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THE RESPONSE TO PROPHESY: AN AFRICAN CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The work and life of Muhammad Jumad Imam, a Yoruba prophet and founder of the Mahdiyya movement, is discussed in some detail. Particular attention is given to the questions as to how opponents and followers understood his leadership and charisma using categories and notions developed by Max Weber. The response of the colonial administration, Traditional, Muslim and Christian leaders alike is given as the Mahdi-Messiah set himself up as being relevant all religious communities in Nigeria (in fierce opposition to traditionalists, irenic towards Christians and claiming leadership amongst Muslims). Perspectives from government correspondence, personal letters and interviews give a multifaceted view of the person, his work and influence. The movement stemming from his influence is one of the few influential Muslim millenarian movements in Nigeria and understanding the leadership role of Muhammad Jumad Imam can be important in understanding publicly influential millenarian movements.

Introduction

This is a study of Muhammad Jumat Imam, the self-proclaimed Yoruba prophet and founder of the Mahdiyya movement, which emerged in Ijebuland, south-western Nigeria in January 1942. The movement is unusual in several important respects: in its pacifism - mahdist movements wherever they are found tend to advocate jihad of the sword as the principal means of attaining their goal; to the extent to which it combined the restorative and the retributive ethos; in its ironic attitude toward Christianity, and in its aim, which was essentially the creation of a 'new religion of the spirit' that would transcend religious divisions, in contrast with the usual mahdist preoccupation, the complete restoration of Islam per se.

The principal tenet of the movement expresses this irenic spirit: a true Muslim or Christian is one who knows, meditates upon and gives equal weight and respect to the Bible and the Qur'an and to the prophets Jesus and Muhammad. The Mahdiyya, a revitalisation movement, adapted a number of Christian rites including marriage and encouraged the integration of Islamic and western education to meet the needs of a small but growing number of younger more westernised Muslims.

The crisis of royal legitimacy that followed on the imposition by the British colonial administration of the 'Sole Native Authority' system in 1916 was perhaps the most important immediate cause of Mahdism in Ijebuland. It left this once tightly structured and firmly governed kingdom leaderless and directionless providing the opening for the

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Mahdi-Messiah whose apocalyptic predictions were given added significance by epidemics and wars, and in particular World War II.

The response to the claims and the message of the self-proclaimed Mahdi-Messiah, Muhammad Jumat Imam, varied. The reaction of the colonial administration, always nervous about Mahdism, was hostile as was that of the Muslim, Christian, apart from the Ijebu Aladura, and Traditional leaders. The popular response, although by no means uniform, was much more enthusiastic, especially among Ijebu women. Many of the Mahdi-Messiah's followers were indeed women and they were attracted by what they referred to as his 'good character', while this charismatic leader's male followers were impressed by his claim to be the divinely appointed black prophet and saviour of Africa. But all, even those who rejected his claims, admired this largely self-educated prophet's learning and gift of 'divine knowledge'.

As to the social composition of the Mahdiyya, the movement contained some who were destitute and for whom society made little if any provision. Many followers, furthermore, were people in that unhappy position of being unable, for emotional, psychological, and religious reasons, to belong wholly to the traditional world and yet were ill equipped and without the means to embrace the new order. Ijebu Mahdism was, therefore, a system of support and leadership for those left alone and helpless by poverty. But, it was also an attempt by people living in a new religious, political, economic and social context, and whose traditional cosmology no longer worked as effectively as it once did, to understand and come to grips with the growth of individualism and the waning of community-based morality, with a pluri-confessional society, with the new idioms and new assumptions that colonialism had generated, and to control and harness the double-edged sword of modernisation.

The Mahdiyya splintered on the death of its founder in 1959 over the interrelated questions of inheritance and the right of a woman to be the overall leader of the movement. However, by then it had provided many who lived on the margins of the old and new worlds and would otherwise have been left to digest change in its raw, naked state, with an ideology that enabled them to cope with the transition to modernity.

Not all who claim to be prophets find acceptance; many are dismissed as impostors or charlatans or lunatics and so denied charisma. It is only, as Wilson argues, when claims to supernatural or extraordinary power or grace are given credence by a body of followers, that the one who makes such claims can be said to be, in a sociological sense, charismatic.[1]

Leaders often see themselves in a different light from their followers but even among the latter there can be wide variation in their understanding of and response to their leader. This, as will be shown below, was as true of Muhammad Jumat Imam as it was of other African prophets including one of the most successful and renowned of them all, the Liberian prophet William Wade Harris who, it was noted in the previous chapter, created, in the space of little more than a year (1913-14), a religious revolution in the Ivory Coast.[2]

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1 B.R. Wilson, *The Noble Savages*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975. Cf.: M. Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, (trans. T. Parsons) New York: The Free Press, 1964 pp. 359-60.

2 S.S. Walker, *The Religious Revolution in the Ivory Coast: The Prophet Harris and the Harrist Church,*

Harris certainly understood himself and his mission differently from some of his converts, as did the Mahdi-Messiah. The former, for example, likened the call he received from God to evangelise the southern Ivory Coast to that of the biblical prophets and saw and presented himself as the last of such prophets whose mission it was to preach the powerlessness of 'fetishism' over against the saving grace of Christ. Yet, he was perceived by many of his converts as very much in the mould and as playing the role of the traditional priest, albeit one who had been converted to represent a power superior to that of the indigenous spirits.[3] There are numerous other examples from West and more generally sub-Saharan Africa where prophets saw themselves in one light and cast themselves accordingly in a role to match but were not necessarily always understood in that way by their followers. Alland's analysis of the way in which Western medical practitioners were perceived within the Abon culture of the Ivory Coast illustrates by way of analogy the point being made here with reference to how prophets tend to be perceived by their followers. He states:

> 'No matter what kind of face an actor may wish to present to strangers, the image he projects will be determined in part by the preconceived notions of the audience. These notions will centre around the role system of the host culture. When the new role has an analogue in the host culture, the image formed will be found in this analogue, and the actor will be pegged into a previous existing part.'[4]

There is nothing static about the perception leaders have of themselves and their role or the understanding converts have of their leader. In both instances this can and does change over time, and one tends to interact with and influence the making of the other. Muhammad Jumat Imam enlarged his perception of himself and his role; from setting out to present himself as the God-guided one or Mahdi of the Muslims and the Messiah of the Christians, he developed with time the notion of himself as the black prophet. As to his disciples' changing perception of him, some initially followed him, they explained, because he was an upright man and a good Muslim, and only later came to see him as a true Muslim-Christian prophet, before going on to acknowledge and relate to him primarily as a black prophet, a wonder worker and healer.

Becoming a prophet may not only involve a great deal of listening and learning but also of time spent on building up a reputation either as a miracle worker or healer or in some other capacity. In the African tradition, if we can use the Nuer prophet as presented by Evans-Pritchard as a model, charismatic power does not come easily.[5] Nuer prophets very often have to make an impression on people very early on if they are to succeed in attracting a sizeable following. This might entail any number of functions such as healing, curing, eradicating an epidemic, bringing rain or fertility, or, to use Weber's expression, operating as 'warrior ecstatics' by cursing opponents or ensuring victory against neighbouring peoples.

It is, then, with these and related concerns in mind that this analysis of the response, or more precisely the various responses, both official and popular, to Muhammad Jumat Imam's claims, is undertaken. However, to avoid any unnecessary misunderstanding,

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Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983.

3 Ibid. p. 155.

4 A. Alland Jnr., 'Native Therapists and Western Medical Practitioners among the Abron of the Ivory Coast', in *Transactions of the New York Academy of Science* 26, (6), 1964, p. 714.

5 E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1956.

some further explanation of what is meant here by a prophet or charismatic leader is required.

The Weberian model of the prophet or charismatic leader.

Weber defined a prophet as:

> 'a purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment.'[6]

Weber means by charisma here, as Bryan Wilson has shown:

> 'a quality not of an individual, but of a relationship between believers (or followers) and the man in whom they believed. His claim, or theirs on his behalf, was that he had authority because of his supernatural competencies.'

Wilson, still interpreting Weber's understanding of the concept, continues:

> 'The charismatic personality is, from a Weberian point of view, almost a contradiction in terms, and it is certainly a debasement of the linguistic coinage. It represents an insensitivity to the subtleties to which Weber was seeking to make us alert... Charisma is not a personality attribute, but a successful claim to power by virtue of supernatural ordination.'[7]

Charisma is a form of interdependence founded on an act of faith by a group in the supernatural claim of its leader. In Weberian terms, therefore, it is a sociological and not a psychological concept.

