

THREE GREAT ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS IN THE ARAB WORLD OF THE RECENT PAST

The Movement of Shaikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab
The Sanussi Movement
The Mahdi of the Sudan

By

MARYAM JAMEELAH

Publisher :

MOHAMMAD YUSUF KHAN
Sant Nagar, LAHORE (Pakistan)

Price : Rs.



THREE GREAT ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS IN THE ARAB WORLD OF THE RECENT PAST

The Movement of Shaikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab

The Sanussi Movement

The Mahdi of the Sudan

By

MARYAM JAMEELAH

Publisher :

MOHAMMAD YUSUF KHAN & SONS

Sunnat Nagar, LAHORE (Pakistan)

All Rights Reserved

First Edition, June 1976, 2,000

Revised Edition, July 1981, 2,000

Price : Rs.

Printed by :

El-Matbaat-ul-Arabia, 30, Lake Road, Lahore-Pakistan

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR :

Maryam Jameelah was born in 1934 in New York at the height of the Great Depression - a fourth-generation American of German-Jewish origin. She was reared in Westchester, one of the most prosperous and populated suburbs of New York and received a thoroughly secular American education at the local public schools. Always an above-average student, she soon became a passionate intellectual and insatiable bibliophile, hardly ever without a book in hand, her readings extending far beyond the requirements of the school curriculum. As she entered adolescence, she became intensely serious-minded, scorning all frivolities, which is very rare for an otherwise attractive young girl. Her main interests were religion, philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology and biology. The school and local community public libraries and later, the New York Public Library, became "her second home."

After her graduation from secondary school in the summer of 1952, she was admitted to New York University where she studied a general liberal arts programme. While at the university, she became severely ill in 1953, grew steadily worse and had to discontinue college two years later without earning any diploma. She was confined to private and public hospitals for two years (1957-1959) and only after her discharge, did she discover her facility for writing. Marmaduke Pickthall's translation of Quran and Allama Muhammad Asad's two books - his autobiographical *Road to Mecca* and *Islam at the Crossroads* ignited her interest in Islam and after correspondence with some prominent Muslims in Muslim lands and making intimate friends with some Muslim converts in New York, she embraced Islam at the Islamic Mission in Brooklyn, New York at the hand of Shaikh Daoud Ahmad Faisal, who then changed her name from Margaret Marcus to Maryam Jameelah.

During extensive correspondence with Muslims throughout the world and reading and making literary contributions to whatever Muslim periodicals were available in English, Maryam Jameelah became acquainted with the writings of Maulana Sayyid Abul Ala Maudoodi and so, beginning in December 1960, they exchanged letters regularly. In the spring of 1962, Maulana Maudoodi invited Maryam Jameelah to migrate to Pakistan and live as a member of his family in Lahore. Maryam Jameelah accepted the offer and a year later, married Mohammad Yusuf Khan, a whole-time worker for the Jama'at-e-Islami who later became the publisher of all her books. She subsequently became the mother of four children, living with her co-wife and her children in a large extended household of inlaws. Most unusual for a woman after marriage, she continued all her intellectual interests and literary activities; in fact, her most important writings were done during and inbetween pregnancies. She observes *Purdah* strictly.

Her hatred of atheism and materialism in all its varied manifestations - past and present - is intense and in her restless quest for absolute, transcendental ideals, she upholds Islam as the most emotionally and intellectually satisfying explanation to the Ultimate Truth which alone gives life (and death) meaning, direction, purpose and value.

UMAR FARUQ KHAN

THE MOVEMENT OF MUHAMMAD BIN ABDUL WAHAB

It is a well-known fact that in the beginning of the 12th century A.H. (18th century A.D.), the religious and moral degeneration of the Islamic world was at its lowest ebb. Not to speak of the Muslims themselves, even the non-Muslims wondered at the disparity between the Muslims of early times and those of the present era. An American writer, Lothrop Stoddard, draws an accurate picture of this period of decadence. In the opinion of Amir Shakib Arsalan, even a most erudite scholar and thinker from among the Muslims could not present such a correct and clear-cut view :

As for religion, it was as decadent as everything else. The austere monotheism of Muhammad (peace be upon him) had become overloaded with a rank growth of superstition and puerile mysticism. The mosques stood unfrequented and ruinous, deserted by the ignorant multitude which, decked out in amulets, charms and rosaries, listened to the squalid faqirs or dervishes and went on pilgrimage to the tombs of the "holy men" worshipped as saints and intercessors. As for the moral precepts of the Quran, they were ignored or defied. Even the holy cities were the holes of iniquity. In fact, the life had apparently gone out of Islam. Could Muhammad return to earth, he would unquestionably have anathematized his followers as apostates and idolaters.*

In the midst of such discouraging circumstances, Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab was born in 1703 into a family of Najd renowned for their learning and their piety. As a child, he was extraordinarily precocious. By the

**The New World of Islam*, pp. 25-26.

time he reached adolescence, he had been acclaimed throughout Arabia as a brilliant Alim. As his reputation spread, students flocked to him. Still thirsty for more knowledge, Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab went to Mecca, Medina and later studied under private teachers in various cities of Iran as well.

After he returned to his native Najd, the rulers of the territory grew more and more apprehensive that his influence would undermine their own power. Thus the ruler of one section of the Najd sent the following warning to the local governor :

“Shaikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab has acted against my will and pleasure so kill him at once, otherwise whatever subsidy you get will be stopped”.

Upon hearing this the Shaikh fearlessly proclaimed his message :

“The stand that I have taken and the message to which I call everybody is : La illaha illah—there is no God but Allah—and the fundamental principles of Islam for doing good and refraining from evil deeds. If you are steadfast and abide by this message, Allah will make you overcome your enemies”.

Unconvinced, the local governor ordered the Shaikh out of his territory so he was compelled to walk barefooted on the scorching sands into exile.

During his wanderings he was welcomed by Amir Muhammad Ibn Saud who agreed to cooperate in the implementation of the Shaikh's programme. Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab was not content merely to preach Islam but was determined to build a society where Islam in its

undiluted purity would be embodied as a practical scheme of life. Under the rule of Amir Muhammad Ibn Saud, the way of life, beliefs and character of his people were completely transformed. Previously most of these people, even in the holy cities, were Muslims in no more than name, knowing nothing except to recite the Kalima Shahadat and that too, with mistakes. Now everyone was required to offer his prayers with the congregation, fast during Ramadan and pay their Zakat. Tobacco, silk and all other symbols of luxurious living were abolished. All un-Islamic taxes were annulled. For the first time in many centuries there was such peace and prosperity in the realm that the beduin could sleep at night without any fear of their cattle and belongings being stolen. Even a black slave could bring his grievances before the ruler of the mightiest tribes and call him to account for his misdeeds. Sectarian conflicts ceased as the ulema of every recognized school of thought took turns in leading the congregational prayers in the mosques.

Shaikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab proved himself a Mujaddid of the first rank and a worthy successor of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taimiya. As much as his predecessors, he vehemently rejected all the rationalist humanism of the Mutazilite philosophers, insisting that the text of the Quran and the pure Sunnah of the Holy Prophet be accepted and obeyed in its plain, literal meaning without question. Continually he emphasized the supreme importance of the plain text of the Quran unadorned with elaborate mystical commentaries and glosses on the commentaries. He rightly feared that too

much attention was paid to the commentaries which, because of their human origin, must necessarily be fallible, than to the plain text of Quran and Hadith. He pointed out that should the text of Quran (God forbid!) become mixed up and confused with the varied interpretations of that text, Muslims, having no longer access to the Scriptures in their purity, would find themselves in the same predicament as the Jews and Christians. Although in legal matters, Shaikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab was strongly partial to the Hanbali school, even here he did not follow Imam Hanbal blindly in everything. In his writings, he explicitly stated that he had no objection to those Muslims who wished to adhere to the schools of the other three Imams.

