



1993

Lawha li-tha`ir sudani: al-Imam al-Mahdi Muhammad Ahmad b. 'Abd Allah (1844-1885)

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Recommended Citation

Sharkey, H. J. (1993). Lawha li-tha`ir sudani: al-Imam al-Mahdi Muhammad Ahmad b. 'Abd Allah (1844-1885). *Sudanic Africa*, 4 229-233. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/nelc_papers/12

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At the time of publication, author Heather J. Sharkey was associated with Princeton University. Currently, she is a faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Comments

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,THE LIFE AND CAREER OF THE MAHDI

Lawḥa li-thāʿir sūdānī: al-Imām al-Mahdī Muḥammad Aḥmad b. ʿAbd Allāh (1844-1885) by Muḥammad Saʿīd al-Qaddāl. Khartoum: University of Khartoum Press, 1985. Reissued as *al-Imām al-Mahdī: Muḥammad Aḥmad b. ʿAbd Allāh (1844-1885)*. Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, 1992.

The year 1981 marked the centenary of the start of the Mahdist revolution; one hundred years before, the Sufi scholar named Muḥammad Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd Allāh had declared his calling as the Mahdi at Aba Island. In commemoration of the event, a librarian at the University of Khartoum decided to collect all of the biographical studies that had been written on the Mahdi up to that point. Much to his surprise and chagrin, however, the search yielded not a single biography on the Mahdi himself—in sharp contrast to the forty-odd works on Charles Gordon which the same search uncovered.¹

Muḥammad Aḥmad was arguably the single most influential personality in the history of the modern Sudan. Studies which deal with any aspect of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Sudanese history inevitably mention him and the movement which he launched. Yet in some sense the breadth of the historiographical tradition on the Sudan has remained quite limited. In particular, many extant English-language studies have tended to focus on Gordon and on the British/Europeans who followed him, while relegating the Mahdi and other Sudanese leaders into the space of a few pages. Such studies have, in effect, treated the Sudanese as if they were the backdrop on the stage of their own history.

Prompted by his colleague's fruitless search in the University of Khartoum library, Muḥammad Saʿīd al-Qaddāl decided to reverse the biographical oversight on the life and career of Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī. In 1985, the University of

1 Muḥammad Saʿīd al-Qaddāl, *Lawḥa li-thāʿir sūdānī*, 1 [1992 edn. p. 7].

Khartoum Press published his biography; just this past year, in 1992, Beirut's Dār al-Jīl publishing house chose to re-issue it. The reprinting of al-Qaddāl's biography on the Mahdi testifies to its supra-Sudanese value as a work of history.

Admittedly, there have been a few works published in past years which ostensibly concentrate on the Mahdi. For different reasons, however, they fail to qualify as full-fledged biographies.

One biographical contender might be Ismā'īl b. 'Abd al-Qādir al-Kurdūfānī's *Kitāb sa'ādat al-mustahdī bi-sīrat al-Imām al-Mahdī*, written in 1888. (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm edited the text for a 1972 Arabic edition; Haim Shaked published a translated and annotated version in 1978.² Commissioned by the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhī, *Kitāb sa'ādat al-mustahdī* functioned as a panegyric and as an 'official' history of the Mahdist state. The book took pains to prove that Muḥammad Aḥmad was indeed the Mahdi, often by referring to popular Sunni eschatological traditions. Al-Kurdūfānī's text is of historical value and interest as an official Mahdist source. Nonetheless, it is not a biography in the usual sense of the term, since its primary function was to serve as a work of propaganda for the fledgling Mahdist state. As such it concentrates almost exclusively on Muḥammad Aḥmad the Mahdi rather than Muḥammad Aḥmad the man.

What might seem to be a second contender, Richard Bermann's *The Mahdi of Allah: The Story of the Dervish Mohammed Ahmed*, published in 1932, actually reads more like a story-book, the underlying goal of which is to discredit the Mahdi and the Mahdist movement.³ From today's standpoint, Bermann's text is shocking for its bitter xenophobia and racism, which tinge even Winston Churchill's introduction to the book.

- 2 Ismā'īl b. 'Abd al-Qādir al-Kurdūfānī, *Kitāb sa'ādat al-mustahdī bi-sīrat al-Imām al-Mahdī*, Ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1972) and Haim Shaked, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitāb sa'adat al-mustahdi bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdi by Isma'il b. 'Abd al-Qadir* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1978).
- 3 Richard A. Bermann, *The Mahdi of Allah: The Story of the Dervish Mohammed Ahmed*, Introduction by Winston Churchill, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1932.

Its title, too, is grossly misleading. Only a fraction of Bermann's text deals with the Mahdi, and a sizeable chunk degenerates into a hagiography of Gordon. The book effectively targets a popular audience in order to justify British intervention in the Sudan (and European intervention within Africa as a whole) as a civilizing mission.

