigns of the Mahdī and the Khalīfa, and the ways each man articulated his claims to political and religious authority. In chapter 5, I address the formation of the Mahdist state. The institutions of state, specifically the treasury and the courts of law, are given close attention. The study will conclude with a discussion concerning the continuing relevancy of the symbols of authority in post-Mahdiyya Sudan.

The transliterations in this study adhere to that of the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (3rd edition) for standard Arabic proper names and terms. For Sudanese and African names, *Arabic Literature in Africa*, vol. 1: *The Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900*, is used. The standard English for proper names with an English form (e.g., Khartoum) will be used. All translations from the Arabic are my own, unless otherwise noted. Generally, common era dates are given; where two dates are presented, these appear as the Islamic Hijri date (AH), followed by the common era date.

CHAPTER ONE

ISLAM IN THE SUDAN

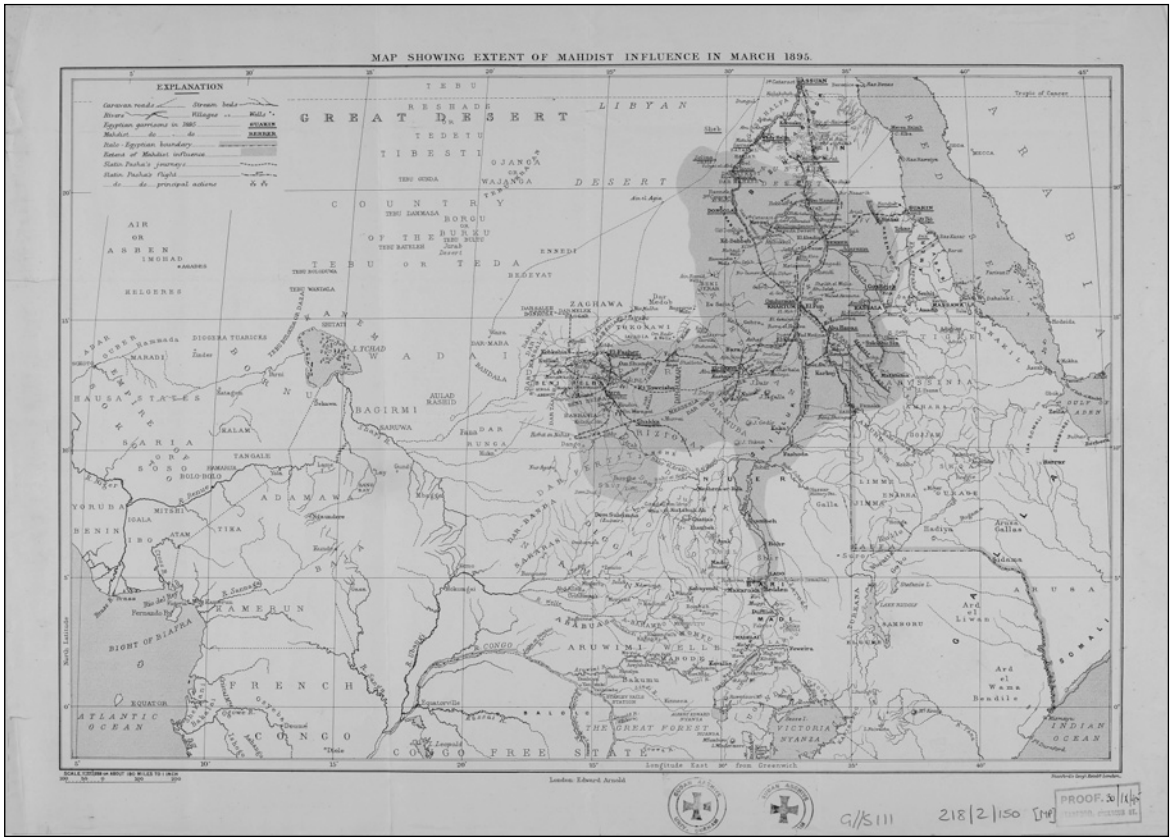
A Brief Geographical Introduction

Arab chroniclers writing before the sixteenth century designated the broad stretch of territory of sub-Saharan Africa from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea as *bilād al-Sūdān*, the land of the Blacks. Thus, the western Sudan included the lands to the south of the Sahara and north of the forest belt of modern West Africa; the central Sudan included the basin of Lake Chad; and the eastern Sudan included the modern-day Republic of the Sudan. This broad geographical designation was adopted by pre-colonial European travelers to the African continent and continues to be used to describe this great belt of territory. The remainder of this book will refer to the area that corresponds to the contemporary Republic of the Sudan as the Nilotic Sudan or as simply the Sudan. The territories extending from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea will be referred to as the geographical Sudan.

Prior to the Egyptian occupation in the nineteenth century, the Nilotic Sudan was divided along linguistic, religious, and cultural boundaries. From the first cataract of the Nile, south of Aswan, to the sixth cataract, north of the intersection of the Blue Nile and the White Nile, was the region known as Nubia, *bilād al-Nūba*. South of Nubia was the Funj Sultanate located on the Blue Nile. To the west of the Funj Sultanate lay the Sultanate of Darfur. These regions were greatly influenced, due to their geographical location, by the cultures of Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula. Islam—undoubtedly the most important cultural influence—arrived from these two areas and became firmly established in the Sudan.

The Arrival of Islam

The niche that Islam carved for itself in the Nilotic Sudan involved a gradual process that began with the Arab conquest of Egypt in 641. When Alexandria, the last stronghold of Byzantium in Egypt, fell in



Map showing extent of Mahdist influence in March 1895. Reproduced by permission of Durham University Library, SAD 218/2/150[MP].

the latter half of 641, the Muslim general ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ began sending military expeditions into Nubia. At this time, Nubia consisted of two Christian kingdoms: Nubia and ʿAlwa. The kingdom of Nubia extended from the first cataract to the fourth cataract and its capital, known as Dongola al-ʿAjūz ("old Dongola"), was located on the upper Nile between the third and fourth cataracts. ʿAlwa's borders ran from the fourth cataract to the upper reaches of the island of Sinnār; its capital, Soba, was located on the right bank of the Blue Nile about fifteen miles from present-day Khartoum. Missionaries from Egypt introduced Christianity to the Sudan in the sixth century.[1] Many churches were built and there is no evidence of any forced conversions. However, Christianity remained primarily the religion of the kings and nobility. J. S. Trimingham notes that the people accepted Christianity nominally, but continued to practice various forms of animism. He argues that the religion of the populace was animistic prior to Islam, and elements of animism continued in the Islam of the Nubians. This argument does not entirely resonate because there can be found in Islamic mysticism, which arguably is the most influential form of Islam in the Sudan, Hindu elements as well as Neoplatonic influences. The role of Islamic mysticism in the religious culture of the Sudan will be treated in depth in subsequent chapters. What may be noted at this point, is the important cultural role of Christianity in Nubia in the years immediately preceding Islam's arrival. The language of the region, Nubian, through the influence of Christianity, became a written language. Hence, the nominal acceptance of Christianity by the population notwithstanding, Christianity had come to shape the consciousness of the Nubian kingdoms.[2]

Thus, around 642, when Arab Muslims began sending raiding parties into Nubia, they found a people loosely united by a common religious culture. It is perhaps due to this unified religious consciousness that these military incursions all ended with the Muslims being defeated by the Nubians. In the face of a foreign foe, the Nubians galvanized their forces to rout the enemy. Heartened by their success, the Nubians themselves made raids across the border into Upper Egypt.

ʿAbdallāh b. Saʿd b. Abī Sarh, who succeeded ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ as governor of Egypt, determined to put an end to the Nubian raids into

[1] J. S. Trimingham, *Islam in the Sudan* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1949), 78.
[2] Ibid., 79–80.

Upper Egypt, and in 651 led a well-armed expedition into Nubia. This force penetrated as far as Dongola and laid siege to the town, destroying the church in the city center. King Qalīdūrūn (r. ca. 651), seeing his capital city in ruins, sued for peace. The king and ʿAbdallāh concluded a treaty known as the *baqt*, in which the Nubians promised to provide 360 slaves to the Muslims annually, and maintain the mosque the Muslims had established in Dongola. In addition, ʿAbdallāh promised the king that he would provide him with grain whenever the latter's reserves dwindled.[3]

On the basis of the reports of the medieval Arab historian al-Maqrīzī, in the first year of the treaty, the Nubians delivered forty additional slaves to the Muslims, who in turn gave the Nubians gifts of tools, alcohol, seeds of barley, wheat, and horses.[4] The *baqt* laid the foundation for trade between Nubia and Egypt. The treaty lasted six hundred years and although there were times when payment was withheld, for the most part, slaves from the upper Nile Valley were transported to Egypt annually in exchange for wheat and barley. In addition to laying the foundation for trade, the treaty paved the way for the spread of Islam in the Sudan.

Islam in the Arabian Peninsula in its initial stages was a dynamic force that spread very rapidly. Ten years after the Prophet's death, Arab Muslims were in control of the entire Arabian Peninsula and Egypt, and were establishing a foothold in North Africa. However, in the Sudan, Islam spread relatively slowly. The *baqt* was the prelude to Muslim missionary activity in the Sudan, as it allowed traders to have contact with the Nubians, and these traders may well have engaged in proselytizing endeavors. The *baqt* agreement was not honored consistently, and despite the fact that the terms of the *baqt* essentially forced the Nubians to build a mosque in Dongola, over time, as individual rulers became committed to Islam, mosques were built free of the constraints of the agreement. However, this commitment to Islam was a slow and gradual process and these factors alone do not paint a complete portrait of how Islam became the dominant religious culture of the region, particularly given the reality that the Nubians managed to preserve their religious and cultural integrity for almost seven hundred

[3] Naʿūm Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān* (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1981), 59–61.
[4] Aḥmad b. ʿAlī al-Maqrīzī, *al-Khiṭaṭ b. al-Maqrīzī* (Lebanon: Dār al-ʿIrfān, 1898), 1:323–5.

years after the initial Arab thrust. Their independent nature allowed them to maintain their political independence and their language in the face of the ever-increasing cultural and religious hegemony of the Arabs.[5] The rise of Islam and the Arabization of some of the Nubian groups in the Nilotic Sudan is primarily attributable to internal causes, specifically the weakness of the Monophysite Church in Nubia.

The Christian kingdoms of Nubia collapsed as a result of the weakness of Christian churches, coupled with the infiltration of Arabs, who settled in the kingdoms and gradually intermarried with the Nubians.[6] A new Arabized Nubian elite arose from the unions of Arab men and Nubian noblewomen; the matrilineal system meant that male offspring from these marriages became noblemen. This new elite increasingly identified itself with Islam and Arab culture. Christianity began to disappear through the absorption of the Nubians into the Arab tribal system and the cultural ascendancy of Islam. According to Trimingham, Dongola collapsed around 1320, and ʿAlwa collapsed around 1504, not as a result of Arab wars of conquest, but rather through their cultural infiltration, which gradually led to an Arab-Islamic hegemony in the region.[7]

The Funj Sultanate

Shuqayr, on the other hand, maintains that the demise of Nubia corresponds to the ascendancy of a dynastic state in the region known as the Sultanate of the Funj.[8] This state was founded in the early sixteenth century by a king known as ʿAmāra Dūnqas (r. 1505–34), and continued to exist, albeit in a debilitated state, until the Turco-Egyptian invasion of 1820. This invasion forced Bādī VI, the last titular Funj ruler, to surrender in the summer of 1821 to the invaders.

The origins of the Funj are shrouded in mystery. According to their own claims they are the descendants of Umayyad Arabs who migrated to the Sudan after the collapse of the Umayyad dynasty in the eighth century. Three theories on the origins of the Funj have been put forth: The first has the Funj originating in Ethiopia; the second maintains

[5] Trimingham, *Islam*, 72.
[6] Ibid., 76.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 97.

that they were a war-band of Shilluk who traveled from their homeland on the upper White Nile and conquered the Arabs who had subdued ʿAlwa; the third hypothesis concludes that the ruling dynasty of the Funj originated with a refugee prince from Bornu, who settled among the Shilluk.

However, there is little concrete evidence from the Nilotic Sudan to support these theories. Arkell noted in his 1932 article on the origins of the Funj, that the Umayyad claims of the Funj were suspect and that they were most probably Shilluk.[9] This hypothesis has stronger claims based upon indigenous sources, specifically the account related to James Bruce by Aḥmad Sīd al-Qom, a high officer in the Funj court.[10]

The Funj established a vast kingdom that extended from the third cataract to Fāzūghlī on the Blue Nile, and from Suakin on the Red Sea to Kordofan. The capital of the kingdom was at Sinnār, which is located about 100 miles south of Khartoum between the Blue Nile and the White Nile. The kingdom was divided into semi-autonomous, small principalities, and the ruler of each paid tribute to the king of Sinnār.

Shuqayr noted that when the Funj initially became ascendant in the region they were animists, but converted to Islam out of political expediency, under threat of attack by Sultan Salīm, the Ottoman Turkish ruler who conquered Egypt in 1517. The Funj king sent a letter with genealogical tables to the Ottoman sultan in order to substantiate the Funj claim that they were indeed Arab Muslims:

> It is said that in those days, after Sultan Salīm had taken possession of the regions of Suakin and Massawa he turned his attention to Ethiopia with the intention of attacking Sinnār. Thus he wrote to the Funj king demanding his capitulation. The king responded by writing, "Indeed I don't know what has incited you to wage war against me and take possession of my land. If it is for the sake of establishing Islam in the land, verily I and the people of my kingdom are Arab Muslims and we practice the religion of the Messenger of God. And if your goal is material in nature, I know that the majority of my people are simple bedouins who emigrated to this land in search of sustenance. They have nothing.[11]

---

[9] A. J. Arkell, "Fung Origins," *Sudan Notes and Records* 14, no. 2 (1932), 205–10.

[10] James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile in the Years 1768–1773* (Edinburgh: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1804), 89–94.

[11] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 100.

When Salīm read the letter and reviewed the tables, he abandoned his war plans against the Funj. Bruce, a Scotsman who traveled throughout the Funj kingdom in the late eighteenth century, maintains that the Funj were indeed initially animist, but converted to Islam to improve their trade relations with Egypt.[12] Trimingham disputes Shuqayr's rendition of the Funj conversion to Islam because the Funj were in fact attacked and defeated by the Sultan's forces after the latter took control of Nubia as far as the third cataract.[13] The defeat was such that the Funj never again attempted to enter into negotiations with the Sultan. The Funj, however, were instrumental in the Islamization of the region, because they encouraged holy men from the Hijaz to visit and settle in the kingdom. Shuqayr's description is illustrative of the way that political legitimacy was articulated through the manipulation of Arab-Islamic symbols, such as genealogical tables purporting descent from the first Muslim dynasty. Even at this early stage in the Islamic history of the Sudan, access to power involved possessing some relationship to the Prophet Muḥammad's family. The Umayyads (r. 661–750), the first Muslim dynasty, were genealogically related to the Prophet Muḥammad's tribe of Quraysh; consequently, any connection to this dynasty afforded the claimant a measure of religious and political legitimacy.

The Funj kings were ostensibly among the first ruling Muslim elites in the Sudan to articulate their political legitimacy by using Islam and descent from the Prophet's tribe as a buttress to their authority. Spaulding designated the period "between the overthrow of the Funj kings of Sinnār and the career of the Mahdī (approximately 1750–1850) as the 'Heroic Age' of the Funj Sultanate." Throughout this Heroic Age, the Funj endured a campaign of propaganda in which their legitimacy and authority to rule over Arabs was challenged. The Funj responded by discovering that in reality they were not only Arabs, but also Umayyads.[14] A document appeared among the northern Funj from a historically unknown sultan emphasizing these prestigious claims.

---

[12] Bruce, *Travels*, 2:372.

[13] Trimingham, *Islam*, 87.

[14] Jay Spaulding, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1985), 210.

> .... Truly, O my people, from your documents you may know your origins to be great; for us there is nothing but greatness.... Firstly, we inform you that you are of the Banū Umayya, Companions of the Prophet....[15]

Additionally, in an obvious attempt to shore up their political legitimacy, the Funj kings gave grants of land and privilege to Muslim holy men. It was under the reign of King Bādī b. Rubāṭ (1644–81) that the Funj kingdom sought to establish itself as a legitimate Islamic state and enhance its status in the wider Islamic world. Bādī built the first mosque in Sinnār and funded worthy religious causes at home and abroad. By the middle of the seventeenth century most of the holy men of Sinnār did not come from Arabia or Egypt; rather, they were individuals who had been born and trained within the Funj kingdom.[16]

The eighteenth century witnessed the ascendancy of the kingdom in terms of wealth and power and geographical extent. During this period several European visitors to Sinnār wrote descriptions of the Funj kingdom. The writings of these travelers, most notably that of Bruce, describe a powerful and centralized kingdom with an elaborate hierarchy.

The Funj king was known by the title *mekk*; the tributary kings were given the title *mangil*. The appointment of a *mangil* involved several emblems of authority that were used by the Mahdists and continue to be used today in ceremonies. Upon his appointment, the *mangil* was crowned with the two-horned skullcap known as the *ṭāqīyya dhat qarnayn* and seated on a throne, called a *kakur*, which was a two-foot high wooden stool with six legs. After being seated upon the throne, he was addressed as *mekk* by the shaykh presiding over the ceremony. The shaykh's hand was kissed by the new *mangil* and the former ordered the beating of a drum known as the *naḥas* to signal the crowning of the *mangil*.[17] Arkell noted in his 1932 article, that although the stool has, in recent years, become a common article of furniture among the Sudanese population, these instruments were originally the prerogative of the elite, and a symbol of authority.[18]

The Funj kings employed a great deal of pomp and circumstance when making public appearances. These kings spent the majority of their reigns secluded within the palace walls and experienced little

---

[15] Ibid., 211.
[16] Trimingham, *Islam*, 84.
[17] Arkell, "Fung Origins," 227.
[18] Ibid.

contact with their subjects. The few who were granted an audience with the king were led through the palace complex to the throne room, where they would find the king seated on a raised earthen dais, surrounded by court officials, attendants, and armed guards. Upon entering the throne room, the subject was ordered to lower to his waist any garment that was draped around his shoulders. He announced his name and title, after which the king repeated his name and the subject replied, "My Lord." The subject then might receive permission to kiss the king's hand and be seated on the ground below the throne.[19]

Spaulding noted that the social distance between noblemen and subjects in the Funj Sultanate was reinforced by laws and defined rules of conduct. Reports arriving in Egypt at the end of the seventeenth century from the Funj capital cautioned potential travelers, "the king alone sometimes wears a cap, and to be clothed in a shirt one must be a great lord."[20] Visitors later confirmed, "no one wears anything on the head except for the highest nobility and the king." Furthermore, sewn garments were to be seen only on important people.[21] These rules, which articulated the relations between rulers and the ruled in the Funj Sultanate, were inherited from the Sudanese tradition and taken from a cultural vocabulary described as "divine" or Sudanic kingship.[22] Sultans and divine kings have, often in combination, ruled the Sudanic Belt for centuries. The Mahdī and his successor, Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi, were likely aware of many of these expressions of divine kingship, particularly given that the rulers of the Funj Sultanate's sister state in the west, Darfur, employed very similar cultural expressions to articulate their political authority.

The demise of the Funj kingdom came about through the rise in power of Muḥammad Abū Likaylik Kamtūr (d. 1776). Abū Likaylik was a general of the ʿAbdallāb, a vassal state of the Funj, who ultimately deposed the Funj king and replaced him with a puppet leader. However, the supremacy of the ʿAbdallāb dynasty in Sinnār was short-lived: under their rule, the kingdom fell into decline and was plagued by internal strife and civil war until the Turkish invasion of 1820, which spelled the end of the kingdom.

---

[19] R. S. O'Fahey and J. L. Spaulding, *Kingdoms of the Sudan* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1974), 42.
[20] Spaulding, *Sinnār*, 78.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 125.

The Islamization of the Sudan prior to the Mahdiyya was a gradual process that was facilitated by the ascendancy of two states, the Funj kingdom and the Sultanate of Darfur, both of which professed Islam as the state religion. While the Funj kingdom came to an end during the first half of the nineteenth century, the Sultanate of Darfur managed to maintain its existence as an independent state until 1874. It was subsequently conquered by the Mahdist forces in 1883. In 1898–99, the kingdom was reestablished by a Fūr prince, ʿAlī Dīnār, and the state survived until 1916.

The Darfur Sultanate

Prior to the arrival of Islam in Darfur, various ethnic groups had settled in this large upland steppe plateau. Before the twelfth century, the Dājo, a widely dispersed people living in eastern Chad, the western Baḥr al-Ghazāl, Darfur, and Kordofan, established a monarchy in the southeast region around Jabal Marra that paved the way for the beginning of the Fūr kingdom.[23] In the fourteenth century, the Tunjur, whose origins are cloaked in mystery, migrated to the region, possibly from Dongola, and eclipsed the Dājo as the preeminent power in the area.[24]

The rulers of the Darfur Sultanate, like the Funj elite, claimed to be descendants of Arab nobility. However, unlike the Funj, the Fūr rulers claimed descent from the ʿAbbāsids. The legitimacy of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate (750–1258) was based on the claim that they were direct descendants of the Prophet's uncle, ʿAbbās; consequently, the ʿAbbāsids maintained that their rule was divinely ordained because of their relationship to the Prophet's family.

The Sudanese tradition concerning the Islamic origins of the Fūr, as related by Shuqayr, holds that after Baghdad succumbed to the Ottomans in 1421, two brothers from the ʿAbbāsid family escaped to Tunis with a group of Bedouin soldiers. The elder brother, ʿAlī, was married to a woman who had designs on the younger brother, Aḥmad

[23] R. S. O'Fahey, *The Darfur Sultanate: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 24.
[24] Ibid., 25.

Sufyān al-Maʿqūr. As a result, Aḥmad was forced to flee. He traveled across the Sahara, finally settling in the area of Darfur.

Though this was home to many ethnic groups, the Fūr people were the dominant sociopolitical force. The Fūr were practicing a form of animism at the time of Aḥmad's appearance, and were not a homogeneous group, rather they were united by their common allegiance to an ancient monarchy. The king of the Fūr who was ruling when Aḥmad arrived was named Shaū Durshīt.[25] He was known for his generosity and shrewd thinking: when he learned that Aḥmad was in his land, he requested that the latter be brought to him. Aḥmad impressed the king with his intelligence and strength of character and as a consequence, Shaū Durshīt put Aḥmad in charge of organizing the affairs of the kingdom. His success in organizing the state ultimately endeared him to the Fūr king, and Shaū Durshīt gave Aḥmad his only daughter in marriage. According to tradition, the king's daughter and Aḥmad had a son named Sulaymān Solong, 'the Arab,' or, of 'reddish complexion,' who became known for his kind nature and his political acumen. Sulaymān reigned from 1660 to 1680, and established the foundation for a multiethnic empire.[26]

Sulaymān Solong, the first Muslim ruler of the Fūr and founder of the sultanate, brought holy men from the east to instruct the populace about Islam.[27] But it was under the rule of his grandson, Aḥmad Bokkor, that the process of Islamization entered a dynamic phase.

In the mid- to late-seventeenth century, Aḥmad Bokkor (r. 1682–1722) had mosques and Islamic schools built. He encouraged traders and holy men from Muslim lands to visit the sultanate. As a result, the Fūr people gradually began to abandon their pre-Islamic religions and embrace Islam. Over time, the Sultanate of the Fūr became the dominant Muslim power in the western Nilotic Sudan and successfully challenged Wadai for military and economic primacy in the Chad basin.[28]

The similarity between the tradition concerning the origins of the Fūr and that of the Funj underscores the importance of Muslim and Arab

[25] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 150.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Gustav Nachtigal, *Sahara and the Sudan*, vol. 4: *Wadai and Darfur*, trans. Allan G. Fisher and Humphrey J. Fisher with Rex S. O'Fahey (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 279–82.
[28] Ibid.

identity in the Nilotic Sudan. It further demonstrates that Sudanese Muslim elites seemed to deem it necessary to form a genealogical link with the Prophet in order to buttress their power and authority.

The Turco-Egyptian Invasion and Occupation

The dominance of the Fūr was challenged in 1820 when Muḥammad ʿAlī, the Ottoman viceroy of Egypt and founder of the Khedive line of Egyptian rulers, invaded the Sudan and attacked the Fūr sultanate. The resistance of the Fūr was so strong that the Egyptians were forced to withdraw, but the sultanate was seriously weakened from these attacks. Darfur never recovered from its diminished state and was conquered by al-Zubayr Pāsha in 1874. From 1874 until the beginning of the Mahdist revolt in 1882, Darfur was, at least in theory, a part of the Turco-Egyptian Sudan.[29]

The Egyptians created an administration that unified a territory of the upper Nile Valley that was comprised of diverse religious, ethnic, and cultural entities. When Egypt invaded the Sudan, it found the Funj kingdom in a state of terminal decline. The kingdom had lost most of its possessions on the White Nile and had only a nominal suzerainty on the east bank of the main Nile. The Shāʾiqiyya, an Arabized nomadic people of probable Beja origin, emerged at the end of the eighteenth century as one of the most dominant forces in the northern Sudan. They controlled the Nile Valley from the third cataract to the intersection of the While Nile and Blue Nile, raiding and pillaging the other riverine groups. In 1811, the Mamlūks, fleeing the purges of Muḥammad ʿAlī, settled in the Sudan. They drove the Shāʾiqiyya out of New Dongola, their base, and protected the Danāqla, one of the riverine groups that had been dispersed by the Shāʾiqiyya.[30]

Shuqayr maintains that the primary reason for Egypt's conquest of the Sudan was economic exploitation. He advances six reasons for the invasion. First, Egyptian merchants traveling to the Sudan often returned from their trips regaling anyone who would listen with tales of the immense wealth in gold the country possessed, especially in the region of Sinnār. Second, Muḥammad ʿAlī viewed the region as

[29] O'Fahey, *Darfur Sultanate*, 275.
[30] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 192.

a source of slave soldiers for his armies. The Nilotic peoples from the south and those inhabiting the Jabal Nūba region were renown in Egypt for their military prowess and bravery in battle. The third reason involved a desire to settle affairs with the remnant of the Mamlūks that had established a stronghold in Dongola. Muḥammad ʿAlī wanted to eliminate all remaining members of this group because they posed a threat to his power. The fourth reason given by Shuqayr coincides with the second, namely, that Muḥammad ʿAlī entered the Sudan to establish a slave raiding post for his patrons, the Ottoman Turks. The discovery of the source of the Nile and extension of Egyptian trading interests in the Sudan were the fifth and sixth reasons Shuqayr presents.[31]

Muḥammad ʿAlī knew of the weakened condition of the Funj kingdom and took advantage of the situation to launch his conquest. In 1821, Sinnār fell to the Egyptians and the Funj sultanate came to an end. Simultaneously, a second Egyptian force under the command of Muḥammad ʿAlī's son-in-law, Muḥammad Bey Khusraw, advanced from Dongola across the desert of northern Kordofan in the west and occupied the important towns of Bāra and El Obeid and separated Kordofan from the Sultanate of the Fūr.

By the time of Muḥammad ʿAlī's death in 1849, Egypt was in possession of Sudanese territories that extended as far east as the Ethiopian border and south to Malakal, the traditional homeland of the Shilluk. In 1830, Egypt had established an administrative capital in the Sudan at the confluence of the While Nile and Blue Nile. The new capital, Khartoum, became the principal commercial center, where slave trading figured prominently. Administration of these new territories was secondary; the primary reason for the Egyptian presence in the Sudan was the exploitation of the human, agricultural, and mineral wealth of the country. Following Muḥammad ʿAlī's death, the Sudan's fortunes declined, largely as a result of increasing privations that were caused by the Egyptian policies of exploitation.

The Egyptians established an elaborate bureaucracy in the sixty years they ruled the Sudan. Each province had a provincial governor who was responsible to the governor-general in Khartoum. These officials were Egyptian, Armenian, or Circassian; one or two were Sudanese; and there were some Europeans. The Sudanese classified them and

[31] Ibid., 194.

their administration as Turkish because this was the language spoken by the chief administrators. This period in Sudanese history is known as al-Turkiyya al-Sābiqa (lit., "the former Turkish government"), but the phrase denotes the first Turkish regime in the Sudan. The second regime, the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, which was in effect from 1898 to 1956, is known as al-Turkiyya al-Ṯhāniyya.

When Muḥammad ʿAlī died, his son ʿAbbās succeeded him; the latter died after an unremarkable six-year rule in Egypt. The following ruler, Saʿīd (r. 1854–63) was distinguished by his proclamations ordering the end of the slave trade in Egypt and the Sudan. These proclamations were issued at the behest of the British government and were, to a great extent, ineffectual.[32]

With Egypt's occupation of the Sudan in the early nineteenth century and the levying of taxes on the populace, the slave trade became the chief form of commerce in the country. As a consequence, the merchant communities (known as *jallāba*) in both the Sudan and Egypt, were reluctant to relinquish their hold on the trade that was providing them with their livelihood. Furthermore, the provincial governors were reluctant to incur the ire of these merchants; therefore they merely read the proclamations condemning the slave trade, but enacted no policy that would effectively put a stop to it. Slave traders, such as al-Zubayr Raḥma Manṣūr, had become virtually autonomous rulers of vast stretches of territory. Al-Zubayr, as noted above, had gained control of Baḥr al-Ghazāl and conquered Darfur.

The Arabs of the Sudan were successful in slave raiding because of the technologically superior weaponry that had been introduced to the country by the Egyptians. Armed with rifles and pistols, the Arabs captured and enslaved the various ethnic groups inhabiting the areas of the upper Nile, Baḥr al-Ghazāl, and Jabal Nūba. The latter were armed with the most rudimentary of weapons, such as spears and swords. The largest provincial slave markets in proximity to the raids were located in El Obeid, Fashoda, and al-Qallābāt. The slave traders would purchase slaves from these regional markets and then sell them in the markets of Khartoum and Shendi, the two main northern markets. Most of these slaves were sent down the Nile to Egypt; others were ferried across the Red Sea to the Hijaz.[33]

[32] Ibid., 247–9.
[33] Ibid., 250.

It was not until the reign of the Khedive Ismāʿīl (r. 1863–79) that the Egyptian government began to enact policies to end the slave trade. The Khedive appointed two British soldiers as governors of Equatoria to enforce the anti-slave trade decrees. Samuel Baker served from 1870 to 1873; Charles Gordon was governor of Equatoria from 1874 to 1876 and governor-general of the entire Sudan from 1877 to 1879.

These men managed to curtail the slave trade to a certain degree, but given the extent to which it was entrenched in the economy of the Sudan at the time, it was difficult to completely eliminate it. In addition, the Egyptian government, though enacting a policy to abolish the slave trade, continued to obtain its soldiers from this commerce—slaves captured by the Egyptian forces were forced into military service.[34] The majority of these slaves came from Jabal Nūba in the southwest. These slave soldiers, known as the *Jihādiyya*, were skilled in the use of firearms. Those captured by the Mahdists' forces were commanded by Ḥamdān Abū ʿAnja, a former slave originally from the same southwest region. Ironically, upon their capture, these slave soldiers were put to use in a most effective manner by the Mahdists to fight against their former imperial masters.

In August 1877, the Khedive Ismāʿīl concluded the Slave-Trade Convention with Great Britain. This agreement ostensibly ended the trade in Ethiopian and Sudanese slaves through Egyptian territory and it also stipulated that private sale and purchase of slaves in the Sudan should end by 1889. Ismāʿīl's attempts at suppressing the slave trade fueled Egypt's expansionist policies in the Sudan. At the end of his reign, the Khedive controlled the Red Sea regions of Sudanese territory and Egyptian forces were occupying areas of western Ethiopia, such as Massawa and Harar. The occupation of these territories led to a war with Ethiopia and ultimately the bankruptcy of Egypt, which gave the British government the pretext to depose Ismāʿīl and install his more pliant son, Muḥammad Tawfīq, as his successor.

Causes of the Mahdist Revolt

Despite the pressure the British government placed upon the Egyptian rulers to abolish it, the slave trade did not completely end. However,

[34] Ibid.

the abolition policies did affect many Sudanese and it is Holt's contention that it was these policies that laid the foundation for the Mahdist revolt.[35] In addition to these attempts to abolish the slave trade, Shuqayr lists a number of causes for the Mahdist revolt: the desire for revenge for the violent manner in which the Egyptians conquered the Sudan, the inequitable system of taxation, and the partiality shown by the government to the Shāʾiqiyya and the Khatmiyya Sufi order.[36] Holt argues that all the reasons provided by Shuqayr are valid, but not equally so. He believes that the Egyptian government's attempts to end slavery created a sense of discontent that transcended class and tribal affiliation in the Sudan.[37]

Indeed there was a general sense of discontent as a result of the manner in which Egypt attempted to suppress slavery. The policy of abolishing the slave trade fueled Egypt's imperial avarice in the Sudan; in fact, the regions the Egyptians occupied and policed expanded, particularly those areas noted for their commerce in slaves. Poll taxes were levied on the traders, their employees, and members of the population who had no connection to the slave trade, but who simply had the misfortune to live in areas under the domination of the Egyptian administration. In his proclamations condemning the Egyptians, the Mahdī singled out the issue of these taxes, rather than the Egyptian policies to end slavery. The taxes were unjust from the Mahdī's perspective because he believed that the only legitimate tax that should be paid by Muslims was the Islamically required *zakat* (alms tax). He thus equated the taxes of the Egyptian administration with the *jizya* (poll tax), a tax levied by Muslim governments on non-Muslim populations living in predominately Muslim lands.[38] Furthermore, at that time there was a messianic expectation that was especially prominent in the western Sudan, and this further contributed to the success of the revolt. This messianic expectation will be explored in greater detail in the third chapter.

Holt's assessment that the overarching reason for the Mahdist revolt was the Egyptian attempt to suppress the slave trade may be true for those who joined the movement after its initial successes. However, for

---

[35] P. M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan 1881–1898* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 24.
[36] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 315–20.
[37] Holt, *Mahdist State*, 24.
[38] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 336–9.

the Mahdī and several of his core followers, there does seem to exist a very strong religious element that served as the catalyst that propelled them into the fray with the Turkiyya, a more significant matter than merely extricating the Sudan from under the sway of a government that had made it difficult for a section of the populace to earn a living. Furthermore, if, as Holt advances, the primary cause for the revolt was the suppression of the slave trade, then why was the revolt initiated by a holy man and his disciples who had no connection with slavery?

Muḥammad al-Qaddāl concludes that neither the oppression of the Sudanese at the hands of the Turkish officials, nor the suppression of the slave trade can fully explain why the revolt erupted.[39] He notes that all revolts have an element of oppression as a motivating factor and adds that despite the Mahdī's pronouncements, religion was not the reason for the revolt, rather it merely served as the ideology behind it.[40] Religion as an ideology behind the revolt does indeed resonate because this religious ideology was successful in uniting many of the disparate Sudanese Muslim peoples under one banner, that of the Mahdiyya. Al-Qaddāl contends that it was the violent manner in which the Turkiyya attempted to suppress the slave trade, rather than the suppression of the slave trade itself, that was the chief factor that led to the revolt.[41]

The time was ripe for revolt. There was widespread discontent in the Sudan, but arguably no one save a charismatic leader like Muḥammad Aḥmad, the Sudanese Mahdī, could have achieved the measure of success he did in such a relatively short time span. From 1877 to 1879 the Egyptian authorities in the Sudan put down several local revolts. There were various causes for these revolts, but none of them had religiously motivated claims. The attempts to suppress the slave trade played a role in the rebellions that took place in Baḥr al-Ghazāl, Darfur, and Kordofan during this two-year period. However, it was heavy taxation and poor administration that led to the revolts on the Somali coast and Red Sea province during this period.[42] The Turkiyya was able to successfully quash all of these rebellions.

---

[39] Muḥammad S. al-Qaddāl, *Siyāsa al-iqtiṣādiyya li-l-dawla al-Mahdiyya: maṣādiruhā, mazāhiruhā: 1881–1898* (Khartoum: Dār Jāmi'a al-Khartoum, 1986), 39.

[40] Ibid., 40.

[41] Ibid., 44.

[42] Alice Moore-Harrell, *Gordon and the Sudan, Prologue to the Mahdiyya 1877–1880* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), 181–5.

Approximately one hundred and fifty years prior to Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī's emergence, one other self-proclaimed *mahdī* appeared in the Sudan.[43] During a pilgrimage to Mecca, Ḥamad al-Nahlan b. Muḥammad, called Wad al-Turābī (1639–1704), claimed to be the *mahdī*.[44] He was a member of the Malāmatiyya, a Sufi order that deliberately engages in iconoclastic behavior from fear of the dangers of popularity. His claim was dismissed by many as one of his excesses.[45] Several followers, however, did not reject his claim, because, according to tradition, he traveled to Mecca and while there performed a miracle. Following the pilgrimage he returned to the Sudan, renounced the world and devoted himself to mysticism; he then set up a *khalwā* (an Islamic school where students studied the Qurʾān and Sunna) in the village named after him, Wad al-Turābī, in the Jezira. His tomb is found in this village. In contrast, the claims of Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī were deemed by a great many as valid. His appeal and message transcended tribal affiliation, regional differences, and sectarian divisions.

The Mahdī's Origins

Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī was born in the province of Dongola on the island of Labab in 1844. His parents, ʿAbdallāh and Zaynab, both claimed to be from the *ashrāf*, descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad. One his grandfathers, Ḥājj Sharīf, was a religious man known for his piety and good works.

Muḥammad Aḥmad's father was a skilled carpenter specializing in boat building. When Muḥammad Aḥmad was still a young child, his father moved the family south to Kararī, on the northern outskirts of Omdurman. His father ʿAbdallāh remained in Kararī, where he worked and died. He had four sons, including Muḥammad Aḥmad, and one daughter. Muḥammad Aḥmad's brothers apprenticed to their father's profession and likewise became boat builders. Muḥammad Aḥmad, on the other hand, chose a path that was paved by his grandfather Ḥājj

[43] Trimingham, *Islam*, 150.

[44] Muḥammad al-Nūr b. Ḍayfallāh, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt fī khuṣūṣ al-awliyāʾ wa-l-ṣāliḥīn wa-l-ʿulamāʾ wa-l-shuʿarāʾ fī-l-Sūdān*, ed. Yūsuf Faḍl Ḥasan (Khartoum: Dār al-Wathāʾiq, 1982), 161.

[45] Trimingham, *Islam*, 150.

Sharīf and embarked on a career in religious study. Initially, he studied the Qurʾān in schools in Kararī and Khartoum, and after completing this he began learning Islamic jurisprudence in the Jezira, in the central Sudan.[46] He traveled to Berber in the northern Sudan to study Sufism; it was during his sojourn there that his reputation for piety and asceticism became fixed among his peers and teachers.

