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# Ruling the Unruly : a Provincial History of the Mahdiyya in Eastern Sudan (1883-1891)

Anaël Poussier

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**UNIVERSITÉ PARIS 1 PANTHÉON-SORBONNE**

**École doctorale d'histoire (ED 113)**

Laboratoire de rattachement : SIRICE

THÈSE

Pour l'obtention du titre de Docteur en Histoire

Présentée et soutenue publiquement

le 26 avril 2024 par

**M. Anaël POUSSIER**

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*Gouverner les rebelles : une histoire provinciale de la Mahdiyya  
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**Sous la direction de M. Pierre VERMEREN**

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**Membres du jury**

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## Résumé

Cette étude explore les modalités de la présence mahdiste au Soudan-Est entre 1883 et 1891. Elle s'appuie sur des sources administratives produites par le régime mahdiste, en particulier les agents du trésor de Tūkar. Ces sources uniques par leur cohérence permettent de développer une réflexion sur les relations entretenues entre les populations locales issues dans leur majorité des communautés bijāwī et le pouvoir central mahdiste. Ces relations doivent être replacées dans une histoire longue des contacts entre ces communautés tournées vers le pastoralisme nomade et les structures politiques de la haute vallée du Nil, notamment dans le cadre de l'expansion du régime ottomano-égyptien depuis 1840. L'arrivée du 'āmil 'Uthmān Diqna en 1883 représente une bascule mais l'expansion du mahdisme doit être replacée dans le cadre plus large de la crise socio-économique qui affecte la région depuis une décennie. Tandis que le conflit entre les Mahdistes et les forces anglo-égyptiennes empêcha la formation d'une véritable administration provinciale, ceci changea à partir de 1885 et la capitulation de Kasalā. Une gouvernance fut mise en place qui est à la fois influencée par les pratiques antérieures, mais également unique au mahdisme. Sa fonction primordiale était la gestion des aspects économiques de la mobilisation pour le jihād. À cet égard, la fiscalité, les échanges commerciaux, et la production de grain furent trois enjeux majeurs. Cependant, le régime provincial mahdiste visait aussi la formation d'une société réformée. Cet objectif demeura inachevé mais l'importance des efforts consentis pour faire émerger une communauté mahdiste montre la pérennité du message du Mahdī.

## Summary

This study explores the modalities of the Mahdist presence in Eastern Sudan between 1883 and 1891. It is based on administrative sources produced by the Mahdist regime, in particular the treasury agents in Tūkar. These sources, which are unique in their coherence, make it possible to develop a reflection on the relations maintained between the local populations, the majority of whom came from bijāwī communities, and the Mahdist central power. These relations must be seen in the context of the long history of contacts between these communities, mainly nomadic pastoralists, and the political structures of the Upper Nile Valley, particularly in the context of the expansion of the Ottoman-Egyptian regime from 1840 onwards. The arrival of the 'āmil 'Uthmān Diqna in 1883 represented a watershed, but the expansion of Mahdism must be seen in the wider context of the socioeconomic crisis that had been affecting the region for a decade. While the conflict between the Mahdists and the Anglo-Egyptian forces prevented the formation of a real provincial administration, this changed in 1885 with the surrender of Kasalā. A form of governance was established that was both influenced by former practices and unique to Mahdism. Its primary function was the management of the economic aspects of mobilisation for the jihād. In this regard, taxation, trade, and grain production were three major issues. However, the Mahdist provincial regime also aimed to form a reformed society. This objective remained unfulfilled, but the scale of the efforts made to bring about the emergence of a Mahdist community shows the enduring nature of the Mahdī's message.

**Mots-clés :** Histoire – Soudan – Soudan-Est – mer Rouge – Mahdiyya – millénarisme – gouvernement – *jihād* – dix-neuvième siècle

**Keywords:** History – Sudan – Eastern Sudan – Red Sea – Mahdiyya – government – millenarianism – *jihād* – nineteenth century



اهدي هذه الأطروحة إلى أمي.



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**NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION AND LANGUAGE**

*i) Transliteration*

For the transliteration of Arabic words, I have followed the guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES). Vowels were determined according to the most common usage in classical Arabic, as given in the *Hans Wehr*. No attempt was made to preserve Sudanese pronunciation, because it may have evolved over time, because we know very little as to the existence of a specific accent among the communities in Eastern Sudan, and most importantly, because it reflects local modes of pronunciations which would certainly not be taken into account for other languages. Words specific to the Sudanese dialect were transliterated according to the most common writing in Arabic.

Arabic	Transliteration	Arabic	Transliteration	Arabic	Transliteration
ء	'	ز	z	ق	q
ب	b	س	s	ك	k
ت	t	ش	sh	ل	l
ث	th	ص	ṣ	م	m
ج	j	ض	ḍ	ن	n
ح	ḥ	ط	ṭ	ه	h
خ	kh	ظ	ẓ	ا	ā
د	d	ع	ʿ	و	w / ū
ذ	dh	غ	gh	ي	y / ī
ر	r	ف	f	ة	a

For names, consistency and rigour have been favoured over readability. All Arabic names have been transliterated using the IJMES guidelines. However, inflections have not been used. Therefore, Abū Qarja will be consistently used and not Abī Qarja. When in doubt, the spelling follows the one chosen by Peter M. Holt<sup>1</sup> or Richard Hill<sup>2</sup>.

Contrary to the common practice, the same rules are used for geographical names. Most readers will probably feel as comfortable with El Obeid as with al-Ubayyid, and those who may have prior knowledge of these places will, hopefully, not feel irremediably lost when confronted with Sawākin rather than with Suakin. The only exceptions to these rules are capitals (Khartoum, Cairo, and Mecca). Names for which I could not ascertain the pronunciation are enclosed in brackets. These are mostly of Bijāwī origin. The motive for this choice is to avoid a disconnect between academic history written in English and that in Arabic, as well as the vibrant and teeming

<sup>1</sup> Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan: 1881-1898: A study of its origins, development and overthrow*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1958.

<sup>2</sup> Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, Londres, Frank Cass & Co., 1967.



production of vernacular history by passionate Sudanese. Fidelity to Arabic spelling is but a token of my debt toward these scholars' work.

Lastly, Arabic plurals are consistently used throughout this dissertation. The plural form is indicated when the singular is used for the first time and conversely for the plural. All terms are indicated in the glossary.

#### *ii) Bijāwī Terms and Names*

This text contains a number of references to terms and names specific to Bijāwiye, the most common language in Eastern Sudan before Arabic. The choice has been made to transliterate these terms based on their rendition in the Arabic script, thus following the sources of the Mahdist administration. At the risk of succumbing to a form of Arabocentrism, this a conscious decision that reflects the central theme of this dissertation, namely the exploration of the relations between the Mahdist state and the Bijāwī communities, from the perspective of the state itself, and so, mostly based on Arabic documents. Consequently, no attempts has been made to retrieve the Bijāwī spelling of toponyms (e.g. al-Tayb and not Andetteib).

The term Bijāwī has been favoured to the more common ethnonym of Beja. It is meant to refer to Bijāwiye-speakers and so to avoid an essentialist and ethnicised conception of Eastern Sudan's populations. Indeed, one of the arguments presented in the pages below is that in the late nineteenth century, linguistic categories trumped other forms of identification. The Bijāwī were first and foremost a community that shared a language at the heart of a larger set of common practices.

Bijāwī names follow the spelling used by Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Dīrār. When different spellings can be found, a very common occurrence for Eastern Sudan's toponyms, the most common one today has been favoured (e.g. Tūkar and not Ṭūkar).

#### *iii) Note on Titles*

The different titles used by the Mahdist administration have not been translated, with two exceptions for Pasha (instead of Bāshā) and Bey (instead of Bāk). The main reason for this is that they were not used in a consistent manner and different titles could be used concomitantly, as was frequently the case, for example, for *amīr* and *āmil*. Thus, translating them would not bring much more clarity while it would certainly entail an unwarranted restriction of their meaning.

Nonetheless, for the sake of clarity, *āmil* will always refer to 'Uthmān b. Abū Bakr Diqna in Eastern Sudan's context, except in quotes. The term *amīr* will be reserved for military commanders, despite the fact that, there too, practices could vary greatly. Both head clerks and delegates carried the title of *amīn*, but only the former will be designated as such in this dissertation.

#### *iv) Standard and Hijrī Dates*

In most cases, especially in reference to Mahdist sources, the *hijrī* date is indicated between parentheses. It is a practical choice, due to the numerous issues raised by attempting to convert all dates while manipulating administrative records, but also a constant reminder of the significance of time for a millenarian movement like Mahdism.

## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>Acronyms</b>	
BNA	British National Archives (London, United Kingdom)
BNF	Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris, France)
DUL	Durham University Library (Durham, United Kingdom)
DMI	Department of Military Intelligence
FO	Foreign Office
HCPP	House of Commons Parliamentary Papers
MTT	Maria Theresa thaler
NRO	National Records Office (Khartoum, Sudan)
WO	War Office
<b>Abbreviations</b>	
aft.	after
b.	<i>ibn / bin</i>
bef.	before
bt.	<i>bint</i>
c.	<i>circa</i>
pl.	plural
sing.	singular
w.	<i>walad / wad</i>
<b>Units</b>	
ard.	<i>ardabb</i>
k.	<i>kīs</i> (bag)
kl.	<i>kīla</i>
qr.	<i>qirsh</i>
r.	<i>riyāl</i>
£	British pound
E£	Egyptian pound
<b>Shortened references</b>	
<i>Al-āthār al-kāmila</i>	M. I. Abū Salīm (ed.), <i>Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī</i>
<i>Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna</i>	Al-Ṭāhir al-Majdhūb, <i>Daftar ‘Uthmān b. Abī Bakr Diqna</i>
<i>Murshid</i>	M. I. Abū Salīm (ed.), <i>Al-murshid ilā wathā’iq al-Mahdī</i>
<i>Report on the Dervish Rule</i>	Maj. F. R. Wingate, <i>Report on the Dervish Rule in the Eastern Sudan</i>
<i>Report on the Soudan</i>	Lt.-Col. Stewart, <i>Report on the Soudan</i>
<i>Ṣīra</i>	M. I. Abū Salīm (ed.), <i>Sa‘ādat al-mustahdī bi-sīrat al-imām al-Mahdī</i>
<i>Waqā’i‘</i>	M. I. Abū Salīm (ed.), <i>Daftar Waqā’i‘ ‘Uthmān Diqna</i>

## GLOSSARY

<b>Misc.</b>	
<i>daym</i> (pl. <i>duyūm</i> )	camp
<i>dhura</i>	sorghum
<i>dukhn</i>	millet
<i>faqīh</i> (pl. <i>fuqahā`</i> or <i>fuqarā`</i> )	holymen
<i>ijāza</i> (pl. <i>ijāzaāt</i> )	license, authorisation to spread the teachings of a <i>shaykh</i>
<i>maṭmūrā</i> (pl. <i>maṭāmīr</i> )	underground granary
<i>ma`mūriyya</i> (pl. <i>ma`mūriyyāt</i> )	district during the Turkiyya
<i>mudīriyya</i> (pl. <i>mudīriyyāt</i> )	province during the Turkiyya
<i>salif</i>	Bijāwī customary law
<i>sāqiya</i> (pl. <i>sawāqī</i> )	waterwheel
<i>ṭarīqa</i> (pl. <i>ṭuruq</i> )	Sufi brotherhood
<i>tukul</i>	hut
<i>zarība</i> (pl. <i>zarā`ib</i> )	enclosure made of thorny bush
<b>Geography</b>	
<i>‘aṭmūr</i>	rained desert
<i>‘Aytbāy</i>	the plain west to the Red Sea Hills (also Awlib)
Gwineb	coastal plain between the Red Sea Hills and the littoral
<i>khūr</i> (pl. <i>khayrān</i> )	seasonal river depression (often larger than a <i>wādī</i> )
Awlib / Olib	the plain west to the Red Sea Hills (also <i>‘Aytbāy</i> )
<i>ṣa`īd</i>	upstream
<i>wādī</i> (pl. <i>widyān</i> )	seasonal river valley
<b>Titles and functions</b>	
<i>‘āmil</i> (pl. <i>‘ummāl</i> / <i>‘umalā`</i> )	provincial governor
<i>amīr</i> (pl. <i>umarā`</i> )	military commander
<i>amīn</i> (pl. <i>umanā`</i> )	secretary or head clerk
<i>shārif</i> (pl. <i>ashrāf</i> )	companions of the Mahdī
<i>diqlal</i>	Banī` Āmir tribal heads
<i>kāshif</i> (pl. <i>kashafa</i> )	Ottoman governor in the Dunqulā Reach
<i>makk</i> (pl. <i>mukūk</i> )	king, mostly used in the Nile Valley
<i>ma`mūr</i> (pl. <i>ma`mūrīn</i> )	head of a district during the Turkiyya
<i>mānjil</i> (pl. <i>manājil</i> )	governor under the Funj
<i>mudīr</i> (pl. <i>mudīrīn</i> )	head of a province during the Turkiyya
<i>muqaddam</i> (pl. <i>maqādim</i> / <i>maqādīm</i> )	military commander under the <i>amīr</i>
<i>nā`ib</i> (pl. <i>nuwwāb</i> )	representative
<i>nāṣir</i> (pl. <i>anṣār</i> )	Mahdist combatants

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## INTRODUCTION

“Tu crois que c’est le sens de l’Histoire qui s’est inversé ? Qu’elle irait et repartirait le long du Nil, l’Histoire, jusqu’ici, comme une marée ? [...] On serait dans le seul lieu du monde, peut-être, où la fameuse, la fumeuse Histoire n’est ni cyclique, ni dialectique, ni linéaire et progressiste, non, mais alternative ?”

Olivier Rolin, *Méroé* (1998)<sup>1</sup>

“Long before the riders of the Mahdiyya appeared, I had an emancipated wife named Mabrūka”, wrote Yūsuf Khaṭīb in a letter he sent to the famous ‘āmil of Eastern Sudan, ‘Uthmān b. Abū Bakr Diqna (c. 1840-1926), on Friday 14 December 1888 (9 Rabī‘ II 1306), just a few days before the last attempt to seize the Red Sea port of Sawākin was crushed by British forces. Yūsuf had probably been toiling in the trenches dug around all around the city and experienced, like the *anṣār* (sing. *nāṣir*)<sup>2</sup>, the hardships caused by several months of military operations. Yet, this did not prevent Yūsuf from airing the pressing concern on which he now elaborated: “After her emancipation, I married her according to the *Sunna* of God and His Prophet. She stayed with me and gave me a daughter named ‘Azīza. [But] I left them, her and her daughter, in Khartoum when I headed to the west<sup>3</sup>.” He did not give details as to the circumstances of his departure, only that he joined Muḥammad Khālid the “Cudgel” (*Zuqal*) (d. 1903) who had been appointed by the Mahdī as the *amīr* general (*amīr ‘umūm*) of the Dār Fūr province in November 1883 (Muḥarram 1301) and had immediately set out to establish his authority on the main towns of the region—Umm Shanqa, Dāra, Kābkābiyya and al-Fāshir—, a mission he completed in mid-January 1884 (mid-Rabī‘ I 1301)<sup>4</sup>. In all likelihood, Yūsuf had left Khartoum at some point in 1885 (1302/3), after the city had fallen into the hands of the Mahdists on 26 January 1885 (9 Rabī‘ II 1302) and witnessed Charles G. “Chinese” Gordon’s (1833-1885) climatic death on the steps of the governor’s palace. Yūsuf did

1 Olivier ROLIN, *Méroé*, Paris, Points, 2000, p. 24. “Do you think the direction of History has reversed? That History would flow back and forth, all the way up to here, like a tide? [...] We’d be in the only place in the world, perhaps, where the famous, cloudy History is neither cyclical, nor dialectical, nor linear and progressive, no, but alternative?”

2 With the meaning of “assistant” or “helper”, this was the term used by the Mahdist authorities to designate its own combatants in a direct reference to early Islam when this was the usual designation for the Medinan “helpers” of the Prophet. Other names such as *muhājirūn* meaning “migrants” or *darāwish* (sing. *darwish*) for “dervishes”, in use during the early phase of the Mahdiyya, were abandoned or banned. However, *fuqarā’* (sing. *faqīr*) meaning “pauper” and, in the Sudanese context, a member of a Sufī *ṭarīqa*, remained present much longer. See Hassan Ahmad IBRAHIM, “Al-Anṣār (Sudan),” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2009 [online].

3 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 1.

4 Rudolf C. SLATIN, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan: A Personal Narrative of Fighting and Serving the Dervishes. 1879-1895*, London, E. Arnold, 1896, p. 244–278 ; Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan (1881-1898): A Study of its Origins, Development and Overthrow*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 76 ; Mūsā al-Mubārak AL-ḤASAN, *Tārīkh Dār Fūr al-siyāsī, 1882-1895*, Khartoum, Khartoum University Press, 1970, p. 64–68.



not mention it, but it is most probable that he was forcefully mobilised, as was the case for many Egyptians (*awlād al-rīf*) (including Copts) established in Nilotic Sudan<sup>5</sup>, because of their particular skills. Indeed, in his letter, Yūsuf described himself as an “artillery carpenter (*najjār al-madāfi*)”<sup>6</sup>.

When he returned to the Nile Valley, at some point in 1886/7 (1304) the capital of the former Egyptian colonial government had been entirely abandoned and the new power’s seat established on the opposite bank, in Umm Durmān, hence dubbed the “Holy Spot (*al-buq‘a al-sharīfa*)”. For as much as he tried, he was unable to find his wife and daughter “among those who had left Khartoum”, presumably in August 1886 (D. al-Ḥijja 1303) when the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhī (1846-1899), the Mahdī’s successor, ordered all the remaining inhabitants to leave the city and relocate in Umm Durmān<sup>7</sup>. He had been looking for them since.

As the new Mahdist capital was rapidly developing, there is little doubt that Yūsuf could have found work there on one of the many building sites. But then again, he decided or was forced to leave and joined a detachment (*sariyya*) heading to Kasalā, maybe with the *‘āmil* of Eastern Sudan himself who was visiting Umm Durmān in July/August 1887 (D. al-Qa‘da 1304) to attend the council of the *umarā’* (sing. *amīr*)<sup>8</sup>. Before he left, he took the precaution to petition the Khalīfa about his wife and daughter’s disappearance, in the hope of obtaining some assistance. The Mahdist leader instructed Yūsuf orally (*amr shafāhī*) to notify him if he ever found them. If indeed he left with ‘Uthmān Dīqna, Yūsuf Khaṭīb cannot have arrived in Kasalā much later than September 1887 (D. al-Ḥijja 1304). This means that he spent at least six months in Eastern Sudan’s largest town. Indeed, in March 1888 (Rajab 1305) as he was preparing to leave for Tūkar—the headquarters of the Mahdist provincial authorities near the Red Sea littoral—with Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Abū Qarja (d. 1916), he saw his wife with someone from the banner (*rāya*) of ‘Uthmān Dīqna’s *umarā’*, Yūsuf w. Muḥammad al-Amīn w. al-Hindī. That person told him that she had been placed under his care by ‘Awaḍ al-Karīm<sup>9</sup> who had gone to al-Qaḍārif. The latter claimed to have bought them from the treasury, one can assume in Umm Durmān.

The situation was bleak but before Yūsuf left for Tūkar, he managed to place his wife under the guardianship of the *qāḍī* of Kasalā. He had to wait again for several months before he finally

5 See, for example, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, Khartoum, Markaz Abū Salīm li-l-dirāsāt, 2004, letter 199.

6 When ‘Uthmān Dīqna transferred Yūsuf Khaṭīb’s petition to the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhī, asking for instructions, he referred to its author as a “wood carpenter (*najjār khashab*)” while the Khalīfa’s answer designated him as an “artillery specialist (*awsā al-madāfi*)” (*Daftar ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, p. 230). A year and half later, in June 1890 (D. al-Qa‘da 1307), with most military operations suspended and Sawākin’s siege long abandoned, his activities had taken a more civil overtone and his carpenter skills were used for construction work (*imāra*), as mentioned when the payment of his salary was recorded by the treasury (NRO Mahdiyya 5/06/29B, p. 43).

7 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, op. cit., p. 104.

8 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, op. cit., letters 4, 7 and 8.

9 In all likelihood ‘Awaḍ al-Karīm Faḍl Allāh Kāfūt, one of the main military leaders of the Mahdist army stationed in Eastern Sudan.

received a letter from the said ‘Awaḍ al-Karīm who declared that he was ready to surrender his ownership over Mabrukā and ‘Azīza. Still, the issue was not easily settled. Yūsuf was busy with artillery repairs, and so could not go to Kasalā, but he wrote in his reply: “I cannot leave my daughter and her mother as the property [of someone] (*ghayr mumkin tark ibnatī wa ummahā mamlūkātīn*)”. The crux of the issue was that he was unable to provide evidence that they were indeed free. All he could do was refer to his acquaintances from their time in Khartoum, among whom figured distinguished figures such as ‘Abd al-Qādir Salāṭīn, the former governor of Dār Fūr, better known, before his conversion to Islam, as Rudolf Carl von Slatin (1857-1932). He gave other names like Muḥammad Sa‘īd Islāmbūliya and Muḥammad Yūsuf Sa‘īd al-Bannā<sup>10</sup> and insisted that all “know the truth about her condition [...] when I was responsible for her in Khartoum (*muwakkal-hu ‘alay-hā*)”. He added that “others know her, and now, they are present in the Holy Spot”. In the meantime, Yūsuf Khaṭīb wished for his family to be sent to him from Kasalā with the assistance of Ḥāmid ‘Alī, the *amīr* of the city. Eventually, on 16 June 1889 (16 Shawwāl 1306), the Khalīfa wrote to ‘Uthmān Diqna to “remove the damage” done to Yūsuf Khaṭīb<sup>11</sup>. Two months later, they were yet to be reunited, but the Khalīfa’s decision had lifted the legal ambivalence allowing the carpenter of the Mahdist camp in Tūkar to write to Abū Qarja that he wished to send something to his family in Kasalā. Since “[his] hands are empty”, he asked whether he could receive an advance on his monthly salary<sup>12</sup>.

The Egyptian carpenter’s name appears time and time again in the records of the treasury of Tūkar, from April 1889 (Sha‘bān 1306) to late 1890 (early 1308)<sup>13</sup>. He may have been missing his family, but he was not alone. In April 1889 (Sha‘bān 1306), when the administrators of the treasury first registered his allowance in grain, they noted that he was accompanied with eight dependants

10 Muḥammad Yūsuf Sa‘īd al-Bannā could not be identified with certainty, but Muḥammad Sa‘īd Islāmbūliya was a well-know Syrian Christian merchant from al-Ubayyīd. When the Mahdists began their siege of the town, he joined them, with most of the inhabitants of the city. He played an important role in its final surrender on 19 January 1883 (10 Rabī‘ I 1300). Later, Yūsuf Mīkhā‘īl mentions that Christian prisoners were entrusted to him (Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK (ed.), *Mudhakkirāt Yūsuf Mīkhā‘īl: al-Turkiyya wa-l-Mahdiyya wa-l-ḥukm al-thunā‘ī fī al-Sūdān*, Khartoum, Markaz ‘Abd al-Karīm Mīrghānī al-thaqāfī, 2017, p. 83.) and he was appointed by the Mahdī as *muqaddam* of the Christians (Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, Londres, Frank Cass & Co., 1967, p. 187). His real name was George (Jūrjī) Iṣṭambūliya. These contacts tend to indicate that Yūsuf Khaṭīb himself was a Copt.

11 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, p. 230.

12 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 36.

13 The records and receipts for the payments of his monthly salary of 10 r. *qūshlī* and stipend of half an *ardabb* for Sha‘bān to D. al-Hijja 1306 (April to August 1889) (NRO Mahdiyya 5/03/11, p. 36, and Mahdiyya 5/14/49, doc. 61) as well as Muḥarram (September 1889) (NRO Mahdiyya 2/07/01, doc. 66) and D. al-Qa‘da 1307 (NRO Mahdiyya 5/06/29B, p. 43) have been preserved. He was also mentioned among the servants of the treasury who collectively received 3 ard. of grain in late Ṣafar 1307 (October 1889) (NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/65). The last occurrence of his name in the available record appears in a letter written by Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Abū Qarja in which the latter requested that Yūsuf Khaṭīb’s debt of 18 r. to a merchant named ‘Abd al-Khāliq ‘Abd al-Qādir be reimbursed by the treasury (NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/63, doc. 93).

(*‘awā’il*)<sup>14</sup>. On 30 June 1889 (1<sup>st</sup> D. al-Qa‘da 1306), the secretary of the treasury modified his allowance from 20 qa. to 1 ardabb<sup>15</sup>. The reason was not mentioned but the additional grain matches what would be granted for two individuals. Could this decision be the result of the Khalīfa’s ruling to return Mabrūka and ‘Azīza to Yūsuf taken two weeks before<sup>16</sup>?

This petition shows a world in turmoil, a world where individuals, spaces and categories were being rapidly transformed by the millenarian and *jihādī* movement initiated by Muḥammad Aḥmad (1840-1885) in 1881 (1298) and the regime it founded, the Mahdiyya, until its overthrow in 1898 (1316). When he returned from Dār Fūr, not only Yūsuf Khaṭīb did not find his wife and child, but the city itself where they had lived had been fully evacuated, for a new enormous capital to emerge on the opposite bank of the Nile. In the course of a few years, this carpenter had probably converted to Islam and travelled over more than 2 000 km, from the most westerly region where Mahdist rule was established, to its eastern limits, the border with Abyssinia and the Red Sea Littoral. In the span of eighteen years, the Mahdiyya overhauled the lives of many, displacing groups across vast regions, mobilising people from radically different communities, and attempting to have them fight side by side for the *jihād*. In December 1888 (Rabī‘ II 1306), barely five year after the foundation of the Mahdist regime, an Egyptian Copt could ask a merchant of Bijāwī background, after having followed a Dunqulāwī to Eastern Sudan, to advocate his case to a member of the Baqqāra Ta‘ā’īsha, so as to prove to a Shukriyya the emancipated status of his wife—herself most probably from the southern regions of the Upper Nile Valley—and his daughter, backed, among others, by the testimony a former Austro-Hungarian officer of Jewish origin. What meaning did Yūsuf give to these interactions? What representations informed them? How did he understand the events that had shaped them?

To answer these questions requires firstly to develop a reflexion on the boundaries of the space within which Yūsuf Khaṭīb’s journey unfolded. This will be the object of the section below. While the mobilities observed during the Mahdiyya were novel in their intensity and scale, they were deeply related to dynamics that had emerged at the end of the eighteenth century when Nilotic Sudan witnessed significant population movements, the emergence of powerful urban centres, and profound structural socioeconomic changes. The second section will chart these transformations to show that the Mahdiyya did not represent a break with these larger trends but, on the contrary, their sudden and brutal acceleration. The first part’s underlying purpose is to anchor the Mahdist movement’s history in a properly Sudanese context. Indeed, the second part will present a brief

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14 The term used in Mahdist archives is *‘ā’ila*. Often translated by “family”, in this context it refers to the entire household, including wives, children and slaves.

15 NRO Mahdiyya 5/02/06 (p. 28).

16 This is likely, but the question is made more obscure as Yūsuf Khaṭīb only received 12 qa. for each of these months. Again, no reason is given for this discrepancy.

overview of its historiography so as to demonstrate that the Mahdiyya has long been studied as a form of historical *hapax*, a singular parenthesis both internally, with regard to Sudanese history, and externally, with regard to the history of the neighbouring entities. Until recently, this bias contributed to the framing of the dominant narrative presented in the second section. Its focus on military operations and political developments eschews several fundamental questions as regards the dynamics of mobilisation, the nature of Mahdist engagement, and the ambiguities of the state construction process. The third and last section will argue that studying the Mahdiyya in the context of its implementation in Eastern Sudan, that is from one of its margins, brings new light to this history.

## Locating Nilotic Sudan in Space and Time

### *A) Spatial Ambivalence: Is Nilotic Sudan in Africa?*

On 23 September 1964, the British historian Paul Hair (1926-2001) gave a short talk before the University of Khartoum's Historical society in which he offered to answer a stimulating question: "how African is the history of the Sudan?" Hair underlined the growing trend of "Africanisation of Sudan History" that he opposed to the "view from the North" that treated Sudan as "a peripheral region of various Mediterranean and Middle East civilisations" and explained most of Sudanese history through external interventions such as the "Arab invasion". According to him, the reason for this "one-directional approach" was that "in colonial days, the Sudan came to be considered as primarily a department of the Middle East<sup>17</sup>." Egyptian political considerations tended to minimise the distance between the Upper and Lower Nile Valley to favour a perspective based on the generative trope of the "unity of the Nile Valley (*waḥdat wādī al-Nīl*)". The overemphasis of the importance of the Nile axis was mainly a political construct and the product of a discourse which began to emerge in the nineteenth century and was later taken up by Egyptian nationalists. Conversely, the establishment of a colonial border between Sudan and Chad separating the British and French empires had for consequence the partial disconnection of those two territories' historiographies.

Beyond the weight of these colonial representations on Sudanese historiography, the subsequent territorial unification of Sudan under Condominium rule after the British occupation of Dār Fūr in 1916 (1334/5) constitutes a second obstacle. To envision Nilotic Sudan as a single spatial entity is misleading and projecting the borders of Sudan on this space can only strengthen the

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<sup>17</sup> Paul E. H. HAIR, "How African is the History of the Sudan?," *Sudan Society*, 1969, p. 39–58.



**Fig. 0.1:** Map of the Upper Nile Valley in the late nineteenth century

teleological vision of the formation of a national Sudanese polity as a necessary destiny. On the contrary, the extreme diversity of local and regional configurations on a vast scale must be taken into account. One should remember that Sudan in its pre-2011 borders covered roughly the same area as Western Europe or a third of the United States. This immense territory was (and still is) characterised by a great linguistic diversity. While some regions adopted Arabic, some others kept the use of a more localised language as their vernacular, for reasons that are still debated<sup>18</sup>.

Setting aside the numerous contacts and interconnections with adjacent territories, the cohesiveness of Nilotic Sudan's territory in the modern period lay on clear spatial discontinuities. The first of such line of separations was located to the north of the Sudanese territory, near what is now the border with Egypt. Indeed, when the troops of the Ottoman governor Mehmet Ali (r. 1805-1848) penetrated Upper Nubia in 1820 (1235/6), the last time that an authority based in Egypt had managed to impose itself for a significant period beyond the three northern cataracts was more than two thousand years prior<sup>19</sup>. These consecutive barriers on the Nile severely impeded circulations on the river (see fig. 0.1). In addition, due to the rocky nature of the terrain near the second cataract—the most difficult of the three to cross<sup>20</sup>, a characteristic to which it owes its name of “Belly of Stone (*Baṭn al-ḥajar*)<sup>21</sup>”, access to the water itself, a crucial commodity in this environment, could be difficult. The narrowing of arable lands also meant that resources were scarce and human settlements few, factors which brought together made circulating on the Nile or on its banks a troublesome matter. As a result, the Nile portion between Arqū and Wādī Ḥalfā formed a Nubian bottleneck, quite invisible on maps, with significant consequences on the history of Sudan in the *longue durée*. For one, this was the region where Islam's expansion in the seventh century was abruptly stopped. With the signature of the famous *Baqt* in 652 (31/2), Arab conquerors were pushed back and the message of the Prophet Muḥammad would wait for half a millennium before gaining a significant number of adherents in Nilotic Sudan. The Ottomans who conquered Egypt in the early sixteenth century fared only slightly better when they attempted to pursue their advance into Funj territory<sup>22</sup>. There are uncertain traces of a first push in 1555 (962/3) which was cut short by a mutiny among the troops. The Ottomans' most southerly opposition was established at Ibrīm,

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18 Rex S. O'FAHEY, “Islamic Hegemonies in the Sudan: Sufism, Mahdism and Islamism,” in Louis Brenner (ed.), *Muslim identity and social change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, London, Hurst & Company, 1993, p. 22.

19 Indeed, from c. 1450 to c. 850 BCE the Egyptian pharaohs imposed their domination on Nubia. The Nile Valley was again briefly united from c. 750 to 650 BCE, this time under the rule of the Nubian Pharaohs of the XXV<sup>th</sup> dynasty. See Olivier CABON et al., *Histoire et civilisations du Soudan: de la préhistoire à nos jours*, Paris, Soleb, 2017, p. 85–114; 133–155.

20 Na'ūm SHUQAYR, *Géographie du Soudan*, translated by Vivianne YAGI, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2012, p. 24.

21 Peter M. HOLT and Martin W. DALY, *A History of the Sudan: From the Coming of Islam to the Present Day*, London, Routledge, 2011, p. 15.

22 The Funj sultanate was founded in the early sixteenth century and overthrown by Egyptian Ottomans in 1821. The most important work on this topic is still Jay Spaulding's *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, Trenton and Asmara, Red Sea Press, 2007.

downstream the second cataract, where a fortress was built between 1555 and 1570 (977/8). Another advance may have been carried out without clear results in 1577 (984/5), but the real headway happened in 1585 (992/3) when they finally reached the third cataract. They failed to progress beyond that point and soon after were forced to withdraw, a result often ascribed to the successful opposition mounted by the ‘Abdallāb—the main polity north of the confluence of the two Niles in the early modern period—who kept the tradition of a major victory at Ḥannik, north of Dunqulā<sup>23</sup>.

Little changed in the next three centuries. When Mehmet Ali (1769-1849) decided to invade Nilotic Sudan in 1820 (1235/6), in search of gold and slaves, the Egyptian expedition encountered immense challenges<sup>24</sup>, even if sufficient political and economic impetus could overcome these obstacles. Starting in September from Wādī Ḥalfā, the Egyptian troops managed to move beyond the Nubian bottleneck and defeat the Shāyqiyya<sup>25</sup>, the community which controlled the territory between the two bends of the Nile, to reach Sinnār, the capital of the Funj Sultanate, with relative ease in late August 1821. In less than a year, they had imposed their authority over a stretch of the Upper Nile Valley long of more than a thousand kilometres. At the same time, on 20 August 1821, another column headed to the west had reached al-Ubayyid and wrestled control of Kurdufān from the Fūr sultan<sup>26</sup>. But further expansion was considerably slower.

Later military endeavours were plagued by the same set of troubles. The 1884-1885 (1301-1302) expedition led by the Adjutant-General Wolseley (1833-1913) to rescue Khartoum from the siege imposed by the Mahdist troops was crippled by logistical issues. Two steamers, a reconnaissance party, eventually reached the city on 28 January 1885 (11 Rabī‘ II 1302), two days after it was stormed by the *anṣār* and Charles G. Gordon killed, a “heroic” death that founded one of the most powerful imperial myths<sup>27</sup>. Subsequent uproar in British public opinion caused by this operation’s delays failed to consider that, in reality, the main body of troops was still hundreds of kilometres away from Khartoum. They were late by weeks, maybe months, not days.

Conversely, south to north movements were hampered by the same issues. The largest military operation organised by the Mahdist state within the framework of its *jihādī* expansion,

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23 Andrew C. S. PEACOCK, “The Ottomans and the Funj Sultanate in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 2012, vol. 75, no. 1, p. 93; 96.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

25 At the battles of Kūrṭī on 4 November 1820 and Jabal Daiqa on 2 December 1820.

26 Richard L. HILL, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 8–13.

27 Douglas H. JOHNSON, “The Death of Gordon: A Victorian Myth,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 1982, vol. 10, no. 3, p. 285–310; John M. MACKENZIE, “Heroic Myths of Empire,” in John M. MacKenzie (ed.), *Popular Imperialism and the Military, 1850-1950*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1992, p. 125–132; Stephanie LAFFER, *Gordon’s Ghosts: British Major-General Charles George Gordon and His Legacies, 1885-1960*, PhD diss., Florida State University, 2010; Berny SÈBE, *Heroic Imperialists in Africa: The Promotion of British and French Colonial Heroes, 1870-1939*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015.

under the command of the famous *amīr* ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Nujūmī (d. 1889), faced immense difficulties to supply the 13 000 men and women who made up the troops which had reached the Egyptian border. It slowly crumbled under its own weight before being crushed by an Anglo-Egyptian force at the battle of Tūshkī on 3 August 1889 (5 D. al-Ḥijja 1306)<sup>28</sup>. Despite that last military success, the victors had little means to push their advantage.

Seventy years after Mehmet Ali’s expedition, passing through the region and reaching the end of the Nile first bend (from north to south) was still a daunting affair. The investments realised by the Sirdar<sup>29</sup> Herbert H. Kitchener (1850-1916) during the first campaign of Sudan’s “reconquest<sup>30</sup>” in 1896-1897 (1313-1314) signalled its true measure. Indeed, he oversaw the laying of hundreds of kilometres of railway tracks—the Sudan Military Railway (SMR)—to transport the 24 000 men mobilised for the final push against Umm Durmān<sup>31</sup>. Contemporaries marvelled at the technological feat this represented, but none commented on the fact that restoring a largely mythical unity of the Nile had required the engagement of enormous resources and Promethean engineering.

These geographical constraints limited the Nile Valley’s role as an axis of circulation between the Sudanese polities and their northerly neighbour. As a result, during the early modern and modern periods the main trading routes bypassed the area between the third and first cataracts to the west and to the east. In the first case, connections were assured through the famed Forty Days’ Road (*darb al-‘arba ‘īn*) which linked the trading centre of Kubbayh in Dār Fūr, near the sultanate’s capital of al-Fāshir, to Aṣyūṭ in the Egyptian *ṣa‘īd*. Other regional trade networks, particularly from Kurdufān, also converged toward this route. It constituted a vital axis of exchange for goods from the Sahel regions. On the eastern side, another major trade route connected Barbar to Abū Ḥamad from whence merchants left the Nile to cross the Nubian Desert and reach Kūruskū, south of Aṣwān (see fig. 0.1)<sup>32</sup>. Furthermore, the three southern cataracts also contributed, albeit to a

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28 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 178–183.

29 The head of the Egyptian army.

30 While this term is still commonly used, as in the work edited by Edward M. Spiers, *Sudan: The Reconquest Reappraised* (London, Frank Cass & Co., 1998), it should be avoided due to its strong relation to British imperial discourse as it posits the legitimacy of Egyptian colonial rule in the region.

31 Based on calculations derived from the experience of the failed 1884-1885 (1301-1302) campaign, moving such a large body of soldiers, as well as artillery and equipment, would have required the staggering number of 80 000 camels (John W. FORTESCUE, *The Royal Army Service Corps, A History of Transport and Supply in the British Army*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1930, vol. 1, p. 205). That such an important force was deemed necessary to overthrow a regime that was regularly presented by British officers as on the verge of collapse is a testimony to colonial anxieties. Far from the triumphant narrative put forward in most accounts, the level of tension, dread and doubt experienced by Kitchener as the campaign unfolded can hardly be overstated. Overwhelming firepower made the outcome much more predictable than in 1884-1885, but it also heightened the stakes in case of failure, if ever British troops were to suffer a blow on the battlefield. To limit this risk, Kitchener was willing to commit massive resources to build a line across the Nubian Desert from Wādī Ḥalfā to Abū Ḥamad (Edward M. SPIERS, “The Sudan Military Railway,” in *Engines for Empire: The Victorian Army and its Use of Railways*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015, p. 96–114).

32 Intisar Soghayrun ELZEIN, *Trade and Wadis System(s) in Muslim Sudan*, Kampala, Fountain Publishers, 2010, p. 68–77.



lesser extent, to the fragmentation of the Upper Nile Valley by hindering river circulation. This was compounded by the particular position of the bends of the Nile at Abū Ḥamad and al-Dabba. Further upstream, beyond the confluence, both the Blue and White Niles followed more regular paths and thus shaped more straightforward patterns of mobility than up north. Yet, in the case of the Blue Nile, those who wished to travel upstream would eventually encounter a significant barrier once they reached the foothills of the great Abyssinian plateau, to the east of Fāzūghlī. On the White Nile, there were no mountains to bar the path, but an even more indomitable obstacle: the Sudd. On an area which can extend over more than 100 000 km<sup>2</sup> during the rainy season, this is one of the greatest wetlands in the world. Its name does not require an extended interpretation as it simply means the “barrier” in Arabic. Despite powerful economic incentives, it took two decades before the Sudd was opened to commercial interests in the 1840s<sup>33</sup>, and two more decades before the region could be said to have been incorporated into Egyptian Sudan. Still, heir control over the southern regions was fragile at best, as it was for subsequent regimes, including the Mahdist one.

In contrast with the fragmentation of the north-south axis, circulations from west to east (and inversely) met few obstacles of the scope described above, as shown by Yūsuf Khaṭīb’s journeys. If progress was slow and travels always a perilous endeavour, pilgrims from the western sultanates of Borno, Waddāy and Sokoto, but also from territories beyond up to the valley of the Senegal River, could hope, with time and luck, to complete the *ḥājj* to Mecca. They benefitted in Nilotic Sudan from a string of urban settlements like al-Fāshir and al-Ubayyiḍ situated south of Khartoum’s latitude, a line under which average rainfalls regularly increased, with the result that access to water was less uncertain and travels in caravans somewhat safer. To the east, his movement was not impeded until the Abyssinian plateau which reoriented circulations toward the Sudanese Red Sea Littoral. Attempts by Egyptians, Mahdists<sup>34</sup> and later Italians to penetrate this territory in the nineteenth century met with limited success. Contacts between communities of the borderlands were dense, but the rapid shift in topography was nonetheless reflected by distinct spheres of influence. Pilgrims and traders could either try to join Maṣawwa‘, or head to the north-east and follow the foothills of the plateau through the *khūr* Baraka to join the littoral and the port of Sawākin where they could embark for Jidda. The importance of this western connection for the history of Nilotic Sudan has not escaped the attention of scholars, quite particularly with respect to

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33 Gondokoro, near Juba, the current capital of South-Sudan, was reached in 1841 by an Egyptian fleet led by Salīm Qapūdān. See Richard L. HILL, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, *op. cit.*, p. 68–70.

34 Iris SERI-HERSCH, “‘Transborder’ Exchanges of People, Things, and Representations: Revisiting the Conflict Between Mahdist Sudan and Christian Ethiopia, 1885-1889,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 2010, vol. 43, no. 1, p. 1–26 ; Haggai ERLICH, “Ethiopia and the Mahdiyya – You Call Me a Chicken?,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 2007, vol. 40, no. 1/2, p. 219–249.

the settlement of Fulani populations<sup>35</sup> in Sudan in the twentieth century<sup>36</sup>.

At the regional level, Sudanese territories were criss-crossed by axes of circulations travelled by nomads, merchants and pilgrims. Nineteenth-century maps only imperfectly rendered the interconnections between the terrain and the manner it structured movements. The only tributary river to the Nile north of Khartoum (the 'Aṭbara River and its main affluents, the Rahad and the Dindir), *widyān* (sing. *wādī*), seasonal rivers of a wide variety of intensity, and the *khayrān* (sing. *khūr*), local depressions, underlay the structure of these networks, since they clearly marked the space and reduced navigational risks, and because in the dry season, residual water stagnated in the underground. Some amount of trust could be placed on the perennial wells dug in these spots. Towns and their markets were the main nodes to these networks. On the Red Sea littoral, harbours were also important positions. Topographies informed circulations.

At the local level, spaces were also highly differentiated and organised in complex patterns related to the rights afferent to their ownership, to the modalities of their economic exploitation, and to the representations which were projected onto them. The organisation of land control differed between the riverain regions where access to the Nile represented the main factor in the management of land, and other spaces such as the open lands of Dār Fūr, the Khayrān<sup>37</sup> of Kurdufān or plots in the Jazīra which were structured by different imperatives. The *khalā*, the “empty space”, and the *jabal*, the mountain, conveyed powerful representations of withdrawal from state norms. This imaginary was potent. This does not entail, of course, that they were anomic.

As a result, a history of the Mahdiyya must necessarily be multi-scalar, that is attached to adopting different hypotheses with regard to the conditions of observation, from micro to macro, following the approach enunciated by Jacques Revel<sup>38</sup>. It must be analysed by holding together considerations derived from the regional context and the particular configuration of the assertion of Mahdist authority in this setting. One of the challenges of writing the history of Nilotic Sudan in the nineteenth century is to heed the cohesiveness of this territory while avoiding the teleological pitfall of considering the formation of the political entities that emerged during this period as the founding blocks of the contemporary Sudan states. The territories within which Yūsuf Khaṭīb circulated were unstable constructs, their borders quickly expanding and contracting and new axes being constantly drawn in direct relation with the tremendous changes and socio-economic upheavals witnessed by this region during a long nineteenth century. This is the subject of the following development.

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35 These populations are known in Sudan under the denomination of Fallāta (from the Kanuri word for Fulani) but also as Takrūr (pl. Takārir).

36 See, for example, Christian Bawa YAMBA, *Permanent Pilgrims: The Role of Pilgrimage in the Lives of West African Muslims in Sudan*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1995.

37 Written here with a capital letter to designate a particular region in Kurdufān.

38 Jacques REVEL (ed.), *Jeux d'échelles: la micro-analyse à l'expérience*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996.

## ***B) Transformations of Nilotic Sudan in the Longue Durée: The Origins of the Mahdist Movement***

### *i) Political and Socioeconomic Crises in Nilotic Sudan in the Nineteenth Century*

The nineteenth century in Nilotic Sudan began in 1762 when the sultan Badi IV was deposed by one of his generals, Muḥammad Abū Likaylik, who had risen to preeminence thanks to his victories in Kurdufān against the Fūr Sultanate<sup>39</sup>. The new regime, the Hamaj Regency (1762-1821), was marred from the onset by instability and the last decades of the Funj Sultanate were marked by political turmoil. Nonetheless, the Hamaj had noticed the tensions which affected the communities of Nilotic Sudan and tried to find ways to reconcile the social order which was emerging in the eighteenth century with adapted institutions of power<sup>40</sup>.

For the past century, more intense contacts with the outside world and the development of long-distance trade relations had mainly benefited the Funj Sultans. However, their monopoly was ever more contested by a nascent merchant class. Noblemen and commoners gathered in towns the number of which grew tenfold, from two to about twenty, between 1700 and 1820<sup>41</sup>. They sought to conduct trade unhampered by the regulations of the sultanate, while founding a new distinctive urban lifestyle at odds with the Funj feudal organisation.

At the same time, Islamic legal views began to penetrate the lower stratum of Nilotic Sudan's societies through the circulation of textbooks on *fiqh*. The "principles of the Arabs", as Jay Spaulding penned it, were to drastically change the socioeconomic configuration of these populations while being one of the main vectors of the demise of the Funj Sultanate. The main actors of this movements were the holymen (sing. *faqih* pl. *fuqahā* /*fuqarā*) who settled in the region and founded Sufi centres of scholarship (*khalwā* pl. *khalwāt*/*khalāwī*) along the river<sup>42</sup>. Initially coopted by the sultan who saw in them allies against the influence of local noble families, these holymen obtained grants over estates and tax exemptions. Their authority over their disciples gradually extended to the entire adjoining communities as their economic power grew, especially since they became responsible for collecting the *zakāt* and the *fiṭra*, two of the main Islamic canonical taxes<sup>43</sup>, and started to engage in trade, replicating the dynamics at play in towns. With the benefits they accrued from these resources, they began to consolidate their hold over ever larger

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39 In the early eighteenth century, Kurdufān was the main battlefield between the two main sultanates in Nilotic Sudan.

40 Jay L. SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, *op. cit.*, p. 123; 167–176 ; Peter M. HOLT and Martin W. DALY, *A History of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 29–31.

41 El-Sayed EL-BUSHRA, "Towns in the Sudan in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1971, vol. 52, p. 63–70.

42 Neil MCHUGH, *Holymen of the Blue Nile: The Making of an Arab-Islamic Community in the Nilotic Sudan, 1500-1850*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1994.

43 See chapter 4.

estates. Judicial matters also became one of their prerogatives, thus contributing to the diffusion of Islamic norms to aspects of riverain communities's everyday life such as matrimonies<sup>44</sup>. These holymen were the architects of a profound restructuring of these societies.

In both cases, the development of these urban and rural enclaves contributed to the weakening of the feudal structure of the Funj Sultanate through the formation of communities that had gained some measure of autonomy from the lords and, ultimately, the sultan himself. The Hamaj regents were aware of these transformations and the tensions that arose with them. As a result, they attempted to favour the integration of this new class within the regime, maybe to find allies to buttress their own fragile legitimacy. A holyman was appointed as *wazīr* and the court opened to others, while their local role as judges and tax collectors was given an official status. As for traders, they were allowed to direct their efforts toward the southern provinces of the Blue Nile that had been left relatively untouched by the social transformations witnessed in the north<sup>45</sup>. But the Hamaj failed to consider that the Islamic norms disseminated within the societies of Nilotic Sudan were undermining the natures of the feudal relations that constituted the fabric itself of the sultanate. The adoption of patrilineal successions in noble families resulted in intense conflicts amongst contenders while depriving the Sultanate from its most potent tool for the control of regional warlords<sup>46</sup>.

