

Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim, Sayyid ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi: A Study of Neo-Mahdism in the Sudan, 1899-1956, Islam in Africa series (Brill: Leiden: 2004). Pp. xiii + 260.

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Sayyid ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi: A Study of Neo-Mahdism in the Sudan is at once a biographical study and political history. It focuses on the career of the Sudanese Mahdi’s posthumous son, Sayyid ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi (1885-1959), who weathered fierce British opposition in the early years of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1898-1956), consolidated wealth and a popular following, and emerged as a leading force behind Sudanese nationalist politics. Sayyid ‘Abd al-Rahman was the architect of what British colonial authorities dubbed “Neo-Mahdism”, a movement that had its roots in mahdist faith (i.e., belief in the teachings of Muhammad Ahmad, the Mahdi) but that struck out in a pragmatic, non-violent direction, becoming something like a cross between a Sufi order and a political forum.

Neo-Mahdism in the early twentieth century adapted itself to the realities of colonial rule and gradually articulated a vision of Sudanese nationalism that was based on the idea of the Sudan as a culturally autonomous area that deserved political independence from both Britain and neighboring Egypt. (One should recall here that Sayyid ‘Abd al-Rahman’s father had declared jihad on an earlier Egyptian colonial

regime that had ruled parts of Sudan from a conquest in 1820 until the Mahdist revolution of the early 1880s.) Led by members of the northern Sudanese Arabic-speaking Muslim male elite, the nationalist wing of Neo-Mahdism became closely associated with the slogan, “Sudan for the Sudanese.” It stood apart from other nationalists who called for “Unity of the Nile Valley”, implying strong Sudanese-Egyptian affinity. In 1945, Sayyid ‘Abd al-Rahman established the Umma Party, a manifestation of Neo-Mahdism that remained a political force in the postcolonial period under the leadership of the Sayyid’s grandson (the Mahdi’s great-grandson), Sadiq al-Mahdi.

This volume is a compilation of articles that the author published over thirty years in three journals, *Sudan Notes and Records*, the *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, and *Middle Eastern Studies*. It is the result of careful cumulative research based on a wide range of Arabic and English archival sources, supplemented by Arabic and English memoirs, histories, newspaper sources and interviews. It draws most heavily on two archives: the National Records Office (NRO) in Khartoum which includes a trove of papers dating from the Anglo-Egyptian period, and the Public Record Office (PRO) in London, which contains British Foreign Office papers pertaining to Sudan. Few historians have been able to tap into NRO papers as extensively as Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim, so that his use of sources adds considerably to the value of his study. One problem with the book, though, is that the text is riddled with small typographical and grammatical errors, both in English and in transliterated Arabic phrases. Brill Publishers deserves praise for sponsoring the new series on “Islam in Africa” of which this book is a part, but Brill also needs to exert a higher degree of editorial oversight, for these stylistic errors ultimately reflect more on the publisher than the author.

This richly detailed study will appeal to readers who already have a firm knowledge of modern Sudanese history. (Those who are new to early twentieth-century northern Sudanese history should start elsewhere, for example, with works by M.W. Daly and Gabriel Warburg.) Readers will quickly realize that the author's approach to Sayyid 'Abd al-Rahman reflects an admiration bordering on adulation. The author calls Sayyid 'Abd al-Rahman the "forerunner and custodian of the 20th century [Sudanese] independence movement", a "self-made man" and a "visionary", a man who could have saved the Sudan from many of its postcolonial woes had he lived longer or had political elites followed his example more closely. Anyone who reads broadly about the life and career of the Mahdi's son can understand why Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim may find him so compelling. Certainly many British men and women who met Sayyid 'Abd al-Rahman in the late Anglo-Egyptian period attested to his warmth, hospitality, shrewd intelligence, and above all, his panache and charisma. (By contrast, Sudanese reactions to the man tended to depend on sectarian affiliations.)

While the author occasionally considers the populist foundations of the Neo-Mahdist movement (notably, the ways in which many humble believers donated their labor to the agricultural plantations that created Sayyid 'Abd al-Rahman's fortunes), he focuses primarily on Sayyid 'Abd al-Rahman himself and the educated classes, as well as their interactions with British authorities. The book thereby narrates a history of nationalism and the colonial encounter as it involved Sudanese Muslim elites.

No doubt Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim has the post-1983 regimes of Sudan in mind when he praises Sayyid 'Abd al-Rahman as a model of rational and socially relevant Islam, and as a religious pragmatist, not extremist. The author suggests that, from Sayyid

‘Abd al-Rahman, Muslims in Sudan and elsewhere can learn to “view their historical legacy intellectually and critically, but never be over-burdened with it” (p. 240). The author builds a convincing case for the importance of Sayyid ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi in Sudanese political history, and shows that the Neo-Mahdist movement drew as much from his insights into Sudanese Muslim society as did from the legacies of his father, the Mahdi.

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