The charismatic leader as defined by Weber differs in several respects from the priest, diviner and even the African prophet as described by, among others, Evans-Pritchard. Beginning with the Nuer, Evans-Pritchard tells us that the prophet has indeterminate powers, acts in abnormal ways, makes sacrifice for himself and others to his own particular spirit and is feared as well as revered. He also points out that whatever their activities and powers African prophets are those who are possessed by 'Spirit'. However, since, in the Nuer context at least, all men have some contact with 'Spirit' what makes some of them prophets and others not is the fact that, in line with the Weberian notion of charisma, the prophets have succeeded in securing:

> 'wider social endorsement of their peculiar status as mediators between men and Spirit.'[8]

Among the Nuer, as in other African societies, there is no clear-cut distinction between the prophet and either the diviner or the priest, for under certain circumstances the latter may develop prophetic powers and become leaders of social and religious change. Where, Evans-Pritchard notes, a distinction does exist between the prophet and say the diviner it is marked by the former's more direct method of communication, wider following and greater originality.

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6 M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, (trans. E. Fischoff with an introduction by T. Parsons), Boston: Beacon Press, 1963, p. 46.

7 Wilson, *The Noble Savages*, op. cit., p. 7.

8 Citation from: T. O. Beidelman: 'Nuer Priests and Prophets: Charisma, Authority, and Power among the Nuer', in *The Translation of Culture*, (ed.) T. O. Beidelman, London: Tavistock 1971, p. 389.

The difference, however, between Weber's prophet and the priest and the diviner is more substantial than that made by Evans-Pritchard and consists essentially of the fact that while the prophet is the recipient of a personal call and is commanded to do and say what he/she does, the authority of the priest or diviner is derived from a religious institution or sacred tradition. Furthermore, the prophet, as depicted by Weber, is usually a layman, who is unpaid and stands outside the main religious structure. He can be required to give some proof of his gift of the Spirit and does so by divination, healing, counselling and the working of miracles. Through these and other signs he attracts his first followers.

As to the prophet's message, while this may take many forms it will usually provide:

> 'a unified view of the world derived from a consciously integrated and meaningful attitude toward life.'[9]

While, as noted in the above quotation, this message is 'an attempt to systematise all the manifestations of life in the light of the need for salvation', and it is also essentially practical, even at the expense of logical consistency: the charismatic leader is above such mundane matters as the rules of logic and where contradictory statements, like unfulfilled promises and predictions, might require clarification there are numerous ways of providing this. Recourse can be had to such explanations as: the statement was made, or the promise or the prediction, to test the faith of the believer, or again to the esoteric meaning of the statement or text on which it was based claiming that the believer did not fully understand its inner, hidden meaning.

Prophecy, furthermore, while it may demand shrewdness, tact, wisdom and empathy is not primarily an intellectual enterprise, and the prophet is seldom a highly educated person. Moreover, the prophet strongly rejects the clerical or priestly system where the canon of sacred scripture is closed and the era of genuine prophecy confined to the past; for the message of the prophet cannot be bound by what has gone before, involving as it does a new interpretation of old scriptures and if necessary the addition of new ones.

Committed by their role and message to break with the established order prophets, thus, stand apart in society as a potential agents of change and, therefore, are often regarded, not surprisingly as seditious. They enjoin a new and different ethic - 'It is written but I say unto you' - new modes of thought and behaviour at the personal and community level.[10] The charismatic ethic and practice are, then, the antithesis of habitual or conventional behaviour, being as they are non-routine and resistant to the process of institutionalisation. As Weber expressed it:

> 'In contrast with all forms of bureaucratic administrative systems, the charismatic structure recognises no forms or orderly procedures for appointment or dismissal, no career, no advancement, no salary; there is no organised training either for the bearer of charisma or his aides, no arrangement for supervision or appeal, no allocation of local areas of control or exclusive spheres of competence. No standing institutions comparable to bureaucratic governing bodies independent of persons and of their purely personal charisma. Rather charisma recognises only those stipulations and limitations that come from within itself. The bearer of charisma assumes the tasks appropriate to him and acquires obedience and a following in virtue of his mission.

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9 Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, op. cit., p. 59.

10 Wilson, *The Noble Savages*, op. cit., pp. 9 ff.

> His success depends on whether he finds them. If those to whom he is sent do not recognise his mission, then his claims collapse.'[11]

On first impression the Mahdi-Messiah appears to fit almost perfectly the Weberian ideal type prophet. On the other hand, as one probes into the nature of and reasons for his appeal, he seems to contradict the Weberian image of the charismatic leader in that he evoked a charismatic response as the 'author and/or generator of order.'[12] The ideas and activities of the Mahdi-Messiah could at first glance be taken as confirmation of this: they point to him as a leader pre-occupied with mitigating the impact of rapid, even revolutionary change rather than one operating primarily as an innovator. Moreover, the Mahdi-Messiah's reliance on administrative and bureaucratic structures and his creation of a 'clerical class' which included his khalifas and his deputy Shaikha Mahdi would also appear to set him apart from the charismatic leader.

In reply it can stressed again that one should not take too static a view of charisma even in the very early stages of its life span. Weber said of it:

> 'All charisma, however, in every hour of its existence finds itself on this road, from a passionate life in which there is no place for the economic to slow suffocation under the weight of material interests, and with every hour of its existence it moves further along it.'[13]

Thus, in order to avoid a too abstract notion of charisma and one that is too divorced from the local context, this tendency for charisma to turn 'graceless', as it were, almost from its inception needs to be remembered. As to the importance of understanding the local context, particularly where it is a question of determining the innovative element of charismatic authority, this can be clearly illustrated in the case of the Mahdi-Messiah.

It is only possible with the benefit of hindsight to argue that there was little that was original or novel about the Mahdi-Messiah's claims, ideas and activities. It is also true that most of his 'original' ideas, were, as we have shown, in the air anyway. Moreover, looking back it is clear that so much of his activity appears to have consisted of systematising readily available and often very similar currents of belief, thought and action.

Though not strikingly original in terms of ideas if looked at in a wider comparative context, what was especially innovative or creative about the Mahdi-Messiah in the local Ijebu setting was, on the one hand, the highly convincing and relevant way in which he interpreted Muslim faith and practice and constructed what many came to recognise not only as an authentic, genuine synthesis of the two rival faiths, Islam and Christianity, but also a synthesis that could save society from complete and total disintegration. Moreover, the realisation of a synthesis such as this required the birth of a new type of person and to this extent the message he preached not only contained a radically new view of Muslim-Christian relations that if implemented would, it was believed, bring harmony out of chaos, but also a new moral charter.

His message, then, was in essence about the making of a new society and a new people and, although there was the Ahmadi precedent for this already known to the

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11 W.G. Runciman (ed.), *Weber: Selections in Translation* (trans. by E. Matthews), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 227

12 E. Shils, 'Charisma, Order and Status,' in *American Sociological Review*, 30 (April 1965), pp. 199-213.

13 Runciman, *Weber: Selections*, op. cit., p. 235.

Ijebu, the Mahdi-Messiah broke decisively with the Muslim past, at least as far as many of his fellow Muslims were concerned, demonstrating that he could not be bound by it, and if not by this past then not by anything Muslim. This fundamental break is best evidenced at the level of belief in his teaching on the 'eternal Spirit' of prophecy which declared that the prophet Muhammad was not the seal or last of the prophets, at least not in the way this idea was traditionally understood.

Thus, although the Mahdi-Messiah may not at first sight and out of context appear to conform to the dynamic, innovative prophet of the Weberian type his overall aims, purposes and performance suggest a striking fit between how he actually behaved and what Weber depicted at a high level of abstraction.

There are numerous other aspects of prophetic or charismatic authority that Weber discussed, all of which cannot be taken up here. However, there is one that is of particular relevance here: the mental state of the prophet or charismatic leader already touched upon and which will be considered again when the responses to the Mahdi-Messiah's claims and message are examined later.

Weber and prophets as 'peculiar men'

Weber commented:

> 'As far as we know the way of life of the prophets was that of peculiar men.'[14]

And the pre-exilic prophets in particular were for the most part 'ecstatic men' who above all else 'heard sounds'.[15] Some of them, moreover, Jeremiah being a case in point, engaged in compulsory speech while others fell into autohypnotic states. But this was not to their disadvantage for:

> 'psychopathic states were valued as holy.'[16]

Some of the Old Testament prophets expressly recounted such states. Jeremiah, for example, describes his condition as being like that of a 'drunken man' all of whose bones trembled.[17] Conditions such as these, Weber believed, were at one time vital to the recognition and acceptance of a claim to supernatural authority:

> 'There can be no doubt that these very states, originally, were considered important legitimations of prophetic charisma... '[18]

There are parallels to all of this in traditional African society. Evans-Pritchard reported that initially it was difficult for the Nuer to distinguish between a madman or epileptic and a prophet, and in this Nuer prophets are not unlike Weber's 'peculiar men'.[19] Furthermore, among the Nuer, as among the Old Testament prophets, 'madness' could enhance the prophet's reputation as Fergusson's account of Dak Dthul makes clear:

> 'When my back was turned an idiot called Dak Dthul... was nearly killed by a thunderbolt which fell among his cattle. It appears he went off his head and attempted

14 M. Weber, *Ancient Judaism,* Glencoe, ILL.: The Free Press, 1952, p. 286.

15 Ibid., p. 287.

16 Ibid., p. 288.

17 Ibid., p. 286.

18 Ibid.

19 Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, op. cit., p. 44.

