

## THE ISLAMIC MILLENARIAN TRADITION IN WEST AFRICA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO NIGERIA: AIMS AND IMPACT

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### Abstract

*The millenarian notions of the Mahdi and Mujaddid as they existed in early Islam, and their impact on Nigeria is discussed with a view to establishing the aims of the West African mahdist movements, their social composition, leadership and achievements. The notion of the Mahdi primarily came to West Africa through Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti's writings and the writings and teaching of Muhammad b. Abd al-Karim al Maghili in the 15th century and thereafter. Aspects of the role of other influential clerics and teachers as well as the Muslim brotherhoods are described. Most notable among these are Shaykh Uthman dan Fodio, involved directly in the 1804-1808 jihad for religious renewal and against slavery. This is followed by a description of aspects of the approach of the colonial authorities to millenarianism, asking the question whether they at all adequately understood the movement. This leads to a discussion of the social composition of millenarian movements in West Africa as well as their aims and achievements. It is concluded that millenarian movements did little to change the traditional order but did effect a number of significant changes in the spread and influence of Islam.*

### Introduction

This article provides an overview of the origins and development in early Islam, and the transmission to and impact on West African, and more specifically, Nigerian Islam of the millenarian notions of the Mahdi, the God-guided-one, and the Mujaddid, the Renewer. It also examines the aims of West African mahdist movements, the overall social composition of these movements and the social and educational background of the leadership, pointing at the similarities with the modern radical Islamic leadership, and assesses the achievements of these movements. But first of all we turn to a brief discussion of the origins, meaning, development, carriers and application of the mahdist and renewal concepts in early Islam for, as will be seen, so much of this early history influenced later developments in West Africa and Nigeria.

### Notions of Mahdism and Renewal in early Islam

While the term Mahdi is not found in the Qur'an there is therein a related word, muhtadi, the one who accepts guidance.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, although the belief in a final restorer of Islam, a Mahdi-like figure, is found in the most 'sound' compendia of hadith,

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<sup>1</sup> The Qur'an: 17: 97 (use is made here and throughout this study of A.J. Arberry, *The Qur'an Interpreted*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

tradition, the Sahihs of al-Bukhari and Muslim, the term Mahdi itself is not used.<sup>2</sup> Those later hadith or traditions which use the term have been declared by Muslim scholars, notably Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), to be unsound or 'weak'.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, while all Muslims look to a final restorer of Islam, much of Sunnite Islamic eschatology does not refer to this figure as the Mahdi.<sup>4</sup> According to certain Muslim scholars, among them the great popularising theologian, Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058), from Tus in modern day Iran, the Mahdi figure is a popular creation 'born' and, as he maintained, 'nurtured and cultivated in the main by the multitudes who saw in him an instrument against oppression.'<sup>5</sup>

Ibn Khaldun refers to the widespread nature and persistence of the belief in this way:

'It has been well known (and generally accepted) by all Muslims in every epoch, that at the end of time a man from the family (of the Prophet) will without fail make his appearance, one who will strengthen the religion and make justice triumph. The Muslims will follow him and he will gain domination over the Muslim realm. He will be called the Mahdi. Following him the Antichrist will appear, together with all the subsequent signs of the Hour (the Day of Judgement). After (the Mahdi) Isa (Jesus) will descend and kill the Antichrist. Or, Jesus will descend together with the Mahdi and help him kill (the Antichrist), and have him as the leader in his prayers.'<sup>6</sup>

Like al-Ghazali, Ibn Khaldun regarded the Mahdi as a popular construct and, therefore, scarcely deserving of any serious theological reflection. Al-Ghazali shows this by paying little or no attention to the Mahdi in his writings on eschatology, while Ibn Khaldun, as already indicated, argues that the mahdist notion has no foundation in authentic hadith or tradition and consequently treated popular notions of mahdism, as will be seen below, with a certain amount of disdain.

But, as already indicated, neither Ibn Khaldun's disdain nor its absence from the Qur'an and 'sound' hadith has prevented the term Mahdi from being applied, albeit not always in a technical sense, to both historical figures - examples being Abraham, prophet Muhammad himself, his cousin and son-in-law Ali, and the first four Caliphs - and to eschatological individuals including the Abassid Caliph, al Nasir (1188-1225 C.E.). Moreover, there have been no shortage of African Mahdis, as we shall see, some of the most prominent among them being Ubayddulah al-Mahdi (d.934 C.E.) who founded the Fatimid dynasty that ruled in North Africa in the tenth century, Muhammad Ibn Tumart (d.1130 C.E.), founder of the Almohad movement in the Maghrib and Muhammad Ahmad ibn Abdullah (d.1885) who founded the mahdist state in the Sudan in the late

2 D.B. Macdonald, 'Al-Mahdi', in M. Th. Houtsa, A.J. Wensinck et al (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (henceforth EI), Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1936, p. 111. An abbreviated version of this article is also available in H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers (eds.), *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (henceforth SEI), Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974, pp. 310 ff. See also D.S. Margoliouth, 'Mahdi', in J. Hastings (eds.), *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, (henceforth ERE), Edinburgh: T & T Clark, Vol. 8, 1958, pp. 336-40.

3 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, (trans. F. Rosenthal), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958, Vol. II, chap. 3, sections 50-51, pp. 156 ff.

4 Macdonald, in SEI, (eds.) Gibb and Kramers op. cit., p. 311.

5 Macdonald, 'Al-Mahdi', in E.I, op. cit., p. 115.

6 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, op. cit., Vol. II, chap. 3, p. 156.

nineteenth century, the thirteenth century of the Muslim era, a century of unprecedented Islamic millennial expectancy in West Africa, including Nigeria, and elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

The mahdist idea is found in both Sunni and Shi'ite Islam and while at the popular, grass roots level both groups perceive the final restorer of Islam in an almost identical way officially his status, role and importance in the two traditions differ. In Ithna'asharite or Twelver Shi'ite theology, to take as an example the largest branch of Shi'ism, the Hidden Imam - the twelfth Imam and last of the Imams, hence the name Twelvers - is an essential part of the creed. His role is that of an infallible and indispensable guide.<sup>8</sup>

In this tradition certainty concerning the meaning of the divine revelation comes through the Hidden Imam and through him alone and not through the body of the faithful or through those qualified scholars - mudjtahids - who, although they are the representatives of the Hidden Imam can, nevertheless, err. In Sunni Islam, by contrast, the people are the ultimate interpreters of the revelation given by God to man through Prophet Muhammad. Thus, in the Sunni tradition the Mahdi is not and cannot be regarded as infallible - only the prophets are protected from error - and his role, therefore, is not that of ultimate arbiter of the revelation but the restorer of that consensus arrived at by the qualified mudjtahids or scholars.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, whereas in Shi'ite Islam the Hidden Imam will rule personally and by divine right the Mahdi in the Sunni perspective is simply the final successor or caliph of Prophet Muhammad and as such will restore the pattern of rule established by the founder of Islam.

These traditions are not always consistent with each other and as a consequence allow for difference of interpretation concerning the place of origin, the house or nation, the character, physical appearance, the appointed time and the length of rule of the Mahdi. Part of the explanation for the divergence lies in the fact that the traditions themselves are sometimes the product of rival factions attempting to wrest power from one another and as such throw light on the inter-ethnic conflicts and political struggles of the times.<sup>10</sup>

There are, nonetheless, a number of common and recurrent themes in these mahdist traditions. For example, many have as their central message the belief that upheavals and dissension (fitnah) will divide the Muslim community (umma) to political strife and social disorder order and moral degeneration, that injustice and oppression will be so widespread that the good person will have no other option than to abandon society and live in seclusion awaiting the advent of the Mahdi or Deliverer who will fill the world, in a state of anarchy and chaos, with equity and justice for a short period before the End of Time.

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7 For a brief overview of Mahdism and Mahdis see J.A. Williams, (ed.) *Themes of Islamic Civilization*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, pp. 191 ff.

8 On the Hidden Imam in Shi'ite Islam cf.: S.A. Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984.

9 Macdonald, 'Al-Mahdi' in *SEI*, (eds.) Gibb and Kramers, op. cit., p. 311.

10 Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam*, op. cit., especially chap. 2. See also: Macdonald op. cit.