With unerring clarity of insight, Shaikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab diagnosed as the worst malady of contemporary Muslims, their morbid attachment to Tasawwuf or mysticism. To be sure, the Shaikh was not opposed to Tasawwuf as such. In his youth, he had thoroughly studied with sympathy the various branches of Sufism in Iran, but as he grew older, he realized that the abuses of Tasawwuf had become so deep-rooted and widespread that just as a pure and lawful thing as water must be prohibited by the doctor if harmful to the patient, so the cult of Tasawwuf, although in principle allowable, had under the circumstances, to be rejected and put aside. "Colour the prayer carpet with wine if so orders your spiritual guide". Obviously, such a mentality does not distinguish between the spiritual guide and gods other than Allah. The

Arabian Shaikh fully understood that the Muslims of his day had become addicted to Sufism as a kind of opiate which lulled them to sleep and deprived them of all vigour and vitality. Thus did the Shaikh conduct his campaign against all the deviations of the mystic way which conflicted with the doctrine of Tauheed or the Unity of God, the most essential tenet of Islam. He put up a tough fight against all such innovations as saint-worship, symbol worship and grave worship. He particularly condemned the prevailing practice—diametrically opposed to the Sunnah of the Prophet—of erecting mosques and mausoleums over graves and ordered them all demolished at once. Although he had no objection to people visiting the graves to remind them of the Life Hereafter, he was vehemently opposed to such practices as ancestor-worship, seeking aid from those buried in the graves and begging their intercession with God.

Naturally the Shaikh ran into severe opposition from many quarters. His enemies tried to convince the people that what the Shaikh taught was a new religion beyond the pale of orthodox Islam. They accused him of creating a new sect and denouncing all those who did not accept his leadership as kaffirs. None of these accusations contained any truth, but his enemies were able to convince their audience of these falsehoods by contemptuously dubbing his followers as "Wahabis".

After Amir Abdul Aziz died, his son succeeded him. Unfortunately, because of his lack of statesmanship and diplomacy, he incited the Shaikh's followers towards bitter

enmity against the Turkish Government. Had he been wise enough, he might have avoided this unnecessary bloodshed between Muslim and Muslim but because his followers demanded absolute political power for themselves and rebelled against Turkish authority, the very mention of the Wahabi movement is odious to the Turk to this day.

This fatal mistake brought down upon the followers of the Shaikh the wrath of the Albanian, Muhammad Ali, who at that time ruled over Egypt. Determined to crush every trace of the Wahabi movement, Muhammad Ali's armies invaded Arabia and after a fierce battle in 1814 near Taif, the Wahabis suffered a decisive defeat. More than 5,000 of them were massacred. Heaps of corpses littered the town. After this engagement came more atrocities. All the Wahabi notables were rounded up and executed in public, dogs were set upon their corpses, every city within reach of the victors was ransacked, palm trees cut down, crops and cattle destroyed and all the dwellings set ablaze. The old, sick, the women and children were massacred without mercy. Naturally the British Government, nervous about an Islamic revival, was delighted to hear what Muhammad Ali and his son, Ibrahim had done and sent a special delegation from India led by Captain George Forester Sadlier to congratulate them. In 1900 the notorious Christian missionary, Samuel Zwemer wrote : "This Wahabi movement came to an ignominious end and in the field of politics, proved to be nothing but a stunt. The power of the Saudis should now be considered as a thing of the past in Arabia".

However, these pessimistic predictions proved to be

false as less than a quarter of a century later, Sultan Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, entirely through his own efforts, conquered most of the Arabian peninsula. In the beginning, not only those Arabians under his rule but Muslims throughout the world were anxiously looking to him to support a universal Islamic revival but these hopes proved futile after the proclamation of the monarchy, and it became clear that to King Ibn Saud, the religious fervour of the Wahabi movement was only an instrument for the acquisition of personal power.

Throughout his life Ibn Saud has loved to speak of Islam as a mission that has been entrusted to him and even in his later days when it had long since become obvious that kingly power weighed more with him than his erstwhile championship of an ideal, his great eloquence has often succeeded in convincing many people—perhaps even himself—that this ideal was still his goal. (p. 166) He is simple, modest and hardworking but, at the same time, he indulges and allows those around him to indulge in the most extravagant and senseless luxuries. He is deeply religious and carries out to the letter every formal injunction of Islamic law, but he rarely seems to give any thought to the spiritual essence and purpose of those injunctions. He performs the five obligatory daily prayers with the utmost regularity and spends long hours at night in deep devotion but it never seems to have occurred to him that prayer is only a means and not an end in itself. He always speaks—with every outward sign of conviction—of the grandeur of the Islamic way of life, but he has done nothing to build up an equitable, progressive society in which that way of life could find its cultural expression. (pp. 177-178) Not being introspective by temperament, he has a tremendous talent for rationalization, for persuading himself of his own righteousness in the face of the most glaring lapses. Those who surround him—his courtiers, and the innumerable hangers-on who live off his bounty—certainly do nothing to

counteract this unfortunate tendency. (p. 180)*

Indeed, it was King Ibn Saud who dealt the death-blow to the movement in Arabia when in 1932 he granted to a giant American business company, permission to search for oil. Had he been truly zealous for the success of Islamic ideals, he would have realized that by denying these American oil concessions, he could have forestalled, or at least delayed for many decades, the infiltration of harmful Western influences into his kingdom. Tragically, the struggle for the triumph of an Islamic social order became completely submerged by the greed for wealth.

The puritan outlook of the Wahabi period virtually ended on the day when the Americans discovered oil in commercial quantities. From 1912 onwards for some thirty years the whole life and activities of the country were strictly regulated by religious sanctions. At the hours prescribed for prayer, all business ceased, the gates of the capital were closed to exit and entry and the whole male population proceeded to the mosque. Today all that is changed. Oil has had a twofold effect on the social economy of Arabia. The wealth derived from it has created a desire for comfort and progress on Western lines among the princes and the well-to-do citizens of the country. They are accustomed to foreign travel, foreign clothes and foreign luxuries of all sorts. In the second place, it is from the neighbouring countries that oil has attracted such vast numbers of migrants that the very character of the town and city populations has been changed out of all recognition. They may be officials and labourers in search of work or merchants and shopkeepers looking for easy profits or industrialists interested in constructional opportunities or the development of factories. Above all, there are the school teachers and technical experts of all sorts who exercise a powerful influence in putting across Westernization to the younger generation. They all wear European clothes and are indistinguishable from Westerners in their manner of life. It would seem but

* *The Road to Mecca*, Muhammad Asad, op. cit.

a matter of time when Westernization will become as general in Saudi Arabia as in its sister borderlands.*

Although the movement in a purely political sense was limited to the Arabian peninsula, spiritually its invigorating impact swept the Muslim world from one end to the other. Its example eventually provided the inspiration for al Ikhwan al Muslimun. Upon the progeny of such Mujaddids as Shaikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab depend not only Islam's renaissance but its very survival.