The occupation of the upper Nile Valley by the troops of Muḥammad 'Alī in 1821 was eased by the territorial fragmentation observed in the Funj Sultanate for several decades. In that respect, the end of the Funj regime did not constitute a watershed for the socioeconomic dynamics of the region. On the contrary, the policies adopted by the new masters accelerated changes already well engaged. The most meaningful of these changes for the riverain communities were related to the stark evolution of the status of land which resided at the nexus between the effects of the diffusion of Islamic norms and the formation of a bourgeois economy. Originally, all lands situated on the banks of the Nile were the ownership of the Funj sultans who could decide on their allocation by granting estates to noble families. Land use was essentially organised by communities and if property rights were recognised, they were limited to the usufruct. The land itself could not be claimed. This changed rapidly in the course of the eighteenth century. The capital accumulated by the emerging merchant class had few, if any, opportunities for reinvestment beside land holding, a precious commodity in this environment. Coincidentally, the Islamic norms upheld by the holymen were instrumental in drawing a framework for the commodification of land as well as giving legal

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44 Jay L. SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, *op. cit.*, p. 87–110.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 123–126.

46 During the Funj sultanate, nobility status was only granted to the progeny of noble women whose marriages had to be approved by the sultan.

backing to their claims.

But for land to be bought, land had to be sold. Several factors contributed to facilitate land transfers. First, greater abidance to Islamic rules of inheritance, particularly as to its equal division between male heirs, was probably the main cause for the spectacular fractionalisation of land ownership. In the early twentieth century, when British colonial officers attempted to establish land registers<sup>47</sup>, claims of landownership to minuscule plots were presented to them and so they tried to impose a minimum of 1/576<sup>th</sup> of a *sāqiya*<sup>48</sup> for the registration to be accepted. Whereas during the Funj Sultanate, customary law mitigated the issue by providing for a mechanism of compensation for the inheritors of ownership claims lower than one twelfth, a strict application of *sharī'a* law during the Turkiyya led to the fragmentation of ownership rights<sup>49</sup>.

The consolidation of land titles could have been attempted by the members of these communities had their economic position not gradually degraded since the late eighteenth century and throughout the Turkiyya. Their impoverishment was the result of the breaking down of the feudal organisation of interrelated obligations between rural communities and their lords. According to the norms which prevailed under the Funj regime, the surpluses of grain collected by the lords were meant, in principle, to abound their granaries so as to be redistributed in case of bad harvests. But the needs of the emerging urban population led to the formation of a grain market and the rapid commodification of this resource. Since the Hamaj regents had resorted to selling titles over estates to a nobility shaken by the multiplication of family feuds, selling grain surpluses was the most efficient way for the lords to abound their coffers. For the commoners, this meant that they could not rely anymore on food gifts to pull through periods of shortage, and were then forced to buy their subsistence from merchants, most often on credit (*shayl*) based on future harvests<sup>50</sup>. The deeply precarious balance between grain production and consumption in the Upper Nile Valley put the riverain cultivators under constant pressure. The disaggregation of the feudal regime was paralleled by the slow demise of the safeguards that had preserved these communities. They found themselves in a state of structural indebtedness.

The precariousness of rural economies was compounded during the Turkiyya with the overhaul of the taxation system<sup>51</sup>. Contemporary European commentators of the economic situation

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47 Steven SERELS, "Political Landscaping: Land Registration, the Definition of Ownership and the Evolution of Colonial Objectives in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1899-1924," *African Economic History*, 2007, no. 35, p. 59–75.

48 The *sāqiya* designates the waterwheel used for irrigation, but also the land surrounding it. See Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Al-sāqiya*, Khartoum, Ma'had al-dirāsāt al-ifriqiyya wa-l-āsiyawiyya, 1980.

49 Hassan Abdel Aziz AHMED, "The Turkish Taxation System and its Impact on Agriculture in the Sudan," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 1980, vol. 16, no. 1, p. 106 ; Jay L. SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, *op. cit.*, p. 145–146.

50 Jay L. SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, *op. cit.*, p. 112–113.

51 Jay L. SPAULDING, "Slavery, Land Tenure and Social Class in the Northern Turkish Sudan," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 1982, vol. 15, no. 1, p. 1–20.

in Nilotic Sudan systematically decried the confiscatory level of the fiscality established by the Egyptian colonial regime (see below). However, the wide consensus on the unsustainability of the absolute level of tax collection may have concealed more important aspects related to the mechanisms of imposition. Since colonial authorities were intent on satisfying the extractive policies enacted in Cairo, in view of balancing the cost of the occupation and generating a budgetary surplus, monetised tax collection was favoured over levies in kind. Besides, lacking the resources to gauge production, the *sāqiya* became the basis of the fiscal system according to fixed rates. This furthered the longer trend of commodification and monetisation of riverain rural economies. In the obligation to find cash to pay the required taxes, cultivators were forced into cycles of debts which could lead to the mortgage of their land, when the merchant class could intervene and consolidate its own acquisition at the expense of local communities<sup>52</sup>.

Finally, since the *sāqiya* was the main unit of Egyptian fiscality in Nilotic Sudan and the level of imposition did not take into account the actual yield, cultivators were constrained by contradictory imperatives. The lesser the number of shares, the greater the return for each participant of a specific *sāqiya*, but this also meant that they had to divide the same amount of taxes between them. Since irrigation in the Upper Nile Valley was very much labour intensive, less hands necessarily entailed that a smaller surface could be cultivated. The solution to this conundrum was to replace free men who could claim a share of the yield by slaves. Since the beginning of the Turkiyya, the increase in slave raids in the southern regions had greatly expanded their numbers, but their purchase required capitals that the vast majority of riverain farmers, already pressed by high levels of indebtedness, had no means of obtaining, in contrast with members of merchant class. Their profits thus reinvested furthered the commodification of land and the expansion of servile agriculture<sup>53</sup>.

All in all, from the last decades of the eighteenth century up to the 1870s, several dynamics had coalesced to alter the fabric of riverain societies and subvert the relationships that the different sections of these populations entertained with each other. Stark contrasts between statuses and entrenched mechanisms of social distinction were somewhat balanced by networks of interdependencies. The power exerted by Funj noblemen may have had few limits, but they also had no interest in the collapse of the economic potential of their dominion. Capitalistic accumulation, the monetisation of the economy and commodification of both land and grain had dramatic consequences for the cultivators of the Upper Nile's irrigated lands. While some noblemen and commoners had harnessed the opportunities arising from the new economic context and had had

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52 Anders J. BJØRKELO, *Prelude to the Mahdiyya: Peasants and Traders in the Shendi Region, 1821-1885*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 85–87.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 76–81.

great success in accruing wealth, particularly in the form of estates, most of the people living on and near the banks of the river were intensely frustrated by the worsening of their condition. This discontent was the origin of the great Sudanese migration.

### *ii) Population Movements and Migrations*

If degraded economic conditions were certainly the main factor behind the migratory movements engaged by populations from the northern provinces of Nilotic Sudan in the nineteenth century, there are some indications as to the anteriority of this “*Drang nach Süden*” to the socioeconomic upheaval that began at the end of the Funj Sultanate. Indeed, eighteenth century records from Cairo courts mention the coming of Dunqulāwī merchants from Dār Fūr, hinting at patterns of migrations to invest trade routes which could be dated from the late seventeenth century<sup>54</sup>. Of the different hypotheses that can be offered to explain the dynamism of one of the most northern communities of the Upper Nile Valley, their position on a distant march of the Funj sultanate figures prominently. But the topographical characteristics of the Dunqulā Reach could also have made them more susceptible to be impacted by climate evolutions. Despite patchy evidence, a growing body of literature, quite particularly Steven Serels’ work, suggests an increase in climate variability related to the “Little Ice Age” from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century in Nilotic Sudan, leading to more frequent and longer periods of drought<sup>55</sup>. The evolution of environmental factors could explain why different northern communities on the west and the east of the Nile may have followed similar patterns of migrations to the south<sup>56</sup>. To know whether this could also explain the intriguing southward shift of state-forming activities in Nilotic Sudan in the sixteenth century is a discussion that has yet to be engaged<sup>57</sup>.

If indeed climatic changes were instrumental in causing southern migrations, they were not brutal breaks but slow and incremental jolts for communities whose adaptation was limited by the physical constraints of their environment. More powerful were the incentives sparked by the evolution of the economic dynamics of Nilotic Sudan in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The Danāqla formed the largest diasporic community, followed by the Ja‘aliyīn. They were prompted to leave the banks of the Nile to head south by “push factors”, to use Anders J. Bjørkelo’s terminology, mostly related to the deterioration of the Northern riverain communities’s

54 Terence WALZ, *Trade between Egypt and Bilād as-Sūdān, 1700-1820*, Cairo, Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 1978, p. 72–74 ; Intisar Soghayrun ELZEIN, *Trade and Wadis System(s) in Muslim Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

55 Douglas H. JOHNSON and David M. ANDERSON (ed.), *The Ecology of Survival: Case Studies from Northeast African History*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1988, p. 43–44 ; David N. EDWARDS, “Post-Medieval Sudan and Islam (c. AD 1500-1900),” in *The Nubian Past: An Archeology of the Sudan*, London, Routledge, 2004, p. 260 ; Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 31–35.

56 See chapter 1 for an analysis of the effect of climate changes in Eastern Sudan.

57 Rex S. O’FAHEY, “Islamic Hegemonies in the Sudan: Sufism, Mahdism and Islamism,” *op. cit.*, p. 22.

socioeconomic situation caused by the gradual spread of market-oriented modes of production, either reinforced or triggered by policies adopted under the Hamaj Regency and the Turkiyya. In contrast with the assessment of most contemporaries, the violent methods of tax-collection employed by the irregulars serving the Egyptian fiscal administration, the Shāyqiyya and Bāsh-Būzuks alienated the Sudanese populations from the colonial government but migrations were caused by more structural factors. A growing number of disaffected and landless peasants began looking for ways to escape the cycles of indebtedness, loss of land ownership and eviction which had become their reality. At the same time, “pull factors” were gaining in strength. The establishment of the Egyptian colonial regime connected the different regions of Nilotic Sudan more tightly together and made the roads somewhat safer. The opening of the South and the expansion of trade circulations, quite particularly of slaves, were seen by impoverished northerners as opportunities. Some of them managed to amass large fortunes and their success stories were powerful lures for those who were attracted by life in the diaspora, however, among the *jallāba*, the growing class of merchants which gained prominence in the nineteenth century, most were small itinerant traders whose wealth remained modest. Others moved not so much because of trade opportunities but in search of available land. They left for the Khayrān, a region of small basins of clay soil in northern Kurdufān<sup>58</sup>, following the footsteps of previous Dunqulāwī migrations to this region from the mid-eighteenth century<sup>59</sup>, or ventured farther to the south, on the White Nile, as the family of Muḥammad Aḥmad, the future Mahdī, did in the late 1860s<sup>60</sup>.

Mirroring the voluntary movement from north to south, the great increase in intensity of the slave trade witnessed in Nilotic Sudan in the nineteenth century brought large numbers of Nuba, Shilluk, Nuer and Dinka, to mention only the most important of the southern communities, to the north<sup>61</sup>. Another important movement of migration saw the steady influx in the Upper Nile Valley of individuals from the western regions of the Sudanic belt. They followed routes previously taken by traders and pilgrims performing the *ḥajj* (two activities which were not mutually exclusive) and crossing Nilotic Sudan to reach the ports of the Red Sea and from there Mecca, but their numbers were increasing and, most importantly, they began to settle. This movement was engaged in the

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58 Leif O. MANGER, *The Sand Swallows our Land: Over-Exploitation of Productive Resources and the Problem of Household Viability in the Kheiran - A Sudanese Oasis*, Bergen, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen, 1981.

59 Anders J. BJØRKELO, *Prelude to the Mahdiyya*, *op. cit.*, p. 138–141.

60 Muḥammad Sa‘īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-imām al-Mahdī: Muḥammad Aḥmad bin ‘Abd Allāh (1844-1885)*, *Lawḥa li-thā‘ir sūdānī*, Khartoum, Maṭba‘at jāmi‘at al-Kharṭūm, 1985, p. 43 ; Fergus NICOLL, *The Sword of the Prophet: The Mahdi of Sudan and the Death of General Gordon*, Stroud, Sutton Publishing, 2004, p. 39.

61 Mohamed Ibrahim NUGUD, *‘Alāqāt al-riqq fī-l-mujtama‘ al-sūdānī*, Cairo, Al-Shirka al-‘ālamīyya li-l-ṭibā‘a wa al-nashr, 1995 ; Alice MOORE-HARELL, “Economic and Political Aspects of the Slave Trade in Ethiopia and the Sudan in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 1999, vol. 32, no. 2/3, p. 407–421.



eighteenth century, when the extension of the Fūr sultanate's influence on Kurdufān prompted the establishment of agricultural colonies populated by Westerners<sup>62</sup>. This trend accelerated in the nineteenth century until small *Fallātā* communities dotted a west-east axis<sup>63</sup>.

These different movements all had in common to entertain ambiguous relations with the heart of the of the Upper Nile Valley. While Khartoum—the new colonial capital founded at the confluence of the two Niles in 1830 (1245/6)—had become the main trading centre and attracted enterprising migrants, it was not the focal point of the circulations described above. The main reason for this phenomenon was the various strategies used to avoid direct control and frequent contacts with the Egyptian colonial authorities. Shortly after the conquest of the Nile Valley, Egyptian occupation forces faced a vast movement of rebellion, caused by the assassination of Ismā'īl Pasha Kāmīl— one of Mehmet Ali's sons—by *makk* Nimir of the Ja'alīyīn in Shandī in October 1822 (Muḥarram/Şafar 1238). The trade city never fully recovered from the violent repression that followed, and the Ja'alī leader was forced to flee toward the Ethiopian borderlands, at a safe distance from the limited reach of the central regime<sup>64</sup>. Other movements of opposition, including two revolts by slave-soldiers in 1844 (1259/60) and 1885-1887 (1302-1304), ended with the mutineers seeking refuge in Fāzūghlī and the Nūba Mountains<sup>65</sup>.

There were, of course, less dramatic motives to move away from the immediate vicinity of the Nile Valley. The most important of them was to avoid the most stringent effects of governmental control, first and foremost oppressive taxation. Indeed, beyond the banks of the Nile and urban settlements, the Egyptian colonial regime's ability to impose its will quickly waned. Evidence of such practices of evasion are scarce and specific groups difficult to follow over periods of time. However, it seems difficult to explain the depopulation of the northern regions concomitant of the collapse of the *sāqiya* system solely by migrations to the south and engagement in the trade activities of the *jallāba*. Some chose to abandon farming for herding, maybe after a period of transition or by regularly shifting from one activity to the other depending on circumstances. In this perspective, population movements in the Nile Valley should not be interpreted solely as mechanical consequences of a wide economic downturn but also as a political statement of state's

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62 Jay L. SPAULDING, "Pastoralism, Slavery, Commerce, Culture and the Fate of the Nubians of Northern and Central Kordofan Under Dar Fur Rule, ca. 1750-ca. 1850," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 2006, vol. 30, no. 3, p. 408.

63 Muhammad Ahmad BADĪN, *Al-Fallāta al-fulāniyyūn fī al-Sūdān: al-aṣl wa al-tārīkh*, Khartoum, Markaz al-dirāsāt al-sūdāniyya, 1996.

64 This also affected the inhabitants of al-Dāmar, a city just to the north of Shandī, including leaders and members of the Majādhīb. See Albrecht HOFHEINZ, "A Flame of Learning in the Winds of Change: Notes on the History of the Majādhīb of al-Qadārif," in Natana J. DeLong-Bas (ed.), *Islam, Revival, and Reform: Redefining Tradition for the Twenty-First Century*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2022, p. 88–90.

65 Yoshiko KURITA, "The Role of 'Negroid But Detribalized' People in Modern Sudanese History," *Nilo-Ethiopian Studies*, 2003, vol. 8–9, p. 2–3.

rejection. Inversely, following Talal Asad's pioneering comments on the divide between sedentary and nomadic groups, it can be noted that the two categories are permeable and that insistence on characterising nomads by their spatial mobility (rather than according to a mode of production in which nomads and sedentaries are interdependent) is, above all, the expression of the state's particular interest in delineating its dominion from "free lands" and says as much about the populations in question as it does about the state's power and its limits<sup>66</sup>.

### *iii) The Reconfiguration of Identities and Structures of Authority*

Social identities and systems of affiliations have considerably evolved during the long nineteenth century in Nilotic Sudan. The comment made above as to the relative permeability between the nomadic and sedentary spheres is a first step toward a more comprehensive qualification of the frames of reference for the various identities of the communities of Nilotic Sudan.

The concepts of tribes and ethnicities, and particularly for Nilotic Sudan the division between Arabs and non-Arabs, have been central to historical writing on this region, as well as most of the African continent. A vast critical literature now exists for both terms, a review of which is beyond the scope of this introduction. Suffice it to note that with regard to the notion of tribe, Sudan studies were instrumental for the formulation of the segmentary-lineage theory which posited that the tribal structures' function was to regulate the social and political order in the absence of a state<sup>67</sup>. While this represented a valuable shift from the Durkheimian evolutionary paradigm, it locked tribes in a necessarily antagonistic relationship with the state, the latter being considered wholly invested in its effort to strengthen its grip over anachronistic social structures, mostly through sedentarisation. Since, this dichotomy has been qualified, among others by Philip Khoury and Joseph Kostiner. They argued that this opposition only exists when both entities are reduced to their ideal-types. According to them, the notion of tribe encompassed a diversity of social organisations accentuated by their radical evolution through time which went much beyond groups of pastoral nomads who shared a common idiom of kinship. Indeed, in nineteenth century Nilotic Sudan, tribes could be neither pastoral nor nomadic, and aspects of kinship almost wholly absent. Rather than opposition, these authors insisted on the variety of forms interactions between tribes and the state

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66 Talal ASAD, "Equality in Nomadic Social Systems?: (notes towards the dissolution of an anthropological category)\*," *Critique of Anthropology*, 1978, vol. 3, no. 11, p. 57–65.

67 Edward EVANS-PRITCHARD, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1940.

could take<sup>68</sup>, an approach predominant in several recent historical works<sup>69</sup>.

However, qualifying the nature of the relations between tribes and state has left aside the question of how to characterise this social structure. Of late, the tendency has been to focus on tribes as state categories for communities targeted by transformative policies. As Nora E. Barakat readily admits, this does not mean that there was no pre-existing social reality behind it, but that the first purpose of this Ottoman designation lay on defining legal individuals and collectives<sup>70</sup>. By building on her intuition, it is possible to hold together both aspects by defining tribes as politically actionable communities characterised by mediated and hierarchised internal networks of mobilisation based on a shared mythology of belonging to a common lineage. This differs from the segmentary-lineage theory in that it gives prevalence not to the elusive equalitarian order conferred by horizontal balances but to the Matryoshka doll-like imbrication of structures of authority. In other words, contrary to other social institutions like the army or, for that matter, Sufi brotherhoods, for which individual action is obtained directly (albeit through the intermediation of a hierarchy), in tribes, it is the result of the mobilisation of the family, then the extended lineage, and finally the clan, each step offering the risk for the process to derail. Therefore, the strength of the Khaldunian *'aṣabiyya* is dependent on each specific configuration of the distribution of power within a tribal community. Conversely, the tribal system is also more robust because mechanics of authority are echoed at each level where the different components' interrelations favours synchronisation. This contrasts strongly with the state's unmediated authority which must obtain the assent of each individual based on its ability to mobilise a common language of action.

Paradoxically, the role of tribal formations<sup>71</sup> during the Funj sultanate and its subsequent evolution under the Turkiyya has been little studied. Keeping in mind the need to systematically historicise assertions of identity and logics of affiliation<sup>72</sup>, tribal groups should not be essentialised and considered as evidently self-reproducing. Several factors contributed to the greater affirmation of tribal bonds. Whereas one can assume that communities in Nilotic Sudan were first organised as political, localised and socioeconomic entities, the weakening of feudal structures in the eighteenth century probably resulted in a stronger emphasis being laid on tribal forms of authority helped by

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68 Philip S. KHOURY and Joseph KOSTINER, "Introduction: Tribes and the Complexities of State Formation in the Middle East," in Philip S. Khoury and Joseph Kostiner (ed.), *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991, p. 1–22.

69 Reuven AHARONI, *The Pasha's Bedouin: Tribes and State in the Egypt of Mehemet Ali, 1805-1848*, London, 2007, p. 2–3 ; Reşat KASABA, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants, and Refugees*, Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 2009, p. 6–8.

70 Nora E. BARAKAT, "Making 'Tribes' in the Late Ottoman Empire," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2021, vol. 53, p. 482–487.

71 Tribe is the most common translation of *qabīla* (pl. *qabā'il*), however, as shall be seen in chapter 5, a variety of terms were used to designate communities such as *nās* and *ahl*, with the general sense of "people".

72 Mahmood MAMDANI, *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2009, p. 108.

the diffusion of the model of patrilineal descent and its corollary, the search for patrilineal pedigrees to support claims of authority<sup>73</sup>. The Egyptian administration in the Upper Nile Valley may have reinforced this dynamic by relying on tribal heads as their intermediaries, but this still deserves further research.

At the same time, the region witnessed important movements of population (see above) that led to the ethnicisation of tribal identities. Since the interactionist approach founded by Frederik Barth, ethnicities are not so much defined by a stable set of socio-cultural references shared by a group, but by the relations the latter entertain with others, thus placing the locus of ethnic affiliation on the negotiation of the boundaries which separate “us” with “them”<sup>74</sup>. Said differently, whereas tribal affiliations are inward-looking, ethnic identities are essentially outward-looking<sup>75</sup>. In that perspective, Jay O’Brien warned against the use of “fuzzy primordialist notions” to insist on the mutability of ethnicities and the fluidity of their affiliations<sup>76</sup>. In the context of nineteenth century Sudan, the dynamics at play varied between communities and answered to different temporalities, thus defying generalisation. The overall trend for the riverain populations of the Upper Nile Valley since the mid-eighteenth century has been to showcase their “Arabness” against their distinctly “non-Arab” overlords, the Funj and the Hamaj. This process was congruent with the emergence of a new social class engaged in trade. Critically, this ethnic claim was supported by the adoption of Arab genealogies which, in turn, may have contributed to giving more weight to tribal affiliations. The main criterion was linguistic, while the causes for the unequal spread of Arabic in Nilotic Sudan remains an open question. The Egyptian conquest of 1820-1821 (1235-1236) accelerated the ethnicisation of Sudanese communities. Migration movements put in direct contact populations from various origins like the *jallāba* from the north, the enslaved individuals from the south and Abyssinia, the Fallātā from the west, the *muwalladūn*<sup>77</sup> or the *awlād al-rīf*<sup>78,79</sup>. The Egyptian administrators, the “Turks”, embodied this alterity. The exact effects of these profound changes are difficult to assess, but increased interactions and the formation of diasporic communities certainly increased the ethnicisation of tribal affiliations, as may have been the case for the Dunqulāwī.

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73 Jay L. SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, *op. cit.*, p. 118–119 ; Jay L. SPAULDING, “The Chronology of Sudanese Arabic Genealogical Tradition,” *History in Africa*, 2000, vol. 27, p. 325–337.

74 Frederik BARTH, “Introduction,” in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1969, p. 9–38.

75 This does not preclude ethnic boundaries from framing meaningful, performative and coherent systems of values.

76 Jay O’BRIEN, “Toward a Reconstitution of Ethnicity: Capitalist Expansion and Cultural Dynamics in Sudan,” *American Anthropologist*, 1986, vol. 88, no. 4.

77 This term is polysemic. In the nineteenth century, it designates prominently the progeny of Egyptian men and “Sudanese” women (often slaves), but can encompass all individuals of mixed origins.

78 Literally, the “country’s sons”. The term *rīf* was used in its Egyptian sense for the region of Lower Egypt (as opposed to Upper Egypt, the *ša’īd*). It designates a “white” population.

79 Na’ūm SHUQAYR, *Géographie du Soudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 83–84.

Islam was the cornerstone of the re-articulation of identities for the populations in Nilotic Sudan. While religious allegiance was mostly communal and practices could vary considerably, the new social class that emerged in the eighteenth century pegged its identity claim to a stricter interpretation of Islamic texts and what they saw as more orthodox rituals. This echoed the effects of one of the most potent innovations brought by the spreading of Islam from the fourteenth century onwards in Nilotic Sudan, namely the parallel diffusion of literacy. In this endeavour, they could rely on the numerous Sufi centres which were established on the banks of the Upper Nile Valley. These *khalwāt* were first and foremost places of education and as such constituted the main vector for the diffusion of literacy. This new teaching system had two main consequences. First, it instilled among the holymen's followers the sense that they were different from their forefathers, leading them to question and reassert a core element of their identity. Secondly, it broadened their horizons, placed them within a vast network of intellectual circulations, and transformed their *Weltanschauung* based on Islamic world representations<sup>80</sup>.

The influence of Sufi *shuyūkh* (sing. *shaykh*) extended beyond the circle of their disciples. Through grants and tax exemptions obtained from Funj then Egyptian authorities, they held considerable power over the populations attached to their estates. Since they often acted as *qādī*, they were instrumental in the imposition of scriptural practices and the respect of Islamic obligations at the expense of customary law, a development that some commoners resented because it favoured the new merchant class. They also promoted a new type of popular Sufi poetry, the *dhikr* and organised various religious feasts and meetings, thus helping to raise “the Islamic consciousness of the ordinary Sudanese<sup>81</sup>”. In that respect, historical Sufi orders like the Ya‘qūbab, the ‘Arakiyyūn or the Majādhīb, all contributed to the emergence of an original sense of Islamic identity in the riverain regions of the Upper Nile Valley.

But this process was deeply affected by the emergence of new forms of Sufi organisations, often described as “neo-Sufi”, to the point where Rex S. O’Fahey argued that if the modern history of Sudan can be started in 1818 with Muḥammad ‘Alī’s decision to invade Sudan, another crucial date would be 1815, when Aḥmad b. Idrīs al-Fāsī (1760-1837) gave the authorisation to Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mīrghanī (1793-1853) to travel to Sudan on a “missionary journey” and establish his own Sufi brotherhood<sup>82</sup>. First penned in 1966 by the Indo-Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman, “neo-Sufism” was defined as a break with Ibn ‘Arabī’s legacy by Muslim scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this perspective, they pulled away from his pantheistic<sup>83</sup> and metaphysical

80 Jay L. SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, *op. cit.*, p. 109–110.

81 Rex S. O’FAHEY, “Islamic Hegemonies in the Sudan: Sufism, Mahdism and Islamism,” *op. cit.*, p. 26.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

83 This criticism was focused on Ibn ‘Arabī’s notion of “*waḥdat al-wujūd*” meaning “the unity of Being”.

understanding of Sufism and condemned the cult of saints. Central to this new trend was the shift from the mystical quest of union with God for a spirituality pointed toward the emulation of the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, the famed *ṭarīqa Muḥammadiyya*<sup>84</sup>. The renewal of the study of the *ḥadīth* can be seen as a corollary of this last point. Finally, adherence to a *ṭarīqa* (pl. *ṭuruq*) was to be exclusive. With some nuances, this notion was adopted by John Voll and Nehemia Levtzion to describe the network of Sufi scholars which emerged from Mecca and Medina in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and were instrumental in the development of new *ṭuruq* or the transformation of historical *ṭuruq* toward a more active political role in the regions where they were established based on a moralistic and puritanical mysticism. The focus of their attention was Ibn Idrīs to whom Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mīrghanī and al-Sanūsī, the founders of the Khatmiyya and the Sanūsiyya, had been the disciples.

In the 1990s, neo-Sufism came under intense criticism. Rahman’s initial framing had already been attacked for it betrayed the influence of outdated scholarship such as Hamilton A. R. Gibb, Harold Bowen, and to some extent John S. Trimingham, and echoed their view on the corruption of Islam, quite particularly Sufism, which would have begun at the end of the “Golden Age” in the twelfth century. According to Rachida Chih, Rahman’s views were “dogmatic and ahistoric”. The historiographical apprehension of neo-Sufism was strongly influenced by colonial fears. Ibn Idrīs was described as a driving intellectual force in the formation of pan-Islamism in the nineteenth century. The *ṭuruq* established by his students were considered as evidence for the large-scale ambitions of Islamic revivalism led by the Idrīsī tradition<sup>85</sup>.

Bernd Radtke and Sean O’Fahey’s questioning of this notion was aimed at its actual novelty. They argued that the *ṭarīqa Muḥammadiyya* was not so much an alteration of the original Sufi quest but another path toward the union with God. In that regard, they could not find evidence in Ibn Idrīs’ texts or those of his disciples clear evidence of a break with Ibn ‘Arabī’s tradition. Lastly, as to the political activism of the neo-Sufi *ṭuruq*, they noted that reaction to colonial expansion could hardly have been their *raison d’être* since the Sanūsiyya and the Khatmiyya were founded before European penetration. That resistance was organised by and around these Sufi institutions did not imply that this was a result of an Idrīsī program<sup>86</sup>. The obvious influence of Ibn Idrīs is all the more puzzling that his teachings were relatively banal, hence the “enigmatic” dimension of his life<sup>87</sup>. In

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84 Literally, “the Muḥammadian path”.

85 Rachida CHIH, *Sufism in Ottoman Egypt: Circulation, Renewal and Authority in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2019, p. 82–84.

86 Rex S. O’FAHEY and Bernd RADTKE, “Neo-Sufism Reconsidered,” *Der Islam*, 1993, vol. 70, no. 1, p. 52–87.

87 Rex S. O’FAHEY and ‘Alī Ṣāliḥ KARRĀR, “The Enigmatic Imam: The Influence of Ahmed Ibn Idris,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1987, vol. 19, no. 2, p. 205–219 ; Rex S. O’FAHEY, *Enigmatic Saint: Ahmad ibn Idris and the Idrisi tradition*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1990 ; Rachida CHIH, *Sufism in Ottoman Egypt: Circulation, Renewal and Authority in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, *op. cit.*, p. 82–84.

addition, the nature of his relationship with Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mīrghanī, the founder of the powerful *ṭarīqa* of the Khatmiyya in Sudan, has also been reappraised. Despite a thorough examination of available sources, it could not be ascertained whether al-Mīrghanī had completed his initiation with Ibn Idrīs before he left for Nubia and Kurdufān in 1813, nor if they had met again afterwards. Furthermore, the correspondence exchanged between the two attests of the growing rift caused by the great ambitions of Ibn Idrīs’ first disciple<sup>88</sup>.

And yet, in nineteenth-century Nilotic Sudan, among other places, “something new<sup>89</sup>” was happening. The stress laid on the scholarly network organised around the holy cities of the Ḥijāz and the quest for intellectual genealogies may have placed undue emphasis on the literary dimensions of this Sufī trend. Despite their criticism, Radtke and O’Fahey themselves recognised a shift which they linked not with the Idrīsī tradition *per se* but with the new territories targeted by its missionary activities, including the Upper Nile Valley. The importance of spatial factors was acknowledged by Awad al-Sid al-Karsani. According to him, one of the reasons explaining the differentiated Sufi presence was that in central Sudan Sufi brotherhoods were settled in socioeconomic and environmental contexts where a surplus could be extracted, either through agriculture or through trade, whereas in western Sudan, local Sufi *shuyūkh* were much more dependent on nomadic and semi-nomadic populations whose revenues mainly came from pastoralism, thus preventing the establishment of these new Sufi orders<sup>90</sup>.

Regardless of these local constraints, the introduction of the Khatmiyya in the early nineteenth century in Nilotic Sudan impelled major transformations of the Sufi landscape that had more to do with “changes in function, rather than in spiritual content<sup>91</sup>.” O’Fahey considered that deviations from former practices appeared in the *ṭuruq* established by Ibn Idrīs’ disciples on the “Islamic frontier” and pertained mostly to new organisational features<sup>92</sup>. Prior to that, Sufi centres in the Upper Nile Valley were only connected through loose affiliations to a particular *ṭarīqa*. They were primarily local institutions and their influence was limited to the boundaries of the community they headed (see above). The new *ṭuruq* founded vast networks organised through a system of licences<sup>93</sup> (*ijāzāt* sing. *ijāza*) that formed hierarchical structures of authorities and represented “supra-tribal mass organizations<sup>94</sup>” linking together the Sufi enclaves which had emerged in the

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88 Jay L. SPAULDING, “Fall of a Wayward Saint,” *Northeast African Studies*, 1983, vol. 5, no. 3, p. 43–50.

89 Anne K. BANG, *Islamic Sufi Networks in the Western Indian Ocean (c. 1880-1940): Ripples of Reform*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2014, p. 8.

90 Awad Al-Sid AL-KARSANI, “Beyond Sufism: The Case of Millennial Islam in Sudan,” in Louis Brenner (ed.), *Muslim identity and social change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, London, Hurst & Company, 1993, p. 136–138.

91 Anne K. BANG, *Islamic Sufi Networks in the Western Indian Ocean (c. 1880-1940)*, *op. cit.*, p. 9–10.

92 Rex S. O’FAHEY and ‘Alī Ṣāliḥ KARRĀR, “The Enigmatic Imam: The Influence of Ahmed Ibn Idris,” *op. cit.*

93 This term is used to designate the authorisation granted to its holder to transmit a type of Islamic knowledge, in this case, related to the teaching of a particular *ṭarīqa*.

94 Rex S. O’FAHEY, “Islamic Hegemonies in the Sudan: Sufism, Mahdism and Islamism,” *op. cit.*, p. 27.

eighteenth century. In its former and classical meaning, *khulafā'* (sing. *khalīfa*) were designated successors to a Sufi *shaykh*. Al-Mīrghanī used the same term but profoundly altered the position to transform them into local agents whom he could dismiss at will<sup>95</sup>. These structural changes gave the new *turuq* a far greater influence over the populations. This made them potential political actors, especially since they contributed to an “explosion of literary activity<sup>96</sup>” at a time of greater investment in education as well as a reframing of the relations between the *shaykh* (also *murshid* pl. *murshidūn*) and his disciple (*murīd* pl. *murīdūn*). In this perspective, the evolution of Sufi institutions was not so much related to an Idrīsī reformist program than to a set of contingent influences, both spatial and temporal, which caused the emergence of specific technologies of power founding a Sufi governmentality at an unprecedented scale.

Despite offering himself a linear understanding of the evolution of Sufi structures by distinguishing between “ancient brotherhoods” (mainly the Qādiriyya and Shādhiliyya) and “centralised brotherhoods” (first the Khatmiyya, but also the Sammāniyya, and later the Tijāniyya and Idrīsiyya), ‘Alī Ṣāliḥ Karrār noted the ambiguity of such clear-cut division. While the Sammāniyya was introduced as a “reformist brotherhood” by Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib w. al-Bashīr (1742-1824), a disciple of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Sammān (1718-1775) himself, it did not produce the type of hierarchical and centralised structure which was to characterise the Khatmiyya. After the death of its *shaykh*, it quickly fragmented into three rival branches<sup>97</sup>, the reason why Karrār calls it a “halfway house”. Coincidentally, it was as a member of the Sammāniyya that Muḥammad Aḥmad proclaimed himself as the Mahdī in 1881 (1298). As to the Khatmiyya, it maintained throughout the nineteenth century a position which favoured the *status quo* and accommodation with the Egyptian authorities.

The abandonment of neo-sufism as a concept resulted primarily from the impossibility to define a coherent set of doctrines and connect it to a clear genealogy leading back to Ibn Idrīs. Nilotic Sudan exemplifies the limits of this paradigm. Centralised brotherhoods did not arrive in the region as a fully-fledged reformist movement derived from an elusive Idrīsī program. Their emergence as hierarchised structures was conditioned to circumstantial factors such as the greater autonomy acquired by Sufi enclaves throughout the eighteenth century and the need to fill the power void caused by the collapse of the Funj feudal organisation. Likewise, the rapid increase of

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95 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, PhD diss., University of Bergen, 1996, p. 161. Hofheinz put forward an enlightening argument by remarking that a neo-Gothic church may be similar in all aspects to a Gothic church, and yet, the two would still be radically different buildings because the functions that drove their architecture would not be comparable. Unfortunately, this paper (“Illumination and Enlightenment Revisited, or: Pietism and the Roots of Islamic Modernity”, 2009) has not been published.

96 Rex S. O’FAHEY, “Islamic Hegemonies in the Sudan: Sufism, Mahdism and Islamism,” *op. cit.*, p. 26.

97 ‘Alī Ṣāliḥ KARRĀR, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan*, London, Hurst, 1992, p. 43–48.



their political influence was made possible by the Egyptian colonial power which required local relays to compensate for their lack of personnel. In that perspective, the Khatmiyya was very much an endogenous institution. It had no program to disrupt the political order since it owed most of its development to the specific configuration of power in Nilotic Sudan. Other religious trends were not so accommodating.

*iv) Millenarian Expectations: Ex Oriente Lux*

At the end of the thirteenth century *hijrī*, millenarian expectations were rife in Nilotic Sudan, as in large segments of the Muslim world. In his analysis, the historian of the Mahdiyya Peter M. Holt gave a “somewhat hesitant introduction to the Mahdist idea in the Sudan, hesitant because there were few antecedents in Sudanese history<sup>98</sup>.” The only previous known Sudanese Mahdī was Ḥamad al-Naḥlān (d. 1704/5), also called Wad al-Turabī, who had proclaimed himself as he was performing the *ḥajj* in Mecca. While it may not have been to the forefront of their program, the Mahdist idea was nonetheless present within the Sufi *ṭuruq*, including the Khatmiyya. Indeed, Ismā‘īl al-Walī (1792/3-1863), a student of Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mīrghanī had written three treatises on this topic. Another scholar, this time from the Qādiriyya, Ibrāhīm w. al-Kabbashī (d. 1869/70) had also authored a book on this question entitled *Al-Mahdī al-muntazar*. Within the Idrīsī tradition, the concept of “extinction of Islam (*indirās al-Islām*)”, understood as the impending collapse of the world caused by its increased corruption may have contributed to buttressed Mahdist expectations and give theological meaning to local experiences of social upheavals. According to O’Fahey, both al-Walī and al-Kabbashī, entertained difficult relations with colonial authorities, pointing to the idea that this particular literature may have been politically motivated and the expression of a form of defiance against Egyptian rule in the Upper Nile Valley<sup>99</sup>.

The diffusion of these ideas to the general population of the region is difficult to assess. The spread of literacy and the emphasis given to education by Sufi *ṭuruq* implies that some among the communities of disciples must have been familiar with the works mentioned above. As for Mahdist expectations proper, they were certainly shared by many, albeit on terms that mostly escape us. In the opening chapter of his memoirs, Bābikir Badrī recounts that when he was studying in Madanī under the *shaykh* Muḥammad al-Izayriq, c. 1880 (c. 1297), he found seeds in a watermelon he had bought on which he could read on one side “There is not God but God”. The other side was harder to decipher, but this did not stop to assert at that time “Naturally, [...] it will be the Mahdi<sup>100</sup>”.

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98 Rex S. O’FAHEY, “Islamic Hegemonies in the Sudan: Sufism, Mahdism and Islamism,” *op. cit.*, p. 28–29.

99 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

100 Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, translated by Yousef BEDRI and translated by George SCOTT, London, Oxford University Press, 1969, vol. 1, p. 12.

The speed and extent with which Muḥammad Aḥmad's *da'wa*<sup>101</sup> was received by the populations of Nilotic Sudan after 1881 (1298) testifies of the diffusion Mahdist expectations. However, no obvious models of millenarian models were then available. Quite surprisingly, none of the numerous movements of resistance against Egyptian rule seems to have taken a prophetic dimension, in contrast with those that emerged during the Mahdiyya. The closest example of a contestation movement structured by religious references was to be found in Upper Egypt, in the successive revolts that engulfed Qīnā and its region between 1820-1824 (1235-1239) and again in 1864. Its leaders, a *shaykh* named al-Ṣalaḥ in 1820 and his son Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib in 1864 (1280/1) were both Sufi mystics and self-proclaimed messiahs. There is no evidence that these events had an echo in Nilotic Sudan, despite the many resonances between these movements, which challenged what Zeinab Abul-Magd described as the Egyptian state's "internal colonialism" on this peripheral province. Matters of fiscality and land property were at the crux of the opposition of the populations of the Qīnā region, as it was for those inhabiting beyond the third cataract<sup>102</sup>.

Scholars have been much more attentive to the western origins of Mahdism. Indeed, the steady flow of pilgrims and traders has long been considered as one of the starting points of the diffusion of millenarian expectations in Nilotic Sudan in the nineteenth century. According to Awad al-Sid al-Karsani, "Messianism and Mahdism were among the oldest religious imports from West Africa into the western Sudan<sup>103</sup>". Since the seventeenth century, territories between the valley of the Senegal River to the east up to the shores of Lake Chad had witnessed several large *jihādī* movements with millenarian overtones<sup>104</sup>. Some of them led to the foundation of perennial state structures, including arguably the most important polity of the region, the Sokoto Caliphate (1804-1903). The whole of the thirteenth century *hijrī* was marked by ever increasing eagerness for migration toward the east, prompted by powerful traditions that the Mahdī would appear in the Nile Valley, up to the point where the third caliph of Sokoto, Abū Bakr 'Atīku (1837-1842) had to remind his subjects that time had not come for the coming of the Mahdī so as to refrain their ardour<sup>105</sup>.

101 The polysemy of the term *da'wa*, meaning "invitation", "summoning" and "preaching" renders its translation arduous, all the more so since these terms fail to encapsulate that it also denotes the ideological paradigm stated through it.

102 Zeinab ABUL-MAGD, *Imagined Empires: A History of Revolt in Egypt*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013, chapters 3 and 4.

103 Awad Al-Sid AL-KARSANI, "Beyond Sufism: The Case of Millennial Islam in Sudan," *op. cit.*, p. 138.

104 For an overview, see Paul E. LOVEJOY, *Jihād in West Africa during the Age of Revolutions*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2016. On this trend, Murray Last wrote that "Millenarianism is perhaps the single most important theme in popular Muslim thought in West Africa, especially as it relates to the thirteenth Muslim century. It has been in the background of the major reform movements of Shaikh Uthman b. Fudi, Shaykh Ahmad Lobbo and Al-Hajj Umar ; it has been responsible for large scale migrations eastwards and the movement of countless individuals in West Africa towards the Nile." (cited in P. B. CLARKE, "Islamic Millenarianism in West Africa: A 'Revolutionary' Ideology?," *Religious Studies*, 1980, vol. 16, no. 3, p. 323.

105 Christian DELMET, "Sur la route du pèlerinage: les Peuls au Soudan (A Note about the Fulani in Sudan)," *Cahiers*

Whereas little is known on the role of the Fallāta communities in Nilotic Sudan before the Condominium, and even less so as to their role in propagating and shaping millenarian expectations, their involvement in the Mahdist revolution has left numerous traces. They were among the first to whom the Mahdī wrote to inform them of his claim to the Mahdīship and obtain their support. Their influence was sufficiently established that the short succession crisis which followed Muḥammad Aḥmad’s death in 1885 (1302) was solved by a *faqīh* Fallāta named al-Dādāri, in favour of yet another westerner, the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhī. Al-Dādāri had been a follower of ‘Uthmān b. Fodio (d. 1817), the first caliph of Sokoto, before moving to the east, probably in the 1860s, where he was reported to have met ‘Abdullāhī engaged like him in a quest to find the Mahdī. This brings light on the complexity of the “trans-Sudanic Islamic connections<sup>106</sup>”. The reverse influence of the Mahdiyya on Central Sudan, embodied by Ḥayātū al-Dīn b. Sa‘īd (1840-1901) and Rābiḥ b. Faḍl Allāh (c. 1842-1900), has been more attentively studied while the extent of the Fallāta influence on the foundation and consolidation of the Mahdist regime itself remains hazy.

Moreover, it is telling that five authors were mobilised to write on al-Dādāri’s trajectory from the Sokoto Caliphate to Nilotic Sudan<sup>107</sup>, so as to overcome the divisions that separate the different historiographical fields of the Sudanic belt. This effort is not so common. The overall tendency has often been to isolate the Upper Nile Valley from both the sociopolitical and religious dynamics prevalent in the west, and emphasise the effects of Egyptian colonialism on its society as the main factor for the eruption of the Mahdist movement in the 1880s<sup>108</sup>. This is all the more surprising as it does not really reflect the not-so recent historiography of the region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries developed by Jay S. Spaulding, Neil McHugh and Anders J. Bjørkelo who all insisted, even if on varying degrees, on bridging the colonial divide. While Paul E. Lovejoy’s work is focused on West Africa, he is keen to point out the reverberation of the western *jihādī* movements to the east and back. The insights he put forward on the commonalities in the socioeconomic transformations to explain their emergence, whether based on a state desire to stabilise and guarantee Islamic identities as a protection against enslavement, or on the social crisis resulting from a fragmentation of landownership under the effects of greater abundance to Islamic rules, have evident echoes for nineteenth century Nilotic Sudan<sup>109</sup>.

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*d’Études Africaines*, 1994, vol. 34, no. 133–135, p. 475.

106 John O. HUNWICK et al., “Between Niger and Nile: New Light on the Fulani Mahdist Muḥammad al-Dādāri,” *Sudanic Africa*, 1997, vol. 8, p. 85–108.

107 See previous note.

108 For an example of such scholarship, see Roman LOIMEIER, *Muslim Societies in Africa: A Historical Anthropology*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2013.

109 Paul E. LOVEJOY, *Jihād in West Africa during the Age of Revolutions*, *op. cit.*

## Researching the Mahdiyya

### *A) The Mahdiyya (1881-1899): A Historiographical Survey*

When Muḥammad Aḥmad b. ‘Abd Allāh, a leading member of the Sammāniyya *ṭarīqa*, openly proclaimed being the Expected Mahdī (*al-Mahdī al-muntazar*) on 29 June 1881 (1<sup>st</sup> Sha‘bān 1298), he initiated a collective religious and political movement which was to profoundly transform Sudanese society. In the next four years, he successfully wrestled the control over most of Nilotic Sudan from Egyptian colonial domination (1820-1885) and founded a centralised state structure, headed after his death on 22 June 1885 (9 Ramaḍān 1302) by the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi. Until its demise in September 1898 (Rabī‘ I/II 1316) in the wake of the Anglo-Egyptian conquest (1896-1899), the Mahdist regime exerted a tremendous influence on the social fabric of the diverse communities present in the region which it attempted to radically alter to conform to the Islamic ideals it promoted, notably through its mobilisation of the population for *jihād*.

#### *i) Early Assessments: The Mahdist Movement and the Arab World*

The first appraisals of the Mahdist movement were heavily influenced by the context of the early 1880s (late 1290s). Outside commentators projected their own agendas and anxieties onto a movement that they had the greatest difficulties on understanding in its own terms. The other *jihādī* mobilisations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in West Africa had unfolded at a distance from European gaze and British officials were at pain to give meaning to the events unfolding in the Upper Nile Valley. In the first report compiled by the British Intelligence branch, the origin of the “insurrection of [the] False Prophet” was vaguely ascribed to the “peculiar fascination [of] the native races” toward Islam, considered as “new converts”, prompt to mobilise for “the regeneration of Islam by force of arms”<sup>110</sup>. Viewed from London, events in the Upper Nile Valley, were construed by some parliamentarians, radicals and Gladstonian liberals as the expression of a movement of national liberation that the British were to support, not crush through yet another misconceived imperial adventure in the region<sup>111</sup>.

The British were not the only ones to regard the Mahdist revolution with puzzlement. It was also a cause of anguish for the Ottoman authorities. Abdülhamid II seems to have considered the

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110 War Office, “Report on the Egyptian provinces of the Sūdān, Red Sea, and equator. Comp. in the Intelligence branch, Quartermaster-General's department, Horse guards, War office”, London, H. M. Stationery Office, 1883, p. 30.

111 Norman DANIEL, *Islam, Europe and Empire*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1966, p. 416; 422 ; Fergus NICOLL, *Gladstone, Gordon and the Sudan Wars: The Battle Over Imperial Intervention in the Victorian Age*, Pen & Sword Military, 2013, p. 12–16 ; Ömer KOÇYIĞIT, “The Ottoman State’s Perception about the Sudanese Mahdi Uprising,” *International Journal of Turcologia*, 2014, vol. 9, no. 8, p. 101–130.

Mahdī as a British puppet sent to further their interests in the region and undermine Ottoman influence by instrumentalising the discourse of national liberation at the expense of the empire. The Sublime Porte was also concerned that the Mahdist *da‘wa* would sap the Islamic legitimacy that Hamidian rule was then attempting to cement. Paradoxically, on this particular point, Ottoman views were shared by the British who feared that a large-scale pan-Islamic movement of contestation could reach their Indian dominion, less than three decades after the Rebellion of 1857<sup>112</sup>.