Furthermore, the vast majority of these traditions trace the idea of the final Deliverer or Mahdi back to Prophet Muhammad as the principal source of this belief. Many state, for example, that the prophet Muhammad announced that the Mahdi would be of his house, a descendant of his daughter Fatima, that he would bear the name Muhammad, and that his father's name would be that of his own father, Abd Allah. As to his appearance, the Mahdi would be 'bald of the forehead, hook-nosed and high-nosed', and in temperament and disposition would resemble Muhammad himself.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of his accomplishments, Muhammad allegedly foretold that the Mahdi would bring unimaginable prosperity to Muslims: 'money in that day will be like that which is trodden underfoot and uncounted'. Moreover, he would replace a world of unbelief, oppression and injustice with firm faith in God, justice and plenty. And, as to the manner of his coming, the Mahdi would appear suddenly and unexpectedly.<sup>12</sup>

On the vital question of the 'appointed hour' of the Mahdi, it is worth noting here that Shi'ite Islam has no means of knowing anything about this other than that the Hidden Imam and/or Mahdi is to come at the End of Time. This idea of the End of Time being the moment for the advent of the Hidden Imam arose, as Arjomand has shown, out of a development of theology expounded during the time of the seventh Imam, Ja'far as-Sadiq and was intended interestingly to dampen down millenarian fervour which was considered to be extremely dangerous to the regime.

Basing his case for a divinely guided Imam who would act as the authoritative teacher of all mankind in all religious matters, Jafar as-Sadiq propounded the doctrine, mentioned above, of the Imam's infallibility and absolute authority.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, he presented the Imam not only as the repository of God's knowledge and the interpreter of his revelation, but also as:

'... the pillar of God's unity (tawhid)... immune from sin and error... possessed of the power of miracles and of irrefutable arguments... (he) may be likened in this community to the ark of Noah: he who boards it obtains salvation and reaches the gate of repentance'.<sup>14</sup>

Although Shi'ite rulers such as Jafar as-Sadiq whenever questioned on the subject gave vague and empty interpretations of the advent of the Hidden Imam and/or Mahdi figure that sought to dilute the chiliastic element of the belief by sublimating it as far as possible into an eschatology, they did not succeed. Not least because the social and political conditions which gave the belief its relevance and intensity remained. Mahdist movement after mahdist movement nurtured by popular Sufism arose to challenge the authorities, particularly among the common people in the more highly decentralised societies in Iran and throughout the Shi'ite world.<sup>15</sup>

11 Macdonald, 'Al-Mahdi' in *SEI*, (eds.) Gibb and Kramers, op. cit., p. 312. See also for references to the traditions cited here and to other relevant traditions: A. J. Wensinck, *A Handbook of Early Muhammadan Tradition*, Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1960, p. 139.

12 Ibid., p. 312.

13 Arjomand, op.cit., pp. 32 ff.

14 Ibid., p. 35.

15 Ibid., chaps. 2&3.

Sufism, as Ibn Khaldun noted, was much more precise in its forecasts concerning the 'appointed hour' and this may have been one reason for the widespread nature of its appeal. Ibn Khaldun informs us that the renowned Sufi, Ibn Arabi, whom he regarded as responsible for the Sufi tendency to predict the advent of the Imam and/or Mahdi, foretold that the Mahdi would appear in the year 1284-85 C.E., and when this prediction failed his followers allegedly extended the period and invented new prophecies.<sup>16</sup>

As to the length of time it would take for the Mahdi to accomplish his mission this varies slightly from tradition to tradition. However, most traditions appear to agree that he would not tarry in restoring the world to Islam, his rule lasting for a period of as little as five or seven or nine years.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding his place of origin some of the earlier of these 'late' traditions foretell that the Mahdi will come from the East, from beyond the river Oxus, while others compiled later point to Medina and others to the Maghrib as the place of his appearance. Although, as already noted, these traditions were not considered 'sound' by Ibn Khaldun and others, they along with those concerning the Mujaddid and/or Renewer, found a home in the writings of eminently respectable scholars, the two most important of whom, as far as the Islamic millenarian tradition in western Africa is concerned, were the distinguished Egyptian scholar Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (1445-1505 C.E.) and the jurist Muhammad b. Abd al-Karim al-Maghili (1425-1505 C.E.) from the ancient city of Tlemcen in the Central Maghrib.<sup>18</sup>

As previously pointed out, the mahdist notion is often used in close conjunction with that of Renewer of Islam. Some Sunni traditions speak of the appearance of eight such Renewers, the last of whom will be the Mahdi, while others refer to ten and others to twelve, the Mahdi being once again the last one in every case.<sup>19</sup>

Al-Maghili, just mentioned, carries a reference in one of his works to a hadith first recorded by Abu Dawud (d.889) on the Mujaddid:

'On the authority of Abu Huraya and on the authority of the Messenger of God, who said: 'God sends to this community at the head (ra's) of each hundred years one/those (man) who will regenerate its religion for it'.<sup>20</sup>

Al-Maghili's reference to this hadith undoubtedly contributed to the spread of the belief in the advent of a Renewer every century among Muslim teachers in the West African setting.<sup>21</sup> And equally important in this respect were the writings and counsels of al-Suyuti. We can now examine the pivotal role played by these two scholars in the

16 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, op. cit., Vol.II, chap. 3, pp. 156 ff.

17 Macdonald, 'Al-Mahdi', in *SEI* (eds.) Gibb and Kramers (eds.), op. cit., p. 313.

18 On the part played by both Al-Suyuti and Al-Maghili in the development of an Islamic tradition of reform in the western Sudan see: *Shari'a in Songhay: The Replies of Al-Maghili to the Questions of Askia Al-Hajj Muhammad*, (edited and translated with an introduction and commentary by J.O. Hunwick), Oxford: Oxford University Press and published for the British Academy, 1985. (Henceforth: Hunwick, *Shari'a in Songhay*).

19 Ibid., pp. 115-118.

20 The citation is from *ibid.*, p. 115.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

development of the mahdist and renewal beliefs first in the West African and later in the Nigerian setting.

### **Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti and the Islamic millenarian tradition in West Africa**

Although he never visited West Africa al-Suyuti exerted a profound influence over its Muslim population, and in particular over the Tuareg of the Sahel region, through his writings, counsel, and his occasional encounters with its rulers and scholars. The peak period of al-Suyuti's influence was from c.1465-1495 C.E., and as one authority on Islam in the region has written:

'No Muslim people in those lands escaped his influence. His works were popular. They were copied and recopied, quoted and used for ideas. More than this, al-Suyuti took an active part in the political upheavals of Takrur, Air and Tagedda. He sent exhortations to rulers, dissuading monarchs from military adventures, and he staged the investiture of Sahelian Sultans by the Caliph in Cairo.'<sup>22</sup>

According to Norris al-Suyuti's name became a 'byword' among the jurists and mystics of Air and Tagedda some of whom studied with him in Cairo while making their way to Mecca. Moreover, some, among them Abu-l-Huda, a great name in fifteenth and sixteenth century Tuareg Islam, became a correspondent and close friend.<sup>23</sup>

Several of the Sahel's and western Sudan's rulers were known to him if not personally, then at least by name, and his good offices appear to have been responsible for the investiture as Sultan by the Caliph in Cairo of at least one of them, Askiya Muhammad Ture I of Songhay.<sup>24</sup>

Many Sahelian Muslim scholars wrote to al-Suyuti seeking his advice on points of Islamic law and practice. Questions of inheritance, the establishment of fiefs, rights to pasturage and on fighting non-Muslims were among the many issues they raised with him in their correspondence and the advice and guidance he gave them on these and other matters relating to Islamic law and practice are said to have had a profound impact on the style of Islam practised in the Sahel. For example, on the extremely important subject of jihad or holy war he counselled that:

'he who does not fight is more exalted'.

And this counsel has been regarded as 'crucial in forming the pacific ideas' of the Ineslemen, scholars, of the Kel-es-Suq.<sup>25</sup> However, it is Al-Suyuti's views on the subject of the Mahdi and the Mujaddid that are the principal concern here, a subject inextricably bound up with the question of tajdid or the reform of Islam. In one of his works al-Suyuti stated that in all there would be twelve 'rightly guided' caliphs and that in his time there were:

22 H.T. Norris, *The Tuaregs: Their Islamic Legacy and Its Diffusion in the Sahel*, Warminster: Aris and Phillips Ltd., 1975, p. 41.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., p. 41.

25 Ibid., p. 27.

'Two more rightly guided caliphs yet to come, the last of whom would be the Mahdi.'<sup>26</sup>

The idea of a plurality of renewers opened a Pandora's box of self-proclaimed renewers and mahdis across the face of West Africa and beyond. Willis says of the extent of al-Suyuti's influence:

'Of the figures under discussion, his seems to have been the most ascendant influence in raising the mujaddid standard beyond the central lands of Islam. The Shaykh Ahmad Faruq Sirhindi, animated by the force of al-Suyuti's claim, lifted the banner of the mujaddid in India...'<sup>27</sup>

But it was no greater where West Africa is concerned than that of al-Maghili.