* "Riyadh : Ancient and Modern", Harry St. John Bridger Philby, *The Middle East Journal*, Washington, D.C., Spring 1959.

THE SANUSSI MOVEMENT

The story of the Sanussi movement is one of the saddest tragedies in modern Islamic history—tragic because had the ideals it represented reached a successful fulfilment, the Sanussi movement could have resulted in a spiritual renaissance throughout the Arab world and beyond. Since Libya regained her political sovereignty in 1951, it has become fashionable for Arab nationalists to equate the struggle of the Sanussis against European imperialism with their own aspirations and ideals. Nothing could be a greater distortion of the truth. The Sanussi waged Jihad for the sake of Islam alone. The secular, nationalist slogans prevalent in the Arab world today were utterly meaningless to these people.

In contrast to the nationalists who have so dishonestly used the names of Sanussi leaders to sanction ends diametrically opposed to all the Sanussi believed in and fought for, Sanussi had nothing but hatred and contempt for modern civilization and, to the bitter end, refused to compromise Islamic ideals with its materialistic philosophy.

As Sayyid Muhammad al-Idris, ex—King of Libya, once replied when asked why he and his followers opposed modern culture :

“The Sanussi only aim at piety and nobility of heart. And how shall this be achieved ? By excluding everything but God from our thoughts, by moderation and by abstaining from all enjoyments which do not bring us nearer to God”.

“Why then, do the Italians take action against the Sanussi ?”

"Because the man who follows our teaching becomes healthy in body and mind. The Italian fascists are interested in making the entire population degenerate as in so many other places in the world of Islam. If that happens, the Italian civilization can advance more rapidly. So long as our teaching rules, it will not happen."

"Why not?"

"Our teaching is simplicity itself. The body must be strengthened by a healthy and abstemious life so that it becomes worthy dwelling-place for the soul. You are not permitted to enjoy any narcotics, even tobacco. You must be a slave of nothing save God, that is, you must be the master of circumstances. The civilization which the Italians want to introduce into Cyrenaica makes us the slaves of circumstances and therefore we must fight against it".

"How does it make us the slaves of circumstances?"

"It overestimates outward technical progress ; it makes external splendour and power the ruling factor in the judgment of a person or nation and it despises the inner development. I can only tell you that where the Sanussi rule, there is peace and contentment on all sides."*

Sayyid Muhammad al-Idris' grandfather, Sayyid Muhammad ibn Ali as-Sanussi, was born near Mustaghanim in Algeria in 1787. When scarcely two years of age, he lost his father. He was raised in a family of learning and piety, his first teacher being his aunt, Sayyidah Fatima, a woman of high intelligence and educational attainments. Under her instruction, young Sanussi learned the Quran by heart at a very early age. After studying theology and jurisprudence under the best available teachers, when he reached adolescence, he left his native country for Morocco where he qualified for admit-

* *Sanussiyya : The Study of a Revivalist Movement in Islam*, Nicola A. Ziadeh, E. J. Brill, Leiden, pp. 130-32.

tance into the famed Qarawiyin university mosque. Here in Qarawiyin under the most renowned teachers of the land, he concentrated on advanced studies in Quran, Hadith, jurisprudence and Arabic language. His scholastic achievements were so outstanding that he soon attracted the attention of the Sultan of Morocco, Moulay Sulaiman, who begged him to serve at his court. But Sayyid as-Sanussi, repelled by the very idea of bowing to any worldly power, refused the offer. Consequently, he left Morocco and joined the ranks of wandering scholars, travelling through Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, thirsty for more and more knowledge. Wherever he went, students flocked to him, drawn by his international reputation as a first-rate Alim. Originally he had planned to remain for a long period in Egypt to continue his studies at al-Azhar University in Cairo only to find a hostile reception. The Azhar ulema, fearing that their positions of influence were threatened by this powerful new personality, went so far as to pronounce a Fatwa against him, branding him as a heretic. As-Sanussi in turn had nothing but contempt for the hypocrisy of these ulema who, while posing as models of orthodoxy and piety, were mere puppets in the hands of the corrupt and dissolute ruling class. He particularly detested Muhammad Ali and openly condemned him for his un-Islamic activities. Disgusted with conditions as he found them in Cairo, he proceeded to the holy city of Mecca. Here he found at last what he was seeking. While on Haj he met the renowned spiritual guide, Sayyid Ahmad ibn Idris al-Fasi of Morocco, the head of the Khidriyah Sufi order, promptly attached himself to him and became his most devoted and dedicated

pupil. When his personality grew too strong for the local ulema to tolerate, both teacher and pupil left Mecca for Yemen. Several years later, when his teacher died, as-Sanussi returned to Mecca and in 1837, founded his first lodge or zawiya which marked the beginning of what later became known as the Sanussi Movement.

The goal of the Sanussi movement was nothing less than the complete spiritual regeneration of the Muslim world on the basis of pure Quran and Sunnah. In his work, as-Sanussi was most inspired by the teachings of Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, al-Ghazzali, Ibn Taimiya and quite probably, the example already set by the contemporary Arabian Mujaddid, Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab. Although both Mujaddids were imbued with identical aspirations and ideals, the Sanussi movement differed from the Wahabi in its much more respectful attitude towards the Sufi orders. But, although the Sanussi encouraged Tasawwuf (mysticism) in its proper place, in contrast to the other Sufi orders, music and dancing were strictly prohibited as was any practice contrary to the Shariah.

After extensive travels where he was enthusiastically welcomed wherever he went, as-Sanussi finally decided upon Cyrenaica as his immediate field of action although he never neglected his zawiyas in Arabia and other parts of North Africa. When his native Algeria became occupied by France and Tunisia was threatened with the same fate, and suspecting that the Ottoman authorities were growing jealous of the movement's success, as-Sanussi decided to shift his headquarters into the most remote regions of the desert where, isolated, he could carry on his work without

interference. Accordingly in 1853, he chose the barren oasis of Jaghbub and sent his masons and building materials by caravan to construct a large zawiya there. By virtue of his strong character, inspired by the command of the Holy Prophet to "make peace among those about you" he was able to reconcile the local tribal feuds and ultimately unite the nomadic tribes in the area. As soon as he had achieved peace and tranquility where none existed before, he concentrated his attention on spreading the teachings of Islam deep into tropical Africa. His most outstanding achievement occurred when some desert tribes, whose ferocity earned them a fearsome reputation, begged as-Sanussi to come and live among them and build a zawiya in Kufra, a group of oases covering an area of more than 20,000 square miles between Cyrenaica and Lake Chad, promising in return to abandon their thieving and raiding forever. Although unable to go in person, as-Sanussi sent his trusted disciples. As a result, thousands of tribesmen who for generations had been Muslims in name only, experienced a complete moral and spritual transformation while many more in tropical Africa embraced Islam.

In 1859, as-Sanussi died and was immediately succeeded by his eldest son, Sayyid al-Mahdi when only a boy of sixteen. Born in 1844, Sayyid al-Mahdi received his education at Jaghbub and joined his father less than a year before his death. When hardly more than a child of twelve he was already preoccupied with his father's activities, competently sending emissaries, receiving delegates, and teaching while at the same time his father continued to supervise

his education under the most learned and pious teachers available. Because of the desperate condition of the Muslims at that time, threatened with European colonial domination, they began to look to him as the expected Imam al-Mahdi who would restore justice and righteousness. Repeatedly and emphatically. Sayyid al-Mahdi denied this. Like his father before him, he had no interest in putting forth claims but only in steady, hard and productive work for the Islamic cause.