It was his propensity for asceticism that propelled Muḥammad Aḥmad to pursue his studies of Sufism under the grandson of the founder of the Sammāniyya order, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Sharīf Nūr al-Dāʾim. In 1861, Muḥammad Aḥmad went to Shaykh Muḥammad al-Sharīf and asked his permission to become one of his disciples. Muḥammad al-Sharīf accepted him as a follower (*murīd*). In addition to his religious studies, Muḥammad Aḥmad worked in his shaykh's house, cooking and cleaning. He devoted himself to prayer and worship, and quickly distinguished himself for his commitment to asceticism. It was reported that Muḥammad Aḥmad's devotion and humility was so great that when he ended his prayers his tears would moisten the earth beneath his feet and when he sat in front of his shaykh he would bow his head and not raise it until ordered.[47]

Muḥammad Aḥmad remained with Shaykh Muḥammad al-Sharīf for seven years, whereupon the shaykh granted him the license of shaykh of the Sammāniyya order. This license gave the former student an authorization to travel and accept students of his own, and undertake activities on behalf of the order. Upon receiving this license, Muḥammad Aḥmad returned to his family in Khartoum and married the daughter of his great uncle.

In 1871, Muḥammad Aḥmad's brothers left Khartoum and emigrated to Ābā Island in the White Nile for the abundance of timber in the region. He subsequently joined his brothers on the island and built a mosque and a school for the study of the Qurʾān. During this period his reputation for piety and asceticism became widely recognized. As a consequence, many of the inhabitants of the island pledged their allegiance to him and became disciples.

During this early stage in Muḥammad Aḥmad's religious career, his former shaykh visited him on the island. Shaykh Muḥammad al-Sharīf became enamored with the island during these visits and settled in

[46] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 322.
[47] Ibid., 322–3.

al-ʿArādayb, a village close to Ābā Island on the White Nile. However, shortly after Muḥammad al-Sharīf's move to al-ʿArādayb, his close relationship with his former disciple became hostile in nature.

According to Muḥammad al-Sharīf, who related the story to Shuqayr after the fall of Omdurman in 1898, the reason for this animosity was Muḥammad Aḥmad's egotistical behavior. When his fame began to spread and the number of his students began to increase, his self-centered behavior also increased.[48] Muḥammad al-Sharīf added that sometime in the year 1878, his former student claimed to be the *mahdī* (the "expected deliverer") and asked him to become his minister and adviser. Muḥammad al-Sharīf upbraided Muḥammad Aḥmad and a council of notables was convened to arbitrate the matter. Ultimately, Muḥammad al-Sharīf had Muḥammad Aḥmad expelled from the Sammāniyya order and attempted to have him arrested.

The Mahdist account of the quarrel between the two men differs drastically from that of Muḥammad al-Sharīf. According to their account, the animosity between the two men began when Shaykh Muḥammad al-Sharīf settled in al-ʿArādayb and saw many of his former students leaving his ranks to join those of Muḥammad Aḥmad.[49] The enmity between the two groups increased to the point that actual fighting ensued, and Muḥammad Aḥmad's followers were badly beaten. In order to quell the fighting, Muḥammad Aḥmad brought the matter to the chief government administrator of the region to mediate. The provincial administrator imprisoned some of the disciples of Muḥammad al-Sharīf's group. A reconciliation occurred at Ābā Island between the two groups, and Muḥammad Aḥmad made a successful entreaty for the release of Muḥammad al-Sharīf's disciples from prison.

After this incident, Muḥammad Aḥmad's respect for his former shaykh began to diminish. He observed Muḥammad al-Sharīf engaging in behavior that he believed to be antithetical to Islam. For example, according to the Mahdists, Muḥammad al-Sharīf allowed women to consult with him and permitted them to kiss his hand. The event that irrevocably damaged the relationship between the two men occurred on the occasion of the feast held at the circumcision of one of Muḥammad al-Sharīf's sons. Muḥammad al-Sharīf invited his disciples to the feast and allowed them to participate in the dancing and

[48] Ibid., 324–5.
[49] Ibid., 325.

singing that accompanied the ritual. Muḥammad Aḥmad was present at the festivities and forbade his followers to dance or sing, maintaining that it transgressed the parameters of the *sharīʿa* (Islamic law).[50]

According to the Mahdist accounts, when Muḥammad al-Sharīf heard of Muḥammad Aḥmad's pronouncements concerning the feast he became incensed and expelled him from the Sammāniyya order. Muḥammad Aḥmad pleaded to be allowed to return to the fold, but to no avail. Muḥammad Aḥmad did not abandon the order; rather, he professed allegiance to another important shaykh of the Sammāniyya, Shaykh al-Qurashī b. al-Zayn. Al-Qurashī lived in al-Ḥalawīn on the Blue Nile between al-Musallamiyya and al-Kāmalīn and had been a disciple of the order's founder, Shaykh al-Ṭayyib al-Bashīr. Thus, al-Qurashī's religious authority and legitimacy was, at the very least, on a par with and perhaps even surpassed that of Muḥammad al-Sharīf, whose authority was based primarily on his kinship with the founder. In times past, some enmity had arisen between al-Qurashī and Muḥammad al-Sharīf, and it was ostensibly due to this tension that al-Qurashī ignored Muḥammad al-Sharīf's entreaties that Muḥammad Aḥmad should be forbidden to rejoin the Sammāniyya. Al-Qurashī responded to Muḥammad al-Sharīf in a letter, stating, "Indeed I have observed Muḥammad Aḥmad and he is worthy and not deserving of oppression."[51]

Hence, Muḥammad Aḥmad renewed his pledge to the order under the auspices of al-Qurashī. Meanwhile, Muḥammad Aḥmad's reputation for piety and asceticism had grown to such an extent that people from throughout the country traveled to Ābā Island seeking his blessings and requesting permission to join the ranks of his disciples. At the end of 1880, al-Qurashī died, and a majority of the adherents of the order agreed that Muḥammad Aḥmad should succeed the shaykh as leader of that particular branch of the Sammāniyya. It was around this time that Muḥammad Aḥmad began traveling with his disciples to the western regions of the Nilotic Sudan calling on the people to come closer to God and abandon the trappings of this world. It was in these travels that he witnessed firsthand the discontent of the Sudanese populace.

[50] Ibid., 326.
[51] Ibid.

Shuqayr notes that the discontent was so great that many people, even at this early stage, approached Muḥammad Aḥmad inquiring if he indeed was the *mahdī*. "Upon seeing Muhammad Aḥmad, the people became fervent in their belief that he was *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar*."[52] Apparently the people saw, in the person of Muḥammad Aḥmad, an individual who possessed all the requisite indices of religious legitimacy: zealous devotion to God, a propensity for asceticism, and claimed descent from the Prophet Muḥammad.

Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī used these indices, as well as other symbols and rituals, to give political and religious authority to his opposition movement against the Turco-Egyptian occupation. The following chapter will examine the relationship of ceremony and ritual to power in the context of Muḥammad Aḥmad's early years as leader of the revolt and subsequent brief rule as head of the nascent state.

[52] Ibid., 330.

CHAPTER TWO

PROTOCOL, CEREMONY, AND SYMBOLS OF AUTHORITY

This chapter examines the functional relationship that power and ceremony share by analyzing the use of the various symbols and ceremonies that the leaders of the Mahdiyya employed to articulate their political and religious authority. The chapter also explores these symbols and ceremonies, which although Islamic in origin, were transformed by the Mahdiyya's leaders, Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī and Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi, into uniquely Sudanese Mahdist iconographies of legitimacy.

In 1885, the Mahdiyya was successful in defeating the Turco-Egyptian forces that had occupied the Nilotic Sudan since 1821. The charisma of Muḥammad Aḥmad, the movement's founder, and the authority and the legitimacy of the Mahdiyya were inextricably linked with Muslim eschatology.

Muḥammad Aḥmad claimed to be the *mahdī*, the "guided one." In Sunnī Muslim tradition, the *mahdī* is a messianic figure whose appearance is associated with the approach of the end of the world. The appearance of the *mahdī* is one of the signs of the Hour and, in Muslim eschatology, is related to the second coming of Jesus. The *mahdī* is a person who has a particular measure of divine guidance and is the repository of esoteric knowledge. It is his task to restore equity and justice and end tyranny and oppression.

The Sudanese Mahdī, Muḥammad Aḥmad, maintained that he was sent to end the injustice and oppression that the Sudanese had been experiencing at the hands of the occupying Turco-Egyptian regime. Muḥammad Aḥmad characterized this regime as irreligious and illegitimate and he claimed that he had been sent by God to revitalize Islam in the Sudan and expel the Turks from the land. Once the government had been removed he believed it was his mission to carry his jihad to every region in the world.

A cursory glance at the Mahdiyya and brief comparison with the Wahhābī movement, which took place in the late eighteenth century in the Arabian Peninsula, reveals some basic similarities between the two movements. At the center of each was a call to end oppression and

return to the pristine Islam of the Prophet's time. Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb (1703–92), the founder and ideologue of the Wahhābiyya movement in central Arabia, called for the moral reconstruction of his society through greater adherence to monotheism, sole reliance on the Qurʾān and Sunna, and a rejection of blind imitation of past interpretations and practices. Like Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī's movement was first and foremost an Islamic revivalist movement, which, at its core, was an effort to revive Islam and reaffirm strict monotheism. In addition to encouraging a renewed commitment to the Qurʾān and Sunna, both leaders condemned what they viewed as the excesses of the Sufi orders. However, this is where the similarity between the two movements ends.

The Wahhābiyya primarily arose in response to internal conditions—the so-called lapsed Islam of a large section of the populace in central Arabia. In contrast, the Mahdiyya arose primarily in response to external aggressions, specifically, Turco-Egyptian imperialist policies. Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī, as we will see, viewed his movement in the context of a global jihad, whereas the Wahhābiyya was primarily a local movement with no purported claims to spread its ideology outside the borders of central and western Arabia.

In 1745 Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb began a campaign of Islamic revival and renewal in Najd in central Arabia and established a relationship with a local ruler, Muḥammad b. Saʿūd, who agreed to implement Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb's religious teachings. The alliance between the two men spawned a militant revivalist movement that ultimately led to the foundation of the first Saudi state. The Wahhābiyya rapidly expanded and gained control over much of central Arabia. Although Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb died in 1791, the movement and state continued to expand. Mecca and Medina were captured in 1805–06. The military success of the Wahhābiyya even threatened Ottoman authority and Muḥammad ʿAlī, the viceroy of Egypt, was ordered by the Ottoman sultan to put an end to the Wahhābī advances. Mecca and Medina were retaken in 1812 and the remaining areas controlled by the Wahhābīs were conquered by 1818.

There is no evidence that suggests that prior to his claims to be the *mahdī*, Muḥammad Aḥmad had any contact with anyone professing allegiance to Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb's movement. Nonetheless, the similarities between the two movements are not a coincidence, rather, as we explore here, important trends emerged in

Islamic thought during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that resulted in the appearance of revivalist movements in various locations. The binding feature of these movements was the perceived deterioration in Muslim beliefs and practices.

Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī, like his Arabian counterpart, was angered by what he viewed as a regression into unbelief and the preponderance of *bidaʿ* (innovations) that he believed had crept into the practice of Islam over time. Muḥammad Aḥmad, in the following letter penned on 5 September 1880, stated his concerns to a tribal shaykh in the central Sudan:

> It is well known that whosoever is for God and the establishment of His religion only finds ease in what is pleasing to God and will only live in a place where His religion is established.... Innovation in the land has become widespread and the *ʿulāmāʾ* (religious scholars) and the disciples alike engage in it.... The only thing that remains of Islam is its name and the only thing that remains of the Qurʾān is its representation.[1]

According to Muḥammad Aḥmad, the Qurʾān and Sunna should be the paradigm of behavior that every Muslim must follow and are the sole religious sources to which Muslims must adhere. Everything else, such as the visitation of saints' tombs, excessive wailing at funerals, and Sufi orders were considered by Muḥammad Aḥmad to be innovation. However, unlike Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, Muḥammad Aḥmad, the Sudanese Mahdī, used many of the symbols of the Sufi orders, as well as the emulation of the Prophetic precedent, in order to articulate his claims to power.

This chapter will shed light on the ways in which, even though the Mahdī claimed to abandon all religious innovations—especially those borrowed from Sufism—he utilized those very Sufi symbols, ceremonies, and rituals, and in doing so, made the Mahdiyya movement uniquely Sudanese. By tracing the specific symbols, ceremonies, and rituals employed by the Mahdī and placing them squarely within the Prophetic and Sudanese Sufi tradition, I illustrate how the use of these symbols resonated within the religious consciousness of the populace; this in turn affirmed the Mahdī's legitimacy.

On 12 August 1881, the Turco-Egyptian administration in Khartoum, at the behest of some religious leaders who considered Muḥammad

[1] Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī, *al-Āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm (Khartoum: Dār al-Wathāʾiq, 1990), 2:59.

Aḥmad's preaching a threat to their authority, dispatched a steamer with two companies of troops to Ābā Island to arrest Muḥammad Aḥmad. Rudolf Slatin, an Austrian soldier who was governor of Darfur before surrendering to the Mahdists on 23 December 1883, spent twelve years in captivity under the Mahdists. During his captivity he developed a rapport with Muḥammad Aḥmad's second-in-command and eventual successor, Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi. In the early stages of the revolt, Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi related to Slatin that the Prophet Muḥammad had appeared to the Mahdī in a dream and announced that all those participating in the jihad would earn the title of Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jilānī and Amīr al-awliyāʾ (commander of the saints).[2] These are titles that are derived from Sufi traditions—ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jilānī (d. 1166) is the eponymous founder of the Qādiriyya Sufi order, one of the largest Sufi orders in the Sudan. ʿAbd al-Qādir was a popular saint whose teachings were spread by his many progeny and followers throughout the Islamic world. The honorific, *amīr al-awliyāʾ* is derived from the Sufi interpretation that the *awliyāʾ* (sing. *walī*), often translated as saint, are those who have an intensely personal relationship with God or live in the presence of God. Thus both of these titles, Amīr al-awliyāʾ and Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jilānī, indicate that an individual is particularly favored by God. Within the Sudanese milieu many Sufis have asserted that the *awliyāʾ* are higher than the prophets in rank.[3] Even at this early stage, the Mahdiyya's use of symbols of Islamic mysticism to buttress the legitimacy of the movement was evident.

The legitimacy of the movement was shored up even further following the first battle between the Mahdists and the Egyptian forces at Ābā Island. The Egyptian steamers arrived at Ābā Island at sunset and the Turco-Egyptian troops advanced in the night, taking different paths toward Muḥammad Aḥmad's settlement, where his forces lay in wait for them. Unbeknownst to the government soldiers, the inhabitants of the settlement had abandoned their huts, armed themselves with swords, lances, and clubs, and hid in the tall grass. The soldiers arrived on the island settlement from opposite directions and opened fire on the empty village. Each section was caught in the crossfire of the other, while the villagers left their hiding places and ambushed the

[2] Rudolf C. Slatin, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan* (London: Edward Arnold, 1897), 59.

[3] Trimingham, *Islam*, 76.

troops. The majority of the troops were killed; only a few succeeded in reaching the bank and returning to the steamer.[4]

Muḥammad Aḥmad and his followers were successful in routing the Turkish forces with little loss. However, the number of his followers did not immediately increase due to this initial success. According to Slatin, this was because the local population was convinced that the Turco-Egyptian authorities would take strong measures to suppress the revolt, and could not risk the loss of life which they felt certain would ensue. Muḥammad Aḥmad was strongly encouraged by his second-in-command, ʿAbdallāhi, and his own brothers to flee Ābā Island. He resolved to retreat to southern Kordofan, and announced to his followers that the Prophet appeared to him in a vision and instructed him to proceed to Jabal al-Qadīr.[5] Before leaving Ābā Island, he appointed his four *khalīfa*s, each corresponding to one of the rightly-guided caliphs (al-Khulafāʾ al-Rāshidūn) of the first Islamic century.

Finally, in late November 1881, Muḥammad Aḥmad reached his destination. At the same time, Rāshid Bey, the Turco-Egyptian governor of Fashoda, resolved to attack Muḥammad Aḥmad before he became more powerful. Underestimating his enemy's strength, Rāshid Bey, without proper military preparation, marched into a carefully prepared ambush in which he and approximately fourteen hundred of his men were killed.

This defeat occurred on 9 December 1881; following this success, Muḥammad Aḥmad openly referred to himself as the Mahdī.[6] Furthermore, the Mahdī dispatched letters to several tribal shaykhs proclaiming his victories and the purpose of his mission. He summoned them to join his ranks, and by early November of 1883, with the defeat of the Turkiyya's forces at the battle of Shaykān, the Mahdī's consolidation of power over the western Sudan was complete.[7]

The leaders of various tribes flocked to the Mahdī, believing, according to Slatin, that he was truly *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar* ("the expected deliverer").[8] The Mahdī had gained money, arms, horses, and plunder of all kinds, and these he distributed among the chiefs of the tribes of

[4] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 335–8.
[5] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 54.
[6] Ibid.
[7] A. B. Theobald, *The Mahdīya: A History of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1881–1899* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1951), 62.
[8] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 65.

Kordofan who now joined the ranks of the Mahdiyya. The Mahdī's prestige increased, not only within the Sudan, but throughout Muslim-ruled areas. Delegations from the Hijaz, India, Tunisia, and Morroco visited him and heard his teachings.[9]

Slatin maintains that with the Mahdī's early military successes the populace began to truly regard him as a direct and immediate legatee of the Prophet Muḥammad.[10] The Mahdī began to designate for himself with the title, Khalīfat Rasūl Allāh ("the Successor of the Messenger of God"). The use of this title further supported his claims to religious legitimacy as heir to the Prophet and indicated a complete break with the vestiges of the past, especially those associated with the Turkiyya.[11]

As mentioned in the introduction, the designation "Turk" was applied by the Sudanese to those individuals connected with the Turco-Egyptian regime, regardless of ethnic origin. The appellation as used by the Mahdiyya suggested a lack of religious legitimacy—the "Turks" were considered non-Arab usurpers. The Mahdī's legitimacy was thus primarily based on the complete severing of ties with the Turkiyya and the re-establishment of Islam in the Sudan based upon the Prophetic model. The Mahdī claimed that his movement was a renewal and reinvigoration of the religion of Islam. This break with the past also entailed the abolition of Sufi orders and all perceived innovations. The Mahdī wanted all Sufi orders disbanded; this was no minor matter given that Sufism was a firmly entrenched religio-cultural aspect of the Nilotic Sudan. Islam entered the Sudan through the efforts of individual holy men, many of whom were associated with a Sufi order. The largest orders were the Qādiriyya, Khatmiyya, Tijāniyya, and Sammāniyya.

After the conquest of El Obeid in 1883, a proclamation was issued by Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi, the Mahdī's second-in-command, stating that the Mahdī had abolished and forbidden the activities of all Sufi orders. The Khalīfa stated that the people should behave as if the Prophet was in their midst, because if the Prophet was indeed in their midst, he would not permit adherence to any institution save faith in God. He continued by asking, how can people adhere to a Sufi order when the

[9] Holt, *Mahdist State*, 64.
[10] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 66.
[11] Ibid.

Mahdī is the "doorway to the Truth and the center of the circle of the Path."[12]

Ironically, having outlawed all Sufi orders, it was within the context of Sufi symbolism and terminology that the Mahdī articulated his claims to power. As Paul Connerton points out in his work on social memory and ritual, an absolutely new beginning is inconceivable. Connerton notes that in all modes of experience, humans must base their particular experiences on a prior context in order to ensure that they are intelligible at all.[13] It would seem that the Mahdī felt compelled to cling to, at the very least, the basic structure of Sufism, in order for his movement to have meaning to the population at large.

In the Sudan Sufism manifested itself in the Sufi brotherhoods; these were the standard and continue to be the standard within which all Islamic movements are measured. Hence, although the Mahdī's pronouncements stress that he desired a complete break with the past, this was an impossibility: aspects of the past had to remain in order to legitimate the new order.

The symbols and ceremonies employed during the Mahdiyya era were an attempt to invalidate the previous institution—the Turkiyya. This revocation was accomplished through the Mahdī's challenge of their religious legitimacy. The Mahdī claimed that the elites of the Turkiyya, although operating under the guise of Islam, were infidels. He wrote the following proclamation decrying the Turkiyya:

> The Turks are the worst of people in terms of unbelief. They produce books which they use to extinguish the light of God and they call these books of law. Also they place you in fetters for the purpose of seizing your possessions. Do not abandon the fight against them until they surrender themselves and their weapons to you.[14]

These attacks on the religious legitimacy of the Turkiyya served to bolster the religious legitimacy of the Mahdiyya. The Mahdī claimed to be in direct communication with the Prophet via visions, and it was the Prophet, he maintained, who was guiding him, and thus guiding the Mahdiyya. For example, the Mahdī abolished all four of the main Sunnī Muslim schools of law. Al-Kurdufānī, the biographer of

---

[12] Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī, *Manshūrāt al-Mahdī*, ed. Muḥammd Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm, (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1983), 125.

[13] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 8–9.

[14] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 344.

the Mahdī, noted that he abolished the legal schools because he "was the best intermediary between us and the Prophet."[15]

When the Mahdī related his visions of the Prophet to the populace via proclamations or within the context of religious sermons, he recalled a time when the rulers were righteous and the ruled were free from oppression, that is, the time of the Prophet and the four rightly-guided caliphs who immediately succeeded the Prophet. The Mahdī maintained that the Prophet appeared to him in a vision and presented him with the latter's sword. He added that ten angels, ʿAzrāʾīl, the angel of death, and al-Khiḍr were his constant guardians. The Mahdī also noted that the Prophet appeared in a vision to one of the Mahdī's principal disciples, the Faqīh ʿĪsā, exhorting all to recognize the authority of the Mahdī:

> The Prophet (may peace be upon him) came and sat next to me, and said, your shaykh [Muḥammad Aḥmad, the Mahdī] is the anticipated *mahdī*. ʿĪsā responded that he was a believer in the Mahdī's authority, to which the Prophet responded by saying, "whosoever does not believe in the Mahdī is an infidel in the eyes of God and his Prophet." The Prophet said this three times.[16]

As a religious movement and organization, the Mahdī claimed that the Mahdiyya was a direct legatee of the first Islamic state in which the Prophet Muḥammad governed as both the religious and political authority. Additionally, the Mahdiyya utilized symbols from the caliphate of the four rightly-guided caliphs (632–661). Within the Muslim milieu, this caliphate is considered the ideal Islamic polity. Their close relationship to the Prophet meant that these caliphs inherited a great deal of the Prophet's spiritual and religious authority; they also wielded political authority—and did so in a way that would be, Muslims generally believe, acceptable to the Prophet. After the overthrow of the Umayyad caliphate by the ʿAbbāsids, the latter, in order to elevate their religious legitimacy, claimed that the Umayyads had been a particularly irreligious dynasty and lacked the authority to rule because they were not pious rulers. One of the indictments leveled against the Umayyads during the ʿAbbāsid period was that they had transformed the caliphate into a kingdom that was based more on their

[15] Ismāʿīl ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Kurdufānī, *Saʿādat al-mustahdī bi-sīrat al-Imām al-Mahdī*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1982), 82.

[16] al-Mahdī, *Manshūrāt*, 14.

identity as Arabs than on their adherence to Islam. The ʿAbbāsids also claimed that they alone, as descendants of the Prophet Muḥammad, had a divine mandate to rule. When one delves into the literature of the period it becomes apparent that the ʿAbbāsids were no less corrupt or autocratic than their predecessors. Nonetheless, one can see the similarities between the claims advanced by the Mahdī in his rejection of the Turkiyya and that of the ʿAbbāsid caliphs.

The Mahdiyya, as a caliphate, was more analogous to that of the rightly-guided caliphs than that of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate. The Mahdī viewed himself as God's caliph, in accordance with the tradition of the Prophet that states that the caliph is God's shadow on earth, for it was God who elected him and entrusted him with the affairs of the world; the caliph's treasury is God's wealth, his armies are God's armies. The caliph is to his subjects as a soul is to a body. Aziz al-Azmeh, in his work on Islamic political culture, traces the origins of these concepts of kingship within Muslim polities to the Sassanids; these concepts gained wide acceptance toward the end of the Umayyad period.[17] Stetkevych, examining the role of the pre-Islamic ode in the Islamic era, states that pre-Islamic concepts of divine kingship influenced ideas of the caliphate.[18]

Despite claims of hearkening back to the time of the Prophet, the Mahdiyya was ostensibly influenced by the concept of divine kingship predominant in the Sudanic Belt, coupled with the Sufi brotherhoods' master-disciple relationships. The result was a uniquely Sudanese concept and practice of leadership.

Though the Mahdī's proclamations and sermons presented the Mahdiyya as a re-enactment of the Prophetic community, in reality, the Mahdiyya was, at least initially, a militant movement that was modeled after the nascent Islamic state in Medina. It utilized symbols of authority not only from this state, but from the Sudanese sultanates of Darfur and Funj; all steeped in the traditions of Islamic mysticism.

Ironically, the Mahdī, who had been a shaykh of the Sammāniyya order, ultimately banned all Sufi orders, all the while continuing to govern the Mahdiyya like a Sufi shaykh. He occupied a supreme and unique position by virtue of his divine investiture, but was, in essence,

---

[17] Aziz al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 73.

[18] Suzanne Stetkevych, *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender, and Ceremony in the Classical Arabic Ode* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 49.

a Sufi shaykh. Before his manifestation as the *mahdī*, Muḥammad Aḥmad's status had been that of the head of a Sufi order with spiritual authority over his disciples. The link between such a shaykh and his followers is a covenant expressed in the form of an oath of allegiance known as the *bayʿa*.

Oaths have a long tradition in Islamic history and are regarded as "the explicit and formal vehicle by which one man committed himself to another."[19] The Qurʾān is replete with a series of covenants between humankind and God, beginning with the covenant God initiated with Adam. The centrality of oath-taking in the political culture of Islam was also bolstered by the Prophetic example. The *bayʿa* was utilized by the Prophet Muḥammad on several occasions, the most famous was the "Pledge of Good Pleasure," also known as the "Pledge under the Tree," in which the Muslims pledged their allegiance to Muḥammad after the treaty of al-Hudaybiyya in March 628. Throughout the various Islamic dynasties, the *bayʿa* came to symbolize the voluntary offering of allegiance to a ruler. The Sufi brotherhoods of the Sudan utilized the practice of oath-taking and all new initiates were required to take an oath of allegiance to the shaykh. This symbolized both the spiritual and political authority possessed by the shaykh. Similarly, the Mahdī, apparently not wishing to break with tradition, employed the oath-taking ceremony to formally recognize new members who were sworn to uphold the tenets of the Mahdiyya. After his capture, Slatin described how he was administered the oath of allegiance by the Mahdī:

> Calling us up beside him, he bade us kneel on the edge of his sheepskin, and placing our hands in his, he told us to repeat after him as follows: "In the name of God, the most compassionate and merciful, in the name of the unity of God, we pay God, His Prophet, and you our allegiance; we swear that we will not associate anything else with God, that we shall not steal, nor commit adultery, nor lead anyone into deception, nor disobey you in your goodness; we swear to renounce this world and [look only] to the world to come, and that we shall not flee from the religious war." This over, we kissed his hand, and were now enrolled amongst the most devoted adherents; but at the same time we were liable to suffer their punishments.[20]

The *bayʿa* was given in a public ceremony involving several initiates and, like other oaths, was administered to ensure the loyalty of the new

---

[19] Roy P. Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 42.

[20] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 160–2.

adherents to the Mahdī. This oath, along with other acts of protocol such as gestures and salutes, comprised the foundation of the Mahdist ceremonies. By taking the oath, an individual affirmed the Mahdī's position as the Prophet's caliph, invested by God with a divine mission to purge the land of infidelity and revive Islam. This revivification of Islam took many forms, not the least of which was the banning of all Sufi orders. Despite this, the Mahdiyya's essential organizational structure was that of a Sufi order.

Mystical Islam: Sufi Brotherhoods

Sufism is the mystical aspect of Islam. Some consider it a reaction to the "cold" and formalistic tenets of more scripturalist Islam, which places great emphasis on the absolute gulf between humans and God. We noted that the Sufi orders or paths (*ṭarīqa*, pl. *ṭuruq*) wielded (and continue to wield) a great deal of influence in the Sudan, politically as well as in popular religious beliefs and practices. The Sufi path is a long mystical journey marked by a number of spiritual attainments that reflect the adherent's progress. A *ṭarīqa*'s legitimacy is traced through its chain of spiritual authority, which derives from the founder and, in several cases, from the Prophet and his cousin and son-in-law, ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib. All *ṭarīqa*s are in agreement that an aspirant who desires to journey safely through this life and arrive at his destination, which is union with the divine, must put him or herself under the guidance of a shaykh.

Sufism in the Sudan, as in the rest of the Muslim world, was never considered a religion in and of itself. The vast majority of Sufi shaykhs and their disciples hold that the tenets of Islam and Sufism are inextricably intertwined. Adherence to the *sharīʿa* (often translated as Islamic law, in the Muslim tradition it is viewed as the method established by God for right conduct) is incumbent upon each follower. Muḥammad ʿUthmān al-Mīrghanī, the founder of the Khatmiyya Sufi order in the Sudan, affirmed this in allegorical form: "The *sharīʿah* is a root, *ṭarīqa* is a branch and the *ḥaqīqa* ["Reality" or "Truth"] is the fruit."[21]

There were, however, some religious figures who did not give equal importance to the *sharīʿa*, instead emphasizing the mystical aspects of

[21] ʿAlī Ṣaliḥ Karrār, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1992), 12.

Sufism. Many of the followers of these Sufi shaykhs believed that the shaykhs were divinely guided and incapable of sin. All of their actions, even those in open contravention of *sharīʿa*, had to be understood within the context of the shaykh's infallibility.

It was within this Sufi context that the Mahdī, too, based his claims to legitimacy. Sudanese Muslims were very familiar with the concept of the Sufi shaykh, and, even if many of the people did not accept Muḥammad Aḥmad's claims that he was the *mahdī*, they recognized his legitimacy as akin to that of a Sufi shaykh, and therefore accorded him the concomitant spiritual authority that accrued to a shaykh. It is logical that the Mahdī would continue his movement along Sufi lines, since, according to ʿAlī Karrār, "Sufism was the most fundamental characteristic of Islam in the Sudan."[22] It was Sufi orders such as the Qādiriyya and Shādhiliyya that essentially facilitated the spread of Islam in the Sudan. The initial spread of Islamic teaching owed its impetus to holy men, often also adherents of Sufi orders, who came from Egypt, the Hijaz, Yemen, and, at a later stage, Morocco. Most of these holy men came after the rise of the Funj kingdom in 1504.[23]

The Turco-Egyptian occupation of the Sudan, in the view of many Sudanese at the time, posed an economic threat because of the taxes levied against the populace and the abolition of the slave trade. The Mahdī, however, viewed the presence of the Turkiyya and the Sufi orders both as threats to the sacrosanct nature of Islam. He believed that the orders distracted the populace from the only sources of Islam that mattered and that were sanctioned by God and His Prophet: the Qurʾān and Sunna.

I noted earlier that the Mahdī claimed to model the Mahdist state after the early Islamic community founded by the Prophet Muḥammad in Medina, and the caliphates of the four rightly-guided caliphs. The Mahdiyya, however, was not entirely analogous in form to the Prophet's community and the early caliphates because it utilized aspects of Sufi symbols of authority to shore up its own religious legitimacy. These symbols of authority remained and functioned as a reaffirmation to the populace that the Mahdī was the exemplary center of the Mahdiyya, and all authority emanated from him.

---

[22] Ibid., 11.

[23] Neil McHugh, *Holymen of the Blue Nile: The Making of an Arab-Islamic Community in the Nilotic Sudan, 1500–1850* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 10–11.

Protocol and Ceremony

Paula Sanders observes that Islamic polities such as the Umayyads, ʿAbbāsids, and Fāṭimids had a rich vocabulary available in Arabic to express the ideas inherent in the notion of protocol. Muslim scholars living in the tenth and eleventh centuries began to write systematically about the sources of political authority. One of these men, Hilāl al-Ṣabiʾ (d. 1056), writing about authority, used the terms *rusūm* and *marāsim* in his account of the rules, regulations, and protocols of the ʿAbbāsid court, where they had a range of meanings that reflect other usages. By far the most common term is *adab*, the ubiquitous and comprehensive Arabic term that concerns manners and etiquette, and reveals a preoccupation with all of the forms of human behavior.[24]

The Mahdiyya was not an established state during the time of the Mahdī, hence there was no court in the literal sense of the word. The Mahdī abolished all the rules and customs practiced by the Turkiyya; all government registers were burned and debts contracted with the Turkiyya considered cancelled. His followers were ordered to call themselves *fuqarāʾ*[25] or *anṣār* (helpers).[26] This was in keeping with the historic precedent of the Prophet's community in Medina: the Muslims of Medina who assisted the newly immigrated Meccans were called the Anṣār. The essence of the movement was an attempt to re-enact the first Muslim community at Medina, and to those ends, the Mahdī construed his military victories as a re-establishment of that community. Similarly, many newly established practices of the Mahdiyya were cast in the mold of the Prophet's community in Medina. The Mahdī attempted to emulate the Prophetic example in the area of protocol as well. One of the fundamental assumptions of Islamic protocol is that all believers are equal before God. However, all believers do not have equal status in society. Some are placed, by the will of God, in positions of authority above others. A tradition of the Prophet related on the authority of ʿAbdallāh b. Zayd states that the Prophet said

[24] Paula Sanders, *Ritual Politics and the City in Fatimid Cairo* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 14.

[25] *Fuqurāʾ*, literally the poverty-stricken, but in the context of Sudanese colloquial the term denotes holy men.

[26] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 64.

Muslims should, "Pay their respect to the rulers and seek their rights from God."[27]

Those individuals occupying positions of authority employed various forms of protocol to articulate their position in a symbolic manner. These were generally manifested in the form of titles and ceremonies of homage, oath-taking, and by holding formal audiences.

The Mahdī regularly held audiences with his followers, and these audiences, though lacking in pomp and circumstance, clearly enunciated who was the premier authority of the Mahdiyya. These ceremonies affirmed both the hierarchy of the Mahdiyya and the concept of community within the Mahdiyya. This was made manifest in the manner in which the Mahdī held audiences.

The Mahdī was available to his followers after every prayer, specifically the noon prayer. It was his custom to pray on a sheepskin mat in the presence of his followers; a slave generally stood beside him with a pillow on which he either sat or knelt. When the prayers were over he received the visitors.[28] The most frequent of all ceremonies of the Mahdiyya were these audiences. It was on these occasions that the Mahdī would issue the oath of allegiance (*bayʿa*) to the aspiring adherent. This oath was obligatory for all who wished to join the Mahdiyya. Al-Kurdufānī observed that the oath of allegiance that the Mahdī administered to his followers was similar to the oath of allegiance sworn by the early Muslims to the Prophet. He added that the Mahdī proclaimed that those who pledged their fealty to him were, in effect, pledging their fealty to God and the Prophet Muḥammad.[29] The practice of oath-taking in the Sudan is a tradition that has its foundation in the Qurʾān and Sunna of the Prophet and came to be used extensively by the Sufi brotherhoods. The *bayʿa* ceremony of the Mahdiyya was very similar in form to that of the Sufi brotherhoods.

The *bayʿa* for the different Sufi orders in the Sudan varied slightly in wording and structure from one order to another. For example, the Qādiriyya required that the initiate sit facing the direction of Mecca and then the shaykh would request that he repent of his previous sins. The initiate would then perform two prostrations and kneel before the shaykh, resting his knees against the latter's. The shaykh, holding the

---

[27] Muḥammad Muḥsin Khān, ed., *The Translation of the Meanings of Ṣaḥīh al-Bukhārī* (Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers, 1997), 9:92.

[28] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 607.

[29] al-Kurdufānī, *Saʿādat*, 144.

initiate's right thumb, would ask him to repeat the following: "I take refuge in God from the accursed devil." Then the initiate would recite "al-Fātiḥa," the first chapter of the Qurʾān. This completed, the initiate would recite the supplication of forgiveness, "I ask forgiveness of the Almighty God," and then repeat twice the supplication for the Prophet Muḥammad: "May God bless our master Muḥammad." The shaykh would then ask the initiate to close his eyes and open "the eyes of his heart" and concentrate on the litanies that the shaykh would dictate to him. After receiving the litanies, the initiate would declare his acceptance of the act of initiation by saying, "I have accepted Allah as my God, Islam as my religion, Muḥammad as the Prophet and Messenger, and our shaykh as a guide." The initiate would kiss the shaykh's hand and recite the verse of allegiance (*āyat al-mubāyaʿa*).[30] The recitation of this verse implies that allegiance to the shaykh and the order is essentially allegiance to God, and a betrayal of the shaykh and the order is a betrayal of God. After completing the recitation, the ceremony would conclude with the initiate and the shaykh reciting the opening chapter of the Qurʾān together.[31]

The initiation ceremony in the Mahdiyya was less elaborate than that of the Qādiriyya, but there are several similarities. The most obvious being the way in which both the Qādirī shaykh and the Mahdī grasped the hand of the initiate at the beginning of the ceremony, and, at its conclusion, required that the initiate kiss the hand of the respective religious leader. Furthermore, both oaths imply in their wording that allegiance to the leader is a compact of divine consequence.

The oath-taking ceremony and the Mahdī's audiences remained essentially modest affairs, clearly a result of the nature of the movement at the time. The Mahdiyya did not establish a truly permanent base of operations until after the fall of Khartoum in January 1885; thus elaborate ceremonies would not have been possible, given the movement's need for mobility. In addition, the modesty of the rituals and ceremonies of the Mahdiyya further demarcated the line of legitimacy, emphasizing the religious illegitimacy of the Turkiyya and the religious legitimacy of the Mahdiyya. The Mahdī eschewed the opulence

[30] "Behold, all who pledge their allegiance to you pledge their allegiance to God: the hand of God is over their hands. Hence, he who breaks his oath, breaks it only to his own detriment; whereas he who remains true to what he has pledged unto God, on him will He bestow a reward supreme" (Qurʾān 48:10).

[31] Karrār, *Sufi Brotherhoods*, 152.

of the Turkiyya and the pomp and circumstance of their ceremonies, preferring more modest displays of his authority; this apparently resonated with the populace, who were familiar with the stories of the Prophet that described him as a ruler not prone to ostentatious displays of wealth or power. Annemarie Schimmel suggests that the Prophet Muḥammad's poverty and the destitution of many of his family members form an important theme in the Sufi tradition.[32] Thus, the enunciation of the Mahdī's authority manifested itself in the lack of ostentation because the Prophet's community had been mythologized to represent one of extreme modesty. The modesty of the Mahdī's ceremony served to bolster his religious authority while simultaneously calling into question the legitimacy of the Turkiyya because the latter were wont to engage in great ostentatious displays of their wealth and authority.[33] This lack of ostentation was apparent in the Mahdī's audiences.