### **Muhammad b. Abd al-Karim al-Maghili and the Islamic millenarian tradition in West Africa**

Al-Maghili had first hand knowledge of the condition of Islam in West Africa.<sup>28</sup> He travelled extensively in the region and taught in a number of its cities including Kano and Katsina in Nigeria, and what he saw and experienced of Islam in these localities most probably re-enforced any ideas he might have already entertained about the need for a Renewer. He was not, however, alone in believing that Islam was in dire need of renewal. A fifteenth century text from the Sahel makes clear the concern of some Tuareg scholars about the sorry plight of Islam in the region listing fifty seven practices which were considered to be unorthodox.<sup>29</sup> The document depicts the region in question - possibly either Tadamakkatt or Agades - as a veritable 'Vanity Fair'.<sup>30</sup>

Among the practices and customs that caused concern to its author and other local Muslim scholars were those practice of magic, of women going about unveiled, the use of talismans, the playing of musical instruments such as the lute, the widespread practice of bribery even where appointments to such posts as that of qadi or Muslim judge were concerned, the worship of idols and the superficial character of qur'anic teaching provided in the main by poorly trained teachers who knew little or no Arabic and who were, thus, unable to distinguish between a valid and a distorted interpretation of the faith. These scholars, 'venal scholars' in the words of Muhammad al-Lamtuni, author of the Sahelian text under discussion, and similar in character to those described by al-Ghazali as 'scholars of the world', were alleged to have preferred mundane rewards such as rank and influence to the truth. In addition there were rulers who violated almost every imaginable Islamic precept from the levying of unlawful taxes to the shedding of Muslim blood and the practice of 'takhlit', the mixing of unbelief with Islam.

It was conditions such as these that strengthened the stern, rigid, legalistic, even militant al-Maghili in his conviction that the time was right for a Renewer of the faith.

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26 Hunwick, *Shari'a in Songhay*, op. cit., p. 46.

27 J.R. Willis, *In the Path of Allah: The Passion of Al-Hajj Umar*, London: Frank Cass, 1989, p. 41.

28 In addition to J. O. Hunwick's *Shari'a in Songhay*, op. cit., other important studies of al-Maghili include: H.I. Gwarzo, *The Life and Teachings of al-Maghili with particular reference to the Saharan Jewish Community*, Ph.D.thesis, University of London, 1972.

29 Hunwick, *Shari'a in Songhay*, op. cit., chaps. 3&4.

30 Ibid.

This much is clear from his *Replies* to the questions posed by Muhammad al-Lamtuni. The *Replies* also contains a brief discussion about the Renewer of Islam, a discussion which, as we shall see shortly, was to have a considerable impact on the thinking of the Muslim reformer in Hausaland, northern Nigeria, Shaykh Uthman b. Fudi (c.1754-1817).

Basing himself on the already mentioned tradition recounted by Abu Dawud in the ninth century al-Maghili told al-Lamtuni:

'Thus it is related that at the beginning of every century God sends men a scholar who regenerates their religion for them. There is no doubt that the conduct of this scholar in every century in enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and setting aright peoples' affairs, establishing justice among them and supporting truth against falsehood and the oppressed against the oppressor, will be in contrast to the scholars of his age.'<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, there would clearly be no difficulty in recognising this scholar for he will be:

'... an odd man out among them on account of his being the only man of such pure conduct and on account of the small number of men like him'<sup>32</sup>

Commenting on this reference to the Renewer Hunwick states:

'Although this idea is an old one in Islam - it was known to Ibn Hanbal (d.855) and is the subject of a hadith first recorded by Abu Dawud (d.889) - it may be through this reference in al-Maghili's work that it became more widely known in West Africa.'<sup>33</sup>

The views of both al-Suyuti and al-Maghili had most influence on the clerical classes that had begun to emerge in western Africa from the fourteenth century.

### Muslim 'clerisies', pacifism, militancy and Mahdism c.1500-1800

Numerous Muslim 'clerisies' emerged in the Sahel from the fourteenth century onwards among them the Zawaya, the Jakhanke, the Kunta, the Mande and the Torodbe clerisies, all of which came to be bound up with the Sufi tradition.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the period 1500 - 1800, saw the gradual institutionalisation of a Muslim 'clerical' class making for the possibility, as Weber pointed out, of much greater conflict between 'church' and 'state' or the spheres of religion and politics.<sup>35</sup>

As to the political leanings of West African 'clerics' these varied greatly. Generally, however, they strove to maintain a position of neutrality where government was concerned.<sup>36</sup> There was also co-operation between scholar and ruler and usually the wealthier and more prestigious the cleric the more he was inclined to move in this

31 Ibid., p. 66.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., p. 115.

34 J.R. Willis, 'Reflections on the Diffusion of Islam in West Africa', in *Studies in Western Islamic History*, (ed.) J.R. Willis, London: Frank Cass, 1979, vol. 1, pp. 1-39.

35 Cf.: R. Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, Berkley, California: University of California Press, 1977, pp. 314 ff.

36 N. Levtzion, 'Islam in West African Politics: Accommodation and Tension between the Ulama and the Political Authorities', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 71, XVIII, 3, 1980, pp. 333-345.



direction, while the poorer cleric of low status increasingly tended to function not only outside of but also as an informal opposition to government.

On the question of the relationship and the degree and quality of the co-operation between Muslims and the wider community this depended like so much else on the strength of the Muslim community within that society. By the end of the fourteenth century and throughout the period under discussion Islam was still very much the religion of a minority of the peoples of West Africa. Moreover, Muslims did not constitute a homogeneous community. Some Muslims, we might label them accommodationists and/or pluralists, either chose or were obliged to participate in the social, political, cultural and religious life of the communities in which they lived. This was the position of most of the scholar or sacerdotal classes who sought through peaceful means, if not to radically change, the religious, political and economic systems of the societies in which they lived, then at least to shape them so that they came to resemble more closely the Islamic model. The Torodbe class was among the main exception, opting as it did for a militant approach.<sup>37</sup>

Prominent among the exponents of this pacific approach were the Jakhanke of the Senegambia who were the followers of the thirteenth century West African Muslim cleric Shaykh al-Hajj Salim Suware.<sup>38</sup> This clerical class settled among communities composed in the main of people of servile status and taught the Qur'an, the Islamic sciences and a range of practical subjects.

Like the Jakhanke, the Kunta were another of the clerical classes to promote both scholarship and the peaceful development of Islam. Batran spoke of them as being:

'distinguished by their purer blood and by their learning as above almost all the tribes of the desert'.<sup>39</sup>

At varying stages between the second half of the fifteenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century the Kunta left the northern Sahara and penetrated further south. The first group to move south did so under the leadership of Sidi Muhammad al-Kunti, from whom the Kunta received their name. Perhaps the best known of the Kunta mystics and scholar-reformers in the Western Sudan and particularly in the Upper and Middle Niger regions in this period was the highly influential Shaykh Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kabir al-Kunti (c.1722-1811).<sup>40</sup>

Author of innumerable treatises and books on the mystical life, Shaykh Sidi al-Mukhtar was an ardent pacifist insisting throughout on the reform of Islam by means of greater jihad, that is spiritual warfare against one's own evil desires and inclinations. A man noted for the simplicity of his appearance Shaykh Sidi al-Mukhtar came to be

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37 Willis, 'Reflections on the Diffusion of Islam in West Africa', op. cit., pp. 21 ff. See also: Hiskett, 'An Islamic Tradition of Reform in the Western Sudan from the Sixteenth Century to the Eighteenth Century', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, (B.S.O.A.S.), Vol. 25, 1962.

38 L.O. Sanneh, *The Jakhanke: The History of an Islamic Clerical People of the Senegambia*, London: International African Institute, 1979.

39 A.A. Batran, 'The Kunta, Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti, and the Office of Shaykh al-Tariqa'l-Qadiriyya', in Willis (ed.), *Studies in West African Islam*, op. cit., p. 114.

40 Ibid. .

regarded as an extra-ordinary figure and was described by the above mentioned Hausa Muslim reformer, Muhammad Bello, as:

'The legal expert, the mystic, the upright wali, the Pole of Poles... the last of the Sufi imams who were well versed in the shari'a and the sciences of haqiqa'.<sup>41</sup>

Others claimed that he possessed the gift of bilocation, the power to revive the dead and to predict the future, and many believed him to be the Mujaddid, the Renewer of Islam for the thirteenth Muslim century (1785-1882 C.E.).