> to raise the country against the Dinkas and oust the Government... Dak excelled himself by killing two Dinka boys in cold blood... He refused to allow his followers to take any captured stock, or women; and proved his madness by not only sacrificing cattle wholesale, but also by killing four of his own men. *One would have thought that such a succession of appalling acts would have sickened the people, but it merely served to augment Dak's reputation.'* (my emphasis).[20]

While it would generally be roundly condemned if it resulted in behaviour such as that associated with Dak Dthul, 'madness' per se rarely if ever detracts from a prophet's reputation. With reference to Old Testament prophets Lindblom remarked:

> 'Madness when it comes from God, is superior to sanity, which is of human origin.'[21]

In agreement with this, albeit writing of a very different context and time, Harrison says of that charismatic figure, the Cornish wine merchant from Truro, John Nicols Tom, who not only claimed to be Sir William Percy Honeywood Courtenay, knight of Malta and heir to the earldom of Devon, but also Jesus Christ, and who had been confined to the county lunatic asylum for four years (1833-37):

> 'Whatever the verdict of the respectable world, madness was not part of the popular understanding of millenarianism - *or rather, charges of madness did not diminish but only confirmed the truth of the claims of Courtenay and other millenarian prophets...* ' (my emphasis).[22]

However, there are differences, as will be seen below, regarding the question of the mental state and in other ways between the biblical, nineteenth century Cornish and African prophets.

Weber, the prophet and ecstasy

Although in both the biblical and African traditions ecstasy and possession are closely related to prophecy the relationship is different in each case. To take the relationship between ecstasy and biblical prophecy first. In this case, following Weber, the relationship had certain unique characteristics. And despite the various forms it assumed, from being carried away or speaking out in a state of trance to simply pondering long in prayer in a state of silent rapture or grief, prophetic ecstasy retained a distinctive character because, as Bendix, interpreting Weber, maintains:

> 'It [prophetic ecstasy] was not connected to the traditional means of attaining ecstasy... '[23]

On the other hand in traditional African society, if once again for the purpose of this comparison we accept the Nuer case as the norm, ecstasy and prophecy are intimately linked, although the ecstasy associated with prophecy is, in terms of its symptoms, no

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20 Citation from: Beidelman, 'Nuer Priests and Prophets', in *The Translation of Culture*, op. cit., pp. 394-95.

21 G. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1963, p. 28

22 J.F.C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism 1780-1850*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 215.

23 R. Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1977, p. 245.

more than a more dramatic, more heightened, more exaggerated form of that which any ordinary person may experience.[24]

Thus, while the African prophet *must* manifest strange behaviour, extra-ordinary attitudes and attributes to demonstrate the validity of their claims, over time these ceased to be important for the validation of divine inspiration in the case of the biblical prophet. For the latter what became essential was the ability to hear the divine voice. This was the foundation stone of the prophet's self-legitimation. Or, as Weber expressed it:

> 'Ecstasy did not guarantee genuineness. Only the hearing of the corporeal voice of Yahweh, the invisible God, assured the prophet that he was Yahweh's tool. Hence the tremendous emphasis on this point.'[25]

As to the importance of ecstatic states and miracles, these did no more and no less than tend:

> 'to support their (prophets) consciousness as tools in the hands of God.'[26]

Hence, in principle at least, biblical prophets had no need of signs to assure their listeners that they had heard the voice of Yahweh. However, notwithstanding this absence of signs, and often of miracles, dreams and visions, there were indeed clear indications of 'divine' election, an unmistakable one being that an individual should actually accept the call to perform such a hazardous role. As Bendix states:

> 'Unless compelled by a higher power, no man in his right mind would willingly incur the hostility of kings, great families, the established priesthood and the public by prophecies of doom that frequently identified the speaker with the merciless conqueror from abroad. Men who spoke out as these men did were believed to have heard the voice of Yahweh.'[27]

This appraisal of the response to the Old Testament prophet points to one further comparison between Weber's biblical and the African prophet as depicted by Evans-Pritchard. The African prophet, although like the former a marginal figure and one who exhibits what Weber termed 'cultural hostility', is clearly more integrated into the mainstream of the social and institutional life of society. As already pointed out, in Nuer society the divide between prophet and priest, or prophet and 'political' authority, was not as wide as that between the biblical prophet and priest and the biblical prophet and ruler.[28]

Such then in outline is our understanding of the Weberian model of the charismatic prophet. The model provides an 'ideal type' to which specific instances may approximate in greater or lesser degree and we have made a loose attempt to show the extent to which the Nuer prophet, our representative of the traditional African prophet, approaches the pattern. However, the main concern here is to use this model as the framework for an

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24 Beidelman, *Nuer Priests and Prophets*, op. cit., pp. 391-92.

25 Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, op. cit., p. 293.

26 Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, op. cit., p. 245.

27 Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, op. cit., pp. 246-47.

28 On the overlap between a) Nuer prophet and priest and b) prophet and ruler see: Beidelman, *Nuer Prophet and Priest*, op. cit.; pp. 399 ff. On Weber: Views on the Old Testament prophet and priest and politician see: Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, op. cit. pp. 246 ff.

examination of the responses to the Mahdi-Messiah with a view to determining from the perspective both of his opponents and his followers the basis of his charismatic power.

We begin this discussion of the response to the Mahdi-Messiah's claims to prophethood with the 'official' responses and follow these with a consideration of the 'popular' responses. Included in the former category are those of the colonial regime and of the Traditional, the Muslim and Christian establishments. The term popular is used to cover all other non-establishment forms of response.

The Colonial regime and the Mahdi-Messiah

Although the colonial administration had little fear of the Mahdi-Messiah himself at the outset it, nevertheless, continued to be haunted by the fear of Mahdism *per se*. Indeed, colonialism and prophecy of any kind did not suit each other. Evans-Pritchard noted that prophets in Nuerland were constantly denounced by colonial officials for their greed and ambition and:

'for being plausible and unscrupulous and charlatans.'[29]

This view shares much in common with the French colonial administration's opinion of the marabout,[30] the Muslim cleric, and was one which Evans-Pritchard himself partly shared arguing that it was only an ambitious person that sought to be filled with 'Spirit' realising the influence it would bring him. By contrast the last thing ordinary Nuer desired was to be in contact with 'Spirit', even offering sacrifice so that it might pass them by.[31]

Its preconceptions and latent fears notwithstanding, the response of the colonial regime in Nigeria to the Mahdi-Messiah's declaration of prophethood was determined in the final analysis by principles which it regarded as essential to uphold in the pluri-confessional context of western Nigeria, those of religious liberty and toleration. However, although this was the regime's starting point it could and would disallow or ban an individual or a movement which it considered might give rise to instability or a serious breach of the peace.[32] Other considerations included the desire to avoid any offence being given to loyal and co-operative traditional rulers and in particular the emirs of Northern Nigeria.

Initially, there was no evidence that the Mahdi-Messiah's claims would constitute a serious problem in these or in any other way in the syncretistic, largely tolerant religious context of Ijebuland and he was, therefore, allowed to make his declaration after first going through the traditional channels. The administration did, however, take the precaution of opening a police file on him shortly after his declaration in January 1942. At first the file is strikingly objective in its appraisal of the Mahdi-Messiah. For example, it comments:

'He speaks intelligently and is very calm in his activities.'[33]

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29 Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, op. cit., p. 307.

30 P.B. Clarke, *West Africa and Islam*, London: Edward Arnold, 1982, p. 184 ff.

31 Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, p. 307.

32 P.B. Clarke, *West Africa and Christianity*, London: Edward Arnold, 1986, pp. 236 ff.

33 National Archives Ibadan (N.A.I.). Ije-Prof. 2.C.138 (Government correspondence regarding Shaikh

But the period of harmony between the regime and the Mahdi-Messiah was to be short-lived. The same police report of December 1942 was already a little apprehensive, stating:

> 'A certain number of Muslims take to him seriously. The Chief Imam objects to him. He is popularly regarded as an eccentric and is treated as such by Muslims and others. He is to be kept under close observation.'[34]

This tolerant and rather benign attitude ended when it was discovered that the Mahdi-Messiah intended to take his message to northern Nigeria where the colonial government had always been deeply concerned to avoid anything that might cause orthodox Islam to feel aggrieved or threatened. On being alerted to the fact that he had sent letters to the Emirs of the North the Resident of Ijebu-Ode was instructed by his superiors to arrange for the Mahdi-Messiah to be:

> 'persuaded to desist from prophesying and made to realise that a Muslim Messiah who quotes the New Testament for his purposes is unlikely to be taken seriously by the Muhammadans in the Northern Provinces.'[35]

We have already seen that after learning of his meeting with Sidi Abdurrahman Pasha in Khartoum on the occasion of the pilgrimage in 1945 the Mahdi-Messiah became in the colonial government's opinion:

> 'a fanatic whose movements should be curtailed to prevent him acquiring a reputation that he could trade on at home.'[36]

The police file kept on the Mahdi-Messiah becomes much more detailed after his return to Ijebu-Ode from Mecca in 1946. His preaching tours are documented and his opinions and claims carefully catalogued. The report noted, for example, that the Mahdi-Messiah began to claim that:

> 'he could speak to any dead person by means of a secret power that he possessed and to refer to himself as the only king on earth... '[37]

Increasingly the colonial administration came to regard him as being of unsound mind, stating:

> 'Public opinion is that Shaikh Mahdi is mentally deranged and should be confined to an asylum.'