During the period Sayyid al Mahdi remained the head of the Sanussi, the strength and influence of the movement reached its prime. Above all, Sanussi teachings demanded that its followers work long and hard. The Grand Sanussi himself often said that precious things existed in the planting of a tree and in its leaves. This philosophy resulted in the transformation of the most arid waste lands into flourishing gardens on an impressive scale. Trade and commerce also began to thrive. Begging and lazy life were not tolerated.

Here is a description of a typical Sanussi zawiya when at the height of its activities :

Jaghbug is not a town in the proper sense of the word but a centre of religion and education. It has all the dreaming peace of a small university town only its dons are turbaned, grey-bearded Shaikhs in long, flowing, white jerds over grass-green or indigo-blue robes. It is one immense building with thick windowless walls surrounding a maze of courts, passages, schools, lodgings for students, the big houses of the Sanussi family and the mosque. Jaghbug stands on a cliff from which flights of steps lead down to palm gardens and the one big well which supplies water to the whole settlement. When Sayyid al Mahdi went to Kufra, he freed fifty slaves and gave them the gardens they

formerly cultivated for their masters demanding that their rights of possession be respected by his successors so now there is a colony of these liberated black slaves who live among the palms of the wadi. They work hard in their vegetable gardens irrigated by an excellent system of channels and reservoirs dependent on the spring below the zawiya and they sell their dates and produce to the college to feed the students. Jaghub is a university pure and simple and around this university the life of the entire community centres. Its library contains 8,000 volumes and there are a number of first-rate men of learning and letters whose presence certainly stimulated the students who numbered in the time in al-Mahdi, 300. The prescribed courses of study include learning of Quran, a thorough study of its exposition, Hadith, jurisprudence, Arabic grammar and literature, history and logic. The training is thorough and the desire to learn, enormous and sincere. Jaghub students are also expected to acquaint themselves with a number of trades taught at the institution. These include carpentry, smithry, building, spinning, weaving, bookbinding, and mat-making. The Thursday of each week is devoted to this kind of instruction and the students often find al-Mahdi himself working with them, certainly an inspiring gesture. Fridays are devoted to various military exercises and training. Students ride horseback and camelback with al-Mahdi himself often supervising. Students are allowed free board and lodging. Sanussi leaders take great interest in their students—future Shaikhs, teachers, and missionaries. Students at Jaghub University receive a loaf of bread each day; they have dates and sour milk for breakfast and for lunch and supper they eat bread with lentil soup and in the evening tea is served. Each student receives two shirts, two caps and turbans, two pairs of shalwar (baggy trousers), a pair of shoes each year and one woolen robe bi-annually. Students of richer parentage often make presents to poorer ones. The future leaders of the movement—the Shaikhs of the zawiyas, the ardent missionaries and the warrior chiefs are trained under the personal supervision of the Grand Sanussi himself with the assistance of his leading disciples. The zawiya is well defended with about 400 rifles and 200 swords besides arms

for 3,000 men which are stored in about twenty rooms. Al-Mahdi himself owns no less than fifty rifles to which he attends in person. At Jaghubub, there are a number of workmen who have mastered the art of caring for weapons, repairing them and can even manufacture some kinds of arms. It has been suggested that a factory for the preparation of gun powder exists at the Sanussi capital. The mosque, large enough to hold five or six hundred persons, is very quiet, white and dignified, the dark carpets on the floor, the only rich note to break its utter simplicity. Rows of great square white-washed pillars support the heavy wooden palm trunks forming the beams of its flat roof. It is utterly unadorned and the "mimbar" is of the simplest description without paint or carving. As befits a creed which forbids all luxury, the simplicity of the mosque is striking. There is nothing to impress the pilgrim except his own passionate reverence. Thus the zawiyas of the Sanussi perform numerous functions ; they are schools, commercial centres, social centres, forts, courts of law, banks, storehouses, poor houses, sanctuary and burial grounds besides being channels through which runs a generous stream of God's blessings.

Although Sayyid al-Mahdi and his father before him made no pretensions, they were in fact rulers of what amounted to a sovereign state performing all the functions of government. At the peak of his power, Sayyid al-Mahdi ruled an impressive empire including most of what is now Libya, the desert of western Egypt, north-west Sudan, all the while penetrating deeper and deeper into tropical Africa where new converts to Islam were won over by the tens of thousands. Like its predecessor, the Wahabi movement, the Sanussi enjoyed a large following among the beduins of Arabia. Whenever the Sanussi went on Haj, they took full advantage of this opportunity to popularize the movement for Islamic renaissance among

the pilgrims from every part of the world. That is how the Sanussi movement became known even in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

In 1902 calamity struck. France, fearing the expansion of Sanussi influence as a threat to her colonial interests, began large-scale military operations in central Africa to put an end to the movement. That same year Sayyid al-Mahdi died. His own son, Sayyid Muhammad al-Idris, being only twelve at the time, was too tender to assume the terrible new responsibilities. Thus the leadership of the movement passed to his elder cousin, twenty nine-year old Sayyid Ahmad ash-Sharif. Born in Jaghbub in 1873, Sayyid Ahmad ash-Sharif received his education under the personal tutelage of his uncle. The most immediate task confronting the new leader was the mortal conflict with European imperialism. After the most desperate struggle, the Sanussi, finally overwhelmed with French unlimited resources of men and the most modern weapons and equipment, were defeated in 1909, henceforth losing all political control over Central Africa. In September 1911 Italy formally declared war on Turkey and sent forces to occupy Tripoli and Benghazi. At once the Turkish War Minister, Anwar Pasha rushed to the scene accompanied by his troops. Sayyid Ahmad ash-Sharif with his warrior tribesmen promptly joined him. With indefatigable energy and enthusiasm, Anwar Pasha inspired the Sanussi tribesmen to fight to the death for a common faith and the effective collaboration between the Arab and Turkish leaders soon succeeded in halting the Italian offensive. Then suddenly and without warning, in October 1911, all the newly

independent Christian Balkan states combined to invade Turkey itself. Faced with the utter extinction of his country, Anwar Pasha had no alternative but to hastily conclude a peace treaty with Italy, declare Libya independent and send all his troops home as quickly as possible, leaving the Sanussi to carry on the struggle alone.

In 1917, Sayyid Ahmad ash-Sharif went by submarine to Istanbul seeking more effective support from the Turkish government and entrusting the leadership of his movement during his absence to his younger cousin, Sayyid Muhammad al-Idris. In Turkey, Sayyid Ahmad found nothing but frustrations and disappointment. The Turkish Government was fearful that Sayyid Ahmad ash-Sharif would proclaim himself the Khalifa of the Islamic world and an Arab dynasty succeed the House of Usman, but even though he had no such ambitions, political intrigues delayed his return for month after month and year after year. The defeat of the Ottomans in 1918 ended all hopes of his ever seeing his native land again. But Sayyid Ahmad ash-Sharif, refusing to yield to despair, crossed over into the plains of Anatolia to join Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in his struggle to save Turkey from annihilation.