Because of the synchronicity of the Mahdist uprising with the ‘Urābī revolt (1879-1882), intellectual figures like Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghanī (1838/9-1897) and Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905) construed the rebellion in the Upper Nile as an extension of the anti-imperialist movement in Egypt. They too tended to underplay its religious dimension which they saw as resulting from its inability to expose a nationalistic discourse. Al-Afghanī’s analysis, presented in several articles published in *L’Intransigeant*, was an attempt to co-opt the Mahdist movement in his own anti-British agenda<sup>113</sup>.

#### ii) *The Mahdiyya in British Colonial Writings*

The diversity that characterised readings of the Mahdist movement during its early phase was not a reality anymore in the 1890s. Francis R. Wingate, the British spy chief in Egypt between 1889 and 1899, was at the origin of a body of literature the influence of which was to prove lasting on the historiography of the Mahdiyya. Indeed, Wingate’s first publication, *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan*<sup>114</sup>, and the two following opuses of his editorial work by Joseph Ohrwalder<sup>115</sup> and Rudolf C. von Slatin<sup>116</sup>, have played a crucial role in shaping contemporary understandings of the Mahdist movement. Famously, his efforts were described by Peter M. Holt as “war propaganda” or “the public relations literature of the Egyptian Military Intelligence<sup>117</sup>” aiming, through the construction of the “legend of the Mahdiyya<sup>118</sup>”, at convincing British public opinion and political leaders of the necessity and legitimacy of a military intervention in Sudan<sup>119</sup>.

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112 Fergus NICOLL, “Fatwa and Propaganda: Contemporary Muslim Responses to the Sudanese Mahdiyya,” *Islamic Africa*, vol. 7 (2), 2016, p. 239-265., 2016, vol. 7, no. 2, p. 252–255.

113 *Ibid.*, p. 261–264.

114 Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan: Being an Account of the Rise And Progress of Mahdiism, And of Subsequent Events in the Sudan to the Present Time*, London, Macmillan and Co., 1891.

115 Josef OHRWALDER, *Ten Years’ Captivity in the Mahdi’s Camp, 1882-1892: From the Original Manuscripts of Father Joseph Ohrwalder ...*, London, Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1892.

116 Rudolf C. SLATIN, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*

117 Peter M. HOLT, “The Source-Materials of the Sudanese Mahdia,” *Middle Eastern Affairs*, 1967, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 112.

118 Norman DANIEL, *Islam, Europe and Empire*, *op. cit.*, p. 424–428.

119 Gabriel R. WARBURG, “The Wingate Literature Revisited: The Sudan As Seen by Members of the Sudan Political Service during the Condominium: 1899–1956,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 2005, vol. 41, no. 3, p. 373.

“Wingate-Slatinism”, as Martin Daly dubbed this production, was based on two central arguments. The first one was that the Mahdist uprising was a reaction to the many abuses of the oppressive Egyptian rule, especially in tax collection, which had antagonised the local populations. This was in line with an opinion expressed very early on by Gordon himself who had written in the *Pall Mall Gazette*: “I am convinced that it is an entire mistake to regard the Mahdi as in any sense a religious leader. [...] He personifies popular discontent<sup>120</sup>”.

So as to persuade British public opinion and reluctant parliamentarians of the necessity of an intervention in Sudan to carry out the “civilising mission”<sup>121</sup>, Wingate had to discredit the legitimacy of the new regime. Thus, his second argument portrayed the Mahdists as fanatics, superstitious men easily swayed by the charisma of the Mahdī. As for the latter, whatever the validity of his early calling, “he was ruined by unbridled sensuality” and became an “effeminate and debauched prophet<sup>122</sup>”, succumbing to the delights of Omdurman. The reformist values he had defended were further corrupted under the rule of his successor, responsible for the “horrors and cruelties” which resulted in “at least seventy-five per cent of the total population [to perish] to war, famine and disease<sup>123</sup>”. In that respect, British colonial literature heavily insisted on the alienation by the Mahdist regime of its own population. This propaganda allowed the framing of the conquest of the Sudanese Nilotic Valley by Anglo-Egyptian troops in 1896-1898 (1313-136) as the liberation of an oppressed people. This rather self-contradictory narrative negated at the same time the potency of the Mahdī’s *da‘wa* and his appeal for the Sudanese populations, as well as the agency of the men and women who had voluntarily joined the movement by framing their commitment as the mechanical result of tribal affiliation or the effect of the manipulative rhetoric of the Mahdī.

And yet, other narratives had been suggested even before the end of the Mahdist regime. Rudolf von Slatin, probably the best-informed European witness of these events, offered another set of explanations. In his famous autobiographical account, *Fire and Sword*, he pointed out that if tax-collection had been a central motive behind the Mahdist uprising, this was not so much because of the overall level of imposition, but because its farming to *jallāba* disrupted social hierarchies dependent on networks of dependencies based on tribute. One could go farther and see the partial “Sudanisation” of the colonial administration as one of the main factors for the Mahdist uprising. It ruptured social links and produced inequality among leaders<sup>124</sup>.

The analysis, centred on Egyptian oppression as the main explaining factor for the outbreak of the Mahdist revolt and on the antagonistic relation entertained by the populations of Nilotic

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120 Norman DANIEL, *Islam, Europe and Empire*, *op. cit.*, p. 416.

121 Gabriel R. WARBURG, “The Wingate Literature Revisited,” *op. cit.*, p. 374–375.

122 Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 12; 228.

123 Rudolf C. SLATIN, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 623.

124 *Ibid.*, p. 133–134.

Sudan with the new regime, became the dominant paradigm of British imperial literature and despite many qualifications, its legacy is still shaping current scholarship. One way to explain its resilience during the first half of the twentieth century is that its founding blocks, the delegitimisation of both the Egyptian colonial regime and the Mahdist state, remained useful ideas during the Condominium. The “benevolent” British administration could consider itself as a rampart against Islamic fanaticism and Egyptian tyranny. This explains the posterity of “Wingate-Slatinism” and its upholding by later administrators of the Sudan Political Service (SPS) who saw in this literature as much a comment on the past than a warning for the current colonial administration. In his preface for *Osman Digna*, an account of the life of one of the main Mahdist *umarā'* published in 1926 by Henry C. Jackson, himself an administrator of the SPS, Wingate could write that “by depicting the situation in the great revolt of the Sudanese against the tyrannical oppression, venality, and hopeless misgovernment of the old Egyptian regime, [Jackson] enables his readers to realise how easily history may repeat itself<sup>125</sup>”.

Another reason for the resilience of “Wingate-Slatinism” was the weakness of opposing discourses. The Mahdiyya was not an easy legacy to mobilise. The Neo-Mahdist movement founded in the 1920s by Sayyid ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, the posthumous son of the Mahdī, was attempting to square the circle of summoning the religious legitimacy of his father while keeping away from what could be considered by the British colonial administration as radical political ambitions that could challenge their rule. On the other hand, if the antagonism caused by the Mahdiyya among the different populations of Nilotic Sudan had been exaggerated and uncritically presented as the common reaction by the colonial literature for the reasons mentioned above, its inheritance was indeed quite divisive. While this deserves further research, works by figures of the nascent Sudanese nationalist milieu seems to have staved off invoking this episode of their recent history to buttress their program.

There are few exceptions to this larger trend. One of them was the work of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ḥusayn al-Jabrī. A Yemeni who visited Sudan in 1925, he was hired by Sayyid ‘Abd al-Raḥmān to write a biography of the Mahdī and a history of the Mahdiyya when he arrived in Sudan in 1925. The result, *Ta’rīkh al-Mahdī ‘alayhi al-salām*, was considered by the British colonial authorities as a “seditious piece of Anti-Government Propaganda”. The books were seized and al-Jabrī swiftly deported from Sudan<sup>126</sup>. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥīm had been a direct witness of the events of the Mahdiyya. He had accompanied his father when the latter joined the *anṣār*, the Mahdist army, and

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125 Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna*, London, Methuen & Co., 1926, p. xii.

126 Mohamed Omer BESHIR, “Abdel Rahman Ibn Hussein El Jabri and His Book ‘History of the Mahdi,’” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1963, vol. 44, p. 136–139 ; Hassan Ahmed IBRAHIM, *Sayyid ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi: A Study of Neo-Mahdism in the Sudan, 1899-1956*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2003, p. 84–85.

had been engaged in some of the important fightings, including the battle of Kararī near Umm Durmān on 2 September 1898 (15 Rabī‘ II 1316) where he was wounded. Among the works he produced in the 1930s, at least two of them, *Baḍā’i‘ al-athar fī akhbār al-Mahdī al-muntaẓar* [*The Attributes of Tradition in the Thought of the Expected Mahdī*] and *Tadawhwur al-Mahdiyya* [*The Overthrow of the Mahdiyya*], dealt directly with this period<sup>127</sup>. The fact they were not published may be an indication as to the opposition of the colonial administration and, maybe, the lack of interest of the Sudanese public<sup>128</sup>. At about the same time, starting in 1929, ‘Alī al-Mahdī, another son of the Mahdī, was collecting testimonies to write his *Al-aqwāl al-marwiyya fī tāriḫ al-Mahdiyya* [*The Oral Accounts of the History of the Mahdiyya*]. However, it was only published in 1965 under another title, *Jihād fī sabīl Allāh* [*The Jihād for the Cause of God*] and while the text had been edited by ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad Aḥmad, its authorship was given to the author of the introduction, Ṣādiq al-Mahdī<sup>129</sup>.

The dearth of vernacular works on the Mahdiyya during the first decades of the Condominium, whether imposed by the British administration or the consequence of the prudent disinterest of the Sudanese elites for this period, was reflected in the production of the colonial officers. They too were reluctant to write on the Mahdiyya. Their attention was mostly turned toward archeology, local history and anthropological studies<sup>130</sup>. The accent brought on ancient history echoed the similar effort to found European nationalisms. Contrary to the pyramids of the Meroitic state, Mahdism was not politically dead, something of which the British administrators at intervals with the Mahdist-inspired uprisings of Kasalā (1918), Sinnār (1919), Nyala (1921) and Zālinjay (1927), to only mention some of them<sup>131</sup>.

Several elements can explain the reversal in the overlook of the Mahdiyya. Firstly, after the 1924 Revolution, the influence of Egyptian nationalism was henceforth considered as the main threat to British influence over Sudan. In that perspective, the instrumentalisation of ancient history may have met its limits, particularly so as there were inherent difficulties in placing the foundation of Sudan in pre-Islamic times. The Mahdiyya was the perfect vehicle to oppose to Egyptian nationalist claims. While scholars in Cairo had set out to challenge the harsh treatment reserved to

127 Yahya Muhammad IBRAHIM et al., “The Life and Writings of a Sudanese Historian: Muhammad ‘Abd al-Rahim (1878-1966),” *Sudanica Africa*, 1995, vol. 6, p. 125–136.

128 Both works, as most of Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥīm’s literary production, has yet to be edited. All the manuscripts were deposited at the National Records Office (Khartoum).

129 Fergus NICOLL, “‘Alī al-Mahdī’s Oral History of the Mahdīa,” *Sudan Studies for South Sudan and Sudan*, 2015, vol. 51, p. 34–43.

130 Between 1918 and 1963, of the 188 articles written on the general history of Sudan, 92 were dedicated to archeology and early history, and only 56 on modern history (among which, one can assume that the majority dealt with the Turkiyya). See George N. SANDERSON, “‘Sudan Notes and Records’ as a Vehicle of Research on the Sudan,” 1964, vol. 45, p. 170.

131 Hassan A. IBRAHIM, “Mahdist Risings Against the Condominium Government in Sudan, 1900-1927,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 1979, vol. 12, no. 3, p. 440–471.



the Turkiyya in British literature through its own historiography to showcase progress made under colonial rule. The most important work in this perspective is probably Muḥammad Fu'ād Shukrī's *Al-ḥukm al-miṣrī fi al-Sudān* [*The Egyptian Rule in the Sudan*] published in 1947<sup>132</sup>, but there were several epigones to this trend<sup>133</sup>. Quite paradoxically, the first impulse for the renewal of studies on the Mahdiyya may have come from the British administrators themselves. As shown by Iris Seri-Hersch, as early as the 1940s, the textbooks prepared in Bakht al-Ruḍā presented the Mahdist revolution under a positive light, as a liberation movement against Egyptian oppression<sup>134</sup>.

### iii) *The History of the Mahdiyya Reappraised*

However, the interpretation of the Mahdiyya remained bound to imperial perspectives which pervaded the interpretation of its origins. While a gradual shift had been initiated at the initiative of the educators of the Condominium, qualifying the fanatical nature and irrational dimension of Mahdist mobilisation, the regime of the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi who had succeeded the Maḥdī in 1885 was still considered through an orientalist prism, as the rule of a cruel despot who had perverted the founding principles of Mahdism.

This perception prevailed until the 1950s when more nuanced accounts were offered by professional historians with the works of Makkī Shibayka<sup>135</sup> and Peter M. Holt. This historiographical reappraisal was supported by a return to primary sources, in the British archives for Shibayka, who was the first graduate of Gordon College to realise a Ph.D. dissertation in history in 1949<sup>136</sup>, and at the Sudanese national archives (*Dār al-wathā'iq al-qawmiyya al-sūdāniyya*), whose foundation was supervised by Holt himself<sup>137</sup>. This opening resulted in the publication of the seminal text of Mahdist studies: *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*<sup>138</sup>, published in 1958 and still the most extent synthesis on the period. This crucial revision of the historiography had been preceded by the publication of Alan B. Theobald's *The Maḥdīya: a History of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*,

132 Muḥammad Fu'ād SHUKRĪ, *Al-ḥukm al-Miṣrī fi al-Sūdān, 1820-1885*, Cairo, Dār al-fikr al-'arabī, 1947.

133 For an overview on this question, see Gabriel R. WARBURG, "The Turco-Egyptian Sudan: A Recent Historiographical Controversy," *Die Welt des Islams*, 1991, vol. 31, no. 2, p. 193–215 ; Gabriel R. WARBURG, *Historical Discord in the Nile Valley*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1992, part I and II.

134 Iris SERI-HERSCH, *Enseigner l'histoire à l'heure de l'ébranlement colonial: Soudan, Egypte, empire britannique (1943-1960)*, Paris, Karthala, 2018.

135 For an overview of Makkī Shibayka's work, see Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Makkī al-Ṭayyib Shibayka, 1905-1980*, Khartoum, Markaz Abū Salīm li-l-dirāsāt, 2006.

136 Mekki SHIBEIKA, *The Sudan and the Mahdist Revolution of 1881-1885*, PhD diss., University of London, London, 1949.

137 Around 50 000 Mahdist documents were seized by the Department of Military Intelligence of the Egyptian army. They were all kept in Cairo until 1913-1915 (Holt gives both dates) when they were brought to Khartoum. They remained inaccessible until the opening of the Sudanese archives in 1951 and the establishment of their inventory. For summaries of the collections, see Peter M. HOLT, "The Archives of the Mahdia," *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1955, vol. 36, no. 1, p. 71–80 ; Peter M. HOLT, "The Source-Materials of the Sudanese Mahdia," *op. cit.* ; Peter M. HOLT, "Mahdist Archives and Related Documents," *Archives*, 1962, vol. 5, no. 28, p. 193–200.

138 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan (1881-1898): A Study of its Origins, Development and Overthrow*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1958.

1881-1899<sup>139</sup> in 1951 and Shibayka's *British Policy in the Sudan 1882-1902*<sup>140</sup> the following year. The mobilisation of primary sources, half a century after the end of the Mahdiyya and in the context of greater pressure toward independence (1956), allowed these historians to revise the characterisation of the Mahdist regime, and quite particularly of the Khalifian rule (1885-1899), inherited from "Wingate-Slatinism". A more serene approach was adopted which led to an important historiographical development in the course of the next three decades, from the 1950s to 1981.

One of the most important aspects of this renewal was the great development of regional studies, all contributions to which this dissertation is eminently indebted. Works on Dār Fūr<sup>141</sup> and Kurdufān<sup>142</sup> were published, while several important theses were written on the Eastern Sudan, the Jazīra, Barbar and Eastern Sudan<sup>143</sup>. Muḥammad Sa'īd al-Qaddāl also wrote an important text on the Mahdist presence on the Ethiopian border<sup>144</sup>. A similar dynamic was affecting the institutions of the Mahdist state, which benefitted from several studies on the judicial and finance systems<sup>145</sup>. At that time, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm, arguably the most important Sudanese historian of the Mahdiyya, was adopting a novel approach by studying the official literary production of the Mahdist state. He offered precious insights on printed documents, chancellery and diplomatics, an effort which led to the publication of the magisterial *Al-ḥaraka al-fikriyya fī al-Mahdiyya* [*The Intellectual Movement in the Mahdiyya*]<sup>146</sup> in 1989.

This formidable development of the historiography of the Mahdiyya may have reached its zenith with the organisation of the Khartoum conference on the Mahdiyya in November 1981, for the centennial commemoration of the launch of Mahdist movement. The proceedings, edited by 'Umar 'Abd al-Rāziq al-Naqar, showed the breath of topics tackled by scholars<sup>147</sup>.

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139 Alan B. THEOBALD, *The Mahdiyya: A History of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1881-1899*, London, Longmans Green and Co., 1951.

140 Mekki SHIBEIKA, *British Policy in the Sudan 1882-1902*, London, Oxford University Press, 1952.

141 Mūsā al-Mubārak AL-ḤASAN, *Tārīkh Dār Fūr al-siyāsī, 1882-1895*, *op. cit.*

142 'Awad 'Abd al-Hādī AL-'ATĀ, *Tārīkh Kurdufān al-siyāsī fī-l-Mahdiyya, 1881-1899*, Khartoum, Al-majlis al-qawmī li-ri'āyat al-ādāb wa al-funūn, 1973.

143 Salāh al-Tijānī HAMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – 'Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa 'Abd Allāh*, MA diss., University of Khartoum, Khartoum, 1967; Aḥmad 'Uthmān Muḥammad IBRĀHĪM, *Al-Jazīra fī khilāl al-Mahdiyya, 1881-1899*, PhD diss., Jāmi'at al-Kharṭūm, Khartoum, 1970; Ibrāhīm 'Akāsha 'ALĪ, *Wilāyat Barbar fī 'ahd al-Khalīfa 'Abd Allāh (Ramadān 1302 – Rajab 1317 / June 1885 – November 1899)*, MA diss., University of Khartoum, Khartoum, 1971.

144 Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha: Dirāsa fī al-siyāsa al-dākhiliyya wa-l-khārijiyya li-dawlat al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, Khartoum, Dār al-ta'līf wa-l-tarjama wa-l-nashr, 1973.

145 'Alī Muḥammad 'Alī ṢĀLIḤ, *Nizām al-qudā' fī al-dawla al-Mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, MA diss., University of Khartoum, Khartoum, 1973; Fayṣal al-Hājj Muḥammad MŪSĀ, *Al-nizām al-mālī fī dawlat al-Mahdiyya bi-l-Sūdān*, MA diss., Jāmi'at al-Qāhira, Cairo, 1975.

146 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Al-ḥaraka al-fikriyya fī-l-Mahdiyya*, Khartoum, Dār jāmi'at al-Kharṭūm li-l-nashr, 1989.

147 'Umar 'Abd al-Rāziq AL-NAQAR (ed.), *Dirāsāt fī tārīkh al-Mahdiyya*, Khartoum, Dār jāmi'at al-Kharṭūm li-l-nashr, 1987, vol. 2, two volumes.

iv) *The Social Turn and Subsequent Decline of Mahdist Studies*

The 1981 conference marked an inflexion away from the state toward economic and social issues, with presentations on the economic policies of the Mahdist state<sup>148</sup> but also, crucially, on the attempted formation of a “Mahdist society”<sup>149</sup>. The first vein, pertaining to the economic aspects was explored with greater acuity. Al-Qaddāl’s work on the economic policy of the Mahdist state is precious for its rigour, but essentially descriptive. However, in his introduction, he raises crucial points with regard to the debate on the root causes of the Mahdist movement. He is dissatisfied with previous explanations. Na‘ūm Shuqayr considered that discontent with Egyptian rule was the main factor for the uprising. The disarray of the colonial institutions in the context of the ‘Urābī revolt would have allowed its development to the point where it became unstoppable. This argument, in line with “Wingate-Slatinism” was highly influential on subsequent analyses. Shibayka insisted on the religious dynamics, seeing in the Mahdist mobilisation the result of the opposition between orthodox Islam imposed by the Egyptians and Sudanese Sufism. As for Holt, while he agreed with Shuqayr’s idea of a general popular discontent, he insisted on the abolition of the slave trade as the immediate cause of the uprising. Al-Qaddāl thought that it was necessary to go back to the socio-economic roots of the movement. Neither the abolition slave trade nor tensions with orthodox Islam could have prompted the level of mobilisation of the early phase of the revolution. His main intuition was that the segments most involved in the uprising were not so much trying to destroy the state but aimed to capture it to reconfigure trade relations, the main source of revenues in the Upper Nile Valley, to their advantage<sup>150</sup>.

While debatable, al-Qaddāl’s approach was a reversal of the existing historiography in that he abandoned the purely reactionary aspect put forward by former historians to explain the Mahdist revolution. For once, the followers of the Mahdī were granted aspirations. Their actions were not solely aimed against the colonial rule. They carried a project partially reflected by the state institutions formed by the Mahdī and his collaborators during the early phase of the movement. This focus on Mahdist economy was pursued by Yitzhak Nakash<sup>151</sup> and shortly after by Aḥmad Ibrāhīm

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148 Muḥammad Sa‘īd AL-QADDĀL, “Al-ittijāhāt al-‘amma li-l-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya (1881-1898),” in ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Naqar (ed.), *Dirāsāt fī tārikh al-Mahdiyya*, Khartoum, Dār jāmi‘at al-Khartūm li-l-nashr, 1987, vol. 2/1, p. 133–155.

149 Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd KĀB AL-RAFĪQ, “Al-Mahdiyya wa al-mujtama‘ al-Mahdawī fī al-Sūdān: al-ahdāf wa al-wasā’il wa madā tawāfuq-hā ma‘a al-āthār wa al-natā’ij,” in ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Naqar (ed.), *Dirāsāt fī tārikh al-Mahdiyya*, Khartoum, Dār jāmi‘at al-Khartūm li-l-nashr, 1987, vol. 2/1, p. 111–117.

150 Muḥammad Sa‘īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, Khartoum, Khartoum University Press, 1986, p. 21–51.

151 Yitzhak NAKASH, “Fiscal and Monetary Systems in the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1988, vol. 20, no. 3, p. 365–385 ; Yitzhak NAKASH, “Reflections on a Subsistence Economy: Production and Trade of the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898,” in Elie Kedourie and Sylvia G. Haim (ed.), *Essays on the Economic History of the Middle East*, London, Frank Cass & Co., 1988, p. 43–57.

Abū Shūk<sup>152</sup>. The latter's doctoral work led to the publication in 1996, in collaboration with Anders J. Bjørkelo, of the first edition of financial sources from the central Mahdist treasury<sup>153</sup>.

These works contributed to close down the historiographical gap between the state and the population. While still mostly focused on the economic policies of the Mahdist state on trade and fiscality, they were taking a step aside from previous analyses centred on their normative aspects and their deviance from an ill-defined Islamic orthodoxy, to bring most of their attention on their effects on the populations of Nilotic Sudan. These first steps toward a social turn in the historiography of the Mahdiyya were furthered by works that endeavoured to unravel the social effects of Mahdist legislation and policies on women. David Decker's analysis of women in Kurdufān during the Mahdiyya<sup>154</sup> and Nawar el-Sheikh Mahboub's more encompassing work on Sudanese women offer precious insights on social life under the Mahdist regime<sup>155</sup>. The most accomplished social history of the Mahdiyya remains Robert Kramer's study of the "Omdurman experience" and the formation of an urban society<sup>156</sup>. Its originality lies in his careful attempt to thread together analyses of the policies implemented by the Mahdist state in Umm Durmān, the governing principles from which they were derived, particularly regarding their transformative objective, and the configuration of the social relations that emerged.

In the 1990s, Mahdist studies subsequently faded from academic debates. In 1989, the military coup led by 'Umar al-Bashīr and supported by the Muslim Brothers of the National Islamic Front had lasting consequences on Sudanese academia. Access to the archives was limited while greater political control was exerted over them, a number of the experienced archivists either left or were not replaced, and the deterioration of the economic situation decreased available resources. All in all, this evolution highly impacted Sudanese and foreign scholars' work. At the same time, the marginalisation in the new political scene shaped by the Islamists of the two main historical parties, the Umma Party (*Ḥizb al-umma*) and the Democratic Unionist Party (*al-Ḥizb al-ittiḥādī al-dīmūqrāṭī*), two Sufi-related organisations (the former to the Mahdiyya and the latter to the Khatmiyya), contributed to diminish the perceived relevancy of Mahdist studies. A common opinion

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152 Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK, *The Fiscal Administration of the Mahdist State in the Sudan (1881-1898)*, MA diss., University of Bergen, Bergen, 1991.

153 Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK and Anders J. BJØRKELO (ed.), *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897*, Leiden, Brill, 1996.

154 David F. DECKER, "Females and the State in Mahdist Kordofan," in Endre Stiansen and Michael Kevane (ed.), *Kordofan Invaded: Peripheral Incorporation and Social Transformation in Islamic Africa*, Leiden, Brill, 1998, p. 86–100.

155 Nawar el-Sheikh MAHGOUN, *Sudanese Women during the Mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, MA diss., University of Bergen, Bergen, 1992.

156 Robert S. KRAMER, *Holy City on the Nile: Omdurman during the Mahdiyya, 1885-1898*, Princeton, Markus Wiener Publishers, 2010. While published in 2010, *Holy City on the Nile* was developed from a research conducted in the late 1980s (Robert S. KRAMER, *Holy City on the Nile: Omdurman, 1885-1898*, PhD diss., Northwestern University, Evanston, 1991).

held in some academic milieus of the Sudanese capital was that the great expansion of the historiography during the second half of the twentieth century had left little unexplored avenues of research.

The impetus given to a structured social history of the Mahdiyya was short-lived, even as the body of edited sources greatly expanded thanks to the work of Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm<sup>157</sup>. This partially compensated reduced access to the archives and allowed the development of valuable scholarship by Kim Searcy on the symbolic dimensions of Mahdist authority<sup>158</sup>, and on the Mahdī's approach of Islamic law by Aharon Layish<sup>159</sup>. However, for the reasons mentioned above, few works were conducted based on primary sources held in Khartoum. Among the exceptions, the studies by Iris Seri-Hersch on the relations between the Mahdist state and its Ethiopian neighbour stand out<sup>160</sup>, along the analysis offered by al-Ṣiddīq Muḥammad Aḥmad Ḥātīm on the Mahdist army as an institution<sup>161</sup>.

### ***B) A Political Chronology of the Mahdiyya (1881-1899)***

For all the developments of the past fifty years, this historiography has remained somewhat locked answering questions that were first asked by the British propagandist literature, whether on the causes of the Mahdist uprising, still presented as primarily dependent on factors external to Sudanese society (Egyptian fiscal oppression and the abolition of the slave trade), or on the nature of Mahdist authority (considered almost uniquely from the point of view of the political centre, Umm Durmān). The initial framing of the overall trajectory of the Mahdist polity, first established by Holt and still prevalent today, clearly exhibits this driving motives. In an important article, the British historian and eminent specialist of the Mahdiyya suggested dividing its evolution into six different periods<sup>162</sup>, the presentation of which shall serve to establish a preliminary framework that will be nuanced in the body of this dissertation.

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157 Among the most important editorial works undertaken by Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm, one must refer to his magistral edition of the correspondence of the Mahdī and of 'Uthmān Dīqna, as well as the unfinished edition of the immense correspondence of the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi. For a useful summary of Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm's work until 1992, see Anders J. BJØRKELO and Rex S. O'FAHEY, "The Writings of the Sudanese Mahdi: Dr. M. I. Abu Salim's Edition: A Progress Report," *Sudanic Africa*, 1992, vol. 3, p. 163–164.

158 Kim SEARCY, *The Formation of the Sudanese Mahdist State: Ceremony and Symbols of Authority (1882-1898)*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2011.

159 Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī'a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan: The Mahdī's Legal Methodology and Doctrine*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2016.

160 Iris SERI-HERSCH, "Confronting a Christian Neighbor: Sudanese Representations of Ethiopia in the Early Mahdist Period, 1885-89," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2009, vol. 41, no. 2, p. 247–267 ; Iris SERI-HERSCH, "'Transborder' Exchanges of People, Things, and Representations: Revisiting the Conflict Between Mahdist Sudan and Christian Ethiopia, 1885-1889," *op. cit.*

161 Ḥātīm al-Ṣiddīq Muḥammad AḤMAD, *Al-jaysh fī al-dawla al-mahdiyya (1881-1898)*, Al-dār al-'arabiyya li-l-mawsū'āt, 2012.

162 Peter M. HOLT, "The Place in History of the Sudanese Mahdiya," *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1959, vol. 40, p. 107–112.

The first period runs from the proclamation by Muḥammad Aḥmad of his claims to the Mahdīship in 1881 (1298) in Abā Island to his death in 1885 (1302) in Umm Durmān. It covers what Holt calls “the creation of the Mahdist Theocracy” during which the Mahdist movement gained territorial control of Kurdufān marked by the capture of al-Ubayyīd on 19 January 1883 (10 Rabī‘ I 1300), before extending its influence to the rest of the Upper Nile Valley thanks to a double movement of local uprisings and the dispatch of military forces from the west, the centre of Mahdist power. In parallel, the first institutions of the nascent Mahdist state were founded, among which the treasury (*bayt al-māl*) occupied a central position. The climax of this first phase was reached with the fall of Khartoum into Mahdist hands in late January 1885 (Rabī‘ II 1302). Soon after Muḥammad Aḥmad settled his capital in a small village on the opposite bank of the Nile.

The death of the Mahdī in 1885, six months after Khartoum’s capture, caused disarray among his adherents. The next two years saw the consolidation of the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi’s power. Beginning in early 1886 (early 1303), he repressed an attempt by the *ashrāf*—a composite group of early supporters of the Mahdī who had conspired against him—to challenge his authority. He sent the famous *amīr* Ḥamdān Abū ‘Anja (c. 1835-1888) to seize control over Muḥammad Khālīd Zuqal’s troops who had left Dār Fūr and were advancing threateningly toward Umm Durmān. Finally, the Khalīfa carried out a vast purge within the ranks of the Mahdist territorial administration to place clients and fellow tribesmen from the Baqqāra. By September 1886 (D. al-Ḥijja 1304), this process was completed.

The following three years, from 1886 to 1889 (1303-1307), constituted what Holt dubbed the “militant phase” of the Mahdist state. In that period, several military expeditions were launched to expand Mahdist territorial control. To the east, on 20 December 1888 (16 Rabī‘ 1306), the Mahdist army which had been besieging the Red Sea port of Sawākin—still under Egyptian control—for several months was pushed back with important losses, a few days after Yūsuf Khaṭīb wrote his letter. This first important halt in Mahdist expansion was quickly followed by others. Further south, Mahdist armies had penetrated the Ethiopian territory and met the armies of Yohannes IV (1837-1889) on several occasions, leading to the death of the latter at the battle of al-Qallābāt on 9 March 1889 (6 Rajab 1306). Exhausted, the two forces retreated shortly after. On the opposite side, to the west, Mahdist control over Dār Fūr had remained fragile since Muḥammad Khālīd Zuqal was ousted from command. While tribal revolts were subdued with relative ease, the uprising led by Aḥmad Abū Jummayza (d. 1889), a messianic figure who claimed the position of *khalīfa* which had been offered by the Mahdī to Muḥammad al-Mahdī b. al-Sanūsī, mobilised a large following and threatened to drive Mahdist power out of the region altogether. His untimely death in early 1889 (mid-1306) signed the end of what was arguably the greatest internal threat to Khalīfian rule. The

last push of the Mahdiyya was directed toward Egypt. The vast army collected by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Nujūmī moved to the border, toward Wādī Ḥalfā, but was severely defeated by an Anglo-Egyptian force at the battle of Tūshkī on 3 August 1889 (5 D. al-Ḥijja 1306). This series of setbacks signed the cessation of important external operations.

The period from 1889 to 1891 saw what Holt called the “stabilisation” of the Khalifian state, but the term of reconfiguration may be more apt to describe the process undergone by the Mahdist polity. Severely weakened by its failure to export the *da‘wa* of the Maḥdī and the famine of 1306 *h.* (1889/90), the power of the Khalīfa was once again challenged by the *ashrāf* in November 1891 who saw then an opportunity to reassert their lost influence. Like the first time, their effort failed and the most ardent opponents to the Khalīfa were either executed or exiled. The end of political contestation in the centre was accompanied by a movement of normalisation. The *jihād* was abandoned as the primary objective of the state, international trade relations were tentatively resumed, and a more coherent administrative organisation implemented, including through the establishment of a more rigorous fiscal system.

Having survived multiple crises in the previous two years, the Khalifian regime benefitted from greater acceptance of its authority by the population. Revolts became rarer. Holt sees in this five-year period the achievement of the transformation of the militant and theocratic state into a personal monarchy, a “Ta‘ā’ishī autocracy”, headed by the Khalīfa and supported by the military might of the Baqqāra.

The Mahdist state had already been forced to partially withdraw from certain regions on its eastern under increased pressures from the British, who regained limited control on some of the hinterland of Sawākin, and more to the south, from the Italians who seized Kasalā, near the Ethiopian border, in July 1894 (Muḥarram 1312). However, the invasion of the northern province of Dunqulā by Anglo-Egyptian troops under the Sirdar Kitchener in 1896 (1313) initiated a sequence that ended with the downfall of the Mahdist regime. After a first push concluded in 1897 (1314/5) with the occupation of Barbar in September 1897 (Rabī‘ II 1315), the colonial troops regrouped and stabilised their position a few hundred kilometres north of Umm Durmān. The last phase of the invasion began in March 1898 (Shawwāl 1315) with the resumption of the advance to the south. On 2 September 1898 (15 Rabī‘ II 1316), at the battle of Kararī, the main body of the Mahdist army was annihilated, bringing an end to the Khalīfa’s power. The capital, Umm Durmān, was occupied, while the Mahdist leader withdrew on the White Nile. One year later, on 24 November 1899 (20 Rajab 1317), he was killed at the battle of Umm Diwaykarāt.

### ***C) New Perspectives on the Mahdiyya***

This initial framing of the Mahdiyya has proved astonishingly resilient. Most Mahdist studies are focused on the state and its institutions. As seen above, the shift toward a social history of the Mahdiyya has been engaged but is far from being completed. Political power is still presented as highly centralised and so, policies decided in Umm Durmān are imposed on the other provinces thus placed in a clear relation of subordination. Political history occupies a disproportionate place in the Mahdiyya's historiography. This is also true of military operations—quite particularly when they involved Anglo-Egyptian troops—, a legacy from “Wingate-Slatinism” (see above). As such, the wealth of information on al-Nujūmī's campaign in the north reflects first and foremost the concerns of the military establishment in Cairo.

Other aspects of the Mahdiyya have not benefitted from the same attention. Analyses on the relation between the new regime and the populations of Nilotic Sudan was predominantly analysed through a dual prism. Most historical assessments have remained locked in a dichotomy opposing adherence and resistance, almost systematically considered at the scale of tribal groups. In that regard, tribal affiliations are considered as the sole determining factor to explain attitudes toward local Mahdist representatives, without consideration for infra-tribal dynamics. This, again, is the reflexion of the grid through which British officers made the political situation in Nilotic Sudan legible. As a result, the complexity of individual interactions with the state, its representatives, and the social model they were promoting was overlooked and little attention was devoted to understanding the ways in which the Mahdī's *da'wa* resonated with the Sudanese populations and led large numbers of men and women to commit to his movement.

With this in mind, this dissertation aims at exploring two axes of reflexion on the Mahdiyya in the specific context of its Eastern Sudan province, both articulated around the idea of social transformation: the mechanisms and nature of Mahdist engagement, and the reformist ambitions of the state.

Despite several accounts and historical works on Muḥammad Aḥmad's movement, the dynamics behind his followers' mobilisation are still elusive. Narratives present a revolution without revolutionaries, supported by vaguely defined groups such as the *jallāba* or the Baqqāra tribes. With exception of a few leaders, most men and women who decided to join the Mahdī vanish in an anonymous masse. In Holt's seminal work, the mechanisms that drove their adherence are barely studied. A few circumstantial factors—among which the abolition of the slave trade in 1877 (1293/4) figures preeminently—are summoned to explain a general state of discontent which was easily converted into a full-fledged uprising and Mahdist mobilisation is framed as a reaction to colonial encroachments. It eschews the notable tension that should have arisen from the realisation



that adherence to Mahdism was the strongest in western and eastern provinces, that is those the least affected by the Egyptian colonial policies, and dismisses it by surreptitiously summoning tropes on the inherent violence of pastoral and nomadic communities. Furthermore, local and short-term causes cannot explain the synchronicity of the uprising in such a wide space, between different linguistic groups with varied occupations. Holt thus resorts to an essentialist reading of the mobilisation, writing with regard to expansion of the movement from the west to the Nile Valley that “there could be little doubt that sooner or later the milder riverain and settled peoples would rise *en masse*, stirred by long memories of a lost freedom, by the weariness of being governed, or by an inclination to anarchy and the desire for booty<sup>163</sup>”. Other explanations based on a Weberian appreciation of the Mahdī’s charismatic power are interesting for their theorisation of the different phases toward the routinisation of power and for their healthy insistence on social crisis as a prerequisite for the emergence of revolutionary movements<sup>164</sup>. However, the dynamics of adherence themselves tend to be quickly evacuated as the sole result of the leader’s particular charisma and the adequacy of his message with his followers’ aspirations.

In contrast with the remarks above, the analysis presented in this dissertation is heavily indebted to Juan R. I. Cole’s historical adaptation of Theda Skocpol’s theory on revolutions as the unplanned result of the interactions between varied and distinct social movements. For Cole, “revolutions, as a form of turbulence, entail an untidy conjuncture of several types of collective action, carried on in an uncoordinated manner by different social groups<sup>165</sup>”, but bound together by a nativist ideology. As opposed to approaches that consider the Mahdist uprising as a proto-national movement<sup>166</sup> or as part of a bourgeois revolution prompted by mercantile interests<sup>167</sup>, Cole’s argument stresses the need to consider the small-scale social changes that affected the different strata of the population. In the case of Nilotic Sudan, due to the extreme diversity of environments and social bodies, an analysis of Mahdist mobilisation must be grounded in a specific territory, even if this does not preclude comparisons. While available sources are far from offering the same granular descriptions on which Cole based his analysis of the social changes experienced by the different segments of Egyptian society, this thesis will attempt to retrace the evolution of power and

163 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

164 For a rich but sometimes ill-guided attempt to apply the Weberian model to the Sudanese Mahdiyya, see Richard H. DEKMEJIAN and M.J. WYSZOMIRSKI, “Charismatic Leadership in Islam: The Mahdi of the Sudan,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1972, vol. 14, no. 2, p. 193–214. This Weberian theory is also at the heart of Kim Searcy’s studies, see for example Kim SEARCY, “The Khalīfa and the Routinization of Charismatic Authority,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 2010, vol. 43, no. 3, p. 429–442.

165 Juan R. COLE, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt Urabi Movement*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 234.

166 For a caricatural example, see P. DAVID, “Le Soudan et l’État mahdiste sous le khalifa ’Abdullahi (1885-1899),” *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer*, 1988, vol. 75, no. 280, p. 273–307.

167 To sum up unfairly al-Qaddāl’s argument as presented in Muḥammad Sa’īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*

socioeconomic structures in Eastern Sudan since the eighteenth century so as to avoid the reification of colonial categories based solely on tribal affiliations.

The main issue is to run together and combine the interpretative and explicative approaches, that is, for Roxanne L. Euben, to adopt a “dialogic model of interpretation<sup>168</sup>”. This essentially means to keep some distance with historical actors and maintain a position of reflexive neutrality, while avoiding to situate academic analysis as fully external. The main objective of applying this model to Mahdist mobilisation is to leave room for belief and curb the overbearing influence of the British colonial discourse. On the one hand, the risk from looking for the causes of the Mahdist uprising is to consider the Mahdist ideology as purely instrumental, the default mode of expression of discontent by these “primitive rebels<sup>169</sup>”, thus emptying Mahdist discourse of all substance and reducing it to a common language of resistance. It was prevalent among colonial officers to explain the frequent shifts of allegiances of the tribal leaders they were trying to attach to their side. They saw their hesitations and turnarounds as evidence of their ambivalence and unavowed unbelief. All Mahdist engagement could then be portrayed as opportunistic and motivated by the lure of loot or to gain political influence.

But the same officers could not help but notice that Mahdist combatants were quite willing to die for beliefs they apparently did not hold. This contradiction did not require to be solved. The irrationality of Mahdist discourse was assumed and thus did not necessitate to be explained. This apparent ambiguity could be imputed with ease to Muslims’ “fanatical” tendencies, particularly those who did not abide to colonial representations of orthodox beliefs. Conversely, provincial Mahdist authorities, especially in Eastern Sudan, frequently made the same observation as to the fickleness of their followers. In their correspondence, Mahdist leaders often accompanied their request for submission with physical threats, but the vocabulary they used was fully imbued with Mahdist ideology. It is inconceivable that they would have worded their instructions in a language that had no potency. Therefore, it must be assumed that several “truth programs”, to use Paul Veyne’s notion<sup>170</sup>, cohabited. Individuals could at the same time believe and not believe, and their position fluctuate according to the circumstances, without their potential engagement with Mahdist ideals being irremediably forsaken.

Taking into account Lidwien Kapteijn’s point that the Mahdiyya still requires to be considered “from below”<sup>171</sup>, one of the central lines pursued in this thesis will be to emphasise the

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168 Roxanne L. EUBEN, *Enemy in the Mirror*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 36–42.

169 Eric J. HOBSBAWM, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th centuries*, Manchester, Manchester University press, 1959.

170 Paul VEYNE, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes ?*, Paris, Seuil, 1983.

171 Lidwien KAPTEIJNS, “The Historiography of the Northern Sudan From 1500 to the Establishment of British Colonial Rule: A Critical Overview,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 1989, vol. 22, no. 2,

perspectives of the members of the nascent Mahdist community composed of combatants, administrators and their families.

The second approach continues the reflexion elaborated above on the need to reinsert the men and women who participated in, witnessed and opposed the Mahdist regime within the historical narrative, especially with regard to the relation they entertained with the administrative apparatus set up in the Mahdist state's provinces. An analysis of the state's normative and prescriptive dimensions will be conducted alongside a reflexion on how individuals interacted, adapted and reacted to these injunctions so as to suggest insights on their perception this vocabulary of power. This focus on individuals rather than groups is central to the argumentation presented here. While the Mahdist movement could be portrayed as a reaction to the process of "modernisation" witnessed by Nilotic Sudan since the eighteenth century, that is its ever increasing incorporation into the "world-system" and influence of capitalism over the socioeconomic fabric of the region, some of the early adherents were not so much opposed to modernity as they were frustrated from having failed to reap the economic and political dividend they may have hoped to gain from these changes. This did not exclude other positions, but the point is to replace a binary opposition by a more nuanced paradigm articulated around their interaction with modernity.

The focus on individuals is the consequence of two trends. The first one links the emergence of what Schumpeter called the "tax state" with the establishment of an impersonal relationship between the population and the administration<sup>172</sup>. In his view, the establishment of the "modern state" was allowed by the decline of the bonds that structured the feudal society. It then found itself responsible for all war-related expenses and so had to resort to taxation. This required "a setting where the bonds of community have disintegrated and the individual [...] has moved to the centre of gravity<sup>173</sup>". While we should be careful before transposing a model initially developed in a European context to Nilotic Sudan, from 1821 (1236/7) to 1881 (1298), the Egyptian colonial regime accelerated the disaggregation of feudal bonds initiated during the late Funj sultanate. To some extent, this effort was perpetuated by the Mahdist regime. At least until 1889 (1306/7), even if this was limited to certain peripheral territories, it sought to incorporate every available man for the *jihād*. As a result, the individuation process, even if incomplete, was particularly intense<sup>174</sup>. But this

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p. 264.

172 Aaron G. JAKES, *Egypt's Occupation: Colonial Economism and the Crises of Capitalism*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2020, p. 17.

173 Richard A. Musgrave MUSGRAVE, "Schumpeter's Crisis of the Tax State: An Essay in Fiscal Sociology," *Journal of Evolutionary Economics*, 1992, vol. 2, no. 2, p. 91–92.

174 This argument reflects vividly Rudof von Slatin's comment mentioned above on the disruption of social structures through the abandonment of tributary networks based hierarchical authority.

was not the only dynamic at play. Feudal and tribal relationships were also affected by the influence gradually gained by Sufi *shuyūkh*, quite particularly after the establishment of hierarchical Sufi *ṭuruq* in the early nineteenth century. The practices they promoted encouraged the formation of individualised links between a disciple and his master and, according to Albrecht Hofheinz, a form of internalisation of Sufi piety<sup>175</sup>. Both these trends combined, albeit on modalities which remain complex to assess, to give form to new norms of governmentality which structured Mahdist communities.

Provincial administrations were one of the main sites of expression of this particular form of authority. Holt noted that if the Mahdiyya “presented itself as a primitivist and rigorist movement, fundamentally opposed to change and to the modernization which had been induced [...] by the impact of the West [...], within the fields of technical modernization and administration, so much was taken over from the Turco-Egyptian regime by the Mahdist state, that in many respects it was its successor<sup>176</sup>”. A number of clerks of the Turkiyya<sup>177</sup>, often Egyptian copts like Yūsuf Mikhā’il, were indeed incorporated into the Mahdist administration, but using the same people does not mean they were doing the same thing. I wish to argue against Holt’s idea that the Mahdist state resorted to the same administrative apparatus as the previous regime out of lack of other options.

Wael Hallaq posited the impossibility of the Islamic state based on two main arguments<sup>178</sup>. First, because positive law, based on the authoritative force of the state, is radically incompatible with Islamic law; and secondly, because the disciplinary and regulatory technologies of the modern state are un-Islamic<sup>179</sup>. Leaving aside the first part of the argument<sup>180</sup>, the Mahdiyya itself was evidently a “possible state” and a significant example that this opposition between the Islamic nature of the state and its use of disciplinary techniques of power requires at least further

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175 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*

176 Peter M. HOLT, “Modernization and Reaction in the Nineteenth-Century Sudan,” in *Studies in the History of the Near East*, London, Franck Cass, 1973, p. 145.

177 This was also the case for specialists like Yūsuf Khaṭīb who was mentioned at the beginning of this text.

178 Wael B. HALLAQ, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity’s Moral Predicament*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013.

179 Andrew F. MARCH, “Review Essay: What Can the Islamic Past Teach Us about Secular Modernity?,” *Political Theory*, 2015, vol. 43, p. 3.

180 The argument on the incompatibility between positive law and *sharī’a* law fails to take into consideration the many interactions between governance (*siyāsa*) and religious law (*fiqh*) and the fact that not all aspects of the life of a Muslim community was covered by religious law. In the context the Mahdiyya, such arguments are not required to invalidate Hallaq’s point. As noted by Aharon Layish, the Mahdī gave precedence, over all other forms of legal decisions, to a particular form of interpretation (*ijtihād*) based on inspiration (*ilhām*). As a result, his liberty to legislate was almost unfettered, especially as he had claimed infallibility (Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī’a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 36–43). This echoed the larger trend among reformist movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of considering the abandonment of the school of laws (*madhhab* pl. *madhā’ib*) (Catherine MAYEUR-JAOUEN, “À la poursuite de la réforme » : nouveaux et débats historiographiques de l’histoire religieuse et intellectuelle de l’islam, XVe-XXIe siècle,” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 2018, vol. 73, no. 2, p. 357).

investigation. Despite Holt's assumption of its inherited nature, the administrative structures were not a circumstantial apposition summoned to solve purely logistical issues but were considered central to the formation of a Mahdist community. Without a preconceived organisation ready to be implemented, they were the result of a gradual process of experiments which was highly influenced by the main model at the disposal of the Mahdist leadership, that of the disciplinary power of the hierarchical Sufi *turuq*. In that regard, I wish to demonstrate that this process was particularly vigorous in the provinces of the Mahdist state, in the sites where were aggregated the most ardent supporters of the Mahdī's *da'wa*. Contrary to what has long been assumed about the hyper-centralisation of the Mahdist state, an undeniable reality, the formation of policies regarding the governance of the Mahdist community and the local populations was not the preserve of the political centre. Actions taken in the provinces could inform the directions adopted by the Khalīfa, one informing the other in loops so as to adapt to ever evolving situations. This is reminiscent of Isa Blumi's theory, in the Ottoman context, that "the kind of exchanges taking place in these "local" contexts were eminently consequential to the very development of the state system, bureaucracy, and socio-economic patterns we associate today with Modernity<sup>181</sup>".