Among the Tuareg Ineslemen or clerical class one group in particular, the Kel Es-Suq of Tadamakkat in the Adrar-n-Ifoghas, stands out as the main protagonist of the pacific approach to Islamic reform. The Kel Es-Suq were Maliki jurists and mystics of the Qadiriyya. Some served the Iwillimeden Tuaregs, a people of obscure origins who during the period under review dominated the area between Timbuktu and Gao. Other Ineslemen served the Imashaghen, the noble class among the Tuareg. As scholars they are noted for, among other things, their development of the most artistic Arabic script of the Sahel, formed by mastering the Kufic-type Andalusian Arabic script, which they employed in epitaphs and adapted for their calligraphy.<sup>42</sup>

The Kel Es-Suq provide another example of a scholarly class occupying a subordinate status and highly dependent on the patronage of its overlords, a dependency which it often found burdensome and frustrating. The response to this frustration was variable, some of the Ineslemen not only justifying jihad as a legitimate means at their disposal to settle their grievances but even entertaining the idea of creating a Tuareg Islamic empire under their command, while others including the vast majority of Kel Es-Suq, declared such militancy illegal and unworthy of holy men and scholars.<sup>43</sup>

Mande clerics took a very similar line on matters of reform. Mande Muslims, in Arabic sources the Wangara, were known by different names according to the region in which they lived: to the Mande speaking Bambara of the Middle Niger they were Marka, to those of the Upper Niger they were Dyula, and Yarse to the Mole-Dogbane people of the Upper Black Volta region.<sup>44</sup>

Mande Islam was characterised by tolerance and lack of fanaticism and this is not at all surprising given their minority status among 'pagan' agriculturalists and given the initial hostility which they encountered as they attempted to build up their commercial activities. As Willis has stated with reference to the Mande/Dyula in Kong and the adjacent regions:

'They were compelled to pay out large sums for the privilege of trading with their neighbours. Commercial transactions were at first unprofitable as a goodly percentage of their revenue went to disarm those who would gladly have pillaged their goods had they not been assuaged with monetary offerings.'<sup>45</sup>

41 Ibid., p. 136.

42 Norris, *The Tuaregs*, op. cit., p. 22.

43 Ibid., p. 118.

44 J.R. Willis, 'Reflections on the Diffusion of Islam in West Africa', in Willis (ed.), *Studies in West African Islamic History*, Frank Cass: London op. cit., pp. 13-21.

45 Ibid., p. 19.

Elsewhere in order not to appear outwardly different from the local pagan peoples they adopted the custom of scarification, marking themselves on the cheeks and abdomen. These, it may be noted, are some of the historical and ethnic roots of Muslim Mande syncretism. There was also an important economic component to their syncretism. To be successful as traders Mande Muslims had to insert their kinsfolk into the local areas slowly and with great caution, and thereby build up a reliable system of personal relationships as the principal means for the expansion of their commercial activities, and this they did with remarkable success over time.

However, the establishment of such a trading network did not do away with the need for protection, and even if there had been no need of protection the warrior class would have forced it upon them. Mande Muslims tended to live in communities under imams who had full authority over spiritual matters, while secular matters were in the hands of their non-Muslim custodians, warriors by profession, and it was they who decided who could and who could not engage in trade and commerce.

The relationship, however, was an uneasy one, the warrior as protector despising the beliefs, practices and intellectual pursuits of the Muslim cleric and at times harassing their wives and families and plundering their goods. The Mande clerisy, nevertheless, rarely if ever abandoned their quietistic tradition which probably had its origins in the opinions of al-Hajj Salim Suwari whose ideas and attitudes to militancy have just been outlined when considering Jakhanke pacifism.<sup>46</sup> Although, for reasons mentioned previously, military conflict was hardly an option open to them, Mande and Jakhanke Muslims, the West African Muslim counterparts to the Quakers seem, nevertheless, to have been in principle opposed to war, and even went so far as to claim that all just people, including animists, could be saved providing they led exemplary lives, maintaining that after their death these animists would enter a kind of purgatory from which they would eventually emerge as Muslims.<sup>47</sup>

As already indicated, not all Muslim scholars advocated the peaceful path of reform, the Torodbe clerisy being the most consistent proponents, among the clerical classes discussed, of jihad of the sword. Beginning with Nasr al-Din's jihad (1673-74) in what is today southern Mauritania and the northern Senegambia, the Torodbe were the inspiration behind a series of interrelated militant Islamic revivalist movements, almost all of them with a pronounced millenarian dimension.<sup>48</sup>

An idea of the content of the preaching of these reformers can be had from a contemporary account of the activities of Nasr al-Din. This young charismatic figure - he was about thirty years old at the time - went from village to village, with shaven head and clothes discarded, announcing to the people that he had been sent by God to reform Islam. He also promised them that God would bring to an end the evil practices of existing rulers which included killing, pillaging and enslaving their subjects and that the latter would be spared such arduous tasks as planting grain. The people responded,

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46 Sanneh, *The Jakhanke*, op. cit.

47 I. Person, 'Samori and Islam', in Willis (ed.) *Studies in West African Islamic History*, London: Frank Cass, op. cit., pp. 259-78.

48 P. Curtin, 'Jihad in West Africa: Early Phases and Interrelations in Mauritania and Senegal', in *Journal of African History*, (henceforth J.A.H.) XII, 1971, pp. 11-24.

according to a contemporary observer, by willingly laying down their tools to follow him.<sup>49</sup>

It was the duty of the king, Nasr al-Din insisted, to serve and protect their subjects. Moreover, he and his missionaries criticised rulers for not performing the canonical prayer regularly and correctly, for not limiting the number of their wives to four, and for associating with jugglers, musicians and others of dubious character. Furthermore, throughout his proselytising campaigns Nasr al-Din emphasised that the End of Time was close at hand and that the Mahdi would soon appear to rid the world of injustice and oppression and ensure the triumph of Islam.<sup>50</sup>

This movement, although short lived, inspired other Torodbe led holy wars which in the final analysis were as much about self-esteem, the overthrow of tyrannical rulers and control of the land as the reform of Islam. One such movement resulted in the creation of the Imamate of Bundu in the Senegambia in the late seventeenth century which was to survive for some two hundred years. Another jihad in Futa Jalon, likewise in the Senegambia, in the first half of the eighteenth century, also seems to have been motivated by the same concerns of identity and social integration. In the words of one authority, these rootless masses of the northern Senegambia led by their clerics:

‘Thrust on by religious impulse... extricated themselves from a solitary minority position and emerged the dominant group in several societies in the Western Sudan’.<sup>51</sup>

Islam undoubtedly served as a spring-board and refuge for these despised persons, who were dismissed by the wider society as ‘liars, cheats and beggars’, and as fit for nothing but a life of slavery.<sup>52</sup> The Torodbe, who had no other means of expressing their needs and aspirations save through Islam, sought to change the public image of themselves and their followers as low caste beggars and slaves. This they did by, on the one hand, immersing themselves in that important craft, the Islamic sciences, a craft that, as we have seen, gave prestige and power, and one that also entailed the abandonment of the nomadic way of life for a sedentary life in the towns, and on the other by shunning what were considered by high society in Futa Toro to be menial occupations such as fishing, tanning and blacksmithing.

Thus, a formerly rootless people originally from the lowest strata of society and with no other common bond than their faith and the desire for their own homeland, clearly achieved quite remarkable results not only for Islam in the Western Sudan, providing as they did the inspiration behind virtually all the militant Islamic uprisings in the Senegambia in the period under review, but also for themselves. They acquired status and prestige as the leaders of the newly created Muslim societies. Yet, ironically, and as so often happens, as they achieved power and came in practice if not in theory to control the land, the Torodbe, in turn, conducted themselves as tyrants enslaving their subjects

49 L. Moreau de Chambonneau, ‘L’Histoire de Toubenan, ou Changement de Royes, et Reforme de Religion des Negres du Senegal Coste d’Afrique depuis 1673 qui est son origine jusqu’en 1677’, in C.I.A. Ritchie, ‘Deux Textes sur Le Senegal (1673-77)’, *Bulletin de l’Institut fondamental d’Afrique Noire*, (henceforth: B.I.F.A.N) ser. B, no.I, 1963, pp. 289-353.

50 Ibid.

51 Willis, ‘Some Reflections on the Diffusion of Islam in West Africa’, in Willis (ed.), *Studies in West African Islamic History*, op. cit., p. 21.

52 Ibid.

and generally displaying an arrogance towards non-Torodbe which generated strong opposition, sometimes in the form of counter-jihads.

For most of the period under review here the Muslim cleric in the West African setting was, to borrow Ibn Khaldun's words on what he believed the role of the Muslim cleric, a councillor, a conciliator, a peacemaker, not a politician.<sup>53</sup> However, by the end of the eighteenth century in certain Muslim communities, as already noted, this image of the cleric was no longer the rule as more became increasingly militant in their attitude toward lax Muslim rulers and lands in which Muslims lived under non-Muslim rule.