One should remember that in the beginning, it was religious enthusiasm alone that gave the Turkish nation in those grim days the strength to fight against the over-whelming power of the Greeks who were backed by all the resources of the Allies. Placing his great spiritual and moral authority in the service of the Turkish cause, Sayyid Ahmad travelled tirelessly the towns and villages of Anatolia calling upon the people to support the "Ghazi" or "Defender of the faith"—Mustafa Kemal. The Grand Sanussi's efforts and the lustre of his name contri-

buted immeasurably to the success of the Kemalist movement among the simple peasants of Anatolia to whom nationalist slogans meant nothing but who for countless generations had deemed it a privilege to lay down their lives for Islam. But no sooner had the Ghazi attained victory than it became obvious that his real aims differed widely from what his people had been led to expect. Instead of basing his social revolution upon a revived and reinvigorated Islam, Ataturk forsook the spiritual force of faith (which alone had brought him to victory) and made, quite unnecessarily, a rejection of all Islamic values the basis of his reforms. In bitter disappointment with Ataturk's anti-Islamic reforms, Sayyid Ahmad, in 1923, left for Damascus where, despite his opposition to Ataturk's internal policies, he tried to serve the cause of Muslim unity by attempting to persuade Syria to reunite with Turkey. The French mandatory government viewed him naturally with distrust and when, towards the end of 1924, his friends learned his arrest was imminent, he escaped by car across the desert to the frontiers of Arabia and thence proceeded to Mecca where he was received warmly by King Ibn Saud.*

Meanwhile in Cyrenaica the Sanussi, under the leadership of Sayyid Muhammad Idris and Umar al-Mukhtar, were waging a desperate struggle for survival against the ruthless military might of Mussolini's Fascist dictatorship :

Umar al-Mukhtar, that lion of Cyrenaica, whose seventy odd years did not prevent him from fighting to the last. For ten long grim years he was the soul of the Sanussi resistance against hopeless odds, against Italian armies ten times more numerous than his, armies equipped with the most modern weapons and artillery while Umar and his half-starved Mujahidin had nothing but rifles and a few horses with which to wage a desperate guerilla warfare in a country that had been turned into one huge prison camp. It often happened that a reconnaissance plane reported the presence of a tribal encampment by wireless to the nearest post and while the machine guns of the plane prevented the people

**The Road to Mecca*, Muhammad Asad, op. cit., pp. 319-320.

from dispersing, a few armoured cars would drive straight through the tents indiscriminately killing everyone within range—men, women and children and whatever people and animals survived were herded together and driven north into the huge barbed wire enclosures—concentration camps—which the Italians had established near the coast. Towards the end of 1930, about eighty thousand beduins together with several hundred thousand head of cattle were herded together into an area which did not provide sufficient nourishment for half that number. Meanwhile hunger and disease were decimating the beduin population in the interior.*

Here is a description of the grim events as Muhammad Asad experienced them :

Before dawn, deep in the heart of Italian-occupied territory we reached the main encampment of Umar al-Mukhtar's own guerilla band which at that time consisted of a little over two hundred men. It was sheltered in a deep narrow gorge and several small fires were burning under overhanging rocks. Several men were sleeping on the bare ground, others in the blurred shadows of the greyness of early dawn were busy with various camp tasks, cleaning their arms, fetching water, cooking or tending to the few horses which were tethered to trees here and there. Almost all of them seemed to be clothed in rags and neither then nor later did I see a single whole jerd or burnus in the entire group. Many of the men wore bandages which spoke of recent encounters with the enemy. To my surprise, I perceived two women, one old and one young, in the camp; they sat near one of the fires engrossed in repairing a torn saddle with crude bodskins "These two sisters of ours go with us wherever we go," said Sidi Umar in reply to my mute astonishment. "They have refused to seek the safety of Egypt together with the rest of our women and children. They are mother and daughter. All their men have been killed in the struggle." With a weary gesture Sidi Umar motioned to one of his men to come closer. "Let this man tell his story; he came to me only yesterday."

* *Ibid.*, pp. 320-323.

The man from Kufra squatted down on the ground before me and pulled his ragged burnus around him. He spoke slowly without any tremor of emotion in his voice but his gaunt face seemed to mirror all the horror he had witnessed :

"They came upon us in three columns from three sides with many armoured cars and heavy cannon. Their airplanes came down low and bombed houses, mosques and palm groves. We had only a few hundred men able to carry arms ; the rest were women, children and old men. We defended house after house but they were too strong for us. Our rifles were useless against their armoured cars so in the end they overwhelmed us. Only a few of us escaped. I hid myself in the palm orchards waiting for a chance to make my way through the Italian lines and all through the night I could hear the screams of the women as they were being raped by the Italian soldiers and their Eritrean mercenaries. On the following day an old woman came to my hiding-place and brought me water and bread. She told me that the Italian general had assembled all the survivors before the tomb of Sayyid Muhammad al-Mahdi and before their eyes, he tore a copy of the Quran into pieces, threw it to the ground and set his foot upon it shouting, "Let your beduin prophet help you now if he can !" And then he ordered the palm trees of the oasis to be cut down and the wells destroyed and all the books of Sayyid Ahmad's library burnt. And on the next day he commanded that some of our elders and ulema be taken up in an airplane and they were hurled out of the plane high above the ground to their deaths. And all through the second night I heard from my hiding-place the cries of our helpless women and the laughter of the soldiers and their rifle shots. At last I crept out into the desert in the dark of night and found a stray camel and rode away.*

By the end of 1932, Sanussi resistance was broken and the whole of Libya occupied by the Italians.

Muhammad Asad continues :

**Ibid.*, pp. 336-9.

As I step over the threshold of the humble Sanussi zawiya of Medina, those dim echoes of death and despair linger in my mind and then the memory of my Cyrenaican adventure fades away until only the pain remains. And once again I stand before the Grand Sanussi and look upon the suffering engraved on the beautiful brow of the aging warrior and once again I kiss the hand that has held a sword for so long that it cannot hold it any longer.

"God bless you, my son, and make thy way secure. It is over a year since we last met and this year has seen the end of our allotted time but praise be unto God whatever He may decree."

It must indeed have been a sorrowful year for Sayyid Ahmad. The furrows around his mouth are deeper and his voice is lower than ever. The old eagle is broken. He sits huddled on his prayer carpet, his white burnus wrapped tightly about him as if for warmth, staring wordlessly into an endless distance.

"If only we could have saved Umar al Mukhtar," he whispers. "If we could have only persuaded him escape to Egypt."

"Nobody could have saved Sidi Umar," I comforted him. "He did not want to be saved. He preferred to die if he could not be victorious. I knew it when I parted from him, oh Sidi Ahmad."

Sayyid Ahmad nods heavily. "Yes, I knew it. I too knew it. I knew it was too late. Sometimes it occurs to me that I was mistaken to heed that call from Istanbul seventeen years ago. But how could I have done otherwise when the Khalif of Islam asked me for help? Who except God can say whether a man is right or foolish if he follows the call of his conscience?"

Who can say indeed?

The Grand Sanussi's head sways slowly from side to side in a perplexity of pain. His eyes are veiled behind drooping lids and with sudden certainty, I know they will never again flare up with a flame of hope.*

**Ibid.*, pp. 342-343.

Sayyid Ahmad ash-Sharif died the following year (1933) in Medina.