Finally, this dissertation aims to show that the techniques of power used by the Mahdist provincial administration were not only regulatory but also transformative. This last aspect of the Mahdiyya was at the core of the *da'wa* promoted by the Mahdī and the revolution he instigated. This last term has not been a staple of descriptions of the Mahdist movement<sup>182</sup>. It does not appear in the proclamations of the Mahdī nor, it seems, in his voluminous correspondence. British officials referred to the events in Nilotic Sudan as a "revolt" or an "uprising". Na'ūm Shuqayr, the famous author of the first comprehensive history of Sudan in its colonial borders introduced the term in Arabic (*thawra*)<sup>183</sup>. However, this designation only became widespread in the late 1940s under the hands of the emergent generation of professional historians. Makkī Shibayka's Ph.D. dissertation was entitled "The Sudan and the Mahdist Revolution of 1881-1885". Holt later wrote that the Mahdiyya was "a movement of religious origin [...] which accomplished a political revolution – the overthrow of Egyptian rule and the establishment of an indigenous Islamic state<sup>184</sup>". In both cases, these authors considered that the revolution was achieved in 1885 (1302) with the capture of Khartoum, thus ending the main movement of territorial control. Yet, I consider that the properly

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181 Isa BLUMI, *Foundations of Modernity: Human Agency and the Imperial State*, New York and Abingdon, Routledge, 2012, p. 5.

182 It could be noted that the "White Flag Revolution" in 1924 presented similar ambiguities. See Elena VEZZADINI, *Lost Nationalism: Revolution, Memory and Anti-colonial Resistance in Sudan*, Woodbridge and Rochester, Boydell & Brewer, 2015.

183 Na'ūm SHUQAYR, *Tārīkh al-Sūdān al-qadīm wa al-ḥadīth wa juḡhrāfiyyat-hu*, Cairo, Maṭba'at al-ma'ārif, 1903, p. 109.

184 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

revolutionary objective of the Mahdist movement did not lay on state formation but on the establishment of an ideal Islamic society. This entailed a lasting effort to alter individual behaviours, a perspective reinforced by the process of subjectivation of faith engaged by the Sufi *turuq*, as well as social structures. Mahdist influence was at its strongest in Umm Durmān, where these efforts were witnessed first-hand by the European prisoners, as studied by Robert S. Kramer<sup>185</sup>. This dissertation will endeavour to give evidence that contrary to what might be expected, this double imperative of regulating and transforming the Mahdist body was also observed in the provinces after 1885. The Mahdist army was the main instrument of this policy.

#### ***D) The Mahdiyya from its Margins: The Case for Eastern Sudan***

The focus of this dissertation is the result of two considerations. First, because my master's thesis dealt primarily with the conflict between the Anglo-Egyptian authorities in Sawākin and the Mahdist movement in Eastern Sudan, it relied heavily on foreign sources<sup>186</sup>. The initial objective of this dissertation is to counterbalance the sonorous voices of the colonial archive by mobilising Mahdist sources. Secondly, the aim was to decentre a narrative too often articulated from the point of view of the capital and offer a history "from below" of the men and women who were engaged in the Mahdist movement, as well as the local populations with whom they interacted. In other words, to paraphrase Edward P. Thompson's famous expression, the objective was, somewhat ambitiously, to rescue the Mahdists "from the enormous condescension of posterity"<sup>187</sup> and weave the threads of a social history of a province under Mahdist rule, thus pursuing the reappraisal initiated by historians such as David F. Decker, Nawar el-Sheikh Mahboub, Robert S. Kramer and Iris Seri-Hersch.

The province (*imāla* pl. *imālāt*) of Eastern Sudan offered compelling advantages to undertake such a study. First, the definition of this territory in the nineteenth century was relatively coherent and stable. Located between the Red Sea Littoral and the Nile Valley, its northern border was often set near the current border between Egypt and Sudan<sup>188</sup>. To the south-west, the 'Aṭbara River was commonly used to distinguish Eastern Sudan from the plains of the Buṭāna, from the Nile up to Kasalā. The situation was more ambiguous to the south-east. The foothills of the Ethiopian highlands constitute a strong topographical break, however, the numerous valleys of seasonal rivers

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185 Robert S. KRAMER, *Holy City on the Nile: Omdurman during the Mahdiyya, 1885-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 81–125.

186 Anaël POUSSIER, *Le conflit au Soudan-Est : se battre pour Sawākin (1883-1891)*, MA diss., Université Paris-I Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, 2012.

187 Edward P. THOMPSON, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London, V. Gollancz, 1963, p. 12.

188 The definition of this border is still an important point of contention between the two countries. The Ḥalā'ib Triangle, a region north of the 22<sup>nd</sup> parallel, was placed under Sudanese authority in 1902 to accommodate the grazing rights of the Bijāwī herdsmen. In 1958, Egypt decided to impose his sovereignty over this territory. The issue has yet to be solved.

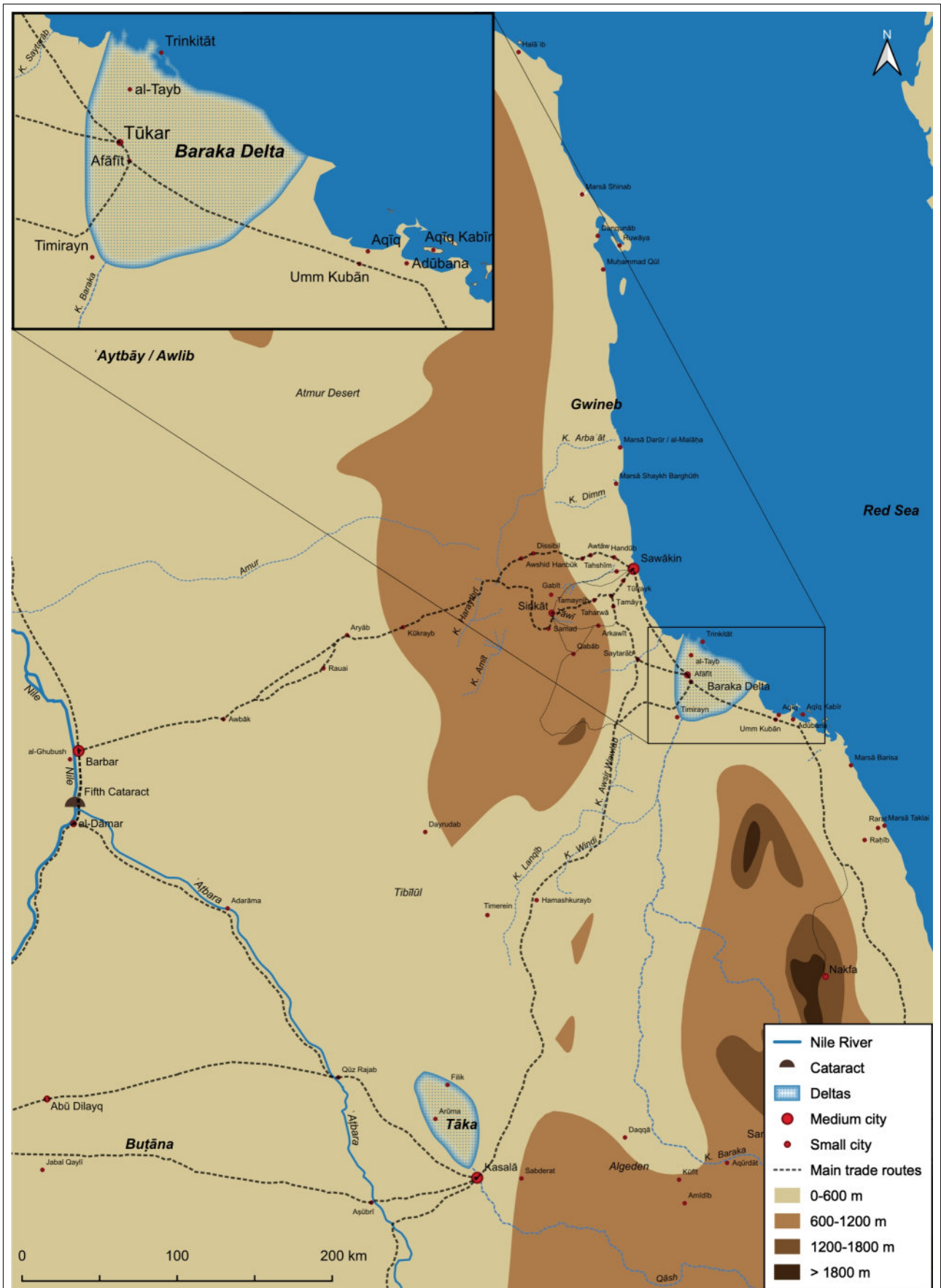


Fig. 0.2 : Map of Eastern Sudan in the late nineteenth century

connect the two spaces and circulations between them were frequent. A similar situation prevailed on the littoral itself. The Sudanese-Eritrean border inherited from the Italian colonisation only partially reflects the realities of human settlements. European observers associated this space to the tribal territory of the Bija populations, that is Bijāwī speakers. As shall be seen in detail in chapter 3, the Eastern province defined by the Mahdist administration matched closely these tribal boundaries<sup>189</sup>, without ever evoking this rationale.

Another facilitating factor to research this particular region is the relative availability of sources<sup>190</sup>. While all British and Egyptian troops were withdrawn from Nilotic Sudan in 1885 shortly after the failure of the Wolseley expedition to relieve Gordon in Khartoum, a garrison was maintained in Sawākin. In spite of the frequent closing of the gates of the city between 1885 and 1891, the intelligence officers stationed there had access to a dense flow of news and rumours propagated by the traders, travellers and tribal leaders who visited the port. Their publications reflected the flimsy nature of their sources and their limited understanding of the socio-political realities outside the confines of the town, particularly before 1889 when the organisation of the branches of the DMI was overhauled by Wingate and its output became more reliable<sup>191</sup>. Nonetheless, it gives precious, even if obviously biased, indications as to the topics of concern for regional economic and political actors, something which does not exist for the other provinces.

This body of archives is useful as it offers a perspective distinct from the one assumed by Mahdist sources, allowing us to read one against the other. These are easier to manipulate for historical and practical reasons. The Mahdī himself placed the eastern province of the Mahdist state under the authority of one of the most famous figures of that time, ‘Uthmān b. Abū Bakr Diqna (c. 1840-1926), in 1883 (1300). Unlike other regions which witnessed numerous changes in leadership, particularly as a result of the 1885-1886 (1300-1301) purges, Eastern Sudan was ruled by only one *‘āmil* throughout the Mahdiyya, even if his effective power knew dramatic changes in that period. This means that the correspondence which ran between him and the central power, the Khalīfa himself in the majority of cases, is much easier to trace and offers a more coherent view of the evolution of regional policies than for other territories. This is compounded by the fact that it benefitted from the immense editorial effort led by Abū Salīm who published in 2004 the *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna [The Writings of ‘Uthmān Diqna]* a rigorous edited compilation of

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189 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, Khartoum, Dār al-balad li-l-ṭibā‘a wa-l-nashr wa-l-tawzī‘, 1998, p. 7–8.

190 The nature of the sources mobilised in this dissertation will be more thoroughly presented in each chapter. The list of all sources can be found at the end.

191 Martin W. Daly, « The soldier as historian : F.R. Wingate and the Sudanese Mahdia », *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 1988, vol. 17 (1), p. 99-106.



‘Uthmān Diqna’s letters to the Khalīfa<sup>192</sup>. This was a crucial addition to the much earlier edition of a fundamental and unique text, the *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna* [*The Memorial of ‘Uthmān Diqna*]<sup>193</sup>, describing for the Mahdī the early Mahdist military operations in Eastern Sudan<sup>194</sup>. The letters sent from the Mahdī and the Khalīfa to ‘Uthmān Diqna were also copied in a letter-book (*daftar*), as was the common practice for this type of correspondence<sup>195</sup>. The original of the *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna* is kept at the National Record Office (NRO) in Khartoum, but a copy is also available on microfilm at the Sudan Archives of Durham University<sup>196</sup>.

However, what makes the province of Eastern Sudan exceptional is the unexpected outcome of a British military operation. In early February 1891 (Rajab 1308), the Lt.-colonel Hotted Smith, who then held the misleading title of Governor-General of the Red Sea, but whose real authority was limited to Sawākin and the immediate neighbourhood of the port, launched a series of expeditions to gain some form of control over the region which was supposed to be under his authority. On 19 February (10 Rajab), he headed to Afāfīt, the Mahdist provincial centre for Eastern Sudan, a few kilometres from the now abandoned Egyptian garrison of Tūkar, in the delta of the Baraka. After having defeated the *anṣār* which advanced against him, the British commander was surprised to discover a city of more than 6 000 *tukuls*<sup>197</sup>. The agents of the DMI quickly began to gather as many documents as they could find, searching the provincial treasury and the domiciles of important figures. The swiftness of the advance had entirely taken by surprise the Mahdist forces. They withdrew hurriedly from their position, leaving behind an important body of administrative documents dating from 1883 up to 1891. For reasons presented in chapter 4, the vast majority of these documents covers the period from to December 1888 January 1891 (Rabī‘ II 1306 to Jumādā II 1308). They now constitute an entire section (section 5) of the Mahdist fonds preserved at the NRO in Khartoum. A rough evaluation of their numbers, around 5 000 documents, would mean that this section alone accounts for 10 % of the entire collection of Mahdist documents. This is purely indicative as it entails to addition very dissimilar types of texts, ledgers, and receipts under a single unit. It nonetheless gives a genuine impression of the size of this fonds, without equivalent for Mahdist archives. Indeed, in the case of most of the other provinces, and particularly in Umm Durmān immediately after the Mahdist defeat of Kararī on 2 September 1898 (15 Rabī‘ II 1316),

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192 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*

193 Henceforth, these works will be designated respectively as the *Muḥarrarāt* and the *Mudhakkirāt*.

194 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.* The original text is designated as *Daftar waqā’i ‘Uthmān Diqna* [*The Record of the Story of ‘Uthmān Diqna*] and is kept in Khartoum (NRO Mahdiyya 8/07/62)

195 There exist several other letter-books. The first to arrive in the hands of the British officers was ‘Abd al-Raḥmān w. al-Nujūmī’s, found on the battlefield of Tūshkī on 3 August 1889 (see above).

196 NRO Mahdiyya 8/07/60 and SAD 14/12M.

197 Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 505.

Mahdist administrators most often resorted to burning official documents, among other reasons to distance themselves from the regime. As a result, none of the other provincial treasuries nor the central treasury present such a continuous and coherent body of financial documents<sup>198</sup>.

Historians did not necessarily agree on the interest of this archive. While Holt mentioned, with regard to administrative and fiscal documents, “a very rich collection<sup>199</sup>”, al-Qaddāl was more dubious as to the use that could be made of them to write an economic history of the Mahdiyya<sup>200</sup>. To some extent, both were right. The hope that this detailed documentation could provide insights on the daily lives of the Mahdist community established in Eastern Sudan was partially achieved. They remained silent on the larger dynamics of the inscription of Mahdist power in the region, quite particularly with regard to its interactions with the local groups. The latter are seldom mentioned and their voice almost entirely absent. The historian Nicolas Michel had already pondered “whether the wonderful Ottoman *daftar*-s transported us only in a world of paper<sup>201</sup>”. Indeed, this immense resource, produced at great cost and effort by a small provincial administration, was essentially self-referential, the state contemplating itself in its action and showcasing his power, but giving only sparse attention to individuals and their daily lives. The initial frustration caused by the relative muteness of these texts led to a reconfiguration of the approach adopted by this research to examine the role of the state so evident in its own production, but to insist on the formation of this bureaucracy and its scriptural practices, so as to emphasise the links between power and the paper trail left by the provincial treasury in Eastern Sudan through its materiality and the microtechniques it deployed<sup>202</sup>, in its endeavour to rule and transform the militant Mahdist community settled in Afāfit and the power it attempted to exert over the populations of the region.<sup>203</sup>

The first chapter will serve as a dense introduction to the history of Eastern Sudan in the *longue durée*. It will pay particular attention to avoiding essentialist categories of analysis with regard to the tribal groups in this region by showcasing the evolution of their zones of settlement, of their economic role in the trade circulations of the Greater Nile Valley, and, crucially, the

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198 The main example for such sources remains the precious work of edition of the accounts of the central treasury for the period stretching from 22 March to 24 December 1897 (18 Shawwāl 1314 to the end of Rajab 1315) (Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK and Anders J. BJØRKELO (ed.), *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897, op. cit.*). As can be immediately noticed, it only covers nine months, and that of a particular period when the Mahdist regime was already crumbling before the Anglo-Egyptian advance led by Kitchener.

199 Peter M. Holt, « The Archives of the Mahdia », *Sudan Notes and Records*, vol. 36 (1), 1955, p. 74.

200 Muḥammad Sa’īd al-Qaddāl, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawlat al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, op. cit., p. 17.

201 “Et si les merveilleux *daftar*-s ottomans ne nous transportaient que dans un monde de papier?” (Nicolas Michel, *L’Égypte des villages autour du seizième siècle*, Peeters, Paris, Louvain and Bristol, 2018, p. 10). My thanks to Didier Guignard for pointing out this reference to me.

202 Rémi DEWIÈRE and Silvia BRUZZI, “Paroles de papier. Matérialité et écritures en contextes africains,” *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 2019, vol. 236, no. 4, p. 949–966.

203 Nicolas MICHEL, “L’Égypte des villages autour du seizième siècle.”

relationship they entertained with the neighbouring polities since the early modern period up to the 1870s.

In the second chapter, the transformation of the socioeconomic context in the 1870s will be analysed to explain the dynamics of Mahdist mobilisation from 1883 (1300) onwards. Against the dominant narrative, I will show that the adherence to Mahdism did not overlap neatly with tribal categories nor was limited to Bijāwī nomads but reveals much more complex tensions within the populations of Eastern Sudan. The nature of the conflict that pitted Mahdist forces and Anglo-Egyptian troops from 1883 to 1885 (1301-1302) will be dealt with, from the point of view of Bijāwī combatants, in the second part, while the breakout of the Bijāwī civil war in 1886-1888 (1303-1305) will be presented last.

Once the level of conflictuality had abated, essentially because of the exhaustion of the belligerent groups, the Mahdist provincial authorities headed by the *‘āmil* ‘Uthmān Dīqna began asserting their power with more intensity and a treasury was established in Tūkar at the end of 1888. The origins and formation of this new structure of authority is the subject of chapter 3. It is meant to inform a larger reflexion on the relations between Umm Durmān and the provinces.

The main objectives of the Mahdist leadership were all military. To complete them required access to economic resources which were and still are quite rare in Eastern Sudan. The substantial body of documentation produced between 1888 and 1891 (1306-1308) by the Mahdist bureaucracy offers a rare window into a Mahdist provincial economy. The unparalleled level of detail of these documents allows for a rich analysis of a Mahdist budget outside the capital, and can also be used to retrace the trade policies adopted by both British authorities in Sawākin and the Mahdist leadership. Money and goods were important but grain was crucial. The particular context of the 1889-1891 food crisis, also called the famine of the *Sanat Sitta*<sup>204</sup> will be discussed in chapter 4.

The Mahdist provincial power was responsible for providing for the men and their families who had joined the movement, willingly or not. Basic needs had to be met (and rarely were), but the Mahdist project was much more radical and required the transformation of these fragmented groups into an ideal Mahdist society. The inner logics of this particular type of governmentality will be examined in the fifth and last chapter.

Finally, in the conclusion, a short epilogue will outline the evolution of Mahdist influence in Eastern Sudan after 1891 (1308) when ‘Uthmān Dīqna’s troops were forced to withdraw to the ‘Aṭbara and settle in a place called Adārāma.

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<sup>204</sup> *Sanat sitta* means “year six”, in reference to the year 1306 (1888/9), the date at which the famine was said to have begun.

*“The Arabs, moreover, have their own politics. It is certain that a large part of them see with pleasure their white and black dominators killing each other<sup>1</sup>.”*

Report by Johann A. W. Munzinger<sup>2</sup>, 12 August 1866

Most, if not all, of the history of Eastern Sudan and of the Bijāwī populations that inhabit this space was written by external observers, travellers, merchants and soldiers coming from the literate centres surrounding this region, a “periphery at the crossroads” to use the expression of Gudrun Dahl and Ander Hjort af Ornäs<sup>3</sup>. As a result, this history has been almost solely defined by its interactions with the outer world, and its inhabitants often depicted as anonymous foes hostile to foreign incursions like the Arab penetration of the tenth century, the Ottoman settlement on the littoral in the sixteenth century, or European colonial expansion in the nineteenth century. According to this dated historiographical perspective, “the Beja [...], for the forty centuries of their known history, have watched Civilisations flourish and decay, and, themselves almost unchanging, have survived them all<sup>4</sup>”.

This chapter’s purpose is twofold. First, it aims at revising the etic description of the immutable Bijāwī communities to bring out facets of their historical evolution since the early modern period, and underline the plurality of their trajectories, from nomads to semi-sedentary cultivators, from camel to cattle-breeders, or from reclusive pastoralists to powerful regional traders. They became all of the above, constantly adapting and reacting to constraints and opportunities. Bijāwī mutability was, however, not boundless, and because ethno-tribal identities were profoundly connected with socioeconomic functions—to the point where some authors derived the ethnonym Bijāwī from the Arabic *badawī*, meaning Bedouins or nomads<sup>5</sup>—the adoption of new means of livelihood either stretched former rationales of tribal belonging to their breaking points, for example with the abandonment of their mother-tongue, Bijāwiye, or required a reconfiguration of what it meant to be Bijāwī.

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1 Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismaïl. Tome III (première partie), L’Empire africain (1863-1869)*, Le Caire, Société royale de géographie d’Égypte, 1936, vol. 3, p. 193.

2 Johann A. W. Munzinger (1832-1875), a Swiss administrator and explorer, held the French consulship in Maşawwa’ from 1864 to 1870 (Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 281–282).

3 Gudrun DAHL and Anders HJORT-AF-ORNÄS, “Precolonial Beja: A Periphery at the Crossroads,” *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 2006, vol. 15, no. 4, p. 473–498.

4 Andrew PAUL, *A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1954, p. 1.

5 Anders HJORT AF ORNÄS and Gudrun DAHL, *Responsible Man: The Atmaan Beja of North-eastern Sudan*, Uppsala, Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology and Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1991, p. 27.

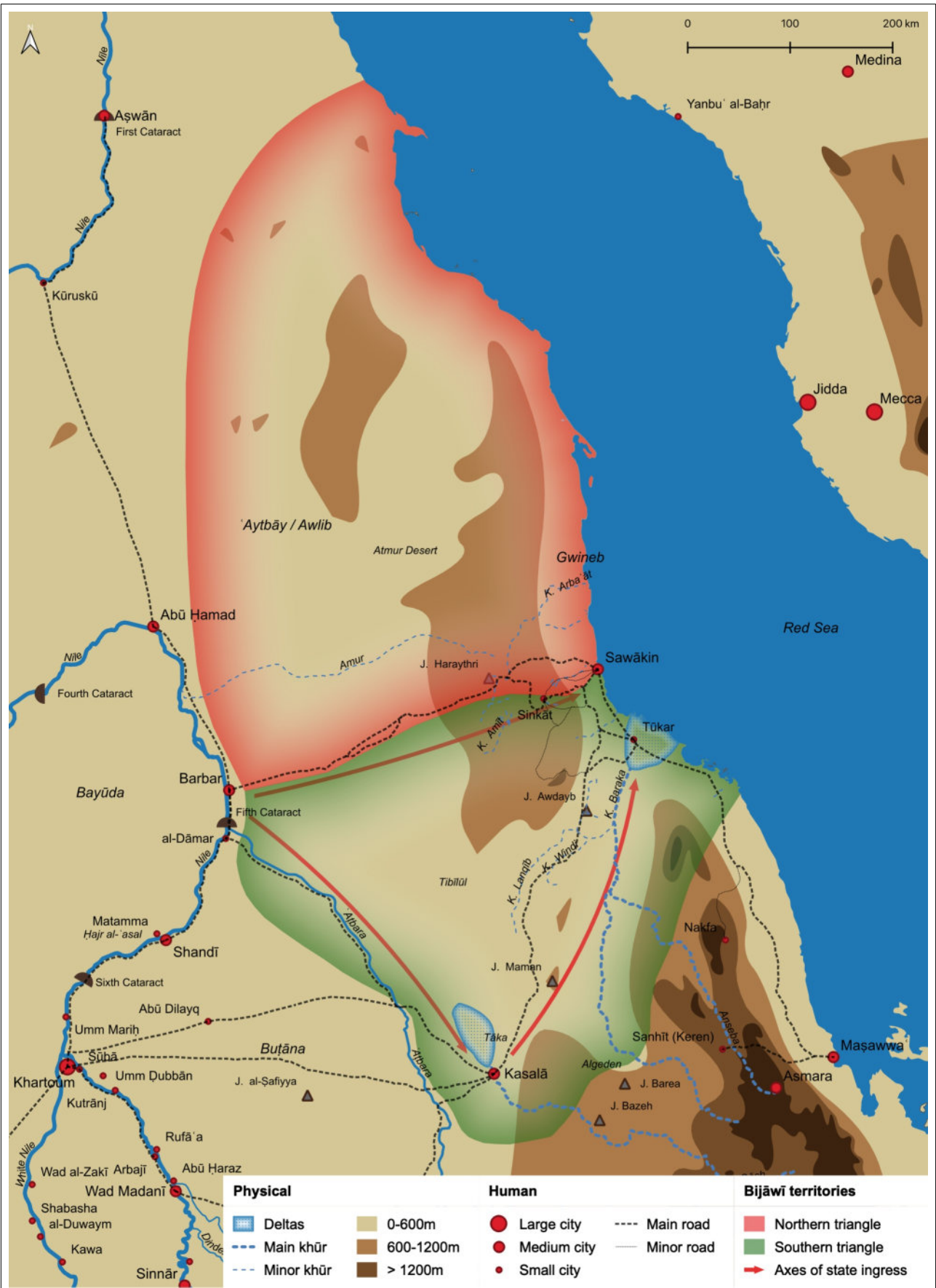


Fig. 1.1: Map of the northern and southern Bijawī triangles in the nineteenth century

Its second objective is to revisit the interactions between these populations and state structures in Nilotic Sudan in the early modern and modern periods. Indeed, the early sixteenth century saw the emergence of the Funj sultanate<sup>6</sup>, the first unified and centralised power controlling the greater part of the Upper Nile Valley since the end of the Meroitic state in the fourth century CE. Its growing influence over Eastern Sudan gave shape to one of the fundamental divisions of this region, between what shall be called the northern Bijāwī triangle<sup>7</sup>, relatively free from the direct authority of the state, and its southern equivalent, much more influenced by the central authorities settled in the Upper Nile Valley. Indeed, trade routes such as the Barbar-Sawākin route in the north, and seasonal rivers like the ‘Aṭbara River to the west and the *khūr* Baraka<sup>8</sup>, which follows at a distance the foothills of the Ethiopian highlands, to the east, delineated the southern Bijāwī triangle and served as conductive axes for state ingress in this part of Eastern Sudan, in contrast with the situation that prevailed in the more arid and inhospitable northern triangle (see fig. 1.1). This dynamic was introduced by Funj power (1504-1821) and pursued under the Turkiyya (1821-1883) and the Mahdiyya (1883-1898).

This chapter aims at qualifying the linear narrative of an ever increasing centralisation of the Sudanic polities since the early modern period, a process that would have culminated with the territorial unification of the Greater Nile Valley achieved in the early years of the Condominium. This teleological approach obscures the complexity of the interactions between the different regions of Nilotic Sudan. Internal migrations, movements of expansion and withdrawal of regional authorities as well as trade relations contributed to the shaping of a dense network of interrelationships and the constant remodelling of local communities. This oversight is partly the result of the structuration of Sudanese historical studies that favoured centralised polities as their object of inquiries: the Funj and Fūr sultanates<sup>9</sup>, the Egyptian colonial regime<sup>10</sup> and the Mahdist state<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, regional analyses almost systematically tended to define their field through tribal affiliation rather than territories, uncritically reinvesting categories highly dependent on the state apparatus and its drive toward the definition of stable social bodies upon which to exert its authority, essentially for fiscal purposes<sup>12</sup>. This means that tribal recompositions through absorption

6 Also called the Sinnār sultanate, from the name its capital since the early seventeenth century, or in Arabic, *al-sulṭana al-zarqā*, i.e. the “black sultanate”.

7 The origin of the distinction between northern and southern Bijāwī ensembles will be presented further below.

8 A *khūr* (pl. *khayrān*) is the bed of a seasonal river.

9 Jay L. SPAULDING, *Kings of Sun and Shadow: a history of the ‘Abdallāb Province of the northern Sinnār sultanate, 1500-1800 A.D.*, Columbia University, New York, 1971 ; Rex S. O’FAHEY and Jay L. SPAULDING, *Kingdoms of the Sudan*, London, Methuen & Co., 1974 ; Rex S. O’FAHEY, *State and Society in Dar Fur*, London, Hurst, 1980 ; Jay L. SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, East Lansing, Michigan State University, 1985 ; Rex S. O’FAHEY, *The Darfur Sultanate: A History*, London, Hurst Publishers, 2008.

10 Richard L. HILL, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, *op. cit.*

11 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*

12 See introduction.

or migration have often been underestimated due to their relative invisibility in state archives.

This called for a reappraisal of the “centre/periphery” model expounded by Yūsuf Faḍl Ḥasan, which itself had succeeded to the dual model opposing “Arabs” to “Africans” developed by British colonial officers, in favour of a network model that emphasises connections and circulations within and among regions of the Greater Nile Valley<sup>13</sup>. This is not to say that relations with centralised authorities did not play a crucial role in modelling Eastern Sudan’s history, but they should not be reduced to a simple confrontation between evasive nomads and a sedentary power. In that regard, this chapter is indebted to the few other studies that already heeded this problematic such as Janet Ewald’s work on the Taqali kingdom<sup>14</sup> and the collective volume edited by Endre Stiansen and Michael Kevane on Kurdufān<sup>15</sup>. For the later period of Sudanese modern history, beginning at the end of the eighteenth century and marked by the influence of Egyptian rule, the effort to decentre historiographical perspectives away from the political centres toward an analysis of socioeconomic factors has been spearheaded, conjointly with Ewald, by Anders J. Bjørkelo<sup>16</sup>, another important source of inspiration for the following development. Further away, Lidwien Kapteijns has made important contributions through her work on Dār Masalit<sup>17</sup>. The southern regions have also recently benefitted from accrued attention. After the pioneering work of Richard Gray<sup>18</sup>, Stephanie Beswick and Noel Stringham have made great strides for our understanding of these spaces’ long term history through their use of oral sources<sup>19</sup>.

The following development will outline the evolution of Bijāwī communities from the early modern period up to the end of the nineteenth century in a vernacular perspective. State structures played an important role in shaping their historical trajectory, however, the analysis presented here will attempt to avoid reducing the relations Bijāwī populations entertained with them to their confrontational dimension. The first part is a discussion on the sources on which this history can be written and a reflexion on the foundations of Bijāwī identity. The main point addressed in the second part regards the differentiated historical trajectories followed by the northern and southern Bijāwī communities since the sixteenth century, until the great migration of the former to the south

13 For a short overview of these heuristic models, see Neil MCHUGH, *Holymen of the Blue Nile*, *op. cit.*, p. 1–3.

14 Janet J. EWALD, *Soldiers, Traders, and Slaves: State Formation and Economic Transformation in the Greater Nile Valley, 1700-1885*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.

15 Endre STIANSEN and Michael KEVANE (ed.), *Kordofan Invaded: Peripheral Incorporation and Social Transformation in Islamic Africa*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 1998, vol. 63.

16 Anders J. BJØRKELO, *From King to Kāshif, Shendi in the Nineteenth Century*, PhD diss., University of Bergen, Bergen, 1984 ; Anders J. BJØRKELO, *Prelude to the Mahdiyya*, *op. cit.*

17 Lidwien KAPTEIJNS, *Mahdist Faith and Sudanic Tradition: The History of the Masalit Sultanate 1870-1930*, PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 1982.

18 Richard GRAY, *A History of the Southern Sudan, 1839-1889*, Westport, Greenwood, 1979.

19 Stephanie BESWICK, *Sudan’s Blood Memory: The Legacy of War, Ethnicity, and Slavery in Early South Sudan*, Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2006 ; Noel STRINGHAM, *Marking Nuer Histories: Gender, Gerontocracy, and the Politics of Inclusion in the Upper Nile from 1400-1931*, PhD diss., University of Virginia, Charlottesville, 2016.

in the mid-eighteenth century. In the early nineteenth century, the position of most tribal groups was set and did not evolve considerably until the Mahdiyya. Therefore, the third part will describe in details the main aspects of Bijāwī societies. Finally, their subjugation in the 1840s by the Egypto-Ottoman power and its consequences will be analysed in the last part.

## I. Historicising Bijāwī Communities in Eastern Sudan

### *A) Sources and Historical Writings: Uncovering Bijāwī History*

Mentioned in epigraphic sources of the sixth century BCE under the name of “Blemmyes”, Bijāwī populations appear time and time again in antique and medieval sources<sup>20</sup>, making them one of the oldest populations in the world designated by a stable denomination<sup>21</sup>. As mentioned above, Eastern Sudan was a “periphery at the crossroads, which means that the Bijāwī communities were surrounded by literate societies which produced an important number of documents mentioning them<sup>22</sup>”. However, this relative wealth of information is deceiving. There are indeed several difficulties in rendering Bijāwī history. First of all, the vast majority, if not all, of the sources at our disposal for the early modern and modern periods were produced by foreigners. Only seldom fluent in Arabic, some knowledge of Bijāwiye was exceptional for early commentators<sup>23</sup>, while diffusion of Arabic in Eastern Sudan was limited to a few circles involved in trade circulations until at least the end of the nineteenth century. Bijāwī historical depth paradoxically contributed to concealing the transformations they underwent in the two millennia of their recorded history. European explorers and scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were eager to find confirmations of descriptions found in the literature of classical antiquity<sup>24</sup>. They went looking for the Roman ports of the Red Sea and revelled in the apparent congruence between the depictions of the Blemmyes as warlike and aloof in ancient texts and their own appreciation of the modern populations of Eastern Sudan<sup>25</sup>. The intensity of this etic perception left little room for more varied testimonies and these

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20 Claude RILLY and Dietrich RAUE, “Languages of Ancient Nubia,” in *Handbook of Ancient Nubia*, Berlin and Boston, De Gruyter, 2019, vol. 1/2, p. 132.

21 Gudrun DAHL and Anders HJORT-AF-ORNÄS, “Precolonial Beja: A Periphery at the Crossroads,” *op. cit.*, p. 482.

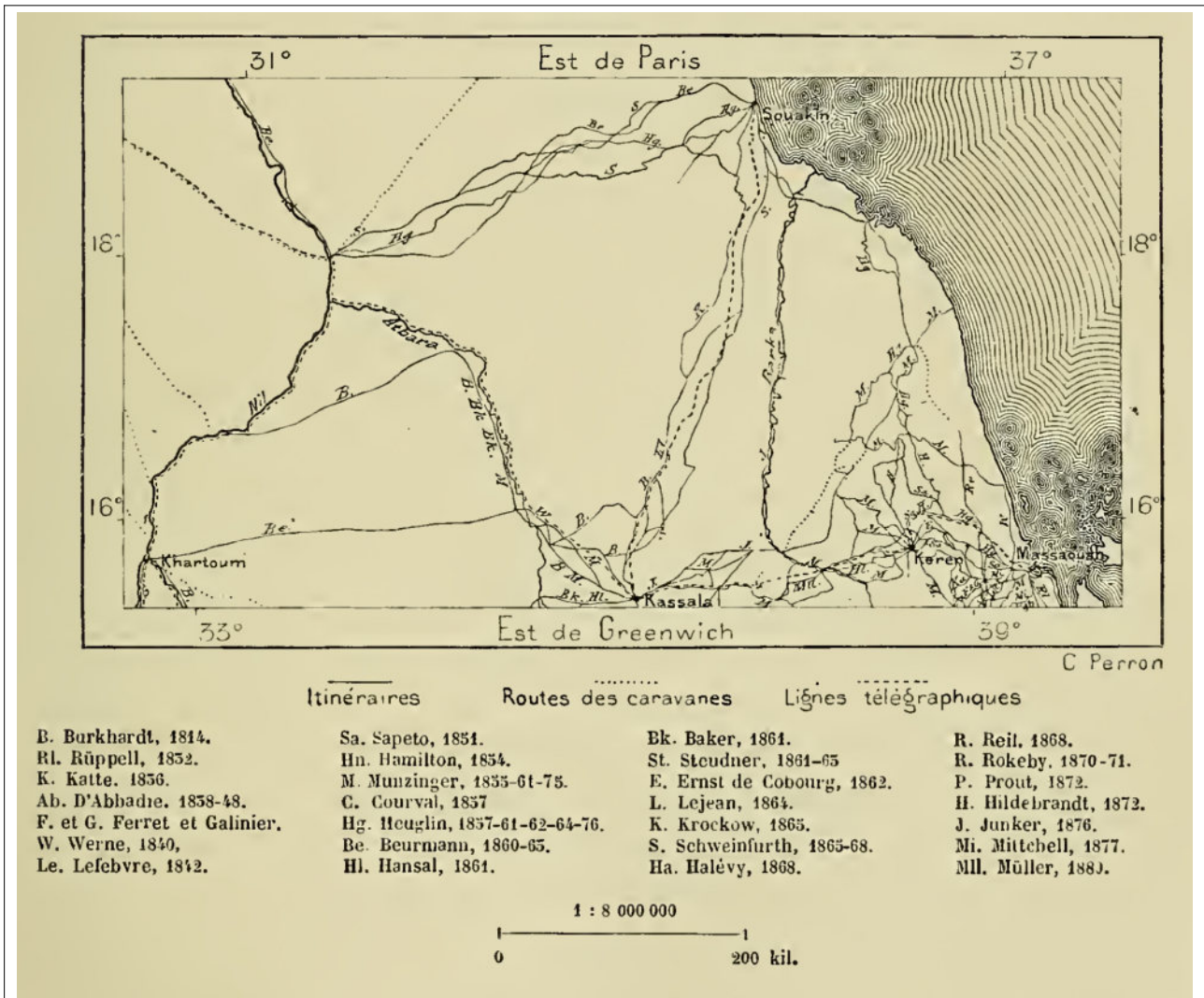
22 *Ibid.*, p. 474.

23 The first Western description of Bijāwiye only came in the early 1880s with the work of the Swedish scholar Herman Almquist (1839-1904) on the Bishārī dialect (*Die Bischari-Sprache Tuu-BeÆaawie in Nordost-Afrika*, Upsala, Kaiserliche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1881-5). This study of limited value was quickly superseded by the three volumes and bilingual dictionary produced by the famous linguist Leo Reinisch (1832-1919) (*Die BeÆauye-Sprache in Nordost-Afrika* (3 vol.), Wien. Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, 1893-4 and *Wörterbuch der BeÆawiyee-Sprache*, Wien, Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, 1895). See Martine VANHOVE, “The Beja Language Today in Sudan,” Bergen, University of Bergen, 2006.

24 It is significant that of the twelve chapters of Andrew Paul’s *A History of the Beja Tribes* (1954), only three are dedicated to the last five centuries.

25 In the 1860s, Guillaume Lejean still described Bijāwiye as the “Troglodytic [language]” (Guillaume LEJEAN,





**Fig. 1.2:** Explorers' routes between the Red Seas Coast and the Nile in the nineteenth century

**Source:** Elisée Reclus, *Nouvelle géographie universelle: la terre et les hommes – L'Afrique septentrionale*, Paris, Librairie Hachette & Cie., 1885, vol. 10, p. 339.

representations crystallised into a fixed and ahistorical conception of the Bijāwī populations<sup>26</sup>. This was further complicated by the variable meaning this name carried in early sources. Contemplated from a distance, often within the framework of the cosmopolite populations of the Red Sea ports, “Beja” was synonymous to otherness and alterity rather than a reference to a clearly defined community.

The relative abundance of texts mentioning them is intimately linked with circulations

*Voyage aux deux Nils: Nubie Kordofan, Soudan oriental: exécuté de 1860 à 1864*, Paris, Hachette, 1865, p. 7.) in reference to the most common denomination of “Trogodytes” used by authors of the first century such as Agatharchides, Diodorus Siculus and Pliny to describe the populations of the Eastern Sudanic Desert (Julien COOPER, “A Nomadic State? The ‘Blemmyean-Beja’ Polity of the Ancient Eastern Desert,” *Journal of African History*, 2020, vol. 61, no. 3, p. 389).

26 Susan L. GRABLER, *Pastoral Nomadism and Colonial Mythology: The Beja of the Sudan, c. 1750-1881*, MA diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1980; Antonio L. PALMISANO, *Ethnicity: The Beja as Representation*, Berlin, Arabische Buch, 1991.

within the Red Sea and between the littoral and the Nile Valley, along trade routes. Most of our knowledge from Bijāwī societies derives from travellers and merchants (when these two activities were not conducted simultaneously). Very limited for the early modern period, the number of accounts increases sharply for the nineteenth century but the information collected was still restricted to axes of circulation and said little about Bijāwī social structures. Besides descriptions of the city of Sawākin, most of the accounts produced narrated the journey from the coast to the Nile, and vice-versa, either by the major trading route that linked the Sudanese port to Barbar, or by following at a distance the border of the Ethiopian Highlands up to Kasalā, from where they could walk along the banks of the 'Aṭbara River up to its confluence with the Nile, the safest option, or cross directly the Buṭāna. In Elisée Reclus' famous *Nouvelle géographie universelle*, Eastern Sudan is reduced to the southern triangle, delineated this time by the routes followed by European explorers (see fig. 1.2). With a few but important exceptions, Eastern Sudan was rarely the destination of these travellers. Passing through, their testimonies are of limited value beyond the confines of the urban centres of Sawākin and Kasalā.

These issues were compounded by Bijāwī communities' inner characteristics. The term "Bijāwī" itself is not self-designatory and there is no compelling evidence before the twentieth century that they thought of themselves as belonging to a unified group. This oral society did not produce its own written accounts and their rich (but famously ambiguous) poetry in Bijāwiye has not been systematically collected and translated, leaving the greatest part of Bijāwī culture and historical memory inaccessible to external observers<sup>27</sup>. As a result of their nomadism, they left few archaeological remains to investigate<sup>28</sup>. Even the Red Sea ports of the Sudanese littoral, arguably outside the realm of direct Bijāwī authority, were transient establishments. Sawākin, one of the most perennial harbours of the region, was built with coral stones easily degraded by salty water and wind so that they needed to be constantly restored<sup>29</sup>. Half of a century after most of the inhabitants of the island of Sawākin had departed in the 1920s, the majority of the houses had already

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27 For studies on Bijāwī poetry, see Mohamed-Tahir HAMID AHMED, *Paroles d'hommes honorables: essai d'anthropologie poétique des Bedja du Soudan*, Paris and Louvain, Peeters, 2005 ; Mohammed-Tahir HAMID AHMED, "Ethics and Oral Poetry in Beja Society," in Catherine Miller (ed.), *Land, Ethnicity and Political Legitimacy in Eastern Sudan (Kassala and Gedaref States)*, Cairo and Khartoum, CEDEJ and DSRC, 2005, p. 473–502.

28 Gudrun DAHL and Anders HJORT-AF-ORNÄS, "Precolonial Beja: A Periphery at the Crossroads," *op. cit.*, p. 474.

29 Built with madrepora (rock-coral), a particularly fragile material, the walls of the houses on the island of Sawākin required to be plastered and this process frequently repeated. In consequence, interruptions in the occupation of the site led rapidly to the crumbling of buildings. The number of houses still erect offered thus a direct reflection of the economic prosperity of the town. See Jean-Pierre GREENLAW, *The Coral Buildings of Suakin: Islamic Architecture, Plannings, Design and Domestic Arrangements in a Red Sea Port*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 87–102.

collapsed<sup>30</sup>. Today, the old town is essentially covered with rubble<sup>31</sup>.

Finally, the important transformations witnessed by the region in the twentieth century have further limited the availability of historical sources. The founding of Port Sudan in 1907 led to the gradual relegation of the historical Red Sea port while trading families relocated<sup>32</sup>. A few years later, the creation of the Tūkar scheme also had disruptive consequences for the population that had originally cultivated this land. The previous system of land division was entirely revamped by the British colonial administration and a new town established to provide accommodation for agricultural workers. The same process was undertaken in the Qāsh Delta near Kasalā. The drawing of the border between Italian Eritrea and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan abolished the relative freedom of circulation in a region previously united by intense contacts. The Banī ‘Āmir, who found themselves split between the two countries, saw their “Sudanity” and their Bijāwī identity challenged, with major consequences with regard to land rights, particularly in the vicinity of Tūkar.

The first contemporary accounts of Bijāwī tribal history were recorded by colonial administrators from the Sudan Political Service (SPS) such as Douglas Newbold (1894-1945), Richard Owen (1903-1982) and George Sandars (1901-1985), while John F. E. Bloss (1908-1982), a medical inspector in Sudan between 1933 and 1954, wrote a history of Sawākin<sup>33</sup>. Most of these studies were published in the colonial journal *par excellence*, *Sudan Notes and Records*<sup>34</sup>. These were the main sources for what is, unfortunately<sup>35</sup>, still the work of reference on the history of Eastern Sudan, *A History of the Beja Tribes*<sup>36</sup>, published in 1954 by, Andrew Paul (1907-1984), yet another member of the SPS. The shortcomings of the colonial scholarship were hardly compensated by anthropological studies conducted in the 1910s and 1920s by the famed Charles Seligman (1873-1940) and his wife Brenda Z. Seligman (1883-1965), particularly on the Banī ‘Āmir<sup>37</sup>. George Murray (1885-1966) who had explored parts of the Eastern desert as Director of Egypt’s Desert

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30 By the early 1940s, “more than 80 per cent of the island houses had tumbled down and only 18 of a registered total of 490 were still occupied”. See D. RODEN, *The Twentieth Century Decline of Suakin*, Khartoum, University of Khartoum, Sudan Research Unit, 1970, p. 16.

31 See appendix [?].

32 Kenneth J. PERKINS, *Port Sudan: The Evolution of a Colonial City*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1993.

33 John F. E. BLOSS, “The Story of Suakin,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1936, vol. 19, no. 2, p. 271–300 ; John F. E. BLOSS, “The Story of Suakin (Concluded),” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1937, vol. 20, no. 2, p. 247–280.

34 George N. SANDERSON, “‘Sudan Notes and Records’ as a Vehicle of Research on the Sudan,” *op. cit.*

35 It was described in a review by Andrzej Zaborski for its second edition in 1971 as “a strange blend of ignorance, irrelevant information, overt mistakes, inaccuracies, triviality, lack of criticism, and fantasy” (Andrzej ZABORSKI, “Review of ‘A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan,’” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 1975, vol. 8, p. 28–32).

36 Andrew PAUL, *A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*

37 Charles G. SELIGMAN and Brenda Z. SELIGMAN, “Note on the History and Present Condition of the Beni Amer (Southern Beja),” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1930, vol. 13, no. 1, p. 83–97.

Surveys followed the footsteps of the Seligmans by publishing studies on the northern Bijāwī tribes<sup>38</sup>.

Interest in Eastern Sudan's populations and their history slowly dwindled after the 1930s. Taking their distance with the anthropometric methods defended by Charles Seligman, a new generation of anthropologists led by Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973) was instrumental in the development of cultural anthropology. Contrasting with the polymathic interests of the colonial administrators, these scholars had narrower fields of research and focused their attention, at the request of the government of the Condominium, on the southern provinces and the Nūba mountains. Bijāwī populations, who did not fit the model developed by British colonial officers in Sudan opposing "Africans" to "Arabs" (see above)—in the context of the adoption of the "Southern Policy" in 1930<sup>39</sup>—were gradually marginalised within colonial studies. It is only in the 1970s that a few analyses were published, dealing with the sedentarisation of the Bijāwī populations and their engagement in Port Sudan's industrial activities of Port Sudan as well as in commercial agriculture near Kasalā<sup>40</sup>. Despite some efforts to reassess modern and contemporary Bijāwī histories, later scholarship remained dependent on early colonial writings. These works suffered from the deficiencies common to most colonial studies. Racist preconceptions of the necessary allogeneic origin of "Civilisation" in the Sudanic Nile Valley drove colonial authors to support Seligman's "Hamitic hypothesis"<sup>41</sup> as well as its corollaries, the "Islamisation" and "Arabisation" of communities of the Nilotic Sudan through Arab migrations from Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula<sup>42</sup>, giving preeminence to external factors over endogenous historical developments.