An important demographic change in this period which not only affected the social character of Islam but also assisted the growth of a more militant Muslim clerical class and is, therefore, deserving of note here. This change consisted of the movement of Islam, very largely until then an urban phenomenon, to the rural areas. As an urban phenomenon Islam had little concern for the lot of the peasants and the pastoralist and those in occupational crafts, or for those whom Iliffe terms the 'very poor' or 'destitute', the majority of whom were found in the rural areas.<sup>54</sup>

However, as Islam moved with the expansion of trade and commerce into the countryside during the period under review and began to appeal to the peasantry and pastoralist whose lot, as we shall see, was often an extremely difficult one, the Muslim cleric was obliged both to articulate the many grievances of these people and to emphasise the social message of Islam, if he was to gain their allegiance and support. Thus, the leader of the jihad in Hausaland, Uthman b. Fudi blamed the Hausa rulers for:

'taking the people's beast of burden without their permission'.<sup>55</sup>

Further north the jihadist Shehu Ahmadu Lobbo, less well educated than Uthman b. Fudi but deeply attached to Fulani pastoralist values, made his stand against the government of Masina in the province of Sebera, in the middle Niger region, which had the highest proportion of castes and slaves in the kingdom.<sup>56</sup> By the early nineteenth century when the Sokoto jihad in northern Nigeria was launched, the countryside had become the home of opposition to government so much so that during the period under review not a single Muslim reformer came from an urban and/or highly commercial centre or capital city under a strong ruler, nor did they have any firm attachments to urban political or commercial interest groups, relying as they did for their support almost entirely on the rural areas which they mobilised against the central government.<sup>57</sup>

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53 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqadimmah*, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 459-60.

54 J. Iliffe, *The African Poor: A History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

55 M. Hiskett, *Kitab al-farq: A Work on the Habe Kingdoms Attributed to Uthman dan Fodio*, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies (BSOAS), XIX, 1957.

56 W.A. Brown, 'The Caliphate of Hamdullahi ca. 1818-1864,' Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1969.

57 N. Levzion, 'Rural Islamic Scholarship in West Africa', (Paper presented at Northwestern University on: The Role of the Ulama in West African Islam, March, 1984).

## The nineteenth century and millenarian fervour

The nineteenth century saw millenarianism become, in the words of one scholar of the period, 'the single most important theme in popular Muslim thought in West Africa'.<sup>58</sup>

The nineteenth century largely overlapped with the thirteenth Muslim century which, as already stated, began in 1785 and ended in 1882 and proved to be a century of intense ferment not only in Nigeria and West Africa but in many parts of the Muslim world, a ferment generated in part by Napoleon's attack on Egypt (1798). This attack was followed by the Wahhabi take-over in the Hijaz in 1803 and the birth of numerous new, more populist Sufi brotherhoods including the Tijaniyya in Algeria which had a direct influence on millenarian developments in Western Africa and Nigeria.<sup>59</sup>

During the first decade of the nineteenth century Nigeria witnessed what many would consider to have been one of the most thorough-going examples of jihads in the history of Islam in West Africa.<sup>60</sup> Mahdism was a prominent theme in this jihad (1804-08) waged by Shaykh Uthman b. Fudi (1754-1817), and was also present, although to a lesser extent, in the jihad in Masina in the Middle Niger region in the 1820's, led by the above mentioned Ahmadu Lobbo, and in the long drawn out holy war (1852-64) in the middle and upper reaches of the same river carried on by Al-Hajj Umar al-Futi (1794-1864).<sup>61</sup>

Many of Uthman's writings bear the imprint of al-Maghili the militant reformer and millennialist. In his treatise, *Kitab al-farq*, on the differences between a Muslim government and a government of 'unbelievers' Uthman b. Fudi, in a manner reminiscent of al-Maghili, lists the failings of the non-Muslim rulers of Hausaland whom he accuses of taking bribes, of failing to observe the shari'a, of imposing uncanonical taxes and of compelling Muslims to serve in non-Muslim armies.<sup>62</sup> In his *Ta'lim al-ikhwan* he condemns as unlawful such practices of the Hausa as divination by sand, by the stars or by spirits, and the veneration of trees and rocks on which libations are poured or sacrifices performed.<sup>63</sup> And in his jihad manifesto, the *Wathiqat ahl al-Sudan*, Uthman echoes al-Maghili once more when instructing his followers that it is obligatory for a Muslim to take over the government of a land where the ruler, a Muslim, abandons Islam for what Uthman calls 'heathendom'.<sup>64</sup>

Again on the question of the Renewer or Mujaddid he cites al-Maghili in his *Siraj al-ikhwan* (1811):

58 D.M. Last, 'Foreword' in *Research Bulletin of the Centre of Arabic Documentation* (henceforth: RBCAD), University of Ibadan, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1967, p. 1.

59 M. Hiskett, *The Development of Islam in West Africa*, London: Longman, 1984, chapter 15 and passim.

60 D.M. Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, London: Longman, 1967.

61 On Mahdism in the Sokoto Jihad see: Al-Hajj, 'The Thirteenth Century in Muslim Eschatology', in RBCAD, Ibadan University, op. cit., pp. 100-116. On the mahdist content of Al-Hajj Umar al-Futi's jihad see: Willis, *In the Path of Allah: The Passion of Al-Hajj Umar*, op. cit., pp. 147 ff. and D. Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal: The Western Sudan in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1985, p. 216 and passim.

62 Cf.: P.B. Clarke *West Africa and Islam*, London: Edward Arnold, 1982, pp. 114-115.

63 Ibid.

64 A.D.H. Bivar, 'The Wathiqat Ahl al-Sudan: A Manifesto of the Fulani Jihad', in *JAH*, II, 1961.

‘And accordingly it is related that at the beginning of every century God will send a learned man to the people to renew their faith, and the characteristics of this learned man in every century must be that he commands what is right and forbids what is disapproved of, and reforms the affairs of the people and judges justly between them, and assists the oppressed against the oppressor.’<sup>65</sup>

This work also contains lengthy quotations from al-Maghili's *Replies*, previously referred to, on the unjust sultan who levies uncanonical taxes, and on the Hausa propensity to ‘mix’ Islam and paganism.

However, while clear and decisive in his mind about what should be done about such evils as ‘mixing’ and related matters Uthman b. Fudi was highly ambivalent about Mahdism. He was clearly a believer in the imminent appearance of the Mahdi prior to launching his jihad in 1804. According to one authority the Shaykh constantly preached to his followers on such subjects as the nearness of death, the torments of hellfire that lay in store for the wrongdoer and the need consequently for repentance, and the rewards of paradise for those who followed the prophet's way. However, while such preaching won the hearts and minds of his listeners, what in Hiskett's view ultimately gained him a following was:

‘... his constant assurance that the Mahdi was coming and his pointing out the signs of the approaching End of Time.’<sup>66</sup>

Uthman's enthusiasm for the mahdist cause apparently knew no bounds before and during the jihad for:

‘In the books written (by Uthman) before 1808... traditions about the approaching End of Time were copiously quoted without any attempt to distinguish between the authentic and the spurious.’<sup>67</sup>

And the following passage shows that he had even come to regard himself as the Mahdi figure:

‘Know that I have also been given the attributes of the Mahdi... He is appointed to office at a time of upheaval, truly during it did I obtain office. When injustice has become excessive, he is made to appear; indeed I have also appeared at a time of tyranny. He is made to appear during religious degeneration; at such a time have I appeared...’<sup>68</sup>

However, Shaykh Uthman b. Fudi wrote and spoke less and less about the idea after the main battles of his holy war had been fought and won. He even went so far as to confess that he had been mistaken in believing that the End of Time was nigh and the Mahdi was about to appear, telling his listeners:

‘What we used to mention again and again during the gatherings for preaching that the time for the appearance of the Mahdi had come, was based on the assumption of

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65 Citation from: M. Hiskett, ‘An Islamic Tradition of Reform in the Western Sudan from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century’, *BSOAS*, 25, 1962, pp. 577-96.

66 Hiskett, *The Development of Islam in West Africa*, op. cit., p. 162.

67 Al-Hajj, *The Thirteenth Century in Muslim Eschatology*, op. cit., p. 109.

68 F.H. El Masri and R. Adeleye, ‘Sifofin Shehu: An Autobiography and Character Study of Uthman b. Fudi in Verse’ *RBCAD*, (Ibadan University) Vol. 2, No. 1, 1966, pp. 1-37; p. 31.

al-Suyuti. But after investigation we admit that we do not know the time with any certainty.'<sup>69</sup>

He also explicitly rejected the claim made by some of his followers that he himself was the Mahdi when on one occasion he began his address to them with the following words:

'Know my brethren that I am not the Mahdi even though that is heard from the tongues of other people.'<sup>70</sup>

He then spelled out for them the characteristics that the Mahdi must possess: he must be a descendent of Fatima, be born in Medina, bear the prophet Muhammad's name and his father, the name of prophet Muhammad's father.

Despite Shaykh Uthman's attempts to put an end to speculation about the coming of the Mahdi the belief persisted among his followers. His son and successor as Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammad Bello, told his subjects that his father had told him that the community would:

'emigrate to these regions (the East) to meet the Mahdi and pay him homage'.<sup>71</sup>

Muhammad Bello went so far as to send troops to the eastern Sudan, to Dar Fur and Wadai, to see if there was any news about the 'expected Mahdi'.<sup>72</sup> Besides, there were several attempts to establish mahdist states in northern Nigeria itself in the last quarter of the nineteenth century many of them inspired by the advent of Muhammad Ahmad b. Abdullah of the Turko-Egyptian Sudan who proclaimed himself the Mahdi in 1881 and established what was perhaps the most thoroughgoing mahdist state in the history of Islam.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, there can be little doubt about the strength and persistence of the mahdist belief in Nigerian and West African Islam in the nineteenth century and once again the main carrier of the idea was the Muslim scholar who almost always belonged to a Sufi order and operated from a rural base.