Upon receiving an audience with the Mahdī, a visitor was required to remove his shoes and approach the Mahdī with head bowed, the Mahdī would then extend his hand for the visitor to kiss. After kissing the Mahdī's hand, the visitor would back away a little from the Mahdī, and then begin his entreaty, addressing the Mahdī as "O Master" in a deferential manner. Upon completing the entreaty, the visitor would exit without turning his back to the Mahdī. Slatin also relates an occasion when he dined with the Mahdī during an audience:

> The Mahdī seemed delighted with the news he had received, and ordered a plate of fried meat to be brought, which he shared with us, eating with his fingers. It was considered a very high favor when he touched the plate with his hand, and handed a small piece of meat to those who sat with him, this favor he conferred on us.[34]

This exchange indicates that public homage was both a sign of reverence for the Mahdī and a mark of rank. The Mahdī personally summoned Slatin: very few of the Mahdī's followers were invited in this way by him and even fewer were given the opportunity to dine with him. Only those of high rank were given the privilege of appearing before the Mahdī. Although a captive of the Mahdist forces, Slatin was

---

[32] Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 47.

[33] Ehud Toledano, *State and Society in Mid-Nineteenth Century Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 51.

[34] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 96.

held in relatively high regard by the Mahdists because of his purported conversion to Islam. The exchange also illustrates the position of the Mahdī at the top of a hierarchy in which all ranks are well-established as relative to him and contingent upon his authority.

Irrespective of rank, all followers of the Mahdiyya who desired an audience with the Mahdī had to participate in the same ceremony. As noted, the foundation of every Sufi order was its shaykh. The shaykh was believed to be divinely authorized to teach and guide people in their worldly life and in the hereafter. In return for his guidance, his followers accorded him great respect and deemed his authority absolute. Within the Mahdiyya, kissing the hand of the Mahdī and meeting with him became a form of veneration: the visitor was essentially paying homage to the Mahdī, recognizing him as the caliph of the Prophet of God.

After they defeated the Turkish forces at Ābā Island in August 1881, the Mahdī related to his followers that the Prophet appeared to him in a vision and instructed him to confer the title of *khalīfa* upon his three principal commanders: ʿAbdallāhi al-Tāʿīshī, ʿAlī wad Ḥilū, and Muḥammad al-Sharīf.

> Then a great vision occurred, wherein the Prophet appointed successors from my companions. He sat one of my companions on the chair of Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq and another on the chair of ʿUmar. He left the chair of ʿUthmān empty and said, "This chair is for the son of al-Sanūsī, until he shall come to you, whether soon or late." He sat another of my companions on the chair of ʿAlī. Your spirit has furthermore been present with us in some of the visions, together with my companions, who are the successors of the companions of the Messenger of God.[35]

This proclamation illustrates that, according to the Mahdī, it was the Prophet Muḥammad who appointed the Mahdī's successors and thus the hierarchy of the movement was established by Prophetic design. The importance of the appointments of ʿAbdallāhi al-Tāʿīshī, ʿAlī wad Ḥilū, and Muḥammad al-Sharīf lies in the fact that they were not, primarily, representatives of the Mahdī, but successors of the earliest leaders of the Muslim community. As the Mahdī was the successor of the Messenger of God, so too ʿAbdallāhi al-Tāʿīshī was the successor of Abū Bakr, ʿAlī wad Ḥilū was the successor of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb,

[35] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 350.

and Muḥammad al-Sharīf was the successor of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin.

The Mahdī's forces were divided into three battalions, each under the command of a *khalīfa*. These commanders were understood to represent the rightly-guided caliphs (al-Khulafāʾ al-Rāshidūn). The first of these *khalīfa*s was ʿAbdallāhi al-Tāʿīshī, who was designated the Caliph Abū Bakr—Khalīfat al-Ṣiddīq. ʿAlī wad Ḥilū, of the Digheim tribe, was chosen to represent the Caliph ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb—Khalīfat al-Fārūq, and the representative of the fourth caliph, ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib—Khalīfat al-Karrār, was Muḥammad al-Sharīf, one of the Mahdī's relatives.[36] The Mahdī chose Shaykh al-Sanūsī, leader of the Sanūsiyya Sufi order of Libya, to represent ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān, but he refused the Mahdī's offer.[37] By designating his commanders as representatives of the four rightly-guided caliphs, the Mahdī was symbolically articulating the notion that he had the power to create an order that was akin to the Prophetic example.

The title Khalīfa is generally translated as "successor," and, in this sense, it was used by Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq after the Prophet's death, in the form of Khalīfat Rasūl Allāh (the Successor to God's messenger). Holt notes that had the Mahdī remained simply a religious teacher he would no doubt have appointed *khalīfa*s from among his principal disciples and sent them out to represent him in the different regions of the Sudan.[38]

ʿAbdallāhi, the representative of Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, was the Mahdī's second-in-command, and came to be called Khalīfat al-Mahdī (Successor of the Mahdī) and Amīr Juyūsh al-Mahdiyya (Commander of the Armies of the Mahdiyya).

The three major divisions of the armies of the Mahdiyya were each known by the banner or flag (*rāya*) around which each mustered on parade or in battle. ʿAbdallāhi was the commander of *al-rāya al-zarqāʾ*[39] (the black flag regiment), which was comprised primarily of Baqqāra Arab tribesmen of Kordofan and Darfur. This was the most numerous of the divisions. ʿAlī wad Ḥilū commanded *al-rāya al-khaḍrāʾ* (the green flag regiment), a small division composed of the tribes of Kināna

[36] Holt, *Mahdist State*, 103.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] *Azraq/zarqāʾ* (f.): in classical Arabic it refers to the color blue, however in Sudanese colloquial Arabic it denotes black.

and Digheim and the Baqqāra of the southern Jezira and Kordofan. Muḥammad al-Sharīf commanded *al-rāya al-ḥamrāʾ* (the red flag regiment), which was comprised of the Ashrāf, who were the relatives of the Mahdī, and the adherents of the Mahdiyya of riverine origin or descent. Each flag had the following phrase emblazoned on one side: "O Beneficent (God), O Compassionate (God), O Living (God), O Everlasting God, O Possessor of might and generosity, there is no god save God and Muḥammad is His messenger, and Muḥammad al-Mahdī is the successor of the messenger of God."[40]

The troops were reviewed on Fridays. The Mahdī alone had the prerogative of reviewing the Mahdist troops on horseback. During these reviews each principal flag was grouped with the flags of the various commanders. When the reviews took place, the commanders of *al-rāya al-zarqāʾ* deployed into a line with their banners raised and unfurled. Lining up opposite them and facing west was *al-rāya al-khaḍrāʾ* and connecting these two lines, and facing north, were the commanders and flags of the Ashrāf, *al-rāya al-ḥamrāʾ*. In this configuration a large square was formed, open on one side and the Mahdī and his staff advancing to the center would receive the salute and would then ride along the lines, welcoming his followers with the words, "Allāh yabarak fīkum" (may God bless you all).[41]

It is evident that these processions served to reaffirm the Mahdī's position as the exemplar at the center. The Mahdī, upon advancing to the center of the square, established his position in the Mahdiyya in a manner that no one could question. At the center of the parade, he received salutes and bestowed God's blessings upon his followers; thus, the parade affirmed his status as both military and religious leader. It may be noted that the Mahdī expressly forbade the populace from riding horses, declaring that horseback riding should only be occasioned under special circumstances. He ordered that, "No man should ride a horse except in time of war, or when he is on parade reviewing the troops, and then he should show no pride, but should conduct himself humbly."[42]

Whenever the Mahdī rode out on horseback or reviewed the troops, Aḥmad wad Sulaymān, the treasurer of the *bayt al-māl* (the public

[40] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 342.
[41] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 173.
[42] Muḥammad al-Mahdī, *Manshūrāt*, 45.

treasury), held the reins and walked barefoot at the horse's side.[43] The Mahdī's use of a mount during these reviews clearly indicated his elevated status in relation to other men.

On some occasions, ʿAbdallāhi, as the Mahdī's second-in-command, was accorded ceremonial privileges, such as the honor of reviewing the troops on horseback. However, ʿAbdallāhi's reviews were more military drills than formal ceremonies. His rank and power was affirmed by his physical proximity to the Mahdī during processions or audiences. During these occasions ʿAbdallāhi always stood or was seated to the right of the Mahdī.[44] After the Mahdī's death in June 1885, and the subsequent accession of ʿAbdallāhi to the leadership of the Mahdiyya, the pomp and circumstance of the military reviews increased. This indicates that there was a direct link between power and ceremony in the view of the Mahdist elites. It also emphasizes the way in which the need for ceremony increases as the stability of a state decreases, or becomes increasingly uncertain.[45] This phenomenon resonates in regard to the Mahdiyya because, as we see in later chapters, ʿAbdallāhi's rule was characterized by instability both internally and externally. He faced challenges to his authority from within the Mahdiyya and from Egyptian and British attempts to reconquer the Sudan. Because ʿAbdallāhi's religious authority was not as firm as that of the Mahdī's, he had to rely increasingly on ceremony to enunciate and buttress his authority.

Ohrwalder describes ʿAbdallāhi's reviews as religious ceremonies in which those who took part were supposed to receive special blessings and advantages.

> On parade days the great war drums begin beating two hours before sunrise.... The people apply all sorts of expressions to the beating in quick time, such as "Nakelkum" or "Naktulkum" ("We will eat you up" or "We will kill you")... The Ansar are drawn up in a long line facing eastwards, and all the people immediately rush to get into the various divisions to which they belong. Then the um bay'a (the great horn) sounds to indicate that the great master himself [ʿAbdallāhi] is arriving... He is generally mounted on a very good camel led by Wad Bashir; he sits with

[43] Joseph Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity in the Mahdī's Camp: 1882–1892*, trans. F. R. Wingate (London: William Clowes & Sons, 1892), 72.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Amelie Kuhrt, "Usurption, Conquest and Ceremonial: From Babylon to Persia," in *Rituals of Royalty*, ed. David Cannadine and Simon Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 40.

Nephew of the Khalīfa, wearing a patched Jibba. Reproduced by permission of Durham University Library, SAD A1/180.

> drawn sword, and moves very slowly, surrounded by his black bodyguards formed in a square. The four um bay'a blowers march just in front, and take it in turns to sound the great elephant's tusk.[46]

The dichotomy between the modest reviews of the Mahdī and the great ceremonial reviews of ʿAbdallāhi can also be explained by the nature of the Mahdiyya under the two men. During the Mahdī's lifetime the Mahdiyya was primarily a jihad movement intent on expelling the Turkiyya from the Sudan. When the Mahdī died, the Mahdists had succeeded in their goal of defeating the Turks, and set upon the task of building a theocracy under the leadership of Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi. It then became incumbent upon ʿAbdallāhi to engage in elaborate ceremonies in order to affirm not only his legitimacy as ruler but the legitimacy of the nascent state as well.

Herein lies the tension in the Mahdist state between the ideal on which it was founded and the social reality in which people lived. The Mahdī sought to restore the ideals of the Muslim community at Medina in the seventh century—ideals that recognized the authority of God and His Prophet—while simultaneously re-enforcing the egalitarian ethic that all believers are equal in the sight of God. However, during the time of the Mahdī, there was a great disparity in classes in the Sudan. The Mahdī attempted to end this disparity through legislation. For example, he prohibited the payment of exorbitant dowries in marriage. He also prohibited the hoarding of wealth and ordered that all followers of the Mahdiyya should dress in the same manner.[47]

The patched robe (*jubba muraqaʿa*) of the Sufi mendicant and other accoutrements of the Sufi orders were used by the Mahdī to emphasize the egalitarian ethic he was encouraging among his followers. This patched robe became the uniform of the Mahdists; it was intended to symbolize the follower's renunciation of the world and acceptance of redemption. The concept of a uniform was clearly a symbol borrowed from the Sufi orders such as the Qādiriyya, whose adherents wore patched robes and coarse garments.[48] The Mahdī claimed that the Prophet appeared to him in a vision and explained the reason for the multicolored patches:

---

[46] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity*, 245.
[47] al-Mahdī, *Manshūrāt*, 17.
[48] Karrār, *Sufi Brotherhoods*, 135.

> Then the Prophet, may peace be upon him, came and with him was ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jilānī. He was wearing a patched robe. Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qādir addressed the Prophet, saying O master, Prophet of God, the people are ashamed to wear the robe… The Messenger of God responded, saying that humans are a combination of colors: The head is blue, the teeth are white, the viscera are red, and fingernails are yellow. Hence, the Prophet said the patches are four colors: white, blue, red, and yellow.[49]

Whenever the robe became worn or tattered the followers of the Mahdī were required to re-patch the garment instead of discarding it. Furthermore, the material of the robe was fashioned from *damur*, a type of cotton that was unique to the Sudan.[50] The apparent intent of these practices was to bring about a complete break with anything associated with the Turkiyya. During the period of the Turkiyya many of the elite of Sudanese society began to emulate the dress of the Turco-Egyptian elites. The adoption of the patched robe as the official uniform of the Mahdiyya de-emphasized the differences in the social station of the various adherents. Everyone was considered equal in the sight of God; the *jubba* even eliminated the distinctions of the various Sufi orders. Many of these orders wore a specifically colored robe that came to be associated with a particular order.[51]

The skullcap, or *ṭāqīyya*, was, and continues to be, a form of headdress common in many Muslim areas. In Ottoman-controlled regions it assumed the shape of a tall, flat-topped cap worn with or without a tassel. This cap was called a *tarbūsh*. The Mahdī forbade all accoutrements associated with the Turkiyya; as a consequence the Mahdists either wore a small, unornamented *ṭāqīyya* or the *ṭāqīyya* known as *ṭāqīyya umm qarnayn*.[52] The *umm qarnayn* was primarily worn during special occasions and, as its name implies, it was a skullcap that had what appeared to be two horns protruding from the edges and, unlike the more common smaller *ṭāqīyya*, the *umm qarnayn* was not worn with a turban wrapped around it. The horned headdress was originally used by the rulers of the Funj Sultanate as a symbol of their royal authority and was later adopted by the Sufi shaykhs. Arkell notes that the Yaʿqubāb branch of the Qādiriyya order used the *umm qarnayn*

---

[49] al-Mahdī, *Manshūrāt*, 17.
[50] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity*, 19.
[51] Karrār, *Sufi Brotherhoods*, 135.
[52] Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm, *Adawāt al-ḥukm wa-l-wilāya fī-l-Sudan* (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1992), 55–7.

and the *kakur* (wooden stool), another symbol of Funj royal authority, in their ceremonies of investiture.[53] It was most likely from the Sufis that the Mahdists adopted the practice of wearing the *umm qarnayn*.

The turban or *ʿimāma* was a long piece of white cloth that was wound around the skullcap and worn on the head with the cap. The Mahdists wore the turban in the style ascribed to the Prophet in the biographies.[54] The use of the turban was not widespread in the Sudan prior to the Mahdiyya, but was limited to rulers, who used it to symbolize their religious authority.[55] When the Sufi shaykhs adopted the turban, they usually wore it with a robe that corresponded in color.[56] There was not a designated length or way of winding the turban until the Mahdī ordered that it be white and wound around the skullcap in the manner worn by the Prophet Muḥammad. The turban would be wound so as to leave a length of cloth approximately half a meter hanging on the right side of the head.[57]

Rosary beads, known as *subḥa*, were worn around the neck in the fashion of the Sufi orders of the day as a form of spiritual protection. Leather sandals were the primary form of footwear worn by the Mahdists.[58]

As discussed above, among the believers differences in social station and rank were assumed to exist, yet before God all ranks were relative. The court protocol of the Umayyads, ʿAbbāsids, and Fāṭimids communicated this difference in rank. In these earlier Muslim dynasties clear distinctions were made between ceremonial costumes and ordinary dress. Thus, the expensive clothes worn by the nobility and the caliphs symbolically drew a line further separating the rulers from the ruled. The Mahdī and his *khalīfa*s, however, always wore the patched robe of the Mahdiyya, and this served as a symbolic reminder of the egalitarian nature claimed by the movement. The Mahdī occupied a unique position as head of the movement, yet it was his intention to abolish any outward signs that would glorify or exalt any individual. Many Sudanese believed that the Turkiyya had shown partiality to certain individuals and groups, such as the Shāʾiqiyya people and the

[53] Arkell, "Fung Origins," 224.
[54] Abū Salīm, *Adawāt al-ḥukm*, 55–7.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] From an interview conducted in Khartoum in June 2001 with Muḥammad Dāwūd al-Khalīfa, grandson of Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi.
[58] Abū Salīm, *Adawāt al-ḥukm*, 57.

Khatmiyya Sufi order.[59] Thus, on one level, the outward abolition of rank and social status in the Mahdiyya was an attempt to restore the early Muslim community in Medina, but on another level it reflected the continuing struggle between the old regime and the new by further de-legitimizing the former regime as one lacking Prophetic precedent (because the Prophet's community was one based on piety rather than social rank). Hence, the Mahdī was essentially passing judgment on the Turkiyya when he abolished rank and partiality. Connerton observes that judging former governments is a constitutive act of all new orders.[60]

Even among his followers, the Mahdī prohibited the use of any designation that implied rank. His followers initially referred to themselves as dervishes, a Sufi term to refer to wandering ascetics; later, the Mahdī issued a proclamation forbidding the use of this designation, and instead ordering that his followers be known as Anṣār.

During the period of the nascent Muslim community there were two groups of Muslims in Medina: The Muhājirūn and the Anṣār. The Muhājirūn (emigrants) were those early Meccan Muslims who fled their city with the Prophet in 622 and settled with him in Medina. The Anṣār (helpers) were those inhabitants of Medina who embraced Islam and welcomed the fleeing Prophet and his Meccan followers.

The change in the designation of the followers of the Mahdī from dervishes to Anṣār was yet another way to emphasize the parallels between the Mahdī and the Prophet Muḥammad. The movement was not merely a militant Sufi order, but a re-enactment of the first Muslim community in Medina. The Mahdī, by designating his followers as Anṣār, identified with the nascent Muslim community, and thus bolstered his own legitimacy and authority, as well as that of the Mahdiyya. The term dervish is not, in and of itself, opprobrious. However, by forbidding the use of this term in favor of Anṣār, the Mahdī placed himself in a position, in his re-enacted community, analogous to that of the Prophet in the original Islamic community. Like the Prophet, the Mahdī was blessed by God, guided by Him, and a personification of His authority; indeed he intercedes between God and humankind. Just as the Mahdī is the Prophet's successor, the Mahdist community came to be identified with the first Muslim community. The Sudanese

[59] Shuqayr, *Ta'rīkh al-Sūdān*, 3:109–12.
[60] Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 7.

Muslims were quite familiar with the Prophetic tradition and its symbols. The Mahdī's use of the Prophetic precedent forced the people to think of the Mahdiyya as the repository of sublime charisma, directing the affairs of the world in accordance with the wishes of God. Thus there was a direct relation between the earthly order and the heavenly order. The Prophet Muḥammad was the archetypal man, and the first Muslim community at Medina was the archetypal community. This recollection of the Prophet's community via the appropriation of its symbols gave legitimacy to the Mahdiyya.

Symbols of Authority

Recurrent throughout the Mahdī's proclamations is a call to renounce the transitory attractions of this world in favor of the more permanent rewards of the hereafter. Insignias that implied rank were prohibited, and all the followers of the Mahdiyya, regardless of socioeconomic and tribal background, were considered Anṣār. Despite this egalitarian ethic, the Mahdī remained at the center of the Mahdiyya, and this central role required that he adopt many of the insignias of sovereignty as symbols of his authority. The insignias used by the Mahdī and Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi after him were significant because of their complex historical associations. Above all, the use of regalia, whether worn, touched, or otherwise in proximity, is a mode of enunciating power, the specific manners of which constituted a set of remarkably constant iconographic conventions with a fairly limited, yet ubiquitous core.[61]

This ubiquitous core of symbols of authority within the Muslim milieu usually took the form of insignia, such as the seal (*khātim*), caliphal garments (*thiyāb al-khilāfa*), the mantle of the Prophet (*burda*), the musical instruments that were used in processions, the sword of the Prophet (*sayf al-nabī*), the eating receptacle (*qadaḥ*), the mention of the caliph's name in the Friday sermon (*khuṭba*), and his inscription on coins (*sikka*).[62] Of course these insignia were a function of the Umayyad, ʿAbbāsid, and Fāṭimid caliphates as well, and the symbols continued to resonate long after these caliphates had ceased to exist. The insignias were taken up by the Ottomans to affirm their

[61] al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship*, 11–12.
[62] Sanders, *Ritual Politics*, 24.

religious as well as temporal authority.[63] The people of these polities were well aware of the power of these insignia, and their use during processions further emphasized the authority of the rulers in the eyes of the populace.

Although the Sudan was considered a country on the periphery of the so-called central Islamic lands, the Muslims of the Sudan were just as familiar with the insignia of sovereignty as their more centrally located co-religionists.[64] Many of these insignias from the central Islamic lands had also been employed by the sultanates of the Funj and the Fūr. However, these two sultanates had employed insignias of sovereignty that were peculiarly Sudanic: the banner (*rāya*), which was raised in battle and processions; the use of the wooden stool (*kakur*) on which the sultan would sit during coronations or processions; the wearing of the two-horned skullcap (*umm qarnayn*), and the bearing of the sword, lance, and the staff.[65]

These insignias, used in association with kings and sultans to emphasize the authority of the ruler, were only meaningful when attached to a royal personage. The ruler ostensibly had authority whether he employed the insignias or not. Nonetheless, the insignias served as a reminder of the authority of the individual bearing it. Over time, in the Sudan these insignias came to be identified as regalia of the Sufi shaykhs. Many of these shaykhs came to be regarded as saints and miracles were attributed to them. Their tombs became places of pilgrimage and they were revered as holy places because the shaykhs entombed within were considered in possession of blessings (*baraka*) that could be transmitted by inheritance or contact.[66]

In addition to the use of such symbols, the Mahdī's behavior itself articulated his claims to authority. His authority was maintained by his ability to use the Prophetic precedent in such a manner that the Mahdī's actions came to be identified with the actions of the Prophet. The Mahdī and the Prophet Muḥammad were, apparently, viewed in the same light by many Sudanese at that time. The followers of the Mahdī, the Anṣār, used the same formula of supplication when pro-

[63] Toledano, *State and Society*, 51.
[64] Abū Salīm, *Adawāt al-ḥukm*, 13
[65] Ibid.
[66] Trimingham, *Islam*, 198–229.

nouncing the name of the Mahdī as they did when mentioning the name of the Prophet: *ʿalayhi al-salām* (may peace be upon him).[67]

As emphasized above, the symbols of authority, and the symbolic behavior employed by the Mahdī were inextricably intertwined with the religious symbols of the Sufi shaykhs and the political symbols of the Funj and Fūr sultans. Arguably, however, it was the Mahdī's adherence to the example of the Prophet more than the use of Sufi and political symbols that affirmed his authority and legitimacy in the eyes of the populace. Within the Islamic tradition, both Sunnī and Shīʿa, it was understood that *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar* would be a direct descendant of the Prophet from the line of Fāṭima and ʿAlī. Although it has been documented that the Mahdī was born in Dongola, a region in the northern Sudan where the majority of the inhabitants are Danāqla, a Nubian group, the Mahdī's family claimed to be Ashrāf, descendants of the Prophet.[68]

By virtue of this relationship, the Mahdī, as Khalīfat al-Rasūl (the Prophet's caliph) had the prerogative of being advised by the Prophet in the form of visions and dreams. Visions of the Prophet are considered to be genuine because, according to a tradition found in the *Ṣaḥiḥ* of Bukhārī, Satan cannot assume the appearance of the Prophet.[69]

Visions are not an uncommon occurrence within the Sufi tradition. A critical juncture within the Sufi adherent's spiritual development is when he begins to experience visions of the Prophet Muḥammad and, sometimes, al-Khiḍr. These visions indicate that the adherent no longer needs a shaykh for guidance because the adherent is guided by the Prophet and al-Khiḍr and can continue on the path on his own. Vision of the mysterious Islamic figure, al-Khiḍr (lit., the "green one"), is important, especially in respect to sainthood and the founding of a new order. Although not mentioned explicitly by name in the Qurʾān, in the chapter of "The Cave" (Sūrat al-Kahf), Moses is guided on his journey by a mysterious, wise figure; tradition maintains that this is al-Khiḍr. Some Qurʾānic commentators maintain that al-Khiḍr is one of the prophets, whereas others refer to him as an angel who serves as a guide to those who seek God. Yet others argue that he is a perfect friend (*walī*) of God. He possesses wisdom (*ḥikma*) and represents in

[67] Al-Kurdufānī, the biographer of the Mahdī, uses this supplication throughout his work when referencing the Mahdī.
[68] al-Mahdī, *Manshūrāt*, 20.
[69] Khān, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 4:135.

Sufi thought the hidden guide for those who walk the mystical path and he is the inner light of sainthood (*wilāya*).[70]

The Mahdī's visions signified a sacred continuity from the Prophet Muḥammad to himself:

> And the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of God be upon him) informed me that I am the expected deliverer (*al-mahdī al-muntaẓar*) and the Messenger (peace and blessings of God be upon him), appointed me as his successor by seating me on his chair in the presence of the caliphs, the hierarchy of saints, and al-Khiḍr (peace be upon him)… and the Prophet girded me with his sword, in addition he supported me with ten angels and ʿAzrāʾīl [the angel of death] will always accompany me. And I continue to receive support and information from the Prophet (peace be upon him) in the presence of a gathering of the most devoted saints.[71]

In this proclamation the concept of prophethood (*nubūwwa*) became manifest in the Mahdiyya. The Mahdī is, essentially, transformed into a prophet by the Prophet Muḥammad himself. Thus, there can be no doubt of the Mahdī's legitimacy because the Prophet seated the Mahdī on the Prophet's chair, implying that the Mahdī had the same authority as the Messenger. The girding of the Mahdī with the Prophet's sword is a symbolic gesture couched in the transcendent symbolic medium of a vision. The sword, in regard to kings, symbolizes power and majesty. In Sufi imagery, the sword is symbolic of spiritual power and spiritual legitimacy. The sword that the Mahdī claimed the Prophet gave him was not, ostensibly, a material sword, but rather a spiritual sword; according to the sources, this sword never appeared in any official processions. The Prophet's sword is mentioned by the Mahdī in another proclamation, in which he states that the Prophet gave him the sword of victory and informed him that neither man nor jinn could defeat him as long as he carried it.[72] Reference to the Prophet's sword was meant to be interpreted as an expression of the victory that God would grant the Mahdiyya over the Turkiyya if the people recognized the authority of the Mahdī.

The symbolism of the sword is evident early on, in the Mahdī's sole reliance on swords and lances in the initial stages of his war with the Turkiyya. He ordered that his followers eschew the use of firearms

---

[70] Trimingham, *Islam*, 158.
[71] al-Mahdī, *Manshūrāt*, 19–22.
[72] al-Mahdi, *al-Āthār al-kāmila*, 1:97.

and utilize these traditional weapons in keeping with the tradition of the Prophet.[73] This use of swords and lances, however, ended after the famous battle of El Obeid, which took place on Friday, 8 September 1883. During this battle the Mahdiyya lost approximately 10,000 men, among them the Mahdī's two brothers and a brother of Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi, as well as the judge, Aḥmad Jubāra. The firearms that had been seized by the Mahdiyya in previous battles were retrieved and used to outfit a new force of non-Arab troops. This force was known as the Jihādiyya (comprised of Nubians and southern Sudanese peoples) and was largely recruited from the Turkiyya's infantry of the same name, who had been taken prisoner in battle by the Mahdist forces.[74]

The sword, the symbolic embodiment of both worldly and spiritual power, was a centerpiece of the ceremonies of the Mahdiyya. According to Shuqayr, the Mahdī received a sword from one of his companions, a man by the name of al-Zubayr b. al-ʿAwwām, after the Mahdī's emigration to Jabal al-Qadīr in 1881. The Mahdī kept this sword with him until his death, and after his death Khālīfa ʿAbdallāhi sought the sword, in order to affirm his own authority. However, he was thwarted in his attempts to obtain it when the female relatives of the Mahdī hid it and subsequently gave it to the Mahdī's kinsman, Khalīfa Sharīf.[75] Because this sword had been touched by the Mahdī, it came to symbolize the spiritual authority of its bearer. The relatives of the Mahdī, who were at odds with Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi, were apparently fearful that if he were to obtain the sword, the populace would give him the same reverence they had shown the Mahdī. This would hinder their plans to oust Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi from his position of power and install one of their own in his stead. From this incident we gain a glimpse of the immense sway these symbols of authority had over the minds of the populace.

Although unable to obtain the Mahdī's sword, the Khalīfa continued to use a sword as a symbol to articulate his authority and power. After succeeding the Mahdī as the leader of the Mahdist state, ʿAbdallāhi would walk in processions carrying a sword in his left hand and a short lance in his right hand. If he mounted a camel in a procession or a military review he would either gird the sword on his right side

[73] al-Kurdufānī, *Saʿādat*, 85.
[74] Holt, *Mahdist State*, 55.
[75] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 636.

or place it in front of him on the saddle.[76] This is a clear example of ritual and symbolic continuity as expressed by the use of the sword by the Mahdī and Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi to enunciate authority and power. The sword was used in the caliphal period as a symbol of majesty and power; later, by Sufi shaykhs to represent spiritual might; and in the context of the Mahdiyya, the very bearing and mention of the sword worked to confirm the worldly and spiritual power of both the Mahdī and Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi.

Concomitant with symbols of authority and symbolic behavior are somatic marks of kingship and holiness. The Prophet Muḥammad's physical characteristics, as well as his moral character, were signs of his prophethood. A special mark of the Prophet, the "seal of prophethood," affirmed his position as the last messenger of the divine revelation. The seal is described unanimously by all sources as a kind of mole that was located between his shoulders.[77] It is said that the Christian monk Baḥīrā recognized young Muḥammad as the promised last prophet by this very mark.

Just as the mark that the Prophet Muḥammad had between his shoulders affirmed his prophecy in line with tradition, "the expected deliverer" had physiognomic signs that distinguished him as the *mahdī*. According to tradition, the *mahdī* will be a man from the Hijaz with a broad forehead and pointed nose.[78] In June 1881, Muḥammad Aḥmad wrote a letter to Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Baṣīr of the Ḥalāwiyīn in the Jezira and claimed that the bodily mark that distinguished him at birth as the "expected deliverer" was the mole on his right cheek.[79]

This claim was reiterated in a number of circulars throughout the Mahdī's time as leader of the Mahdiyya. Holt notes that this claim was repeated in response to the religious scholars who criticized the Mahdī and maintained that he was an impostor because he bore none of the traditional features that would indicate that he was the "expected deliverer."[80] In response, the Mahdī maintained that he was not interested in the traditional characteristics of the *mahdī*, since God is not

[76] Ibid.
[77] Schimmel, *Muhammad*, 34.
[78] Aḥmad Ḥasan, trans., *Sunan Abū Dawud* (Lahore: Sh. Muḥammad Ashrāf Publishers, 1984), 1:191.
[79] al-Mahdī, *Manshūrāt*, 26.
[80] Holt, *Mahdist State*, 99.

bound by human speculation on the matter.[81] Despite this, the Mahdī did make a great effort to demonstrate that at least two of the characteristics of the "expected deliverer" did apply to him: the mole on the cheek, which was reminiscent of the Prophet Muḥammad's somatic sign of prophethood, and descent from the family of the Prophet.

In addition to these characteristics, the Mahdī wrote that God bestowed upon him another sign that affirmed his position as the "expected deliverer." This sign was a banner of light that manifested itself in the Sudan during the early stages of the Mahdiyya.[82] Furthermore, the Mahdī related to his followers that the Prophet told him that he was created from a light from the depths of the Prophet's heart.[83]

This vision is reminiscent of the Sufi concept of the Muḥammadan light (*al-nūr al-Muḥammadiyya*). The concept of the light of Muḥammad has its origin in the Qurʾān itself, where the Prophet is referred to as a shining lamp (*sirājun munīr*). Early Sufis interpreted the "Light verse" (*āyat al-nūr*) of the Qurʾān as referring to the Prophet.[84]

According to the Sufi interpretation of this concept, God created the light of Muḥammad before He created the world. God created Adam and the prophets after him from this light. The light then passed into Muḥammad's descendants, through the line of his daughter, Fāṭima, and his cousin ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib.[85] The mention of this light of the Prophet emphasized the Mahdī's status as successor of the Prophet. Thus God invested the Mahdī with the attributes of the Prophet. The Prophet's essence is one of guidance and light, and this light serves as a beacon for guidance. As the Prophet's successor, the Mahdī is the guide who will disperse the darkness of the Turkiyya and illuminate the way to salvation for all who choose to follow him.

Holt maintains that the imagery of these visions had a compelling effect on the Sudanese Muslim populace, who were exposed to stories of the miracles of the various saints from childhood. In contrast, the

---

[81] Ibid.

[82] al-Mahdī, *Manshūrāt*, 26.

[83] Ibid.

[84] "God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His light is, as it were, that of a niche containing a lamp; the lamp is in a glass, the glass is like a radiant star lit from a blessed tree. An olive, neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil is well nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it: light upon light! God establishes parables for men and God is all knowing" (Qurʾān 24:35).

[85] Schimmel, *Muhammad*, 135.

religious scholars, many of whom had been trained at al-Azhar, the bastion of orthodox theology, were not so easily convinced of the Mahdī's claims of spiritual authority.[86] The Mahdī defended his authority and legitimacy by maintaining that the religious scholars that were attacking him were venal scholars (*ʿulāmaʾ al-sūʾ*) co-opted by the Turkiyya. Furthermore, the Mahdī countered that the knowledge and power of God were beyond the ken of ordinary men. Despite not fulfilling the traditional qualifications of the *mahdī*, Muḥammad Aḥmad proclaimed that he was indeed the "expected deliverer" because God had chosen him, and that not believing in the Mahdiyya was tantamount to not believing in God and the Prophet.[87]

The possession of esoteric knowledge of the divine will is a mystical gift that was well known among the Sufis. Mystical gnosis (*maʿrifa*) enables those so favored to unveil the secrets of the unseen world of reality and contemplate the mysteries of being. With the Sufis, the divine mysteries are revealed by degrees, in proportion to a person's spiritual growth and receptivity, but there are individuals with special gifts who have been given a mystical understanding of life that transcends ascetic discipline.[88] The Mahdī effectively claimed such a status when he stated that God had chosen him personally and that because of his spiritual investiture he alone could interpret God's will and the Prophet's will.

It seems, however, that despite his claim to possess divine knowledge and his assertion that God knows what men know not (i.e., implying that God may know he is the *mahdī*, while men are slow to recognize it), the Mahdī went to great lengths to fulfill the popular expectations concerning *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar*. For example, the Mahdī's emigration to Jabal al-Qadīr in October 1881 is somewhat analogous to his use of Prophetic genealogy to affirm his authority. According to tradition, the anticipated *mahdī* would begin his call from Jabal Māsa in North Africa.[89]

In southern Kordofan in the range of Jabal Nūba, there was a small mountain called Jabal al-Qadīr. This mountain was not known as Māsa prior to the appearance of the Mahdī; the Mahdī gave it that name in an effort to fulfill the traditions concerning the coming of the *mahdī*.

---

[86] Holt, *Mahdist State*, 100.
[87] al-Mahdī, *Manshūrāt*, 23–7.
[88] Trimingham, *Islam*, 140.
[89] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 339.

The Mahdī proclaimed to his followers that the Prophet told him to emigrate from Ābā Island to Jabal Māsa, which he claimed was the true name of Jabal al-Qadīr.[90]

The legitimacy of the Mahdiyya as a movement and a nascent state was of course inextricably intertwined with the Mahdī's authority. Use of such symbolic acts as the emigration to Jabal al-Qadīr further buttressed the Mahdī's spiritual authority. After the Mahdist conquest of Khartoum on 26 January 1885, and the subsequent death of General Charles Gordon, the Mahdī's authority and the legitimacy of the movement increased. The Mahdists had defeated the "Turks" and they were now in control of most of the northern Sudan. It became incumbent upon the Mahdī to initiate policies that would reinforce the legitimacy of the new Mahdist state. The most important of these policies was the minting of coins, the prerogative of a truly sovereign state. One of the first policies of any newly independent state is to mint new coinage, it is, in effect, a proclamation of independence. The Mahdiyya was no exception to this rule.

The Mahdist coins were modeled after the Ottoman coins.[91] The Mahdists had amassed a great deal of gold and silver during the course of their battles. Consequently, the Mahdī ordered that these precious metals be transformed into hard currency using the same weights and designations as had been used by the Turkiyya. For example, the Mahdiyya's minted gold pound was the same as the Egyptian pound; likewise the silver riyal of the Mahdists' was the same as the Egyptian riyal. One side of the coins was inscribed with the date the coin was minted and on the other side was inscribed: "By the order of the Mahdī."[92]

Despite the Mahdī's intense criticism of the Turkiyya, there were aspects of the regime that he could not completely abandon; the monetary system was one of the aspects that had to be retained. The replacement of the Ottoman phrases on the coins with that of the Mahdiyya's was obviously an attempt to establish a new beginning. Objects such as coins symbolized temporal authority, but came to be identified with spiritual authority as well—because it was the Mahdī who had ordered

---

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ahmad Ibrahim Abu Shouk and Anders Bjørlelo, eds., *The Public Treasury of the Muslim, Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), xvii.

[92] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 598.

the minting. Other more purely symbolic objects came to be associated with the spiritual authority of the Mahdī.

One such object was the trumpet that was used during processions. This trumpet, which was a hollowed out piece of wood with inscriptions written on its surface, was an instrument associated with royal personages in parts of Africa. According to Abū Salīm, there is no record of any Sufi shaykh using the instrument in the Sudan.[93] However, the Funj sultans employed a trumpet, which was primarily fashioned from wood, though in some instances it was made from elephant tusks, the horn of a gazelle, or a mountain goat. This trumpet, called a *būq*, was used during coronation ceremonies and in summoning the army.[94] The Mahdists employed a trumpet made from the tusk of an elephant; this trumpet, known as *um bayʿa*, was used in much the same way as the *būq*. For example, Slatin observed that the horn was sounded whenever the Khalīfa reviewed the troops on Friday.[95]

The Khalīfa also made use of the *qadaḥ* as a symbolic expression of his authority. The *qadaḥ* is an eating receptacle from which a large group of people could eat. These receptacles were well known throughout the Sudan and symbolized generosity because rulers and religious men used them in distributing food to the people. The Khalīfa, in a display of generosity, used the *qadaḥ* of a famous shaykh who was captured in battle to feed his army in banquets.[96]

The staff, like the eating receptacle, was a functional instrument that with time came to symbolize authority. While its initial function was to aid those who had difficulty walking or who walked long distances, the staff (*ʿaṣā*) became a symbol of authority used by both kings and Sufis. Shuqayr mentions that the Fūr sultans used a silver-and gold-ornamented staff as an instrument when issuing the oath of allegiance. He adds that the Mahdī sometimes carried a copper staff when walking, but it appears that he did not use it in more formal settings.[97] It seems that the Mahdī employed the staff as a functional instrument rather than as a symbol of authority.