THE MAHDI OF THE SUDAN

Following several decades of exploration by various European adventurers, the last two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the frantic squabble of English, French and Italian imperialism for the division of the spoils of Africa between them. At that time, Egypt enjoyed a tenuous hold over the Sudan. In his over-zealous efforts to modernize the country so that his dream could be fulfilled to make Egypt an appendage to Europe, the Khedive Ismail rapidly emptied the national treasury and the country fell into bankruptcy. Under Lord Cromer, England promptly intervened and occupied the land. Khedive Ismail was succeeded by his weak son, Tewfik, who was no more than a British puppet. Egyptian administration treated the Sudanese like aliens and was chiefly concerned with extorting as heavy taxes as possible from them. Every official was known to the public to be corrupt. In the midst of this atmosphere of despotism and discontent, an exceptionally gifted man rapidly rose to international prominence destined to become the most outstanding leader in Sudanese history—Muhammad Ahmad, the Mahdi.

When Muhammad Ahmad declared himself as the expected *Imam al-Mahdi* in 1831, he was thirty-seven years of age. He was born on August 12, 1844 in the province of Dongola. His family claimed direct descendancy from the Holy Prophet. His father, Abdullah, was a boat-builder and when the future Mahdi was a child, the family moved

southwards and settled about twelve miles north of Khartoum where there was an adequate supply of timber. Here Abdullah died and was buried, leaving a family of four sons and a daughter. While Muhammad Ahmad's brothers all followed their father's trade, he displayed a special aptitude for religious studies. His teacher was subsidized by the government and it is said that Muhammad Ahmad refused to eat the food he provided since it was derived from oppression. After he had received as thorough an education as was available in the Sudan in those days, instead of, like numerous other Sudanese students, proceeding to al-Azhar to continue his theological training, he decided to enter a Sufi order and devote himself to a life of asceticism and mystic experiences. Therefore in 1861 he became the disciple of Shaikh Muhammad Sharif Nur Daim, the grandson of the founder of the Sammaniya order in the Sudan. Here he remained for seven years gaining a reputation of extreme asceticism and performing the most menial duties in evidence of his humility towards his master. At the end of this period, he was appointed as a Shaikh of the order and began to travel about the country on religious missions. During this period, he made his home with his brothers in Khartoum and married the daughter of his grand-uncle, Ahmad Sarfi. In search of timber, he accompanied his brothers when they moved to the island of Aba on the White Nile and from 1870, this became his headquarters.

At first Shaikh Muhammad Sharfi displayed the warmest affection towards his nephew but as the popularity and fame of the young Shaikh increased, the uncle,

consumed with jealousy and fearing a loss of his prestige, expelled him from the order. This opened his eyes to the faults in his master whom he had previously served with servile devotion. He particularly resented his uncle permitting music and dancing on the occasion of the circumcision feast of his sons. This, he declared, contravened the *Shariah* for which no excuse would suffice. Shaikh Muhammad Sharif again denounced him most contemptuously. His popularity, however, appeared to be not at all affected. He decided not to relinquish the order but instead to profess allegiance to the rival head of the Sammaniya, Shaikh al-Quraishi, who welcomed him and expected him to eventually become his successor. In 1880 he died and Muhammad Ahmad's leadership of the Sammaniya order was assured.

The following year an obscure man from the Ta'aisha tribe named Abdullah bin Muhammad came to him and requested admission into the Sammaniya order. His father had been a man of high repute for his piety and skill as a diviner on whose foresight they relied in planning their raids. As his father grew old, he succeeded him as the tribal sooth-sayer. He dictated the following to Muhammad Ahmad :

"I saw in a dream that you are the expected Imam al-Mahdi and I am one of your followers so tell me if you are the Mahdi of the age that I may follow you."*

Despite his illiteracy, Abdullah bin Muhammad proved himself highly intelligent, energetic and able and rapidly

* *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, Peter Malcolm Holt, Oxford University Press, London, 1958, p. 44.

gained a high place in his master's affections which he repaid with complete devotion.

Muhammad Ahmad was no passive tool in the hands of his disciple. His assumption of the Mahdia came from firm inner conviction supported by his wide popularity and the public's searching for the Messiah to rescue them from disaster and calamity and restore universal justice and righteousness. Muhammad Ahmad began to study the Hadith which foretold the coming of the *Imam al-Mahdi* and applied them to himself. Then he experienced a series of remarkable visions to that effect. First he disclosed the secret of his divine election to Abdullah bin Muhammad and afterwards in March 1881, to his other disciples and supporters. With fervent emotionalism he spoke before his followers, promising them to liberate the Sudan from Egyptian tyranny and then after conquering Egypt, proceed to take Mecca. Next, he would advance on Jerusalem where Jesus Christ would descend from heaven to meet him and Islam thereafter would rule the world.

The oath of allegiance Muhammad Ahmad instructed his followers to make shows his loyalty to the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet :

We swear allegiance to Allah and His Apostle and we swear allegiance to you, upon the Unity of God, and that we will not associate anyone with Him ; we will not steal, we will not commit adultery, we will not bring false accusations, and we will not disobey you in that which is lawful. We swear allegiance to you upon the renunciation of this world and being content with what is with God, desiring only the Hereafter and that we will not shirk our duty of *Jihad*.*

**Ibid.*, p. 101.

Alarmed, the Egyptian governor and his force of 200 men were dispatched to Aba island with instructions to bring the rebel to Khartoum for punishment only to be killed by the Mahdi's followers. This was followed by the news that the Mahdi had retreated into the desert of Kordofan and raised the demand for *Jihad*.

On May 22, 1882, the Mahdi wrote the following reply to the Egyptian Governor :

You say that our only followers are the poor, the ignorant, the nomads and the idolators. Know then that the followers of the prophets and their successors and of the Holy Prophet Muhammad were the weak and the ignorant, the destitute, slaves and idolators who worshipped rocks and trees. As for the kings and the rich and the people of luxury, they did not follow them until they had ruined their palaces, killed their nobles and ruled them by force. We are not under your command but you and your superiors are under our command. For there is nothing between us and you save the sword !*

From the most powerful Amir to the humblest water-carrier, his followers never doubted his claim and were ready to die for him. He was able to command from the wild tribesmen a sense of duty and a discipline that was utterly lacking in the demoralized Egyptian ranks. His success was astonishing. In Kordofan, his men were hardly armed at all except for spears and sticks, yet they routed a column of Egyptian soldiers equipped with modern weapons sent against them. In August 1882, (the same month that the British established their hold on the Suez), the Mahdi laid seige to el-Obeid, which was a town of 100,000 people protected by a strong Egyptian garrison. After

**Ibid.*, p. 50.

managing to resist for six months, famine defeated them and in January 1883, the city fell.

The following proclamation was issued by the Mahdi from the Government House at his new residence in Obeid :

“Let us show penitence before Allah and abandon all evil and forbidden, degrading acts of the flesh such as the use of liquor and tobacco, lying, bearing false witness, disobedience to parents, brigandage, the non-restitution of goods to others, improper glances with the eyes, the clapping of hands, singing, dancing, extravagant wailing and lamentation at the bed of the dead, slanderous language, calumny and the company of strange women. Clothe your women in a decent way and let them be careful not to associate with unknown persons. All those who refuse to heed these precepts disobey Allah and the Holy Prophet and they shall be punished in accordance with the law. Perform regular Salat at the prescribed times. Adore Allah and hate not each*other but assist each other to do good.*

The British government had hoped that the Governor-General in Kartoum would be able to handle the rebellion with the soldiers already under his command but with the fall of Kordofan, the richest province in the Sudan, it became plain that a large military expedition would have to be sent from Cairo if the revolution was to be crushed. The command was given to Colonel William Hicks of the Bombay army who had joined the Egyptian service and he had with him a staff of more than a dozen Europeans including a correspondent of the *London Times* and another from the *London Graphic*. With them followed 7,000 infantry, 1,000 cavalry and 5,000 camels required to carry supplies across the desert. They were armed with machine