And again:

> 'Shaikh Mahdi is not right in his mind. He is, however, a fine figure of a man and of some personality.'[38]

Mahdi, op. cit.: Assistant Commissioner of Police, Ijebu-Ode to the Resident, Ijebu Province).

34 Ibid. Assistant Commissioner of Police, Ijebu-Ode to the Resident, Ijebu Province, 14th November, 1942.

35 Ibid. The Secretary of the Western Provinces to the Resident, Ijebu Province, 5th December, 1945.

36 Ibid. The Secretary, Northern Provinces, Kaduna, to the Chief Secretary to the Government, 23rd November, 1945.

37 Ibid. Assistant Superintendent, Nigerian Police, to the Resident, Ijebu Province, 12th November, 1946.

38 Ibid.

While many were puzzled, bemused and even at times amused by the Mahdi-Messiah's activities the description mad (Yoruba: were) was never used of him save by the colonial administration. In certain respects the Mahdi-Messiah's behaviour did conform to local definitions of madness. The local people distinguish between several forms of madness one set of symptoms being continuous laughter and/or crying, constantly behaving in a juvenile manner, talking incessantly, claiming to be someone other than oneself, normally someone more exalted such as an oba, chief or king. This constitutes that form of insanity known locally as 'were elegun', the possessed mad person, implying that the individual in question is under the influence of an evil or hostile spirit. And to the extent that he claimed to be someone other than he 'really' was the Mahdi-Messiah's behaviour fitted into this category of madness.

The term mad is also used of those with dishevelled, unkempt hair, who go about naked and speak incoherently and aloud to themselves in public, and wander around aimlessly and absent-mindedly. This is 'were onihoho', or literally the mad person who goes about naked.[39]

Clearly, the extent to which the Yoruba categorise behaviour disorders as mental illness depends to a large extent on whether or not the socially recognisable symptoms of madness are present, and the Mahdi-Messiah appears to have exhibited very few of these. However, although not considered insane, many regarded the Mahdi-Messiah as somewhat eccentric, a necessary 'attribute' in a Yoruba prophet. What is meant here by eccentric behaviour is that behaviour which, while in certain respects unconventional, nevertheless, for the most part makes for a fit between the socio-cultural framework and the needs of the society in question.[40]

Thus, individuals who, for example, are believed to be psychotic in one sphere of behaviour only and where this does not prevent them from carrying out efficiently their normal responsibilities are one kind of eccentric, but not mentally unsound. The Nigerian psychiatrist Asuni offered the example of a policeman who allegedly wrote to the head of state daily for a period of two years warning him of an impending drought, but who otherwise behaved perfectly normally. In Asuni's words:

> 'He carried out his police duties well, kept himself clean and looked after his family.'[41]

Asuni compared this behaviour with the policeman who claimed to have been inspired in a dream to go to Dugbe market in Ibadan city and simply sit there, solitary and inactive. Lacking a relevant message and a following, this policeman's behaviour was seen to constitute a threat to the wider society, and while the former was considered to be eccentric or mildly psychotic the latter was regarded as mentally abnormal.[42] Where they detected signs of eccentricity in the Mahdi-Messiah's behaviour both supporters and opponents were inclined to regard these not as anti-social but as a result of his close contact with some spiritual force or power that exercised an 'invisible' influence over his behaviour.

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39 W.R. Bascom, 'Social Status, Wealth and Individual Differences among the Yoruba', *American Anthropologist*, No. 53, 1951, pp. 493 ff.

40 Interview with the psychiatrist Professor T. O. Asuni, Ibadan, 10th May, 1978.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

As previously noted, the term 'were' (mad) - local informants, opponents as well as followers, insist - was never used of the Mahdi-Messiah, either in a mild or a strong sense, except by the colonial regime.[43] And the more he appeared to constitute a threat to good order and social stability the more the colonial administration moved toward a view of the Mahdi-Messiah as insane. As already indicated, this reaction is characteristic of the type of response Weber would have expected of a bureaucracy when confronted with a charismatic leader or prophet.

The Traditionalists and the Mahdi-Messiah

Questioned by the olorituns, the representatives of the Traditionalists, as to why he had given permission to the Mahdi-Messiah to proclaim his message the king (awujale) of Ijebu-Ode explained that as long as the principle of religious toleration was 'an article of faith of the colonial government's constitution' he had no alternative but to license the Mahdi-Messiah to preach. He then attempted to rid himself of the problem by contending that the Mahdiyya was the responsibility of the Muslim community.[44]

Nevertheless, the local ruler evidently saw in the Mahdiyya a further threat to his position already severely weakened by the opposition generated by the 'Sole Native Authority' system. This led to several attempts being made to prosecute its leader for 'disrespect' and 'insulting behaviour' toward the king. For example, in 1947 the Mahdi-Messiah was arrested and brought before the local council and charged with refusing to bow in the presence of the awujale only for the British Resident of Ijebu-Ode to then intervene to have the Mahdi-Messiah released on the grounds that in British law there was no case against him.[45]

This made good sense politically and in every other way for prosecution for such an offence as 'disrespect' toward an extremely unpopular king might have led to a considerable increase in support for the Mahdi-Messiah. Moreover, the Mahdi-Messiah in his defence claimed that he was being persecuted on religious grounds, for his faith forbade him to prostrate before anyone but God. While in principle this was so, the refusal to prostrate was much more than a simple ritual rejection of traditional authority by an eccentric individual; it symbolised the increasing tension occasioned by the growing demands made by the universal religions - Islam and Christianity - on local custom and tradition.

Notwithstanding their own rejection of the authority of the king in question, Traditionalists regarded this refusal to respect custom as an attack on themselves, as symbolic of the Mahdi-Messiah's rejection of all traditional authority and as motivated by

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43 This information is derived from Interviews with Ijebu Mahdists, orthodox Muslims and members of the aladura churches who knew the Mahdi-Messiah, 1976-78; Aug./Sept. 1979; Aug./Sept. 1980; Aug./Sept. 1981. See also for relevant material on the Yoruba and mental illness: A. Kiev (ed.), *Magic, Faith and Healing*, New York: The Free Press, 1964 and T. O. Asuni, 'Socio-Medical Problems of Religious Converts,' in *Psychopathologie Africaine*, 1973, vol.9, 2, pp. 223-236. Id., 'Religious conversion and psychosis,' in *International Mental Health Research Newsletter*, vol. 9, No. 1, 1967.

44 N.A.I. (U.I.L.): The Private Papers of M. J. Imam op. cit. Also: interviews with the chief imam of Ijebu-Ode and Al-Hajj Eleri, the first and oldest living disciple of the Mahdi Messiah, Ijebu-Ode, 9th January, 1976.

45 N.A.I. Ije.Prof., 2.C.138 op.cit: the Resident, Ijebu Province, to the Awujale, 10th August, 1947.

his ambition to become what he claimed to be the ruler and law giver of a new order.[46] Among the Traditionalists who felt most aggrieved by Muhammad Jumat Imam were the priests, some of whom in their turn attempted to have him prosecuted for violating the principle of religious freedom and toleration.

The Mahdi-Messiah's hostile attitude - sometimes less than honest - toward indigenous beliefs and practices has already been noted and in 1949 an opportunity arose for him to display to the full and in public his contempt for these beliefs and practices.

The clash between the traditional priests and the Mahdi-Messiah reached a climax in that same year when numerous 'pagan' converts to the Mahdiyya movement were asked to hand over to him their shrines, idols and amulets. The Mahdi-Messiah then preceded to burn them outside his mosque in the presence of a large crowd. Outraged, the traditional priests protested to the awujale accusing the Mahdi-Messiah of disdaining their gods, annoying the spirits of their ancestors and profaning the land, clear evidence of the strong attachment to the 'Old Order'.[47]

This time the Mahdi-Messiah was found guilty and offered the choice of one of three punishments: banishment, imprisonment or a heavy fine. However, he was to turn the judgement to his own advantage by presenting this verdict as yet another proof of his calling, informing the king that he would accept any of the punishments in good faith since all 'genuine' prophets - Muhammad, Jesus and many others - had been persecuted by their own people.[48] At this juncture the awujale decided to shift the responsibility for the sentence to the native courts but here again the judge proved reluctant to act and the defendant was subsequently acquitted and discharged, providing his followers with further proof that their leader was no ordinary individual.[49]

Although the Mahdi-Messiah shared certain things in common with the Traditionalists, including a common lifestyle this was overshadowed by clashing symbols and rhetoric as the latter struggled to move back toward the past and remain there while the former preached reform for the purpose of preparing for the advent of a 'New Order.'