All of the insignias of sovereignty were not used equally. There was a definite hierarchy of the insignias: the seal and the signet ring were

[93] Abū Salīm, *Adawāt al-ḥukm*, 86.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 100–5.
[96] Abū Salīm, *Adawāt al-ḥukm*, 87.
[97] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 749.

at the top of this hierarchy. The identification of power with the signet ring (*khātim*) is an ancient one. In the Islamic tradition the ring of the Prophet Sulaymān (Solomon) illustrated his authority and power.

The Mahdī used the seal to verify the authenticity of documents. His seal was oval in shape with an inscription that comprised three lines. Muḥammad al-Mahdī ʿAbdallāh was inscribed in the middle, at the top of the seal was inscribed: "Lā ilāha illā Allāh" (There is no god, but God), and at the bottom of the seal was written, "Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh" (Muḥammad is the Messenger of God). On the far right edge was inscribed the date and on the left edge was written the *basmallāh* (In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Compassionate).[98]

The uninscribed ring was also an important symbol of religious authority because the Prophet Muḥammad was said to have worn a silver ring on his right hand. In keeping with this tradition, the Mahdī did the same.[99] When Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi assumed leadership of the Mahdiyya he obtained all of the Mahdī's seals, as well as the uninscribed silver ring. The objects of the Mahdī were coveted because they conferred honor and rank; they were also believed to have the power to transmit blessings and grace. The Khalīfa alone wished to be the sole benefactor of this grace; hence, he prohibited the use of the seals and he alone wore the Mahdī's signet ring. In addition, he had inscribed on the ring the phrase: "Ḥasbunā Allāh wa niʿma al-Wakīl" (God suffices us and what an excellent one He is in whom to place our trust), and used this as his official seal.[100] In this way, ʿAbdallāhi asserted his authority by appropriating one of the Mahdī's insignias of authority.

These insignias of authority, concomitant with symbolic behavior, all served to reinforce in the social consciousness and religious imagination of the populace Muḥammad Aḥmad's identity as the "expected deliverer" and sole legitimate ruler of the Mahdist state. The Mahdī employed a complex array of symbols and ceremonies borrowed from Sudanic symbols of divine kingship, the traditions of the Prophet, and the rituals of the Sufi brotherhoods to articulate his religious and political authority.

[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid., 646.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CHARISMATIC LEADER

The previous chapter treated the symbols, protocol, and ceremony that articulated the Mahdī's claims to authority. These symbols of authority did, indeed, enunciate power, though in themselves they held little meaning without the figure who utilized these insignias of authority. The ruler who usually stood at the summit of the social hierarchy wielded these insignias to articulate his commanding authority. But all rulers do not necessarily wield effective authority. In some Asian societies, kingship consisted of pomp and circumstance rather than governance, while actual authority was exercised at local or regional levels.[1] The Mahdiyya, as I have shown, engaged in relatively little pomp and circumstance, yet everyone knew that the Mahdī wielded the effective authority of the movement and later the state.

This chapter analyzes the Mahdī as the locus of power and authority of the Mahdiyya and explores the role that ceremonial played in buttressing his authority. I will begin with a discussion of Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority and explore how and if the Mahdī fits this paradigm. Within this framework I argue that much of the Mahdī's authority is a result of how he was perceived by his followers and those members of the general populace predisposed to his message. Many of the northern Sudanese apparently considered the Mahdī as the charismatic and spiritual heir of the indigenous Muslim holy men, who, according to Neil McHugh, were responsible for the Arabization and Islamization of much of the northern Sudan beginning in the sixteenth century and continuing well into the nineteenth century.[2] I pursue this argument by treating the reasons why the activities of these holy men resonate in the collective memory of the Muslims of the northern Sudan. Finally, the chapter advances the notion that there was a connection between the Mahdī's authority and the eschatological ideas

[1] Reinhard Bendix, *Kings or People: Power and the Mandate to Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 21.

[2] McHugh, *Holymen*, 10.

that had entered the upper Nile Valley via the western Sudan in the nineteenth century.

Charisma

The Mahdī's authority was built upon what Weber refers to as a charismatic foundation—devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by that person.[3] Arguably, Weber's definition of charismatic authority can be applied to the Mahdī because his legitimacy as a leader and his claims to authority were a result of the personal trust he engendered in the people. The Mahdī's legitimacy and claim to authority was not born of position or rank. He was at the top of a hierarchy that established all rank as relative and in some way contingent upon his authority. At the core of Weber's argument is the question of how a leader's followers and disciples perceive him; this determines the validity of his charisma.[4] The ultimate judgment of the leader's goodness or genuineness lies solely with his followers. The opinions of outsiders or non-communicants who have not succumbed to the leader's charisma are irrelevant. Whatever the leader's personal qualities or morality, the fact remains that these were acceptable to his followers and proved instrumental in convincing them of the truth of his message. An example of this point can be clearly seen in the observations of followers. After the fall of Khartoum, Bābikr Bedrī, an early follower of the Mahdiyya, observed that the Mahdī dismounted from a black horse with a decorated saddle and bridle and entered the public treasury of the Turkiyya. On seeing the gold and jewels, Bedrī noted that "the Mahdī, with whom be God's peace, turned his back on it with the quickness of lightning and left."[5]

Bedrī is obviously struck by what he describes as the Mahdī's disdain for worldly possessions, yet he also describes the latter mounting a black horse with a decorated saddle, both emblems of earthly might.

---

[3] Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans and ed., A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 328.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Bābikr Bedrī, *The Memoirs of Bābikir Bedrī*, trans. Yousef Bedrī and George Scott (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 33.

As a consequence, Weber's argument that the charisma of a leader resides with his followers seems to be particularly relevant in the case of the Mahdī. The obvious contradiction is lost on the Mahdī's disciple, Bedrī, because he is so enraptured by what he perceives as the Mahdī's essential nature: his ostensible piety.

In the African Islamic tradition, the concept of *baraka* is a close equivalent to charisma. The term *baraka* has been translated to mean a "benign force, of divine origin, which bestows physical superabundance and prosperity, and psychological happiness."[6] In the Qurʾān the term is used only in the plural and God is the unique and direct source of all *baraka*. Jean-Louis Triad notes that charisma does not generally lead to sainthood, that is, a state of perfection governed by proximity to the divine. *Baraka* and sainthood, on the other hand, are linked.[7] Similarly, charisma and *baraka* are related but not identical concepts.

For our purposes, the question remains: What was the foundation of the Mahdī's charisma? Was it built upon his exemplary character, or the message he was preaching?

Ostensibly, it was a combination of the two—the Mahdī's perceived character and message acted in synergy to affirm his claims to legitimacy, which in turn buttressed his authority as a leader. Weber suggests that a rudimentary or contingent exchange is built into the function of leadership. He adds that the ruler's supreme authority and endorsement of the hierarchy of rank are accepted as long as the people believe in the charismatic gifts of the ruler and in the social order as divinely established. People have a strong desire to perpetuate a leader's success in dealing with extraordinary misfortunes or great risks. The leader feels inspired by his success. His followers and the community at large naturally want to benefit from the wonders they have attributed to his charismatic powers. As long as his undertakings are successful, his actions legitimate the social and political establishment he heads.[8]

Within the Sudanic milieu of the last two hundred and sixty years the success of many Muslim leaders was directly attributed to miraculous

---

[6] Jean-Louis Triaud, "*Khalwa* and the Career of Sainthood: An Interpretative Essay," in *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam*, ed. Donal B. Cruise O'Brien and Christian Coulon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 53.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Weber, *Social and Economic Organization*, 34.

achievements at decisive moments in their early exercise of leadership.[9] It can be argued that the Mahdī's claims that he was in communion with the Prophet Muḥammad via visions served to galvanize the people to his cause. However, the early military successes of the Mahdist forces against the Turkiyya also played a role in increasing the Mahdī's authority and legitimacy. Ohrwalder wrote that during the early stages of the Mahdiyya there was much discussion devoted to the Mahdī's miracles, the most important of which was his ability to transform the lead bullets of the Turkiyya's forces into water.[10] Thus the military successes of the Mahdī assumed a miraculous aura. Slatin adds that with a crowd of poorly-armed and undisciplined men, the Mahdī inflicted several crushing defeats on the well-armed and well-equipped forces of the Turkiyya. As a consequence, there was no doubt in the minds of the people that he was the expected *mahdī*.[11] With each subsequent military success the Mahdī's legitimacy was re-affirmed and other so-called miracles were attributed to him. Bābikr Bedrī observed that the mere presence of the Mahdī sufficed as a miracle.[12]

Sainthood (*wilāya*) within the Sufi tradition is characterized by the manifestation of *karāmāt*, a word that has often been translated as miracles, but is more accurately described as gifted spiritual powers.[13] The followers of the Mahdī, in ascribing miracles to him, placed him in a familiar archetypal model, that of the Sufi shaykh.

The first chapter mentioned that the Mahdī began his career as a shaykh of the Sammāniyya Sufi order. Wingate notes that the ground was well prepared in many ways for the Mahdist revolt, but the broad base of the Mahdī's appeal was the discontent engendered by the Turco-Egyptian regime. The Mahdī's oratorical skills, coupled with his call for an end to the oppression of the Turkiyya, fell on receptive ears. Wingate wrote, "No orator in France in 1793 could speak of oppression that here in the Sudan was not doubled. None could address the

[9] Donal Cruise O'Brien, "Introduction," in *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam*, ed. Donal Cruise O'Brien and Christian Coulon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 10.
[10] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity,* 10.
[11] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 66.
[12] Bedrī, *Memoirs*, 12.
[13] Trimingham, *Islam*, 26.

long-enslaved crowds in France with an effect that here in the passionate souls of these ignorant men was not trebled in intensity."[14]

The Mahdī's pronouncements and teachings set him apart from the other Sufi shaykhs because his sermons assumed a more eschatological hue. He preached that with his coming, right would triumph and all oppression would come to an end. To many Sudanese Muslims it seemed that the Mahdī had indeed been singled out by God because his statements resonated in regard to the conditions they were experiencing at the time. Furthermore, at every stage of the progression of the Mahdī's life, from disciple to Sufi shaykh, to his manifestation as the anticipated *mahdī*, the message and performance components of leadership were maintained in a mutually reinforcing interaction. The unity between doctrine and practice constituted one of the greatest strengths of the new leader. The appeal of the Mahdī's message had been powerfully reinforced by his personal life of uncompromising asceticism and sacrifice. This is not an uncommon occurrence within the Sufi tradition; several shaykhs have come to be revered as *quṭb*s. The term *quṭb* literally means pole or axis, but within the Sufi tradition it designates the highest member in the hierarchy of saints.[15] Apparently it was the personal qualities of the Mahdī that convinced his followers of the truth of his message. These qualities and his message mutually reinforced the other. The Mahdī's personal characteristics and their influence on the people are evident in Yūsuf Mikhāʾīl's recounting of the first time he heard about the Mahdī. Upon the Mahdī's visit to Khartoum before his manifestation as the expected *mahdī*, Mikhāʾīl wrote,

> When the news arrived from the elders that a *darwīsh*, whose name was Muḥammad Aḥmad, had come from the Nile with a great number of his disciples and stayed with Sayyid al-Makkī, there were those who said, "I saw him with the son of Siwār al-Dhahab." And they said that he was a righteous man from the region of the Nile who visited every house among the people of religion and at midnight he and his disciples made one continuous circuit around the town until the time of the morning prayer, and during this circuit throughout the town, he continuously uttered, "God is everlasting." Therefore, people said, "By God, this man from the Nile is righteous." As a consequence, many people sought him

[14] F. R. Wingate, *Mahdism and Egyptian Sudan* (London: William Clowes & Sons, 1891), 12–13.

[15] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 57.

> out for the sake of obtaining *baraka* from this *darwīsh*. When he was about to take his leave, the Sufis asked, "where do you live, O Teacher?" He answered, "I live on Ābā Island on the White Nile." They in turn remarked, "Amazing, the people from the Nile region are always the most righteous of people."[16]

Thus, it is apparent that many people were struck by the Mahdī's character even before he began spreading his eschatological message. Arguably, the message alone, without his exemplary character, would have only attracted a disaffected few and would not have had the same broad-based appeal.

It was, then, the exemplary character of the Mahdī that was the overarching reason that inspired the charismatic relationship and concomitant authority. If Weber is correct in suggesting that the cult of saints is a response to the needs of the masses, it is clear why those who venerated the Mahdī paid such close attention to his social conduct. The populace pined for a modicum of dignity and respect and wanted the religious practices of their leaders to be based upon the universal principles of Islam that were embodied by the Prophet Muḥammad.

The Prophet Muḥammad was the archetype of supreme virtue, he combined humility and generosity with the religious-legal requirements of prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. In the eyes of his followers, the Mahdī's daily life was lived according to the rules of Islam and he fulfilled his religious duties with as much zeal as he devoted to his social duties. Bābikr Bedrī recalls in his memoirs the occasions on which he used to attend the Mahdī's sermons during the early stages of the revolt. Bedrī noted that even in this early stage it was evident that the Mahdī was a unique individual.[17]

After hearing these early sermons, Bedrī wrote that he joined the Mahdiyya. One of the most distinctive characteristics of charismatic authority that sets it apart from traditional or legal-rational types of authority can be found in the spiritual relationship that develops between the leader and his followers. The leader is in a state of intense spiritual union with his followers. He achieves this state by imparting to his faithful followers a feeling of comfort, consolation, and a sense of belonging.

---

[16] Yūsuf Mikhāʾīl, *Mudhakkirāt Yūsuf Mikhāʾīl ʿan awākhir al-ʿahd al-Turkī wa-l-Mahdiyya bi-l-Sūdan* (El Obeid: Dār al-Nuṣayrī, 1962), 13–4.

[17] Bedrī, *Memoirs*, 19.

One cannot determine if the multitudes that flocked to the Mahdī actually believed that he was the anticipated *mahdī*, or if they merely believed him to be an extremely pious Sufi shaykh. Sheibeka offers some insight into this dilemma, "If doubt is to be entertained about the sincerity and self-sacrificing spirit of the later followers of the Mahdī,… there is no shadow of doubt that those first fighters of Ābā Island were believers in his divine mission."[18] Regardless of whether the followers actually believed his claims, there was obviously an intense spiritual bond between the Mahdī and his followers. From the perspective of the adherents, the Mahdī's behavior seemed to be consistent with his teachings. He exhorted them to be disciplined and abandon any behavior that could be perceived as an innovation in religion. Even captives of the Mahdī, such as Rudolf Slatin, were impressed with his ability to transform the religious practices of the people:

> He [the Mahdī] preached renunciation; he had inveighed against earthly pleasures; he had broken down both social and official ranks; he had made rich and poor alike. He had reduced the Mahr [the gift usually given by the bridegroom to the bride] to ten dollars and two dresses for unmarried girls, and to five dollars and two dresses for widows. Whoever sought for more or gave more was considered to have performed an act of disobedience, and was punished by deprivation of all property… At the same time he had forbidden dancing and playing… The use of bad language was punished with eighty lashes for every insulting word used, and seven days imprisonment. The use of intoxicating drinks, such as marissa or date wine, and smoking were most strictly prohibited. Offences of this description were punishable by flogging… Wailing for the dead and feasts for the dead were punishable by deprivation of property.[19]

The implementation of these injunctions into rules of law symbolized liberation from the established order and the beginning of a new order.

The essence of the Mahdī's teachings that took the form of proclamations, was a call for a return to the pristine Islam of the Prophet's time. These pronouncements engendered a great deal of interest from the demoralized Sudanese populace. It was on the basis of the Mahdī's message that he established an initial charismatic bond with those unfamiliar with his reputation for piety.

---

[18] Mekkī Sheibeka, *British Policy in the Sudan, 1882–1902* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 84–5.

[19] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 232.

Weber suggests that there must be some form of social crisis as a requisite backdrop to the emergence of the charismatic figure.[20] In chapter 1, I noted Shuqayr's observance that in the years preceding the Mahdist revolt, the Sudan had witnessed what can be considered a social crisis. Shuqayr concluded that the Mahdiyya arose as a result of four causes: 1) the violence that accompanied the original conquest of the Sudan was still fresh in the memory of the people; 2) the partiality of the Turkiyya for certain tribes and Sufi orders; 3) the attempts of the government to suppress the slave trade; and 4) the levying of taxes on the populace.[21]

It was, however, the poll taxes that the Mahdī wrote most vehemently against in his proclamations. He contended that these were *jizya* taxes, that is, the taxes that Muslim governments levy on non-Muslim communities. Despite the fact that many Sudanese avoided paying the taxes by abandoning their homes and resettling in remoter regions where the authority of the government was weaker, the Mahdī viewed the imposition of the taxes on the Sudanese Muslim population as symbolic of the Turkiyya's illegitimacy. He regarded the behavior of the Turco-Egyptian occupiers as evidence of their unbelief and viewed the Turkiyya with the utmost disdain.

In his early proclamations, the Mahdī criticized the Turkiyya intensely, primarily for imposing taxes upon the populace. He declared:

> Verily those Turks, when God granted them grace and well-being, believed that all authority resided in their hands. They opposed the commands of God and His prophets and followed the example of those who ruled in a manner opposed to what was revealed by God and the law of the Prophet Muḥammad. They insulted the religion of God and levied the *jizya* tax on your necks, and none of this is a matter sanctioned by God or His Prophet.[22]

The labeling of the poll tax as *jizya* is an example of one way that the Mahdī laid claim to religious authority. The Mahdī's spiritual authority was enhanced while the authority of the Turkiyya was diminished because they were engaging in an innovative practice that led to the oppression of Muslims. In claiming to be the anticipated *mahdī*, the

[20] Weber, *Social and Economic Organization*, 124.
[21] Shuqayr, *Ta'rīkh al-Sūdān*, 315–18.
[22] al-Mahdī, *al-Āthār al-kāmila*, 5:417.

Mahdī was declaring that he would oppose this measure because it contravened the divine will.

Charismatic heroes present society as gripped by the throes of a social crisis, subject to unjust rulers, and permeated by unbelief. This common theme serves their interests and enables them to represent themselves as individuals who will end, or, at the very least, ameliorate the crisis.[23] The charismatic leader, on some occasions creates his own crisis, in order to resolve it. For example, Shehu Uthman dan Fodio, the leader of the Fulani jihads in northern Nigeria during the early nineteenth century, initially presented himself as a cleric who was forced to fight the Hausa chiefs because of their tyrannical and arbitrary rule.[24] Dan Fodio exhorted his followers to abandon the areas where unbelief predominated: "Withdrawal from the towns of the heathen is an essential duty, both in the Qurʾān and the Traditions… They [The Hausa kings] have obstructed the way of Islam, and have put worldly standards before the Faith."[25] With this argument, dan Fodio created a situation in which Muslims were essentially forced to emigrate if they wished to be true to their religion. This is how he justified his flight from the region and subsequent war against the Hausa rulers.

Dan Fodio's situation is similar to that of the Mahdī in that both leaders used unbelief as a justification for their wars. The Mahdī claimed that the Turco-Egyptian occupiers were corrupting the religion of the populace and, as a consequence, a social crisis was imminent.

From all accounts, it is true that the Sudan at the time of the Mahdiyya was in the midst of a profound crisis. The levying of the poll tax on the populace was just one of several measures undertaken by the Turkiyya during its occupation, which many of the Sudanese people found oppressive. Stigmatizing the taxes as an un-Islamic innovation legitimized the Mahdī's jihad against the Turkiyya and bolstered his own religious authority.

The revivalist motif found throughout the Mahdī's writings is characteristic of the Sufi notion of the saint as an individual who possesses the capacity to restore the condition of primeval innocence binding

[23] O'Brien and Coulon, *Charisma and Brotherhood*, 7.

[24] Mervyn Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 74.

[25] Ibid.

humanity and divinity.[26] O'Brien concludes that Sufism is the essential guiding force for the production of Muslim charisma.[27] This is clearly manifested in the case of the Mahdī. As the people began to learn more of his personal history, they became increasingly impressed with his saintly behavior, behavior that bore a stark resemblance to the myriad of holy figures that dot the religious landscape of the northern Sudan. Hence, the Mahdī was not unlike the special class of charismatic holy leader that the people had long been revering.

It is important to recognize that while Weber's treatment of charisma is a description of pure types, he was aware that in reality there will be a blend of different elements that act in synergy to legitimate this overarching charismatic authority. For example, the Prophet Muḥammad's authority was based to a considerable extent on his authority, but elements of pre-Islamic Arab religio-cultural traditions, such as the importance of the *ḥaram* (sanctuary) at Mecca, formed major elements in the new religion of Islam. Similarly, the Mahdī's charisma was based primarily on the belief his followers had about his mission; however, the symbols, ceremonies, and rituals from the Sufi brotherhoods also played an important role in cementing his charismatic authority.

Saints and Zāwiyas

The preceding chapter established that the predominant feature of the religious culture of the northern Sudan has been a tradition of mysticism personalized in the link between the shaykh and his followers and institutionalized in Sufi practices. The historical consciousness of the northern Sudanese is colored by the presence of the Muslim holy man or shaykh, also known as a *fakī* in Sudanese colloquial Arabic. This term comes from the classical Arabic *faqīh*, which denotes a jurist. The plural of *faqīh, fuqahā'*, is not used in Sudanese colloquial Arabic, rather the plural of *faqīr, fuqarā'*, is used instead.

I noted earlier that the initial spread of Islamic teaching in the Sudan received its impetus from these holy men who were often adherents of Sufi orders. Early in the Islamization of the Sudan, many of these

[26] al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co., 1997), 198.
[27] O'Brien and Coulon, *Charisma and Brotherhood*, 15.

men came from Egypt, the Hijaz, Yemen, and, at a later stage, from Morocco. However, over time, Sudanese who had studied at al-Azhar University in Egypt and in the Hijaz predominated. According to Karrār, most of these holy men arrived in the Sudan after the rise of the Funj kingdom around 1504.[28] The introduction of the Qādiriyya and Shādhiliyya Sufi brotherhoods in the Sudan was a result of the influence of men from the Hijaz. Initially, these orders did not have a centralized organization. Rather, all religious authority found its locus in the person of the shaykh.[29] As a consequence, saint-worship became the most important religious influence in the Sudan and many of these Sudanese saints were regarded by the populace as having a higher status than many major figures in the religious history of Islam.[30]

The lives of many of these Sudanese holy men are chronicled in the biographical dictionary known as *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt* [Book of the classes] by Muḥammad al-Nūr b. Ḍayfallāh (1728–1809). According to his book, the first Muslim reformer in the Funj kingdom was the Egyptian Maḥmūd al-ʿArakī who settled on the White Nile.[31]

Other holy men from Egypt and Arabia followed al-ʿArakī's example and came to the Sudan at the behest of the Funj kings to teach the people the Islamic sciences. However, Trimingham points out that a majority of holy men came from the Hijaz and these men had the greatest influence on religious culture in the Sudan.[32] In addition, many Sudanese returned from the pilgrimage and established themselves as *fakī*s. Although these *fakī*s were uneducated, their activities encouraged internal missionary work that resulted in the revival of Islam in Nubia and Sinnār. The migrations and settlement on the Blue Nile of the Maḥas, a Nubian people, during the Funj period also promoted the spread of Islam. The Maḥas, who claimed to be descendants of the Anṣār of the first Muslim community in Medina, adopted the Arabic language, became conversant in jurisprudence and mysticism, and established themselves as miracle-working *fakī* families that influenced the life of the indigenous peoples in the Funj sultanate.[33]

---

[28] Karrār, *Sufi Brotherhoods*, 14–15.
[29] Trimingham, *Islam*, 101.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibn Ḍayfallāh, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt*, 41.
[32] Trimingham, *Islam*, 100–1.
[33] Ibid., 101.

Holy men were also responsible for the Islamization of the Sudan's other major Islamic polity: the Sultanate of Darfur. The holy men of Darfur were either immigrants or descendants of immigrants to the region. O'Fahey surmises that the earliest waves of these immigrants entered the region from the West in late sixteenth century, and it was not until the eighteenth century that missionaries began entering the region from the Nile Valley.[34] The rural holy men of Darfur were not as well educated in the Islamic sciences as their Nile Valley counterparts and as a result their charisma and miracles were unfettered in expression. In contrast, the *fuqarāʾ* attached to the courts were better educated and able to build settlements throughout the state, the latter probably a result of their relationship with the sultan.[35]

Al-Sādiq al-Mahdī, the great-grandson of the Mahdī, also recognizes that the holy men were responsible for establishing the religious foundation that allowed Islam to spread in a relatively rapid manner throughout the northern Sudan. These holy men built mosques along the banks of the Nile, and as people flocked to study under the various shaykhs, villages and cities sprang up.[36]

As a consequence, it was the Sufi shaykhs that informed the Islamic consciousness of the northern Sudanese more than any other factor. They built the mosques and established schools for the instruction of the Qurʾān and educated the public on the complexities of Islam. In addition to their knowledge of Islam, these holy men possessed specific personal qualities that set them apart from ordinary individuals. The characteristics of generosity (*karam*), asceticism (*zuhd*), and piety (*waraʿ*) were, and are, held in high esteem. For example, toward the end of the sixteenth century, Ismāʿīl b. Jābir, who learned Islamic jurisprudence from his brother ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, assumed his brother's position as shaykh of the Qurʾān school. Both Ismāʿīl b. Jābir and his brother became noted religious teachers, referred to as the Awlād Jābir (lit., sons of Jābir); their descendents are called Jābiriyya. Three mosques at Kurti were devoted to their teachings and many famous saints emerged from among the pupils of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. The latter

[34] R. S. O'Fahey, *State and Society in Dār Fūr* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1980), 116.

[35] Ibid.

[36] al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī, *Yasʾalūnaka ʿan al-Mahdiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Qaḍaya, 1975), 130.

is noteworthy for having not only four sons famed for their learning, but a daughter, Fāṭima, who was equally learned and pious.[37]

According to various reports, these holy men lived in strict accordance to the rules of Islam. They paid particular attention to the underprivileged and marginalized members of society, and this enhanced their religious authority.[38] It becomes increasingly apparent that these holy men wielded a great deal of power over many Sudanese Muslims. They claimed to be repositories of sacred knowledge and it was their task to transmit this knowledge to the general populace in a language that they could comprehend. The possession of this esoteric knowledge (*ʿulūm al-walī*) was considered a form of God's favor (*karāmāt*), a gift that God grants certain people.[39] Chapter 2 addressed the ways in which many of these holy men claimed to be in communion with the Prophet Muḥammad and al-Khiḍr, as well as eminent saints. Many also claimed to have the ability to perform miracles.[40] Miracles performed by Sufis are known as *karāmāt* because they are favors, not unlike the possession of esoteric knowledge that God has bestowed upon individual Sufis.[41] The holy man's ability to perform miracles is contingent upon the strength of his *baraka*. Trimingham maintains that *karāmāt* in the Sudanese context can be grouped under five headings: 1) healing, 2) divination, 3) metamorphosis, 4) power over the elements, and 5) restoring the dead to life.[42]

The Mīrghanī family, founders of the Khatmiyya order in the Sudan, were all alleged to have the power to perform miracles. Muḥammad ʿUthmān al-Mīrghanī II, the grandson of the founder of the order, is said to have restored the eyesight of a woman who was supporting many orphaned children.[43] The ability to perform miracles, coupled with the genealogical claims of many of these holy men, bolstered the charismatic authority of these shaykhs in the eyes of many of Sudanese Muslims. Karrār contends that a major factor in the success of the founder of the Khatmiyya, Muḥammad ʿUthmān al-Mīrghanī I, was the widespread belief in the authenticity of his claims of being a

[37] Ibn Ḍayfallāh, *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt*, 47.
[38] Ibid., 59–60.
[39] Trimingham, *Islam*, 135.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 206.
[42] Trimingham, *Islam*, 135–6.
[43] Karrār, *Sufi Brotherhoods*, 92.

descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad, unlike the general pretension to such descent.[44]

These holy men possessed a great deal of power in the Sudan, but they did not seek out political power, preferring instead to exercise influence from the solitude of their Qurʾān schools and Sufi lodges (s. *zāwiya* / pl. *zawāyā*). They accepted the established authority and many of their schools were subsidized by the government.[45]

Though the Mahdī, as noted earlier, began his career as a shaykh, not unlike the men treated above, he was not content with the status quo and sought to change it by engaging in jihad against the Turkiyya. Like other holy men, the Mahdī had the respect and veneration of his disciples; in addition, he claimed descent from the Prophet Muḥammad and was renowned for his possession of esoteric knowledge.

Before announcing his claims, the Mahdī had no documented *karāmāt*, though arguably, if he had remained merely a holy man, over time his followers may very well have attributed *karāmāt* to him. The Italian explorer Gaetano Casati, who, at the request of the Commercial Geographical Society of Milan, undertook a journey to the Sudan, related that the chief accountant of Equatoria province told him that he and others paid their respects to the Mahdī at Ābā Island when they went upstream with Baker's expedition in February of 1870. Ten years later, when Casati again passed Ābā Island, the steamer slowed to salute the "ascetic of Ābā." Clearly the Mahdī's reputation for piety had increased over time. Casati added that at this time (1880), the Mahdī also enjoyed the respect of the government.[46] Thus, the Mahdī, before advancing his claims, appeared to be traveling along the same path as other holy men: he enjoyed the respect of both the populace and the government and devoted his life to asceticism and teaching.

However, as I alluded to in the previous chapter, the religious scholars (*ʿūlamāʾ*) remained unconvinced of the veracity of the Mahdī's claims and it was they who leveled the most vehement criticism against him. The majority of these scholars had been educated at al-Azhar. They argued that the Mahdī's claims were spurious because the time had not yet come for the appearance of *mahdī*, they claimed that people were enjoying peace and good governance under the Khedive

[44] Ibid., 69.
[45] Ibid., 87.
[46] Gaetano Casati, *Ten Years' in Equatoria and the Return of Emin Pasha*, trans. J. Randolph Clay (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 33–4.

Ismāʿīl and the governor-general of the Sudan, ʿAbd al-Qādir Pasha.[47] These scholars maintained that it was incumbent upon all Muslims to obey the sultan in Istanbul and the Mahdī was an imposter because he did not conform to the traditional description of the anticipated savior.[48] Shaykh Aḥmad al-Azharī, a graduate of al-Azhar and Shaykh al-Islām for the western Sudan, and the Muftī Shākir al-Ghazī were among the Sudanese scholars who referred to the traditional accounts of the *mahdī*'s characteristics in order to discredit the Mahdī's claims. According to al-Ghazī the traditions are unequivocal concerning the description of the *mahdī* and the Mahdī did not conform to any of the traits chronicled in the traditions. Al-Ghazī wrote the following:

> Muḥammad Aḥmad is not the "expected deliverer." There is a divergence as far as his characteristics and place of his birth and place of his manifestation. It is mentioned [in the traditions] that the "expected deliverer's" birth place is Mecca and his manifestation is in the Maghrib. And you all know that Muḥammad Aḥmad was born in Dongola. And his manifestation was on Ābā Island.[49]

The religious scholars added that Muslim theologians did not universally accept the idea of the anticipated *mahdī*, as it is not mentioned in the Qurʾān, rather it appears in the Ḥadīth. However, the pronouncements of the scholars did not dissuade the multitudes from joining the Mahdiyya. Shuqayr states a great many Sudanese from all levels of society believed in the Mahdī's message and also believed that whoever died for the cause of the Mahdiyya would be rewarded with eternal paradise.[50] In an undated proclamation, the Mahdī wrote, possibly in an allusion to the Qurʾānic verse 2:7, that he had placed a seal over the hearts and ears and eyes of these scholars, whom he termed venal scholars. He added, ostensibly alluding to the Qurʾānic verse 2:86, that these scholars had purchased the "life of this world for the hereafter."[51]

The divergence between the views of the religious scholars and the beliefs held by the general populace supports Connerton's hypothesis that different social groups are informed by different memories.[52] The

---

[47] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 621–2.
[48] Ibid., 622–3.
[49] Ibid., 621–3.
[50] Ibid., 618.
[51] SAD, 98/2/3.
[52] Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 38.

religious scholars were primarily informed by textual sources. Hence, the Mahdī's repudiation of their claims against him was couched in the terminology of the sacred sources and allusions to the Qurʾān. The general populace was predominately illiterate and was informed by oral histories and popular traditions. As a consequence, the Mahdī's oral pronouncements resonated more profoundly in the collective social memory of the populace, because they were the words of a familiar societal icon—the holy man.

Thus, it is clear that the Mahdī's appeal was widespread and his authority was primarily based on his resemblance to the holy men who were responsible for the propagation of Islam in the Sudan. His spiritual authority was bolstered by the Mahdist expectation that was prevalent at the time. It was this factor that affirmed, for many Sudanese, the legitimacy of Muḥammad Aḥmad as the expected redeemer. If not for the Mahdist expectation, the Mahdī would have remained merely a holy man, not unlike those treated above.

Mahdist Expectations: The West African Connection

The fourth of November 1785 marked the first day of the Hijri year 1200, the beginning of a new Islamic century; concomitant with the advent of the new century came a messianic expectation that was felt throughout the Muslim world.[53] Many Muslims interpreted Napoleon's arrival in Egypt in 1798 and the defeat of the Moghuls by the British in 1858 as signs of the Hour, portents of the Day of Judgment and the subsequent end of the world. However, before this would come to pass, Muslims believed that God would send the *mahdī* to restore justice and end oppression in the world. In Islamic eschatology the appearance of the *mahdī* coincides with the second coming of the Prophet ʿĪsā (Jesus). According to the traditions, before the appearance of the *mahdī* or the Prophet ʿĪsā, a "renewer of the faith" (*mujaddid*) would be sent by God to purify the religion and prepare the way for the *mahdī*.[54] The last of these "renewers" would herald the *mahdī*.[55]

---

[53] M. A. al-Ḥajj, "The Thirteenth Century in Muslim Eschatology: Mahdist Expectations in the Sokoto Caliphate," *Center for Arabic Documentation Research Bulletin* 3, no. 2 (1967): 103–5.

[54] Ibid.

[55] *Encyclopedia of Islam*, third edition, s.v. "*Al-Mahdī*."

In the early nineteenth century in Hausaland (now part of northern Nigeria) Shehu (or Shaykh) Uthman dan Fodio claimed this designation as "Renewer of the Faith" and led a successful jihad that culminated in the formation of an Islamic state, the Sokoto Caliphate, that lasted nearly a century. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, several regions in the western and central Sudan experienced a succession of militant Islamic revivalist movements. The leaders of these movements were all clerics and ethnically Fulani. The Fulani are a nomadic people, who, according to early records, lived in the medieval Saharan kingdom of Mali.[56] Certain Fulani clans began migrating from Mali into Hausaland as early as 1450.

The Hausa are a group with a variety of ethnic origins who speak a common language—Hausa.[57] Early in the sixteenth century, seven main Hausa states emerged: Kano, Daura, Rano, Katsina, Zazzau, Gobir, and Garun Gabas. They were associated, through kinship ties and trade links, with seven others: Kebbi, Zamfara, Nupe, Gwari, Yauri, Yoruba, and Kwararafa.[58]

By the end of the eighteenth century there was a considerable Fulani population in Hausaland, consisting of both nomadic cattle-raising clans and the sedentary clan of the clerical Toronkawa, Uthman dan Fodio's clan. According to Hiskett, this clan adopted Islam in the fourteenth century and established for themselves a tradition of Islamic learning.

Thus while Islam penetrated Hausaland as early as the fourteenth century, its presence was not firmly established until the end of the fifteenth century. Even then, pre-Islamic animist rites and customs continued. According to his writings, it was this syncretism that kindled the ire of Shehu (Shaykh) Uthman dan Fodio. From 1804 to 1810, Uthman dan Fodio, his younger brother ʿAbdallāh b. Muḥammad, and a group of their kinsmen waged war against the Hausa states of Gobir, Zamfara, Katsina, and Kebbi. Initially, Dan Fodio attempted to reason with the Sultan of Gobir and other members of the Hausa elite, imploring them to abandon the mixed form of Islam they were practicing. He objected primarily to the rites of animism—sacrifices and libations to various objects of worship, failure to observe the Islamic

[56] Hiskett, *Sword of Truth*, 5.
[57] Ibid., 3.
[58] Ibid.

food prohibitions, and marrying beyond the limits designated by the religion. He found particularly offensive the failure of women to wear the veil and long robe and the mingling of the sexes.[59]

Like the Mahdī after him, Uthman dan Fodio was a Sufi holy man, a member of the Qādiriyya order who employed Sufi symbols to legitimize his struggle. In 1794, he claimed that he had a vision in which ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jilānī presented him with a sword, to "unsheath it against the enemies of God."[60] Despite this vision, Dan Fodio did not engage in a military struggle against the Hausa kings until 1804. In February of that year, he and his followers left Gobir and immigrated to a place across the border called Gudu. Uthman dan Fodio regarded this flight as akin to the Prophet's hijra, or emigration, from Mecca to Medina. The king of Gobir at the time, Yunfa, interpreted Dan Fodio's departure as an act of rebellion and sent a force to punish the rebels. The Hausa forces attacked and Dan Fodio and his men retaliated.[61]

Dan Fodio and his followers suffered some defeats initially. However, by September 1808, his forces had managed to capture Alkalawa, the capital of Gobir, and the resistance of the Gobir elites came to an end. The capture of Gobir did not herald the end of Dan Fodio's struggles against the Hausa sultans in other areas of Hausaland, rather it set off Fulani campaigns in other Hausa states. Dan Fodio inspired these outlying campaigns, which were then conducted by Fulani clan leaders in various kingdoms.

By 1812, the military campaigns of Uthman dan Fodio had culminated in the formation of a Muslim Fulani empire, known as the Sokoto Caliphate. Though Dan Fodio died in 1817, the Islamic state he founded continued to thrive until the British colonial conquest of 1903.

It is apparent that there are many parallels between the Mahdī and Shehu Uthman dan Fodio. Like the Mahdī of the Sudan, Dan Fodio's followers believed him to be *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar*, but, unlike the Mahdī, he denied the appellation. Instead he advanced the claim that he was last of the "renewers" (*mujaddidūn*) and after him the *mahdī* would appear.[62] Uthman dan Fodio and his followers were firmly convinced that the coming of the *mahdī* was imminent, and thus they

[59] Ibid., 9.
[60] Ibid., 66.
[61] Ibid., 87.
[62] Ibid., 121–5.

had a duty to prepare for this event. Hiskett believes that this conviction—that the *mahdī*'s arrival was close at hand—served as a catalyst for Dan Fodio's campaigns.[63] Uthman dan Fodio's son, Muḥammadu Bello, wrote the following on the relationship between Dan Fodio and the coming of the *mahdī*:

> The Shehu in Hausa sent me to all his followers in the east among the people of Zamfara, Katsina, Kano, and Daura […] I conveyed to them his good tidings about the approaching of the *mahdī*, and [told them] that the Shehu's followers are his vanguard and that this struggle will not end, God willing, until it reaches the *mahdī*.[64]

This passage makes clear that the reform movement initiated by Dan Fodio was fueled by the anticipation of the *mahdī*. Dan Fodio's preaching and military campaigns against what he perceived as forces working against the faith were meant to pave the way for the coming of the *mahdī*.