**The White Nile*, Alan Moorehead, Dell Publishing Co., New York, p. 226

guns and a million rounds of ammunition. On November 5, 1883, the expedition encountered an army of 50,000 Arab warriors. Of the original ten thousand, not more than two or three hundred men survived. Colonel Hicks and his entire European staff were slain. After this triumph, one town after the other fell into the hands of the Mahdi. Alarmed, the British sent General Gordon to take charge of the administration in Khartoum. General Gordon posed as a great humanitarian, as the champion of civilization and progress as opposed to barbarism and fanaticism. Much propaganda was created by the British about the inhumanity of the slave-trade in the Sudan and other parts of Africa still under Muslim rule, conveniently forgetting the unpalatable fact that during the 18th and much of the 19th centuries, under the sway of British imperialism, millions of African slaves were shipped to the New World under the most brutal and degrading conditions, far worse, than the treatment of slaves in any Muslim country. On the pretext of stopping the traffic of slaves in the Sudan, General Gordon was determined to establish the British as supreme. At first he thought he could appease the Mahdi by appointing him as Sultan of Kordofan and urged him to release all European prisoners in his charge. Along with the letter confirming the appointment, he sent a red robe of honour and a tarbush. The Mahdi's reply shows how seriously General Gordon had underestimated the calibre of his rival :

Know that I am the *Imam al-Mahdi*, the successor to the Messenger of Allah. Thus I have no need of the sultanate nor of the Kingdom of Kordofan or elsewhere nor of the wealth of this world and its vanity.

I am but a slave of Allah, guiding unto Allah and to what is with Him according to His will and Allah has succoured me with the Prophets, salots and pious men to revive His faith. As for the gift which you have sent us, may Allah reward you for your good-will and guide you to the Straight Path. Returned to you are the clothing you sent. We wish for ourselves and our Companions only salvation in the world to come.*

After the receipt of this communication, General Gordon then telegraphed Lord Cromer :

If Egypt is to be kept quiet, the Mahdi must be smashed up. If you decide to smash the Mahdi, then send up another one hundred thousand pounds and dispatch 200 Indian troops to Wadi Halfa and send another officer to Dongola under pretence to look out quarters for troops. At present, it should be comparatively easy to destroy the Mahdi.**

With full-scale British military intervention in the Sudan, the Mahdi decided that it would be essential to lay siege to Khartoum. The British government repeatedly begged General Gordon to escape before it was too late but this he steadfastly refused. Again he telegraphed Lord Cromer :

I declare positively once and for all that I will not leave the Sudan until our Government is established which relieves me of the charge.***

This made General Gordon a hero in England overnight.

At midnight on January 25, 1885 the Mahdi crossed the white Nile and gave his general, al-Nujmi, the order to attack. An hour before dawn, the assault began. In a few hours all resistance had ceased. In the struggle

* *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, op. cit., p. 85.

** *Ibid.*, p. 89.

*** *The White Nile*, op. cit., p. 271.

General Gordon had perished, speared to death on the staircase of his palace. Four days after the conquest, the Mahdi made his triumphal entry into the capital and led the Friday prayer in the mosque.

Queen Victoria's feelings have been described by her private secretary :

The Queen was in a terrible state about the fall of Khartoum and indeed, it had a good deal to do with making her ill. She was just going out when she received the telegram and sent for me. Pale and trembling, she said to my wife who was terrified at her appearance. "Too late!"**

The following letter in Queen Victoria's handwriting reached General Gordon's sister in Southampton :

"How shall I write to you or how shall I attempt to express what I feel? To think of your dear, noble, heroic brother who served his country and his Queen so truly, so heroically with self-sacrifice so edifying to the world, not having been rescued! This is to me grief inexpressible. Indeed, it has made me ill."***

Mrs. Gordon replied by sending the Queen one of Gordon's Bibles and it was placed in a special exhibition case under glass in Windsor Castle. The English press then proceeded to publish General Gordon's diary which immediately became a best-seller. The English press inflamed the public with rabid anti-Islamic propaganda depicting the Mahdi and his followers as savage, blood-thirsty fanatics. The only prominent Englishman who openly expressed his sympathy for the Mahdi was the orientalist, Wilfred Scawen Blunt who vehemently protested against British aggression in the Sudan. He fearlessly condemned General

**Ibid.*, p. 290.

***Ibid.*

Wolseley and his men and pleaded for peaceful negotiations with the Mahdi.

The personal magnetism of the Mahdi was so great that he was able to impress even his most avowed enemies. Father Josph Ohrawlder, an Austrian priest who was a prisoner of the Mahdists for seven years recalled :

His physical appearance was strangely fascinating. He was a man of strong constitution, powerfully built with broad shoulders, a large head, sparkling eyes, a black beard and three tribal gashes on his cheek. His complexion was very dark and his face always wore a pleasant smile. He had singularly even white teeth and his mode of conversation had by training become exceptionally pleasing and sweet.*

And Wingate, the future Governor of the Sudan remarked :

“There is no doubt that this man had the strongest head and the clearest mental vision in the two million square miles of which he had more or less made himself master before he died.**

Five months after the fall of Khartoum in his new capital at Omdurman, the Mahdi was stricken with typhus and expired several days later.

The Mahdi had died at the height of his triumph ; it now fell to his chief disciple and successor, Khalifa Abdullah bin Muhammad, the far more difficult task of consolidating his rule, establishing an independent, well-organized Islamic state and guarding it both from dissension and corruption from within and enemies from without.

For some years the British were so terrified of the power of this new Islamic state that they dared not make another attack. The Khalifa now controlled an empire half the size of Europe. He dispatched a letter to Queen

**Ibid.*, p. 224.

***Ibid.*, p. 224-225.

Victoria summoning her to Omdurman and inviting her submission to his rule and to embrace Islam :

Know that Allah is Almighty and great and remember the fate that has overtaken Hicks, Gordon and the other British generals in the Sudan. Thy soldiers thought only of retreat whereof they had more than enough. Thou hast erred in many ways and art suffering great loss wherefrom there is no refuge for thee save by turning to God, the King, and entering among the people of Islam and the followers of the Mahdi, grace be upon him. If thou wilt do this and yield all the matter to us, then shalt thou achieve thy desire of perfect felicity and true repose which is salvation before Allah in the blissful and enduring Dwelling, the like of which eye has not seen nor ear heard nor heart of man conceived. But if thou wilt not turn from thy blindness and self will, continue to war against the hosts of God with all thy armies and warlike equipment, thou shalt behold the end of thy work. Thou shalt be crushed by the power of Allah and His might or be afflicted by the death of many of thy people who have entered on war with the people of God by reason of thy Satanic presumption.*

Soon after the rise of the Khalifa of the Mahdi, tribalism reasserted itself and in order to maintain his rule and avert utter chaos and anarchy in the land, the Khalifa was compelled to crush one faction after another, often dealing with the tribes and even some of his over-ambitious subordinates with harsh severity. The Anti-Slavery Society in England lost no opportunity to give the widest publicity to each fresh alleged brutality. Public sentiment in the English-speaking world ran so high against the Mahdists that to defend the Khalifa against this torrent of anti-Islamic propaganda meant being maligned as a traitor. English journalists depicted Christendom defied by these "murderous fanatics." The Khalifa was downgraded by

**The White Nile*, op. cit., pp. 308-309.

presenting him as an ambitious politician who only used the cloak of piety to further his personal gain.