In that light, tribal groupings were considered as stable entities, organised according to a strict segmentary system, the history of which could be traced back to their foundational myth of ethnogenesis. The emphasis on hierarchical structures of authority reflected British officers'

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38 George W. MURRAY, "The Ababda," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1923, vol. 53, p. 417–423 ; George W. MURRAY, "The Northern Beja," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1927, vol. 57, p. 39–53.

39 Several measures were adopted in the 1920s, including "Closed district ordinances", to cordon off the southern provinces, but most historians date the "Southern Policy" from 1930 when Sir Harold MacMichael, then civil secretary of the Sudan Political Service (1926-1933), published a memorandum that formulated a program to limit "Arab" influence in the south. For a summary, see Robert O. COLLINS, *The Southern Sudan in Historical Perspective*, Tel Aviv, Transaction Publishers, 1975, p. 50–66.

40 Hassan Mohamed SALIH, *The Hadendawa: Pastoralism and Problems of Sedentarisation*, MA diss., University of Hull, Hull, 1976 ; Janet C. MURRAY MILNE, *The Changing Pattern of Mobility and Migration of the Amara Tribe of Eastern Sudan*, MA diss., University of London - SOAS, London, 1976.

41 The Hamitic hypothesis stated that Hamites—pastoralists from Europe—had migrated to the African continent and were at the origin of all Civilisational processes. See Edith R. SANDERS, "The Hamitic Hypothesis; Its Origin and Functions in Time Perspective," *Journal of African History*, 1969, vol. 10, no. 4, p. 521–532.

42 Lidwien KAPTEIJNS and Jay L. SPAULDING, "The Orientalist Paradigm in the Historiography of the Late Precolonial Sudan," in Jay O'Brien and William Roseberry (ed.), *Golden Ages, Dark Ages : Imagining the Past in Anthropology and History*, University of California Press., Berkeley, 1991, p. 139–151.

attention toward social bodies that could serve as proxies for colonial domination<sup>43</sup>. Tribal and clan divisions were considered uncritically and Bijāwī history was reified into a long-term process of tribal competition, groups gaining ascendancy over others following patterns that did not require to be examined, but could be ascribed to their “warlike” nature. The trajectories of these communities were confined to literal interpretations of their oral genealogies. The fact the latter were mostly self-referential was construed as evidence of an absence of relations between Bijāwī communities and state structures prior to the mid-nineteenth century. Conversely, this was compounded by their marginal place within the main historical sources for the early modern history of riverain societies, the *Ṭabaqāt* of Wad Ḍayf Allāh, the *Funj Chronicles*, and the documents emanating from the Sinnār sultanate<sup>44</sup>. Funj authority expressed itself primordially through sovereignty over land, so most of the surviving documents are charters allocating specific rights over estates (*dār* pl. *diyār*). This crucial grid of legibility did not extend much beyond the banks of the Nile. Bijāwī societies were themselves not alien to land issues and had developed a complex and singular system of usufructuary rights, but the latter left almost no traces before states attempted to regulate them.

Genealogical traditions are still informative of wider dynamics, especially population movements and tribal reconfigurations, even if these cannot be dated with certainty. In that regard, works such as Richard Owen’s on the Hadanduwa—the main Bijāwī community in the nineteenth century—offer rich insights on the later developments of Bijāwī history, once oral traditions can be more easily compared to available written accounts, that is essentially from the late eighteenth century onwards. As will be argued below, these genealogies allow us to partially bridge the gap introduced by the important socioeconomic changes that affected Bijāwī groups from the beginning of the twentieth century and deepened the disruption of a social organisation already profoundly weakened by the Mahdiyya. Thanks to recent editorial programs, some of the local sources consulted by the British colonial administrators to write their tribal histories, such as the “anonymous Amārar historian<sup>45</sup>” mentioned by Paul, were made accessible. For Eastern Sudan, Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Ḍirār (1892-1972) was a crucial intermediary. Himself of Malḥitkināb origin, one of the tribes present in the Qāsh Delta, he graduated from high school in 1908 but, unable to pay the tuition of the Gordon College in Khartoum, he joined the following year the Company of the Eastern Telegraph, where he stayed until his retirement in 1953. His knowledge of Bijāwiye and

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43 See introduction.

44 Muḥammad al-Nūr IBN ḌAYFALLĀH, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt fī khusūṣ al-awliyā’ wa-l-sāliḥīn wa-l-‘ulamā’ wa-l-shu‘arā’ fī-l-Sūdān*, Khartoum, Dār al-wathā’iq, 1982 ; Peter M. HOLT, *The Sudan of the Three Niles: The Funj Chronicle, 910-1288/1504-1871*, Leiden, Brill, 1999 ; Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM and Jay L. SPAULDING (ed.), *Public Documents from Sinnār*, East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1989.

45 Andrew PAUL, “The Hadāreb: A Study in Arab-Beja Relationships,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1959, vol. 40, p. 75.

Tigre allowed him to record oral testimonies from several Bijāwī tribes (with a particular emphasis on the southern communities)<sup>46</sup>. Most of his work was edited posthumously by his son ʿĪrār Ṣāliḥ ʿĪrār, himself a historian, including his most important book *Tārīkh Sawākin wa al-Baḥr al-Aḥmar* (*The History of Sawākin and the Red Sea*), published in 1981. Other original manuscripts were gathered and published in 2012 under the title *Tārīkh sharq al-Sūdān: mamālik al-Bija, qabā'il-hā wa tārīkh-hā* (*The History of Eastern Sudan: The Bija Kingdoms, Its Tribes and History*)<sup>47</sup>. Rarely acknowledged (but thanked by Paul in his *History of the Beja Tribes*), a comparison between the colonial works mentioned above on the different Bijāwī tribes and ʿĪrār's writings leaves no doubt as to the importance of his contribution<sup>48</sup>.

### **B) Bijāwī Identities, Norms, and Territories**

In the nineteenth century, the majority of Eastern Sudan's inhabitants were semi-nomadic pastoralists. With very limited water resources in an unforgiving environment, these communities developed diverse responses to adapt to these constraints, including different types of pastoral activities, herding camels, sheep and cattle, and seasonal cultivations. While all Bijāwī groups shared a number of cultural and social aspects, livelihoods vary greatly from one community to the other, according to the particular mix of economic practices on which they relied to ensure their survival.

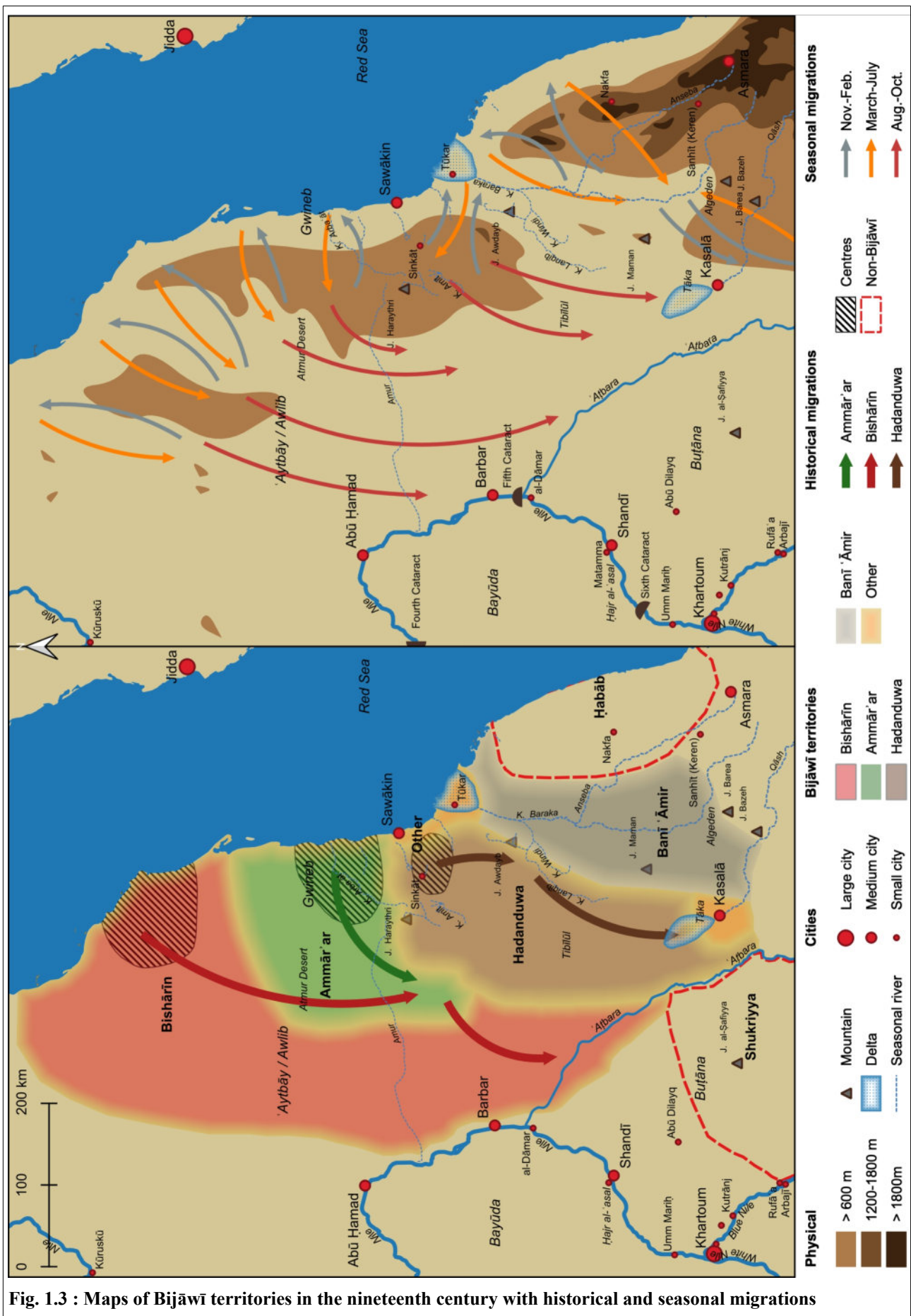
Bijāwī populations were then (and still are) divided into five main tribal groups. Their territories are very roughly organised as follows (see fig. 1.3): the Ammār'ar and the Hadanduwa occupy the centre of the Sudanese Red Sea Littoral, the former to the north and the latter to the south of the Sawākin-Barbar route. Hadanduwa territory extended further to the south up to Kasalā. This inner space was surrounded by the territory of the Bishārīn that formed a circular belt around the tribes mentioned above and extended to the west, up to the Nile River, and to the south to the banks of the 'Aṭbara River. Two minor tribes were located to the north of this ensemble, the 'Abābda, and to the south, on both sides of the current border between Sudan and Eritrea, the Banī 'Āmir. Unsurprisingly, these two groups are those whose claims to a Bijāwī identity are the most contested. The 'Abābda were particularly peripheral and their presence was noted in other northerly

46 Muḥammad Aḍrūb AWHAJJ, *Min tārīkh al-Bija*, Khartoum, Dār jāmi'at al-Khartūm li-l-nashr, 1986, vol. 1, p. 113–125.

47 Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ʿĪRĀR, *Tārīkh Sawākin wa-l-Baḥr al-Aḥmar*, Khartoum, Al-dār al-sūdāniyya li-l-kutub, 1981 ; Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ʿĪRĀR, *Tārīkh sharq al-Sūdān: mamālik al-Bija, qabā'il-hā wa tārīkh-hā*, Riyadh, Maktabat al-tawba, 2012.

48 His contribution extended beyond tribal history. In that respect, he sent original documents related to trade in Sawākin to Albert N. Gibson (1891-1975), an administrator of the Sudan Customs Department between 1912 and 1937, then working on an *Outline of the History of Soudan Customs*, which remained unpublished (DUL SAD 606/1).





provinces as well as in Egypt, around Aṣwān. Because their interests lay on both sides of the borders, they did not sever ties with Egyptian and British authorities, while keeping as much distance as possible with the Mahdist regime, which rightfully suspected their commitment to the cause. Consequently, they are almost never referred to in the documents of the Mahdist provincial administration in Eastern Sudan and so were not included in the maps. Finally, a number of smaller tribal entities were also present on this territory, concentrated near the two main zones where seasonal cultivation was possible: the Ḥalānqa, Siqūlāb and Malhītkināb in the Qāsh Delta; and the Ashrāf, Artayqa and Ḥasanāb in the Baraka Delta. Overall, this spatial distribution remained relatively stable from the early nineteenth century up to the early twentieth century.

In contrast with some societies in Western Sudan, like the Baqqāra, tribal divisions only partially overlapped with specific modes of life. While some regularities could be observed, for example camel-herding was much more prevalent in the north than the south, the fact that tribes were spread over vast spaces meant that a spectrum of economic strategies could coexist within a single tribe or clan<sup>49</sup>. Besides, different tribal groups could live in close proximity, connected by complex networks of entangled land rights, often challenged and renegotiated. In that regard, the cartographical representation of tribal territories reflects the numerical predominance of a certain community, not exclusionary spaces. Boundaries indicate not much more than sovereignty claims over a particular land and so echo located and historical power relationships among Bijāwī communities.

Colonial accounts of Bijāwī populations were based on essentialist conceptions of ethnicity that greatly underestimated mobilities and processes of intermixing, and left their indigeneity unquestioned. “Immutable nomad[s]”<sup>50</sup> roaming the hills of Eastern Sudan, their identity was mostly defined by its alterity as an inverted mirror to the Historicised communities of the Nile Valley. Yet, as early as in the late nineteenth century, Western observers had noted that “Bijā” was not an emic designation, nor did they form a homogeneous society placed under a single authority and united by a reference to a common ancestry<sup>51</sup>, thus raising the issue of how this term should be understood.

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49 This is particularly clear for Hadanduwa clans whose territories were articulated alongside a north-south axis, from the Red Sea Hills to the banks of the ‘Aṭbara. As a result, members of one clan had access to the whole variety of ecosystems available in Eastern Sudan. The search for complementary spaces associated to specific resources may have constituted a driving principle of their expansion to the south (Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1937, vol. 20, no. 2, p. plate IV).

50 Susan L. GRABLER, *Pastoral Nomadism and Colonial Mythology : The Beja of the Sudan, c. 1750-1881, op. cit.*, p. 13.

51 Anaël POUSSIER, “Les représentations identitaires de l’État mahdiste. L’autorité provinciale au Soudan-Est et les tribus bija (1883-1898),” *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 2020, vol. 240, no. 4, p. 851–871.



The crux of Bijāwī identity was first and foremost linguistic. Bijāwiye is the last surviving language from the northern Cushitic group<sup>52</sup>, within the larger ensemble of Afro-Asiatic languages that includes the Semitic branches. The vast majority of the population of Eastern Sudan can thus be described as Bijāwiye-speaking communities. In consequence, the abandonment of its use as the primary means of communication by certain groups entailed their marginalisation within the larger Bijāwī community. This was already the case in the nineteenth century with the ‘Abābda to the north, who had become Arabic-speakers, and the Banī ‘Āmir to the south, who were mostly Tigre-speakers.

The importance of an idiom shared by all Bijāwī communities went beyond reflecting a shared culture in which oral poetry played a central role. It was at the basis of a complex system of land rights that structured the entirety of Bijāwī territories, referred to as the *salif*<sup>53</sup> (also spelled *silif* and *o’slif*<sup>54</sup>). In order to be performative, these norms had to be enacted through instances aimed at conflict resolution within or between Bijāwī groups. These gatherings were conducted orally and the mastery of Bijāwiye was a requisite. This has been attentively observed in the twentieth century, but the historicity of the *salif* is all but an open question, especially since the extent to which it may have evolved under the policies of formalisation of customary laws implemented by colonial administrators during the Condominium has been little studied<sup>55</sup>. The term itself rarely appears in studies on Bijāwī societies before the 1960s<sup>56</sup>. There were no reasons for non-Bijāwī to attend the councils where matters related to the *salif* were debated, and if they had, they still would have had to understand Bijāwiye. The *salif* was also fundamental to tribal identities. Indeed, claims over specific territories were most often grounded on the idea that control had been obtained by means of arms. Having fought for a piece of land and wrested from enemies granted legitimacy to later claims. That was in one of the very few occasions when clans gathered and acted as a cohesive tribal body which expressed itself through “a conspicuous consciousness of common attachment to

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52 There are debates as to whether Bijāwiye could constitute an independent branch within the Afro-Asiatic languages.

53 Hassan Abdel ATI, “Conflict Management and Resolution Among Beja Pastoralists: Elements and Procedures of the Salif Customary Law,” *Nomadic Peoples*, 2009, vol. 13, no. 1, p. 23–44.

54 Anders HJORT AF ORNÄS and Gudrun DAHL, *Responsible Man: The Atmaan Beja of North-eastern Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

55 For a rare but important contribution, see Hassan Mohamed SALIH, “Hadanduwa Traditional Territorial Rights and Inter-Population Relations Within the Context of the Native Administration System (1927-1970),” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1980, vol. 61, p. 118–133. It should be noted that it was also the case for the set of powerful moral norms that structured Bijāwī lives and gathered under the term of *darurit* (honor). See Amal Hassan FADLALLA, *Embodying Honor: Fertility, Foreignness, and Regeneration in Eastern Sudan*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2007.

56 Quite extraordinarily, this is the case for Andrew Paul’s *A History of the Beja tribes of the Sudan*. Its author considered the Bijāwī populations “a primitive, warlike and untamable race of savages”, but he nonetheless added that “the gift for compromise [is] one of the most deep-seated of all Beja characteristics” and that “they will come together and spend days endless discussion of the most minute differences” (Andrew PAUL, *A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 4).

a traditional territory”. As a result, tribal unity was all the more effective when land rights were threatened<sup>57</sup>.

To sum up, Bijāwī identity was essentially linguistic at the supra-tribal level and territorial at the infra-tribal level, while the *salif* held these two aspects together. In contrast with its inaccurately assumed ethnic dimension, foreign elements could be assimilated into Bijāwī societies with relative ease, as long as they learned Bijāwiye. Conversely, there could hardly be a Bijāwī diaspora, firstly because it may entail the abandonment of Bijāwiye, and secondly because affiliations based on kinship were most potent when they could still be connected with territorial claims. In other words, Bijāwī identity was fundamentally relational. To reflect this and avoid the reification and ethnicisation of the ethnonym Bijā, its Arabic adjectival form Bijāwī will be favoured throughout this text to designate, above all, a linguistic community, in the hope to unsettle the misguided obviousness of this group’s cohesion. The development below will attempt to outline the main transformations undergone by Bijāwī communities in the early modern period.

## II. Bijāwī Societies in Early Modern Sudanese History (16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century)

### A) Traders and Migrants in Eastern Sudan

The Ḥaḍāriiba were the main actors of the early modern history of Eastern Sudan. Their identification has been long debated. Paul, among others, considered them to be migrants from Ḥaḍramawt<sup>58</sup> who had settled on the Sudanic Red Sea coast at the end of the seventh century and through intermarriages had been assimilated to Bijāwī society<sup>59</sup>. Indeed, the early establishment of small numbers of Arabs in harbours of the Sudanese African littoral is well attested. As their control over the Red Sea stabilised<sup>60</sup>, the activity of these settlements gradually shifted in the eighth century toward the development of trade, particularly of slaves. Later, in the ninth century, the region between ‘Aydhāb<sup>61</sup> and Aṣwān was the theatre of a “gold rush” to exploit the deposits of the *wādī*<sup>62</sup> al-‘Allāqī (see fig. 0.1). This entailed the coming and semi-permanent settling of Arab migrants<sup>63</sup> as

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57 Hassan Mohamed SALIH, “Hadanduwa Traditional Territorial Rights and Inter-Population Relations Within the Context of the Native Administration System (1927-1970),” *op. cit.*, p. 121.

58 Based on the idea that Ḥaḍāriiba was a deformation of Ḥaḍramawī.

59 Andrew PAUL, *A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 64–65.

60 These harbours were founded for strategic reasons, i.e. to contest the Abyssinian hegemony over the southern Red Sea in the south and to support the concomitant Arab conquest of Egypt in the north.

61 Andrew PAUL, “Aidhab: A Medieval Red Sea Port,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1955, vol. 36, no. 1, p. 64–70.

62 A *wādī* (pl. *widyān*) is the bed of a seasonal river, but it is often larger than a *khūr*, among other reasons because they tend to be situated in plains rather than in hills and mountains.

63 George E. R. SANDARS, “The Bisharin,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1933, vol. 16, no. 2, p. 124 ; Jay L. SPAULDING, “Precolonial Islam in the Eastern Sudan,” in Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels (ed.), *The History of Islam in Africa*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2000, p. 118 ; Tim POWER, “The Origin and

well as their commingling with local Bijāwī clans<sup>64</sup>. At that point, the Ḥaḍāriḇa emerged in historical records as a local elite of mixed origins<sup>65</sup>. The migrant Arab community who had come attracted by Sudanese ores was said to have resorted to enslaving locals as the primary workforce for mining activities, perpetuating practices initiated in the centuries before. However, the resistance put up by local communities, their intimate knowledge of the country, and the support they could garner from nearby Bijāwī groups cast doubt about the imposition of a slave economy supported by Arab “cultural superiority” and based on a caste-system, especially since the crossing of the Eastern Nubian desert is consistently mentioned in Arab medieval sources as being under Bijāwī control<sup>66</sup>. In any case, gold mining quickly came to a halt, giving way to the rise of Ḥaḍāriḇa power based on the profits they garnered from the trade route between ‘Aydhāb and the Nile Valley, used by merchants and pilgrims alike<sup>67</sup>.

Around the thirteenth century, another Ḥaḍāriḇa community emerged in Sawākin, a small outpost first mentioned in sources in the eleventh century, and annexed by the Mamluks in 1266 (664/5) as it was gaining greater economic significance. Its rapid growth was closely intertwined with the concomitant development of global trade circulations in the Indian Ocean. The shift to the south of trading activities on the Sudanese Red Sea littoral, as ‘Aydhāb was gradually eclipsed by its southern rival, was caused by the now predominant role played by the monsoon in structuring patterns of exchange. During this season, the Red Sea winds—which flew the rest of the year from north to south—would reverse, allowing traders to sail north up to the latitude of Jidda (and Sawākin), thus excluding ‘Aydhāb from the most profitable trading routes. Its slow decline came to an abrupt and definitive end when the port was destroyed by the Mamluks in 1426 (829/30)<sup>68</sup>. Parts of the remaining Ḥaḍāriḇa community fled to Dunqulā, but the bulk went to Sawākin<sup>69</sup>.

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Development of the Sudanese Ports (‘Aydhāb, Bādi’, Sawākin) in the Early Islamic Period,” *Arabian Humanities*, 2008, vol. 15, p. 92–110.

64 Jay L. SPAULDING, “Precolonial Islam in the Eastern Sudan,” *op. cit.*, p. 118 ; Gudrun DAHL and Anders HJORT-AF-ORNÄS, “Precolonial Beja: A Periphery at the Crossroads,” *op. cit.*, p. 481.

65 Paul described this process in the terms of his time, writing that “by virtue of [...] a superior culture [the Ḥaḍāriḇa] [were] able to establish themselves as a dominant aristocracy, partly Arab in blood, ruling over a very much larger number of indigenous Beja serfs” (Andrew PAUL, “The Hadāreb: A Study in Arab-Beja Relationships,” *op. cit.*, p. 75).

66 Jay L. SPAULDING, “Precolonial Islam in the Eastern Sudan,” *op. cit.*, p. 118 ; Gudrun DAHL and Anders HJORT-AF-ORNÄS, “Precolonial Beja: A Periphery at the Crossroads,” *op. cit.*, p. 482.

67 This route became all the more important in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as the northern route through Sinai became too dangerous for circulation in the wake of the Crusades.

68 Leo Africanus wrote that this raid had been organised by the Sawākinīn and that the Mamluks had only provided material support to the venture. Spaulding sees this as evidence for rivalry between Ḥaḍāriḇa coastal cities (Jay L. SPAULDING, “Suakin: A Port City of the Early Modern Sudan,” in Kenneth R. Hall (ed.), *Secondary Cities and Urban Networking in the Indian Ocean Realm, c. 1400-1800*, Plymouth, Lexington Books, 2008, p. 42).

69 According to some oral tradition, upon their arrival in Sawākin, the Ḥaḍāriḇa were massacred (Andrew PAUL, “The Hadāreb: A Study in Arab-Beja Relationships,” *op. cit.*, p. 77). This contradicts the fact that a community with the same name was consistently described in later sources as dominant in the Red Sea port. The mention of a massacre preserved in Bijāwī history may have been metaphorical and referred to the merger of the Ḥaḍāriḇa with the local merchant community of the Artayqa. Meaning “patricians” in Bijāwiye, the designation “Artayqa” belongs

According to Spaulding, the Ḥaḍāriḇa from Sawākin became “the most prominent Beja rulers from the fourteenth through the eighteenth centuries<sup>70</sup>”. They undertook to fill the power vacuum caused by the collapse of the Nubian Christian kingdoms of Nopata and Makuria and established a seemingly loose alliance with the riverain communities of northern Sudan, maybe up to Dunqulā<sup>71</sup>. The real extent of their influence is still discussed due to the lack of sources, beyond allusive comments by a few Arab authors. Certain Sudanese historical traditions present ‘Abd Allāh Jammā’, the founder of the ‘Abdallāb, the first “Arab” polity in northern Sudan<sup>72</sup>, as a vassal of a “king of the East” and the instrument of Ḥaḍāriḇa’s expansion toward the Nile<sup>73</sup>. If there is little evidence as to the existence of a proper Ḥaḍāriḇa state, this cannot completely be dismissed because of the intriguing diffusion of Bijāwiye *nisba*<sup>74</sup> endings in the Upper Nile Valley. The suffix “āb”, commonly found in the names of Bijāwī clans, such as the Hadanduwa Shabūdināb or the Ammār’ar Faḍlāb, meaning “belonging to” and “from”<sup>75</sup>, appears in important ethnonyms such as the Rubāṭāb, currently situated north of Barbar<sup>76</sup>, and of course, with the ‘Abdallāb themselves. Nonetheless, short of ties of vassalage, the Ḥaḍāriḇa may have found ways to instrumentalise their economic power to impose their influence over the riverain communities. The town of Arbajī<sup>77</sup>, a “commercial entrepôt (almost a merchant republic)” was founded in the late fifteenth century and entertained important links with the Ḥijāz through Sawākin<sup>78</sup>. Its inhabitants were called the “Ḥudur”, a term designating foreign merchants, that could derive from Ḥaḍāriḇa. It was in the same city that the ‘Abdallāb eventually submitted to the Funj, the new masters of the Nilotic Sudan, in

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to the same set of social ethnonyms as Ḥaḍāriḇa and probably did not entail, at least initially, a common ethnic origin. Mentioned in early Arab sources as a branch of the Ḥaḍāriḇa, the exact nature of the relationships between these two groups is still debated.

70 Rex S. O’FAHEY and Jay L. SPAULDING, *Kingdoms of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

71 Jay L. SPAULDING, “Suakin: A Port City of the Early Modern Sudan,” *op. cit.*, p. 42.

72 Hence his honorific name (*laqab*), literally “the gatherer”.

73 Rex S. O’FAHEY and Jay L. SPAULDING, *Kingdoms of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 22–23 ; Gudrun DAHL and Anders HJORT-AF-ORNÄS, “Precolonial Beja: A Periphery at the Crossroads,” *op. cit.*, p. 487.

74 In a name, the *nisba* indicates a relation between an individual and a group or a location. In Arabic, it ends in “ī” (“iyya” for the feminine). For example, a man whose name includes al-Sawākinī can reasonably be assumed to possess a paternal ascendance linked to place. In Bijāwiye, the “āb” denotes the same type of ascendance and, more generally, an affiliation with a specific group. For example, the ‘*amil*’ Uthmān b. Abū Bakr Diqna belongs clearly to the Diqnāb.

75 Based on Richard Hudon’s work on Bijāwiye, Albrecht Hofheinz indicates that the « ā » renders the plural and the « b » an indefinite accusative (Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. xvii.)

76 Awn al-Sharif GASIM, “Some Aspects of Sudanese Colloquial Arabic,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1965, vol. 46, p. 48–49.

77 Later al-Masallimiyya. It was destroyed in 1783/4 (1198). See Richard L. HILL, *On the Frontiers of Islam: Two Manuscripts Concerning the Sudan Under Turco-Egyptian Rule, 1822-1845*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970, p. 143.

78 In consequence, it was the main centre for the Shāfi’ī *madhhab*, Barbar being the second one, also in direct relation with Sawākin.

1504 (909/10)<sup>79</sup>, a potential indication of Ḥaḍāriiba influence on the politics of the hinterland<sup>80</sup>. In the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century, their port, Sawākin, was at the height of its prosperity to the extent where a Portuguese testimony dated 1541 (947/8) compared it positively to Lisbon<sup>81</sup>.

As it appears clearly from the previous development, rather than a distinct ethnic and tribal group of Arab origin, the Ḥaḍāriiba were a dominant Bijāwiye-speaking class characterised by its involvement in trade activities and its adoption of Islam<sup>82</sup>. They occupied a variety of roles as heads of trade emporiums or intermediaries between the Bijāwī nomads and the sedentary populations of the Nile Valley. More generally, this versatile designation was attributed to Easterners of higher social status, may they be urban dwellers, or cattle owners<sup>83</sup>. Because of their preponderant role in the main trade routes between the Red Sea and the Nile Valley and their influence on Upper Nubia, their name became an antonomasia for Eastern elites in general<sup>84</sup>. The Bijāwī communities proper, those from the hinterland, remain out of reach from historical enquiry. Their association with the Ḥaḍāriiba is not in doubt, but nothing is known of the political system that regulated their relations. Astonishingly, the account given by Ibn Hawqal of the gold mines' region he visited between 945 and 950 mentioned ethnonyms, besides the Ḥaḍāriiba, such as Artayqa or Hadanduwa still used by contemporary Bijāwī groups<sup>85</sup>. However, the end of mining activities in the *wādī* al-ʿAllāqī closed down the small windows that had been opened on this cosmopolite frontier society and, as there were no reasons for foreign observers to venture in the Bijāwī hinterlands, the dribble of information provided by Arab authors in the tenth century dried out. The Ḥaḍāriiba became the necessary intermediaries for all transactions in Eastern Sudan while Arab merchants retreated to the confines of the Red Sea ports. Bijāwī reluctance toward sea-related activities and the Ḥaḍāriiba's

79 According to the account communicated to James Bruce (1730-1794) in Sinnār.

80 Neil MCHUGH, *Holy men of the Blue Nile*, *op. cit.*, p. 38–39.

81 Rex S. O'FAHEY and Jay L. SPAULDING, *Kingdoms of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*; Andrew C. S. PEACOCK, "Suakin: A Northeast African Port in the Ottoman Empire," *Northeast African Studies*, 2012, vol. 12, no. 1, p. 29–50.

82 Arab writers of the tenth century such as al-Mas'ūdī and Ibn Hawqal remarked on the adherence of the Ḥaḍāriiba to Islam, if only to criticise its superficiality in the case of the latter (Jan ZÁHORÍK, "The Islamization of the Beja until the 19th century," Cologne, 2006).

83 Gudrun DAHL and Anders HJORT-AF-ORNÄS, "Precolonial Beja: A Periphery at the Crossroads," *op. cit.*, p. 485.

84 This particular configuration, that is the formation of a heterogeneous society composed of Muslim Arabic-speakers, natives and slaves organised around gold extraction and trade, is highly reminiscent of the Funj early polity. Against previous hypotheses which located their origin among the Shilluk, in Eritrea or from southern Nubian groups of the White Nile, Wendy James has convincingly argued, based on anthropological and linguistic evidence, that "the term "Funj," applied to a local elite [...] refer less to ethnicity than to status" (James WENDY, "The Funj Mystique: Approaches to a Problem of Sudan History," in Ravindra K. Jain (ed.), *Text and Context: The Social Anthropology of Tradition*, Philadelphia, Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1977, p. 95–133). The parallel goes further since the Ḥaḍāriiba, like the Funj, occupied a position of intermediacy as organisers of trade circulations. The adoption of the vocable of Islam by Funj rulers in their relations to the outside world strengthened their nodal position which underlaid their political authority Jay L. SPAULDING, "Toward a Demystification of the Funj: Some Perspectives on Society in Southern Sinnār, 1685-1900," *Northeast African Studies*, 1980, vol. 2, no. 1, p. 1–18.

85 Gudrun DAHL and Anders HJORT-AF-ORNÄS, "Precolonial Beja: A Periphery at the Crossroads," *op. cit.*, p. 482.

attention to protect their intercessory role meant that up to the nineteenth century, mentions of the populations of Eastern Sudan were impressionistic and the information available confined to “offshore” perspectives that granted to the Ḥaḍāriḇa a social role that was probably overestimated.

### ***B) The Funj, the Ottomans, and Bijāwī Populations***

Contrary to most political entities of the Upper Nile Valley that found themselves incorporated, directly or indirectly, in the Sinnār sultanate in the sixteenth century, the Ḥaḍāriḇa preserved some of their autonomy. The Funj power made attempts to extend its authority to the east, across the Buṭāna, but these mostly failed as the Bija would simply withdraw further into the Red Sea Hills<sup>86</sup>. And yet, this autonomy was also symbolic of the Ḥaḍāriḇa gradual marginalisation, both politically, as they lost their influence over the riverain tribes to the ‘Abdallāb, and economically, with the reorganisation of trade circulations under Funj monopoly in the seventeenth century. Henceforth, most of the high-value trade would head directly to Egypt through the Barbar-Kuruskū road. The Ḥaḍāriḇa and other Bijāwī groups were still necessary interlocutors for the logistics of caravans, but they failed to retain control over commercial relations until they slowly became minor regional actors<sup>87</sup>.

The southern regions were more directly affected by the expansion of Funj power, even if information on this process is patchy. Indeed, the issues met by any attempt at reconstructing the modern history of the Ḥaḍāriḇa are exacerbated in the case of the southern Bijāwī people<sup>88</sup>, since the populations that inhabited the regions—today divided by the Sudanese-Eritrean border—were less involved in trade circulations. Other factors, such as their bilingualism (Bijāwiye and Tigre), their fragmentation, or their regular movements in the borderlands between the Ethiopian Highlands and the valleys and plains of the Tāka region<sup>89</sup>, combined to make this composite population less

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86 As shall be seen in this chapter and the next one, this tactic was to be employed time and time again in the nineteenth century.

87 Gudrun DAHL and Anders HJORT-AF-ORNÄS, “Precolonial Beja: A Periphery at the Crossroads,” *op. cit.*, p. 488–489.

88 The expressions “northern” and “southern Beja” were first introduced in the early twentieth century by George W. Murray. Strongly inspired by the work of Charles G. Seligman on the “Hamitic problem”, the pioneer of the anthropological studies of the Bija communities, Murray arrived to the same conclusion than his mentor, that the Banī ‘Āmir and the ‘Abābda were more likely to be the only true indigenous population of the region, while the other tribes showed, according to him, signs of “possible foreign elements” (George W. MURRAY, “The Northern Beja,” *op. cit.*). Seligman furthered this idea to define the Bishārīn, Ammār’ar and Hadanduwa as “northern Bija”, leaving the Banī ‘Āmir to constitute the “southern Bija” (Charles G. SELIGMAN and Brenda Z. SELIGMAN, “Note on the History and Present Condition of the Beni Amer (Southern Beja),” *op. cit.*). The failings of anthropometry are well-known and apparent in Murray’s article when he writes that for his study “only real desert-dwelling Ababda were measured”, thus establishing a physical archetype of a group of individuals he had himself defined. The term is only used here to reflect socioeconomic differences.

89 In all likelihood, this was initially the name of the region that included the Qāsh Delta. It became, during the Turkiyya, the name of the province where Kasalā was founded. See Duncan C. CUMMING, “The History of Kassala and the Province of Taka (Part I),” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1937, vol. 20, p. 3.

legible.

Early sources mention the existence of a Ballaw<sup>90</sup> kingdom ruling over the southern Bijāwī territories from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century<sup>91</sup>, not unlike the political structure of the Ḥaḍāribā. In the course of the early seventeenth century, it was subjected to three penetrations. The first one was the doing of the Bet Asgadé coming from the highlands. The ‘Abdallāb, Funj vassals, were second and finally the Malhītkināb and Sīqūlāb are said to have moved up the ‘Aṭbara to settle in the region<sup>92</sup>. In contrast with Funj attempts against the Ḥaḍāribā to the north, these expeditions met some measure of success in the hills south of *khūr* Baraka, leading to the formation of new communities. The Bet Asgadé split into several sections including the ‘Ad Tekles, ‘Ad Temaryam and above all, the Ḥabāb<sup>93</sup>. The Ja‘aliyīn who had taken part in the ‘Abdallāb advance were joined by some of the Malhītkināb and the Sīqūlāb to form the Banī ‘Āmir. If the Bet Asgadé’s offshoots were predominantly Tigre-speakers, the linguistic status of the Banī ‘Āmir was more ambiguous, Bijāwiye, some Tigre, while others were fully bilingual.

The Banī ‘Āmir groups, a complex body of tribes and clans, shared characteristics that set them apart from the northern Bijāwī populations, first and foremost their organisation in a caste-system. Both the Ja‘aliyīn and the Malhītkināb are said to have mixed with and evinced the local elites to form the aristocracies (*ḥaḍārib* in Bijāwiye or *tigre* in Tigre) of the Nābtāb and the ‘Ajilāb ruling over a serf community (*aflanda* in the case of the ‘Ajilāb) composed in majority of “remnants of Tigre clans” (the Almada, Hamasīn, Asfada) as well as clans of Bijāwiye-speakers (Labat, Sinkātkināb, Hafara and others)<sup>94</sup>. As for the mentions of Bijāwī enslavement in the context of the Arab migrations of the tenth century, the Eurocentric notion of “serf” should be used with caution. Descriptions from the 1940s by the anthropologist Siegfried F. Nadel show the importance of mutual ties between the Nābtāb and the *ḥaḍārib*. While the latter could be summoned for the milking of his master’s cows or the moving of the camp for the migration season, these had to be asked by the Nābtāb as favours, even if they were indeed compulsory. On the other hand, the Nābtāb were responsible for the security of his dependants. In case of hardship, he must also provide for them by giving out food or clothes. Despite being deeply unequal, both Nābtāb and *ḥaḍārib* lived close to each other, with few formal social barriers between the two, with the

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90 Also named Belou. This has been considered by some historians as deformation of “belawie”, meaning is non-Bijāwiye-speakers or foreigners.

91 Charles G. SELIGMAN and Brenda Z. SELIGMAN, “Note on the History and Present Condition of the Beni Amer (Southern Beja),” *op. cit.*, p. 88–92 ; Andrew PAUL, *A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

92 Muḥammad Šāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Tārīkh sharq al-Sūdān: mamālik al-Bija, qabā’il-hā wa tārīkh-ha*, *op. cit.*, p. 600–602.

93 On the Ḥabāb see Osbert G. S. CRAWFORD, “The Habab Tribe,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1955, vol. 36, no. 2, p. 183–187 ; Muḥammad Šāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Tārīkh qabā’il al-Ḥabāb wa-l-Ḥamāsīn bi-l-Sūdān wa Arītriyā*, Khartoum, Al-dār al-sūdāniyya li-l-kutub, 1984 ; Idrīs Ibrāhīm JAMĪL, *Al-Ḥabāb mulūk al-baḥr al-aḥmar wa ahl al-sāda*, 2nd ed., Doha, Maktabat al-thaqāfa, 2014.

94 Andrew PAUL, *A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

important exception of intermarriages, which were formally prohibited<sup>95</sup>.

Looking for the origins of this particular social system is illusory. Mentions in genealogical myths of ethnogenesis of the coming of foreign elements within pre-existing local structures are not specific to the Banī ‘Āmir, even if they reflect plausible patterns of migration. However, the fact remains that this organisation was unique to the southern regions of the Bijāwī sphere. Therefore, it is tempting to link it with the specific environment in which it emerged, on the slopes of the Ethiopian plateau and in the *khayrān* (sing. *khūr*) that connected it to the Sudanese lowlands. More regular access to water in the *khūr* Baraka and the Upper Qāsh, the main axis of Banī ‘Āmir settlement, meant that cattle-herding was more frequent than in the north where goats, sheep and camels predominated in the herds of the Bishārīn, the Ammār’ar and the Hadanduwa. One of the most defining norms of Banī ‘Āmir society was the prohibition for the Nābtāb to milk their own cows, with the consequence that cattle-herding was necessarily dependent on the use of *ḥaḍārib*<sup>96</sup>. Thanks to the rich silt deposited during the flooding season of the Qāsh and the Baraka, *dhura* (sorghum)<sup>97</sup> cultivation was also undertaken on a greater scale than in the north, without having a noticeable influence on Banī ‘Āmir society. Nadel observed that none of the norms that shaped the ties between the Nābtāb and the *ḥaḍārib* were related to agricultural activities, to what he concluded that cultivation may have been a late addition to Banī ‘Āmir economic activities. Again, contrary to the northern Bijāwī who had developed a complex system of land rights (see below) that deeply structured relations between communities, these were almost entirely absent in the case of their southern peers<sup>98</sup>.

The combination of these factors gave to the populations inhabiting the southern regions a distinctive sedentary tropism, especially for the aristocratic clans who followed tighter patterns of transhumance. This particular trait of the southern Bijāwī explains in part the stronger influence exerted by centralised states over this territory. Unbeknownst to the northern communities, tribute relationships were central to the assertion of hierarchical structures of authority. The head of the royal clan of the Banī ‘Āmir was recognised by the other groups of having a commanding position, without him exerting true power but on one particular topic, that of tribute collection. Early mentions of its payment to the Funj sultans<sup>99</sup> testify of the wider if distant subordination of the southern Bija to the feudal organisation centered around Sinnār. By association, later comments

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95 Siegfried F. NADEL, “Notes on Beni Amer Society,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1945, vol. 26, no. 1, p. 73–82.

96 Northern Bijāwī could milk their own animals, but were forbidden from drinking from what they had themselves drawn.

97 For detailed information on *dhura*, see Hamid A. DIRAR, *The Indigenous Fermented Foods of the Sudan: A Study in African Food and Nutrition*, Wallingford, CAB International, 1993.

98 Siegfried F. NADEL, “Notes on Beni Amer Society,” *op. cit.*, p. 73–82.

99 *Ibid.*, p. 75–76.



from the late nineteenth century affirmed that the Banī ‘Āmir themselves were of Funj origin<sup>100</sup>.

Genealogical traditions collected in the early twentieth century and contemporary observations of the southern Bijāwī tribal structures both describe a group with loose internal connections, frequent rearrangements through integration and a flexible identity. Importantly, the same could be said of most of the Tigre clans. Whether cause or consequence, these fragmented populations were also clearly more easily subdued and attached to a centralised power, as it was the case during the Funj sultanate, and as will be seen below, during the Turkiyya. These external interventions from polities settled in the Nile Valley followed, to reach this region, a common axis of circulation between Eastern Sudan and the Nile: the valley of the ‘Aṭbara, from the north-west to the south-east, and then, going up again following the Qāsh and then the Baraka, from the south-west to the north-east.

This contrast between the northern and southern Bijāwī populations is multifaceted and brings a certain number of questions. One of them is on the progress of Islam among these tribes. The more structured, and somewhat more equalitarian Bijāwī groups of the north, were in direct contact with Islam since the seventh century, and in an inescapable manner from the tenth century onwards. Nonetheless, sources tend to emphasise that only the Ḥaḍāriba were Muslims. One should be particularly careful with assessments by foreigners of the degree of Islamisation of Bijāwī populations, almost systematically criticised for the superficiality of their faith and their ignorance of the main Islamic precepts, without advancing compelling evidence for these statements. Inversely, there are more definitive traces of Islamic practices in the southern regions of Bijāwī territory with the presence of a series of *qubab* (domed tombs, sing. *qubba*), on the Tūkar-Kasalā axis, that is on most of the Baraka and Qāsh valleys. However, whereas these archeological remains signal the antiquity of the penetration of Islam in the southern regions, the aristocracy of the Banī ‘Āmir monopolised Islamic practice as a sign of distinction toward their Tigre serfs or clients, something that only changed in the early nineteenth century when most of the Tigre clans converted<sup>101</sup>. It is thus delicate to distinguish two clear cut processes of adoption of Islam, one among the northern Bijāwī, at least partially under the influence of trade relations and pilgrimage circulations, and another for the southern Bijāwī, belatedly. Nonetheless, two different societies emerge from this analysis of the early modern history of Eastern Sudan: a more Islamicised and equalitarian in the north, the livelihood of which mainly depended on sheep and camel rearing with the addition of revenues derived from the organisation of caravans, and a more fragmented caste

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100 ANONYM, “The Beni Amer Country,” *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography*, 1892, vol. 14, no. 8, p. 548.

101 Jonathan MIRAN, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2009.

society, in which Islam was not evenly practiced, and that relied mostly on cattle-rearing and seasonal agriculture, thus proving to be more easily subjected to a centralised power.

Lastly, another state power imposed its rule over parts of Eastern Sudan. The arrival of the Ottoman Empire on the Sudanese Red Sea littoral was concomitant with the emergence of the Funj sultanate. It reinforced the role of Sawākin, and more generally Eastern Sudan, as an interface between the immediate outside world, now under Ottoman control, and the interior, gradually integrated to the sultanate. Having defeated the Mamluks in 1517 (922/3), the Ottomans became the *de jure* rulers of Sawākin. Their control was weak and so Ḥaḍāriba initially maintained a certain degree of autonomy, but as early as 1527 (933/4), the taxes collected in Sawākin, as well as in the ports of Alexandria, Suez and Jidda, were present in the provincial budget of Egypt<sup>102</sup>. The city briefly fell into Portuguese hands in 1541 (947/8), on their way to Suez where they aimed at destroying the Ottoman naval base and shipyard, within the larger context of the conflict which opposed the two empires in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean<sup>103</sup>. The disruption of trade relations during this period of low-scale confrontations undermined the Sudanese port's prosperity. The city was eventually more firmly attached to the Ottoman Empire with the creation of the *eyalet* (Ottoman province) of Habeş in 1555 (962/3), under the governorship of Özdemiş Pasha who chose Sawākin for capital. The Ottomans established other "bridgeheads" by seizing Maşawwa', Arqīqū and the Dahlak islands. From this position, Ottoman authorities were in direct contact with the Abyssinian kingdom. The several attempts made to expand Ottoman authority in the hinterland were all thwarted. In 1579 (986/7), their defeat at Addi Qarro<sup>104</sup> constituted a major shift in Ottoman global strategy<sup>105</sup>. Protracted fightings continued for another decade but Ottoman advance toward the highlands failed to move beyond Debarwa, 100 km south of Asmara. Subsequently, they retreated to the littoral and reinforced their positions at Sawākin and Maşawwa' where they would remain without great changes for the next three centuries.

The Abyssinians were not the only regional actors with whom the Ottomans had to compose. The second half of the sixteenth century was also marked by clashes of limited scale with the Funj. A few years after settling in Sawākin, the Ottomans complained that the neighbouring tribes were preventing access to water. They designated them as "Funj", indicating that in the

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102 Giancarlo L. CASALE, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 41.

103 For a translation of the account of the capture of Sawākin by João de Castro, one of the captains of the Portuguese fleet, see Brian KENNEDY-COOKE, "The Red Sea Coast in 1540," *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1933, vol. 16, no. 2, p. 151–159.

104 Andrew C. S. PEACOCK, "Suakin: A Northeast African Port in the Ottoman Empire," *op. cit.*, p. 34–35.

105 Giancarlo L. CASALE, "Global Politics in the 1580s: One Canal, Twenty Thousand Cannibals, and an Ottoman Plot to Rule the World," *Journal of World History*, 2007, vol. 18, no. 3, p. 267–296.

second half of the sixteenth century, the Bijāwī populations had been at least partially subdued to Funj authority, albeit probably through the intermediation of the ‘Abdallāb. Another attack was mentioned in 1571 (978/9), again by “rebellious tribal chiefs” affiliated to the Funj. However, Ottoman attempts at penetrating Funj territory from the north were brought to an halt in the 1580s (990s), and the stabilisation of the border between the Ottoman empire and the Funj sultanate came at around the same time as with Abyssinia. At the end of the sixteenth century, the conflict between the three state powers of the region had subsided. Some evidence point to the idea that Ottoman imperial expansion was met by an uneasy Funj-Abyssinian alliance, maybe prompted by the economic interdependency of the two kingdoms<sup>106</sup>.