Dan Fodio refused to accept the designation that his followers attempted to bestow upon him—that he was the *mahdī*, because he maintained, in keeping with the beliefs of Sunnī Muslims, that the *mahdī* would be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad, would be born in Medina, and would make his initial appearance in the East. These were also the characteristics claimed by the Mahdī, with the sole exception of being born in Medina.[65]

John A. Works, Jr., in his work on Hausa-Fulani communities in Chad and the western Nilotic Sudan, states that interest in the pilgrimage increased in the West and Central regions of Africa during this period.[66] While the origins and exact nature of this increase are not entirely clear, he believes that one of the most likely reasons for this increase in the number of pilgrims was Uthman dan Fodio's exhortations to his followers to await the appearance of the *mahdī* in the Hijaz.[67] Although he did not make the pilgrimage himself, his writings are replete with references to its importance.[68]

---

[63] Mervyn Hiskett, *The Development of Islam in West Africa* (New York: Longman Group United, 1984), 161.

[64] Muḥammadu Bello, *Ĭnfāq al-maysūr fī tārīkh bi-lā al-takrūr* (Rabat: Maʿhad al-Dirāsāt al-Ifrīqiyya, 1996), 60.

[65] Hiskett, *Sword of Truth*, 121–4.

[66] John A. Works Jr., *Pilgrims in a Strange Land: Hausa Communities in Chad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 19–25.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Hiskett, *Sword of Truth*, 33.

The pilgrimage to Mecca is a duty incumbent upon all Muslims who are able to undertake the journey. However, for Muslims of the western Sudan, the distance from Mecca, organization of travel, and lack of security along the route was prohibitive. Al-Naqar notes that several Saharan and Sahilian *ʿulamāʾ* wrote *fatāwā* (non-binding legal opinions) declaring that the pilgrimage was no longer obligatory for Sudanese Muslims because of the lack of safety of the pilgrimage routes.[69] He adds that many of these *fatāwā* were written as early as the sixteenth century, and are possibly linked to the period of anarchy precipitated by the Moroccan conquest of the Songhay Empire in 1594.[70] He notes, however, that the earliest available *fatāwā* taking the view that the pilgrimage was not obligatory for West African Muslims is from Muḥammad b. al-Mukhtār, the seventeenth-century scholar from the western Saharan town of Shīnqīṭ (present-day Mauritania). Ibn al-Mukhtār wrote that embarking upon the pilgrimage was a risky endeavor, and this risk prohibited Muslims from carrying out the obligations of prayer and fasting, and as a consequence it should be abandoned as a religious obligation.[71]

We noted that the leaders of the Sokoto Caliphate encouraged people to participate in the pilgrimage; this was in keeping with the caliphate's stated purpose of restoring pristine Islam. Dan Fodio, in his *Najm al-ikhwān*, contended that there are twenty-three achievements for which the caliphate should be thankful, and these achievements demonstrate to all who are intelligent that his community is in accordance with the Prophet's community.[72] One of these achievements was encouraging the populace to perform the pilgrimage.

The leaders of the caliphate did this by appointing a leader of the pilgrimage caravan (*amīr al-ḥājj*), and implementing what approximated an official policy on the pilgrimage. The policy of the caliphate concerning pilgrimage and the popular notion that the *mahdī*'s arrival was imminent contributed to the increased traffic from the western Sudan to the upper Nile Valley region during the nineteenth century.[73] Al-Naqar concludes that the relationship between Mahdist expecta-

[69] ʿUmar al-Naqar, *The Pilgrimage Tradition in West Africa* (Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1972), 47.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid., 54.
[73] Works, *Pilgrims*, 26.

tions and the pilgrimage related to the belief that when the *mahdī* did appear and the end of the world was near, it was better for Muslims to either meet him or await his arrival in the East.[74]

When Shehu Uthman dan Fodio died in 1817, his second son, Muḥammadu Bello, succeeded him as head of the Sokoto Caliphate. The eschatological notion of the *mahdī* and the end of time achieved preeminence during the reign of Bello (1817–44). Like his father, he was a religious scholar as well as a warrior and political leader. More than ninety works in classical Arabic are attributed to him. According to Hiskett, Bello's teachings helped make Mahdism and the Islamic teachings concerning the end of time a part of the official ideology of the Sokoto Caliphate.[75]

The pilgrimage route taken by western Sudanese pilgrims in the nineteenth century favored the Sahil route rather than the trans-Saharan route. The Sahil, where the Sahara desert meets the Savanna, includes the modern countries of Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Senegal. Works believes that it was this use of the Sahil route that was responsible for the establishment of the earliest Hausa–Fulani communities in Chad and the Nilotic Sudan. The trans-Saharan route was longer and more expensive. Pilgrims embarking on this route had to purchase camels and the distance from Hausaland to Mecca and back was 5,000 miles, as opposed to the Sahil route, which was just half this, approximately 2,500 miles.[76]

Although their objective was Mecca or the *mahdī*, many pilgrims never attained either goal and were forced to settle somewhere along the pilgrimage route before returning to Hausaland, if they returned at all. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the tendency toward settlement increased because of economic straits. Many scholars who embarked on the journey stopped along the way to establish Qurʾān schools in order to eke out a living. Sometimes they would make use of existing schools, at other times they would set up temporary establishments for a year or two.[77] In this manner information and cultural traditions from the western Sudan were transported to the upper Nile Valley. The method of teaching and learning in these schools was most probably the same throughout West and Central

[74] al-Naqar, *Pilgrimage Tradition*, 83.
[75] Hiskett, *Sword of Truth*, 179–85.
[76] Works, *Pilgrims*, 26–30.
[77] Ibid.

Africa, and consisted of instruction in the correct recitation of the Qurʾān. It is most likely through this instruction that West and Central African eschatological ideas reached the Nilotic Sudan.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century many of these shaykhs and other Hausa–Fulani pilgrims began to establish communities along the pilgrimage routes. Works notes that the present communities in Wadai and Bagirmi in Chad and settlements in Kordofan and Darfur in the Nilotic Sudan date from this period.[78] He adds that one of the informants in Henrich Barth's *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa* was a Fulani courtier during the reign of Sultan ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz of Wadai (1830–34). This courtier, whose name was Faqīḥ Samba, related that his father was fully conversant in Hausa culture. In addition, in 1810, the Arab explorer al-Tūnisī found Fulani people in Darfur who spoke Hausa and had Hausa nicknames. By all accounts it seems that even though many pilgrims were forced to settle in the Nile Valley region, their traditions were not lost but were passed on to succeeding generations.

Furthermore, one of the Mahdī's more influential counselors was al-Fakī Muḥammad al-Dādārī, a 'westerner' who had settled in Darfur and was held in high regard by both the Mahdī and Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi. Al-Fakī al-Dādārī was one of the many pilgrims from the western Sudan who were linked by their common search for the *mahdī*. When al-Dādārī recognized the Mahdī, he wrote to his friend, Ḥayātū b. Saʿīd, urging him to join the Mahdiyya. Ḥayātū b. Saʿīd became the most prominent Mahdist leader in the central Sudan. Al-Dādārī remained an influential counselor under the Khalīfa's rule and, as discussed in the next chapter, was one of the first notables of the Mahdiyya to pledge his allegiance to the Khalīfa after the Mahdī's death.[79]

Hence, in 1881, when the Mahdī began urging people to abandon this world and turn to the world to come, he was preaching to many who were already convinced that the *mahdī*'s appearance was imminent. The majority of those who heeded his initial call were from the regions of Darfur and Kordofan, regions with a strong presence of the descendants of West African pilgrims who had settled in these places a

[78] Ibid., 30–41.

[79] John O. Hunwick, et al., "Between Niger and Nile: New Light on the Fulani Mahdist Muḥammad al-Dādārī," *Sudanic Africa: A Journal of Historical Sources* 8 (1997): 85–105.

generation past. Furthermore, it is most likely that these communities of settlers influenced the indigenous peoples in these various regions.

Shuqayr relates that Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi's grandfather had been one of the many pilgrims who had left the western Sudan on the journey to Mecca but, like other West African Muslims, was forced to settle in the Sudan because the trip proved too arduous and costly. ʿAbdallāhi's grandfather settled among the Taʿāīsha, an Arab group in southern Darfur, and married a Tāʿīshī woman.[80]

Shuqayr adds that ʿAbdallāhi's grandfather had passed on information concerning the appearance of the *mahdī* to his son, who in turn passed it on to his son ʿAbdallāhi.[81] It seems that certain traditions from the western Sudan became inculcated within the greater society of the western regions of the Nilotic Sudan. The Mahdī found fertile ground to plant the seed of Mahdism in the western regions of the country primarily because these people, apparently more than any other people in the Nilotic Sudan, were anxiously awaiting the arrival of the *mahdī*.

Thus it becomes increasingly clear that the mood of Mahdist excitement contributed greatly to the creation of a charismatic constituency for the Mahdī. This mood was prevalent not only in Africa, but pervaded the Middle East as well.[82] As a consequence, the Mahdī was able to recruit a large following. Disciples flocked to him because they believed he had special access to divine favor. He could intercede on their behalf on the Last Day and deliver on the promise of paradise in the hereafter if these disciples simply heeded his call.

The Mahdī's power and authority were born primarily out of his relationship to the institution of Islamic mysticism, as manifest in the Sufi brotherhoods. The Sufi brotherhoods in the African context are, in the words of Donal O'Brien, "an instrument of power brokerage in a sacred code."[83] The Mahdī was, in all likelihood, accepted in the same light that earlier holy men had been, however, his claims to be the *mahdī* and the concomitant expectations at that time served to further bolster his religious authority.

The role of ceremonial and ritual in buttressing the Mahdī's authority was miniscule. Father Joseph Ohrwalder, a captive of the Mahdists,

---

[80] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 609.
[81] Ibid.
[82] al-Hajj, "Mahdist Expectations," 5.
[83] O'Brien and Coulon, *Charisma and Brotherhood*, 2.

relates that the Mahdī had no distinctive military insignia, flag, or drum. "He [the Mahdī] had absolutely no knowledge of system or drill, but he had men in abundance."[84] The lack of pomp and circumstance, as we mentioned in the last chapter, was primarily due to the nature of the Mahdiyya at the time. Up until the Mahdī's death in 1885, it remained a guerilla movement with no established base of operations. The ceremonies employed by the Mahdiyya consisted of borrowed Sufi vocabulary and iconographies from the Darfur and Funj sultanates. The political and religious sources of the Mahdī's authority entailed a mixture of his individual charisma and the limited use of insignias, rituals, and ceremonies.

Even given the lack of elaborate ceremonial, the Mahdī was clearly the center of power and certain ceremonial displays reinforced this notion, such as the prerogative of riding on horseback in parades. However, the Mahdī's power was not contingent upon spectacle, rather spectacle served merely as an ancillary element of his already established authority—an authority founded upon a charisma that was a result of his resemblance to Sufi holy men and the eschatological notions that were prevalent at the time.

[84] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity,* 18.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE KHALĪFA AND THE ROUTINIZATION OF CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY

The preceding chapter established that the Mahdī's authority was not, primarily, bolstered by ceremony; rather, he was the exemplar and center of the Mahdiyya because of his charismatic authority, which was derived from his identification by many Sudanese as a Sufi holy man not unlike the Sufis who had helped spread Islam throughout the Sudan. The Mahdī molded the symbols and rhetorical devices of Islamic mysticism, as manifested in the Sufi brotherhoods, to produce a new order that maintained a structure that continued to resonate for the northern Sudanese. He claimed to have been guided by the Prophet Muḥammad to establish an Islamic community reminiscent of the nascent Muslim community at Medina in the seventh century. These factors and the Mahdist expectation prevalent at the time served to buttress his spiritual and political authority. However, the Mahdī died before he could witness the fruition of his vision of an Islamic state; the task of building this state fell upon his second-in-command, Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi.

Upon succeeding the Mahdī, the Khalīfa used similar symbolic, rhetorical, and political strategies to establish his legitimacy. However, in the absence of the original charismatic leader, ceremony came to play an increasingly greater role in affirming the Khalīfa's authority. As the Mahdī assumed a position analogous to that of the Prophet Muḥammad, Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi assumed one analogous to the first of the rightly-guided caliphs, Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq. This chapter examines the ceremonial idiom within the context of the Khalīfa's rule, his use of insignias of authority, and the creation of what Connerton designates as a "mythic concordance," between him and Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, and the Mahdī.[1]

[1] Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 43.

A New Era for the Mahdiyya

The death of the Mahdī on 8 Ramaḍān 1302/22 June 1885 ushered in a new era for the Mahdiyya. The revolt had succeeded in ending the Turkiyya's occupation of the Sudan, with the exception of a few isolated regions. Following the Mahdiyya's conquest of El Obeid in late 1883, the Mahdī set his sights on Khartoum, the administrative capital of the Turkiyya in the Sudan. He was successful in defeating the Turkiyya's forces in Khartoum in January 1885. The Mahdī, however, lived only six months after his triumphal entry into Khartoum.[2] He faced the dilemma of building a state in a region that had grown accustomed to instability and warfare. Theobald notes that it was doubtful whether the Mahdī would have attempted to engender in the Sudanese people a sense of stability and peace. He adds that the Mahdī's proclamations encouraging the spread of the Mahdist message throughout the Muslim world indicates that the Mahdī intended for the people to remain in a state of constant warfare.[3] The task of waging jihad was the official policy of the Mahdiyya and after his death, the task of continuing this policy fell upon the shoulders of Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi.

However, according to Sanderson, from about 1889, this policy was gradually abandoned as a result of more pressing issues, such as the great famine and their failed attempt to invade Egypt.[4] As successor to the Mahdī, Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi had a more daunting task than his predecessor. He had to create a state while simultaneously establishing and maintaining spiritual and political authority. During the first five years of his rule (1885–89), the Khalīfa was confronted with several internal and external problems that threatened the stability of the Mahdist state. First, the Khalīfa had to contend with the attempts of the Mahdī's relatives (Ashrāf) to undermine his authority. In addition, he had to quash a revolt in Darfur in 1888, and was forced to address the consequences of a devastating famine that besieged the Sudan in 1889–90.[5]

---

[2] Holt, *Mahdist State*, 96. The Mahdī's illness was short and rumor spread that one of his concubines poisoned him, but it seems more likely that he died from natural causes, specifically typhus, since there was a typhus outbreak at the time.

[3] Theobald, *Mahdiyya*, 141.

[4] G. N. Sanderson, "Conflict and Co-operation Between Ethiopia and the Mahdist State, 1884–1898," *Sudan Notes and Records* 50 (1969), 15.

[5] See Holt, *Mahdist State*, for his treatment of the Khalīfa's clash with the Ashrāf (125–31), details of the revolt of Abū Jummayza in Darfur (138–9), and reference to the great famine (173–8).

The Khalīfa's authority was continually called into question. Consequently, he was required to buttress his authority by creating a "mythic concordance," to use Connerton's term, between himself and Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq. The establishment of a mythic concordance is not merely an act that reminds people of a particular past event or symbol; rather, it serves to engender a sense that the past is linked with the present.

Chapter 2 treated the designation by the Mahdī of his three commanders to positions of authority that were equated with three of the four rightly-guided caliphs. According to Holt, the Mahdī intended that each of the commanders he designated as caliph would assume leadership of the Mahdist state in accordance with the example of the nascent Islamic community in Medina. The three appointees of the Mahdī, the *khalīfa*s, were not merely deputies of a religious order; they were the successors of the first Muslim state.[6]

Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi occupied the place of Abū Bakr and was the commander of the largest and most powerful of the Mahdist's forces. This prominent position caused a great deal of resentment and jealousy among the ranks of the Anṣār. To address this, the Mahdī issued a proclamation acknowledging that Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi was the Mahdī's representative in all state affairs.[7] Holt adds that the Khalīfa's position vis-à-vis the Mahdī became analogous to that of the traditional Muslim vizier (*wazīr*).[8] He further concludes that at the time of the Mahdī's death, Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi had the best claim to assume the latter's sovereignty for two reasons. First, the military climate at the time favored the Khalīfa, and second, his nomination as Khalīfat al-Ṣiddīq implied that ʿAbdallāhi should succeed the Mahdī as Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq had succeeded the Prophet.[9] It was the latter that the Khalīfa primarily used in order to enunciate his power and legitimacy after the Mahdī's unexpected death. The Khalīfa did not merely remind the people that he was entrusted with the same authority as Abū Bakr; rather, he represented himself in the sacred narrative of the first rightly-guided caliph through the use of various rites and ceremonies.

[6] Ibid., 103.
[7] Ibid., 108.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., 119.

The Mythic Concordance: The Khalīfa's Claims to Authority

After the Mahdī was buried, the Khalīfa called a meeting that was attended by Khalīfa ʿAlī wad Ḥilū, Khalīfa Muḥammad al-Sharīf, and other commanders and notables of the Mahdiyya. The Ashrāf (the family of the Mahdī), were also in attendance. In the meeting, Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi stated that the Mahdī had died, but the Prophet Muḥammad, too, had died, and the four rightly-guided caliphs were able to continue the work of the Prophet. The Khalīfa added that the Mahdī, too, had designated caliphs to carry on his work in the event of his demise and it was incumbent upon those who revered the Mahdī and those who believed in him to pledge allegiance to Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi so that the Mahdī's vision of an Islamic state would come to fruition. ʿAbdallāhi qualified this command by stating that the Mahdī had designated him as the spiritual heir of the caliph Abū Bakr.[10]

However, Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi's claims to political authority based upon his designation as the heir to the first of the rightly-guided caliphs did not go unchallenged. The chief opposition came from the Ashrāf, who believed that the succession should have gone to their kinsman, Muḥammad al-Sharīf. Yūsuf Mikhāʾīl gives a detailed account of the dispute and subsequent ceremony that ensued following the Mahdī's death:

> After the burial of the Mahdī, the Ashrāf agreed upon the succession of their kinsman Sayyid Muḥammad al-Sharīf, and the rest of the gathering opposed them in that. They said, "The succession belongs to ʿAbdallāhi b. al-Sayyid Muḥammad [Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi] in accordance to the arrangement of the caliphs and as the Mahdī said, "The Khalīfa is of me and I am of him. Follow him in every matter." The people began to argue and Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi was silent, saying nothing but listening and observing. Then Fakī al-Dādārī [a notable from the Fellata tribe] stood up and took Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi by the hand and said, "We swear allegiance, O Khalīfa of the Mahdī." In addition, the patriarch of the Ashrāf, Aḥmad Sharīfī, arose and took the sword and turban of the Mahdī, presented them to Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi, and said to him, "We hereby give allegiance." After him Khalīfa ʿAlī wad Ḥilū and Sayyid al-Makkī came forward and took the oath of allegiance. At the very end, some of the Ashrāf came forward and took the oath of allegiance, such as Sayyid ʿAbd al-Qādir Sattī ʿAlī

[10] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 641.

> and Sayyid ʿAbd al-Karīm. Finally, Khalīfa Muḥammad al-Sharīf came forward and took the oath.[11]

This pledge-taking ceremony was obviously recognition of a new beginning. The notables of the Mahdiyya on one level were swearing their allegiance to the new leader, while on another level, the Khalīfa was affirming his domination of the Mahdiyya through this ritual. ʿAbdallāhi was the *khalīfa* of the Mahdī and as such assumed the same position in the hierarchy that the Mahdī had occupied.

Connerton notes that all beginnings contain elements of recollection.[12] In this ceremony the recollection is one that recalls the first of the rightly-guided caliphs, Abū Bakr, and the Mahdī as well. When those in opposition to the Ashrāf stated that the Khalīfa should succeed the Mahdī because of the arrangement of the rightly-guided caliphs they were drawing a sacred parallel between Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi, the first of the caliphs designated by the Mahdī, and Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, the immediate successor of the Prophet Muḥammad. Thus, those who swore their allegiance to ʿAbdallāhi were imbuing him with the same authority Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq had. Furthermore, these men thereby recognized the transfer of the Mahdī's authority to ʿAbdallāhi. As noted above, before his death, the Mahdī declared, "The Khalīfa is of me and I am of him. Follow him in every matter." The Khalīfa was essentially acting out the "mythic concordance" that the Mahdī set in motion by equating him with Abū Bakr. The Mahdī maintained that he was the Prophet Muḥammad's spiritual successor and ʿAbdallāhi was the spiritual successor of Abū Bakr. As a consequence, just as Abū Bakr succeeded the Prophet and became the first caliph, ʿAbdallāhi succeeded the Mahdī and became his caliph.

The presentation of the Khalīfa with the insignias of authority, the turban and sword of the Mahdī, affirmed the former's authority and symbolized the transfer of authority from the old order to the new. Chapter 2 elucidated the way in which all things associated with the Mahdī were given the same reverence as the man himself. The turban is a material sign of sovereignty representing spiritual majesty, and the sword symbolizes temporal authority and might. In bestowing these insignia of sovereignty upon ʿAbdallāhi, the notables were, in effect, recognizing his authority both as a spiritual and temporal

[11] Mikhāʾīl, *Mudhakkirāt*, 68–9.
[12] Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 6.

leader. Essentially, this ceremony served two purposes: the recognition of the Khalīfa's right to govern, and a symbolic bridge between the old and new authority.

In a proclamation issued on 27 January 1883, the Mahdī praised the Khalīfa and stated that the Prophet had appeared to him and ordered all of the followers of the Mahdiyya to obey the Khalīfa. This was the same proclamation in which the Mahdī declared that, "Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi is of me and I of him."

> The master of existence [the Prophet Muḥammad] (may God's blessings and peace be upon him) advised that he [Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi] should be given the same respect that all of you give me. And you must submit to him outwardly and inwardly in the same manner you have submitted to me. Also accept his pronouncements and do not concern yourselves with his actions. For everything he does is a command of the Prophet (may God's blessings and peace be upon him) or by our permission.... And know with all certainty that his [Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi] ruling [on a matter] is a ruling from the Messenger of God (may God's blessings and peace be upon him).[13]

In essence, this proclamation, and others like it, serves as a conduit of divinely appointed authority from the Prophet Muḥammad through the Mahdī to Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi. It is important to note that despite the Mahdī's purported claims of following the Prophetic example, the Prophet Muḥammad did not designate a successor prior to his death. The Prophet made it clear that he was the "the seal of the Prophets," and there could be no question of anyone inheriting his role. The first question that confronted the first Muslim state was, who should lead, and what status and power should the leader have? These questions became the major concerns of the Muslims in the years following Muḥammad's death and the problems they caused proved to be extremely intractable. Ultimately a council of leaders met and Abū Bakr was elected Khalīfat Rasūl Allāh (successor to the Messenger of God). The title indicated that Abū Bakr was not a prophet, but he was not a secular ruler like a king either. However, the question of succession continued to plague the early Muslim state until the Umayyads established a hereditary dynasty.

It is not certain if the Mahdī designated his four *khalīfa*s in order to avoid any problems of succession that might befall the Mahdist

[13] al-Mahdī, *Manshūrāt*, 163.

state. The above proclamation was presented to all those who opposed the Khalīfa's accession and essentially served to cement the Khalīfa's authority to govern. In this proclamation the Mahdī was reaffirming his position as the elect of God and as such it was his prerogative alone to determine who could share or partake in his authority. The Mahdī was exercising this prerogative by designating ʿAbdallāhi as *khalīfat al-mahdī* (the *mahdī*'s caliph); he would therefore possess the same spiritual and temporal authority as the Mahdī.

Thus, ʿAbdallāhi had the best claim to succeed the Mahdī because of his nomination as Khalīfat al-Ṣiddīq. In addition, supporters of ʿAbdallāhi believed that the Mahdī had nominated the Khalīfa as his successor on his deathbed, where he had indicated that he had a vision from the Prophet that they should elect ʿAbdallāhi as his successor. The *khalīfa*s Muḥammad al-Sharīf and ʿAlī wad Ḥilū announced this vision to the populace in a proclamation whose purpose was to quell the anxiety of the masses and affirm the religious and political legitimacy of Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi on the eve of his accession:

> The Shaykh al-Qurashī was sent together with a company of saints in the presence of the Prophet (peace be upon him), to say that the Prophet had hastened his [the Mahdī's] removal to the next world. He said to him, "Choose a deputy who will rule after you from among the ranks of your *khalīfa*s." The Mahdī said, "I have chosen Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi b. Muḥammad, 'Khalīfa al-Ṣiddīq,' as my deputy to rule after me."[14]

Thus, it is evident that these proclamations served the same function as material insignias of authority because they engendered in many of the Sudanese a sense that the Khalīfa's power and authority was an extension of the Mahdī's; these proclamations made this manifest.

ʿAbdallāhi was clearly the most qualified man to undertake the leadership of the Mahdist state. According to all the available sources, he had been the Mahdī's most trusted commander from the beginning of the movement. In addition, he was the commander of the most powerful regiment of the Mahdiyya. The Ashrāf, however, considered ʿAbdallāhi a usurper to the power that was rightfully theirs. They saw him as an illiterate nomad from the West.

The Mahdī had been revered to such an extent that it was difficult for Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi to fill the charismatic vacuum that resulted from the Mahdī's death. A significant volume of hagiography was produced

[14] al-Mahdī, *Manshūrāt*, 87.

by the Mahdī's adherents during his lifetime and continuing after his death. Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi was not so fortunate: his reputation was sullied almost from the moment of his inception as the successor to the Mahdī. The Ashrāf had grudgingly accepted the Khalīfa's succession but could not countenance for long the fact that the power they believed to be rightfully theirs had been given to a man from such an inauspicious background as the Khalīfa's. The Ashrāf maintained that as direct descendants of the Prophet, they had the right to rule. From their perspective, the Khalīfa was merely the son of an amulet-maker from the West.

The Khalīfa's Origins

ʿAbdallāhi b. Muḥammad Karrār b. ʿAlī al-Tāʿīshī was born and raised in Darfur. As his name suggests, ʿAbdallāhi was a member of the Tāʿāīsha, a branch of the Baqqāra Arabs engaged in semi-nomadic pastoralism in Darfur. Both his father and grandfather were members of the Sammāniyya order. ʿAbdallāhi's grandfather was one of the many pilgrims from West Africa who ultimately settled in the Sudan. ʿAbdallāhi's father, Muḥammad, was well known among the Tāʿāīsha as a man of piety and a religious shaykh. Shuqayr notes the following:

> Those who knew him described him as a good man, scrupulous in his attendance to his religious duties, and capable of curing diseases and insanity by means of *ḥijāb*s, or religious charms; he was also a teacher of the Qurʾān possessing esoteric knowledge.[15]

The Tāʿāīsha utilized Muḥammad Karrār's purported ability to foretell the future to plan their raids against the tribes in the region of southern Darfur. If Muḥammad Karrār foretold of victory, the Tāʿāīsha believed victory was imminent, and if he warned them that a raid was ill-advised on a certain occasion, the Tāʿāīsha would heed his advice and postpone or abandon the battle. Muḥammad Karrār became wealthy from this unique skill and was able to marry more than one woman and purchase a concubine.[16]

Muḥammad Karrār had five children. The eldest child, Yaʿqūb, was born to Muḥammad and his first wife. Muḥammad took a second wife,

[15] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 271.
[16] Ibid.

a widow who later gave birth to ʿAbdallāhi. It was Muḥammad Karrār's desire to educate all of his children in the Islamic sciences; he wanted them to be fully conversant in the Qurʾān, Ḥadīth, and Islamic jurisprudence, so he hired a religious scholar to teach them. All of Muḥammad Karrār's children were excellent students, save ʿAbdallāhi.[17] He found that his interests did not lay in intellectual pursuits. ʿAbdallāhi's father apparently believed that his son shared his talent for divination and therefore tutored him in the sciences of divination. It was understood that ʿAbdallāhi would eventually succeed his father as a practitioner of this science.[18] According to Shuqayr, ʿAbdallāhi came to be regarded as a *faki* and was employed as a diviner by the Rizayqāt (a branch of the Baqqāra who also inhabit Darfur) in their war against al-Zubayr Raḥma Manṣūr, the slave trader who was the de-facto ruler of Baḥr al-Ghazāl.

Al-Zubayr ultimately defeated the Rizayqāt, ʿAbdallāhi was captured and imprisoned, and, it seemed, set for execution. Some of the shaykhs intervened on his behalf and al-Zubayr spared him, noting that soon after he pardoned ʿAbdallāhi, the latter approached him with news of a dream that al-Zubayr was actually the anticipated *mahdī*. ʿAbdallāhi asked al-Zubayr if he was truly the expected *mahdī*, because ʿAbdallāhi wanted to pledge allegiance to him and become a devoted follower.[19]

ʿAbdallāhi's dream was ostensibly a manifestation of the Mahdist expectation. The teachings Muḥammad Karrār imparted to his children almost certainly mentioned the appearance of the *mahdī* and his characteristics. Al-Zubayr spared ʿAbdallāhi's life, and ʿAbdallāhi came to perceive him as uncommonly generous. In addition, al-Zubayr was a powerful presence who claimed that his war against the Rizayqāt was because they were "wicked nomads" who were engaged in highway robbery and he wanted to make the roads safe for travel.[20] Al-Zubayr, however, denied that he was the *mahdī*. He wrote to ʿAbdallāhi, stating that he was merely one soldier in the army of God and that he waged war against tyranny and rebellion.[21]

When al-Zubayr and the Rizayqāt arrived at a peace treaty, ʿAbdallāhi, his father, his father's disciples, and the rest of the family

---

[17] Mekkī Sheibeka, *al-Sūdān ʿabr al-qurūn* (Cairo: n.p., 1947), 381.
[18] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 271–3.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

left their home with the intention of reaching the Hijaz and making the pilgrimage. Like many other pilgrims, they were unsuccessful in this quest and instead remained for two years in Dār Jimʿa in Kordofan, where they were the guests of the shaykh of the region, ʿAsākir Abū Kalām. It was in Kordofan that Muḥammad Karrār died and was buried, but not before encouraging ʿAbdallāhi to continue on the journey to the Hijaz and never return to the Sudan.[22]

Hence, in accordance with the dying wishes of his father, ʿAbdallāhi left his brothers and sister in the care of Shaykh ʿAsākir and embarked on the journey to Mecca via the Nile Valley. ʿAbdallāhi journeyed from Dār Jimʿa to the Nile Valley on foot, a distance of roughly 700 miles. He related to Slatin that the journey was one marked by mistreatment at the hands of many of the riverine Arabs.

> Yes, indeed, it was a very troublesome journey. My clothes and my dialect at once distinguished me as a stranger wherever I went; and when I crossed the Nile, I was greeted with, "What do you want? Go back to your country; there is nothing to steal here." Once, when passing through a village, the people wanted to take my donkey away, saying that it had been stolen from them the previous year.[23]

On his journey ʿAbdallāhi heard about Muḥammad Aḥmad and decided to seek him out and become one of his disciples before continuing to Mecca. ʿAbdallāhi claimed that when he initially saw Muḥammad Aḥmad he fainted and did not regain consciousness for more than an hour. When he finally regained consciousness he glanced at Muḥammad Aḥmad again and lost consciousness a second time. Upon waking this time, ʿAbdallāhi approached Muḥammad Aḥmad, shuddering and crying and took his hand, kissed it, and told him that he was the anticipated *mahdī*, which the latter did not deny. ʿAbdallāhi swore his oath of allegiance to Muḥammad Aḥmad, and upon completion of the oath, Muḥammad Aḥmad appointed ʿAbdallāhi as one of his standard-bearers.[24]

Slatin notes that in ʿAbdallāhi, Muḥammad Aḥmad had a ready instrument at hand for establishing the Mahdiyya. With time, however, it seems the relationship became more symbiotic in nature. The Mahdī was the visionary, while the Khalīfa was the architect. In the

---

[22] Ibid.
[23] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 129.
[24] Ibid., 129–30.

early stages of the Mahdiyya, ʿAbdallāhi provided Muḥammad Aḥmad with information about the Baqqāra and their potential usefulness in the Mahdiyya. ʿAbdallāhi believed "They [the Baqqāra] would gladly seize an occasion to fight for the religion of God and His Prophet, and conquer or die."[25] Thus, it was ʿAbdallāhi who managed to recruit and command the most zealous of the warriors of the Mahdiyya.

Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi became the Mahdī's chief adviser and confidante. However, despite this, the relationship between the two men was viewed with suspicion and envy by the Mahdī's immediate relatives, the Ashrāf. Apparently, the Ashrāf believed that the Mahdī's charisma could only be transmitted in a hereditary manner. Like the early ʿAlids (followers of ʿAlī), who believed that leadership of the Muslim polity should only be given to descendants of the Prophet, the Ashrāf believed that the legitimate ruler of the state must come from within the family of the Mahdī. Weber mentions the possibility of charisma being inherited or transmitted along the path of routinization. In the case of hereditary charisma, the followers' recognition is no longer paid to the outstanding qualities of the individual leader, but to the legitimacy of the position that he has acquired by hereditary succession. In its pure form, charismatic authority only exists in the process of origination. Charismatic authority does not remain stable; rather, it becomes either traditionalized or rationalized. It can, however, be transmitted—for example, this is what takes place when the priest anoints with oil and the king is anointed at the coronation.[26]

The Mahdī did not formally anoint the Khalīfa, but the Mahdī's prophetic vision, in which he designated ʿAbdallāhi as his successor, essentially amounted to the transference of the charismatic authority.

Charisma, as noted earlier, is a concept that exists in peoples' minds. The term is applied to a quality in an individual who is thought to be endowed with exceptional gifts, and, on the basis of these gifts, the individual is treated as a leader. The recognition of these gifts on the part of the subjects validates charismatic authority. Thus, for the supporters of the Khalīfa, the Mahdī's purported vision provided enough evidence to legitimate his succession; however, the Khalīfa was hard-pressed to convince the Ashrāf and the other riverine Arabs that he was indeed the legitimate successor to the Mahdī.

---

[25] Ibid.
[26] Weber, *Social and Economic Organization*, 365.

Upon the death of the Mahdī, the Khalīfa issued a proclamation that affirmed his authority to take possession of the leadership of the Mahdiyya. In this proclamation, the Khalīfa also exercised his claim to the authority that was possessed by Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, that is, at the death of the Mahdī, the Khalīfa uttered the same pronouncement that the first caliph uttered at the death of the Prophet to the people of Mecca: "O People: whosoever worshiped Muḥammad, know that Muḥammad has died. And whosoever worships God, know that God lives and does not die."[27]

These two sentences are well known in the Muslim milieu; the pronouncement of these sentences amounted to a ritual performance that created a mythic concordance between the Khalīfa and Abū Bakr. It is in the employment of such ritual performances that memories of the past and knowledge of past events were enlisted to support the legitimacy of the Khalīfa's rule of the Mahdiyya. This ritual performance explicitly claimed that there was indeed continuity with the past. Through this mythic concordance, a sacred link was established between the Mahdī's *khalīfa* and the Prophet's *khalīfa*. In uttering these sentences Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi was recalling a period in sacred history in which the nascent Muslim community embarked on a journey never traveled before. Under the capable leadership of Abū Bakr, the journey not only succeeded, but the community emerged even stronger than before. The Khalīfa was symbolically making the claim that even though the Mahdī had died, he (the Khalīfa), would emerge just as capable a leader as Abū Bakr had been. He was essentially stating, albeit in symbolic terms, that the past would definitely inform the present. Just as Abū Bakr continued to implement the Prophet's plans of expanding Islam outside the confines of the Hijaz in the seventh century, the Khalīfa would continue to fulfill the Mahdī's desire to spread the Mahdiyya outside the confines of the Nilotic Sudan in the late nineteenth century.

The Khalīfa assured the populace that the Mahdī, when he was alive, guided the people to that which is correct, informed them about God's call, and caused the unknown to be known. Hence, the Khalīfa added, it was incumbent upon him, as successor of the Mahdī, to do the same. In a proclamation to his followers written sometime after the

[27] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 270.

Mahdī's death, the Khalīfa stated, "Know that I am following the way and behavior of the Mahdī."[28]

The Khalīfa continued to assure the populace by noting that he, too, had spiritual support from the Mahdī, even after the latter's death:

> The Mahdī (may peace be upon him) came to me at the end of the month of Rajab 1303 [April 1886]. He had with him the caliphs and his most trusted companions. During this period, the Mahdī (peace be upon him) said all of the divine secrets are gathered in the letter *bāʾ* and its dot. The Mahdī (peace be upon him) then wrote the letter and told his companions that God had imprinted this letter and its secrets in one man. The companions asked, "Who is this man?" And the Mahdī gestured toward the humble servant [Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi]: "This Khalīfa al-Ṣiddīq." Then the Mahdī glanced at his companions and they found the letter *bāʾ* on my right cheek and it is there. In addition, on the second day after the Mahdī (peace be upon him) was called to heaven, I saw while in a state between sleep and consciousness a hand of brilliant light stretching forth toward me from the heavens. This hand took my hand and I pledged my allegiance to the strengthening of the religion… And you all know that the divine assistance in which God provided His Mahdī (peace be upon him) continues and did not end with the Mahdī's (peace be upon him) call to the next world. For ʿAzrāʾīl continues to carry the standard of victory, and the chosen one [the Prophet Muḥammad] (peace be upon him) is still the commander of the army [of the Mahdiyya]. Likewise, the Almighty's support for the believers with His angels and His jinn and His saints has not been severed. Such being the case, the sword of victory is in the hand of the servant of God [the Khalīfa], which was given to me by the Mahdī (peace be upon him) in accordance with the Prophetic presence.[29]

This proclamation is yet another example of ritual performance articulating and affirming the spiritual legitimacy and political authority of the Khalīfa. It begins with the Khalīfa's claims that the Mahdī appeared to him in a vision, which establishes the link between the Mahdī's authority and that of the Khalīfa, and confirms that the social order will be preserved because the Mahdī is still in communication with the Khalīfa. Apparently many believed that with the death of the Mahdī the Mahdiyya would come to an end. The Mahdī was essentially the guarantor of the divine order. The existence of the Mahdiyya was conceived to represent a God-given and divinely established order and the Mahdī acted as the guardian against those forces that sought

[28] SAD, 430/1/1.
[29] al-Mahdī, *Manshūrāt*, 92.

to bring about the demise of the movement. Thus, in an effort to reassure the people that even though the Mahdī was dead, the movement and subsequent state would continue to thrive, the Khalīfa used the same symbolic discourse that was employed by the Mahdī when he first claimed to be *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar*.