The Christian churches and the Mahdi-Messiah.

Muhammad Jumat Imam's decision to proclaim himself to be the Messiah of the Christians inevitably gave rise to strong and divergent reactions from the Christian churches.

Where the Mahdi-Messiah offended many Christian leaders was by his insistence that since he had been privileged by God with a more complete and better understanding of the Bible and the Christian scriptures as a whole than any other individual they should go to him to discover the true meaning of their faith so that they might enter 'the Kingdom of Heaven'.[50] He even went so far as to refer to himself as 'the way and the life', promising his followers that:

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46 Interview material, Ijebuland, 1976-78; 1979-81.

47 M.O. Ogundunsin, 'Mahdism in Islam with special reference to the Mahdi of Ijebu-Ode', (Dissertation for the B.A. Religious Studies, University of Ibadan 1968).

48 Ibid. p. 20.

49 Ibid.

50 N.A.I. (U.I.L): The Private Papers of M. J. Imam, op. cit. It is worth noting that Christian leaders

'whosoever shall pass through me shall enter into the Kingdom of God.'[51]

This was hardly likely to endear him to the Christian churches anymore than his letter to the local bishop and to the pope in which he announced his advent as the Messiah of the Christians.[52] The Catholic bishop responsible for Ijebu-Ode quoting Matthew 24:3 dismissed him as a 'false' prophet only to receive a reply containing extensive quotations from the New Testament to prove that the time was propitious for the advent of the Mahdi-Messiah. He also asked the bishop to consider 'the abundant evidence available that the Holy Spirit was his guide'.[53]

The bishop, further, was not to discount his claims simply because he came from the remote and only very recently evangelised town of Ijebu-Ode for, as Matthew 20:16 and Luke 30:30 foretold, 'the first shall be last and the last first.' The Mahdi-Messiah finished his reply to the bishop with the words: 'Please note that a false prophet could not quote the Gospels correctly'.[54]

Although the Catholic bishop of Ijebu-Ode remained unimpressed many Christian leaders and their followers, particularly from among the aladura churches, held the Mahdi-Messiah in high regard. And, as previously mentioned there, Muhammad Jumat Imam not only lived within a few hundred yards of the Faith Tabernacle group, forerunner of the Christ Apostolic Church, but also frequently consulted Pastor Shadare on many issues including his decision to proclaim himself the Mahdi-Messiah and on this last issue met with 'a very positive response.'[55]

Moreover, prayer, healing and revelation through dreams and visions - central to the aladura praying movement - were introduced by Muhammad Jumat Imam to his mosque which not only made for tolerance between the two movements but also made the passage between aladura church and Mahdiyya community a relatively smooth one. 'Official' Islam was much less accommodating.

The Muslim community and the Mahdi-Messiah

By the early 1950s an estimated ten thousand Muslims in Ijebu-Ode had joined the Mahdiyya movement, then about one fifth of the Muslim population of that city.[56] Mahdist communities had also been established in other towns and cities throughout Yorubaland making, as already mentioned, for a total of somewhere between ten and fifteen thousand members by 1959 the year of the Mahdi-Messiah's death.

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including the Catholic bishop of Ijebu-Ode and the bishop of the African Church in Ijebu-Ode, among others, dismissed as insulting the Mahdi-Messiah's idea that Christians should go to him to discover the true meaning of their own faith. Of course, in advocating this manner of action Muhammad Jumat Imam was following Muslim practice.

51 N.A.I. (U.I.L): The Private Papers of M.J. Imam, op. cit.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Interview with Pastor Shadare Sesebe, Ijebu-Ode, 7th April, 1978.

56 This estimate was given by the late Ijebu Muslim scholar M.O.A. Abdul, among others, in an interview with the author at Ibadan, 3rd March, 1977.

The reaction of the Muslim establishment to the Mahdi-Messiah, while it highlights an actual contest for the Muslim leadership also sheds light on a wider struggle between old and new approaches to the standards, qualities and skills required for leadership of any kind in Ijebuland. And this competition was intense in a society where high status, such as that attached to the office of chief imam, was already in some measure regarded as something that had to be earned.

The strongest reaction came from one of the two rival chief imams, Borokini, an 'al-hajj' and once a member the Mahdi-Messiah's Islamic Reform Society, from the Ahmadiyya and from members of the Tijaniyya order to which the Mahdi-Messiah once belonged. Borokini accused Muhammad Jumat Imam of attempting to usurp the position of the 'lawful Muslim leadership' and orchestrated the stoning of his house and mosque after the latter's return to Ijebu-Ode in 1946 from the disastrous pilgrimage to Mecca during which many of his followers died.

What appears to have provoked Borokini's anger even more than the pilgrimage fiasco was the Mahdi-Messiah's denunciation of the Muslim leadership as illiterate and incompetent and, therefore, unqualified to guide the Muslim community. The Mahdi-Messiah, by placing the emphasis on literacy in Arabic effectively excluded his two main rivals from the post of chief imam. He stated openly:

> 'Before a man can be chief imam he must be a good Muslim, free from all diseases, well educated in Arabic and know how to translate the Qur'an for the people. Because of his knowledge a leader is able to advise and govern and can command the Holy Spirit.'[57]

Although how or why the Holy Spirit would heed the authority of the one literate in Arabic is nowhere mentioned, the Mahdi-Messiah by insisting on Arabic as a qualification for 'commanding the Holy Spirit' was expressing a view widespread in West Africa that much of the value of Islam lay in the ability of its clerics to manipulate supernatural power through a variety of means, an important one being literacy.

The most resolute opposition to the Mahdi-Messiah came from the Ahmadiyya for in appearance at least the Mahdiyya was an attempt to steal this movement's thunder. The Ahmadiyya had come to Ijebu-Ode in 1929 and it was widely believed that Muhammad Jumat Imam was keenly interested in becoming the Imam of the Ijebu branch. This did not happen and a certain Mr Kuku was appointed to this post. It was the same Mr Kuku who challenged the Mahdi-Messiah to explain how there could be two Mahdi-Messiahs, Ghulam Ahmad (founder of the Ahmadiyya) and himself. And like many other opponents he also wanted to know how the Mahdi-Messiah could possibly come from Ijebu-Ode. He finally challenged the Mahdi-Messiah to a type of trial by ordeal - a form of trial traditionally resorted to when there was a dispute over a verdict pronounced by the headman of a village[58] - by asking him 'to produce fire from his belly in the presence of a crowd'. Kuku remembered twice counting to ten and no fire appeared he declared Muhammad Jumat Imam, 'a liar to his face'.[59]

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57 N.A.I. (U.I.L): Private Papers of M.J. Imam, op. cit.

58 C.D. Forde, *The Yoruba-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria,* London: International African Institute, p. 52.

59 Interview with Mr. Kuku, 22nd October, 1977.

Elsewhere the form of trial was different and could have serious consequences for either the defendant or the prosecution. For example, in the early part of the twentieth century Sultan Ali Dinar of Darfur, in the West of the present day Republic of the Sudan, resolved the question in this way: a self proclaimed Mahdi would be arrested and then given the opportunity to confess that he had tried to deceive the people in making his proclamation. If he refused the ulama, scholars, would be called in to determine whether he was lying or insane. If neither, it had to be decided whether he was the true Mahdi or a heretic and here the Sultan would sometimes take over complete responsibility and attempt to slay the would-be Mahdi. Success in this was clear evidence of heresy, while failure meant that the ruler was corrupt and that his time was up.[60]

Tijaniyya members displayed little immediate opposition to the Mahdi-Messiah after his declaration in 1942, maintaining simply that it was his disappointment at not being chosen as chief imam that accounted for his decision to announce himself as the Mahdi-Messiah. As one Tijaniyya member, speaking for many others, expressed it:

> 'Muhammad Jumat Imam was the best candidate but was unfortunate not to be appointed Chief Imam. The Muslim leaders did not want someone who knew more than them. He was a good leader who knew Arabic and religion well and one who made many good reforms.'[61]

However, the fact of his ambition was not sufficient in itself to convince the Tijaniyya that Muhammad Jumat Imam's claims were false. Like the Ahmadiyya, this brotherhood also decided to test his claim albeit in a very different way. One of their leading and highly respected Shaykhs, Sharif Ahmad, was asked for his opinion on the matter and by reference to hadith, the Qur'an and classical Islamic texts proved to his Ijebu colleagues that Muhammad Jumat Imam could not be the Mahdi as he lacked the attributes and qualifications, coming as he did from Ijebu-Ode, being born when he was and so on.