### Colonial rule and Islamic millenarianism in Nigeria

The incidence of Mahdism and the threat it posed during colonial rule in former British and French West Africa has possibly been exaggerated. In former British West Africa, for example, the colonial regime was never faced with a mahdist threat as serious as that presented to the colonial regime in eastern Africa by Muhammad Abdallah Hassan, the 'Mullah of Somaliland', more popularly known as the 'Mad Mullah', who led a jihad for some twenty years against 'Christian' colonisation.<sup>74</sup>

However, chastened by their experience in the Sudan, British colonial administrators in northern Nigeria, and in particular those in the more distant parts of the north-eastern and north-western regions of the country, tended to see all Muslim opposition as inspired

69 Ibid., p. 111.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid., p. 112.

72 Ibid., p. 111.

73 J.E. Lavers, 'Jibril Gaini: A Preliminary Account of the Career of a Mahdist Leader in North Eastern Nigeria', *RBCAD*, University of Ibadan, vol 3, No. 1, 1967, pp. 16-40.

74 I.M. Lewis (ed.), *Islam in Tropical Africa*, London: Hutchinson, 1980, p. 78.



by mahdist elements and Mahdism itself as the natural expression of anti-colonialism. Likewise the French who encountered numerous Islamic resistance movements led by charismatic Muslim leaders including the above mentioned al-Hajj Umar al-Futi were inclined to see the hand of a mahdism wherever there was militant opposition to their rule.<sup>75</sup>

This over-reaction to Mahdism notwithstanding, the early years of colonial rule in northern Nigeria witnessed numerous mahdist uprisings, some spontaneous and very transitory, and others well organised and difficult to suppress. Two of the better organised mahdist uprisings were at Bormi (1903) on the banks of the river Gongola in north-eastern Nigeria and Satiru (1906), twelve miles to the south of Sokoto in the north-west.<sup>76</sup> Another centre of mahdist activity was at Dumbulwa near the town of Fika, also in the north-east of the country.

The Dumbulwa mahdist community under the leadership of Shaykh Sa'id b. Hayatu, of the Toronkawa clan of the Fulani, grew rapidly in the space of three years from no more than a handful of rural Fulani in 1919 to over three thousand by 1923, the year in which the British arrested the Shaykh and deported him to the Cameroon. Shaykh Sa'id was officially released from detention in 1959 and settled in Kano, the headquarters of Nigerian Mahdism.<sup>77</sup>

Despite exile and opposition from the Muslim establishment Shaykh Sa'id remained convinced that the Mahdi had come in the person of the Mahdi of the Sudan and wrote to this effect in 1957:

'The idea of the Mahdi is well known in Islam all over the world... Shaykh Uthman (leader of the Sokoto jihad) confirmed on an authentic chain of authority that there would be no other authentic reformer from him until the time of the Mahdi... Muhammad Bello (son of Uthman b. Fudi) said at the battle of Yandoto 'I will tell you what the Shehu has been telling me about the nearness of the period in which the Mahdi will appear'. When they heard this they were delighted and put much more effort into the battle, morally and financially... Muhammad Bello said in his book... that the Mahdi would appear fifty seven years after the death of Uthman. The Shaykh died in 1232 (A.H.). Therefore the Mahdi appeared in 1280... The Shaykh said that allegiance to the Mahdi was necessary...'<sup>78</sup>

These uprisings, those over the border in Niger against the French, the fear of the post World War I pan-Islamic movement and the rapid growth of the Dumbulwa mahdist community, prompted the colonial administration in Nigeria to undertake an in-depth

<sup>75</sup> Clarke, *West Africa and Islam*, op. cit., pp. 202 ff.

<sup>76</sup> R.A. Adeleye, *Power and Diplomacy in Northern Nigeria (1804-1906)*, London: Longman, 1971. Also: A.G. Saeed, 'British Fears over Mahdism in Northern Nigeria: A Look at Bormi 1903, Satiru 1906, and Dumbulwa 1923.' (A paper presented at the School of Oriental and African Studies to a seminar on Islam in Africa, 21st October, 1986).

<sup>77</sup> Saeed, 'British Fears over Mahdism...', op. cit. Also: G.F. Tomlinson and G. J. Lethem, *A History of Islamic Propaganda in Nigeria*, London: Waterlow, 1927, Vols. 1&2.

<sup>78</sup> Citation from: J. Paden, *Religion and Political Culture in Kano*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, pp. 177-8.

study of Mahdism in the region. The investigation reached the conclusion that mahdism was 'a political problem of the first importance'.<sup>79</sup>

Mahdist inspired revolts continued well into the 1920's. Commenting on mahdist uprisings Tomlinson and Lethem, the two senior officers appointed to investigate the force and scope of Mahdism in Nigeria, stated:

'These outbreaks of religious fanaticism... are due to the influence of the Sokoto jihad and Burmi Mahdism... they are strikingly critical of the European government and there appears to be a strong desire to oust the Europeans'.<sup>80</sup>

It was not only colonialism as a negative political and cultural phenomenon that was to act as a catalyst for Mahdism but also the opportunities, and the improvements that it brought with it in, for example, communications; the railways linking southern and northern Nigeria, Chad and the Sudan enabled more Muslims from Nigeria and West Africa as a whole to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. In this way Mahdists from many different regions could exchange ideas and spread their message more widely. It was estimated that some 80,000 West African Muslims were to be found in the Sudan at any one time, all on the road to Mecca, a long road that could take as much as ten years to travel before the hajj was completed. Another 10,000 or so were scattered about Egypt, the Hijaz and elsewhere.<sup>81</sup>

Some of these pilgrims stayed for a time in mahdist villages and we have some idea of their socio-economic background, what they discussed and the type of information and literature which they brought back with them. A frequent topic of conversation was the deplorable state of Islam, the treachery of those Muslim rulers who had collaborated with the Christian infidel, the colonial administration. And the view was widespread that in order to defeat imperialism Islam would first have to be reformed.

The anti-colonial, anti-Muslim establishment themes are even stronger in the mahdist literature. A mahdist poem in circulation in Northern Nigeria in the 1920's violently condemned the existing Muslim establishment, the foreigner and modern ways. However, all would be put right by the Renewer of Islam.<sup>82</sup>

As we have seen, the British administration attempted to curtail the influence of Mahdism in Nigeria by deporting its leading exponent, Sa'id b. Hayatu, to the Cameroon in 1923 and although less frequent from this time onwards mahdist uprisings, nevertheless, continued. Moreover, the old Muslim city of Kano became a refuge for Mahdists from all over northern Nigeria and for those hounded out of bordering states under French administration.

Mahdist ideas, however, did not respect colonial boundaries; Mahdists in Nigeria gave support to those in Niger and even as far afield as Morocco and the Hijaz and the converse was also the case. And with the increasing influence of the Wahhabi and Reformed Tijani movements in West Africa, Mahdists, wherever they were to be found,

79 Tomlinson and Lethem, *A History of Islamic Propaganda in Nigeria*, op. cit., p. 25.

80 Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 55.

81 Ibid.

82 The poem referred to is 'Waken Karohen Duniya' (Song of the End of the World). There is a copy in my possession.

intensified their appeal for the destruction of the Antichrist, the colonial regime, and its alleged ally the traditional Muslim hierarchy.

The economic depression of the 1930s, the growing influence of the Reformed Tijaniyya - there was a tradition that the Mahdi would emerge from the Tijaniyya<sup>83</sup> - Wahhabi radicalism, what was perceived by many Muslims as the humiliation of their emirs, who passively accepted their dethronement by colonial administrators, and World War II, all did much to keep the appeal of Mahdism alive. And for some, the advent of the Mahdi was close at hand. A Nigerian Mahdist from Kano wrote in 1941:

'There is clear evidence indicating the imminent appearance of the Mahdi. Among the proofs is the coming of the Europeans to Hausaland. Emirs have no powers but they go to Kaduna (colonial headquarters for Northern Nigeria)... the Mahdi will come very soon... Emirs go to Kaduna like sheep'.<sup>84</sup>

### **The social constituency of Islamic millenarianism.**

Mahdism has very often been linked to oppression. As Macdonald expressed it:

'The more the Muslim masses have felt themselves oppressed and humiliated either by their own rulers or by non-Muslims, the more fervent has been their longing for this ultimate restorer of the true Islam and conqueror of the whole world for Islam. And as the need for a Mahdi has been felt, the Mahdi has always appeared and Islam has risen, sword in hand, under their banner'.<sup>85</sup>

As already noted, both al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun stressed the popular character of this belief. The 'stupid' masses, Ibn Khaldun informed his readers, make claims about the Mahdi, 'unguided by any intelligence or helped by any knowledge' and assume that he will appear in a variety of circumstances and places, mostly in remote areas out of the reach of ruling dynasties and outside their authority. Moreover, according to Ibn Khaldun the 'unenlightened' masses took their belief in the advent of the Mahdi extremely seriously even to the point of dying for it:

'Many weak minded people go to these places to support a deceptive cause that the human soul in its delusion and stupidity leads them to believe capable of succeeding. Many of them have been killed'.<sup>86</sup>

Thus, Ibn Khaldun in particular leaves little doubt that these chiliastic ideas appealed above all to the educationally disadvantaged, and the poor, who were more often than not the same people. But can we be more precise about the social constituency of Islamic millenarianism in West Africa and in particular in Nigeria?