In addition, when referring to himself, the Khalīfa invoked the designation, "Khalīfat al-Ṣiddīq, Khalīfat al-Mahdī, Khalīfat Rasūl Allāh," thereby confirming his authority as the spiritual heir of not only Abū Bakr, but the Mahdī as well, and by extension, the Prophet Muḥammad. The declaration of the Mahdī's and Prophet's name emphasized that one who disobeyed the Khalīfa was guilty of disobeying the Mahdī and the Prophet, and this amounted to apostasy.

In the proclamation, the Khalīfa declared that he was imbued with esoteric knowledge given to him directly from God. It is not out of the ordinary for a man claiming divine guidance to maintain that the Almighty is in direct communication with him. However, it is interesting to note that the Khalīfa employed the same symbolic convention (the letter *bāʾ* and the mole on the right cheek) used by the Mahdī to illustrate his investiture of esoteric knowledge. This reference may have been derived from the doctrine of a Shīʿa group established in the fourteenth century, known as the Ḥurūfiyya, who believed that the word is the supreme manifestation of God and is revealed in the human face.[30] In essence, the Khalīfa was making a declaration that he was a favorite of God, an individual in possession of *baraka*. God's favor is manifested in men by their possession of esoteric knowledge, miracles, and their association with the Prophet, al-Khiḍr, and eminent saints.

From the perspective of the northern Sudanese Muslims, the visions a holy man experiences indicates that he is indeed an individual imbued with *baraka*. In the Khalīfa's proclamation above, he states that he had a vision where he saw what he believed to be the hand of God descend from the heavens and request the Khalīfa's oath of allegiance. These visions have some relation to the story of the *miʿrāj* that appears in the Qurʾān (chapter 17), where the Prophet Muḥammad's ascension to the seven heavens is mentioned. For Sufis, the *miʿrāj* is paradigmatic of the mystical journey each Sufi must embark on to attain union with the divine. Thus, replete within this one proclamation are symbolic references to the Mahdī, the Prophet Muḥammad, and Islamic mysticism. These are all

[30] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 412.

symbols of religious authority that resonate within the collective social memory of the northern Sudanese.

Around this same period, ʿAbdallāhi issued a proclamation that came to be known as the "Proclamation of the Hair." In it, he further affirms his legitimacy as the successor of the Mahdī by employing a sacred *sanad* (chain of authorities on which a tradition is based) to confer authenticity to al-Khiḍr's message:

> Al-Khiḍr (peace be upon him) told me, "Your Lord salutes you, and the angels salute you, and the Prophet (peace be upon him) salutes you, and the Mahdī (peace be upon him) salutes you and informs you that God has blessed you in what you have done for the religion." Al-Khiḍr told me that the Mahdī (peace be upon him) has informed you that God told Gabriel and Gabriel told the Prophet (peace be upon him), and the Prophet said to the Mahdī and the Mahdī informed me that I should tell you that God has made you a guidance in the earth from the East to the West. He continued by saying that whoever loves you and follows your pronouncements has accepted our guidance and is safe from God's wrath and those who do not love you and do not listen to your pronouncements are among the unrighteous and the abode of the unrighteous is the eternal hellfire. I asked al-Khiḍr (peace be upon him) what was the reason for his withdrawal from me since the Mahdī's departure to the other realm. He [al-Khiḍr] told me the reason was, "since the Mahdī's departure, I have been watching over a hair of the Mahdī, which he gave to Aḥmad Sulaymān [the secretary of the public treasury] for safekeeping. Sulaymān kept the hair in a place and at the time of the Mahdī's transference, opened it and wept. And likewise in Khartoum he opened it and I was fearful that it would fall in an unclean place in the blowing of the wind and become lost. But it would not become lost to me. Therefore I kept guard over it, night and day. After you swallowed it yesterday, I was heartened." Al-Khiḍr said, the heart, which this hair is in, is safe from hypocrisy and it enters with a light. This is all a result of this hair. After this al-Khiḍr was absent for a while and when he returned, in his hand was a long light shaped like a rope. He said, "This light is from the Truth [God], praise and exalted be He. He gave it to Gabriel and Gabriel gave it to the Prophet, and the Prophet gave it to the Mahdī and the Mahdī gave it to me, so that I could give it to you. The Mahdī ordered that it be divided into four parts; you must swallow one part, wipe your face with another part, put one part in *al–rāya al-zarqāʾ* [the black flag regiment], and the remaining part should be scattered in the place of the ranks and every rank you command will be bathed in this light."[31]

[31] al-Mahdī, *Manshūrāt*, 98–9.

In this proclamation, ʿAbdallāhi again appealed to the collective social memory of the followers of the Mahdī in order to assure his authority. We noted in the previous chapter that images of the past serve to legitimate the present. The Khalīfa could not claim, as the Mahdī did, to be in direct communication with the Prophet. But ʿAbdallāhi could claim that he was the Mahdī's representative, and, as such, the heir of the Mahdī's *baraka*.

The details concerning the Mahdī's hair are important because the Mahdī's *baraka* was thought to inhere in all aspects of his person. In swallowing the Mahdī's hair, the *baraka* that was inherent in it became manifest in the Khalīfa. This belief was not unique to the Mahdiyya. Al-Jāḥiẓ, the eighth-century Arab prose writer, related the belief in the curative powers of royal or noble blood, which was reputed to cure rabies and madness.[32]

The rope of divine light can be understood as a further use of a thematic device well known to the populace to convey the investiture or transference of power and authority from the Mahdī to the Khalīfa. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this light motif was used by the Mahdī and has its foundation within the Sufi milieu with the doctrine of *al-nūr al-Muḥammadiyya* (the Muḥammadan light). In the context of the Khalīfa, the light was portioned out to him, members of his standard, *al-rāya al-zarqāʾ* (the black flag regiment), and all those who were faithful to his cause. In essence, the divine light was shed on anyone who recognized the Khalīfa's authority.

In addition to the use of proclamations to create a new legitimizing myth of the Khalīfa's authority, material insignias of authority such as the sword and turban were used extensively to articulate his claims to political and spiritual legitimacy. The second chapter mentioned that, following the latter's death, the Khalīfa took into his possession the Mahdī's seal and signet ring, both ubiquitous insignias of power.

The seal and signet ring comprised what Aziz al-Azmeh refers to as a "floating repertoire of immensely ancient iconography concerning power in relation to the sacred."[33] Abū Salīm observed that the use of the seal and signet ring in the Funj Sultanate was limited to those

[32] ʿAmr b. Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ, *Rasāʾil al-Jāḥiẓ*, ed. ʿAbd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanjī, 1964), 149–50.

[33] al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship*, 10.

individuals who possessed authority.[34] Furthermore, as noted above, proximity to these sacred objects was thought to be empowering—a way of evoking the presence of sacred power.

In fact, the Mahdī's wives hid his sword and signet ring from the Khalīfa and instead gave it to Muḥammad al-Sharīf. It is apparent that the power of regalia was not lost on the wives of the Mahdī. According to Shuqayr, the wives claimed that the sword possessed the "triumph" (*naṣr*) of the Mahdī and could only be given to one of the Mahdī's relatives.[35] ʿAbdallāhi's possession of these objects was important as a symbolic indication that the Mahdī had indeed transferred his authority to the Khalīfa.

The Khalīfa's use of dreams, visions, and regalia as symbols of authority after the death of the Mahdī obviously resonated in the consciousness of the populace. The Sudan was, and continues to be, a country steeped in Sufi traditions. In relation to succession to the office of shaykh within the Sufi context, the shaykh usually nominated his successor before his death. It was not necessary for the successor to be a member of the family of the founder of the order, since the succession is spiritual. The new shaykh inherits certain instruments (*ālāt*) considered to be physical symbols of the continuity of authority.

While we have established that the supporters of the Khalīfa accepted that the Mahdī designated ʿAbdallāhi as successor and the latter obtained some of the physical symbols of the Mahdī's authority: the turban, seal, and signet ring, the question remains, did the use of these symbols of authority successfully establish the Khalīfa as the legitimate successor to the Mahdī's political, as well as spiritual, mantle?

During the ʿAbbāsid caliphate, the transference of power was clearly marked in an elaborate ceremony in which the new leader's authority was confirmed by the bestowal of specific elements of regalia, such as robes of honor, black turbans, and swords. When ʿAbdallāhi assumed control of the Mahdiyya, there was a bestowal of regalia, but an elaborate ceremony was absent. Instead, there was a continuation of the Sufi practice of oath-taking. Upon his death, the Mahdī's *khalīfa*s

[34] Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm, *al-Khatam al-Diwānī fī-l-Sūdān* (Khartoum: al-Majlas al-ʿAlā li-l-Shuʾūn al-Dīniyya wa-l-Arqān, 1983), 44.

[35] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 642.

and notables within the Mahdiyya pledged their oath of allegiance to Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi.

Slatin relates that after the Mahdī's death was made known to the public, the Khalīfa demanded the oath of allegiance from the entire populace:

> We *mulāzimīn* [bodyguards of the Khalīfa] were the first to be summoned before the new ruler, who henceforth was called Khalīfat al-Mahdī [successor of the Mahdī], and he gave us the oath of allegiance, directing us at the same time to move the Mahdī's pulpit to the entrance-door of the mosque, and to inform the populace that he was about to appear before them. Informed that this had been completed, he left his late master's grave, and, for the first time, ascended the pulpit as ruler. He was in a state of intense excitement. Great tears rolled down his cheeks as, with a trembling voice, he began to address the multitude. "Friends of the Mahdī," he shouted, "God's will cannot be changed. The Mahdī has left and has entered into heaven, where everlasting joys await him. It is for us to obey his precepts, and to support one another, just as the stones and walls of a house go to make a building. The good tidings of this life are not lasting. Seize, therefore, with both hands, the good fortune that is yours of having been the friends and adherents of the Mahdī, and never deviate in the slightest degree from the path that he has shown you. You are the friends of the Mahdī and I am his Khalīfa. Swear that you will be faithful to me." This short address over, all those present now repeated the well-known oath of allegiance. But the Khalīfa altered the first sentence as follows: "Bayʿana Allāh wa Rasūlahu wa Mahdīna wa bayʿanaka ala tawḥīdillāhi." (We pledge allegiance to God and His Prophet and our Mahdī and we pledge allegiance to the unity of God). As only a certain number could take the oath of allegiance at one time; those who had finished made way for others, and the crowd was so enormous that many were in danger of being trodden to death. The ceremony went on till nightfall.[36]

The ceremony continued until past midnight the following morning, with the Khalīfa summoning all the *amīr*s of his standard, *al-rāya al-zarqāʾ*, in order for them to give him their oath of allegiance. Oath-taking ceremonies such as this serve as a powerful means to ensure the loyalty of the populace.

After completing the oath-taking ceremony, the Khalīfa set out to consolidate his power and the power of the Mahdiyya in the realm. Despite this elaborate ceremony, the Khalīfa's hold on the reins of power was tenuous at best. Theobald wrote that, "the Khalīfa's 'policy,'

[36] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 231.

not in any way carefully formulated, was a struggle for survival. He sought first to establish an unchallenged authority, and then maintain it."[37]

The Khalīfa's first act in establishing this "unchallenged authority" was to designate Omdurman, *buqʿat al-Mahdī* (the Mahdī's place), as the capital of the nascent state. Prior to the Mahdiyya, Omdurman was little more than a place across the river from Khartoum, comprised of a few huts of little use save as a watering and grazing site for the herds of the Jummūʿiyya people that occupied the region.[38] After the fall of Khartoum, both the Mahdī and the Khalīfa were opposed to settling in Khartoum. It was their contention that Khartoum, because it had been founded by the Turkiyya, was an abode of unbelief.

Hence, on 14 Shawwāl 1302/27 July 1885, the Khalīfa issued the following proclamation calling for the abandonment of Khartoum and the emigration to Omdurman:

> From Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi b. Muḥammad, the Khalīfa al-Ṣiddīq, to all the people now residing in Khartoum, riverine and westerners, laborers and others: may God guide them to that which is correct, Amen. My beloved, upholding the religion and concern with that which enhances it is incumbent upon every Muslim. In addition, preparation for the Last Day is incumbent upon all as well. It is a sign of God's favor and concern for you that you are present during these auspicious times. Thus, you must give thanks and praise to God the Almighty for these blessings. You must, because of this, be prepared to do whatever is asked of you in relationship to the religion. Know, my beloved, that out of consideration for the faith and the enhancement of the religion, you should leave Khartoum and come to the city of the Mahdī, peace be upon him, living among us with your children and all of your property. This emigration must begin today. No one should delay. The deadline for completion of this emigration is next Friday, 18 Shawwāl 1302 [31 July 1885]. After Friday, a search will be conducted in Khartoum. Anyone found delaying will be punished . . . We have ordered Ibrāhīm Burdaynī to be the overseer of all who are in Khartoum. Anyone found delaying in Khartoum after Friday will be reported. Anyone interfering with the execution of the order will be reported to us and we will punish both the delayer and the interferer. Peace.[39]

---

[37] Theobald, *Mahdīya*, 144.

[38] Robert Kramer, "The Holy City on the Nile: Omdurman, 1885–1898" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1991), 44.

[39] al-Mahdī, *Manshūrāt*, 67.

This proclamation is symbolically important because it illustrates the Khalīfa's desire to initiate a complete break with the old order. Khartoum had been the administrative center of the Turkiyya; consequently, it came to be equated with oppression and unbelief, whereas Omdurman, as the Mahdī's city, was purported to be the Mahdist counterpart of seventh-century Medina. Hence, the Khalīfa was attempting to establish a symbolic demarcation between the old order and the beginning of the new with this proclamation ordering the abandonment of Khartoum for Omdurman. This practice emphasizes the point that the more complete the aspirations of the new regime, the more imperiously it will seek to introduce an era of "forced forgetting."[40] The emigration to Omdurman can be interpreted as a "forced forgetting": a new era was being introduced, that of the Mahdiyya as a state, and all vestiges of the past regime had to be abandoned.

Many of the Anṣār protested the decree and the Khalīfa acquiesced to their demands and did not punish those who continued to linger in Khartoum after the order was issued. However, the following year, in Dhū-l Ḥijja 1303/September 1886, Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi issued a stern order for the abandonment of Khartoum. The inhabitants were allowed ten days to evacuate the city. This order was met with compliance and, following the evacuation of Khartoum, Omdurman became the sole legitimate capital of the Mahdiyya. During this period the Khalīfa also encouraged the people who had emigrated to Omdurman to pledge their allegiance to him. Entire tribes, in addition to individuals, were required to be in the city during the feast of the sacrifice, ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā 1302/20 September 1885.[41]

Omdurman became the administrative center of the Mahdiyya, but first and foremost, it was the spiritual epicenter of the nascent state. The city was founded on the principle of emigration, which has its foundation in the Prophetic precedent. Just as the early Muslims left the oppression and unbelief found in Mecca for Medina (*madīnat Rasūl Allāh*, or the city of God's messenger), the Mahdists abandoned Khartoum, the city of unbelief, for the city of the Mahdī. The mythic concordance between Omdurman and Medina was primarily achieved through the use of proclamation as a rhetorical device emphasizing the link between the two cities. The proclamation evoked a seminal

[40] Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 12.
[41] Kramer, "Holy City," 50–1.

event in Muslim sacred history, the beginning of the nascent Muslim community, and its identification with the beginning of the Mahdist period.

As was the case with the Mahdī, the Khalīfa also apparently utilized symbols from notions of kingship that predominated in the Sudanic Belt to buttress his authority. Spaulding observes that the eastern *mekk*s (kings) of the Funj Sultanate retained some of the customs, insignia, and military accoutrements of Sinnār well into the nineteenth century.[42] Hence, it is not improbable that under the Khalīfa the Mahdiyya, too, would make use of these Sudanic insignia of kingly authority. Especially as the Khalīfa's commitment to and need for pomp and ceremony was much greater than that of the Mahdī.

For example, like his predecessors, the Funj kings, ʿAbdallāhi kept lions at his court.[43] Father Theodoro Krump, a Catholic missionary traveling throughout Sinnār, remarked, in the early eighteenth century, that he saw "boys taking two tame lions for a walk every Friday in the square of Sinnār."[44]

The Khalīfa's emulation of the Funj kings may not have been a conscious decision, rather his mere presence in the Sudanic Belt determined the way he was, even subconsciously, influenced by their ceremonies and those of the Fūr sultans. There is a continuity of sorts from the Fūr and Funj kings to the Mahdiyya. However, this continuity must be understood within of the Mahdiyya's use of symbols, ceremony, and insignia of authority to create something completely unique. This uniqueness is evinced when examining the rise of the Mahdist capital Omdurman and the Khalīfa as the locus of power in the Mahdist state.

The Khalīfa as the Locus of Power and the City of Omdurman

In addition to being known as *buqʿat al-Mahdī*, Omdurman was designated as *al-buqʿat al-musharrafa* (the noble place); *ʿāṣimat al-Islām*

[42] Spaulding, *Sinnār*, 383.

[43] In the monthly budgets of the public treasury records of the Mahdist state in 1897 there appears in the debit column expenses for lions. Abu Shouk and Bjørkelo, *Public Treasury*, 122.

[44] Theodoro Krump, *Hoher und Fruchtbarer Palm-Baum des Heiligen Evangelij*, trans. Jay Spaulding (Augsburg: Georg Schulter & Martin Happach, 1710), 216.

(the capital of Islam); *al-madīnat al-munawwara* (lit., the brilliant city), which is the name reserved for the Prophet's city; and *al-ḥaram al-sharīf*, which is primarily reserved for the temple mount in Jerusalem and the mosque of the Kaʿba.[45] The city was rarely referred to as Omdurman during this period; the various designations indicate that identity of name confers a spiritual or symbolic identification between the Mahdist capital and the sacred places of Islam.[46]

At the physical heart of the Mahdī's city stood the mosque where the population of the city gathered for prayer every Friday. The construction of this mosque, which began on 4 Rabīʿa al-Awwal 1305/20 November 1887, was ordered by Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi and completed seventy-three days later. The mosque came to be known as the Khalīfa's mosque and was considered by the Mahdists to be the fourth greatest mosque in the world, after those of Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. The Khalīfa led all five prayers there and required all the inhabitants of the city to attend the prayers. People found lingering in the streets during prayer time were summarily flogged.[47]

On the occasions when the Khalīfa became ill, one of the *qāḍī*s (judges) or a very pious member of the Khalīfa's bodyguard, the *mulāzimūn*, would substitute as imam.[48] This substitute, however, was forbidden to occupy the *miḥrāb* (the prayer niche where the imam stands to lead the prayer). Rather he was required to stand outside of the *miḥrāb*.[49] This asserted the Khalīfa's unique and uncontested power and authority. According to Islamic law, any male can lead the worshipers in prayer. But the *miḥrāb*, in the Mahdist context, marked the boundary between the ordinary worshiper and the almost sacral quality of the space occupied by the imam. Standing in the *miḥrāb* was the prerogative of a select few. Since Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi was the Imam of the Mahdiyya, standing in the *miḥrāb* was his prerogative alone. He monopolized for himself the spiritual authority to occupy this sacred space.

After the afternoon and evening prayers, the Khalīfa would discuss the affairs of the state in the mosque. His meetings were primarily held with his *qāḍī*s, who would sit on the bare floor, heads bowed in a

[45] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 320.
[46] Kramer, "Holy City," 42–50.
[47] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 321–3.
[48] Ibid., 320.
[49] Ibid.

semicircle around the Khalīfa, who was seated on a *farwa* (a prayer rug made of sheepskin). The *qāḍī*s would remain silent until the Khalīfa completed his inquiries.[50]

The Khalīfa, like the Mahdī before him, was the locus of power of the Mahdiyya and the position he assumed in his meetings in the mosque and the prerogative of standing in the *miḥrāb* reaffirmed the social, political, and religious hierarchy of the nascent state. Connerton refers to this physical positioning as "the choreography of authority."[51]

Posture is important for communal memory because power and rank are commonly expressed through certain postures. From the disposition of one body relative to another, one can deduce the degree of authority that each is thought to enjoy or that each lays claim to. This is particularly clear when one person sits in an elevated position and everyone else stands; or when one person stands and everyone else sits. Much of the choreography of authority is expressed through the body.[52] The employment of the choreography of authority became starkly evident whenever the Khalīfa heard complaints or petitions in the mosque. Any individual with a complaint could enter the mosque for the afternoon or evening prayer and state that he had been wronged in a matter.

The complainant was initially required to ask the Khalīfa's permission for an audience. Once permission was granted, the individual would remove his weapons, and, with head bowed and arms folded on his chest, advance toward the Khalīfa. The individual would stop a few feet from where the Khalīfa was sitting and say, "Peace unto you, O Khalīfa of the Mahdī." The Khalīfa would respond by saying, "And peace unto you," and then direct the person to sit down. The person would sit down, kneeling, or advance toward the Khalīfa, kneel before him, grasp his hand, and kiss the palm and back of the Khalīfa's hand. The individual would then rise and retreat to the place where he had been standing. If the Khalīfa ordered the person to sit, then the person would sit on the ground, kneeling with his hands on his knees and wait for the Khalīfa to permit him to state the reason for the audience. The Khalīfa would remain silent until the individual completed his entreaty; then the Khalīfa would dismiss him. The individual would

[50] Ibid.
[51] Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 73–4.
[52] Ibid.

then retreat from the Khalīfa's presence without turning his back to the Khalīfa.[53] This protocol extended to everyone wishing an audience, regardless of his position within the Mahdiyya.

This ritual was a reaffirmation of the Khalīfa's dominion of the Mahdiyya. It involved what amounted to a reenactment of the oath-taking ceremony; as a consequence, it was also a reaffirmation of the subjects' recognition that the Khalīfa was the exemplary head of the Mahdiyya.

The Khalīfa's protocol was essentially the same as the Mahdī's. The major difference was location: the Mahdī held audiences in his home, whereas the Khalīfa's audiences were held in the mosque. The mosque exemplified the association of politics and religion in a single center. Next to the mosque was the Mahdī's tomb; the homes of the Mahdī, Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi and his brother Yaʿqūb, Khalīfa ʿAlī wad Ḥilū, Khalīfa Muḥammad al-Sharīf; as well as those of several *amīr*s, *qāḍī*s, and clerks.[54]

If the lines between administration and spirituality were blurred in relationship to the mosque, there was no such ambiguity concerning the Mahdī's tomb (*qubbat al-Mahdī*). The tomb of the Mahdī was, without question, the spiritual center of Omdurman. For those Sudanese whose religion was informed by Sufism, the *baraka* possessed by dead saints was held in great esteem. In many cases, at least in the view of their followers, these saints possessed more *baraka* deceased than they did when they were living. The deceased shaykh is merely considered to be in a deep sleep, able to manifest himself to people in dreams or trances.

The shrines of these deceased shaykhs, which assume many shapes, impart some of the *baraka* associated with the holy man. The domed tombs (*qubbāt*) are the most elaborate of these shrines and are built over the grave. The grave is most often the place where the shaykh died. The *baraka* of the dead man is ostensibly the strongest where he lived and died. The domed tomb is a sanctuary, an asylum for those fleeing vengeance or injustice. No living being should be killed within the confines of the tomb because it is under the protection of the saint.[55]

---

[53] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 896.
[54] Kramer, "Holy City," 53.
[55] Trimingham, *Islam*, 141–6.

The construction of the Mahdī's tomb began with a ceremony led by Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi, who laid the first stone for its foundation. The Khalīfa led a procession of around 30,000 people to the banks of the Nile where the stones for the construction of the building had been deposited. Lifting a stone on his shoulder, the Khalīfa carried it to the site where the tomb was to be built. After the Khalīfa laid the first stone, Khalīfa ʿAlī wad Ḥilū and Khalīfa Muḥammad al-Sharīf followed his example. Then the *amīr*s approached the site and laid down their stones. Then the general populace participated in the ceremony: each man, woman, and child who could lift a stone went to the site of the tomb's construction carrying a stone.[56] This ceremony, which took place on 3 Rabīʿa al-Awwal 1306/7 November 1888, was a choreography of authority that reenacted and reaffirmed those present in the hierarchy of the Mahdiyya. Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi was the first to lay a stone at the site of the tomb's construction, signifying that he was truly the first citizen of the state and its leader. Then, following him were the two other *khalīfa*s and the *amīr*s respectively, thus indicating their position within the state in relationship to the Khalīfa. The populace was allowed to participate in the ceremony, which simultaneously reinforced the hierarchy and created a sense of communal participation. Apparently, if the Khalīfa had chosen to, he could have restricted participation in the ceremony to himself or the notables of the state. However, permitting the people to participate in this ceremony reinforced in their minds the idea that the Mahdist state was akin to the nascent Islamic community founded by the Prophet Muḥammad, where the Prophet was the first among equals.

The mosque and tomb were symbols of spiritual authority that isolated the Khalīfa at their spiritual center. For some believers, Omdurman was the object of devotion because of the Khalīfa's presence. The physical proximity engendered a sense of spiritual proximity. According to correspondence written to him, many believed that the Khalīfa had the power to intercede with God on their behalf.[57] The Khalīfa's spiritual authority was asserted symbolically as the architect of the two sacred buildings of Omdurman. As the successor to the Mahdī's mantle, he alone had the prerogative to build a tomb and mosque as objects and locations of devotion.

---

[56] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 259.
[57] Kramer, "Holy City," 89–90.

Unlike the Mahdī, who eschewed pomp, the political authority of the Khalīfa was primarily asserted in ceremonial processions. Early in the Khalīfa's rule, these processions would occur every Friday after the congregational prayer. After a time, the Khalīfa stopped appearing in the weekly processions, preferring to lead them only on special occasions such as feast days. On the occasion of ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā (the feast of the sacrifice) on 1 Shawwāl 1305/31 July 1887, a great review was held to commemorate the feast and celebrate the Khalīfa's most capable and trusted general, Ḥamdān Abū ʿAnja. Abū ʿAnja was born a slave, but had been raised as a member of the Khalīfa's family. Abū ʿAnja had been associated with the Mahdiyya from its beginning. The Khalīfa ordered Abū ʿAnja, who had been in the West, to return to Omdurman to participate in the feast and make preparations for war with Ethiopia, which had attacked the Sudanese border village of al-Qallābāt in January 1887.[58] Sanderson contends that these preparations for war with Ethiopia had more to do with the Khalīfa's desire to secure his border, than with jihad.[59] Abū ʿAnja arrived at Omdurman in April 1887, and was celebrated during the feast in July, but was not dispatched to al-Qallābāt until October.[60]

Within the Muslim milieu, festivals such as the feast of the sacrifice serve a dual purpose: symbolically representing the restoration of order and, concomitant with this restoration, reaffirming the position of the leader at the top of the social order.[61] Similarly, in the feast ceremonies at Omdurman, claims of authority and the re-affirmation of the hierarchy of the Mahdiyya were all manifest in the grand review.

Ohrwalder observed that more than 31,000 people attended this feast, which was held on the parade grounds west of Omdurman. The night prior to the festival, criers were sent throughout Omdurman announcing that anyone who failed to appear at the great review would suffer severe consequences. The day of the feast was signaled by the beating of drums. Before sunrise, the *amīr*s gathered their standards and followers, assembled, and marched to their assigned positions on the parade ground. The troops assembled in long lines behind each other facing east. Immediately after sunrise the Khalīfa exited his residence mounted on a large camel and, surrounded by his bodyguards, rode

[58] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity,* 239–42.
[59] Sanderson, "Conflict and Co-operation," 20.
[60] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 248.
[61] Stetkevych, *Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy*, 244.

to the parade ground. This procession was accompanied by the sound of the drums and the trumpet. This trumpet was alternately blown, on the orders of the Khalīfa, by six men who were walking ahead of him. Behind him walked the buglers, who sounded the advance or halting of the procession on the orders of the Khalīfa. Behind the buglers followed the personal attendants of the Khalīfa; they carried the *rekwa* (a leather container used for making ablutions), the sheepskin prayer rug, and several spears. Following the attendants was a musical band comprised of fifty black slaves playing drums and horns. Marching on either side of the Khalīfa were two physically imposing men. On the right was an extremely tall Dinka who was the head of the slaves in the royal palace, and on the Khalīfa's left was a powerfully built Arab who was responsible for lifting the Khalīfa in and out of the saddle.[62]

This procession spatially reinforced the Khalīfa's sovereignty. The Khalīfa formed the center of this great moving square. His position at the center symbolized his central position in the Mahdiyya. The Khalīfa was the signal for the procession to halt or advance; this symbolically enacted his authority within the Mahdist state, where all orders and edicts emanated from him. Even Abū ʿAnja, whom this procession was celebrating, was a secondary figure to the Khalīfa. The procession stopped at the center of the parade ground, and Abū ʿAnja, who was mounted on a pony, advanced to meet the Khalīfa. On approaching the Khalīfa, Abū ʿAnja dismounted and kissed the Khalīfa's hands. The Khalīfa greeted his general and ordered him to remount. Then the review of the troops was conducted. The Khalīfa remained seated on his camel while each *amīr* and his troops rode past. After the review, the Khalīfa dismounted and stood on his prayer rug and conducted the prayers. With the conclusion of the prayers, guns were fired in a salute.[63]

This procession was unique in that it did not, solely, assert the Khalīfa's authority. In all of the processions that the Khalīfa participated in, he was the locus of power. He was the center whether he was riding a camel or a horse, or being pulled in a carriage. This particular ceremony also asserted the importance of Abū ʿAnja within the Mahdiyya. Those who rode with the Khalīfa in processions were an elect few. Rank and station were clearly demarcated by a person's

[62] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity,* 242.
[63] Ibid.

spatial relationship to the Khalīfa in the processions. The Khalīfa's bodyguards always surrounded him in the positions closest to him. When Abū ʿAnja approached the Khalīfa, he dismounted and greeted the latter, demonstrating the special favor he enjoyed. He was the only individual afforded the prerogative to personally approach the Khalīfa in this procession. Furthermore, according to Ohrwalder, the Khalīfa returned the greeting warmly, thus indicating for all in attendance the significance and position of Abū ʿAnja within the hierarchy. These ceremonies were not solely designed to affirm the sovereignty of the ruler, but were, as we see in the instance of Abū ʿAnja, used to assert the hierarchy of the Mahdiyya and demonstrate how specific individuals fit into this hierarchy.

The Ashrāf apparently believed that they should have occupied a position at the top of this hierarchy. They initially, grudgingly, accepted the Khalīfa's succession to the mantle of the Mahdī. Charles Neufeld, a German merchant who was held captive during much of the Khalīfa's rule, stated in his memoirs that during the Khalīfa's early rule, there was a growing conviction of the imposture of the Mahdī's successor.[64] As noted previously, many Sudanese considered that political authority could only be transferred through hereditary succession. While in theory, when a holy man died, the individual appointed to succeed him need not be of the same family, in reality, the hereditary principle was usually adhered to.

The shaykh usually nominated his successor from among his sons, though not necessarily choosing the eldest. The belief being that the shaykh's *baraka* is hereditary. Apparently many members of the Ashrāf believed that they shared in the *baraka* of the Mahdī. Even when the Mahdī was alive, the behavior of the Ashrāf indicated their view that the Mahdī's authority was theirs also, because of their relation to him. The Mahdī, however, was not under the same impression. Bedrī recalls an occasion when the Mahdī delivered the Friday sermon and admonished the Ashrāf:

> At noon we went to the mosque for the Friday service, and the Mahdī (with whom be God's peace), led the prayers and preached the sermon. Towards the end of it he said, "Companions of the Mahdi, Aḥmad Sulaymān has distracted the Ashrāf with riches. Say after me three times,

[64] Charles Neufeld, *A Prisoner of the Khaleefa: Twelve Years Captivity at Omdurman* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1899), 86.

> 'We ask God's protection that we be not like them.'" And the Ashrāf, who were the uncles and cousins and other near relatives of the Mahdī, sat glum and silent, as though birds were flying over their heads. He spoke this as a serious judgement, and not lightly in jest.[65]

Despite this upbraiding, it seems that with the death of the Mahdī, the Ashrāf became convinced of their authority as the legitimate leaders of the Mahdiyya. With the ascension of Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi, the Ashrāf became angry at being out of power. Soon Omdurman was divided into two factions: ʿAlī wad Ḥilū and Muḥammad al-Sharīf with the Ashrāf in one and Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi in the other. The two camps mobilized to do battle, but ʿAlī wad Ḥilū acted as a mediator and peace was secured on Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi's terms. Muḥammad al-Sharīf relinquished his men and arms, thus establishing Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi as the sole authority within the Mahdist state.[66]

The Khalīfa's authority was of the charismatic type, but it was an authority that was transformed in the process of its transfer from the original charismatic leader. For this transfer to be stable there must be a recognition of the passage of the charisma from the original leader to the successor; the nature of charismatic authority is such that there must be some sort of designation on the part of the followers.[67]

There is evidence, in the form of a purported deathbed declaration, that the Mahdī, the original charismatic leader, designated Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi as his successor, and this succession was recognized by the most devoted of the Mahdī's followers. The legitimacy of the new Khalīfa was linked to the legitimacy of the Mahdī. For many followers of the Mahdiyya, the Khalīfa possessed a number of the distinguishing characteristics possessed by the Mahdī.[68] These are abilities that the Mahdī was said to possess in his lifetime. Furthermore, the charisma of the Khalīfa after he assumed leadership of the Mahdiyya became inextricably intertwined with that of the Mahdī. Throughout Bābikr Bedrī's memoirs, the Khalīfa is always referred to as the "Khalīfa of the Mahdī." This is in stark contrast to Shuqayr and other contemporary non-Mahdists. For instance, Shuqayr, throughout his treatment of the Mahdiyya, refers to Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi as "the Tāʿīshī," thereby emphasizing his western nomadic background. Nonetheless, it seems

---

[65] Bedrī, *Memoirs*, 34.
[66] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity,* 188.
[67] Weber, *Social and Economic Organization*, 365.
[68] Kramer, "Holy City," 89.

that the overwhelming majority of the followers of the Mahdī accepted the Khalīfa's legitimacy as the heir to the Mahdī's authority. Kramer points out that the high death toll in the British re-conquest illustrates that the Anṣār remained loyal to the Khalīfa even in the face of certain death.[69]

Authority, in the sense of a right to issue commands, and a corresponding obligation on the part of a subject to obey them, arises from the consent of a person subject to it. In the instance of charisma and authority, charismatic authority resides in the minds of those who are subordinate to it. Thus, it seems that the Khalīfa's authority was based upon a routinization of charisma. A charismatic leader can designate a successor, and much of the charisma can be transferred to the successor. It does seem, from the available sources, that the majority of the adherents of the Mahdiyya recognized the political and spiritual authority of the Khalīfa. However, since he was not the original charismatic leader of the Mahdiyya, he had to employ a great deal of ceremony in order to bolster this authority. As a consequence, unlike the Mahdī, ceremony was, in the case of the Khalīfa, a key element of power. During the Khalīfa's rule, ceremony was primarily employed to establish a mythic concordance between him and Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, and between him and the Mahdī. Indeed, despite claiming to embark on a new beginning, the past continued to inform the present. In addition, the ceremonial rites affirmed the hierarchy of the Mahdiyya, placing the Khalīfa at the top of this hierarchy and spatially in the center.

[69] Ibid., 90.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CREATION OF AN ISLAMIC STATE

The previous chapter argued that Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi articulated claims to authority by establishing a mythic concordance between himself and the first of the rightly-guided caliphs, Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, and the Mahdī as well. This concordance manipulated collective symbols of authority to create a myth of the Khalīfa's authority in which the hierarchy of the Mahdiyya was symbolically enacted with the Khalīfa as the locus of all power. This chapter explores, within the context of the growth of the Mahdist state, how the ruling elites of the Mahdiyya ordered and organized society as authoritative and God-given. In addition, it analyzes how ceremonies informed the establishment of the state and how the elite manipulated ceremonies to bolster the legitimacy of state policy by creating a mythic concordance between the Mahdist state and the nascent Muslim community in Medina. The Mahdists, in participating in ceremonies, were essentially erecting a symbolic barrier between the old tyranny and a new beginning.[1]

At the political center of any complex society there are symbolic forms that articulate the fact that it is, indeed, governing the people. Even if governing elites are chosen in a democratic fashion and are divided among themselves, their actions will be ordered and their existence justified by a collection of stories, ceremonies, and insignia that have either been inherited, or, in the context of revolutionary situations, invented. It is these symbols and ceremonies that present an aura of importance and are somehow connected with the way the world is ordered.[2]

The Mahdī eschewed great ceremonial displays during the period he led the Mahdiyya, but after his death the Khalīfa developed what Geertz has termed a "symbolic character of domination" to affirm the legitimacy of the Mahdist state.[3] This symbolic character of domination

[1] Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 7.
[2] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 124.
[3] Ibid.

was explicitly manifest in the performance of rituals and ceremonies under the Khalīfa's reign. A change in attitude to ceremonies and ostentation was noticeable almost immediately upon his accession. The Khalīfa had to win legitimacy not only for himself, but for the Mahdist state as well. Logically, a rite revoking an old institution must call into question the other rites that previously confirmed that institution.[4]

For example, during the ceremony celebrating ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā, the Khalīfa held up a certain Shaykh Khalīl from Egypt as an example of the past regime. Ohrwalder relates that Shaykh Khalīl had come to the Sudan sometime in 1888 to encourage the people to abandon the Mahdiyya and return to the orthodox faith. This shaykh was ultimately captured, imprisoned, and kept confined to the outskirts of Omdurman for several months.

> The Khalifa brought Khalil here to show him how immense was his power and authority, and just before the parade was concluded Abdullahi and all the cavalry galloped up to him, surrounded him, and asked whether he would not rather stay in the shadow of the Mahdi's dome than return to Egypt. Khalil, who had now been for upwards of five months in confinement, and thinking that he should never be allowed to leave, and thinking that he should never be allowed to return and report to the [Turco-Egyptian] Government all he had seen, replied diplomatically that having once been in the light he had no wish to return to darkness. This reply delighted the Khalifa, who ordered him to be set free and at prayers in the mosque on that day he sat in the center of the long line of Ansar just behind the Khalifa.[5]

The decision of the Khalīfa to denounce the Turkiyya at the ʿĪd celebration was not arbitrary. The ceremony had the twofold purpose of affirming the religious legitimacy of the Mahdist state and denouncing the Turkiyya, which was represented symbolically by Shaykh Khalīl.

Much has been written concerning the administration of the Mahdist state, an administration, which, according to Rudolf Slatin, was despotic and arbitrary in nature. As a ruler, Slatin describes the Khalīfa as a man "given to vanity and cowardice."[6] Slatin contends that the Khalīfa's policies were devised to enable him to hold the reins of power firmly. He adds that the Khalīfa relied heavily on his kinsmen, who were appointed to administrative posts despite their incompetence. These

[4] Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 9.
[5] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity,* 374.
[6] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 308–12.

appointments led to the deterioration of the administrative system and widespread corruption. Slatin's perspective is not, however, balanced, as it is informed by his personal bias against the Khalīfa—a result of his long imprisonment by the Mahdists. The administration of the Mahdist state under the Khalīfa was purportedly a continuation of the teaching and precepts of the Mahdī in the form of an organized polity. Just as Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq continued the implementation of the Prophet's orders following the latter's death, the Khalīfa continued or established the Mahdī's teachings as state policy after he acceded to the position of leader of the Mahdiyya. The principal point of this teaching was a return to the pristine Islam that was practiced during the Prophet's time. God would rule the earth through his representative, the Mahdī, and the Mahdī would refill the earth with justice and purity just as it had been filled with oppression and corruption under the Turkiyya. As God's representative on earth, obedience to the Mahdī was tantamount to obedience to God and disobedience to him was akin to apostasy.