In the Tijaniyya view, then, Muhammad Jumat Imam's claim was simply an aberration resulting from frustrated ambition which in itself was the consequence of an essentially flawed system of selecting the Muslim leadership. However, he was neither insane nor incompetent, and while rejecting his claim a number of Tijaniyya continued to follow his progress and teachings.

Thus, with the exception of the Aladura and to a lesser degree the Tijaniyya, the official response to the Mahdi-Messiah was hostile, repudiating his claims on grounds of insanity or frustrated ambition.

The popular response to Muhammad Jumat Imam

This response will be considered under the broad categories of acceptance and rejection. Such a neat dichotomy is, however, misleading for it will be shown that, among other things, the message proclaimed by the Mahdi-Messiah was not only regarded as relevant and timely by those who accepted his claims but even by some of those who rejected them. Moreover, it should be pointed out that in characterising a response as one of acceptance or rejection it is not intended to convey the idea that these reactions were

60 Cf. A. Christellow, 'The Yan Tatsine Disturbances...', 'The Yan Tatsine Disturbances in Kano - A Search for Perspective', in *Muslim World*, Vol. LXXV, No 2, 1985, p. 78.

61 Ibid.

automatic and unquestioning. At times it would appear to have been so, but on many occasions acceptance of the Mahdi-Messiah's claims only came after a period of questioning and inquiry, sometimes brief, a matter of days or even less, and sometimes after a relatively long period of several months and more.

The popular response and 'the gift of divine knowledge'

Very frequently those who became devoted disciples of the Mahdi-Messiah explained that their leader had convinced them that he was in possession of the gift of 'divine knowledge', and a number claimed to have witnessed this for themselves. As one expressed it:

> 'I went to him and said 'you call yourself the Mahdi-Messiah. How do you come to say that ?': He then gave me a lot of explanation from the Bible and the Qur'an. He explained much to me. I was convinced he was a prophet.'[62]

It was not only his deep and seemingly unrivalled knowledge of the meaning of the qur'anic and biblical texts - something that convinced people but also, borrowing a phrase from Ibn Khaldun, his 'supernatural perception,'[63] or what they interpreted as:

> 'his power to group numbers and words and to deduce from them such things as the name of God, of the prophet Muhammad and his own name, Jumat, which he wrote down and put it together to give Messiah. All of this was evidence of his divine gifts.'[64]

For most of those that followed him this gift of 'divine knowledge' could not be explained by the Mahdi-Messiah's mastery of the science of numerology or divinatory techniques. For them he was one of those 'chosen' individuals, whom Ibn Khaldun described as being somehow liberated from the limitations of the organic body and endowed with the necessary subtlety of soul to ensure receptiveness to supernatural influence and who, as a consequence, was able to penetrate beyond the visible, manifest world (al-zahir) to the hidden, esoteric world (al-batin).

This gift of 'supernatural perception', it should be noted here, would not automatically have been regarded in a positive light by all those who listened to the Mahdi-Messiah. As Buckley has shown, the Yoruba have an ambivalent attitude towards revelation and can be even more preoccupied with the possible danger from this than from that extremely ambivalent notion, secrecy.[65] The Mahdi-Messiah, however, had a reputation for honest dealings with his clients; he gave good advice and eschewed all negative forecasts and such harmful practices as casting spells on opponents or wrongdoers. And because 'upright' and so endowed, he would clearly have been seen by Ijebu Muslims and even by non-Muslims in the wider West African setting as capable of manipulating spiritual power, and of controlling and transmitting such power for the benefit of others, something that was likely to attract many to his side.

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62 Interview with the mahdist Al-Hajj Raji, Ibadan, 22nd June 1977.

63 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, (trans. F. Rosenthal and edited and abridged by N.J. Dawood), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 70 ff.

64 Interview with Al-Hajj Raji, Ibadan, 22nd June, 1977.

65 A.D. Buckley, *Yoruba Medicine*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1985, pp. 133 ff.

This impression of the Mahdi-Messiah was rendered all the more convincing by the belief that was widespread that despite the fact that he had received no formal education he possessed such a profound knowledge of the Bible and Qur'an, such a command of numerology, and such fluency in Arabic, Yoruba and English. All of this persuaded many that Muhammad Jumat Imam had, as he claimed, received the 'Spirit of Truth and the gift of divine knowledge,' and was, therefore, worthy of their complete trust and confidence. Many of his followers posed the following question, the answer to which was, they believed, self evident:

> 'How could he know and understand so many things - he never went to school - but for the fact that he was chosen by God and possessed the Spirit of Truth?'[66]

And sometimes the same point was made in this way:

> 'From where did he get his knowledge? He did not go to Arabic school, he was not at the university. He had a certain power from Almighty God. When he gave you the answers you were convinced that there was no other man who could do the same job.'[67]

Many of those who accompanied the Mahdi-Messiah to Mecca in 1945 were highly impressed by his ability to debate with the Muslim ulama (scholars) in both Kano and Borno. In the words of one pilgrim:

> 'All their questions he answered but he did not go to school to learn to read. That is what convinced us. From where, we ask ourselves, did he get this knowledge?'[68]

The Mahdi-Messiah's talent for prediction was also an important element in the conversion of a sizeable number. One who joined the movement in 1946 recalled that although he was extremely impressed by the Mahdi-Messiah from the outset he was reluctant to become a disciple until 1952:

> 'Then my mind was fully certain for all the things he said would happen came to pass. The Mahdi-Messiah said in 1942 that the Queen of England would visit Nigeria and she came in 1952, as he had predicted.'[69]

This former soldier recounted how his own conversion to the Mahdiyya was triggered by this and other predictions:

> 'I was in the army in Sierra Leone in 1942 during the Hitler War when the Spirit of Truth came to Shaikh Mahdi. I was reading the paper. I read that a Shaikh Mahdi was addressing the people that a time was coming when - you know at that time in Ijebu-Ode we were not civilised like today - the King or Queen of England is coming to Ijebu-Ode. I asked myself what sort of man he was and how he knew that. He also said there would be a time when we will drive the Europeans away. That was 1942.

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56 Interview with the Mahdist, Al-Hajj Yusuf, Ife, 30th April, 1981.

57 Interview with Mahdist Al-Hajj Rufai, Ijebu-Igbo, 23rd April, 1981.

58 Interview with Mahdist Al-Hajj Eleri, Ijebu-Ode, 5th April, 1981.

59 Interview with a mahdist and former soldier in the West African Frontier Force, Ijebu-Ode 28th April, 1980.

> What he said was fulfilled. The Queen came to Nigeria and we are now ruling ourselves.'[70]

Others also had their faith in the Mahdi-Messiah confirmed by similar predictions such as that which foretold that the flag of an independent Nigeria would be green and white like that of the Mahdiyya movement and that the motto of the country would be, again like that of the Mahdiyya, Unity and Faith, and on both counts he was correct.

The Mahdi-Messiah's ability to predict was not only acknowledged as a divine gift by followers but also by Christians, even by Christians with status and standing in the town. Mr Otufale, a respected elder spokesman, senior citizen of Ijebu-Ode and pillar of the Christ Apostolic church stated:

> 'The Mahdi told me my future in 1936 and it has come true. I do not believe in prophecy or fortune telling so much but one can know that he is truly guided by God.'[71]

Local market traders recall the Mahdi-Messiah's predictions concerning the sharp increase in the price of foodstuffs such as gari and rice. One remembered how he foretold:

> 'That the gari we are now eating which is enough for two men and costs one shilling and six pence would rise to five shillings for just sufficient for one man to quench (sic) his appetite. A tin of kerosene, not more than one shilling and six pence now and that would last for three days would, he predicted, rise to five shillings and would not last for more than one day. Those were marvellous predictions.'[72]

Good character and true religion

While many who became committed followers of the Mahdi-Messiah placed great emphasis on his 'divine gift' of knowledge and his ability to predict, to others what appears to have mattered as much was his 'good character', and the fact that he was a 'true man of God' who preached *true* religion.

This response was most common among the women members of the movement some of whom found the restrictions placed on their religious and other activities by Traditional cults such as the Egungun and Oro cults and by 'traditional' Islam, that is Islam as practised by the main body of Muslims in Ijebu-Ode, irksome and constraining.

By comparison the Mahdi-Messiah was a forward looking 'fundamentalist'. Fundamentalism is often interpreted, somewhat simplistically, as backward and anti-modern.[73] There are, however, occasions when people resort to fundamentalism precisely in order to be modern, an example would be many second generation Muslims in western Europe, especially where such questions as what they refer to as 'cast marriage' are concerned. They point to the Qur'an and hadith to explain that this practice is not part of Islam and should, therefore, be discontinued.

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70 Ibid.