The leadership of mahdist and renewal movements were in the main individuals who at one and the same time were other worldly Sufis, scholars of varying educational achievement, and frustrated tribesmen. Few were politicians or successful business people, and almost all either lived at some distance from the main centres of power and

83 Paden, *Religion and Political Culture in Kano*, op. cit., p. 173.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 172.

85 Macdonald, 'Al-Mahdi' in *SEI*, (eds.) Gibb and Kramers, op. cit., p. 313.

86 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqadimmah*, op. cit., Vol.II, chap. 3, pp. 196-97.

influence, or withdrew to rural enclaves, sometimes as a sign of their distaste for or opposition to the existing political authorities.

Moreover, what is known about their personal life style suggests that they lived very modestly, and even in some cases in poverty. According to tradition Uthman b. Fudi, the Hausa reformer, possessed but one pair of trousers and one cap, and made a living from rope-making, a poor man's occupation.<sup>87</sup> Modest living could be a valuable asset to any would be reformer, especially for one who enjoyed a high reputation for learning.

However, not all Muslim scholars were poor; some had even amassed considerable wealth.<sup>88</sup> And paradoxically while the possession of great wealth by scholars ran counter to the ideal way of life of the Muslim cleric, and especially one who was also a mystic, its loss may well have been one of the principal underlying causes of the nineteenth century jihads or holy wars mentioned above. Writing of the scholars of Timbuktu in this connection Saad suggests that:

‘... an erosion of the status of the scholar there, along with a decline in the mercantile interests of their class, may lie at the background of the nineteenth century jihads’.<sup>89</sup>

The following acquired by reformers was made up in large measure by Muslim students who lived in the main by begging. Shaykh Ahmadu Lobbo the leader of the reform movement in Masina was surrounded by such student ‘undesirables.’<sup>90</sup> Of course, beggars were not necessarily among the very poor and/ or destitute; for the most part the category of the ‘very poor’, it will be shown below, was comprised of the physically incapacitated and those without family and/or institutional support in times of extreme hardship or need such as famine. Otherwise the vast majority of people were poor making it somewhat meaningless to conclude that millenarians came from their ranks. This notwithstanding, recent historical research by Iliffe, among others, on the poor in Africa not only makes a useful distinction between different types of poor and different types of poverty in Africa but also highlights the lack in many societies of institutions and networks to assist the poor, and where these were seriously lacking millenarianism tended to thrive.

Iliffe distinguishes between the ordinary poor and the very poor and/or destitute. The former he defines as those who are obliged to strive continuously to preserve themselves and their dependants from physical want. The destitute are those who despite their struggle have fallen into physical want and indeed are never free from it. Usually they are, as previously noted, seriously incapacitated in one form or another or victims of political or climatic insecurity or those experiencing poverty and who for various reasons either could not benefit from the largess of the wealthy or lacked the support of a family or community.<sup>91</sup>

87 Iliffe, *The African Poor*, op. cit., p. 46.

88 E. Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslims and Notables (1400-1900)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

89 Ibid., p. 229.

90 A. Hampate Ba and J. Daget, *L'Empire Peul de Macina*, Vol. 1 (1818-1853), Paris: Mouton and Co., 1962, pp. 55-56.

91 Iliffe, *The African Poor*, op. cit., pp. 48 ff.

As to the kinds of poverty that existed and exist to this day in Africa, Iliffe, basing himself on Gutton, makes a distinction between structural and what he terms conjunctural poverty.<sup>92</sup> Structural poverty is long term and due to an individual's circumstances such as serious disablement or lack of access to labour, while conjunctural poverty is that poverty which affects ordinarily self-sufficient people, is temporary and is brought on by some crisis or other.<sup>93</sup>

Wherever one looks from the Senegal flood-plain in the north of West Africa southward to Hausaland or eastward across the Sahel there were large numbers of very poor, the majority in the pastoral, rural communities, and some of them suffered from structural poverty, incapacitated as they were by leprosy or blindness or some other serious physical handicap or illness. There was also destitution among the able bodied - the hunters, herders, cultivators and labourers - many of whom were slaves whose lives clearly were extremely insecure in a society where demand for labour was high.

Famine accounted for much of the 'conjunctural poverty' and was not infrequent in Senegal and elsewhere in West Africa from the 1680s through to the nineteenth century and beyond, and that major famines occurred at the height of the nineteenth century Islamic reform movement (1790-1830), is clearly relevant to any explanation of the rise and persistence of mahdist movements then. However, although the effects of famine on the moral as on every other aspect of peoples' lives should not be minimised, one cannot safely posit a direct causal link between famine and the militant struggle for the transformation of society in every instance for, as already noted, it was sometimes this militancy that gave rise to famine, and indeed to a host of other evils from cattle epidemics, to plague to insecurity, enslavement and physical handicap.

While, then, the degree of poverty was uneven from one West African society to another it existed in some measure everywhere. In Hausaland which was by no means the worst affected area there were pockets of extreme poverty and little in the way of measures to alleviate it. The reason for this indigence varied from banditry, to slave raiding, to political insecurity, to such disasters as cattle epidemics, drought and famine. Naturally, those most adversely affected took whatever precautions they could against misfortune and deprivation from rain making rites, to methods of energy preservation, to selling themselves into slavery, to migration to what appeared to be the better protected urban areas.

But generally, as we have seen, safety nets for the very poor were virtually non-existent even in the towns; to be very poor and/or destitute was for the most part synonymous with being without support. The family was not always the strong support that is often imagined, yet along with the system of zakat or almsgiving, where implemented, and individual generosity, it was the only real protection available.<sup>94</sup>

Moreover, as the reformer Uthman b. Fudi protested, even in relatively wealthy Hausaland, the better off often proved ungenerous to the poor. Indeed, Uthman b. Fudi was convinced that the 'evil situation' that was to prefigure the advent of the Mahdi in which 'men will beg from the rich in vain' had arrived.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, governments far

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92 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

93 *Ibid.*, pp. 4 ff.

94 *Ibid.*

95 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

from collecting and distributing zakat in accordance with shari'a (canon law), imposed instead extra uncanonical tax on its subjects. This exploitation ensured the support of the common people not only for Uthman b. Fudi in the early nineteenth century but also for reform and mahdist movements before and since.<sup>96</sup> Writing of the appeal of mahdist leaders in north-eastern Nigeria and the northern Cameroon in this century Lacroix noted that:

'... all essentially found their Fulbe adepts among the common people and tributary populations. All, too, put in the first rank of the 'Enemies of God' the 'Bad Chiefs' and the 'doctors' devoted to them and denounced not only the heresies of which they accused them, but also their rapacity and the abuses it led to, thus externalising the conflicts latent in the society'.<sup>97</sup>

A category which, although not destitute, was, nonetheless, sufficiently marginal, detached and free to constitute an additional source of recruitment for any would be prophet or Mahdi were the beggars, of whom there were vast numbers dispersed throughout the region. Many of these beggars, as previously pointed out, were students and came from societies in which 'youthful violence was expected and institutionalised'.<sup>98</sup> These rootless, educated young people, were potentially the most radical social group in pre-colonial West Africa and it is not surprising to find that they were among the followers of the leaders of the jihads.<sup>99</sup>

Where the society was highly stratified, and such societies were not uncommon, it was not only the poverty that hurt but also the social deprivation experienced as a result of being poor. As Iliffe expresses it:

'Savanna Muslims viewed poverty with much ambivalence. Their traditions stress the values of wealth and generosity... At their best, these traditions evoked the largess of the rich and the hospitality of the common people... At their worst, the same traditions bred contempt for poverty, both in others, expressed sometimes in mockery of the handicapped, and in oneself, for the shame of poverty could lead men (but apparently not women) to suicide... Savanna Muslims lived too close to poverty to idealise it. 'Beg from a beggar and you will see the blackest miserliness', said a Hausa proverb. 'Poverty you hate and are hated for it', added the Fulani.'<sup>100</sup>