The sincerety of the Khalifa in Islam is proved beyond doubt in the daily routine of his life and his works in which he alone among all the rulers in the Muslim world at that time, fulfilled the essentials of Islamic government. His sense of duty was so strong that he never left the capital at Omdurman but relied upon his subordinates to inform him about conditions in the outlying provinces. He rose at dawn and proceeded to the mosque for *Salat*. Then he returned to his house to sleep for two hours and after a conference with his Amirs, he rode in procession to review his soldiers on the outskirts of the city. Friday was regarded as a special day and then as many as 50,000 horsemen would gallop towards the black flag of the Mahdia inscribed with verses from the Quran, brandishing their spears and shooting their rifles into the air. Breakfast followed and after leading the tribesmen in the early afternoon *Salat*, the Khalifa again spoke in the mosque. Mid-afternoon found him again behind the high walls of his house or conducting business in the *Bait ul-Mal* (treasury) and then more *Salat* at sunset and speeches and announcements in the mosque. The evening meal was followed by the fifth and final *Salat* and afterwards, the Khalifa retired to his room, to be seen no more until the following morning.

The Khalifa felt no need of any constitution except the Quran and Sunnah. The *Shariah* was the supreme law of the land. *Salat*, *Zakat*, the fast of Ramadan, the

prohibition of liquor, tobacco, song and dance and the institution of Hijab or the segregation of the sexes was strictly and effectively enforced. The standard costume of the Mahdists, which amounted to practically a uniform, was a patched white gown or *Jibbeh* tied at the waist with a girdle, a white turban with one end falling over the neck, and sandals. Repeatedly the Mahdi had praised this form of dress as most pleasing to the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet.

Both geographically and administratively, the heart of the Mahdist state was its capital at Omdurman. From a military camp, within a few years, Omdurman developed into a veritable city, sprawling along the left bank of the Nile for about six miles. The Khalifa's house was the only two-storied building in Omdurman. Not far away was the arsenal, the storehouse of materials for war and its associated workshops. The treasury or Bait ul Mal formed another complex of buildings containing offices, stores, the lithograph press and the mint. The market covered a large area and was arranged according to trades and commodities. The greater part of Omdurman consisted of an unplanned array of dwelling places, ranging from brick houses to straw and mud huts separated by narrow, winding alleys. The mosque near the domed tomb of the Mahdi was the starting point of the main roads.

In 1896 the British decided on re-conquest at all costs. General Kitchener was appointed to command the expedition along with Wingate in his intelligence service and one of his most promising young soldiers, Winston Churchill.

This time there was to be no haste and no mistake. In the summer of 1898, Kitchener fell upon Omdurman with the full force of his modern artillery. No quarter was given to the enemy during the assault and before long, thousands were dead. Few outside the Sudan believed that the Khalifa stood much of a chance. Many of his 50,000 warriors were armed with nothing but spears and sticks and their guns were obsolete. The Mahdist troops were very brave, rushing straight into the British artillery fire and Kitchener's rifles completed the work. "No white troops could have faced that torrent of death for five minutes," wrote an English war correspondent for the *London Times*. "It was not a battle. It was an execution!" Churchill wrote in his memoirs; "Sir H. Kitchener shut up his telescopic glasses, remarking that he thought that the enemy had been given a "good dusting."

As soon as he entered Omdurman, Kitchener ordered the Mahdi's tomb destroyed. The body of the Mahdi was exhumed and flung into the Nile, not however, until the head was severed and this was appropriated by Kitchener as a trophy of war. First he considered using the Mahdi's skull as an inkstand, a paperweight or a drinking cup but finally he decided to forward it as a curiosity to the Royal College of Surgeons in London and so it was sent to Cairo. Meanwhile Lord Cromer quietly obtained the skull and sent it to the cemetery at Wadi Halfa where it was secretly buried by night.

The Khalifa had escaped the massacre at Omdurman and fled with 7,000 of his warriors to Jebel Gedir, some 400 miles south of Khartoum in the same country where

he was born and reared. Kitchener dispatched a force of 8,000 men to pursue him. The machine guns then opened fire. On the battlefield Wingate came upon an awesome sight. Finding resistance impossible and all routes of escape cut off, the Khalifa called upon his Amirs to dismount from their horses, and seating himself cross-legged on his sheep-skin prayer mat as was the custom for Arab chieftans who disdain surrender, he placed his Ministers on his right and left while the remaining Amirs seated themselves around him with the warriors in front and here they unflinchingly met their end.

The inherent weaknesses of the Mahdists made its failure in a worldly sense inevitable. Firstly, although Muhammad Ahmad's claim to be *Imamal-Mahdi* was accepted without question by the illiterate tribesmen who flocked to him, it was plain to all Muslims outside the Sudan that as sincere he was, his claim was false. In the end, he could have secured more support, especially from Muslims outside the Sudan, by proving himself as a valiant and fearless *Mujahid* which he certainly was. The second weakness of the Mahdists was their utter failure to secure any support from Muslims beyond the borders of the Sudan. Just before his death in his last letter to the Khalifa, General Nujmi confessed that non-Sudanese Muslims had not the slightest concern for the plight of the Mahdists, but willingly cooperated with the British, denying them provisions, smuggling arms for the enemy and attacking the Sudanese. A third weakness of the Mahdist state was its almost total neglect of education. In the entire archives of the Mahdists, there is no mention

of the establishment of any schools or educational centres where the illiterate tribesmen could be instructed in the practice and true spirit of Islam. The slave-trade was certainly not in conformity to the precepts of the *Shariah* and the conduct of some of the Mahdist troops at the capture of El-Obeid and Khartoum shows that they did not fully understand the humane requirements for *Jihad*. But the most serious defect of the Mahdists was its isolationist policy which proved suicidal and the abysmal ignorance of the Mahdi and the Khalifa about the outside world. In fact, the Khalifa had had once asked Slatin, one of his European captives, if France was a tribe! Had the Khalifa been able to secure accurate and adequate knowledge of events taking place beyond the frontiers of the Sudan, then he could have realistically assessed the forces aligned against him and offered more effective and enduring resistance.

However, the Mahdist movement was not in vain. Undoubtedly the fervour of piety and zeal for *Jihad* that Muhammad Ahmad aroused among his people is responsible for the fact that to this day, the Sudanese are the most Islamically-minded in the Arab world.

MUSLIMS AWAKE !

While the evils of atheism and materialism, supported by all the forces of modern technology, are working day and night to destroy us—spiritually, culturally and politically—rather than hold fast to faith in Allah, unite and combat our real enemies, we foolishly choose to tread the path of an alien civilization, hoping thereby in vain to attain social prestige and the comforts and pleasures of this transitory world in utter forgetfulness of the eternal Life Hereafter and thus totally neglect our duties as Muslims to Allah and our fellow-beings. This is not the way to “Progress” but can only result in our failure degeneration and doom, both individually and collectively! Muslim brothers and sisters! Follow the path of the Quran and Sunnah, not as a set of dead rituals but as a practical manual of guidance for our conduct in daily life in private and in public, put aside sectarian and political controversies and let us all cooperate and work together in harmony for the cause of Allah in Islamic movements in whichever country you happen to live, do not waste valuable time in useless things and *inshallah*, Allah shall crown your life with great achievements here and supreme success in the Hereafter.

MARYAM JAMEELAH