> Whoever submitted to him [the Mahdī] and pledged their allegiance to him and the jihad, was counted as one of his Ansar. Conversely, those who did not pledge allegiance to him, he would wage war against them and humiliate them no matter if they were Muslim or non-Muslim. And anyone denying he was *al-mahdi*, would be killed. Furthermore, anyone who disobeyed an order would either be killed or have his left leg and right arm cut off. And he made it incumbent upon his followers that he is the link between them and the Prophet of Islam in the conveyance of the rules of Islam.[7]

Furthermore, doubt in the Mahdiyya was construed as unbelief and punishable by death. The Mahdī wrote the following letter to the Shaykh al-Islām, Muḥammad al-Amīn prior to the conquest of Khartoum. The letter is a warning of the consequences of doubting the mission of the Mahdiyya.

> The Prophet says, "A messenger has but to deliver his message, and I, as a messenger from God, have delivered my message faithfully to you. I delivered it as I was ordered, without untruth or forgery, and yet you would not believe." The Prophet assembled the spirits of the scholars and holy men, and rebuked them, saying, "You are not grateful, for God in His gracious mercy has sent you the Mahdī and yet you will not believe him." The scholars replied, "O Messenger of God, we repent."

[7] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity,* 44.

> The Prophet then said, "Go then and seek his pardon." So they then came and asked my pardon, and those chosen ones believed in me…. Know that I do nothing but by the direct command of the Prophet. It is the will of God that I should become powerful through the sword, as it was with the Prophet. You are aware that besides yourself there are other scholars who say that my message is contrary to their belief, but you know well that true revelation may be abrogated by further true revelations…. Before I leave off, I advise you to think of your end, so that you may not be the cause of your own death. I need say no more to such a man as you.[8]

If one doubted in the Mahdiyya, by extension this was doubt in the Prophet Muḥammad because, the Mahdī claimed, it was the Prophet who had appointed him as his representative. Under the Mahdī's leadership, the Mahdiyya crystallized as a faith and began its initial formation as a state.

According to the Mahdists, the model for the organization of the state was the period of Muḥammad and the rightly-guided caliphate. From an Islamic perspective, this period is viewed as the exemplary period of Muslim life because it was the time when God revealed His final message to the last Prophet; the Islamic community was created with a common purpose and bond; and the sources of Islamic law, the Qurʾān and spiritual leadership of Muḥammad, originated. The paradigm for the state's governance, according to the Mahdists, was the Qurʾān and the Sunna of the Prophet. The Muslim community was to be the principle vehicle for the realization of God's will. The Qurʾān illustrates this: "You are the best community ever brought forth for mankind, enjoining what is good and forbidding evil" (3:30).

We will see how this paradigm was molded to suit the interests of the Mahdī and to articulate his power; however, it is anachronistic to presume that the period of the Prophet and the rightly-guided caliphs produced statutes, forms of state, and leadership of a determinative or definitive character that informed the later crystallization of Muslim polities. From the time of the death of the Prophet until the present, Muslim polities have made the claim that they were formed according to Qurʾānic paradigms. These claims are, however, specious in nature. Sacred scripture, by its nature, is open to interpretation and re-interpretation. An individual reading the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth would not learn the intricacies of state governance, rather these evolved through

[8] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 609.

a process of emulation of the statecraft of the polities that held sway over the specific regions prior to the Muslim conquests, whether they were Sassanid or Byzantine. The Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid caliphs, despite professing religious authority, utilized many of the insignia of royal authority from the Sassanid and Byzantine courts. As time progressed, the attributes of the caliph were transferred to the person of the Prophet.[9] By extension, the nascent Islamic state at Medina came to be viewed as a royal state with the Prophet representing the absolute authority.

The title "Khalīfat Allāh" (vicegerent of God) gained currency under the Umayyads, who used the title to express a strong claim to religious authority. Interestingly, this title had been rejected by the earlier caliphs, Abū Bakr and ʿUmar, in favor of the title of "Khalīfat Rasūl Allāh" (vicegerent of God's Messenger). Hence, the early rightly-guided caliphate conceived itself as successor to the Prophet. Over time, the caliphs fashioned this paradigm to buttress their authority and the ʿAbbāsid caliphs in particular came to be viewed as successors of the Prophet, and the caliphate as the successor of the first Islamic state.[10] By the Ayyūbid period in the twelfth century, the Prophet was viewed both from a sacred and a royal perspective.

The Mahdī claimed to be heir of the Prophet's authority and, by extension, his state would be heir to the Prophet's state, adhering strictly to the precepts of the Qurʾān and Sunna. Despite these claims, the state structure was derived from a variety of sources that determined its nature and created a peculiarly Sudanese polity. The Sufi organizations concomitant with insignias of power borrowed from the Funj and Fūr sultanates were the principal elements that colored the Mahdist state, along with the Mahdī's own interpretation of the Qurʾān and Sunna. In the previous chapters we addressed how the Mahdists appropriated symbols of authority from Sufism and the Funj and Fūr sultanates to enunciate their power. These same appropriations were carried over in relationship to the organization and rule of the state.

In the pre-Mahdist society in the Sudan, tribal affiliation and affiliation with Sufi orders represented the basic social bond. And just as Islam replaced tribal solidarity in the pre-Islamic Arabian milieu with a community based upon a common faith rather than kinship ties,

[9] al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship*, 63.
[10] Ibid.

the Mahdiyya replaced tribal affiliations and Sufi organizational ties with that of adherence to the ideals of the Mahdist state. The Mahdī, like the Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid caliphs and like the Funj and Fūr sultans, was the ultimate custodian of authority. He claimed to be the Prophet's caliph and all members of the community were to be equal before God. The equality of the believers and the necessity of allegiance to the state were affirmed, for example, by the Mahdī's proclamation banning excessive spending on the marriage ceremony. The social position of the contracting families found expression in the amount of money they were able to expend in the marriage ceremony. Hence, families were wont to spend lavishly on weddings in order to demonstrate their position within society. The Mahdī viewed this as an un-Islamic innovation.

> As you are now God's followers, your weddings must not be merely a show. Those among you who wish to be married must never incur lavish expenditure. Your weddings must be simple, like that of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet. The Prophet has expressed great anger at the extravagance at present going on. The banquet should not consist of more than one lamb. The dowry of a widow and the trousseau should consist of two dresses only. For the money must be kept for the struggle and must be distributed…. Anyone disobeying these orders will be considered a thief and punished accordingly.[11]

The reference to the Prophet's daughter in the proclamation affirms the link between the Mahdiyya and the early Islamic community. If the Mahdī was the heir to the Prophet then the followers of the Mahdiyya were likened to the followers of the Prophet and had to conduct themselves accordingly.

The Mahdiyya was to rely solely on the Mahdī's interpretations of the law for correct governance; consequently, he prohibited anyone from using the works of the four main Sunnī schools of Islamic law (s. *madhhab*, pl. *madhāhib*) as reference texts. When the Mahdī had emigrated to Jabal al-Qadīr, he was asked by one of his followers, al-Ḥājj Marzūq, the following question:

> "It is known that the four *madhhab*s are Ḥanafī, Shāfiʿī, Mālikī, and Ḥanbalī. But what is the *madhhab* of the Mahdī?" The Mahdī replied, "These imams, may God reward them, have allowed the people to advance and advance toward us. They are like the device which moves

[11] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity,* 58.

> water from one pool to the next until the water finally reaches its source, which is the sea. May God reward these imams with goodness; however, they are men and we are men, and if they were aware of us they would have followed us. For our *madhhab* is the book of God and the Sunna of his Prophet and trust in God."[12]

In this response, the Mahdī asserts not only his claim to spiritual and temporal authority, but his affirmation that the state also possessed the same spiritual and temporal authority. The Mahdī's opposition to the four *madhāhib* was framed in the vocabulary of *tawḥīd,* the pure monotheism that was espoused by the Prophet Muḥammad. The Mahdī, in response to a query by al-Fakī Jalāl al-Dīn, who inquired about the "path" of the Mahdiyya, stated: "Our Path is: there is no god, save God and Muḥammad is the messenger of God; and our *madhhab* is the Sunna and the Qurʾān."[13] On a purely political level it seems that the *madhāhib* were banned in order to project an image of unity within the Mahdist state and give the Mahdī unchallenged authority in interpreting the Qurʾān and Sunna.

Claiming to strictly adhere to the Qurʾān and Sunna was a key element in the legitimacy of the state. Institutions and practices that were not in existence during the time of the Prophet were considered by the Mahdists to be innovations that had to be eliminated. The Mahdī ordered the burning of all works save the Qurʾān and the Ḥadīth compilations of al-Bukhārī and Muslim and the works of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, the theologian and Sufi. He maintained that the books he had ordered burned "concealed the light of the Qurʾān and Sunna."[14] In the spring of 1885, Francis W. Grenfell, brigadier-general in charge of communications in the Nile expedition of 1884–85 and the *sirdār* (commander) of the Egyptian army from 1885 to 1892, wrote a letter to Evelyn Baring, the British consul-general of Egypt, relating to him that when the Mahdī entered the province of Baḥr al-Ghazāl all the Egyptian troops surrendered and the Mahdī ordered all of the books to be burnt.[15]

The Mahdī also ordered that the Qurʾān and the *rātib* of the Mahdī be the sole books of recitation. The *rātib* is a compilation of prayers, texts, and exhortations from the Qurʾān and Ḥadīth, which was to

---

[12] Sheibeka, *al-Sūdān*, 373.
[13] Ibid., 374.
[14] Ibid.
[15] SAD, 250/1/549–50.

be recited twice daily, after the morning and afternoon prayers. The *rātib* is a genre that has its origins in Sufi traditions. For example, Ibrāhīm al-Kabbāshī, the eponymous founder of the Kabbāshī branch of the Qādiriyya order, composed several prayers and invocations to be repeated by his followers, individually or collectively, a prescribed number of times a day after the regular daily prayers. The Khatmiyya, like the Qādiriyya, included collections of devotions that were to be recited by the followers of the order. These devotions were known as *musabbaʿāt* because they were divided according to the seven days of the week.[16]

Despite the obvious borrowing of many Sufi insignias, the Mahdī and the Khalīfa deemed all Sufi orders religious innovations. As we discussed in chapter 2, the initial spread of Islam in the Sudan owed its impetus to holy men, often adherents of Sufi orders. Sufism was a firmly entrenched religio-cultural aspect of the Nilotic Sudan during the Mahdist revolt. The shaykh of each order asserted his claim to spiritual and temporal authority and maintained that his order provided the sole means to salvation and that adherents of other orders were misled. The individual shaykhs, however, represented only the narrow sectarian interest of their particular order, not those of the substantial populations adhering to other orders. This resulted in much disagreement between the orders and the Mahdī claimed just as the *madhāhib* obscured the true light of the Qurʾān and Sunna, so the various Sufi orders did the same to undermine the religion.[17]

The Mahdī claimed that this ban on the Sufi orders was instituted in an attempt to re-enact the Prophetic precedent, and, since there were no Sufi orders in existence during the time of the Prophet, this was considered an innovation.[18] Perhaps more significant is the reality that it was the Sufi shaykhs who were the Mahdī's major competitors for spiritual and political authority. Thus it becomes increasingly clear that the Mahdī and the Khalīfa effectively prohibited alternative modes of thought by declaring them religious innovations that had no relationship with the Qurʾān and Sunna.

The Mahdī stated that the least of his followers was greater than the eponymous founder of the Qādiriyya Sufi order, Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qādir

[16] Karrār, *Sufi Brotherhoods*, 155–61.
[17] Sheibeka, *al-Sūdān*, 374.
[18] Ibid.

al-Jilānī, because the shaykh and his order, although possessing many virtues, engaged in what the Mahdī considered irreligious behavior and so the Mahdī declared, "…the Anṣār, upon viewing any irreligious act, will summarily put an end to it with their swords."[19]

This statement emphasized that all Sufi orders were made obsolete by the presence of the Mahdiyya because the Mahdī had been ordained to lead the populace to the path of righteousness. The Mahdiyya was attempting to construct a barrier between their new beginning and the old tyranny of the Turkiyya and the perceived religious innovation of the Sufi orders.

State Hierarchy

There is no social system that is completely egalitarian; with society comes a requisite inequality. The Mahdist state was no exception to this rule and was extremely hierarchal in nature. The followers of the Mahdī, as we noted in the second chapter, were given the appellation of Anṣār, in keeping with the Prophetic precedent. The Anṣār were divided into sections and honor was bestowed in a descending order based upon the time when they joined the revolt. The first section and most meritorious group was comprised of the Mahdī's initial students prior to his manifestation as the *mahdī*. This group was known as the "first-born of the Mahdī." The second group was called the Anṣār of Ābā and, as the name implies, these were the individuals that began participating in the Mahdiyya at Ābā Island. The third group comprised those who emigrated to Jabal al-Qadīr while the Mahdī was there. The Anṣār of Kābā were the fourth group, those followers who had left El Obeid for Kābā in order to join the Mahdiyya.[20] The remainder of the Anṣār was divided into sections as well, with merit allotted according to the time when each joined. For example, the people who joined the Mahdiyya at El Obeid were of a more elevated status than those at Khartoum. Shuqayr relates an incident that illustrates the honor bestowed upon those with a long-standing association with the Mahdī.

[19] Ibid.
[20] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 617.

> General Ibrāhīm Bāsha Fawzī met with Lieutenant Yūsuf Afandī Manṣūr in the house of al-Ḥājj Khālid al-ʿUmarabī after the conquest of Khartoum and when the servant brought the coffee he served it to Yūsuf Manṣūr first. Yūsuf indicated to the servant that he must serve Ibrāhīm first. Al-Ḥājj Khālid asked Yūsuf why he refused the coffee and insisted that Ibrāhīm be served first. Yūsuf replied, "Because he has a higher rank than I." Al-Ḥājj Khālid responded by saying, "No, you are more honored than he is because you preceded him in joining the Mahdī." When the servant heard this exchange he took the cup from the hand of Ibrāhīm and gave it to Yūsuf. Then he served Ibrāhīm and excused himself and left the room gnashing his teeth in anger at the Mahdiyya and its rules.[21]

This organization was akin to, and most likely borrowed from, the concept of the *dīwān* of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭab. The caliph ʿUmar, around the year 640, created a register of all the men in the armies, arranged according to when each joined the Prophet at a particular battle. The register fixed a stipend each man was to receive out of the taxes of the conquered lands. The stipends were graded on the principle that those who had become Muslims at an earlier date should receive more. One of the results of the principle on which the register was constructed was the creation of a new elite, replacing the former Arab nobility.[22]

The organization of the Mahdist Anṣār likewise resulted in the creation of a new elite that replaced the older elites. The new elite replaced the *jallāba* merchants and the Sudanese families that had a long relationship with the Turkiyya, families such as the Mīrghanī family, who established the Khatmiyya Sufi order.[23] These new elites were comprised primarily of those individuals who had joined the Mahdiyya early; in addition, the relatives of the Mahdī and those of the Khalīfa comprised a new nobility as well. After the succession of Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi, his kinsmen and members of the Tāʿāīsha tribe found themselves at the top of the Mahdiyya's hierarchal ladder. The position of the families of the Khalīfa and the Mahdī was underscored by the fact that a portion of the monthly expenditures of the Mahdist state were devoted to supporting the Khalīfa's household and the household of the Mahdī's widows.[24]

---

[21] Ibid., 618.

[22] Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*: *The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1986), 68–9.

[23] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity*, 59.

[24] Abu Shouk and Bjørkelo, *Public Treasury*, xxxiii.

The institutions of the state were divided under three heads: the high command of the Mahdiyya, the financial system, and the judicial system. The high command consisted of the Mahdī and the three *khalīfa*s, ʿAbdallāhi al-Tāʿīshī, ʿAlī wad Ḥilū, and Muḥammad al-Sharīf; and the commanders of the various battalions, such as ʿAbd al-Raḥmān wad al-Nujūmī, ʿUthmān Diqna, Muḥammad al-Khayr, ʿAbdallāh Khūjalī, and Ḥamdān Abū ʿAnja. The Ashrāf, the relatives of the Mahdī, also had a close relationship to the high command prior to the Mahdī's death. The principal decisions were made by the Mahdī in consultation with the Khalīfa.[25]

The other *khalīfa*s and commanders implemented the orders issued by the Mahdī, who was the chief lawmaker and decision maker. The Mahdī's legal methodology originated from three sources of law: the Sunna of the Prophet, the Qurʾān, and the inspiration (*ilhām*) transmitted to him by the Prophet.[26] However, based upon the Mahdī's proclamations, it is apparent that *ilhām* was the primary source of law, indeed, the Mahdī considered himself a direct legatee of the Prophet. During his rule, the Mahdī's perceived exemplary character and conduct and his claim to be in constant communication with the Prophet reinforced his authority.

The new state was to be purified of all practices not associated with the time of the Prophet. All such practices were deemed innovation (*bidʿa*); those practices associated with the Turkiyya received the strongest censure. The Mahdī ordered that everyone should "Abandon everything that has the slightest resemblance to the manners and customs of Turks and infidels…. All their dress, therefore, as well as drums, bugles, and other articles, must be abandoned; adhere only to the customs of the Sahaba [Companions of the Prophet]. This is now the time to come to God and make a covenant with Him."[27]

Jihad as a Symbol of Legitimacy

The reorganization of the Nilotic Sudan based upon the eschatological preachings of the Mahdī fueled the fervor for military campaigns.

---

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ahron Layish, "The Legal Methodology of the Mahdī in the Sudan, 1881–1885," *Sudanic Africa: A Journal of Historical Sources* 8 (1997): 39–41.

[27] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity,* 59.

Shortly after the fall of El Obeid, the Mahdī told his followers that the Mahdiyya was destined to be carried outside the borders of the Sudan:

> The Prophet told me to kill three cows upon the conquest of El Obeid in order to celebrate the victory; this I did. Then, in another vision, he told me that as I prayed in the mosque of El Obeid I should pray in the mosque of Khartoum, then in the mosque of Berber, then in the mosque of Mecca, then in Jerusalem, then in Iraq, then in Kufa. May God grant that we die as martyrs.[28]

This concept of carrying the divine message to other regions was in keeping with the Prophetic example as well. When the Mahdī spoke about praying in the various mosques he was declaring that his particular message should not be limited to the Sudan; rather it was incumbent upon the Mahdists to carry the message throughout the Muslim world. As Muslim armies advanced out of Arabia in the seventh century and entered new areas, the peoples they encountered were offered three choices: conversion, that is, to become a member of the Muslim community with its rights and duties; acceptance of Muslim rule as "protected" people; and, if neither of these options were accepted, then the people were in open rebellion and warfare was the last option. The expansion of Islam came about as a result of those who accepted the first two peaceful options, and not, in a significant way, from the conquest of those who resisted Muslim rule.

The concept of jihad was of the utmost importance to the Mahdist state. From the Mahdī's perspective, this concept primarily encompassed, but was not solely limited to, militant struggle. The Mahdī declared that warfare was not necessary to destroy the infidels, but militant struggle was encouraged because God works through the people to carry out His will.

> My beloved, place your trust in the one God and wage jihad for His sake as He has ordered you and do not fear His enemy whom He has seized by the forelock. He has only commanded you to wage jihad against the enemy if you are seeking the great recompense and closeness to God and deliverance on the Day of Resurrection.... The Prophet (may peace and blessings be upon him) informed us of the good tidings and said: "Whosoever embarks upon jihad will not suffer."[29]

---

[28] Shuqayr, *Ta'rīkh al-Sūdān,* 588.
[29] al-Mahdī, *Manshūrāt*, 113.

For the Mahdists, jihad was essential for the establishment of God's rule. The legend and myth of the Prophet's conquest of Mecca was evoked by the Mahdī's conquest of Khartoum. After the Prophet conquered Mecca in January 630, he sent out expeditions throughout the Arabian Peninsula calling for the tribes to join Islam. This was accomplished more by diplomatic means than by military expeditions. Letters and messengers were sent to the settled peoples of south Arabia and by the end of his life the Prophet had secured a measure of acknowledgement in most of the Arabian Peninsula.

By the time of the death of the last of the rightly-guided caliphs, ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, in 661, the nascent Muslim state controlled the entire Arabian Peninsula and Egypt; it was making forays into North Africa and Spain in the west, and Iran and Sind in the east. Creating a further mythic link between the Mahdist state and the early Muslim community, the Mahdī, upon conquering Khartoum in January 1885, set out to expand his state, initially by diplomatic means, and if this method failed, then by military might. In May 1885, the Mahdī wrote a proclamation that was to be delivered to the rulers, merchants, and village chiefs calling them to his cause.[30] In addition, the Mahdī sent an agent to Syria in order to spread his message there. Indeed, a group of individuals from Morocco who had settled in Egypt wrote to the Mahdī proclaiming belief in his message and asking permission to spread the message in their homeland. The Mahdī wrote to them, welcoming them into the fold.[31]

As noted above, after the Mahdī died the Mahdiyya transformed itself from a revolutionary armed struggle into a unified Islamic state. Following his accession, the Khalīfa took up the task of spreading the message of the Mahdiyya. After consolidating his power in the Sudan, he set upon the task of carrying the Mahdī's message outside the borders of the Sudan. He, too, sent letters to various foreign leaders requesting that they join the Mahdiyya. It was his initial desire to conquer Egypt and then have the remaining regions capitulate. In April 1887, he sent letters to the people of the Hijaz, the Ottoman sultan, ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd, the Khedive Tawfīq of Egypt, and Queen Victoria of England, calling each of them to join the Mahdiyya and warning them

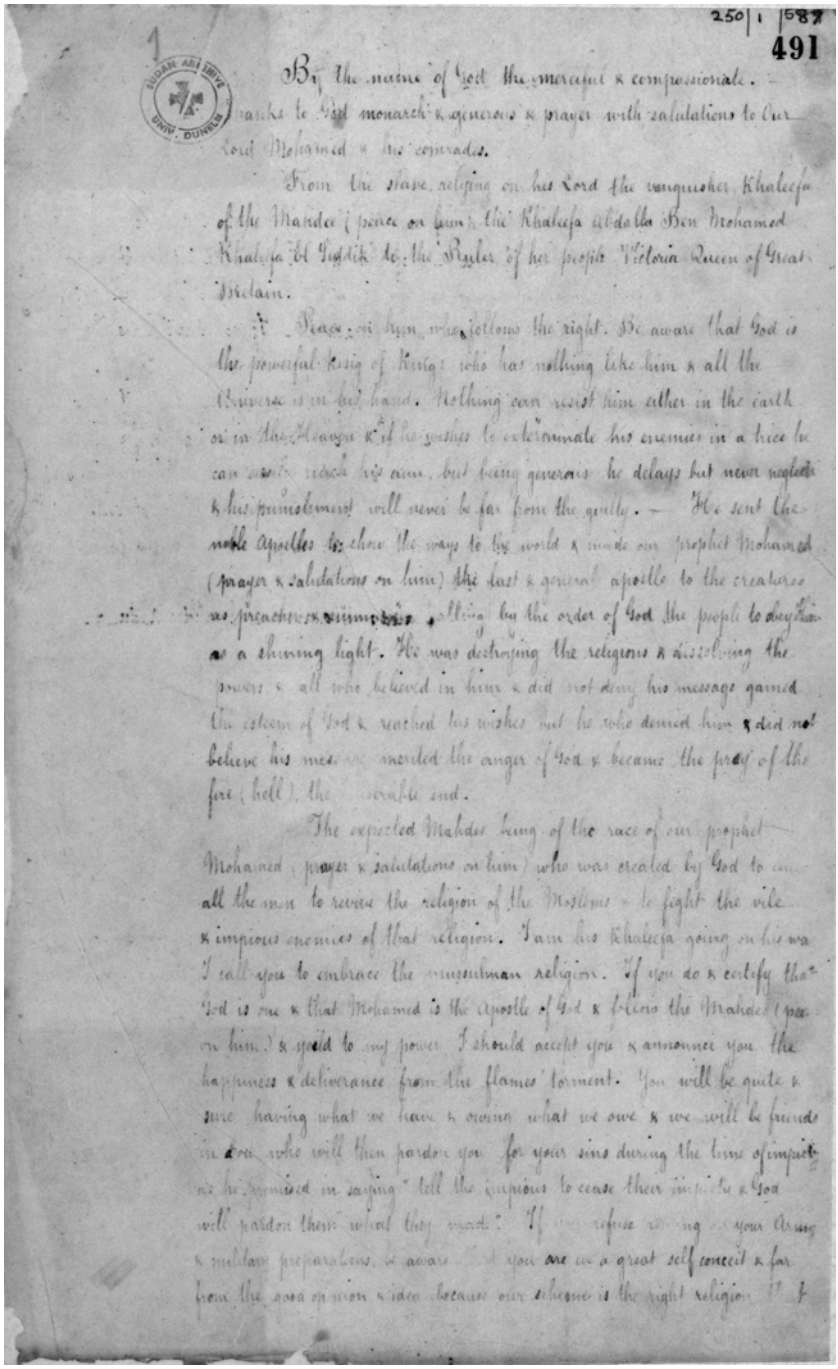
[30] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 590.
[31] Ibid., 594.

of the dire consequences of failure to do so. The following is the letter the Khalīfa sent to Queen Victoria:

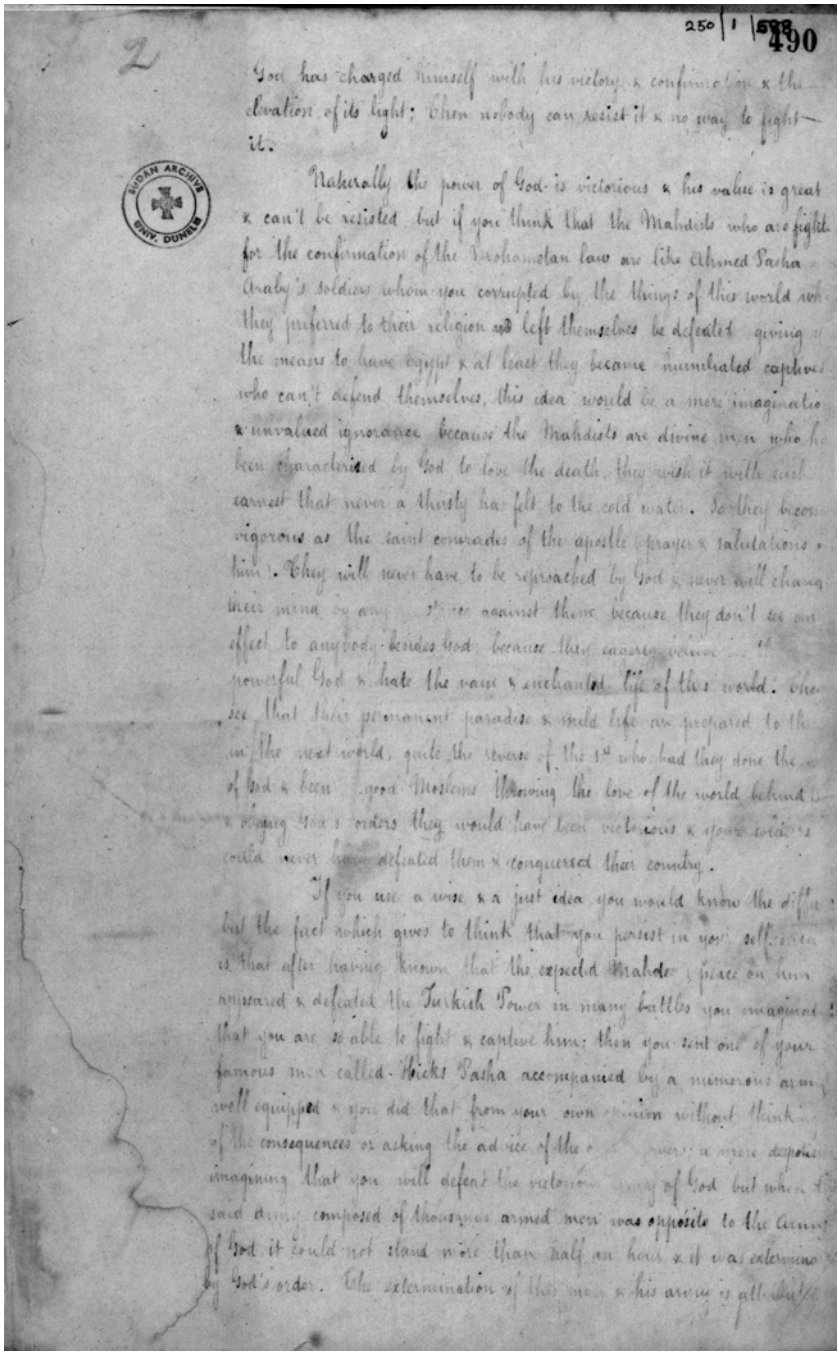
> From the faithful servant of the Almighty, the Khalīfa of the Mahdī, (peace be upon him) ʿAbdallāh b. Muḥammad Khalīfa al-Ṣiddīq, to dear Victoria, Queen of England (peace upon whosoever follows the guidance [of God]). I know that God in His majesty is the master of the world and universe.... And if He desired he could destroy His enemies in less time than a footfall. However, He is generous and slow to respond to a recalcitrant people. He has sent messengers to make clear the path and He has made our Prophet Muḥammad the seal of the Prophets, the messenger for the entire human race bringing glad tidings and warning and summoning everyone to God.... The Mahdī (peace be upon him) was the vicegerent of our Prophet Muḥammad who entrusted him with the mission of summoning all people to the revivification of the religion of Islam and the struggle against enemies, the infidels. And I am the vicegerent following the Mahdī and I am summoning you to Islam and if you embrace Islam and testify that there is no god save God and that Muḥammad is the messenger of God, and if you follow the Mahdī (peace be upon him) and obey my commands I will receive you and announce the glad tidings that you have been saved from the eternal punishment of damnation and your mind will be at rest. You will be one of us. You will join the ranks of the beloved in God and He will forgive you for all the sinful deeds you committed as an infidel.... The men of the Mahdiyya are followers of God and await death with longing.... They do not seek the life of this transitory world, rather they look to the blessings of the hereafter.... Your men have returned from the Sudan suffering defeat and disappointment. There is no doubt that the reason for this retreat was due to your fear of the power of the party of God.... I know with certainty that I have the support of God. I alone am weak, but with the strength of God all those who confront us as enemies shall be killed by our hands with God's support.... And if you do not embrace Islam and enter the Muslim community as followers of the Mahdī (peace be upon him) you can come with your army, for the party of God will meet you in warfare. And if you do not come I am prepared for the party of God to attack with the permission of God in a time He has appointed. This is enough for you. Peace.[32]

In this letter the Khalīfa clearly reaffirms his legitimacy and the legitimacy of the Mahdiyya. The Khalīfa's declaration that the Mahdī is the Prophet's vicegerent and that he is the Mahdī's vicegerent is an affirmation of authority wherein the Khalīfa traces his claims of legitimacy to God via the establishment of a mythic link between himself and

[32] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 685–6.



Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi's letter to Queen Victoria. Reproduced by permission of Durham University Library, SAD 250/1/587–589.



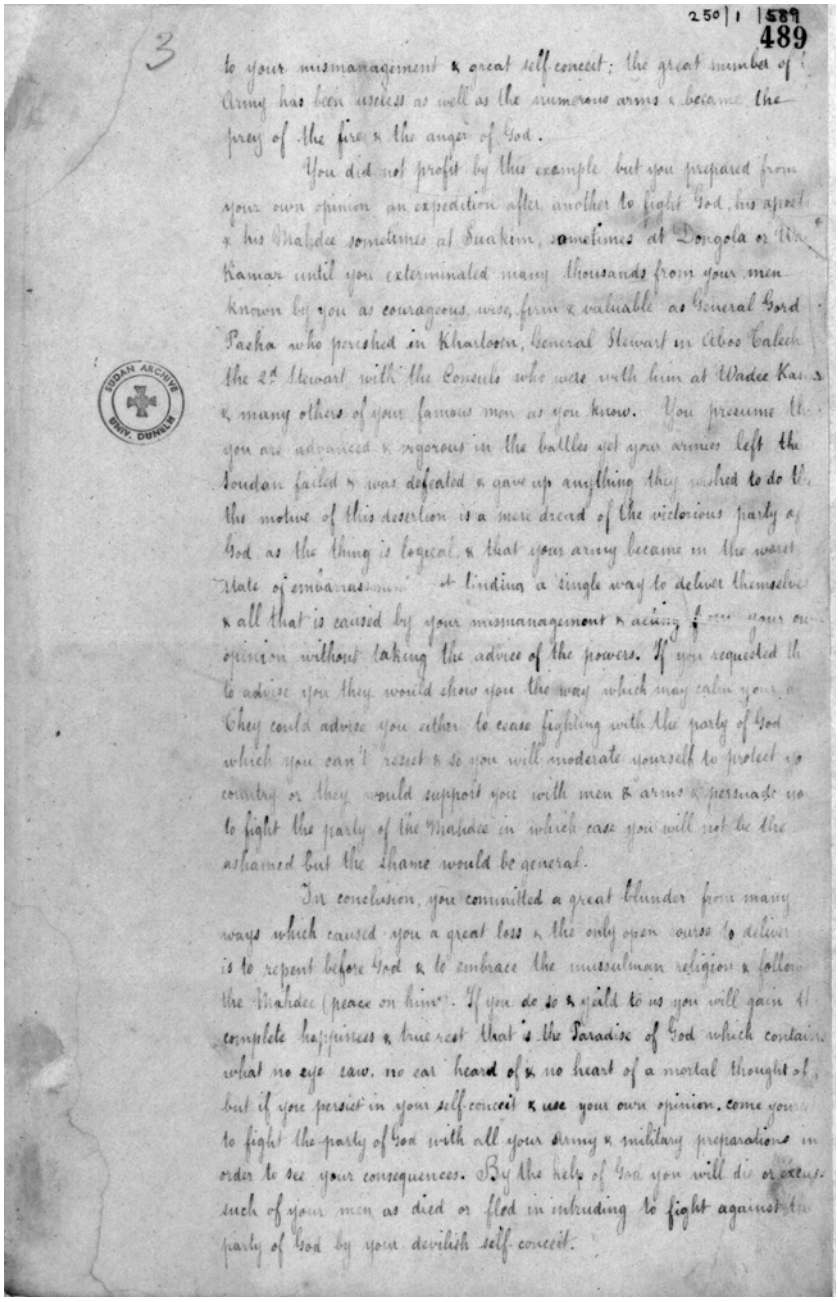
250 | 1 | 588 490

2

God has charged himself with his victory & confirmation & the elevation of its light: then nobody can resist it & no way to fight it.

Naturally the power of God is victorious & his value is great & can't be resisted but if you think that the Mahdists who are fighting for the confirmation of the Mohamedan law are like Ahmed Pacha Oraby's soldiers whom you corrupted by the things of this world which they preferred to their religion and left themselves be defeated giving the means to have egypt & at least they became humiliated captives who can't defend themselves, this idea would be a mere imagination & unrivalled ignorance because the Mahdists are divine men who have been characterised by God to love the death, they wish it with such earnest that never a thirsty has felt to the cold water. So they become vigorous as the saint comrades of the apostle (prayer & salutations on him). They will never have to be reproached by God & never will change their mind on any matter against them because they don't see any effect to anybody besides God, because their eagerness [illegible] powerful God & hate the vain & enchanted life of this world. They see that their permanent paradise & world life are prepared to them in the next world, quite the reverse of the 1st who had they done the will of God & been good Moslems throwing the love of the world behind & obeying God's orders they would have been victorious & your soldiers could never have defeated them & conquered their country.

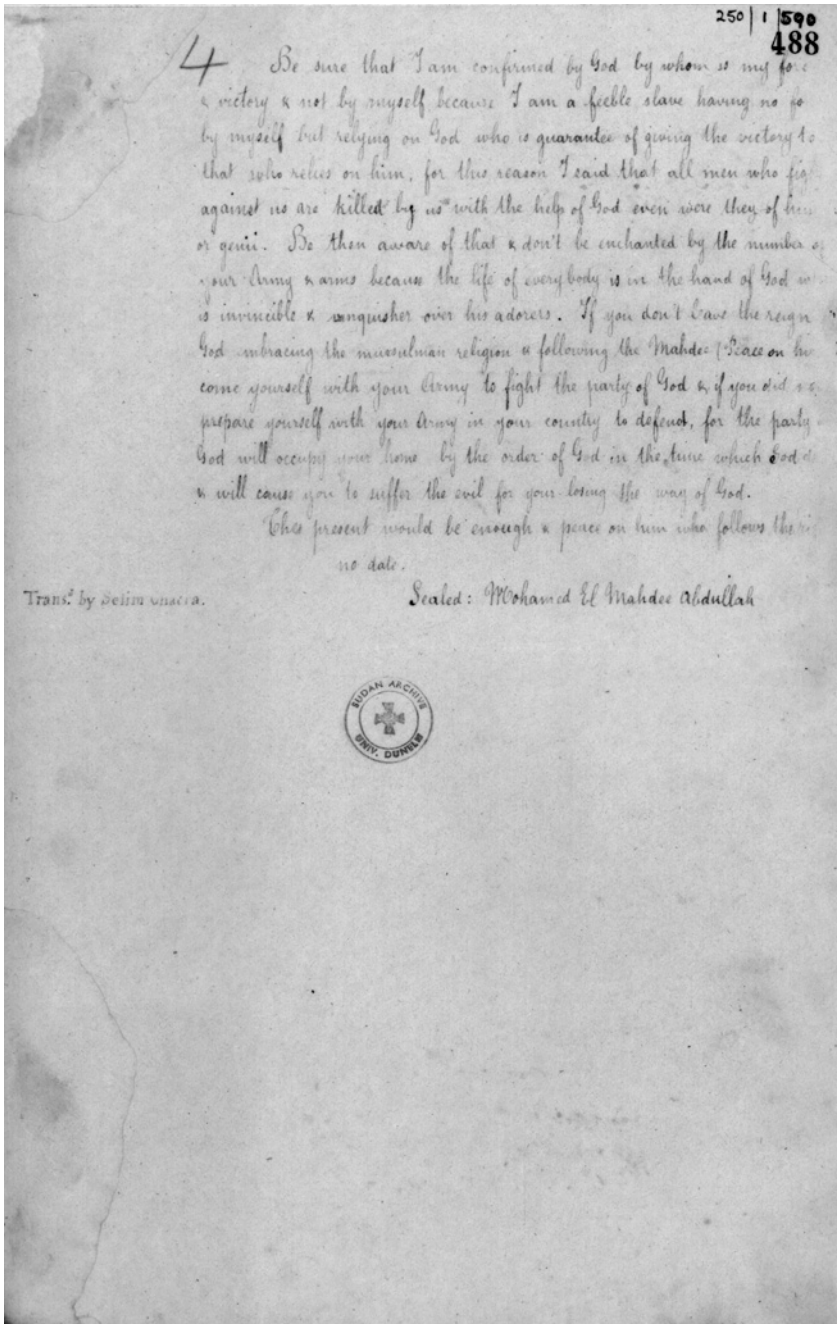
If you use a wise & a just idea you would know the difference but the fact which gives to think that you persist in your self-deception is that after having known that the expected Mahdi appeared on time & defeated the Turkish Power in many battles you imagined that you are so able to fight & captive him: then you sent one of your famous men called Hicks Pasha accompanied by a numerous army well equipped & you did that from your own opinion without thinking of the consequences or asking the advice of the [illegible] a mere despotism imagining that you will defend the victorious army of God but when the said army composed of thousands armed men was opposite to the army of God it could not stand more than half an hour & it was exterminated by God's order. The extermination of this men & his army is all due to



to your mismanagement & great self conceit; the great number of
Army has been useless as well as the numerous arms & became the
prey of the fire & the anger of God.