71 Interview with Mr Otufale, Ijebu-Ode, 25th June, 1977.

72 Interview with the chief imam of the Mahdiyya, Ijebu-Ode, 8th May, 1977.

73 L. Caplan (ed.), *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism,* Basingstoke and London: MacMillan, 1987.

In several respects the Mahdi-Messiah was also fundamentalist in this sense; his resort to the Qur'an was a method of throwing off what he saw as the outmoded and un-Islamic attitudes, beliefs and practices of Ijebu Muslims regarding women and worship and in other matters.

Indeed, although many of those who joined the Mahdiyya emphasised that the Mahdi-Messiah's message concerning the building of the New Jerusalem - that is, as the Ijebu chemist expressed it 'a world in which there would be no wicked people and peace everywhere' - was crucial in helping them to decide to follow him, his 'true religion' which included a correct interpretation of the Qur'an was also extremely important.[74] Likewise, the reforms he introduced into the Mosjidi Zahir or Temple of the New Jerusalem and his insistence on punctuality, an extremely radical measure in the Ijebu context but one which those with more regular employment found attractive.

The reforms already discussed regarding women turned the Mahdi-Messiah into a 'champion of womens' rights' in religious matters for according to a view commonly expressed by mahdist women:

> 'He encouraged us to worship like men.'[75]

Women were not only immensely appreciative of the opportunity to attend mosque regularly but also of the encouragement and assistance given to them to learn Yoruba, Arabic and English and to read the Bible and Qur'an. This was a major advance for many of the women who joined the Mahdiyya were illiterate. For such women as these there was little need of miraculous proof that their leader was a prophet. It sufficed that he was:

> 'a very good and balanced man who directed people in the right way. And this showed us that he was anointed by God and a prophet of Allah.'[76]

The term 'balanced' was frequently used by women to describe their leader and what was particularly 'balanced' about his tolerance not only toward them but also to Christians. As one female disciple stated:

> 'He preached the one way to Allah and belief in all holy books, that not to believe in the Bible as well as the Qur'an is not to be a Muslim, and he gave women their equal position with men in religion.'[77]

Wise counsel and modest life style

His followers generally, whether male or female, while greatly impressed by their leader's tolerant attitude towards Christians and supportive of his reforms regarding the education of Muslim women, also found him to be an able and wise counsellor. That he lived in a modest, unpretentious way was also much admired. Counselling sometimes took the form of interpreting dreams. The following words of one informant sum up what many Mahdists experienced:

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74 Interview with mahdist Al-Hajj Yinusa, Ijebu-Igbo, 12th May, 1978.

75 Collective interview with ten women members of the Mahdiyya, Ijebu-Ode, 30th April, 1980.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

'If you had a dream in which you sinned and you went to tell him he would tell you what to do and by the grace of God you would overcome your trouble.'[78]

While it was not considered a soft option - its emphasis on punctuality and the obligation to read and study the Bible and Qur'an daily being but two examples of the demands made upon followers - mahdism did make life easier emotionally and psychologically. As a panel beater said of his mahdist faith:

'It is a go-easy religion for it helps you to solve your problems. If you go and pray in the name of God and the Mahdi the problems of mind and heart will be solved.'[79]

It was mentioned previously that the Mahdi-Messiah, although a person of some considerable status in the community, retained a simple lifestyle which was no more than moderately comfortable, and this too explained something of his appeal for such a life-style was not only in keeping with what was expected of a genuine holy man but also put him within easy reach of the majority. Muhammad Jumat Imam, informants would insist, had earned their respect and confidence. They followed him not because he was a wealthy man who had bestowed material benefits upon them but because he was a man of principle (emia pataki), someone who spoke the truth entrusted to him without fear. To be regarded as a person of principle meant a great deal more in Yoruba society than perhaps in other societies. Such a person was a gentleman (gbagjumo): that is one deserving of honour and respect because fearless and responsible, and one with a natural talent for leadership.[80]

The Mahdi-Messiah not only lived close to ordinary people but also voiced their concerns at the high costs attached to practising their faith. Some of the more serious economic difficulties in the way of practising religion in Ijebuland were occasioned by Muslim clerics who demanded large sums for performing such socially as well as religiously important rites as funerals which no one could neglect without great unease and anxiety. To counteract this the Mahdi-Messiah insisted that the imam who conducted the burial services of which there were two - one was performed in the home and one at the burial ground - should not receive the customary double payment but only one modest fee in accordance with each person's ability to pay. He likewise banned the wearing of expensive clothes made from 'aso ebi' cloth on the grounds that the money could be better spent on the basic necessities of life and, where these had been met, on education.

While he appealed in these personal and practical ways - millenarianism is often in terms of its practical consequences a this-worldly belief - the Mahdi-Messiah's reputation as a defender of his peoples' fundamental rights was also growing. The fact that he was a Nigerian and a 'black prophet' who spoke about the end of colonial rule, at a time of growing interest in independence politics, also caught the popular imagination in ways reminiscent of Kimbangu and Chilembwe, among others, who likewise made people aware that however hopeless things appeared to be with divine assistance change was possible.[81]

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78 Ibid.

79 Interview with mahdist Mr Abdul Fasasi, 23rd April, 1978.

80 W.R. Bascom, 'Social Status, Wealth and Individual Differences among the Yoruba,' *American Anthropologist*, op. cit., pp. 492-93.

81 T. Hodgkin, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa*, London: F. Muller, 1956, chap. 3, pp. 93 ff.

An 'ordinary' black prophet

Although in much of sub-Saharan African such 'nationalist' prophets tended to be Christian there were also numerous Muslim prophets, a majority of them not unexpectedly coming from the heavily islamised regions of former French West Africa.[82] One of the more widely known examples of a black Muslim prophet in the post World War II era was the previously mentioned Senegalese Shaikh, Ibrahim Niass, from Kaolack.[83] Another was the Mahdi, Seydina Mouhamadou Limamou Laye, also from Senegal and, from among the Yoruba, Al-hajj Abdul Salami Bamidele whose movement will be compared with the Mahdiyya in the conclusion to this study.[84]

Many of the Mahdiyya members believed, as already indicated, that their leader was an 'ordinary' black prophet in the sense that he in no way superseded Muhammad or Jesus or any other 'genuine' prophet. To insist, moreover, that he was superior to these other prophets was to engage in the same form of cultural and political domination that had been and continued to be practised by others toward Africans. A madhist spokesman explained:

> 'The belief that there can be only one prophet is motivated by the desire to dominate politically. Shaikh Mahdi has as much right to be regarded as a prophet as anyone else for he has done the work to prove he is a prophet. If he was not black and Nigeria had a written language of its own he would have a better chance of being more widely accepted.'[85]

Many Mahdists were convinced that even those among their own people who rejected their founder's claims did so because:

> 'he grew up among ordinary people and was black.'[86]

According to those who followed him this obscurity and anonymity was one of the main reasons that made Muhammad Jumat Imam pre-eminently suitable for the role to which he had been called for, using the New Testament in support of their argument, they pointed out that:

> 'Matthew 12 says a prophet is never recognised in his own country.'[87]

This response points to a desire for an 'indigenous Islam', a religion that people could identify with in terms of its leadership, culture and language along the lines of the aladura form of Christianity. The Islam which they knew, no matter how syncretistic it had become, was perceived to be in essence an Arab faith. Traditional religion, for its

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82 C. Harrison, *France and Islam in West Africa, 1860-1960*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

83 M. Hiskett, 'The Community of Grace and Its Opponents, The Rejectors: A Debate about Theology and Mysticism in Muslim West Africa with special reference as to its Hausa expression', in *African Language Studies*, XVII, 1980, pp. 99 ff.

84 A. Sylla and H. Gaye, *Le Mahdi Seydina Mouhamadou Limamou Laye Du Senegal*, Dakar (no date and no publishing house given).

85 Interview with the chief imam of the Mahdiyya mosque, Ibadan, 7th June, 1978.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

part, was not an option for it clashed sharply with 'progress'. The Mahdi-Messiah's way to the New Jerusalem symbolised in the Mosjidi Zahir, on the other hand, offered the most hope of integration both personal, cultural and social in a deeply divided and confused society: it was the 'religion of the Spirit' in which Muslims and Christians respected each other, worshipped together and believed in all true prophets whatever their race or colour.

By way of contrast the Senegalese Muslim leader and quasi prophet Shaikh Ibrahim Niass, already referred to above, entered into the politics of African nationalism with a short pamphlet 'Africa to the Africans' which was essentially a claim that Africa could find unity through Islam, a universal faith that would overcome the ethnic divisions which hampered the process of African integration.[88]

There were, however, similarities between Niass and the Mahdi-Messiah: in both cases a majority of disciples were from the poorer, illiterate or semi-illiterate classes, and believed that their leader, although black, had been chosen by God to be the 'holiest' person in the contemporary world and that through him the black race would be saved.[89] Therefore, for the followers of both Niass and the Mahdi-Messiah, to be a disciple of a distinguished black prophet was a measure of their own value as Africans and an explanation of their own role, again as Africans, in the divine plan of salvation: it was clear sign that Africa had not been left out of that plan for its own profound and ultimate material and spiritual transformation and that they had been divinely chosen to carry it forward.