Iliffe not only maintains that there was much contempt for slaves and victims of poverty generally in Hausaland and elsewhere but also that considerations of status were important even to the reformers and mahdist leaders; Muhammad Bello of the Sokoto Caliphate included slave origin among the disgraces of which the Hausa rulers that he overthrew were guilty.<sup>101</sup> The castes, blacksmiths, butchers, cattle traders and griots or praise singers, fared little better. The latter were attacked by Uthman b. Fudi, the leader

96 Clarke, *West Africa and Islam*, op. cit., pp. 114-115.

97 P.F. Lacroix, 'Islam among the Fulbe of Adamawa', in I.M. Lewis (ed) *Islam in Tropical Africa*, op. cit., p. 211.

98 Ibid., p. 32.

99 Ibid., p. 32.

100 Ibid., p. 46.

101 L.G. Colvin, *West African Ulama as Revolutionaries*, p. 6 (Paper presented to the International Conference on the Political Role of the Ulama in West Africa Islam, Northwestern University, 1984).

of the Sokoto jihad, as '*gens de plaisir*' and were widely known as those 'towards whom every insult is permitted'.<sup>102</sup>

In Western Africa, then, raw, naked, 'lonely' destitution and sickness were integral to the millenarian milieu, as they were in the Sudan.<sup>103</sup> And scholarly analysis of the causes of the most recent outbreak in the early 1980's of militant millenarian fervour in northern Nigeria in the form of the Maitatsine riots in which an estimated six thousand people lost their life indicates that for the 'very poor' little has changed.<sup>104</sup> Once again the mainstay of this mahdist movement were the displaced and marginalized, those in the classic occupations taken up by the 'floating labour pool' - street vendors, water carriers and so on all of whom were among the 'lonely poor' who lacked the welfare institutions to enable them to escape from destitution.

Members of the Maitatsine movement were experiencing much greater difficulties in obtaining employment and shelter as the oil boom of the late 1960's and early 1970's in Nigeria collapsed leaving the wealthier section of the population which traditionally employed and housed the less fortunate without the means to retain their services. Moreover, traditional places of shelter such as in the porticoes of the grand dwellings of the rich were no longer an option for the poor as the mounting crime wave led the former to install high walls and fences and ever greater security precautions to protect their property. In this and other ways the little that existed in the form of a protection against dire poverty was removed.<sup>105</sup>

Thus, the appeal of and the social constituency of Mahdism in pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial West Africa and Nigeria were in large measure determined by the following interrelated variables: the existence of a disaffected clerical class outside of and antagonistic to governments that were seen to exploit and oppress the masses, a pool of students and young people who were expected to be militant, and sizeable numbers of very poor who for the most part possessed no representative institutions or channels by means of which they could express their grievances or obtain redress. We will now consider what such people hoped to gain by supporting Mahdis and Renewers and, of equal importance for an understanding of millenarianism, what the latter sought from them.

### **Aims and achievements of Islamic millenarianism**

What struck Ibn Khaldun most of all about Mahdism was its capacity to unify and restore 'asabiyya' or group feeling. He wrote of how the family of the prophet Muhammad had lost its authority and power in a situation and at a time when:

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<sup>102</sup> Iliffe, *The African Poor*, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>103</sup> L. Kapteijns, 'Popular Islam and Popular Revolt in the Western Sudan', (Paper presented to the symposium on Popular Islam in Twentieth-Century Africa, University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign, April, 1984).

<sup>104</sup> On the Maitatsine uprisings see: A. Christelow, 'The Yan Tatsine Disturbances in Kano - A Search for Perspective', in *The Muslim World*, Vol. LXXV, No. 2, 1985, pp. 69 ff. Also: P. Lubeck, 'Islamic Protest under Semi-Industrial Capital: Yan Tatsini Explained', (Paper presented at the symposium on Popular Islam In Twentieth-Century Africa, University of Illinois at Urbana /Champaign, April 1984).

<sup>105</sup> Lubeck, 'Islamic Protest under Semi-Industrial Capital', op. cit.

'the group feeling of the Quraysh (the clan of Muhammad) has everywhere disappeared'.<sup>106</sup>

Without 'asabiyya', or group feeling, he maintained, no religious or political propaganda could be successful. Commenting on the potential of the mahdist idea to restore a sense of solidarity to the Quraysh he wrote:

'If it is correct that a Mahdi is to appear there is only one way for his propaganda to make its appearance. He must be one of them, and God must unite them in the intention to follow him, until he gathers enough strength and group feeling to gain success for his cause and to move people to support him. Any other way... (for example) by merely relying on the relationship to the family of Muhammad - will not be feasible or successful'.<sup>107</sup>

There is much evidence from Nigeria and West Africa generally to show that the belief in the Mahdi and/or the Renewer was made to serve the same purposes: to galvanise support and to foster 'group feeling' for the purpose of renewing Islam in preparation for the approaching End of Time. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century it was made, as already indicated, to serve Torodbe 'asabiyya', as this collection of once despised peoples struggled to establish its identity as a group. Moreover, although Uthman b. Fudi preached against ethnicity, his reform movement like others of the nineteenth century and previously, in some measure served this same purpose.<sup>108</sup>

In the colonial period Mahdism was often used as a weapon against the infidel and as such tended to draw together Muslims regardless of ethnic background. Al-Hajj Umar al-Futi, mentioned above, waged holy war for the expansion and reform of Islam and against French penetration in Senegal and in the middle and upper Niger regions for almost a decade in the mid-nineteenth century.

He is known to have preached about the Mahdi at a time when the very survival of his jihad was at stake. The occasion was in 1854 when the French laid siege to the Senegalese city of Medine. Not only did he lose two thousand men on this occasion but many of the survivors deserted the jihad causing him to intensify his rhetoric and to make the following Cromwellian like appeal to the remaining followers to stay loyal and await the Mahdi:

'I swear by the highest authority that the army is foreordained by Him who created the seven heavens and the seven earths, and that it cannot be destroyed by infidels or hypocrites or libertines until the coming of the Imam, Muhammad the Mahdi'.<sup>109</sup>

Umar's jihad survived this set back and there was little more to be heard of the Mahdi from his lips or his pen although his lieutenants continued to make use of the notion to enhance his prestige and frighten his opponents into submission. One, Muhammad B. Ahmad b. Aqia, of the previously mentioned Tuareg Kel el-Suq spoke of him as the

106 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqadimmah*, op. cit., Vol. II, chap. 3, p. 196.

107 Ibid.

108 On Fulbe asabiyya see: Colvin, 'West African Ulama as Revolutionaries', op. cit. Also: Willis, 'Reflections on the Diffusion of Islam in West Africa' in Willis, (ed.), *Studies in West African Islamic History*, op. cit., pp. 1-39.

109 Citation from: Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal: The Western Sudan in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, op. cit., p. 216.



Mahdi while another announced that he was one of the Mahdi's three wazirs or ministers and had been entrusted with responsibility for the Maghrib or West.<sup>110</sup>

Al-Hajj Umar is not the only example of a militant Muslim reformer in nineteenth century West Africa to use the Mahdi notion to generate support, foster unity among his followers and fire them with zeal for the cause at hand, the purification and triumph of Islam. The millenarian theme figured prominently, as was shown, in the build up to the Sokoto jihad only to be dampened down after victory seemed assured.

Militant Mahdism, thus, had considerable potential not only as an instrument for fostering unity but also for destabilising an unpopular or rival regime, and this reformers recognised once in power. Reforming regimes did little or nothing in the long term to solve the problems of destitution which gave rise to millenarianism. Slaves who were promised their freedom if they supported the reform movement were indeed often set free, but no effort was made once the holy war had been won to abolish the system of slavery itself.

## Conclusions

Reform movements built around millenarian hopes and expectations achieved much in the way of forging identities, spreading Islam and centralising power but did little to challenge the traditional order. The idea of allowing individuals to step out of what were considered to be their 'natural roles' would have constituted a radical if not revolutionary challenge to the social order, something which the reformers appeared to be able to contemplate in that liminal period prior to the reform itself when all seemed possible, but not in the aftermath of victory when it was time for consolidation.

Thus, slave systems and caste systems remained as did much else that was characteristic of the pre-reform period, including the importance of past Islamic history, the conflict between scholars and rulers and marginal and dominant groups, the lack of formal and adequate provisions to protect the very poor and the sick and in this respect the Nigerian and wider West African mahdist milieu were not notably different from that of Medieval Europe where:

'Revolutionary millenarianism drew its strength from a population living on the margins of society - peasants without land or with too little land even for subsistence; journeymen and unskilled workers living under the continuous threat of unemployment; beggars and vagabonds - in fact from the amorphous mass of people who were not simply poor but who could find no assured and recognised place in society at all.'<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Willis, *In the Path of Allah*, op. cit., pp. 147-8.

<sup>111</sup> N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, London: Paladin, 1970, p. 282.