Set against this context, al-Qaddāl's study is all the more refreshing. He has written what is neither a hagiography nor a vilification of Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdi. Al-Qaddāl relies extensively on Sudanese Arabic sources, including texts written by Mahdiyya contemporaries (e.g., Yūsuf Mikhā'īl, al-Kurdūfānī); studies by Sudanese scholars (e.g., Mekki Shibeika, Abū Salīm); and collections of Mahdist documents. He uses English-language sources extensively as well: the contemporary accounts of Wingate, Slatin, and Ohrwalder, of course, but also scholarship by the likes of Hill, Holt, O'Fahey, and others. Careful citation of sources makes his study of considerable use to researchers who wish to follow the footnote trail. His Arabic prose is clear and straightforward, so that his book should be accessible to non-native Arabic speakers who have had a few years' training in the written language.

Less than 150 pages long, al-Qaddāl's text manages to provide a thorough if concise survey of Muḥammad Aḥmad's life and thought—a much-needed account of the man and his mission. Al-Qaddāl gives a brief outline of Sudanese history during the Turkiyya, and of the nature of Islam and Sufism in the Sudan. He then turns to a study of the early life of Muḥammad Aḥmad, placing particular emphasis on his religious education and development and on his Sufi beliefs. The last two-thirds of the book are devoted to Muḥammad Aḥmad after he had declared his calling as the Mahdi. He traces the crystallization of the movement and the consolidation of its support base, before detailing the military struggle under the Mahdi with a battle-by-battle description. He concludes his study with an analysis of the Mahdi's political, economic, and social program: he deals with such topics as Mahdist policy towards the Sufi orders, the structure of the Bayt al-māl, rulings on marriage, and so forth.

The author clearly admires the Mahdi; on the first page of the biography he calls him 'a revolutionary whose life story has illuminated [Sudanese] history.' Nonetheless, he tempers his praise with judicious criticism. For example, he criticizes the Mahdi for having ordered the burning of all books except for the Qur^ʿān and compilations of *ḥadīth*, and says that this step 'was not devoid of extremism.'⁴ Moreover, he describes the Mahdi's political, economic, and social programs as 'the weakest of his intellectual links,' in contrast to his highly developed and shrewd *jihad* ideology and military organization.⁵

Al-Qaddāl seems to feel least comfortable in characterizing Muḥammad Aḥmad's position vis-a-vis the Sufi orders after his declaration of the Mahdship. Muḥammad Aḥmad, after all, had been a member of the Sammāniyya *ṭarīqa* before his calling. Once he had established a broad base of support, however, he had outlawed all Sufi orders, no doubt seeing them as potential rival power bases. Al-Qaddāl repeatedly alludes to but does not truly confront the nature of Muḥammad Aḥmad the Sufi versus Muḥammad Aḥmad the Mahdi, the continuities and the breaks between the two.

One of the most interesting series of minor details which al-Qaddāl includes in his study pertains to the folklore and legends surrounding the Mahdi, and to the signs of *baraka* and proofs of piety which his supporters saw in him. When still a young man, for example, Muḥammad Aḥmad had been eating the food at one mosque where he was studying until he learned that it had been subsidized by the Turco-Egyptian government. He thereafter refused to eat the mosque food, on the grounds that it had come from illegal taxes. According to another story, Muḥammad Aḥmad had been selling firewood in the Khartoum market until he learned that one of his customers was burning it in order to distill liquor.⁶

How could one individual do so much to shape a country's history? This is the question which al-Qaddāl asks at the beginning of his study. In the case of Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī,

4 al-Qaddāl, *Lawḥa*, 124 [1992 edn., 140].

5 al-Qaddāl, *Lawḥa*, 123 [1992 edn., 139].

6 al-Qaddāl, *Lawḥa*, 37, 42 [1992 edn., 49, 55-6].

even those historians who generally avoid the 'Great Man' theory of history cannot deny his remarkable charismatic force in propelling the history of the Sudan along its path.

Al-Qaddāl may represent many Sudanese in attributing to the Mahdi a manifold and very positive legacy: he sees the Mahdi as a symbol against foreign oppression and a symbol for national liberation, who unified the tribes of the northern Sudan under the aegis of a shared Islamic heritage. This modern-day interpretation is certainly a compelling one, though in a nation as socially, politically, and religiously fragmented as the Sudan is today, one must realize that it is not the only one. While many Sudanese, of the North and South, might agree that Muḥammad Aḥmad represents one of the most influential figures in Sudanese history, not all would attribute to him the glorious legacy of national liberation and unification.

Heather J. Sharkey