Both movements, then, resembled each other in that they were statements about the dignity and identity of Africans emphasising that, contrary to appearances, the continent and its people had not been abandoned by God. These movements were emphatic that there was no need of a saviour from another race. Indeed, far from being left out of the divine plan or given only a passive role therein Mahdists belonged to a noble race and were called by God to help save their own continent.

This nationalist dimension in the Mahdiyya movement by focusing attention on the active role of the African in the divine plan imparted to followers not only a greater sense of their own worth but also of their capacity for self-improvement. Furthermore, the identification of the Mosjidi-Zahir or Temple of the New Jerusalem as a second or alternative Mecca not only enabled the immense spiritual power and prestige symbolised by Islam's sacred shrine to be localised in a community distant geographically and historically from the source of such power, but also gave rise, as we shall see immediately below, to a strong sense of personal worth and feeling of self-esteem, among people who did not have and probably never would have the means to perform the hajj.

Making Mecca and 'forgiveness' accessible

For most Nigerian Muslims from the south-west of the country, the benefits of Mecca were beyond their reach. The forgiveness, the sense of solidarity and the status that could be had from undertaking the hajj were little more than a dream for the vast majority. By contrast Mahdists, dressed in their white robes and emotionally uplifted by the chanting

88 Hiskett, 'The Community of Grace and the Rejectors...', op. cit., p. 109.

89 Ibid., p. 109.

of their profession of faith, could obtain a sense of all that Mecca had to offer from the pilgrimage to the Mosjidi Zahir.

Behind the Mosjidi Zahir or the New Temple of Jerusalem stands both the Mahdi-Messiah's tomb and a concrete replica of the Kaabah which together attract thousands of Muslims from Ijebu-Ode and other western Nigerian towns. These pilgrims visit the mosque on special occasions including the date of the anniversary of the declaration of Mahdi-Messiahship, January 2nd, 'to make tawwaf', circumambulation around the Mahdi-Messiah's tomb and the replica of the kaabah. This ritual, it is believed, purifies the soul and is, 'as nice as coming into the house from the dust and washing one's body.'[90]

Mahdism, therefore, brought within the reach of ordinary people some of the prized spiritual, emotional, collective and social benefits of the hajj. But more importantly, it pointed out that the source of spiritual power which they needed to effect their moral transformation and bring about their new world lay within themselves rather than in others from outside.

Rejection

The form taken by the 'popular rejectionist' response to the Mahdi-Messiah has already been touched upon. This questioned, it will be recalled, his claims to prophethood on the grounds that he was black and from the 'small unknown city of Ijebu-Ode' and so forth. However, it is worth noting again here that there was a sizeable group of Ijebu Muslims, excluding the members of the Ahmadiyya who felt aggrieved that the Mahdi-Messiah was attempting to expropriate their message, that tempered its rejection of the Mahdi-Messiah's by making a sharp distinction between what it considered to be his erroneous claims to prophethood and the vast bulk of his teaching and opinions on Islam.

Many of this group were among the better educated Muslims and here we can mention the response of two of them, one a former headmaster of a Muslim College and the other the former Professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of Ibadan, the Muslim scholar, Muhammad Abdul.

The headmaster, a university graduate, used to attend the same mosque as Muhammad Jumat Imam whom he described as:

> 'one of the most learned Muslims I have ever come across. Even by today's standards he was really learned especially in Arabic and Oriental studies. He was regarded as a big (very learned) mallam (Muslim teacher). He even felt he was the most knowledgeable and found it difficult to accept when he was not elected chief Imam. That is why he started his own sect.'[91]

Asked how people responded to his claims, and if they regarded him as of sound mind, this one time Muslim headmaster replied:

> 'Everyone knew he was learned. Moreover, we all knew that someone was coming sometime for we all believed in the resurrection (sic). Some of us knew it could not be Shaikh Mahdi because we knew the cause of his behaviour - he wanted to be a

90 Interview with mahdist Mr Arowasikila, Ijebu-Ode, 15th May, 1978.

91 Interview Mr Sanni, Ijebu-Ode, 27th May, 1978.

leader, and he succeeded. He was a very, very learned man and tried to modernise Islam by patterning it on Christianity. No! No one thought he was mad.'[92]

Professor Muhammad Abdul who, as an adolescent attended the Mahdi-Messiah's lectures, likewise rejected Muhammad Jumat Imam's claims to prophethood. However, he also spoke of the strong impression made on him and others by the high quality of the content of those lectures. What also impressed Abdul was the method of the Mahdi-Messiah's teaching. He recalled that the Mahdi-Messiah:

'would teach Arabic and teach it in the modern way. Because of this so many people would go to him every Sunday and learn to read and write'.[93]

Abdul, therefore, continued to frequent the Mahdi-Messiah's mosque after the declaration in January 1942 without ever accepting the latter's prophetic claims. Others interviewed adopted this approach, simply dismissing the declaration as something of an aberration which could not be allowed to stand in the way of the gains, spiritual and educational, to be had from attendance at the Mosjidi Zahir or Temple of the New Jerusalem.

Popular views of the Mahdi-Messiah's mental state

There are a number of points of contrast between what we termed the official and the popular response to the Mahdi-Messiah's claims and the one that stands out and has already been commented upon at length centres on the Mahdi-Messiah's state of mind.

The colonial authority, as indicated, came to classify him as insane and claimed that the people of Ijebu-Ode thought likewise. On the other hand our evidence based on interviews with some seventy people - some of whom were his opponents - who knew Muhammad Jumat Imam suggests that only very few if any held this view of his state of mind. However, that he was 'eccentric' is not in question for even some of his own followers confirmed this, although, as we have seen, his women disciples constantly refer to him as a 'balanced' man.

It is not the intention here to pass moral judgement on the colonial administration by suggesting that its diagnosis was superficial and motivated by all the wrong reasons. Because people around him did not regard him as psychotic does not mean that according to other criteria he was not so. Moreover, from what has been said about his frustrated ambition there would appear to be a case for a psychoanalytic interpretation of the Mahdi-Messiah's behaviour along lines of wish-fulfilment theory: society has cheated me by refusing me my rights, so now I will succeed in becoming even more important than I would have been had society granted me those rights.

However, from a sociological perspective there is no evidence of insanity or madness and therefore the interest shifts from this to local views on eccentricity showing, as mentioned above, that while a degree of this is essential to charismatic authority this same authority is destroyed by either hyper-abnormality on the one hand or complete normality on the other.

All responses speak of the Mahdi-Messiah as an impressive man, tall, with piercing eyes, eloquent and self confident. He was also certainly something of an enigma and by

92 Ibid.

93 Interview with M.O.A. Abdul, Ibadan, 3rd March, 1977.

the way he at times ignored convention - making use of the royal umbrella, refusing to prostrate before the awujale - he behaved as if he were above the law. Moreover, his references to himself as 'King of kings', as 'the Way, the Truth and the Life' and so forth gave rise to a certain bewilderment.

But if this were abnormal or hyper-eccentric behaviour and not simply mild eccentricity his followers would have ensured that the Mahdi-Messiah received treatment. In parts of south-western Nigeria when there is a case of abnormality or hyper-eccentricity in a religious leader, the psychiatrist Asuni notes, the leader in question is taken by his disciples to the hospital to be 'cured' and, importantly for our purposes:

> 'when cured is no longer acceptable as leader because he is now perfectly well and normal.'[94]

Once again, this is not to suggest that the Mahdi-Messiah's disciples considered him to be completely 'normal', but rather as one who manifested the 'necessary' degree of unusual behaviour. In this matter what constitutes sufficient and what constitutes an excess is determined by the followers.[95]

Conclusion

By considering in detail the various responses to the Mahdi-Messiah's message and to him as a leader this article shows why he readily galvanised support among the Ijebu and why in a relatively short period of time he was able to create one of the few influential Muslim millenarian movements in south-western Nigeria.

It has also been shown that conversion to the Mahdiyya was not, on the whole, of the passive or mechanical sort: belief in the Mahdi-Messiah's claims was not lightly undertaken in most cases nor was it undertaken for highly irrational motives. People placed their trust in a leader because, although he was without any formal education, he demonstrated an extraordinary ability to comprehend and explain matters of the highest complexity. Moreover, they placed their confidence in a man whose message made sense in terms of the emotional, political and moral chaos into which their society had been plunged by the crisis of legitimacy affecting the reigning awujale. Their faith was in one who could guide them through the apparently insurmountable trials and difficulties of life.

This study of response to prophecy, furthermore, has not only pointed up the similarities between Weber's ideal type prophet and Muhammad Jumat Imam but has also attempted to make clear the extent to which the movement he founded was highly dependent on his charisma.

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94 Interview with Professor Asuni, Ibadan, op.cit.

95 Ibid.