Sawākin occupied a peripheral position within the Ottoman Empire. It preserved some of its autonomy, up to the point that in 1655 (1065/6) the city mutinied in reaction to an increase of taxation decided by the newly appointed governor of the *eyalet* of Habeş. Accounts of this episode depict a relatively prosperous city, benefiting from the betterment of the Indian trade. During the mutiny, the janissaries were reported to have sided with the local population, a likely sign that they had settled and intermarried with them<sup>107</sup>. The same phenomenon was noticed in Maşawwa‘, the other important Ottoman settlement of the African Red Sea Littoral, as well as in lower Nubia. Indeed, Ottoman communities in these ports were not only geographically isolated from the rest of Ottoman territories, mere trading and military posts clinging to the coast, but also fully dependent on the hinterland for their supply of water (as seen above) and food, essentially grain from the Funj sultanate<sup>108</sup>.

A fragile arrangement was formed between the Funj and the Ottomans in the seventeenth century, despite the recurring tensions mentioned above, and it appears that the customs collected in the Red Sea port were divided between the two powers<sup>109</sup>. In this context, Sawākin became an important point of connection between the Greater Nile Valley and the Muslim world, allowing for the coming of Islamic scholars to the Funj lands. Mentions in the *Ṭabaqāt* de Wad Ḍayf Allāh

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106 Andrew C. S. PEACOCK, “The Ottomans and the Funj Sultanate in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” *op. cit.*, p. 98–102.

107 Andrew C. S. PEACOCK, “Suakin: A Northeast African Port in the Ottoman Empire,” *op. cit.*, p. 38–39. This echoes directly the immediate ascendancy of ‘Uthmān Diqna who was said to have been of mixed heritage, his mother being a Hadanduwa and his father from Diyarbakir. There is no substantiated evidence for this beyond consistent oral traditions, but is neither unlikely considering past practices.

108 This situation was to prevail until the 1880s when the British Navy was able to supply the city besieged by the Mahdists with fresh water and food (John F. E. BLOSS, “The Story of Suakin (Concluded),” *op. cit.*, p. 263). However, the precariousness of this position was almost as much an issue in the late nineteenth century as it was in the seventeenth century. See chapter 3.

109 Jay L. SPAULDING, “Suakin: A Port City of the Early Modern Sudan,” *op. cit.*, p. 43. In an earlier text, Spaulding had written that the customs were divided between the Ḥaḍāriiba and the Funj. This seems unlikely to have happened in the short period between the Funj consolidation of power and the capture of the town by Ottomans. The original reference could not be consulted. See Rex S. O’FAHEY and Jay L. SPAULDING, *Kingdoms of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

indicate that several *fuqahā'* (sing. *faqīh*) had gone to the Ḥijāz for the *ḥajj* and probably visited the education centres of the region<sup>110</sup>.

Regarding Eastern Sudan, the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century were defined by the increased influence of centralised state structures over the region, at the same time the Red Sea port was losing some of its importance. When Funj power ceased to be itinerant to settle its capital in Sinnār and began to structure its monopoly on long-distance trade in the 1670s (1080s), through the organisation of yearly caravans to Egypt, it contributed to reducing the importance of Sawākin as a trading outlet<sup>111</sup>. In parallel, the Ottomans lost some of their interest in the region and Sawākin was demoted from its status of capital of the Habeş *eyalet*. Henceforth, the city was to be administered from Jidda. This may have been linked with the general decrease of Sawākin's international trade relationships in favour of more regional circulations. In any case, in the eighteenth century, the general impression was that of a decline of Sawākin's role in the Red Sea trade. Both Bruce in 1769 (1182/3), who imputed it to Ottoman mismanagement, and Burckhardt in 1814 (1229/30), mentioned the low degree of activity in the port<sup>112</sup>.

### ***C) A Season of Migration to the South***

At the onset of the eighteenth century, Eastern Sudan's littoral had been integrated within the Ottoman empire's sphere while the interior was dominated by the Funj. The relative stability that had characterised the previous period, albeit marked by sporadic conflicts, was due, in part, to the fact that none of these state structures were ready to invest heavily to reinforce a control that had little chance to yield significant results. The gradual collapse of the Funj state disrupted that balance. The political crisis witnessed by Sudanese territories during most of the eighteenth century, with a stark acceleration in the second half of that century, up to the Egyptian conquest of 1820 (1235/6), was accompanied by political and socioeconomic changes that profoundly reshaped the Eastern Sudan's communities. Whereas a sudden increase in available sources offer an unprecedented level of details on the evolution of the Upper Nilotic Valley<sup>113</sup>, the situation is somewhat more nuanced in Eastern Sudan where historical accounts have to rely almost exclusively on the detailed narration offered by the Swiss traveller Johann L. Burckhardt (1784-1817) of the

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110 Andrew C. S. PEACOCK, "The Ottomans and the Funj Sultanate in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *op. cit.*, p. 108–109.

111 Lidwien KAPTEIJNS and Jay L. SPAULDING, "Precolonial Trade Between States in Eastern Sudan, ca. 1700-ca. 1900," *African Economic History*, 1982, no. 11, p. 29–62 ; Jay L. SPAULDING, "Precolonial Islam in the Eastern Sudan," *op. cit.*, p. 122.

112 Andrew C. S. PEACOCK, "Suakin: A Northeast African Port in the Ottoman Empire," *op. cit.*

113 One of the most interesting body of documents for this period is the administrative output of the Funj sultanate (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM and Jay L. SPAULDING (ed.), *Public Documents from Sinnār*, *op. cit.*). James Bruce's testimony also proved to be invaluable to understand the evolution of the societies of the Upper Nile Valley under the late Funj period.

travel he undertook in 1814 (1229/30)<sup>114</sup>, quite particularly for Sawākin where he resided. The most important shift involved genealogical traditions. Collected in the early twentieth century, their reliability greatly increases from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, allowing a more confident rendition of tribal dynamics (see below).

The decline of the Funj sultanate had been initially ascribed to the structural weakness of the system of authority based upon a fragile network of vassals who answered only to the sultan. The end of the first Funj dynasty, the Unsāb, in 1718 (1130/1), brought by ever more intense internal challenges started a cycle that undermined central authority and allowed the expression of centrifugal tribal forces striving to regain their autonomy<sup>115</sup>, leading to ever greater political and territorial fragmentation. According to the historian Neil McHugh, “this theory was a product of its time as it enshrined ideal-types of a primordial tribalism and an oriental despotism as promulgated by Western scholarship of the colonial era<sup>116</sup>.” Spaulding’s reappraisal of this historiography<sup>117</sup> considered Funj decline not as the result of tribalism but caused by the emergence of a bourgeois society, a Sudanese “middle class”, that claimed an Islamic identity and requested a greater share in trade benefits, a double challenge to both the feudal legitimacy of the Funj overlords and to their main source of income (two connected dimensions)<sup>118</sup>.

Bijāwī traders were instrumental in the formation of this new merchant class since they began to expand their networks in the early eighteenth century. They settled in the new merchant towns which were quickly growing and around 1725 (1137/8) a “Beja dynasty came to dominate Arbajī [one of the main trade centres on the Blue Nile]<sup>119</sup>” (see fig. 0.1). Mentioned throughout the sources as Ḥaḍārī (pl. Ḥudūr), Spaulding suggested that all Bijāwī traders may have been designated under a single denomination<sup>120</sup>.

But at the same time these traders were investing the new Nilotic trade networks, giving form to a Ḥaḍāriba renaissance, long-distance trade from Sawākin itself was in crisis. In 1699, Jacques-Charles Poncet, then on a diplomatic mission to Abyssinia, noticed that Sawākin was still thriving, but this picture changed rapidly and in 1769 (1182/3), during his travel in the Red Sea, James Bruce wrote that the port had suffered from Ottoman mismanagement and that its activity

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114 Johann L. BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Nubia*, London, Murray, 1819.

115 Classical historiography thus characterised initial contestations of Funj power as “revolts of free-born warriors against sultans seeking a new military power base in slave-troop” without offering any further development (Peter M. HOLT and Martin W. DALY, *A History of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 29).

116 Neil MCHUGH, *Holy men of the Blue Nile: Religious Leadership and the Genesis of an Arab Islamic Society in the Nilotic Sudan, 1500-1850*, PhD diss., Northwestern University, Evanston, 1986, p. 165.

117 See introduction.

118 Jay L. SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, *op. cit.*

119 Rex S. O’FAHEY and Jay L. SPAULDING, *Kingdoms of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 79 ; Gudrun DAHL and Anders HJORT-AF-ORNÄS, “Precolonial Beja: A Periphery at the Crossroads,” *op. cit.*, p. 490.

120 Rex S. O’FAHEY and Jay L. SPAULDING, *Kingdoms of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

had dwindled. This impression was confirmed forty years later by Burckhardt who remarked in 1814 (1229/30) that two thirds of the houses<sup>121</sup> of the Sudanese Red Sea port were in disrepair<sup>122</sup>. The decline in the role of the Red Sea in international trade circulations in the eighteenth century is well-known. Repeated attempts by European merchants to break Egyptian monopoly over this zone, associated with the rerouting of the trade in coffee, severely affected the economic dynamism of the Red Sea ports, particularly in the second half of the century<sup>123</sup>. The exact consequences of this decline in trade circulations on the activities of Sawākin is difficult to gauge. For once, Sawākin partook more to regional circulations, essentially with the Ḥijāz, than with the global trade in commodities that extended over the whole of the Indian Ocean. It had remained in early modern and modern history a secondary port, and as such, less susceptible to be impacted by the diverting of the coffee trade than the main hubs of the region such as Jidda and Suez. The relegation of Sawākin was manifest with the Ottoman decision to integrate the *eyalet* of Habeş to the *sanjak* of Jidda<sup>124</sup>.

Eastern Sudan was not affected by this process to the same extent as the riverain communities. However, this process was deeply intertwined with urbanisation, a dynamic that had made little headway in the oriental province. Sawākin was the only real town until the foundation of Kasalā in 1842 (1257/8). Nonetheless, the decline of the Funj kingdom influenced the conditions prevailing in Eastern Sudan. The reconfiguration of Ḥaḍāriba power toward the Nile Valley took place at the same time as what Paul described as “one of those inexplicable spillings-over of a desert population in escape from conditions which have grown too hard for it<sup>125</sup>.” For reasons analysed below, the northern Bijāwī, quite particularly the Hadanduwa, engaged an important movement to the south (see fig. 1.3). Their settling on the banks of the ‘Aṭbara and the delta of the Qāsh allowed them to diversify their sources of livelihood. By adopting semi-sedentary patterns, they also brought themselves in a position to be much more directly affected by a centralised power, an unpredictable perspective in the late eighteenth century that materialised with force in the first half of the nineteenth century with the gradual expansion of Egyptian control over the peripheries of the Sudanic Nile Valley.

Using Fernand Braudel’s classical division between a “geographical time”, a “social time”

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121 See the first section of the first part for a short discussion of this aspect of Sawākin’s architecture.

122 Andrew C. S. PEACOCK, “Suakin: A Northeast African Port in the Ottoman Empire,” *op. cit.*

123 André RAYMOND, *Artisans et commerçants au Caire au XVIIIe siècle*, Damas, Institut français de Damas, 1973, vol. 1, p. 142–157.

124 Andrew C. S. PEACOCK, “Suakin: A Northeast African Port in the Ottoman Empire,” *op. cit.*

125 Andrew PAUL, *A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

and an “individual time”<sup>126</sup>, three distinct temporalities can be used to describe the transformation of Eastern Sudan in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The first temporality is that of climate change in Eastern Sudan and more globally in the Sahel band. The idea that an increase in the irregularities of rainfalls in the region may be the primary motive for the expansion of the northern Bijāwī populations to the south was first proposed by Steven Serels<sup>127</sup>. According to him, the Little Ice Age that ran approximately from 1640 to 1840 (c. 1050-1255) was characterised by lower-than-average rainfalls and intense droughts. Besides, rains, when they occurred, were less regular and thus less predictable. This further impeded attempts at ecological adaptation from the pastoralist communities of the Red Sea Littoral. Based on the records of the Nilometer of Rawda Island in Cairo, such a conclusion is confirmed by similar results for most of the Sahel and Eastern Africa between 1400 and 1800 (c. 800-1200)<sup>128</sup>. The overall aridity that characterised the effects of the Little Ice Age on most of the equatorial regions, and therefore, on the Greater Nile Valley, brought with it episodes of “mega-droughts”<sup>129</sup> and increased scale of the long-term desertification of the northern Sudanic fringe, a process that was in part responsible for the Dunqulāwī diasporic movement<sup>130</sup>. More than a direct causality, linking the rarefaction of water resources in the northern regions of Eastern Sudan and the migrations undertaken by the tribes inhabiting these spaces toward the south, it may be more pertinent to consider this transformation *in the longue durée* as slowly reducing opportunities for sustainable modes of production based on husbandry, to eventually result in the reconfiguration of their patterns of migration.

The pressure exerted by new ecological constraints was heightened by the aforementioned degradation of trade activity in the eighteenth century. The extent to which weaker trade circulations may have affected the Bijāwī tribes of the hinterland depends on the relationships between the latter and Ḥaḍāriba, especially as to the income they may have derived from the organisation of caravans. According to oral traditions, the first tribal group that engaged in southern expansion was the Bishārīn. Settled in the ‘Āyṭbāy, they played an important role in protecting (and sometimes

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126 Fernand BRAUDEL, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, translated by Sian REYNOLDS, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995, p. 21.

127 Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

128 James M. RUSSELL et al., “Spatial complexity of ‘Little Ice Age’ climate in East Africa: sedimentary records from two crater lake basins in western Uganda,” *The Holocene*, 2007, vol. 17, no. 2, p. 183–193 ; T. M. SHANAHAN et al., “Atlantic Forcing of Persistent Drought in West Africa,” *Science*, 2009, vol. 324, no. 5925, p. 377–380 ; Jean MALEY and Robert VERNET, “Peuples et évolution climatique en Afrique nord- tropicale, de la fin du Néolithique à l’aube de l’époque moderne,” *Afriques*, 2013, vol. 4.

129 Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945*, *op. cit.*

130 Since at least the early eighteenth century, groups from Dunqulā began to look for other regions to settle, first in Kurdufān and then in other regions of the Upper Nile Valley, thus forming a Danaqlā diaspora. This dynamic had a significant influence on Muḥammad Aḥmad’s life trajectory. See chapter 2.

pillaging) the caravans heading north from Sinnār (see fig. 1.3). The political instability encountered by the sultanate since the beginning of the eighteenth century must have had dire consequences on the regularity of these caravans<sup>131</sup>. As for the trade route between Sawākin and Barbar, conflicting narratives have been offered. On the one hand, a certain number of testimonies mentioned above attest to a progressive decline of circulation on this road. In that respect, it is difficult to imagine that commerce in Sawākin may have waned without a parallel decrease in caravans. The *shaykh* of the Ḥaḍāriba in Sawākin controlled the circulation of caravans and used intermediaries for transport. Linking specific Bijāwī groups to this activity can only be supported by their presence on the different stations where the caravans stopped and obtained water. One of the most important of those was Sinkāt, on the main path to cross the remarkable obstacle that were the Red Sea Hills, both because of the rugged terrain they presented and the lack of water points. According to oral traditions, groups such as the Malhītkināb and Banī ‘Āmir were established there, before being pushed to the south by the Hadanduwa, maybe an indication that the redeployment of the northern Bijāwī communities also aimed at capturing revenues associated with the trade route. The Ḥaḍāriba may have seized control over local trade, from the mainland where they usually resided, whereas long distance trade would be declining, thus explaining the degradation of the buildings on the island of Sawākin proper. In any case, the crisis which the northern Bijāwī were going through due to the slowly contracting availability of regular water resources may have pushed them to find alternative supplementary sources of livelihood and grasp control over a trade route now beyond the direct supervision of the Funj rulers. Still, this cannot fully explain the impetus to engage in a southerly expansion.

The last temporality is that of the rapid succession of political upheavals as witnessed by the Greater Nile valley in the eighteenth century. Serels noted that several droughts had weakened the Funj sultanate, contributing to yet greater political instability. Contrary to the populations of the Nile Valley, Bijāwī tribes were little affected by the turmoil brought by the decline of Funj power, the bid for power of the Hamaj and the fragmentation of political authority in the Sudanic Nile Valley. They do not seem to have played a meaningful role in the contest for power that spanned most of the eighteenth century. However, it is likely that the weak control that the Funj appeared to have exerted over the southern Bijāwī, from the valley of the ‘Aṭbara to the *khūr* Baraka, and then, to a lesser extent, up north toward the Red Sea littoral, was strained by instability. This, in turn, would have favoured the opening of a power vacuum in the region. The northern Bijāwī who had in the past had encounters with the Funj, quite particularly the Hadanduwa<sup>132</sup>, may have been

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131 André RAYMOND, *Artisans et commerçants au Caire au XVIIIe siècle*, *op. cit.*, p. 157–159.

132 Douglas NEWBOLD, “The Beja Tribes of the Red Sea Hinterland,” in John A. de Courcy Hamilton (ed.), *The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan from Within*, London, Faber and Faber, 1935, p. 152.



emboldened by the Funj withdrawal, searching for new sources of livelihood due to the decrease in revenues extracted from caravans, and pressed by a degradation of the ecological balance in the ‘Aytbāy.

Evidence for northern Bijāwī migrations is scant and most of it relies on oral sources difficult to situate in time, due to the lack of external references. In accordance with Serels’ conclusion of an ecological degradation that affected the most northerly regions, the communities in these spaces appear to have been the first ones to undertake migration movements<sup>133</sup>. The ‘Abābda did not retreat to the south but drew closer to the Nile and settled in “colonies [...] along the edge of the Nile Valley cultivation from as far north as Aṣyūṭ to as far south as Kūruskū<sup>134</sup>”. Since they derived important resources from their control of the northern section of the Abū Ḥamad-Kūruskū road, the decline in royal caravans from Sinnār since the beginning of the eighteenth century certainly impacted them directly. The establishment of settlements near the Nile Valley points to the importance of access to water points for husbandry.

The first group to start a migration to the south was the Bishārīn (see map 1.3). Bijāwī traditions located them near *jabal* ‘Ilba, in the direct vicinity of ‘Aydhāb, where they were engaged in trade relations between the Nile and the Red Sea port until the progressive abandonment of the latter in favour of Sawākin from the fourteenth century onward<sup>135</sup>. At some point before the mid-eighteenth century, some sections of the Bishārīn had already initiated a southern migration to settle in the region of Aryāb, a strategic location on one of the two branches of the Sawākin-Barbar route, thus hinting at the primacy of economic motives for this first push. The second advance led to their arrival in the region of the ‘Aṭbara valley, around the 1760s (1170s). It was the result of their involvement in the ‘Aṭbara wars of the second half of the eighteenth century that opposed the Bija Kimaylāb to the Masallamiyya, since the 1750s (1160s). Set off by opposing territorial claims on the western banks of the ‘Aṭbara, in the context of the disintegration of Funj influence over the southern regions, this first conflict may have been linked to larger dynamics of competition over trade circulations on the ‘Aṭbara axis. Indeed, both the Kimaylāb, present on the Red Sea coast and in Barbar—maybe as part of the Ḥaḍāriba trade system<sup>136</sup>—and the Masallamiyya—well connected to the trading centres of the Blue Nile such as Arbajī<sup>137</sup>—, were involved in trade circulations. Following their initial defeat, the Masallamiyya withdrew from the west bank of the ‘Aṭbara and they requested the help of the Baṭāḥīn, a small community mainly situated on the Blue Nile, in

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133 Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

134 George W. MURRAY, “The Ababda,” *op. cit.*, p. 417.

135 George E. R. SANDARS, “The Bisharin,” *op. cit.*, p. 125.

136 Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Tārīkh sharq al-Sūdān: mamālik al-Bija, qabā’ il-hā wa tārīkh-ha*, *op. cit.*, p. 677.

137 Arbajī was destroyed in 1783-1784. See Jay L. SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

Alwān, near Sūbā<sup>138</sup>, but also established in the northern Buṭāna at Abū Dilayq<sup>139</sup>. In reaction, the Kimaylāb called upon the Bishārīn then established in Aryāb for their support and together they won over the Masallamiyya-Baṭāḥīn coalition, driving them back further to the south. Eventually, the Bishārīn settled on both banks of the ‘Aṭbara, up to Qūz Rajab and integrated the minor tribes which were already present there<sup>140</sup>, forming a new Bishārī confederation named the Umm Nājī, while the remaining populations in the ‘Aytbāy formed the Umm ‘Alī.

The second movement of expansion toward the southern regions was engaged by a section of the Ammār’ar named the Atmaan. This group traced its origin to a union between an Ammār’ar woman, Maryam, and ‘Ajīb b. ‘Abd Allāh, a *mānjil*<sup>141</sup> of Qarrī<sup>142</sup>. The descendants of their son Atmaan [‘Uthmān] coalesced into a sub-group of the Ammār’ar and led a movement of expansion, distinguishing themselves by their frequent recourse to intermarriages with neighbouring tribes. This advance accelerated under the impetus of Muḥammad ‘Ajīm who took his community away from the coast to settle in the region of Aryāb, at the border with the Atmur plain, and then further to the south-west up to the *wādī* Amur. The third phase of expansion was led by the grandson of Muḥammad ‘Aqim, Ḥamad Hassāy, the first Ammār’ar historical figure, mentioned as the *shaykh* of this tribe by Linant de Bellefonds in 1833 (1248/9). He consolidated the Ammār’ar position in Aryāb and pushed further to the south to the *khayrān* Habub and ‘Arab, near Musmar<sup>143</sup> (see fig. 1.3). The motives for such an expansion are unclear. Initially located in the Gwineb, the coastal plain east of the Red Sea Hills, the Ammār’ar were probably in their early history under the direct influence of the larger confederations of the Bishārīn to the north and the Artayqa to the south. They then dwelled near the *khūr* Arba‘āt where they were engaged in seasonal cultivation in the wake of the rainy season.

Ecological pressure on this northerly cultivation area is likely to have been an important factor in motivating the Ammār’ar to find other sources of livelihood, especially since the Atmaan, responsible for the main drive of the expansion to the south, were then on the rise and probably increasing in numbers as they aggregated external elements. However the choice of expanding

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138 Sūbā has now been integrated into Khartoum’s conurbation.

139 Harold A. MACMICHAEL, *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1922, vol. 1, p. 206–207.

140 George E. R. SANDARS, “The Bisharin,” *op. cit.*, p. 129–131.

141 The title *mānjil* (pl. *manājil*) was granted to the most important vassals of the Funj sultans (Carolyn FLUEHR-LOBBAN et al., *Historical Dictionary of the Sudan*, 2nd ed., Metuchen and London, The Scarecrow Press, 1992, p. 136).

142 The union of Bijāwī women with foreigners is a trope of genealogical traditions. They helped buttress the assumption that the pre-Islamic Bijāwī society was matrilineal. There is no historic evidence for this and the linguistic structure of Bijāwiye tends to disprove it. However, the importance of matrilineality for Funj nobility has been amply analysed by Spaulding. See John F. MORTON, “Beja Kinship Terminology,” *Northeast African Studies*, 1988, vol. 10, no. 2–3, p. 141–149.

143 George E. R. SANDARS, “The Ammar,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1935, vol. 18, no. 2, p. 199–205.

toward Aryāb, that is on a border zone between the mountainous range of the Red Sea Hills and the Atmur Plain is not obvious. Contrary to the Bishārīn who moved toward a more regular source of water, the ‘Aṭbara, the decision taken by the Ammār’ar is less easy to comprehend. Two hypotheses can be formulated. The first one is that by seizing territory within the Red Sea Hills, they could emulate the migration patterns of the Bishārīn by benefitting from both the rainy seasons of the Nile Valley and of the coastal plain. The second hypothesis would be that the Ammār’ar undertook to grasp some influence over the trade route between Sawākin and Barbar. By settling in Aryāb, they occupied a strategic position, which they consolidated by moving further to the south, rendering necessary for caravans between the Nile and the Red Sea to cross their territory. Whether this was an assumed objective of their expansion or not, the Atmaan’s role on this trade route was recognised by the Egyptian colonial administration as early as the 1830s (c. 1245-1255)<sup>144</sup>.

The third phase of expansion led by the Hadanduwa was by far the most consequential. The Bīshārīn expansion to the south was realised at the expense of relatively minor tribes on the ‘Aṭbara, the Masallamiyya first and then the Baṭāhīn. Any further advance was impeded by their confrontation with the much more powerful tribe of the Shukriyya. As for the Ammār’ar, since they settled on lands formerly under Bishārīn control, they had little influence on the overall tribal equilibrium in Eastern Sudan. This is true with one important exception: by driving a wedge between the Bishārīn Umm Nājī on the ‘Aṭbara and the remaining of the tribe in the ‘Aytbāy, the establishment of an Ammār’ar “bridgehead” on the *wādī* Amūr probably contributed to the division of the Bishārīn into two relatively independent polities.

The Hadanduwa expansion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the south was remarkably described by Thomas H. Owen as a “Drang nach Süden<sup>145</sup>”. This movement is said to have started under Wayl ‘Alī b. Muḥammad<sup>146</sup> in the second half of the eighteenth century. No precise information exists on the origin of the Hadanduwa. The equivalent of the *jabal* ‘Ilba for the Bishārīn and the *khūr* Arba‘āt for the Ammār’ar, quasi-mythical regions of origin, would be the *jabal* Ukwur, some 50 km to the south-west of Sinkāt. The concentration of important Hadanduwa tribes, such as the Bushāryāb, Shar‘āb, Qar‘īb, Amirāb, Hākūlāb and Jamīlāb, in this region in the twentieth century gives credence to the hypothesis of their initial settlement on the Arkawīt plateau. Before heading to the south, the Hadanduwa community consolidated its grasp on this region, and according to Owen, the Shar‘āb forced the Banī ‘Āmir who were installed there to move to new

144 *Ibid.*, p. 204.

145 Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 188.

146 Osbert G. S. CRAWFORD, “The Ashraf of the Sudan,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1955, vol. 36, no. 2, p. Crawford gives the list of the nāzirs of the Hadanduwa, based upon the information given to him by Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Ḍīrar. Curiously, the Sudanese historian presented a more complex genealogy in his own book. See ; Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Tārīkh sharq al-Sūdān: mamālik al-Bija, qabā’il-hā wa tārīkh-ha*, *op. cit.*, p. 530–535.

pastures. The Hadanduwa leader is said to have been buried in *khūr* Lanqīb, hinting at the fact that he had managed to seize control over most of the southern half of the Arkawīt plateau. Other oral traditions report that the Bushāryāb drove the Bishārīn westward would thus indicating that the latter had already settled near Aryāb and may have begun to extend their influence toward Sinkāt, following the Sawākin-Barbar road to the east, and to the south, toward Durdayb (100 km to the south-west of Sinkāt). Wayl ‘Alī b. Muḥammad is thus quite firmly linked with the second half of the eighteenth century, after the first Bishārī movement to Aryāb but before their migration to the ‘Aṭbara. Since the Ammār’ar are not mentioned as immediate neighbours, this first consolidation of Hadanduwa territorial claims probably preceded their expansion across the Red Sea Hills toward Aryāb and the Atmur. The presence of Banī ‘Āmir in the region of Arkawīt is intriguing, especially since neither Charles Seligman nor Andrew Paul mentioned it<sup>147</sup>. Their proximity with the Sawākin-Barbar road could indicate that they were engaged in trade circulations and would tend to confirm the larger role played by the southern Bija within the Ḥaḍārība commercial organisation. This could also have been one of the primary motives of the Hadanduwa for their initial expansion.

Still, the Hadanduwa advance did not remain confined to this region. Hadanduwa imperialism became a force to reckon with at the turn of the nineteenth century. Under the leadership of Muḥammad b. Mūsā, the great-grandson of Wayl ‘Alī, the Hadanduwa took control of the Qāsh at the turn of the nineteenth century, and their *shaykh* settled at Filik, near the *wādī*. In the process, they entered in direct conflict with the communities previously established on the Qāsh, namely the Banī ‘Āmir, the Ḥalānqa, the Malhītkināb and the Siqūlāb. The struggle for the control of the Qāsh was violent and spanned almost half a century. Muḥammad b. Mūsā himself died fighting the Banī ‘Āmir around 1810 (1224/5). His son, Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad, is remembered for having attempted to temper down the violence. He is credited for having pressed his people away from internal conflicts<sup>148</sup>. However his term did not last and he was probably ousted around 1814 (1229/30) by his brother Muḥammad Dīn b. Muḥammad (d. 1841), a more warlike figure, and the first leader of the Hadanduwa to be attested in external sources. He pursued the policy adopted by his father and further pushed the Ḥalānqa up the Qāsh, toward the current position of Kasalā, which became their main centre. In the same way, he advanced over the territories of the Malhītkināb and the Siqūlāb. Violence was not the only tool used by the Hadanduwa: some of these tribes were partially absorbed through intermarriages, as when Muḥammad Dīn married a Malhītkinābī<sup>149</sup>. Still tensions must have remained rife. The Sudanese historian Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Dīrār recounts the story

147 Charles G. SELIGMAN and Brenda Z. SELIGMAN, “Note on the History and Present Condition of the Beni Amer (Southern Beja),” *op. cit.*; Andrew PAUL, “Notes on the Beni Amer,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1950, vol. 31, no. 2, p. 223–245.

148 Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ DİRĀR, *Tārīkh sharq al-Sūdān: mamālik al-Bija, qabā’il-hā wa tārīkh-ha*, *op. cit.*, p. 541.

149 Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 188–191.

of a Hadanduwa woman cultivating a piece of land in company of his child when a band of the Malhītkināb came and cut the head of her child off. She complained to the *shaykh* who mobilised all his men in Filik, took with him his two children from his Malhītkinābī wife, and raided the lands of the Malhītkināb with utter ferocity<sup>150</sup>.

This climate of open warfare was not limited to the Qāsh valley. The Hadanduwa had brutally pushed southward and had made themselves masters of the region in a few years. When Burckhardt travelled the region in 1814 (1229/30), Hadanduwa presence was conspicuous. But in doing so, they encountered the Bishārīn who were also extending their influence and may have been pressing up to Tāka<sup>151</sup>. The whole region, from the ‘Aṭbara valley on the west to the Qāsh on the east was in the first half of the nineteenth century the theatre of intense rivalries between the three hegemonic tribes of the region: the Hadanduwa, the Bishārīn and the Shukriyya.

### **III. Bijāwī Societies in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Sudan**

The great migration to the south of the northern Bijāwī communities, during the second half of the eighteenth century, altered their way of living as they were able to exploit the more diverse resources of the regions they occupied. The socioeconomic structures that prevailed in these Bijāwī societies will be examined in the second part of this section. However, the evolutions undergone by these communities were not confined to their material conditions of living. In the same period, these groups elaborated genealogical traditions that modified how these groups perceived themselves as sociopolitical bodies. The northern Bijāwī expansion, spearheaded by the Bishārīn, the Ammār’ar and Hadanduwa, constituted a crucial moment in their formation as tribal entities with internal hierarchical relationships. The two sections below will endeavour to shed light on their social structures as well as on their main socioeconomic characteristics.

#### ***A) Bijāwī Social Structures: Tribes and Clans***

##### *i) Genealogical Traditions and Power Structures*

When tribal genealogies were collected by British colonial officers in the early twentieth century, they were considered uncritically as blurred traces of real historical trajectories, that only required to be straightened or “dusted” by comparing them to each other and, if possible, with external data. What the anthropologist Abdullahi Ali Ibrahim termed the “literally-oriented

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150 Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Tārīkh sharq al-Sūdān: mamālik al-Bija, qabā’il-hā wa tārīkh-ha*, *op. cit.*, p. 543 ; Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 191.

151 Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 189.

authoritative discourse” answered the political motivations of the administration of the Condominium, that is to find legible and historically stable social structures to use as local proxies, more often than not by subsuming a wide variety of organisations under the single designation of “tribe”<sup>152</sup>.

The interpretation offered by George E. R. Sandars<sup>153</sup> (1901-1985) of the origins of the Ammār’ar Atmān is a good example of this literalist approach. ‘Wishing to date the union between Maryam and the *mānjil* ‘Ajīb ‘Abd Allāh (see above), Sandars summoned Harold A. MacMichael’s foundational work on the Arab tribes in the Nilotic Sudan, and determined that two *manājil* fit the requirements, one that died in 1610 (1018/9) and the second in *c.* 1779 (1192/3). Based on suspicious calculations, he concluded that the last option could be discarded in favour of an earlier date<sup>154</sup>. Sandars, as others before him including MacMichael himself, gave considerable weight to the information recorded in these genealogies to the extent that contradictions or tensions were quickly discarded. Indeed, the first ‘Ajīb was a major protagonist of the formation of the ‘Abdallāb dominion, as such, his presence in Eastern Sudan is rather doubtful and his union with a woman from a small and marginal community even more; besides, the Ammār’ar were consistently noted in Bijāwī oral traditions as a relatively recent tribal formation; but none of these considerations undermined Sandars’ trust in the succession of generations. Ibrahim remarked that this approach resulted in “the genealogical tradition [being] robbed of its discursive integrity”, and so he favoured considering them as “parables” or a “local framework of historical interpretations”, that is not so much as historical evidence but as contemporary discourses that require to be analysed by taking into account the circumstances of their production and by contextualizing the categories they carry, to locate them as products of a colonial encounter<sup>155</sup>.

Spaulding considered this healthy departure from literal interpretations of tribal genealogies as too radical. Adopting a “positivist” approach, he proved that if these genealogies were indeed fabrications, some of them may have been conceived as early as the 1770s (*c.* 1183-1193) in the context of the upheavals of the Sinnār sultanate of the late eighteenth century, at a moment when several riverain communities claimed prestigious Arab ascendancies. The main problem faced by these genealogists was that in order to connect local lineages with Arab ancestry, they had to bridge several centuries without available data. To answer this issue, they resorted to two techniques: the

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152 ‘Abd Allāh ‘Alī IBRĀHĪM, “Breaking the Pen of Harold MacMichael: The Ja’aliyyin Identity Revisited,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 1988, vol. 21, no. 2, p. 226.

153 George E. R. Sandars spent most of his early career in Eastern Sudan. After a first appointment in Kurdufān from 1924, he was transferred to al-Qadārif in 1926, Sinkāt in 1929 where he spent the next four years, as Assistance District Commissioner and then District Commissioner.

154 George E. R. SANDARS, “The Ammarar,” *op. cit.*, p. 199–200.

155 ‘Abd Allāh ‘Alī IBRĀHĪM, “Breaking the Pen of Harold MacMichael: The Ja’aliyyin Identity Revisited,” *op. cit.*

first one was to expand each genealogical level, with the result that lives could span incredible periods; the second was a willing oversight on the realities of *shaykhship*. Genealogies all presented neatly arranged successions of tribal *shuyūkh* (sing. *shaykh*) who succeeded one another, against historical evidence that showed that tribal positions of leadership were highly unstable. To come back to the example given above, in the thirteen years between ‘Ajīb b. ‘Abd Allāh’s appointment as *mānjil* in 1766/7 (1179) and his death in 1779 (1193), two others occupied this position, thus precluding simplistic attempts to count each *shaykh* and multiply by an average lifespan. Spaulding convincingly argued that genealogical traditions could still be fathomed for historical data once their scope was reduced to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries<sup>156</sup>. He was also keen to note that the re-Historicisation of these genealogical traditions implied a prior reflexion on the specificities of the community in which they were produced. For example, Richard A. Lobban showed that records in Maḥas genealogies of the forty-seven generations<sup>157</sup> spanning the period from the 620s to the 1980s were reliable beyond the eighteenth century. However, this prompted a reflection on the conditions required for the long-term preservation of stable genealogies so as to bring light to their exceptionality. Based on the example of the Maḥas, he determined that hierarchical and literate societies that entertained close relationships with political power and where recorders were isolated from the political arena were more likely to preserve reliable genealogical traditions<sup>158</sup>. Spaulding came to a similar conclusion when he suggested that oral traditions predating the last quarter of the eighteenth century would not be found among subject communities, but from the “remnants of major governing houses of the Funj kingdom: the ‘Abdallab, Musabba‘at, Ghudiyat, Beni ‘Amr [Banī ‘Āmir], and the ruling houses of Qubba and Taqali<sup>159</sup>”<sup>160</sup>.

This means that Bijāwī genealogies should be considered with great caution, as the societies in which they were produced lacked most of the characteristics defined by Lobban to ensure some degree of trustworthiness in their preservation over a long period of time, with the debatable exception of the Banī ‘Āmir. This does not, however, negate their value, if they are considered as testimonies of the representations of historical trajectories developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A synoptic comparison between the respective genealogies of the Bishārīn, the

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156 Jay L. SPAULDING, “The Chronology of Sudanese Arabic Genealogical Tradition,” *op. cit.*

157 On average, each generation equaled 28,9 years.

158 Richard A. LOBBAN, “A Genealogical and Historical Study of the Mahas of the Three Towns,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 1983, vol. 16, no. 2, p. 231–262.

159 On this last example, Janet Ewald showed that contrary to what she had expected at the onset of her fieldwork in the Nūbā Mountains, the Taqali kingdom not only kept very few written documents but that oral traditions were also very limited before the advent of this polity. See Janet J. EWALD, “Experience and Speculation: History and Founding Stories in the Kingdom of Taqali, 1780-1935,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 1985, vol. 18, no. 2, p. 265–287 ; Janet EWALD, “Speaking, Writing, and Authority: Explorations in and from the Kingdom of Taqali,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1988, vol. 30, no. 2, p. 199–224.

160 Jay L. SPAULDING, “The Chronology of Sudanese Arabic Genealogical Tradition,” *op. cit.*, p. 337.

Ammār'ar, the Hadanduwa and the Banī 'Āmir reveal the patterns that underlaid the formation of authority structures in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries at the time of the southerly expansion of the northern groups. The genealogies presented in the tables 1 and 2<sup>161</sup> were established by comparing accounts given in British and Sudanese sources from the first half of the twentieth century<sup>162</sup>. They were constructed so as to suggest similarities and differences, not to emphasise synchronicity.

A cursory look at these tables reveal obvious parallels between the Bishārī and Ammār'ar genealogies. This confirms the proximity between the two tribes<sup>163</sup> and indicates that they envisioned their history on close terms. Indeed, both can easily be divided into three periods of tribal reorganisation. The first phase is heuristic: it aims at giving a foundational basis for each community and grant meaning to the current balance of power relations *vis-à-vis* groups that could attempt to challenge it. This is the case for marginalised tribes such as the Maḍākir for the Bishārīn, or the 'Āmlāb for the Ammār'ar, but also for others that have retained some of their influence, like the Faḍlāb. Whether the tribal organisation described in this first phase ever existed is paradoxically not important, what matters is that it does not reflect the current structure. The break between the two is emphasised by a period of “contraction”: no new lineages are founded, either because of the narrowing of male progeny, or the predominance of female descendants. In both cases, the creation of a new set of tribal groups is the result of exterior input. The second phase is an assertion of the political and geographical divisions of each tribal ensemble. The mapping of the territories and interrelationships between the different subsets represents a retroactive formulation of the situation of the late eighteenth century. Indeed, the split between the two main branches of the Bishārīn, the Umm 'Alī to the north and the Umm Nājī near the 'Aṭbara only makes sense in the context of the later expansion to the south. By the same token, the relations drawn from the marriages of Qwilāy's five daughters with men from the five most important tribes of Eastern Sudan, what Sandars called Qwilāy's “matrimonial catholicity<sup>164</sup>”, are meant to define the Ammār'ar position within the Bijāwī world. The striking resemblance between their genealogy and that of the Bishārīn, in association with the unsubtle effort to affirm their interconnectedness with neighbouring groups, suggests a bid

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161 See appendix [check].

162 There is a strong incentive to look at the earliest genealogical traditions recorded. Hjort af Ornäs and Dahl showed —by comparing genealogies collected in the 1930s with those given to them in the 1980s—that with time, “generational depth” was progressively lost. See Anders HJORT AF ORNÄS and Gudrun DAHL, *Responsible Man: The Atmaan Beja of North-eastern Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

163 External observers had difficulties distinguishing the Ammār'ar from the Bishārī and the 'Abābda, so much so that in the fiscal data presented in Stewart's *Report on the Soudan* (p. 28-29) of 1883 and based on the Egyptian colonial government's records, Ammār'ar groups were included in three different sections, that of the Bishārīn, of the 'Abābda, and a third rather confusing designation, the “Atbari”.

164 George E. R. SANDARS, “The Ammarar,” *op. cit.*, p. 201.



for recognition, and conversely, reveals the frailty of their territorial claims in the nineteenth century<sup>165</sup>. One last point should be raised. If that genealogical data itself is almost certainly without historical basis, it is nonetheless significant that this second phase was initiated by individuals representing the “outer world”, not so much as foreigners, the unlikely Arab traveller, but as figures of new forces, the ‘Abdallāb for the Ammār’ar and a trader for the Bishārīn. In that respect, these genealogies firmly set the period of political structuration of both tribes within the framework of the Funj sultanate, and, one may think, as external forces triggered changes in the fabric of Bijāwī society.

The main divergence between the two genealogies appears in the last phase, the one most likely to bear relations with historical developments, particularly the southern migration. On the one hand, the Bishārīn groups kept on witnessing new splits and the formation of new communities. The expansion to the south in the 1760s (*c.* 1173-1183) is credited to Ḥamad w. ‘Umrān, but his succession remains nebulous. On the other hand, the Ammār’ar genealogy is a straight line from the founder of the new dominant branch of the Atmaan and Muḥammad b. ‘Ajīm who is said to have been the main instrument of their territorial gains to the south and south-west, presenting an unambiguous, and highly idealised, single line of descent.

The reasons for the crucial disjunction between these two genealogical patterns can be found in the Hadanduwa’s own singular genealogy. For one, compared to the Bishārīn and the Ammār’ar, the Hadanduwa did not resort to as sophisticated a construction as theirs: the network of intra-tribal relations is dealt with in a single continuous phase. There are two main explanations for this. Firstly, they may indeed have constituted a more homogeneous and dense social body when they set out from the Arkawīt region in the late eighteenth century (see fig. 1.3), as sources tend to corroborate. Secondly, the extent of their impressive success—detailed above—probably lowered the need to compensate a lack of legitimacy. Yet, the most important aspect of this genealogy is the apparent concentration of power on the single Wayl’alyāb lineage, a particularity that the Ammār’ar, contrary to the Bishārīn, copied or emulated with regard to their focus on the descendants of Qwilāy.

While the process behind this genealogical innovation remains to be elucidated, the model to which it referred was without doubt Banī ‘Āmir genealogy. As anticipated by Lobban and Spaulding, the southern Bijāwī polity presented the most reliable, and datable, genealogy. In

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165 There are several examples of Ammār’ar insecurities. The Bishārīn were, it seems, reluctant to accept ‘Ammār, the mythical founder of the Ammār’ar, as the brother of Bishār, their own founder. Besides, in the 1930s, “other Bega [could suggest] that the Amarar had no status as a tribe before the time of the Turkish government” (*Ibid.*, p. 198–199). Suspicions went further, particularly against the Atmaan, who were said to have only been integrated within the Ammār’ar after they had defeated the Mahdist ‘Uthmān Diqna in the 1880s (Gudrun DAHL and Anders HJORT-AF-ORNÄS, “Precolonial Beja: A Periphery at the Crossroads,” *op. cit.*, p. 48–49).

contrast with the three others, it does not formulate a vision of segmentary relations between its different groups, essentially because of its much more stratified structure of power, concentrated in the sections (*ḥiṣas*) of the Nābtāb dominating numerous Ḥaḍārib and Tigre communities. The uninterrupted succession of *diqlal*-s (Banī ‘Āmir tribal heads) testifies of the perenniality of their authority, even if their actual ability to impose their will on subaltern heads was always fragile. This leaves the open question of whether Hadanduwa genealogies, and in less pronounced way, the Ammār’ar’s, were mimicking Banī ‘Āmir (and more generally riverain) self-representations of power, or if they indeed witnessed transformations of power structures, may they be endogenous, prompted by their southern migration and proximity with alternative forms of authority<sup>166</sup>, or prompted by Egyptian colonial policies (see below).

A few conclusions can be drawn from these previous remarks. Bijāwī genealogies all testify of a rearticulation of authority structures in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with a vindicated shift from loose confederations to more hierarchical and segmented organisations grounded on a new concentration of power by a narrow group. This process was concomitant to their southern expansion but simplistic explanations based on a diffusion of models prevalent in the southern and riverain regions should be avoided<sup>167</sup>. Nonetheless it can be noted that such transfers attest of the integration of the Bijāwī populations within the larger circulations that unfolded at the scale of the Greater Nile Valley. It so appears that this new configuration was evidently more potent for the Hadanduwa and reflected in what Thomas Owen qualified as “pan-Beja aspirations<sup>168</sup>”. Still, despite the numerous crossovers between these genealogies, either through references to common ancestors or mentions of intermarriages, there was no unified genealogical Bijāwī tradition, meaning that identities were primordially defined at lower echelons.

#### *ii) The Internal organisation of Bijāwī Communities*

Most anthropological accounts on the tribal organisation of the Bija present a strongly hierarchical structure. Antonio Palmisano divided Bijāwī society, from the largest to the smallest unit, between *qabīla*, *badana*, *‘umūdiyya*, *diwāb*, *ḥiṣsa*, *farīq* and *‘ā’ila*. This clearly enunciated segmentary structure only imperfectly reflects the reality of the internal dynamics between the

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166 On that particular aspect, it should be noted that matrimonies in Hadanduwa genealogies do not set them in a Bijāwī network, but emphasise relations with other neighbouring communities, particularly the Ja’āliyīn and Shukriyya (see table 2 in appendix [check]). At least in posterior representations, the Hadanduwa appear to have been outward-looking.

167 The paradox lies in the fact that the Hadanduwa were the last to initiate their southern migration and yet the one whose genealogies reflected with the greatest intensity patterns of power observable in Banī ‘Āmir and riverain communities. Attempts at solving this are based on circumstantial and allusive onomastic allusions, such as the presence of a Sinkātkināb section of the Banī ‘Āmir which may have once inhabited the same territory of the Hadanduwa near Arkawīt.

168 Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 193.

different sections of the Bijāwī tribes. Indeed, Palmisano himself insisted that “the [...] classifications of the Beja *qabilat* [...] cannot be considered as “objective” or as set once and for all. They constitute a platform for negotiating identities inside a specific *qabila*<sup>169</sup>.” These divisions were evolutive and groups of a certain level could see their relative position change over time, demoted through integration or to the contrary gaining a higher status by political skill and shrewdness. In that regard, the comment formulated by Hjort af Ornäs and Dahl for the Atmān that “[their] lineage system does not fit a conventional model of segmentary opposition” and that tribes and clans “actually function as economic and political groups” can be applied without reservation to all the Bijāwī communities<sup>170</sup>. The great southern migration of the second half of the eighteenth century saw the upheaval of tribal structures, new groups being formed, while some were added to larger bodies, and others yet wholly absorbed as was the case for some clans of the Sīqūlāb and Malhītkināb in the Qāsh in the early years of the nineteenth century<sup>171</sup>.

As a result, not only is the very notion of tribe difficult to define, but it is also a challenge to locate it<sup>172</sup>. As mentioned before, genealogies are proof that if Bijāwī populations envisioned each

Translation	Arabic (Ar.)	Bijāwiye (Bij.)	Tigre (Tig.)
tribe	<i>qabīla</i>	∅	∅
clan	<i>badana</i>	<i>a`dāt</i>	<i>‘ad</i>
section	<i>hiṣṣa</i>	<i>diwāb</i>	<i>dagga</i>
party	<i>farīq</i>	<i>dua / duwār</i>	∅

**Fig. 1.4** : Bijāwi tribal structures

group in relation with the others, they did not consider themselves as belonging to a unified entity. Moreover, describing the main Bijāwī divisions, the Bishārīn, Ammār’ar, Hadanduwa, Banī ‘Āmir and ‘Abābda,

as tribes is also problematic, to the extent that there no emic term seems to have existed among Bijāwiye-speakers to designate this particular level<sup>173</sup>. The same process of expansion may have contributed to strengthen their significance. Indeed, groups in distant locations and in non-homogeneous tribal environments were more likely to resort to the Ammār’ar tribal reference for self-designation than those who occupied more central positions and who most often presented themselves as Atmān<sup>174</sup>. This concurs with the hypothesis formulated above that the tribes’ role as central social institutions may have slowly grown out of the transformations experienced by the northern Bija from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards. However, they remained

169 Antonio L. PALMISANO, *Ethnicity: The Beja as Representation*, *op. cit.*, p. 40–41.

170 Anders HJORT AF ORNÄS and Gudrun DAHL, *Responsible Man: The Atmaan Beja of North-eastern Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

171 Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 191.

172 See introduction.

173 Giorgio AUSENDA, *Leisurely Nomads: The Hadendowa (Beja) of the Gash Delta and their Transition to Sedentary Village Life*, PhD diss., Columbia University, New York, 1987, p. 238.