You did not profit by this example but you prepared from
your own opinion an expedition after another to fight God, his apost
& his Mahdee sometimes at Suakim, sometimes at Dongola or Wa
Hamar until you exterminated many thousands from your men
known by you as courageous, wise, firm & valuable as General Gord
Pacha who perished in Khartoum, General Stewart in Abou Taleh
the 2d Stewart with the Consuls who were with him at Wadee Kai
& many others of your famous men as you know. You presume th
you are advanced & vigorous in the battles yet your armies left the
Soudan failed & was defeated & gave up anything they wished to do V
the motive of this desertion is a mere dread of the victorious party o
God as the thing is logical & that your army became in the worst
state of embarras[illegible] finding a single way to deliver themselve
& all that is caused by your mismanagement & acting from your ow
opinion without taking the advice of the powers. If you requested th
to advise you they would show you the way which may calm you
They could advise you either to cease fighting with the party of God
which you can't resist & so you will moderate yourself to protect yo
country or they would support you with men & arms & persuade yo
to fight the party of the Mahdee in which case you will not be the
ashamed but the shame would be general.

In conclusion, you committed a great blunder from many
ways which caused you a great loss & the only open course to deliver
is to repent before God & to embrace the muselman religion & follow
the Mahdee (peace on him). If you do so & yield to us you will gain th
complete happiness & true rest that is the Paradise of God which contains
what no eye saw, no ear heard of & no heart of a mortal thought of;
but if you persist in your self conceit & use your own opinion, come you
to fight the party of God with all your army & military preparations in
order to see your consequences. By the help of God you will die or exter
such of your men as died or fled in intruding to fight against the
party of God by your devilish self conceit.



250 | 1 | 590
488

4 Be sure that I am confirmed by God by whom is my fo
& victory & not by myself because I am a feeble slave having no po
by myself but relying on God who is guarantee of giving the victory to
that who relies on him, for this reason I said that all men who fig
against us are killed by us with the help of God even were they of hu
or genii. Be then aware of that & don't be enchanted by the numbe
your Army & arms because the life of every body is in the hand of God w
is invincible & conquisher over his adorers. If you don't leave the reign
God embracing the muzulman religion & following the Mahdee Peace on hi
come yourself with your Army to fight the party of God &, if you did n
prepare yourself with your Army in your country to defend, for the party
God will occupy your home by the order of God in the time which God d
& will cause you to suffer the evil for your losing the way of God.

This present would be enough & peace on him who follows the ri

no date.

Trans.d by Selim Chacra.

Sealed: Mohamed El Mahdee Abdullah

the Mahdī. Furthermore, encoded in this passage is a reference to the Qurʾānic verse that states, "Truly it is the party of God that will achieve felicity" (58:22). The reference to this verse creates a mythic concordance between the Prophet's community and the Mahdist community, which legitimated the authority of the state and mystified it as well.

Needless to say, the Khalīfa did not attack England and his plans to attack Egypt were thwarted by internal revolts in Darfur and Kordofan that prevented him from embarking on an expedition to conquer the Sudan's northern neighbor until 1889. This mission was defeated in August of the same year. The Mahdist forces commanded by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān wad al-Nujūmī were crushed at Ṭūshkī near Abū Simbel by an Anglo-Egyptian army under General F. W. Grenfell.[33] This defeat was followed by a reversal at Suakin; in December 1889, the Anglo-Egyptian army made a surprise attack on the Mahdist forces massed around the town. The attack was a success and removed the Mahdist threat to Suakin.[34]

Months prior, however, the Mahdist forces were successful in attacking Ethiopia. In March 1889, the Mahdist forces killed the monarch of Ethiopia, King John, and amassed a great amount of booty. The Mahdists, however, did not pursue this victory and Ethiopia fell for a time into chaos; this was exploited by the Italians, who established the colony of Eritrea in 1890.[35]

According to Theobald, the Mahdist victory in Ethiopia signified the high point of Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi's power, whereas the defeats of the Mahdists at Ṭūshkī and Suakin marked the beginning of the decline of the Khalīfa.[36]

The war with Ethiopia did not begin as a jihad but as a border dispute that escalated into a militant confrontation, which the Mahdists then couched in the rhetoric of jihad. The following is an excerpt of the letter Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi sent to King John of Ethiopia in March of 1887:

> Know that God the most Majestic is King of the world and grants ownership to whom He wishes and imparts greatness to whom He wishes. He has created humankind to worship Him and He sent to them messengers to

[33] Holt, *Mahdist State*, 163.
[34] Theobald, *Mahdīya*, 165.
[35] Holt, *Mahdist State*, 155.
[36] Theobald, *Mahdīya*, 156–67.

> teach them about His unity. If you testify that there is no god save God and that Muḥammad is the messenger of God you will have entered the sanctity of Islam.[37]

Needless to say, King John did not heed the summons of the Khalīfa to enter Islam.

Unlike the war with Ethiopia, the expeditions to attack Egypt and the eastern Sudan were not mere border disputes or the initial stages of wars of conquest; rather the call to wage war on these two regions formed a major component of the Mahdist state's campaign for legitimacy. Inextricably intertwined with the call for these wars, most particularly the war with Egypt, were prerogatives in which the power, sacredness, and legitimacy of the Mahdist state was enunciated.

The call for jihad against the enemies of Islam recalled the first Islamic state in Medina under the command of the Prophet Muḥammad. This was one of the most potent means of enunciating the sacred nature of the Mahdist state. The state, like the Mahdī, was associated with divinity because it had a divine message to carry to the four corners of the world. The relation of the Mahdist state to other polities is illustrated in the Khalīfa's letter to Queen Victoria. He noted that the men of the Mahdiyya are not like other men; rather they are men of God who long for the hereafter. Hence, the Mahdiyya was not like other earthly governments, but was ordained by God.

By 1891, the defeats at Ṭūshkī and Suakin by the Anglo-Egyptian forces led the Mahdists to abandon jihad as state policy. Al-Qaddāl contends that after the Mahdiyya became a state it lost its religious fervor.[38] This is not entirely the case, rather the aforementioned defeats forced the Khalīfa to assume a defensive posture in the face of external and internal threats. In an effort to alleviate the shock of these defeats, ʿAbdallāhi instituted a new economic policy that reorganized the public treasury for the second time during his reign. The Khalīfa ordered the commissioners of the public treasuries to issue licenses for the purchase of grain in an effort to stave off the effects of the famine that had indirectly resulted from their defeats at Ṭūshkī and Suakin.

---

[37] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 727.
[38] al-Qaddāl, *al-Siyāsa al-iqtiṣādiyya*, 51.

The Treasury

The financial system of the Mahdist state was purportedly organized according to the system that was extant in Medina during the time of the Prophet. In most of the expeditions during Muḥammad's lifetime, the movable booty was divided among those individuals participating in the raids. In the case of larger expeditions, the division of the booty was carried out by agents of the public treasury (*bayt al-māl*). In the nascent Islamic community, a fifth of the proceeds was paid directly to the Prophet for the public treasury. A similar principle was followed under the first two rightly-guided caliphs, Abū Bakr and ʿUmar, and as lands were conquered the inhabitants were assigned certain amounts as land taxes (*kharāj*), in addition to the poll taxes (*jizya*). We noted above that in 640, during the reign of the caliph ʿUmar, a financial reform was undertaken that resulted in the creation of a new elite.

This financial reform involved a register (*dīwān*) that contained the names of all the men in the armies, arranged according to their tribes, and the establishment of a public treasury. These men were given pensions from the monies deposited in the treasury. A similar institution was created by the Mahdist rulers. Along with a fifth of the booty, the *zakāt* and tithes (*ʿushr*) were deposited in the public treasury for distribution among the Mahdists. Despite denouncing all aspects of the Turkiyya, al-Qaddāl notes that the Mahdī adopted the economic improvements the Turks made to the Sudan.[39] Holt adds that within the fields of technical modernization and administration, so much was taken over from the Turco-Egyptian regime by the Mahdist state that in many respects it was its successor. The three technical innovations of the Turkiyya were firearms, steamers, and the electric telegraph. All of these were used by the new regime.[40] The Mahdists did indeed utilize innovations from the Turco-Egyptian regime, however, they did not merely borrow and copy these innovations, rather they molded them to fit their vision of an Islamic state, thus creating a new system.

After the siege of El Obeid, the Mahdī established a public treasury based upon the Medinan model, but using aspects from the Turkiyya's financial system. In this treasury were deposited the tithes (*ʿushr*) and

---

[39] al-Qaddāl, *al-Siyāsa al-iqtiṣādiyya*, 47.

[40] P. M. Holt, "Modernization and Reaction in the Nineteenth Century Sudan," ed. William Polk and Richard Chambers, in *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 410–12.

alms taxes (*zakāt*). In addition, all war booty and confiscated property and fines for theft, drinking, and using tobacco were collected in the treasury. There was no system, however, to regulate the revenue and expenditure.[41]

Aḥmad Sulaymān al-Maḥasī was the first commissioner of the treasury (*amīn bayt al-māl*); he was formally appointed by the Mahdī in May 1883.[42] As a result of the conquests of El Obeid, Shaykān, Khartoum, Sinnār, and Berber, the amount of money in the public treasury was considerable. Furthermore, any Mahdist who was in need of anything came to Aḥmad Sulaymān, hence, with time, he began to wield a great deal of influence.

With regard to the economy and commerce, the Mahdī took only preliminary steps; these were taken, in large part, because of the war. He did, however, institute a policy in which all the weapons, gold, silver, and slaves handed over to the public treasury. Thus, all economic activities could be utilized to meet the necessities of the jihad.[43]

Following the death of the Mahdī, Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi's first administrative action as leader of the Mahdist state was to examine the accounts of the public treasury and reorganize the entire system. Upon inspection of Sulaymān's home, 5000 grams of unstamped gold was found. He was arrested in April 1886, and remained imprisoned for more than a year.[44] Upon his release, he harbored a great deal of resentment for the Khalīfa, and in November 1891, he instigated the Khalīfa's enemies and fomented the revolt of the Ashrāf.[45] After its failure, Sulaymān was exiled to Fashoda on the White Nile, where he was executed.[46] About a month after the arrest of Sulaymān, Ibrāhīm wad ʿAdlān, a merchant of El Obeid, was appointed commissioner of the public treasury.

---

[41] Slatin, *Fire and Sword*, 134.

[42] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity,* 207.

[43] al-Qaddāl, *al-Siyāsa al-iqtiṣādiyya*, 76.

[44] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity*, 207–8.

[45] Immediately after the Mahdī's death, the Khalīfa clashed with the Ashrāf, who had begun acting as independent sovereigns in Omdurman. In a bold move for complete power, the Khalīfa ordered the arrest and imprisonment of many of the key supporters of the Ashrāf, and seized their funds. He also deprived the Ashrāf of the Jihādiyya troops, effectively rendering them powerless. In this way, the Khalīfa was able to destroy his opponents piecemeal. The discontent of the Ashrāf had been simmering since the sudden collapse of their power in 1886; this came to a head in November 1891, when they hatched a conspiracy to kill Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi. Their plans, however, were thwarted. See Holt, *Mahdist State*, for a detailed account of these events.

[46] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity*, 207–8.

Ibrāhīm wad ʿAdlān reorganized it and removed it from its original inland position in Omdurman to the riverbank, thereby facilitating the transport of goods brought by boat to the stores.[47]

In addition to the repository of war booty and taxes, the public treasury under Ibrāhīm wad ʿAdlān also served as a public slave auction house. Slaves were sold in the treasury and a written certificate was given to the purchaser stating in detail the description of the slave. Wad ʿAdlān also designated a section of the treasury for the reception of cattle, camels, sheep, and donkeys, which were sold by auction. Another section was used for the minting of coins, and a printing and lithograph press was established there. This was where the Mahdī's proclamations and prayer books (*rātib*s) were printed and distributed.[48]

The public treasury thus came to represent the nerve center of the administration of the Mahdist state. With its reorganization, the commissioner was required to provide the Khalīfa with a daily statement showing all revenue and expenditure. In addition, the market commissioner (*shaykh al-sūq*) was required to render a daily report of market affairs to the commissioner, who in turn reported these affairs to the Khalīfa. Wad ʿAdlān was ordered by the Khalīfa to keep a careful list of those to whom money was issued, or who were in receipt of pensions.[49]

As the Mahdiyya extended its territories throughout the Sudan with conquest after conquest, the Khalīfa began to organize the state into provinces. Each province of the state had a governor (*amīr*). The governor was the supreme civil and military leader of his province and was entirely responsible for its administration. Each governor had his own treasury and had the power to appoint his own commissioner of treasury.[50] According to Ohrwalder, the public treasury at Omdurman was known as the *bayt al-māl al-ʿāmm* (the general public treasury). The commissioner of the treasury in Omdurman was responsible for all provincial treasuries and issued orders at the behest of the Khalīfa to all the provincial treasuries.[51]

As provinces within the Sudan capitulated to the Mahdist forces, the inhabitants were required to pay the *ʿushr* and *zakāt* taxes. After the fall of Khartoum, the Mahdī began to have these taxes collected

[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] al-Qaddāl, *al-Siyāsa al-iqtiṣādiyya*, 72.
[50] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity,* 209.
[51] Ibid.

in his name. The individuals responsible for collecting these taxes were known as agents (*ʿumālaʾ*) and they visited the various provinces annually.[52]

The task of tax collecting became a much more organized endeavor under the Khalīfa. The majority of the monies collected in the provincial public treasuries were spent on the Anṣār in the provinces. All excess funds were sent to the general public treasury in Omdurman every month, where funds were used for the general welfare, Qurʾān schools, the maintenance of Khalīfa wad Ḥilū, ʿAlī wad Ḥilū, and the Mahdī's wives. When the soldiers embarked upon a raid or battle, funds were used from the general public treasury to finance their transport.[53]

In addition to its functional role, the public treasury was an essential part of the symbolic legitimacy of the Mahdiyya. It evoked the treasury used during the time of the Prophet and consequently, the authority of the Mahdist state was viewed by many as derived from the charisma of the nascent Muslim state. It was thus incumbent upon the Khalīfa to continuously evoke images that emphasized this ongoing flow of symbolic support from the Prophet's community to the Mahdist state.

The Implementation of Sharīʿa

The Khalīfa's power and legitimacy in relation to his administration was articulated by his claims of emulating the example of the Mahdī, who maintained that he was emulating the example of the Prophet and the political and administrative example of the rightly-guided caliphate. Perhaps the most important characteristic that illuminated the legitimacy of the state was the establishment of the *sharīʿa* as the overriding rule of law in the land. The term *sharīʿa* has been translated as Islamic law, and within the Muslim milieu, *sharīʿa* is considered the unequivocal will of God. The sources of the *sharīʿa* are of two types: revealed and non-revealed. The revealed sources are the Qurʾān and the Sunna of the Prophet Muḥammad. The non-revealed sources are juristic reasoning (*ijtihād*), which may take a variety of forms, including

[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., 210.

analogical reasoning (*qiyās*), juristic preference (*istiḥsān*), considerations of public interest (*maṣlaḥa*), and general consensus (*ijmāʿ*).

For the Mahdist leaders the implementation of *sharīʿa* was a very important aspect with which to re-emphasize the legitimacy and authority of the state. The Mahdī and the Khalīfa after him borrowed from existing Islamic judicial institutions and molded them to fit their idea of the pristine Islamic state. During the Mahdī's lifetime, the system of justice was ill-defined. It was based upon, as was alluded to earlier, inspiration (*ilhām*) and the Qurʾān and Sunna. There was an office of chief judge (*qāḍī al-Islām*), but the Ashrāf, the Mahdī's kinsmen, also acted in the capacity of judges, thereby creating a great deal of confusion. When Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi assumed the reins of power he reorganized the judicial system.[54]

The creation of the commissioner of markets and the establishment of the post of chief judge were concepts borrowed from existing judicial institutions. The chief judge was one of the administrative officials introduced by the Umayyads. Originally, he was a representative, or legal secretary, of the provincial governor; essentially a member of his administration charged with overseeing the implementation of government decrees and settling disputes. By the end of the Umayyad period, the office had become a separate and distinct government position.

Soon after taking power, the Khalīfa appointed Aḥmad Badīn chief judge, and appointed several assistant judges. The Khalīfa ordered everyone to report all disputes to the chief judge. It was the latter's duty to arbitrate every dispute and render a decision. The judges maintained that their decisions were based upon the two revealed sources of Islamic law, i.e., the Qurʾān and Sunna, and on the proclamations and sermons of the Mahdī.[55] For example, some of the innovative laws that were instituted based upon the Mahdī's proclamations were the prohibitions of the use of tobacco, the use of foul language, dancing and playing, and long hair for men.

Of all the laws the Mahdī enacted, the prohibition of the pilgrimage to Mecca drew the most vitriolic criticism from the *ʿulamāʾ*, who claimed that the Mahdī was contravening divine law and engaging in heretical practices.[56] This prohibition, according to al-Ṣādiq al-Mahdī

[54] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity*, 214.
[55] Ibid., 215.
[56] Ibid.

(the Mahdī's grandson) was not an innovation; rather, since the nascent state was under constant siege by the Turkiyya, it was not safe for anyone to embark upon the pilgrimage.[57]

In addition to forbidding the pilgrimage to Mecca, orders were given regarding assault and battery; if a man struck another he was liable to have his hand cut off or his property confiscated. Ohrwalder described the small claims court of justice in Omdurman as being comprised of an assistant judge, commissioner of markets, and a phalanx of soldiers and policemen. In the case of disputes, such as debts and fraudulent dealing, each party defended himself without the assistance of lawyers. The Khalīfa ordered that all debts must be repaid, and if there was a delay, the debtor would be imprisoned. In instances where an individual violated the *sharīʿa*, the usual punishment was public flogging.[58]

Following the death of the Mahdī, the Khalīfa continued to uphold the former's proclamations as rules of law in addition to the Qurʾān and Sunna. Traditional *sharīʿa* is a kind of divine civil law; however, the Mahdiyya employed the law to re-emphasize the legitimacy of the Mahdist state and call into question the past regime. In Islamic law, legal concepts are fused with religious meaning. The Qurʾānic precepts and Sunna of the Prophet are immutable standards; the Mahdī did not abolish any of these laws, rather, he added several precepts that lent a decidedly Mahdist hue to the *sharīʿa*. This is not an unusual practice in the history of Islamic law, as the essentials, which are divinely revealed, cannot be altered. This led many Muslim rulers to issue decrees that were akin to legislation and establish courts not based on the divine law. These decrees were issued and courts established because it was specifically incumbent upon the caliph or ruler by virtue of his authority and power to fulfill the Qurʾānic precept of commanding the good and forbidding evil (*al-nahy ʿan al-munkar wa-l-amr bi-l-maʿrūf*).[59]

Thus, by implementing such rules of law as the prohibition of the pilgrimage to Mecca and proscription of the smoking of tobacco, the Mahdī was keeping within the parameters of the *sharīʿa* and reinforcing his legitimacy as a lawful ruler. Any measures taken by a legitimate ruler that, in his judgment, secure a benefit or repel a mischief fall

[57] al-Ṣadiq al-Mahdī, *Yasʾalūnaka*, 218.
[58] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity*, 215.
[59] Watt, *Islamic Political Thought*, 95–6.

within the scope of public policy (*siyāsa sharīʿa*). Public policy throughout Islamic history enabled government leaders and judges to respond to circumstances in both normal and emergency situations.[60] The Mahdists claimed the latter, that the morality of the populace had fallen into decline and it was incumbent upon the Mahdiyya to rectify this situation with the implementation of new laws. These laws also called into question the legitimacy of the past regime, while reaffirming the Mahdiyya's authority.

The legitimacy of the Mahdist state was based on its adherence to the Prophetic principle, but it also claimed that it was not a *ḥukm jadīd*, a new government; rather, it was a revivification of orthodoxy whose purpose was to right the wrongs committed by the past regime. The legislation of such laws as the prohibition against smoking tobacco and embarking upon the pilgrimage, and the dismantling of the four Sunnī schools of law (*madhāhib*) were essentially a ritual revocation of the past regime, cloaked in legal garb. The Turks had smoked tobacco and it was detrimental to one's health, thus it must be outlawed. The Turks were responsible for the lack of security along the pilgrimage routes, hence the pilgrimage had to be abandoned. By legislating new laws and constructing new buildings, the Mahdists were demarcating the boundaries of a radical beginning in relationship to the establishment of their new polity.

The Construction of Buildings and Roads

The authority of the Mahdist state during the Khalīfa's rule was bolstered by the legislation of laws, while the construction of the Mahdī's tomb, palaces, and roads served as a symbolic reaffirmation of the restoration of the cosmos and the position of the ruler at the top. Ohrwalder recorded that the Khalīfa destroyed any vestiges of the past regime and this destruction extended to towns associated with the Turkiyya. For example, the town of Berber, after its conquest by the Mahdists in the spring of 1884, fell into ruin and a new Berber was built just north of the old city.[61]

---

[60] al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship*, 111–2.
[61] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity*, 298.

As discussed in the last chapter, Omdurman became the new capital of the Mahdist state. The Khalīfa had the Mahdī's tomb built in the center of the city; this tomb was the most impressive shrine at that time in the Sudan and for many Sudanese it occupied the same religious position as that of the Kaʿba in Mecca.[62]

Built next to this shrine was the great mosque, which was not an ornamental structure, but what it lacked in style, it made up for in sheer size. The courtyard of the mosque was immense—large enough to hold around 70,000 people. The third largest structure built in Omdurman during the Khalīfa's reign was his residence. The Khalīfa also ordered the construction of broad straight roads to facilitate movement to principal locations. Ohrwalder wrote that this necessitated the removal of thousands of mud huts whose owners most likely did not receive compensation. The roads that were constructed led to the north gate of the great mosque; from the west gate of the mosque to the parade grounds; and from the north gate of the mosque to the western Nilotic Sudan. The public treasury (*bayt al-amāna*) was built as a storehouse for the weapons and ammunition of the Mahdiyya. This building was enclosed by a high wall with a large vaulted gate and was guarded continuously by detachments of soldiers. Within the yard the flags of the Mahdiyya were on display with the black flag of the Khalīfa towering above the rest.[63]

The construction of these buildings created a symbolic demarcation between the past regime and the new regime. The Turkiyya's primary purpose in the Sudan was one of an exploitive nature. Although the Khedive Ismāʿīl did make some improvements in the infrastructure and educational system of the Sudan, this was done with a view to linking the Sudan closer to Egypt for the purpose of trade.[64]

The Khalīfa, on the other hand, created a new capital city, built a grand mosque, and widened the roads. These improvements in the infrastructure represented his sovereign power and political authority and reflected, in a symbolic manner, that he was a ruler who was interested in the well-being of the country rather than the mere pursuit of power or exploitation of the country's resources. The Khalīfa

---

[62] Shuqayr, *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*, 799.
[63] Ohrwalder, *Ten Years' Captivity*, 300.
[64] Richard Hill, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820–1881* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 57.

emphasized his role as a leader who would restore order to the previously chaotic situation.

The second chapter treated the various ways power may be enunciated, such as through clothing or proximity to the ruler. In this chapter we have shown that the power of the state is also bolstered by various symbols of authority. The Khalīfa and the Mahdī enacted laws and instituted state policy based on what they claimed to be the Prophet's example. The Mahdist state's legitimacy was based on its adherence to the Prophetic principle, but also on its claim that it was not a new government (*ḥukm jadīd*), rather it was a restoration of orthodoxy, and its purpose was to right the wrongs committed by the previous regime.

CONCLUSION

Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi spoke to an assembly of his officers at the feast of ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā (August 1890) declaring that his one idea for the present was peace, and that unless he was attacked from outside he would preserve this attitude. As a consequence, all chiefs and *amīr*s from the outlying districts were to return to their commands and concentrate on improving the cultivation of their lands.[1] This speech, which was given after the Mahdist defeat at Ṭūshkī, signaled a turning point in the Mahdiyya. The policy of jihad was abandoned and the further consolidation of the Khalīfa's power within the context of transforming from a revolutionary millenarian movement to a stable state intensified.

The Mahdiyya can be characterized by three phases: the first phase began with Muḥammad Aḥmad b. ʿAbdallāh's manifestation as *al-mahdī al-muntaẓar* in 1881 and ended with the conquest of Khartoum in 1885. During this phase, the Mahdiyya was essentially a revolutionary movement that successfully routed the Turco-Egyptian forces in a majority of battles. The second phase began with the death of the Mahdī and the accession of Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi and consisted of the transformation of the Mahdiyya from a militant struggle into a state organization. This phase corresponds roughly to the years 1885 to 1891. In this phase the Khalīfa sought to consolidate his power by quelling insurrections in Darfur and putting down dissent fomented by the Mahdī's kinsmen. The zenith of the Khalīfa's power was reached during this period with the successful defeat of the Ethiopian forces at al-Qallābāt in March 1889. However, the defeat at Ṭūshkī in August 1889 and the failure of the jihad in the eastern Sudan around the same period resulted in a change of attitude on the part of the Khalīfa. The third and last phase involved the Khalīfa's intensified efforts to consolidate his power within the Mahdist state (i.e., defending rather than increasing the territory of the Mahdiyya) and to confront internal and external challenges to this power. He met with a measure of success with regard to the internal challenges. For example, the disaffected Ashrāf revolted in November 1891 and the Khalīfa quashed it. However, the more immediate threat

[1] Holt, *Mahdist State*, 178.

to the Mahdist state came from the European powers, who began their scramble for Africa. The Italians had created the colony of Eritrea on the eastern borders of the Mahdist state, and the French and Belgian colonial expansion toward the west bank of the Nile and Baḥr al-Ghazāl posed a threat to the Mahdiyya as well. However, the most pressing threat came from a joint Anglo-Egyptian force, whose intent was the reconquest of the Sudan. It was this threat that spelled the demise of the Mahdiyya. On 2 September 1898, in a battle outside Omdurman, the Anglo-Egyptian forces defeated the Mahdists. A year later, Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi was killed at Umm Diwaykarāt. Thus marked the end of the short-lived Sudanese Mahdist state.

Holt maintained that in many respects, the Mahdist state was a successor to the Turco-Egyptian regime. He makes this claim largely because the Mahdiyya benefited from the technological advancements employed in the Sudan by the Turkiyya during that time. The Mahdists did indeed benefit from the superior technology introduced to the Sudan by the Turco-Egyptian regime, including firearms, the telegraph, and steamers. In addition, the Mahdists modeled their currency after the Ottoman currency.

Despite this, the Mahdiyya cannot be considered a successor to the Turco-Egyptian regime, nor a successor of the Funj and Fūr sultanates, it was, rather, a beneficiary of these polities. Furthermore, despite the claims made by the Mahdī and Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi after him, the Mahdiyya did not directly emulate the first Islamic community in the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century. Rather, again, the Mahdiyya benefited by linking itself with the Prophet's community, because this linkage served to buttress its authority among its followers.

Furthermore, while Sufism is the most fundamental aspect of Islam in the Sudan and the Mahdī and the Khalīfa were both members of the Sammāniyya order, Sufi orders were abolished by order of the Mahdī. Yet the Mahdiyya maintained symbolic aspects—vestiges, such as the patched *jubba*, of the Sufi brotherhoods.

Thus, I argue that the Mahdiyya was not a successor of the Funj and Fūr sultanates and did not merely borrow aspects associated with Sufism or the first Islamic community, rather it used symbols, ceremony, and ritual from all these systems in order to create a new and unique system, heretofore unknown in the Sudan. The Mahdiyya was unique in that it successfully replaced tribal affiliations and Sufi organizational ties with adherence to the ideals of the Mahdist state as conceived by the Mahdī and the Khalīfa.

The Mahdiyya's leaders employed religious symbols and ritual in order to shape, legitimate, renew, and inform their society. The Mahdiyya began as a revolt, and ultimately culminated in the establishment of a state. The examination of this evolution from a movement to a state reveals the ways in which the Mahdists imbued the symbols and insignias of authority with a meaning that was uniquely Mahdist and Sudanese. The Mahdists articulated their claims to authority in a unique combination of ways: primarily through the creation of a sacred link between the Mahdist community and the first Islamic community, in what Connerton refers to as a mythic concordance; but also through the use of symbols and ceremonies borrowed from Sufi contexts, and by emulating aspects of kingship from the two Sudanese Islamic polities, the Funj and Fūr sultanates.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abū Salīm, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm. *Adawāt al-ḥukm wa-l-wilāya fī-l-Sudan*. Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1992.

——. *al-Khatam al-Diwānī fī-l-Sūdān.* Khartoum: al-Majlis al-ʿAlā li-l-Shuʾūn al-Dīniyya wa-l-Arqān, 1983.

Abu Shouk, Aḥmad Ibrāhīm, and Anders Bjørkelo, eds and trans. *The Public Treasury of the Muslims, Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996.

Arkell, A. J. "Fung Origins." *Sudan Notes and Records* 14, no. 2 (1932): 201–51.

al-Azmeh, Aziz. *Muslim Kingship: Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Polities*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1997.

Bedrī, Bābikr. *The Memoirs of Bābikr Bedrī*. Translated by Yūsuf Bedrī and George Scott. London: Oxford University Press, 1969.

Bello, Sultan Muḥammadu. *Infāq al-maysūr fī taʾrīkh bi-lā al-takrūr*. Rabat: Maʿhad al-Dirāsāt al-Ifrīqiyya, 1996.

Bendix, Reinhard. *Kings or People: Power and the Mandate to Rule*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

Bruce, James. *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile in the Years 1768–1773*. 2 vols. Edinburgh: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1804.

Cannadine, David, and Simon Price, eds. *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Casati, Gaetano. *Ten Years in Equatoria and the Return of Emin Pasha.* Translated by J. Randolph Clay. New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969.

Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Crone, Patricia, and Martin Hinds, eds. *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

al-Ḥajj, M. A. "The Thirteenth Century in Muslim Eschatology: Mahdist Expectations in the Sokoto Caliphate." *Center for Arabic Documentation Research Bulletin* 3, no. 2 (1967): 100–13.

Ḥasan, Aḥmad, trans. *Sunan Abū Dawud.* Lahore: Sh. Muḥammad Ashrāf Publishers, 1984.

Hill, Richard. *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820–1881*. London: Oxford University Press, 1959.

Hiskett, Mervyn. *The Development of Islam in West Africa.* New York: Longman Group United, 1984.

——. *The Sword of Truth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Holt, Peter M. *Mahdist State in the Sudan: A Study of its Origins, Development and Overthrow*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958.

——. "Modernization and Reaction in the Nineteenth Century Sudan." In *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East*, edited by W. R. Polk and R. I. Chambers, pp. 401–15. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.

Hunwick, John O., Sydney Kanya-Forstner, Paul Lovejoy, R. S. O'Fahey, and al-Amin Abu Manga. "Between Niger and Nile: New Light on the Fulani Mahdist Muhammad al-Dadari." *Sudanic Africa: A Journal of Historical Sources* 8 (1997): 85–108.

Ibn Ḍayfallāh, Muḥammad al-Nūr. *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt fī khuṣūṣ al-awliyāʾ wa-l-ṣāliḥīn wa-l-ʿulamāʾ wa-l-shuʿarāʾ fī-l-Sūdān.* Edited by Yūsuf Faḍl Ḥasan. Khartoum: Dār al-Wathāʾiq, 1982.

Israel, Jonathan I. *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

al-Jāḥiẓ, ʿAmr b. Baḥr. *Rasāʾil al-Jāḥiẓ.* Edited by ʿAbd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn. Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanjī, 1964.

Karrār, ʿAlī Ṣāliḥ. *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1992.

Kennedy, Hugh. *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century*. London: Longman Group Limited, 1986.

Khān, Muḥammad Muḥsin, ed. *The Translation of the Meanings of Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī.* 9 vols. Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers, 1997.

Kramer, Robert. "The Holy City on the Nile: Omdurman, 1885–1898." Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1991.

Krump, Theodoro. *Hoher und Fruchtbarer Palm-Baum des Heiligen Evangelij*. Translated by Jay Spaulding. Augsburg: Georg Schulter & Martin Happach, 1710.

Kuhrt, Amelie. "Usurpation, Conquest and Ceremonial: From Babylon to Persia." In *Rituals of Royalty*, edited by David Cannadine and Simon Price. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

al-Kurdufānī, ʿAbd al-Qādir. *Saʿādat al-mustahdī bi-sīrat al-Imām al-Mahdī.* Edited by Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm. Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1982.

Layish, Ahron. "The Legal Methodology of the Mahdī in the Sudan, 1881–1885." *Sudanic Africa: A Journal of Historical Sources* 8 (1997): 39–41.

al-Mahdī, Muḥammad Aḥmad. *al-Āthār al-kāmila li-l-Imām al-Mahdī.* Edited by Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm. 7 vols. Khartoum: Dār al-Wathāʾiq, 1990.

——. *Manshūrāt al-Mahdiyya.* Edited by Muḥammad Abū Salīm. Khartoum: Dār al-Wathāʾiq, 1969.

al-Mahdī, al-Ṣādiq. *Yasʾalūnaka ʿan al-Mahdiyya*. Beirut: Dār al-Qaḍiya, 1975.

al-Maqrīzī, Aḥmad b. ʿAlī. *al-Khiṭaṭ b. al-Maqrīzī.* Lebanon: Dār al-ʿIrfān, 1898.

McHugh, Neil. *Holymen of the Blue Nile: The Making of an Arab-Islamic Community in the Nilotic Sudan, 1500–1850*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994.

Mikhāʾīl, Yūsuf. *Mudhakkirāt Yūsuf Mikhāʾīl ʿan awākhir al-ʿahd al-Turkī wa-l-Mahdiyya bi-l-Sūdān*. El Obeid: Dār al-Nuṣayrī, 1962.

Moore-Harrell, Alice. *Gordon and the Sudan, Prologue to the Mahdiyya 1877–1880*. London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001.

Mottahedeh, Roy P. *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Nachtigal, Gustav. *Sahara and the Sudan*. Vol. 4: *Wadai and Darfur*. Translated by Allan G. Fisher and Humphrey J. Fisher, with R. S. O'Fahey. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971.

al-Naqar, ʿUmar. *The Pilgrimage Tradition in West Africa*. Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1972.

Neufeld, Charles. *A Prisoner of the Khaleefa: Twelve Years Captivity at Omdurman*. London: Chapman & Hall, 1899.

O'Brien, Donal Cruise, and Christian Coulon, eds. *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

O'Fahey, R. S. *The Darfur Sultanate: A History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

——. *State and Society in Dār Fūr*. New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1980.

O'Fahey, R. S. and J. L. Spaulding. *Kingdoms of the Sudan*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1974.

O'Fahey, R. S., et al., eds. *Arabic Literature of Africa*. Vol. 1: *The Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900*. New York: E. J. Brill, 1994.
Ohrwalder, Joseph. *Ten Years' Captivity in the Mahdi's Camp: 1882–1892*. Translated by F. R. Wingate. London: William Clowes & Sons, 1892.
al-Qaddāl, Muḥammad S. *Siyāsa al-iqtiṣādiyya li-l-dawla al-Mahdiyya: maṣādiruhā, mazāhiruhā: 1881–1898*. Khartoum: Dār Jāmiʿa al-Khartoum, 1986.
Sanders, Paula. *Ritual Politics and the City in Fatimid Cairo*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.
Sanderson, G. N. "Conflict and Co-operation between Ethiopia and the Mahdist State, 1884–1898." *Sudan Notes and Records* 50 (1969), 15–40.
Schimmel, Annemarie. *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.
——. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975.
Sells, Michael, ed., *Early Islamic Mysticism*. New York: Paulist Press, 1996.
Sheibeka, Mekkī. *al-Sūdān ʿabr al-qurūn*. Cairo, 1947.
——. *British Policy in the Sudan, 1882–1902*. London: Oxford University Press, 1952.
Shuqayr, Naʿūm. *Taʾrīkh al-Sūdān*. Edited by Muḥammad Abū Salīm. Khartoum: Dār al-Jīl, 1981.
Slatin, Rudolf C. *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*. London: Edward Arnold, 1897.
Spaulding, Jay. *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*. East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1985.
Spaulding, Jay, and Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm, eds., *Public Documents from Sinnār*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1989.
Stetkevych, Suzanne P. *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender, and Ceremony in the Classical Arabic Ode*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.
Theobald, A. B. *The Mahdīya: A History of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1881–1899*. London: Longmans, Green, 1951.
Toledano, Ehud. *State and Society in Mid-Nineteenth Century Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
Triaud, Jean-Louis. "*Khalwa* and the Career of Sainthood: An Interpretative Essay." In *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam*, edited by Donal B. Cruise O'Brien and Christian Coulon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
Trimingham, J. S. *Islam in the Sudan*. London: Frank Cass & Co., 1949.
Watt, W. Montgomery. *Islamic Political Thought: The Basic Concepts*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968.
Weber, Max. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Translated and edited by A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons. New York: Oxford University Press, 1947.
Wingate, F. R. *Mahdism and Egyptian Sudan*. London: William Clowes & Sons, 1891.
Works, John A., Jr. *Pilgrims in a Strange Land: Hausa Communities in Chad*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1976.
Zulfū, ʿIṣmat Ḥasan. *Kararī: Taḥlīl ʿaskarī li-maʿrakat Umm durmān*. Khartoum: Maṭbaʿ al-Tawḥīd, 1973.

Manuscript Sources

Sudan Archive, Durham University Library (SAD).
98/2/3. Proclamation from the Mahdī denouncing the venal scholars.
430/1/1. Copy of letter of Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi to his followers.
250/1/549–550. Letter from Francis W. Grenfell to Evelyn Baring.

INDEX