174 Anders HJORT AF ORNÄS and Gudrun DAHL, *Responsible Man: The Atmaan Beja of North-eastern Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

loose networks of affiliation that indicated political bonds rather than ethnic homogeneity.

Henceforth, the main vector of identification was the *badana* (Ar.) or *a'dāt* (Bij.), which designated their maximal lineage<sup>175</sup>, often translated as clan (see fig. 1.4). It would correspond, for the Ammār'ar, to the Atmān, as mentioned in the example above. But primary social structures were set in yet a lower echelon, namely the *diwāb*<sup>176</sup> (Bij.), 'ad (in Tig.) and also *hiṣṣa* (Ar.), the unit of the minimal lineage based on patrilineality. A *badana* of several hundred households would include up to a dozen *diwāb*-s, each comprising between 50 and 200 households<sup>177</sup>. Contrary to the *badana*, which was essentially a political institution, the *diwāb* was linked to economic and social functions as it was the level at which Bijāwī customary law, the *salif* (see below), was performative. Collective rights to grazing and access to water were exercised through the *diwāb*, as its members were, at least in principle, the only ones who could use the land by digging a well, using its pastures, or cultivating a parcel. Besides, violations of the *salif* engaged the responsibility of the entire *diwāb*.

Yet, environmental constraints in Eastern Sudan precluded seasonal migratory movements of groups of hundreds of individuals, unlike the nomadic tribes of the Buṭāna or Kurdufān. The mobilisation of an entire *diwāb* was a rare event, often the sign of a brewing crisis, meaning that day-to-day Bijāwī life was limited to a few households, the *dua* or *duwār* (Bij.)<sup>178</sup> or *farīq* (Ar.). This was, according to Leif Manger, a “camp cluster<sup>179</sup>”, a small gathering of families, rarely more than five, moving together on their *diwāb*'s lands in search of pasture. In a more favourable environment with important water resources, an entire *diwāb* could gather, such as the one observed by Burckhardt near Tāka c. 1814 (1229/30), where he counted between 150 and 200 households, divided in four *duwār*-s. This was not, however, the prevalent practice and the high number of households per *duwār* reflected the more sedentary nature of the Bijāwī groups established in the Qāsh Delta<sup>180</sup>. Finally, individuals were grouped into small nuclear family units that could also be divided allowing different generations to engage in distinct economic activities, sometimes in distant locations.

### ***B) Bijāwī Socioeconomic Structures: Pastoralism, Cultivation and Trade***

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175 Hassan Mohamed SALIH, *The Hadendowa: Pastoralism and Problems of Sedentarisation*, op. cit., p. 38.

176 In Bijāwiye, *diwa* means “family”. To this was added the suffix -āb, conveying a sense of belonging, literally. “those of the family of”.

177 Giorgio AUSENDA, *Leisurely Nomads: The Hadendowa (Beja) of the Gash Delta and their Transition to Sedentary Village Life*, op. cit., p. 243.

178 Maybe a deformation of the Arabic word for “circle” (*dā'ira*), as suggested by Burckhardt (Johann L. BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Nubia*, op. cit., p. 385).

179 Leif MANGER (ed.), *Survival on Meagre Resources: Hadendowa Pastoralism in the Red Sea Hills*, Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1996, p. 20.

180 Johann L. BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Nubia*, op. cit., p. 393.

i) *Bijāwī Customary Law: the Salif*

As mentioned earlier, Bijāwī identity was first and foremost linguistic: the ability to speak Bijāwiye. The use of a common tongue may have been the basis of an “imagined community”, allowing for intermarriages and the circulation of poetic discourses. But most importantly, it enabled agreement and cooperation between Bijāwī groups through observance of the customary law, the *salif*. A purely internal Bijāwī institution, no references to this set of rules could be found prior to twentieth-century anthropological studies. In the absence of a literate Bijāwī tradition<sup>181</sup> and direct testimonies predating the Condominium, it is not possible to assess whether the *salif* may have evolved over time. The vast literature on customary rules in Sudan has repeatedly emphasised the ambivalent nature of its formalisation under the supervision of British colonial administrators<sup>182</sup> and so considering anthropological analyses as reflective of past practices is at best debatable. The few cautious comments offered below are based on the postulate that if modalities of its application probably changed, the areas regulated by the *salif* were also of importance for the Bijāwī populations of the nineteenth century.

The *salif*, as described in contemporary accounts, was a set of commonly accepted regulations on interactions between tribes, clans and family groups. It mainly dealt with matters of land and water resources, livestock and civil relations, particularly marriages. Since there was no hegemonic authority to impose sanctions, reparatory dispositions prevailed, even if other measures such as bans on certain territories or exile could be required. As many authors noted, contrary to the representations of the Bijāwī as hostile, warlike and aggressive, the *salif* clearly emphasised decreasing conflictuality and preserving of peace through negotiated compromises<sup>183</sup>.

Its main provisions dealt with land use. Bijāwī territory was, and still is, precisely divided and claimed by specific *diwāb*-s. Usufructuary rights, rather than ownership, were recognised on particular spaces the boundaries of which depended more on outstanding features than on linear demarcations. They were intrinsically linked with a narrow set of resources: grazing and arable lands, and wells. Besides, these rights were not necessarily exclusionary, but periods of economic distress, mainly caused by droughts, meant that rights were asserted with more severity<sup>184</sup>. The main

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181 The famed Bijāwī poetry is, to this day, still mostly unwritten, and those which were collected by linguists and anthropologists confirm the value granted to ambiguity and obscure (when not simply licentious) references by Eastern Sudan’s poets. For an examples of this poetry, see Martine VANHOVE, “‘La grenouille et le moustique’ ou l’humour poétique bedja,” in Ursula Baumgardt and Jean Derive (ed.), *Paroles nomades. Ecrits d’ethnolinguistique africaine*, Paris, Khartala, 2005, p. 497–502.

182 For a nuanced interpretation of this process, see Justin WILLIS, “Hukm: The Creolization of Authority in Condominium Sudan,” *The Journal of African History*, 2005, vol. 46, no. 1, p. 29–50.

183 Hassan Abdel ATI, “Conflict Management and Resolution Among Beja Pastoralists: Elements and Procedures of the Salif Customary Law,” *op. cit.*

184 Anders HJORT AF ORNÄS and Gudrun DAHL, *Responsible Man: The Atmaan Beja of North-eastern Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 58–59.

expression of these rights, besides transgressions sanctioned by the *salif*, was the *gwadab*: the obligation for non-members of the *diwāb* to offer part of the production extracted from the latter's lands, either in animals or grain. The amount itself of the *gwadab* is not central and does not depend on a precise evaluation of the yield. What matters is the recognition of a *diwāb*'s rights over a specific territory<sup>185</sup>.

The historicisation of *salif* practices quickly meets its limits. However, it is certain that the turn of the nineteenth century saw increased tensions related to land use, firstly because the great southern migration may have been prompted by decreasing water resources, and secondly because the settlement of the northern Bijāwī in the Qāsh and on the banks of the 'Aṭbara was realised at the expense of the local populations<sup>186</sup>. These factors may have contributed to the elaboration of shared rules that could serve as a basis for reducing tribal frictions, helped by the emergence of centralised figures of authority ruling over better delineated social bodies<sup>187</sup>. Contrary to their northern peers, the Banī 'Āmir did not define rigid boundaries and exclusive grazing rights, among other reasons because arable land and water was abundant in the southern valleys<sup>188</sup>. Also, the authority vested in the *diqal* and the Nābtāb may have contributed to limit internal territorial tensions. Conversely, this disregard for land rights set them apart to the point where their affiliation to the larger Bijāwī group was (and still is) contested. The subsequent stabilisation of Hadanduwa power in the region almost certainly caused the diffusion of the *salif* to the southern Bijāwī communities, albeit on terms that mostly escape us.

### *ii) Pastoralism, Cultivation, and Seasonal Migrations*

The first use of land was pastoralism, the main economic activity of the Bijāwī communities. In the north, the Bishārīn and the Ammār'ar were mostly focused on camel breeding. Donkeys could also be kept for utilitarian reasons. Cattle husbandry was much more common in the southern regions, essentially around the Qāsh Delta, where grazing pastures could be found in the areas flooded by the seasonal river, as well as on the slopes of the Ethiopian Plateau. This meant

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185 Hassan Mohamed SALIH, *The Hadendawa: Pastoralism and Problems of Sedentarisation*, *op. cit.*, p. 40 ; Gudrun DAHL and Anders HJORT-AF-ORNÄS, "Precolonial Beja: A Periphery at the Crossroads," *op. cit.*, p. 116.

186 For example, on a conflict between the Hadanduwa and Ḥalānqa in the early eighteenth century, see Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ DIRĀR, *Tārīkh sharq al-Sūdān: mamālik al-Bija, qabā'il-hā wa tārīkh-ha*, *op. cit.*, p. 535.

187 Talal Asad makes a very similar argument by noting, on the basis of remarks made oral informants, that prior to the Mahdiyya, the different sections of the Kabābīsh were much more coordinated, because "there were many wars between the tribes at that time" and not as many watering places. The triptych noted for the Bijāwī communities, bonding together conflicts, lack of access to water and greater internal structuration of tribal groups, is also apparent in Asad's description of the Kabābīsh in the nineteenth century. The links between the Bijāwī and the Kabābīsh may have been even stronger since the latter "may have included one or more Te Bedawi-speaking groups on the banks of the Nile near Dongola." See Talal ASAD, "A Note on the History of the Kababish Tribe," *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1966, vol. 47, p. 79–87.

188 Siegfried F. NADEL, "Notes on Beni Amer Society," *op. cit.*, p. 52.

that cattle-rearing on a large scale was almost uniquely undertaken by the Banī ‘Āmir, for whom this activity played a crucial role in the expression of the caste-system, and to a lesser extent, by the Hadanduwa who had settled in the region. Goats and sheep were ubiquitous in the whole of Eastern Sudan, with a predominance of the former on the eastern slopes of the Red Sea Hills, and of the latter on the western side.

Bijāwī pastoral migration patterns were highly dependent on the environmental peculiarities of Eastern Sudan. The most important seasonal factor to determine migratory movements was the dissociation between the rainy season of the Gwineb (the zone between the coast and the Red Sea Hills) which extends from October to January with the inland rains which are concentrated between July and September in the ‘Ayṭbāy/Awlib (the plains between the Red Sea Hills and the Nile River) (see fig. 1.3) where they temporarily fill the *widyān* and *khayrān* of the region, sometimes with devastating violence. Besides, the harshness of the climate during the dry season had to be mitigated by searching for pastures in higher ground, either in the Red Sea Hills or in the Ethiopian highlands where some humidity could be hoped to be found. This complex set of geographic features was compounded by the obligation to balance between the needs of the different types of livestock bred in the region. The climate of the Gwineb often proved too humid for camels. The latter being particularly sensitive to changes in their alimentation, herds acclimated to certain types of grass could not be brought without risk to the saltier pastures of the coastal area. Cattle required a much more stable supply of water that could not be easily found and put important restrictions on their movement<sup>189</sup>.

These different aspects meant that, confronted with scarce water resources, Bijāwī communities developed complex, differentiated and evolving migratory routes. Different sections of the same clan could elaborate distinct strategies to adapt to the specificities of the territory they inhabit. As noted above, Bijāwī migrations involved small numbers of households gathered in a *duwār*, mainly because most grazing grounds and water points could not support hundreds of individuals and their livestock<sup>190</sup>. All these elements converged to make Bijāwī migrations follow complex and fragmented patterns (see fig. 1.3).

In the north, the Umm ‘Alī Bishārīn and the Ammār’ar mainly migrated along an east-west axis. Those established on the eastern slope of the Red Sea Hills would migrate with their herds to the Gwineb, the coastal area, during the winter to benefit from the rainy season. In March, they would return to the foothills and then, in April or May, retreat to the mountains so as to avoid the

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189 For a precise description of three contemporary patterns of migrations among the Ammār’ar Atmān, Anders HJORT AF ORNĀS and Gudrun DAHL, *Responsible Man: The Atmaan Beja of North-eastern Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 134–139.

190 As underlined by Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī Ḥammūdī, this was caused by environmental constraints, but also a cultural trait. See Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, MA diss., University of Khartoum, Khartoum, 1967, p. 10.

scorching heat of the summer and access the *khayrān* that would fill up in July. On the western slope of the Red Sea Hills, other sections of the same tribes would look for grazing grounds in the Atmur plain from August to November, during and after the inland rainy season, before retreating to higher grounds in the hills for the winter<sup>191</sup>. For the groups more to the south, that is the Umm Nājī Bishārīn, the Hadanduwa and Banī ‘Āmir, migrations were predominantly structured along a north-south axis<sup>192</sup>. The Umm Nājī Bishārīn followed a migration pattern similar to that of their northern tribesmen but aimed mostly at the ‘Aṭbara rather than the Nile, where they spend the summer months. The Hadanduwa usually left the Baraka delta with their livestock before the flood begins and as the hot season sets in, in March or April. They migrate to the north to the Red Sea Hills. They will remain there until October or November, sometimes sooner if the rainy season has been weak to head to the south to settle near the Qāsh Delta<sup>193</sup>. Finally, some of the Banī ‘Āmir migrated from the upper *khūr* Baraka and the Eritrean hills to the north, toward the Tūkar Delta and the coast, during the winter to benefit from the coastal rainy season, and then again south to the Eritrean lowlands of the Baraka while others head to the south, sometimes up to the Saytīt/Tezeke<sup>194</sup>.

There is no reason to believe that the patterns of pastoral migrations massively evolved after the end of the southern migration in the early nineteenth century. The most important alteration of previous dynamics was the Hadanduwa expansion to the Qāsh delta which allowed them to engage in cattle husbandry.

Bijāwī populations were also engaged in the small-scale cultivation of *dhura* (sorghum) in the many *widyān* and *khayrān* of the Red Sea Hills, like the Ammār’ar in the *khūr* Arba’āt. However, this dimension of Bijāwī economy was overlooked by nineteenth-century observers due to the strong emphasis laid upon herding as a defining social framework for Bijāwī societies, but also because Bijāwī agricultural practices did not entail clearly delineated fields and all-year round occupation. In the absence of a consequent workforce, the amount of land that could be cleared was limited and the sowing itself reduced to its simplest form. Holes were made with a sharp stick in the ground, the seeds deposited, and the area weeded twice in the following week. The Bijāwī

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191 *Ibid.*

192 Susan L. GRABLER, *Pastoral Nomadism and Colonial Mythology : The Beja of the Sudan, c. 1750-1881, op. cit.*, p. 2;4.

193 Johann L. BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Nubia, op. cit.*, p. 390 ; Giorgio AUSENDA, *Leisurely Nomads: The Hadendowa (Beja) of the Gash Delta and their Transition to Sedentary Village Life, op. cit.*, p. 63–65 ; Hassan Mohamed SALIH, “Struggle for the Delta: Hadendowa Conflict Over Land Rights in the Sudan,” *Nomadic Peoples*, 1994, no. 34–35, p. 152–155.

194 Leif MANGER (ed.), *Survival on Meagre Resources: Hadendowa Pastoralism in the Red Sea Hills, op. cit.* ; Sara PANTULIANO, *Sustaining Livelihoods Across the Rural-urban Divide: Changes and challenges facing the Beja Pastoralists of North-eastern Sudan*, International Institute for Environment and Development, 2002 ; Zeremariam FRE, *Knowledge Sovereignty among African Cattle Herders*, London, UCL Press, 2018, p. 90.



cultivators would then leave only to return five months later to harvest the *dhura*<sup>195</sup>. For the vast majority of them, cultivation was only one activity among others. During a journey in the Nilotic Sudan in 1833-1834, the French explorer Edmond Combes (1812-1848) observed that “the Bicharys [Bishārīn], taking advantage of the happy dispositions of their soil, work and sow a very small part of their lands: they are at the same time shepherds, warriors and farmers<sup>196</sup>.”

But two zones, the deltas of the Qāsh and the Baraka, were particularly suitable for cultivation and allowed for a grain surplus. The flooding of both rivers resulting from the rainy season in the Ethiopian Highlands (July-September) left a rich silt that could be used to grow *dhura* with relative ease. However, the historicity of cultivation in both these zones is still debated.

Concerning the Qāsh, Serels suggested that the nineteenth century saw a decrease in agricultural activities. According to him, the “mega-drought” of the Little Ice Age had reduced the areas of watered land, a dynamic compounded by the disruption caused by the Hadanduwa expansion and the resistance it generated from local communities, resulting in a protracted period of low-intensity conflicts<sup>197</sup>. Because of the contraction of available land, Bijāwī groups would have turned away from cultivation to favour husbandry<sup>198</sup>. Indeed, in the first in-depth description presented by Burckhardt after his journey in the region in 1813-1814 (1828-1830), he commented on the high fertility of the grounds covered by the alluvial mud of the Qāsh, but remarked that only one fifth of the land appeared to be used<sup>199</sup>. Twenty-five years later, Ferdinand Werne (1800-1874), a German doctor and explorer, had a somewhat more nuanced opinion, noting the presence of “large fields or plains covered with durra” in the lower part of the Qāsh, between the villages of Filik and Mitkinab, as well as, “cotton plantation [...] of considerable extent” near “Aronga” (most likely Arūma). He nonetheless pointed out, quite emphatically, to the underuse of such fertile land, writing “What, I ask, might not be done with and grown on such a soil? And what is it now? Nothing!<sup>200</sup>”. The situation had, if anything, worsened in the 1860s, when Lejean asserted, after two journeys in the Qāsh region in 1860 (1276/7) and 1864 (1280/1), that only “a fortieth of its surface” was cultivated<sup>201</sup>. Yet, these various assessments should be taken with caution. Burckhardt crossed the

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195 Giorgio AUSENDA, *Leisurely Nomads: The Hadendowa (Beja) of the Gash Delta and their Transition to Sedentary Village Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 116 ; Anders HJORT AF ORNÅS and Gudrun DAHL, *Responsible Man: The Atmaan Beja of North-eastern Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 117–122.

196 Edmond COMBES, *Voyage en Égypte et en Nubie*, Bruxelles, Imprimerie de N.-J. Slingeneyer Jeune, 1846, p. 152.

197 While the caravan that Burckhardt had joined went through the southern end of the Red Sea Hills on its way to Sawākin, they met “some poor families of Hadendowa [...] who are afraid of descending into the plain, on account of the incursions of the Bisharein” (Johann L. BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Nubia*, *op. cit.*, p. 420).

198 Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

199 Johann L. BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Nubia*, *op. cit.*, p. 389.

200 Ferdinand WERNE, *African Wanderings; or, An Expedition from Sennaar to Taka, Basa, and Beni-Amer; with a Particular Glance at the Races of Bellad Sudan*, London, Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1852, p. 97–98.

201 Guillaume LEJEAN, *Voyage aux deux Nils: Nubie Kordofan, Soudan oriental: exécuté de 1860 à 1864*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

Qāsh region in early June when the flood had not started and so months before any cultivation would be undertaken. Bijāwī cultivation methods left little traces and so, comments by Werne or Lejean say more about their downplaying of local practices than they do about significant changes in the cultivation of the Qāsh Delta in the nineteenth century. Besides, their appraisal constituted a direct echo to the long-enduring trope of indigenous populations unable to fully exploit their land. By underlining the agricultural potential of the Qāsh Delta, they were calling for its development under foreign and colonial supervision, so that, in Werne’s words, “this land might be made the granary for the grain-needing Hedjas<sup>202</sup>”.

If there was indeed a decrease in land use, it most likely started after 1840 (1255/6) as a result of the fiscal pressure exerted by the Egyptian administration. In the early 1860s, Baker noted that “every attempt at cultivation [in the Qāsh] is thwarted by the authorities, who impose a fine or tax upon the superficial area of the cultivated land. Thus, no one will cultivate more than is absolutely necessary, as he dreads the difficulties that the broad acres of waving crops would entail upon his family.” Lejean—then travelling from Sawākin to Kasalā through the *khūr* Lanqīb—made the surprising remark that most of the lands cultivated by the Hadanduwa were situated in the Odi plain, south from *khūr* Lanqīb, and that heading to the south toward Kasalā, he did not see fields after the *khūr* Gadamai<sup>203</sup>, that is for most of the length of the Qāsh Delta. This is a hint that, as is in the Nile Valley, the high level of taxation imposed by the Egyptian colonial power may have prompted the Hadanduwa to withdraw farther into the Red Sea Hills and abandon the rich soils of the Qāsh. Lejean said this directly when he ascribed the “rarity of the population” to the “oppressive regime of Egypt<sup>204</sup>”.

Methods of cultivation themselves underwent significant changes, among other reasons because of the settlement of Hadanduwa populations in the area. This caused exacerbated tensions as they began to appropriate land held by the local communities, but, at least in the 1810s (*c.* 1224-1234), the latter had shown some form of resilience since Burckhardt could note that, of the different markets of the Tāka region, the largest was still the Ḥalānqa’s where the cheapest *dhura* could be found<sup>205</sup>. The Hadanduwa may have kept to husbandry not out of external constraints but because they had not yet adapted to the specificities, and opportunities, of the Qāsh valley, until the 1830s (*c.* 1245-1255), when they are said to have introduced the *shayote*, both a method of irrigation and a system of land tenure<sup>206</sup>. At its heart, the *shayote* was a series of small canals and

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202 Ferdinand WERNE, *African Wanderings*, *op. cit.*, p. 97–98.

203 Guillaume LEJEAN, *Voyage aux deux Nils: Nubie Kordofan, Soudan oriental: exécuté de 1860 à 1864*, *op. cit.*, p. 6–8.

204 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

205 Johann L. BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Nubia*, *op. cit.*, p. 399.

206 Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

dams formed to control the circulation of water originating from either a *khūr* or a flooded area. The construction of this small earthwork required more labour than most Bijāwī families could muster, in consequence, parties would gather to clear a zone and dig the trenches. However, they only received half of the yields since the land itself was the property of a *shaykh* who received the other half as *gwadab*.

In line with previous comments, it is tempting to see in the *shayote* a direct example of the diffusion of the *salif* to the southern regions through the Hadanduwa migration. There are two issues with this idea, the first one as to the date of its introduction. Serels stated that it had been introduced by the Hadanduwa a few decades after their settling in the region, but Johan A. van Dijk only asserted that it predated 1840 (1255/6), not that it was introduced in the 1830s (*c.* 1245-1255)<sup>207</sup>. Indeed, the sole testimony at our disposal was written by Werne who had accompanied the Egyptian expedition to Tāka. Contrary to Burckhardt who had not seen any traces of planned cultivation, Werne noted the presence of “many large fields [which] are, for irrigating purposes, intersected with ditches and small walls of six inches or one foot deep or high<sup>208</sup>”. It happened that these lands were situated in Hadanduwa territory, but Werne gave no indication as to whether the *shayote* was specific to them.

The second one pertains to the inner workings of the *shayote* as a tenancy system. Despite the fluctuating definitions of the *salif*, one of its bases remains that usufructuary rights were not paid by members of the same maximal lineage. The *gwadab* was a customary gift to the *shaykh* given by non-members of the *diwāb*, not a rent paid by a tenant<sup>209</sup>. Werne himself made no remarks as to the organisation of land cultivation, and so the *shayote* is described based on oral testimonies by Giorgio Ausenda more than half a century after it had been replaced by the new organisation of the Qāsh Scheme in the 1920s<sup>210</sup>. Nonetheless, if indeed the *shayote* worked in the 1820s (*c.* 1235-1245) as it may have in the 1920s, this leaves the intriguing possibility that those who worked the fields of the Qāsh were not all Hadanduwa, but Sīqūlāb, Ḥalānqa or Malhītkināb who had lost their rights over this land, and found themselves under the obligation to enter into a dependency relation with the Hadanduwa *shaykhship*, following a tributary regime that was comparable to the caste system of the neighbouring Banī ‘Āmir<sup>211</sup>. In the absence of more detailed accounts of tenure

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207 Johan A. van DIJK, *Taking the Waters; Soil and Water Conservation among Settling Beja Nomads in Eastern*, Leiden, African Studies Centre, 1995, p. 75.

208 Ferdinand WERNE, *African Wanderings*, *op. cit.*, p. 101–102.

209 Hassan Mohamed SALIH, “Hadanduwa Traditional Territorial Rights and Inter-Population Relations Within the Context of the Native Administration System (1927-1970),” *op. cit.*, p. 120.

210 Giorgio AUSENDA, *Leisurely Nomads: The Hadendowa (Beja) of the Gash Delta and their Transition to Sedentary Village Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 113–117.

211 This could be the interpretation suggested by Hasan Mohamed Salih when he defined *shayote*-s as “plots owned by Hadanduwa lineages” (Hassan Mohamed SALIH, “Hadanduwa Traditional Territorial Rights and Inter-Population Relations Within the Context of the Native Administration System (1927-1970),” *op. cit.*, p. 122).

systems in the nineteenth century, this shall remain an hypothesis.

Nineteenth-century cultivation in the Tūkar Delta brings out similar discussions. Situated between Sawākin and, further to the south, Maṣawwaʿ, there were no particular reasons for Western explorers to pass through this region. At the moment of deciding which one of the two routes to Sawākin to follow, the Takrūrī merchants in Burckhardt's caravan opted for the shortest but more difficult one through the Red Sea Hills and not through the *khūr* Baraka, the road to Tūkar. Despite the absence of direct testimony, it is certain that the region knew some form of cultivation in the early nineteenth century. Upon his arrival in Sawākin, Burckhardt was informed of Tūkar's fertile plains and that some Hadanduwa of Sawākin used to sow there after the rains. This must have been a modest activity, as he added that a very small proportion of the consumption of the Red Sea port was produced there<sup>212</sup> (supporting the idea that most of the *dhura* brought to Sawākin came from Tāka). Around the same time, in 1808 (1222/3), the German explorer Ulrich J. Seetzen reported that a man named Ḥājī Saʿīd, probably a Bijāwī, had also evoked cultivation of corn in the Tūkar Delta where two harvests every year were possible<sup>213</sup>.

Half a century later, the region was not much better known. Theodor von Heuglin (1824-1876), another German explorer and zoologist, who undertook several expeditions in Sudan and Abyssinia between 1852 and 1875 (1268-1292), could write in 1867 that “the interior of the land between Tó-kar, the Red Sea, the lower Barka and Anseba has not yet been travelled by any European<sup>214</sup>”. The description he gave of the Tūkar delta was based on two previous trips, along the Red Sea coast in 1857 (1273/4), and in 1864 (1280/1) as he followed the route from Barbar to Sawākin<sup>215</sup>. The situation had clearly evolved since the early nineteenth century. Heuglin mentioned the presence of dams and canals built to control the summer flood and irrigate the lands. The high fertility of the silt deposited guaranteed important yields, if locusts did not intervene. It is unclear when this more formalised method of cultivation which echoes directly the *shayote* was introduced in the delta. Heuglin's only indication is that the Artayqa, once its sole residents, were subjugated by the “Omara [*umarā*] von Qēf [Qayf]”, the mainland section of Sawākin. This echoed a movement—alluded to by several later authors—of Artayqa heads from Sawākin to settle in the

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212 Johann L. BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Nubia, op. cit.*, p. 449.

213 Ulrich J. von SEETZEN, “Mémoire sur les pays de Souakem (Szauaken) et de Massuah (Massaua): situés sur la côte occidentale du Golfe de l'Arabie; accompagné d'observations sur quelques pays limitrophes,” *Annales des Voyages*, 1809, vol. 9, p. 330 ; Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan, op. cit.*, p. 210.

214 Theodor von HEUGLIN, “Über das Land der Beni Amer oder Beni Aamer,” *Mittheilungen aus Justus Perthes' Geographischer Anstalt über wichtige neue Erforschungen auf dem Gesamtgebiete der Geographie*, 1867, vol. 13, p. 170.

215 The details of Theodor von Heuglin's famed expeditions along the Red Sea coast, from Suez to the Somali coast (1857-1858), to Abyssinia (1861-1862) and to the sources of the White Nile (1863-1864) are well known, unlike the one he undertook in 1864 through Eastern Sudan.

Tūkar Delta in the early nineteenth century, maybe caused by a “power struggle between the Kurbāb and the Manwāb”, two Artayqa sections of Sawākin. The latter having lost their bid to power against the former would have left for Tūkar. Beyond local politics, according to the historian Albrecht Hofheinz, the drive for the arable lands of the *khūr* Baraka may have been a reaction to Hadanduwa expansion and their ever increasing influence over Sawākin and the hinterland<sup>216</sup>.

In the deltas of the Qāsh and of the Baraka, labour-intensive cultivation seems to have emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century as *shuyūkh* assumed more direct control over the land, may they be of Artayqa or Hadanduwa origin<sup>217</sup>. This corresponds to the larger trend of consolidation of hierarchical relations within Bijāwī communities in that period, as well as a pivot to more direct claims with regard land ownership, that may have been linked with the Hadanduwa southern migration. Available data is insufficient to draw definitive conclusions. However, it could be remarked that at least in Tūkar, the main actors of this development were traders, before turning their attention to agriculture. *Shaykh* ‘Alī Diqna, the head of the Sawākin Chamber of Commerce (and a cousin of the Mahdist leader ‘Uthmān Diqna) was reported to have passed away Tūkar in 1865-1866 (1282), pointing to the potential involvement of the great merchants’ families of the Red Sea port in cultivating the Baraka delta<sup>218</sup>. Could they have been looking for alternative sources of revenue in the face of decreasing trade circulations?

### *iii) Bijāwī Involvement in Trade Activities*

Because of local environmental constraints, Bijāwī populations had to rely on a “diverse basket of resources” to avoid their simultaneous collapse and guarantee their livelihood against adverse variability<sup>219</sup>. Next to herding and cultivation, trade represented a third pillar less susceptible to be affected by external natural factors such as droughts, diseases and locusts, and, moreover, a source of currencies that could be used for importations, another way to balance the threats looming on Bijāwī economy.

Their involvement, either as traders or as caravan leaders is ancient and attested in numerous sources. The difficult terrain between Sawākin and the Nile Valley made their assistance necessary. Historically, the two most important tribes involved in trade circulations, the ‘Abābda and the Bishārīn, were predominantly engaged with the northern routes to Egypt through the

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216 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 210–211.

217 The difference was not obvious to external observers. On that regard, Guillaume Lejean wrote that Tūkar was “inhabited by several sections of the Hadanduwa” (Guillaume LEJEAN, *Voyage aux deux Nils: Nubie Kordofan, Soudan oriental: exécuté de 1860 à 1864*, *op. cit.*, p. 6).

218 Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Amīr al-Sharq, ‘Uthmān Diqna*, Khartoum, al-Dār al-Sūdāniyya li-l-kutub, 1975, p. 19.

219 Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

Nubian Desert. The former controlled the route between Abū Ḥamad and Kūruskū while the latter were present more to the south, between Barbar and Abū Ḥamad. The Ammār'ar and Hadanduwa were latecomers in investing trading activities, though they occupied strategic positions on both the main routes between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea. The first one left from Tāka to follow the *khūr* Lanqīb, or, less frequently, the *khūr* Baraka, to reach the coast at Sawākin or at 'Aqīq, more to the south. Tāka itself could be reached either by following the 'Aṭbara from its confluence with the Nile north of Shandī, or by cutting through the Buṭāna from Sinnār or Arbajī. On the east, the upper valleys of the Baraka and the Qāsh served as entry points to Abyssinia and connected Tāka to the highlands, an alternative to the southern route through al-Qaḍārif. The second route directly linked Barbar to Sawākin through the Red Sea Hills.

The Ḥaḍāriba and Artayqa controlled the interface between the two through their network of representatives in the other cities of Nilotic Sudan and dealt above all in high-value goods such as ostrich feathers, gum Arabic, and slaves, as well as a variety of locally-produced goods. The Bijāwī communities at large carried out the bulk of the logistical functions and participated in local and regional circulations<sup>220</sup>, in relation with international trade which, in all likelihood, was the driving factor of the relations between Sawākin and the hinterland, even if the evolution of regional trade did not necessarily match wider circulations across the Indian Ocean. To summarise, the merchants of Sawākin experienced a slow decline of their activity from the seventeenth century onwards caused initially by the development of a Funj monopoly over international trade, and in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century because of the political turbulences witnessed in the Greater Nile Valley that favoured circulations through the forty days road<sup>221</sup>, as well as the larger trade slump witnessed from the mid-eighteenth onwards in the Red Sea due to several factors including increased European penetration and political instability in the Ḥijāz and Egypt. The trend was eventually reversed in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly since the 1860s with the introduction of steamers in the Red Sea and the perspective of the opening of the Suez Canal, completed in 1869 (1285/6)<sup>222</sup>.

The matter of the relationships between Bijāwī communities and trade circulations brings out a twofold discussion on the centrality of this economic activity for Eastern Sudan's populations, firstly on the modalities of their involvement and the repartition of the benefits accrued from the

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220 For example, some Bishārīn brought senna, ostrich feathers and some livestock to Upper Egypt, that they would exchange against fabrics and *dhura* (John F. MORTON, *Descent, Reciprocity and Inequality among the Northern Beja.*, PhD diss., University of Hull, Hull, 1989, p. 185).

221 D. RODEN, *The Twentieth Century Decline of Suakin*, *op. cit.*, p. 1; Lidwien KAPTEIJNS and Jay L. SPAULDING, "Precolonial Trade Between States in Eastern Sudan, ca. 1700-ca. 1900," *op. cit.*

222 Philippe PÉTRIAT, *Les grandes familles marchandes hadramites de Djedda, 1850-1950*, PhD diss., Université Paris-I Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, 2013, p. 23.

services they provided, and secondly on their reliance on imports, particularly grain, to sustain their livelihood.

Some Bijāwī communities were efficient at monetizing the renting of camels, their knowledge of routes and water sources, as well as their protection. Their role was certainly not trivial. In 1844 (1259/60), when Mehmet Ali decided to reduce the rate per camel paid by the authorities from 80 to 60 piastres, the ‘Abābda and Bishārīn refused to bring them to Kūruskū, effectively cutting the route between Egypt and the Upper Nile Valley for a whole year<sup>223</sup>. Transportation remained throughout the nineteenth century the main problem in the development of trade based on the exportation of commodified agricultural products. Nilotic Sudan was isolated, in the north and in the east, from the world markets of Egypt and the Red Sea by stretches of desert that rendered the renting of camels necessary<sup>224</sup>. This means that whatever the regime in control of this region, the state was entirely dependent on nomads who acted as gatekeepers<sup>225</sup>. Few men were required to drive a caravan but since their protection was only effective on lands controlled by their own community, or friendly clans, the path they chose necessarily reflected this and involved, albeit distantly, their whole tribal group. In that respect, Burckhardt noted during one of the caravan’s stops on his way to the Red Sea that “one of [their] chief guides or Khobara [*khubarā*’ sing. *khabīr*] [...] was married to a relative of the chief of this encampment<sup>226</sup>”. In this way, as the caravan halted, some barter could take place and groups distant from the main trading centres obtained items they could not produce themselves such as metalwork, certain types of fabric, etc., in exchange for articles mainly derived from husbandry, namely leather, milk and butter. The importance for Bijāwī populations of this very localised trade in animal products should not be underestimated<sup>227</sup>, as a way to raise additional revenues and barter required items, within a larger caravan economy based on the renting of their services and camels. Trade circulations supported their diversification strategy, but few segments of the Bijāwī populations were wholly dependent on them since they could sustain themselves in relative autarchy, living mainly of milk and meat.

A crucial exception concerned their supply of grain, first and foremost *dhura*. In the early nineteenth century, there is little doubt that Tāka region was a net exporter. Caravans between the Nile and the Red Sea would stop at one of the several tribal markets of the Qāsh and exchange tobacco (an important item of consumption in Eastern Sudan), natron, spices and *damūr*<sup>228</sup> against

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223 Karl R. LEPSIUS, *Discoveries in Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Sinai Peninsula in the Years 1842-1845*, London, Richard Bentley, 1852, p. 133–134.

224 Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

225 In that regard, the effect on the Eastern Sudan populations (and others) of the building of a wide railway network during the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium cannot be overestimated.

226 Johann L. BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Nubia*, *op. cit.*, p. 385.

227 See chapter 2 for a longer discussion on the importance of this local production in trade circulations.

228 A coarse cotton fabric that was used as small currency in the Greater Nile Valley.

cheap *dhura*. They would then bring it to Sawākin and sell it locally for four times its initial value or export it to Jidda for even more important margins<sup>229</sup>. In general, the Arabian Peninsula was the main outlet of Eastern Sudan grain, particularly the Ḥijāz where demand was at its highest during the *ḥajj*<sup>230</sup>. The grain from Eastern Sudan also alimanted the Upper Nile Valley market. On his way to Tāka, Burckhardt crossed the path of the Bīshārīn caravan following the ‘Aṭbara on its way to Qūz Rajab to purchase *dhura* there and bring it back to Barbar or Shandī<sup>231</sup>. He added that “during the last famine Tāka [had] supplied the whole valley of the Nile from Shendy to Mograt with Dhourra<sup>232</sup>”.

Serels contended that in the course of the nineteenth century, Bijāwī food autonomy had slowly degraded—because of the decreased in cultivated land—to the point where Eastern Sudan had become, between the 1830s and 1850s, a net importer of grain, leading to its incorporation within the Red Sea market economy<sup>233</sup>. With a population of around 180 000s, on the basis of an individual consumption of one *ardabb* of *dhura* (approximately 144 kg) per year, the annual needs would have amounted to 180 000 ard. (around 26 000 t.), whereas yields from the Qāsh and Baraka deltas as well as from small cultivation zones near Sinkāt and more generally in the *khayrān* of the Red Sea Hills could yield between 29 000 and 87 000 ard. (4 200-12 500 t.) every year, meaning that prior to the Mahdiyya, importations may have represented between 50 % and 80 % of grain consumption in Eastern Sudan<sup>234</sup>. This is almost certainly too high a proportion based on an overestimate of actual food consumption<sup>235</sup> and an underestimate of land use.

It is certain that most Bijāwī communities were not self-sufficient in terms of grain supply. Following his comment on cultivation by the Bīshārīn in the early 1830s (*c.* 1245-1255), Edmond Combes had noted that “their harvests are not enough for their needs; they sell a part of their herds, and with the price of this sale, they get cloths, tobacco, weapons, ornaments for their wives and the grain which they miss<sup>236</sup>.” In any case, environmental constraints and irregular rainfalls all played

229 Johann L. BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Nubia, op. cit.*, p. 399–400 ; Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 190.

230 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan, op. cit.*, p. 212.

231 Johann L. BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Nubia, op. cit.*, p. 377.

232 *Ibid.*, p. 400.

233 Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945, op. cit.*, p. 37–38.

234 Steven SERELS, “Famines of War: The Red Sea Grain Market and Famine in Eastern Sudan, 1889-1891,” *Northeast African Studies*, 2012, vol. 12, no. 1, p. 77–79.

235 The British colonial officers who suggested this number in the 1890s were referring to a situation where no other food sources were available. Indeed, it closely matched the actual grain stipend granted by Mahdist authorities in Tūkar. The latter would give every month 2 qard. for any dependent family member, that is 24 qard. or 1 ard. per year. This, however, was made necessary because men and women mobilised for the Mahdist movement were entirely dependent on these distributions and rarely had other means of livelihood (see chapters 4 and 5). Bijāwī diet was complemented with dairy products and meat, thus lowering their consumption of grain.

236 Edmond COMBES, *Voyage en Égypte et en Nubie, op. cit.*, p. 152.



against a significant engagement in agricultural activities: the risk of a low yield was just too important. The remainder had to be acquired in the trading centres on the banks of the Nile or in the Qāsh, while larger crises had to be weathered by relying on importations<sup>237</sup>.

These had become easier with the arrival in the Red Sea of cheap Indian grain (and rice) in the 1860s (c. 1276-1286). In the early 1880s (late 1290s), grain was one of the main commodities imported in Sawākin<sup>238</sup>. Lower prices meant that cultivation may have become less profitable, leading some the Bijāwī cultivators of the Qāsh to abandon their activity and return to husbandry. However, this does not entail that the Bijāwī populations themselves had become more dependent on external supplies, at least because to some extent, they had always been in the obligation to purchase some of it elsewhere. Visiting the Qāsh in 1861 (1277/8), Samuel Baker remarked that “actual poverty is unknown”, mainly because *dhura* was so cheap<sup>239</sup>. The main shift that occurred in the nineteenth century was the collapse of grain production in the Nile Valley. Imports in Sawākin were probably not meant for Eastern Sudan but for the riverine populations, especially since the security on the trading routes between the Red Sea and the Nile Valley had greatly increased in the same period. The Qāsh region may have thus continued to export its production, only this time toward the west and not the east. In this regard, there is some circumstantial evidence pointing to the greater involvement of the riverain communities in grain trade. For example, in 1865 (1281/2), Lejean noted the presence outside of Kasalā of large grain reserves owned by Ja‘aliyīn merchants<sup>240</sup>. The intensification of trade relations, particularly after the 1860s, was favoured by the Egyptian conquest the Greater Nile Valley in 1820 (1235/6) and the subsequent subjugation of the Bijāwī populations by the colonial power.

#### IV. Colonial Rule in Eastern Sudan (1820s-1870s)

The Egyptian conquest of the Sudanic Nile Valley decided by Mehmet Ali was prompted by several motives. The presence of Mamluks—the survivors of the 1811 (1226) massacre—in the Dunqulā region may have been the immediate reason, but slaves and gold were the real objective. The former were thought to constitute an alternative to the unruly Mamluks and a potential basis for a new army<sup>241</sup>. The notion that Sudan had important reserves of gold was also instrumental in the

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237 John F. MORTON, *Descent, Reciprocity and Inequality among the Northern Beja.*, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

238 Steven SERELS, “Famines of War: The Red Sea Grain Market and Famine in Eastern Sudan, 1889-1891,” *op. cit.*, p. 80–81.

239 Samuel W. BAKER, *The Nile Tributaries of Abyssinia, and the Sword Hunters of the Hamran Arabs*, London, Macmillan and Co., 1867, p. 77.

240 Guillaume LEJEAN, “Appendice au Voyage en Haute-Nubie. Révolte et sac de Kassala (1865),” *Le Tour du monde: nouveau journal des voyages*, 1867, vol. 15, p. 398–399 ; Duncan C. CUMMING, “The History of Kassala and the Province of Taka (Part I),” *op. cit.*, p. 28.

241 Khaled FAHMY, *All the Pasha’s Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army and the Making of Modern Egypt*, Cairo and New

Egypto-Ottoman ruler's decision<sup>242</sup>.

The conquest started in July 1820 (Ramaḍān/Shawwāl 1235) from Aṣwān under the command of Ismā'īl Pasha, one of the sons of Mehmet Ali, and advanced rapidly against Upper Nubia and the province of Dunqulā. The Mamluks themselves opposed with little resistance and most of them fled upstream, contrary to the Shāyqiyya confederation. The charges of Shāyqī cavalymen proved inefficient against the modern weaponry of the Egyptian soldiers while tribal divisions prevented the formation of a common front against the new enemy. By the end of 1820, the conquerors were in control of the Nile Valley up to the fourth cataract (see fig. 0.1). In February 1821 (Jumādā I 1236), they prepared to cross the Bayūḍa Desert to reach Barbar in March (Jumādā II). This brought the riverain *mukūk* (sing. *makk*)<sup>243</sup> to submit and opened the rest of the Sudanese territory. In June (Ramaḍān), Sinnār was captured and the Funj sultanate, still riddled by internal dissensions, abolished. Another expeditionary corps sent in early 1821 and led by Muḥammad Bey Kushraw invaded Kurdufān and seized al-Ubayyiḍ, thus bringing an end to the first phase of the conquest<sup>244</sup>.

Despite the early efforts of the Egyptian commandants to avoid unnecessary violence, the advance on the Nile was marked by numerous exactions and massacres, particularly in the north, in Shāyqiyya territory. Once the Mamluk problem was eliminated, the new masters of the Upper Nile Valley concentrated their attention on the extraction of wealth. Expeditions were launched against the region of Fazūqli, on the Blue Nile, to seize gold and slaves, while the riverain regions were subjected to high levels of taxation. Sporadic movements of insurrection flared up until November 1822 (Ṣafar/Rabī' I 1238), when Ismā'īl presented himself in Shandī and requested an important tribute in gold and slaves. The local ruler, the famed *makk* Nimir, trapped Ismā'īl and his men and set fire to their quarters. This prompted a wide scale insurrection in the north and the Jazīra, quickly and brutally subdued by the *Defterdar*<sup>245</sup> Muḥammad Bey Kushraw (d. 1833) who, upon learning of the death of Ismā'īl in Shandī, returned from Kurdufān. Retribution for the contestation of Egyptian rule was total, villages were burned down and entire populations massacred or taken as captives<sup>246</sup>.

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York, American University in Cairo Press, 2002 ; Peter M. HOLT and Martin W. DALY, *A History of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 35–36.

242 Hassan Ahmed IBRAHIM, "The Strategy, Responses and Legacy of the First Imperialist Era in the Sudan, 1820-1885," *The Muslim World*, 2001, vol. 91, no. 1–1, p. 212–213 ; Emanuel BEŠKA, "Muḥammad 'Alī's Conquest of Sudan (1820-1824)," *Asian and African Studies*, 2019, vol. 28, no. 1, p. 30–56.

243 *Makk* was a Sudanese title derived from *mālik* (king) granted to important tribal leaders during the Funj sultanate. He was theoretically below the *mānjil*. They remained in use under the subsequent regimes.

244 Richard L. HILL, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, *op. cit.*, p. 7–12 ; Peter M. HOLT and Martin W. DALY, *A History of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 37–39.

245 Muḥammad Bey Kushraw was Mehmet Alī's son-in-law who appointed him the intendant of finances, or *Defterdar* in Turkish.

246 For a detailed analysis of the violence perpetrated during the Egyptian conquest of Sudan, see Shamil M. JEPPIE, *Constructing a Colony on the Nile, circa 1820-1870*, PhD diss., Princeton University, Princeton, 1996, p. 108–145.

*Makk* Nimir and his retinue fled to the east, first through the Buṭāna and then settled on the banks of the Saytūt, in the Abyssinian borderlands. In January 1824 (Jumādā I 1239), the rebellion had been squashed and the whole of central Sudan and Kurdufān under the control of the new Egyptian colonial administration.

### ***A) The Subjugation of the Bijāwī Populations (1820-1844)***

#### *i) First attempts at Imposing Egyptian Rule over the Eastern Sudan (1823-1840)*

Egyptian influence was first felt in the northern Bijāwī triangle, before they gained effective control over the southern regions. The Bishārīn and ‘Abābda, were directly interested in the continuation of trade on the routes they controlled, respectively the old Barbar-Aṣwān road and the more recent Abū Ḥamad-Kūruskū road. Egyptians were also keen on securing these vital axes of circulation and promptly confirmed the Bishārīn and the ‘Abābda’s in their roles<sup>247</sup>. Improved security was also sought on the Barbar-Sawākin road where the Ammār’ar were entrusted with this task. In 1814 (1229/30), when Burckhardt had enquired about the state of this route, it was informed that he was unsafe for travel<sup>248</sup>. Most of the trade appears to have circulated through Tāka and then either to Shandī or directly to Sinnār.

But less than two decades later, William Bouchier, an officer of the Royal Navy, who was travelling back from Bombay in 1833-1834 (1248-1250), found no difficulty in hiring in Sawākin a small crew, including a “Turkish” soldier from Baghdad, to take him and his companions through the Eastern Desert to Barbar, claiming that they were the first Europeans to ever undertake this journey. Henceforth, the greater security that prevailed over the Barbar-Sawākin road contributed to the economic revival of Barbar, which Bouchier described as “a place of considerable magnitude and importance” where “a considerable trade [was] carried on in Surat piece-goods, sandal-wood, and perfumes”, even boasting the presence of a French establishment selling “*café au lait*”<sup>249</sup>. George A. Hoskins, travelling a year before Bouchier had a more nuanced vision of the economic position of Barbar. Its bazaar, he noted, only had six or seven shops and barely deserved its title. He forwent any mention of Sawākin, but insisted on the considerable needs of the Egyptian administration in camels, to carry the product of taxation and of local manufactures (indigo, grain, hides, etc.) up to Aṣwān, and inversely to transport soldiers and officers, as well as provisions, up to Khartoum. This brought the ‘Abābda, Bishārīn and Ammār’ar in close contact with their colonial

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247 George E. R. SANDARS, “The Bisharin,” *op. cit.*, p. 138.

248 Johann L. BURCKHARDT, *Travels in Nubia*, *op. cit.*, p. 374–375.

249 William BOURCHIER, *Narrative of a Passage from Bombay to England: Describing the Author’s Shipwreck in the Nautilus in the Red Sea, Journies across the Nubian Desert, Detention in the Lazaretto at Leghorn, &c., &c.*, London, Whittaker and Co., 1834, p. 31–33.

overlords from whom most of their revenues now derived. It is therefore not surprising that Hoskins would find in the entourage of ‘Abbās Bey, the Egyptian governor (*mudīr*<sup>250</sup>) of Barbar between 1832 and 1838 (1247-1254), several *shuyūkh* of the two tribes mentioned above<sup>251</sup>. Still, relations were not entirely pacified. The ‘Abābdī shaykh Khalīfa rebelled in 1827/8 (1242)<sup>252</sup> and an anonymous account also relates a conflict between ‘Abbās Agha and a *shaykh* of the Bishārīn<sup>253</sup>.

The situation was radically different for the southern Bijāwī triangle. The first brush of the Bijāwī populations with Egyptian authorities happened during the 1822-1823 (1237-1239) rebellion. Pursuing the main rebel group which had retreated between the Dindar and Rahad rivers, the *Defterdar* Kushraw headed east and defeated them. He then turned his attention north in an attempt to capture *makk* Nimir and advanced up to the limits of Tāka, near Sabdarāt, at the border of Hadanduwa territory, in 1823<sup>254</sup>. This first encounter turned to the disadvantage of the Bijāwī fighters but proved sufficiently daunting that the *Defterdar* retreated<sup>255</sup>. The Egyptian troops had reached the limits of their extension, in consequence, Eastern Sudan was left for the time being to its own device.

Whereas the ‘Aytbāy quickly lost of its attraction, especially after Louis M. A. Linant de Bellefonds’ unfruitful exploration of the region looking for gold in 1831 (1246/7)<sup>256</sup>, the riches of the Qāsh valley remained to be seized. The same year as the dreams of resuscitating gold mining in the *wādī* ‘*Allāqī* vanished, the Governor-General (*ḥikīmdār*) ‘Alī Khūrshīd Bey (1826-1838)<sup>257</sup> led another expedition against Tāka. Following raids on Fāzūqlī in 1828 (1243/4) and against the Shilluk in 1830 (1245/6), the purpose of this operation was probably not to assert control over this region but solely to seize cattle and slaves, and maybe to capture the elusive *makk* Nimir in Sabdarāt, where the latter had escaped eight years before. It was a disaster. As they entered the woods of the northern parts of the Qāsh, the cavalry was ambushed by the Hadanduwa and almost annihilated, while the footmen were divided and engaged in close quarters combat. They eventually

250 Provincial governor appointed by the Egyptian colonial regime at the head of a governorate (*mudīriyya*). The administrative organisation of Egyptian Sudan is explained below.

251 George A. HOSKINS, *Travels in Ethiopia, above the Second Cataract of the Nile: Exhibiting the State of that Country, and its Various Inhabitants, under the Dominion of Mohammed Ali; and Illustrating the Antiquities, Arts, and History of the Ancient Kingdom of Meroe*, London, Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longman, 1835, p. 45–61.

252 Richard L. HILL, *On the Frontiers of Islam*, *op. cit.*, p. 9–12.

253 Paul SANTI and Richard L. HILL (ed.), *The Europeans in the Sudan, 1834-1878: Some Manuscripts, Mostly Unpublished, Written by Traders, Christian Missionaries, Officials, and Others*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980, p. 107–108.

254 Peter M. HOLT and Martin W. DALY, *A History of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 42 ; Susan L. GRABLER, *Pastoral Nomadism and Colonial Mythology : The Beja of the Sudan, c. 1750-1881*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

255 Duncan C. CUMMING, “The History of Kassala and the Province of Taka (Part I),” *op. cit.*, p. 11.

256 Louis M. A. LINANT DE BELLEFONDS, *L’Étyaye*, Paris, Arthus Bertrand, 1868.

257 Richard L. HILL, “Rulers of the Sudan: 1820-1885,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1951, vol. 32, p. 85. ‘Alī Khūrshīd Bey was the first Governor-General of Sudan to unite both civil and military functions (Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 48–49).

managed to regroup so as to defend themselves against these assaults thanks to superior firepower. The experience had nonetheless proved dramatic for Khūrshīd ‘Alī who decided to cautiously return to Khartoum after having lost at least a quarter of his men<sup>258</sup>.

*ii) The Pacification of Eastern Sudan (1840-1844)*

The drive for the integration of the southern regions of Eastern Sudan began in earnest in 1840. The Governor-General Aḥmad Pasha Abū Adhān (1838-1843), ‘Alī Khūrshīd Pasha’s successor, left Khartoum in March (Muḥarram 1256) of that year, descended the Nile up to al-Dāmar where they followed the ‘Aṭbara until Qūz Rajab. From this point they crossed the desert and settled on the outer limits of the Qāsh where they summoned the *shuyūkh* of the Hadanduwa, Malhītkināb and Ḥalānqa. The Egyptians were the last to arrive in a conflict that pitted against each other these communities, as well as the Bishārīn and Shukriyya, for the better part of the last three decades. The belligerent were prompt to understand the advantage they could gain from siding with the Egyptians. Muḥammad Dīn, the head *shaykh* of the Hadanduwa, asked them to loan him men and supplies so as to subdue the Ḥalānqa whose *shaykh*, ‘Awaḍ Masāmīr, had refused to meet with Abū Adhān. At the same time, Muḥammad Īla, a minor Ḥalānqa head, tried to go over his *shaykh* and offered his services as an intermediary in an internal bid for power<sup>259</sup>. These schemes were not heeded by the Egyptians who deemed the tributes brought to them insufficient. Ever greater tensions with the Hadanduwa arose and led to the arrest of Muḥammad Dīn in late April 1840 (late Ṣafar). The situation quickly degraded due to the Hadanduwa’s refusal to submit. They resorted to their strategy of avoiding direct confrontation with vastly superior firepower, maybe a lesson learned in 1831 (1246/7), and harassed the Egyptian troops from the cover of the woods.

In order to increase the pressure on the rebellious tribes, the Egyptian army moved to occupy Tāka<sup>260</sup> where Abū Adhān requested that 6 000 ard. (around 860 t.) of grain be delivered to them. Such an extravagant quantity is at the same time a testimony of the exploitative practices of the Egyptians and of the perceived wealth of the region. This intrusion into the Bijāwī economic heartland proved insufficient and failed to bring the Hadanduwa to submission, despite the imprisonment of their *shaykh*. According to Werne, the main eyewitness to this operation<sup>261</sup>, the solution came from the *shaykh* of the Ḥalānqa. On his advice, Abū Adhān decided to build a dam to

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258 Richard L. HILL, *On the Frontiers of Islam*, *op. cit.*, p. 12–14.

259 Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Tārīkh sharq al-Sūdān: mamālik al-Bija, qabā’il-hā wa tārīkh-ha*, *op. cit.*, p. 451 ; Duncan C. CUMMING, “The History of Kassala and the Province of Taka (Part I),” *op. cit.*, p. 11 ; Ghada H. TALHAMI, *Suakin and Massawa Under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885*, Washington, University Press of America, 1979, p. 62.

260 For reasons that are unclear, Werne’s attention to dates faltered after May 1840 and the chronology of the subsequent events is much blurrier.

261 Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 377.

divert the flood of the Qāsh, then in its early phase and so deprive the Hadanduwa of access to water. The strategic character of the Qāsh had been fully understood: the Egyptian governor wanted to “force the people of Taka to purchase from him, by an immense yearly tribute, the waters for the irrigation of their fields<sup>262</sup>.” Two months later, the dam was completed with the help of the Ḥalānqa but the strength of the current of the Qāsh, maybe helped by a Hadanduwa intervention<sup>263</sup>, overwhelmed it<sup>264</sup>.

A garrison was then established around which the city of Kasalā was to develop, securing Egyptian presence in Tāka, but their control over the Qāsh, and more largely, over the Hadanduwa remained nominal. Muḥammad Dīn had been taken to Khartoum where he subsequently died. This did not benefit the Egyptians who realised that this vacancy in authority did not make the Hadanduwa more inclined to submit, and as a result they brought back Muḥammad Mūsā who had accompanied his uncle to Khartoum and confirmed him as the *shaykh* of the Hadanduwa in 1841<sup>265</sup>. Neither peace nor war, the following three years were marked by sporadic conflicts.

Abū Adhān, who died in 1843 (1259), was replaced by Aḥmad Pasha al-Maniklī who decided, shortly after his arrival in Khartoum to definitively subdue the region of Tāka. The campaign he led in 1844 (1260) was characterised by his targeting of Hadanduwa leadership<sup>266</sup> and by the extreme violence exacted against the local populations. The new governor-general earned his nickname, “the butcher” (*al-jazzār*), during this phase of terror, of shock and awe, marked by mass killings, mutilations and looting. The southern Bija were not so much fully integrated to the realm of the Egyptian Sudan, as the question of the collection of the tribute would appear again and again in the next forty years, rather, they were simply pushed into submission out of fear of retaliation. Paradoxically, the murders of many of the Hadanduwa *shuyūkh* may have contributed to strengthening the position of Mūsā Ibrāhīm (d. 1884) as their *nāzir* (see below). The Egyptians may have accelerated the process of consolidation of the internal power structures of the Hadanduwa resulting in a greater hierarchisation and densification of tribal authority. This explains, in part, why his rule, from 1841 (1256/7) to his death in 1884 (1301/2) may have been considered by the Hadanduwa as their “golden age”, despite the obvious presence of an alien power in Kasalā, that led

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262 Ferdinand WERNE, *African Wanderings*, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

263 Werne attributes the failure of the dam to Hadanduwa intervention. Hill has not kept with that version, maybe on the assumption that Werne who had played a role in engineering the dam may have found it more convenient to blame an external factor rather than a faulty conception.

264 Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 193 ; Richard L. HILL, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, *op. cit.*, p. 70–72 ; Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Dīqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 13–15 ; Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945*, *op. cit.*, p. 58 ; Ghada H. TALHAMI, *Suakin and Massawa Under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

265 Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 191–192.

266 Ghada H. TALHAMI, *Suakin and Massawa Under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885*, *op. cit.*, p. 64 ; Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945*, *op. cit.*

to the consolidation of “Hadanduwa supremacy from Kassala to Suakin”, bringing minor tribes outside the Qāsh such as the Kimaylāb, Artayqa and Sha‘yāb within their sphere of influence<sup>267</sup>.

## ***B) Indirect Rule in Eastern Sudan (1844-1865)***

### *i) Colonial Administration in Eastern Sudan*

The administrative structure of Egyptian Sudan went through many changes in the sixty years of its existence but its foundational bricks remained relatively stable and appear to have somewhat replicated Funj organisation. Of the three levels it distinguished, the first one was the governorate (*mudīriyya* pl. *mudīriyyāt*). There was initially four of them, from north to south, Dunqulā, Kurdufān, Barbar and Sinnār, before several others were added in the course of Egyptian territorial expansion. The governorate of Tāka was formed in 1840 (1255/6), three others (White Nile, Baḥr al-Ghazal and Equatoria) in the south in the early 1860s, and finally Dār Fūr was integrated in 1874 (1290). Each governorate was then divided into districts (*aqsām* sing. *qism*), and sub-districts (*khuṭūṭ* sing. *khaṭṭ*), each headed by a *nāzīr* (*nāzīr al-qism* and *nāzīr al khaṭṭ*)<sup>268</sup>. After a period of uncertainty and experiments, the whole of Sudan was gradually placed under the tutelage of a governor-general (*ḥikimdār*), located in Khartoum since 1837 (1252).

The main point of tension in this structure resided in the degree of centralisation of this administrative organisation. Powerful governors-general were suspected of harbouring projects of independence made all the more threatening because distance and lack of communications rendered metropolitan supervision arduous. Their failure at extracting the sufficient resources to pay for their own administration and accusations of corruption and brutality led to several attempts by the central government to reaffirm their direct control over the governorates. Both Muḥammad Sa‘īd (1854-1863) and Ismā‘īl Pasha (1863-1879) tried to implement large set of reforms and overhauled the administration of Egyptian Sudan by abolishing the general-governorate in 1856-1862 (1272-1279) and again in 1871-1873 (1287-1289). That these efforts were short lived points to the difficulties of administering such a vast dominion with limited personnel and resources. These policies were eventually reversed without ever solving this primary tension. In any case, whether under the control of the governor-general or not, the governorates remained throughout this period semi-autonomous and the government in Cairo often dealt directly with their local representative rather than going through Khartoum. In 1882 (1299/300), Egyptian Sudan was once again divided into three distinct general-governorates, each with its own governor. Alongside the provinces of West

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267 Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 193.

268 These designations were not uniformly adopted and used, especially by Sudanese subjects, and former titles such as *kāshif* and *ḥākīm* survived in the available sources after they had been officially abandoned.

Sudan that included Dunqulā, Dār Fūr, Kurdufān and Baḥr al-Ghazal, and of Central Sudan encompassing most of the Nile Valley south of the fourth cataract, a province of East Sudan was instituted. It aggregated Tāka, Sawākin and Maṣawwa‘, the latter becoming the provincial capital<sup>269</sup>.

From 1844 (1260) onwards, Bijāwī hinterland was supervised through differentiated approaches between the north and the south. Whereas the northern regions were devoid of Egyptian presence, the southern triangle formed by Sawākin, Barbar and Kasalā saw the establishment of several garrisons. The most important governmental position and the provincial capital was Kasalā which offered direct control over the southern portion of the Qāsh<sup>270</sup>. Trading in the city probably decreased during the second half of the nineteenth century for a variety of reasons. The securitisation of the route Barbar-Sawākin road and the development of Khartoum marginalised the former road through Tāka to Sinnār and the trading centres of the Blue Nile. This was further accentuated by the rise of trade circulations with Egypt. Kasalā nonetheless remained an important focus point of the southern Bijāwī economy because its water resources and arable lands. Other small positions were also established in Miktināb, near the Hadanduwa headquarter of Filik, and in Banī ‘Āmir territory, in Dagga and Takrūrīt<sup>271</sup>. Unable to effectively control the large swathes of desert that spreads on most of Eastern Sudan, the Egyptians settled in the other cultivable zones, namely in Sinkāt, Tūkar and Tamarayn<sup>272</sup>. This list is almost exclusively derived from travellers’ accounts, due to the lack of Egyptian documentation<sup>273</sup>, and is probably not exhaustive. Smaller positions were certainly dispersed in Bijāwī territory<sup>274</sup>. Telegraph lines were also installed to link Sawākin and Kasalā to Khartoum. Overall, the Red Sea Hills were barely affected by government control. It latter exerted itself almost solely whenever Bijāwī groups migrated to zones where water was available, either for cultivation or husbandry.

#### ii) *Intermediaries: Tribal Leaders and Sufi Ṭuruq*

The characterisation of the relationships between Bijāwī leaders and the Egyptian authorities defies simplification. Overall, local leadership was little disrupted by Egyptian intervention. In most cases, current *shuyūkh* were confirmed in their position and integrated within the colonial state by the payment of a small stipend, a compensation for their new role as

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269 Anders J. BJØRKELO, “The Territorial Unification and Administrative Divisions of Turkish Sudan, 1821-1885,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1997, vol. 1, p. 36.

270 Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 195.

271 Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismail. Tome III (première partie), L’Empire africain (1863-1869)*, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

272 Andrew PAUL, *A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

273 Almost all records were destroyed in 1885 (1302/3) when Khartoum was captured by Mahdist forces. An important collection is held by the Egyptian national archives (*Dār al-wathā’iq al-qawmiyya*) but my four requests for access between 2016 and 2020 were denied.

274 Shamil M. JEPPIE, *Constructing a Colony on the Nile, circa 1820-1870*, *op. cit.*, p. 286–287.



intermediaries between the central power and their tribesmen. They were also made responsible for the collection of tribute which they were supposed to deliver to the governorate. They could give preeminence to one specific *shaykh* over a larger tribal group as *shaykh al-mashāyikh*<sup>275</sup>. This certainly contributed to the consolidation or “tribalisation” of confederations that were previously loose arrangements of communities. Minor clans could be adjoined to larger groups for the payment of the tribute under a single *shaykh*—as was the case for the ‘Abdalkarīmāb, a Ja‘alī group on the ‘Aṭbara, that was integrated by the Bishārīn<sup>276</sup>—to the extent where tribes, in the eyes of the colonial administration, were essentially fiscal units. This was the case for the ‘Abābda, Bishārīn, Hadanduwa and Banī ‘Āmir who all appeared in Egyptian fiscal sources as tribes. As mentioned above, the Ammār’ar clans were included in three different sections (the Bishārīn, the ‘Abābda, and the “Atbari”). They contain no reference to a Bijāwī identity<sup>277</sup>.

Egyptians appear to have refrained from direct intervention in tribal affairs, leaving legal matters or internal conflicts to the judgement of the *naẓīr* or local *shuyūkh*. Bijāwī leaders quickly realised that they could instrumentalise Egyptian presence to challenge the old tribal order. Muḥammad Īla, whose role in the conquest of Tāka was mentioned above, successfully wrested the Ḥalānqa *shaykhship* from the ‘Awaḍ family, thanks to his active collaboration with colonial authorities. In the same vein, according to oral traditions, the transfer of the Umm Nājī Bishārīn *shaykhship* from the Ḥanmādāb to the Ibrāhīmāb in the late 1830s (early 1250s) was aided by the Egyptians who decided to support Muḥammad Abū ‘Īsā, of the Ibrāhīmāb, when the latter came to them asking that his brother, killed by the Hanmādāb, be avenged<sup>278</sup>.

The trajectory of Mūsā Ibrāhīm may be the most representative case of the complexity of the dynamics that characterised the integration of Eastern Sudan in the Egyptian colonial realm. At the head of one of the two Hadanduwa nazirates—the northern Hadanduwa answered to Muḥammad al-Amīn, his cousin—for more than forty years, Muḥammad Mūsā had more negotiating power than expected, as when he pressured the central government to obtain the departure of the governor of Sawākin, Murtad Pasha, with whom he was in disagreement over an intertribal dispute with the Kimaylāb. Contrary to the vision of tribal leaders circulating solely within the confines of their territory, Mūsā Ibrāhīm extensively travelled to the Ḥijāz, to Khartoum and on multiple occasions to Cairo. Responsible for tribute collection for all southern Hadanduwa, and with wide discretionary powers as to the repartition of this fiscal effort, he acted as tax-farmer

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275 Anders J. BJØRKELO, “The Territorial Unification and Administrative Divisions of Turkish Sudan, 1821-1885,” *op. cit.*, p. 33.

276 George E. R. SANDARS, “The Bisharin,” *op. cit.*, p. 134.

277 Lt.-Colonel Stewart, *Report on the Soudan*, 1883 (p. 28-29).

278 George E. R. SANDARS, “The Bisharin,” *op. cit.*, p. 136.

for the Egyptian administration and managed to accumulate an important property<sup>279</sup>. The Hadanduwa leaders were “colonial entrepreneurs”, who seem to have benefitted from Egyptian rule despite the many limits that were imposed upon them. Coincidentally, whereas the first effect of the subjugation of the Hadanduwa was to put a halt to their expansion, the new position acquired by Mūsā Ibrāhīm went beyond his initial tribal prerogatives and contributed to strengthen his influence to all the southern regions.

Sufi *ṭuruq* (sing. *ṭarīqa*), mainly the Majdhūbiyya and the Khatmiyya, were also major actors in the region. Their establishment was linked to the development of new forms of Sufi institutions in the Greater Nile Valley<sup>280</sup> in the first half of the nineteenth century. The leading figure of this process in Nilotic Sudan, and in Eastern Sudan, was Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mīrghanī<sup>281</sup> (1793-1852), the founder of the Khatmiyya<sup>282</sup>. In accordance to Ibn Idrīs’ missionary tropism, Muḥammad ‘Uthmān was sent to Eritrea in 1813 (1228/9) and then probably to Upper Egypt, from whence he pursued his travels to the Sudanic Nile Valley before settling in Kurdufān in 1816 (1231/2). Three years later, he met in al-Matamma, Muḥammad Majdhūb<sup>283</sup> (1796-1831), himself a member of the great Sufi family of the Majādhīb established in al-Dāmar<sup>284</sup>. The two men left together, through al-Dāmar, Tāka and Maṣawwa‘, but they had split when they arrived in Mecca in 1822 (1237/8)<sup>285</sup>.

Al-Mīrghanī was the first of the two to return to the Nilotic Sudan in 1823/4 (1238), first to Maṣawwa‘ and Tāka, where he had stopped on his way to Mecca. He returned a second time *c.* 1830 (1245/6), this time to Sawākin, and again in 1843 (1258/9) when he appointed the *khulafā’* of the Khatmiyya in the port city<sup>286</sup>. However, this early penetration of Eastern Sudan only came to fruition when al-Mīrghanī sent one of his sons, Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-Mīrghanī (1820-1868) to Kasalā in 1843, where the latter founded the village of al-Khatmiyya adjoining the garrison town, at

279 Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 194–195.

280 See introduction.

281 John O. HUNWICK and Rex S. O’FAHEY (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 1 Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900*, Leiden, Brill, 1993, p. 187–198.

282 John O. VOLL, *A History of the Khatmiyyah Tariqa in the Sudan*, PhD diss., Harvard University, Cambridge, 1969, p. 89–152 ; ‘Alī Ṣāliḥ KARRĀR, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 55–72 ; Silvia BRUZZI, *Islam and Gender in Colonial Northeast Africa: Sitti ‘Alawiyya, The Uncrowned Queen*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2018, p. 12–24.

283 John O. HUNWICK and Rex S. O’FAHEY (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 1 Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900*, *op. cit.*, p. 244–257.

284 See appendix [?] table [check].

285 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 147–162.

286 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, “Encounters with a Saint: Al-Majdhūb, al-Mīrghanī and Ibn Idrīs as Seen Through the Eyes of Ibrāhīm al-Rashīd,” *Sudanic Africa*, 1990, vol. 1, p. 30–31.

the foot of the mountain<sup>287</sup>. Having arrived at the same time the Egyptians were imposing their authority on the region, the new *ṭarīqa* in town developed cordial relations with them. They extended their influence by settling in Sinkāt, another garrison town, at an unknown date<sup>288</sup>. Al-Ḥasan al-Mīrghanī benefitted from the important following that his father had garnered in Tāka among the main local groups.

The *shaykh* al-Majdhūb returned to Sudan after al-Mīrghanī, in 1829 (1244/5). He first settled in Sawākin where he stayed two years. The relation of the Majādhīb with the new rulers were much more strained than the Khatmiyya's, as the main branch in al-Dāmar had initially refused to pledge allegiance to Ismā'īl Pasha and taken arms against the Egyptians. Defeated, a number of the Majādhīb had sought refuge in the east. Whereas some of them later returned to al-Dāmar, others settled in Kasalā and al-Qaḍārif, along with other minor positions in the Buṭāna<sup>289</sup>.

Shortly after his arrival, al-Majdhūb was integrated in Sawākin's society where he contracted several marriages within local families and began the construction of a *zāwiya*<sup>290</sup> on the Qayf. As al-Mīrghanī, the Sufī *shaykh* was quick in acquiring an important following, however his influence on the Bijāwī hinterland seems to have been limited, maybe for linguistic or cultural reasons. He left Sawākin in February 1831 (1246/7) to return to al-Dāmar where he died abruptly five months later. The *zāwiya* he had founded remained active after the departure of the *shaykh* but for two decades, there was no representative of the *ṭarīqa* in Eastern Sudan. The Sawākin community was first headed by al-Amīn al-Kitayābī, a disciple who had accompanied him to the Ḥijāz, then the *shaykh* of the Artayqa, Yāsīn b. 'Abd al-Qādir<sup>291</sup>. Eventually, in 1853/4 (1270), the latter, in association with 'Alī Diqna<sup>292</sup>, appealed to al-Ṭayyib, the brother of Muḥammad Majdhūb, to the effect that his son, Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir (b. 1832/3), be sent to Sawākin to head the *ṭarīqa*. The cession of Sawākin to Egypt in 1865 (1281/2) (see below) resulted in a loss of influence of the Majādhīb in Sawākin in favour of the Khatmiyya, although al-Ṭāhir managed to maintain appeased relationships with the new power and to extend his further inland, primarily in Qabāb, near Arkawīt, where a small centre was established<sup>293</sup>.

The Khatmiyya and Majdhūbiyya were not the first *ṭuruq* to settle in Eastern Sudan. The famous *ṭarīqa* of the Qādiriyya was already well established in Maṣawwa' in the eighteenth century

287 John O. HUNWICK and Rex S. O'FAHEY (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 1 Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900, op. cit.*, p. 204.

288 John O. VOLL, *A History of the Khatmiyyah Tariqa in the Sudan, op. cit.*, p. 153–186.

289 F. C. S. LORIMER, "The Megadhib of El Damer," *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1936, vol. 19, no. 2, p. 339.

290 A *zāwiyya* (lit. "corner") was a building that hosted an array of functions for a specific *ṭarīqa*. Hence, it could contain a mausoleum of the founder and his *khulafā'*, a school, a mosque, a library, etc.

291 John O. HUNWICK and Rex S. O'FAHEY (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 1 Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900, op. cit.*, p. 245.

292 This is the same 'Alī Diqna mentioned above who headed the Sawākin chamber of commerce and died in Tūkar.

293 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*

and the Shādhiliyya in Sawākin as well as several smaller spots on the coast<sup>294</sup>. The situation in the hinterland is more obscure and the degree to which the Bijāwī populations held Islamic beliefs has often been criticised as “no more than skin deep<sup>295</sup>”, but this is above all the reflection of Arab writers’ prejudice toward an illiterate society. Their adoption of Islam may have been slow, at first somewhat superficial, and highly differentiated depending on territories, but there is no doubt that the process was complete at the onset of the nineteenth century<sup>296</sup>, as attested by the thousands of Islamic sepulchres laying between ‘Aqīq and Kasalā dating from the sixteenth to the twentieth century<sup>297</sup>. The nineteenth century, particularly between the 1820s and the 1860s (1230s-1280s), witnessed a transformation of religiosity in Eastern Sudan. This began with the rapid conversion to Islam of the Bet Asgede (including the Ḥabāb) populations and others (Mensa’, Maryā, etc.) of the Eritrean lowlands under the action of the ‘Ad Shaykh family, often in relation with their initiation into the Qādiriyya *ṭarīqa*, in a movement that constituted a “form of social revolution” as it challenged the authority the Banī ‘Āmir chiefs had over their Tigre serfs. In the same period, in Tāka, the Khatmiyya was gaining ever more influence over the Ḥalānqa and Banī ‘Āmir, as well as on the recently converted Tigre communities. That is, all groups that been subjected first to Hadanduwa authority, and then to the coming of Egyptian power, and may have seen in the Khatmiyya a useful (and holy) counterweight to both<sup>298</sup>. As for the Majdhūbiyya, its followers came mostly from Sawākin, but Hofheinz’s careful prosopography showed that “[al-Majdhūb] [had] found support not among the old political and economic *élite* (the inhabitants of Sawākin Island or the centre of the Qayf) but chiefly among ‘urban’ Beja from the mainland<sup>299</sup>” who felt increasing pressure from newly-arrived Bijāwī migrants.

In these three cases, the populations most involved with Sufi *ṭuruq* had all experienced important mutations of their socioeconomic framework. The expansion of Egyptian authority and the revitalisation of Red Sea trade and of inland routes may have brought more pressures on Tigre-

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294 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 237–240.

295 John S. TRIMINGHAM, *Islam in the Sudan*, London, Oxford University Press, 1949, p. 15.

296 Jan ZÁHORÍK, “The Islamization of the Beja until the 19th century,” *op. cit.* Serel’s assertion that “before the end of the eighteenth century, the Ḥaḍāriba were the only significant community of Beja pastoralists to convert away from traditional religious practices” and that the nineteenth century saw the mass conversion of pastoralists of the African Red Sea littoral is not corroborated by evidence (Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945*, *op. cit.*, p. 43–49).

297 Andrew PAUL, “Ancient Tombs in Kassala Province,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1952, vol. 33, no. 1, p. 54–57 ; Knut KRZYWINSKI, “The Eastern Desert Tombs and Cultural Continuity,” in Hans Barnard and Kim Duistermaat (ed.), *The History of the Peoples of the Eastern Desert*, Los Angeles, Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2012, p. 140–155 ; Stefano COSTANZO et al., “Creating the funerary landscape of Eastern Sudan,” *PLoS ONE*, 2021, vol. 16, no. 7, p. 1–24.

298 Jonathan MIRAN, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa*, *op. cit.*, p. 175–180.

299 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

speaking communities and contributed to their adherence to the Qādiriyya and Khatmiyya<sup>300</sup>. A similar comment could be made with regard to Bijāwī groups in Sawākin or in Tāka. Serels suggested that Sufi *ṭuruq* were successful in their expansion because they represented “trans-communal organisation[s]” that constituted substitutes for Eastern Sudan pastoralists to a waning tribal order destabilised by the evolution of climatic conditions<sup>301</sup>. On the contrary, it has been argued before that most Bijāwī communities had witnessed a strengthening of tribal structures since the turn of the nineteenth century<sup>302</sup>. But more importantly, these three *ṭuruq* did not thrive among pastoralists so much as among emerging semi-sedentary communities who entertained ever increasing contacts with the cities of Maṣawwa‘, Sawākin and Kasalā<sup>303</sup>. The notion that adherence to a certain Sufi *tārīqa* echoed tribal affiliation was essentially a colonial artefact alimeted by British officers who vastly overestimated the influence of Sufi *shuyūkh*. Indeed, the latter were above all in contact with individuals whose position was ambiguous and fluid and who belonged neither to the urban elite nor to the hinterland society, but to a liminal and fragmented community. Their engagement with the *ṭuruq* was personal and internalised<sup>304</sup>. This is not to say that the *shuyūkh* of the Khatmiyya or the Majdhūbiyya held no power over Bijāwī pastoralists, but that it was mediated by their own followers who could attempt to mobilise their tribal networks with uneven success.

### *iii) Eastern Sudan in Crisis: the 1860s*

After Aḥmad Pasha al-Maniklī’s violent subjugation of the Hadanduwa in 1844 (1260), the situation in Eastern Sudan remained peaceful for almost two decades and, in the 1850s and early 1860s (1260s-1270s), travelers like Vayssière or Lejean could circulate from Sawākin to Kasalā through Bijāwī territory without fearing more than common banditry.

The situation, however, quickly degraded for a number of factors. The first one was the effects of the reforms imposed by Sa‘īd Pasha (1854-1863). Following the example of his father, Muḥammad ‘Alī, who had visited Sudan in 1839 (1254/5), he arrived in Khartoum in February 1857 (1273/4) for a tour of inspection. At first shocked by the state of the country, to the point where he was said to have considered abandoning this land altogether, he came around and

300 Jonathan MIRAN, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa*, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

301 Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

302 At least in the case of the Tigre-speaking populations that came under the influence of Sufi *ṭuruq*, the latter were a source of disruption of the tribal order, not an answer to its weakening.

303 For example, in the early 1860s, Lejean estimated that the sedentary population in the region of Tāka amounted to 38 000 among whom 28 000 were settled in the Qāsh alone, including 6 000 Takrūrī, as well as 6-7 000 inhabitants in Kasalā itself (Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismaïl. Tome III (première partie), L’Empire africain (1863-1869)*, *op. cit.*, p. 29–30).

304 Hofheinz insisted on the role played by neo-Sufi *ṭuruq* in inducing an internalisation of Islam which would have rendered religious practice more individual and less communal. See Introduction.

attempted to entirely revise the administrative system. The series of edits published in the aftermath of Saʿīd's visit<sup>305</sup> broadly aimed at alleviating the fiscal pressure and making taxation less arbitrary<sup>306</sup>. Crucially, a set of measures was directed at nomadic populations. The tributes were to be assessed directly by Saʿīd Pasha and so as to favor their sedentarisation and the development of cultivation, it was prescribed that those who wished to settle in a village should not be taxed twice but that their participation to the tribal tribute should be deduced. Paradoxically, these measures had the opposite effect to the one intended. Instead of promoting a greater engagement in cultivation (particularly in cash crops), the demilitarisation of tax collection led to the concentration of most of the fiscal burden on the sedentary populations of the Nile Valley, the easiest to tax, while pastoral communities found themselves temporarily free from fiscal raids. Large parcels of land were abandoned leading to a tenfold increase of the price of *dhura* between 1857 and 1860 (1273-1277)<sup>307</sup>. Discontent spread and there were reports of mass movements of population away from the Nile Valley: ten to fifteen thousand Rufāʿa Arabs were said to have left the province of Sinnār and nine to ten thousand the ʿAṭbara<sup>308</sup>, all seemingly with the intention of settling in the Abyssinian borderlands<sup>309</sup>. This latter region must have appeared all the more attractive than for the past forty years, *makk* Nimir and his son had successfully remained out of reach from Egyptian control and managed to wage frequent raids on Sudanese territory. In the late 1850s (early 1270s), because of Tewodros II's (1855-1868) effort to unite the highlands under his authority after almost eighty years of internecine feuds during the *Zemene Mesafent* (the "Age of princes"), the region was particularly unstable, leaving room for new comers who wished to put distance between them and any form of centralised authority.

The situation was compounded in the Tāka governorate due to the decision to split the general-governorate in 1856 (1272/3). Chronically in deficit, the provincial budget could not be abounded anymore by transfers from other governorates resulting in an ever larger amount of arrears in the payment of salaries and stipends. In 1862 (1278/9), the arrival of a new governor-general, Mūsā Pasha Ḥamdī, marked an abrupt return to former practices of tax collection. Tensions

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305 For the texts of the edits of Saʿīd's Pasha, see Onofrio ABBATE, *De l'Afrique centrale ou voyage de S. A. Mohammed-Saïd-Pacha dans ses provinces du Soudan*, Paris, Typographie de Henri Plon, 1858.

306 In that respect, dues for a *sāqiyya* were reduced to 200 piastres, village assemblies were made responsible for the division of the imposition, and the *kashafa* (sing. *kāshif*) were dismissed, with their men, so that only the local *shuyūkh* would be responsible for the collect.

307 Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismaïl. Tome III (première partie), L'Empire africain (1863-1869)*, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

308 Samuel Baker who travelled with his wife in the valley of the ʿAṭbara in 1861, mentioned *en passant* the diffusion of an "epidemic or cattle plague [which] carried off an immense number of camels". The rising transport costs certainly contributed to even higher grain prices while reducing the available capital of Bijāwī populations (Samuel W. BAKER, *The Nile Tributaries of Abyssinia, and the Sword Hunters of the Hamran Arabs*, *op. cit.*, p. 16).

309 Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismaïl. Tome III (première partie), L'Empire africain (1863-1869)*, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

were rife in the *khūr* Baraka where a *shaykh* of the Banī ‘Āmir who had lost his governmental subvention conducted an insurrection helped by Abyssinian chiefs<sup>310</sup>. Mūsā Pasha’s intervention in the region to gather tributes in arrear and quell rebellious movements only aggravated an already volatile situation. Only two years later, in October 1864, the four to five thousand men who constituted the garrison of Kasalā refused to obey orders until they were paid. Their demands having been met, the tension abated until an attempt to disarm them in July 1865 (Ṣafar 1282) led to a full mutiny<sup>311</sup>. The reaction was extremely brutal: 200 men were said to have been executed while their families were taken into slavery. In the meantime, the Hadanduwa whose help had been requested by the Egyptian authorities took advantage of the confusion to launch raids against the Banī ‘Āmir and seize their cattle, adding to the chaos<sup>312</sup>.

The reassertion of Egyptian authority in Tāka was concomitant to the definitive cession of Sawākin and Maṣawwa‘ by the Ottoman power in 1865<sup>313</sup>. At last, colonial authorities would control the hinterland and the Red Sea ports.

### ***C) Colonising Eastern Sudan (1865-1883)***<sup>314</sup>

Like his predecessors, Khedive Ismā‘īl (r. 1863-1879) was dejected by his administration’s inability to turn a profit from his possessions in the Nilotic Sudan. High levels of taxation, corruption, and unmitigated violence waged by Shāyqī auxiliaries were the foremost reasons given by Egyptians and foreigners to explain this failure. The question had already been addressed by Sa‘īd (r. 1854-1863) who had ordered in 1857 (1273/4) to lower the fiscality on *sawāqī* (sing. *saqiya*) as well as the tributes paid by nomadic populations. The intended effects had not followed and twenty years later, Charles G. Gordon (1833-1885), the newly appointed British governor-general, tried again to alleviate the fiscal burden on the Sudanese populations by revising how the

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310 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

311 The Sawākin garrison also briefly revolted, a sign of the wide discontent of slave-soldiers of the Egyptian army (*Ibid.*, p. 205).

312 Guillaume LEJEAN, “Appendice au Voyage en Haute-Nubie. Révolte et sac de Kassala (1865),” *op. cit.*

313 The two Red Sea ports were the objects of many transfers between Ottoman and Egypt-Ottoman sovereignty. After their campaign in the Hījāz against Wahhābi forces in 1813, the Egyptians controlled Jidda and so its dependencies, including Sawākin. Egypt eventually had to evacuate in 1841, in the wake of the treaty of London. But in 1846, Sawākin and Maṣawwa‘ were leased to Muḥammad ‘Alī for his lifetime. At the latter’s death, three years later, the ports were once again returned to Ottoman control, before that decision was reverted in May 1865 when it was decided that Khedive Ismā‘īl would benefit from the same conditions as his father’s in 1846. However, the following year, when Ismā‘īl’s title was made hereditary, it was decided that his successors would hold the African Red Sea ports (Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 221–222).

314 The last twenty years of Egyptian rule in Sudan are better known than the preceding period thanks to the work of Georges Douin. His *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismaïl* published between 1933 and 1941 used and quoted extensively the documentation kept in ‘Ābdīn Palace in Cairo. The third tome (in three parts) of more than 2 500 pages covers with great details the evolution of Egypt’s “African Empire” until 1876. Unfortunately, his death in 1944 prevented him from completing the fourth part dealing with the period of 1876-1879. Due to the difficulty in accessing the Egyptian National Archives, Douin’s work proved to be a remarkable source.

tax base was assessed<sup>315</sup>. Yet, these efforts were insufficient or too late to avoid the growing popular discontent that fed the Mahdist uprising. In 1883 (1300/1), in a last-ditch attempt at curbing the insurrection, Lt.-Colonel Stewart also insisted on the necessity to profoundly reform and decrease tax collection, but the administration had no time to implement his suggestions, as it got swept away by the Mahdist revolution<sup>316</sup>.

Ismā‘īl understood that former policies of direct extraction had reached their limits. If higher returns could not be obtained through greater pressure on the populations, an approach that had evidently failed for at least several decades, then the tax base had to be broadened by increasing sources of revenue. This represented a major shift toward a colonial program of internal economic development meant to favour exportations, so as to reframe Egyptian presence in the Nilotic Sudan as a “Civilising mission” and associate the newly autonomous Khedivial regime to the small number of nations involved in colonial expansion<sup>317</sup>.

In that perspective, Eastern Sudan was at the centre of the Khedive’s project of economic development. Thanks to the annexation of Sawākin (and to a lesser extent of Maṣawwa‘), the Egyptian power could finally connect the productive zones of the hinterland with the maritime outlets on the Red Sea. Besides, the provincial administration had long complained about Bijāwī communities who instrumentalised the break in territorial sovereignty to evade tax collection<sup>318</sup>. For that and other reasons, Tāka showed the greatest deficit of all the provinces of the Nilotic Sudan. In 1865 (1281/2), the whole of the region was brought under a single authority and plans were made to remedy this situation.

*i) The Egyptian “Civilising Mission” in Eastern Sudan: Mumtāz Pasha and Munzinger’s Experiments*

At first, the impetus toward the development of Eastern Sudan was focalised on Sawākin and prompted by Ismā‘īl’s ambitious vision for the Red Sea port in view of the opening of the Suez canal. He found in Aḥmad Mumtāz Pasha, appointed at the head of the new *muḥāfaẓa*<sup>319</sup> of Sawākin

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315 Alice MOORE-HARELL, *Gordon and the Sudan: Prologue to the Mahdiyya, 1877-1880*, Routledge, 2001, p. 102.

316 HCCP, Egypt n°11, “Report on the Sudan by Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart”, 1883, p. 26.

317 The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 brought renewed interest by the Egyptian power in asserting their position in the Red Sea. Colonial expansion led to the annexation of the ports of Berbera in 1867 and Zaylā in 1875, the same year as the occupation of Harar (Anders J. BJØRKELO, “The Territorial Unification and Administrative Divisions of Turkish Sudan, 1821-1885,” *op. cit.*, p. 31–32). Imperialist ambitions were also directed toward the Abyssinian hinterland, an effort that culminated with the Egyptian-Ethiopian war of 1875-1876. See Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismail. Tome III (troisième partie), L’Empire africain (1874-1876)*, Le Caire, Société royale de géographie d’Égypte, 1941, vol. 3. At the same time, in 1874, the sultanate of Dār Fūr was being invaded by the troops of the famous slave trader al-Zubayr Raḥma Maṣṣūr Pasha (1830-1913) on behalf of the khedivial state.

318 Ghada H. TALHAMI, *Suakin and Massawa Under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

319 This designation was equivalent to that of the governorate but signalled the recent integration of the Red Sea port under Egyptian administration.



in August 1865 (Rabī' I/II 1282), the right agent for his projects. The latter suggested in March 1867 (D. al-Qa' da 1283) to direct the water circulating through the *khūr* Tamānayb to irrigate fields as well as build dykes across the Baraka so as to control the flood in Tūkar<sup>320</sup>. Progress was slow, especially since the initial plans had proved to underestimate the complexity of the work involved. Breaking of the ground only began in December 1868 (Sha'bān/Ramādān 1285) with the aim of building a six-kilometre-long canal. Preparatory plans were also made for the development of cultivation in Tūkar and Sinkāt. According to Douin, only *dhura* was cultivated in the former and the local population showed no inclination toward the culture of cotton. The first attempt at introducing this crop, interestingly, was made by 'Alī Diqna, the merchants' provost in Sawākin c. 1868. His example and that of the agronomist sent by Cairo who had also taken up cotton cultivation, was followed by some of the local population who extended the used surface. A similar process emerged in Sinkāt. Following these early successes, Mumtāz Pasha requested 72 ard. of cotton seeds and ginning machines in 1869 (1285/6)<sup>321</sup>. The attention of the *muḥāfiẓ* then switched to the even more promising potential of the Qāsh Delta, but because the latter fell outside his jurisdiction, changes in provincial boundaries were implemented, leading to a "bewildering series of administrative experiments<sup>322</sup>" centred on Eastern Sudan and the development of its agricultural production.

In May 1870 (Şafar 1287), a governorate of the Red Sea Littoral was created with Mumtāz Pasha at its head, uniting the governorates of Sawākin and Maşawwa', the governorate of Kasalā, and Egyptian possessions on the Somali coast. He estimated being able to extend the surface dedicated to the cultivation of cotton to 100 000 *faddān*-s (42 000 ha.) in the next few years, provided that he be supplied with 3000 ard. (around 430 t.) of cotton seeds to be planted in 1871 (1287/8). Mumtāz's intense pressure on Tāka's governor, 'Abd al-Rāziq Bey, including for his project of boat building in Qūz Rajab, was resented by the latter who complained to Cairo of the unrealistic character of the governor's requests, in vain<sup>323</sup>. Despite the lack of immediate results, the Khedive appears to have been enthused by Mumtāz's success which he considered as proof of the efficacy of his decentralisation policy. However, internal contestations by the administrative apparatus kept on growing, and Ismā'īl sent Shāhin Pasha to assess the reality of the situation. His report was disappointing: far from the 100 000 *faddān*-s projected by Mumtāz Pasha, only 2 500

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320 Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismaïl. Tome III (première partie), L'Empire africain (1863-1869)*, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

321 *Ibid.*, p. 424–427.

322 Ghada H. TALHAMI, *Suakin and Massawa Under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885*, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

323 Richard L. HILL, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, *op. cit.*, p. 114–116 ; Andrew PAUL, *A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

(1 050 ha.) were cultivated in the Qāsh Delta and 50 (21 ha.) in Tūkar in 1871<sup>324</sup>. As a result, in September (Jumādā II/Rajab 1288), the general-governorate of Sudan was once again divided into three distinct and independent governorates, and Mumtāz Pasha appointed as governor of Southern Sudan (that is sent into exile)<sup>325</sup>. The Red Sea Littoral governorate itself lost its integrity and the former divisions between the *muḥāfaẓāt* of Sawākin and Maṣawwa‘ and that of Tāka were reinstated<sup>326</sup>.

And yet, Mumtāz Pasha’s effort had not been totally vain and his punishment maybe premature. Barely two years later, in 1873 (1274/5), the *Statistique de l’Égypte* indicated that 25 000 (10 500 ha.) of the 125 000 *faddān*-s (52 500 ha.) available in the Baraka Delta<sup>327</sup> were cultivated for cotton, *dhura* and oat (*dukhn*) for a total production of 2000 t. of grain. To this, 600 *faddān*-s in Sawākin and 200 in ‘Aqīq must be added. In the Qāsh Delta, Egyptian national statistics estimated that 36 600 *faddān*-s (15 120 ha.) were cultivated for cotton<sup>328</sup>. Even if the numbers for 1873 may have been somewhat influenced by wishful thinking from the part of the provincial administration, they testify to some diffusion of cotton cultivation, and go counter the negative view heralded by ulterior analyses of “the folly of Mumtāz Pasha<sup>329</sup>”.

After two years of decentralised government in Sudan, the different provinces were once again all placed under the authority of a single governor-general. The Red Sea ports and Tāka were also gathered in a single entity in February 1873 (D. al-Ḥijja 1289), followed shortly by the district of al-Qallābāt in 1874 (1290/1)<sup>330</sup>, essentially for military reasons in the context of growing tensions with Abyssinia. Johann A. W. Munzinger (1832-1875), the governor of Maṣawwa‘ between 1871 and 1873, found himself the inheritor of Mumtāz’s developmental programs. With the arrival of two ginning machines to Kasalā, hopes were high that finally the production of cotton would increase, but after one year it was abandoned. The death of Munzinger in 1875 (1292) and the Egyptian defeat against Abyssinia in 1876 (1293) concluded the Eastern Sudan experiment. With the

324 Richard L. HILL, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

325 Mumtāz Pasha would eventually be brought down in one of the many cabals of the Egyptian administration in Sudan.

326 Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismaïl. Tome III (seconde partie), L’Empire africain (1869-1873)*, Le Caire, Société royale de géographie d’Égypte, 1938, vol. 3, p. 475.

327 Estimates of arable land should be considered with caution as they presented wide variations. For example, other contemporary sources suggested numbers as high as 200 000 *faddān*-s or even 500 000 *faddān*-s (Hassan Abdel Aziz AHMED, *Commercial Cotton Growing in the Sudan Between 1860 and 1925: A Study in Historical Geography*, PhD diss., University of Durham, Durham, 1970, p. 151).

328 Ministère de l’Intérieur, *Statistique de l’Égypte, Année 1873 – 1290 de l’Hégire*, Cairo, Mourès & Cie., 1873, p. 292-292. Unfortunately, these statistics do not appear to have been consolidated and published in the Ministère de l’Intérieur, *Essai de statistique générale de l’Égypte (années 1873, 1874, 1875, 1876, 1877)*, two volumes, Cairo, Imprimerie de l’état-major égyptien, 1879.

329 Richard L. HILL, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

330 Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismaïl. Tome III (troisième partie), L’Empire africain (1874-1876)*, *op. cit.*, p. 1096 ; Ghada H. TALHAMI, *Suakin and Massawa Under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885*, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

annexation of Dār Fūr in 1874 and the arrival of Gordon in 1877 (1294), the focus of the state switched to other regions and the struggle against the slave trade while the administration of the province of the Red Sea was divided between the governorates of the Red Sea and the governorate of Tāka.

*ii) The Colonial State and Tribes in Eastern Sudan*

The Eastern Sudan experiment failed for several reasons<sup>331</sup>. Among the prominent factors was the lack of transportation. The several plans established in the first half of the 1870s (late 1280s) to connect the Red Sea to the Nile or to Tāka through a railway were doomed by the magnitude of the investments they required from a state already on a path to bankruptcy. Caravans were therefore the only means of transport but camels' requisitions by the state were vehemently opposed.

The numerous reversals of provincial structures did not help the implementation of Egyptian developmental policies, but cotton was already cultivated in Eastern Sudan before the region was subjugated in 1840 (1255/6) and initiatives by 'Alī Diqna in Tūkar or the Greek merchant Yanni Cozzika in the Qāsh<sup>332</sup> predated Mumtāz's projects. Local populations were not intrinsically opposed to engaging in this type of cultivation which could even have raised "the[ir] [...] enthusiastic interest<sup>333</sup>". However, Egyptian administrators were fully aware that they lacked the tools to impose cotton cultivation on Bijāwī communities in the Qāsh and Baraka deltas and so had to rely mainly on incentives for the diffusion of this crop through loans of seeds, the setting up of model farms, or by authorizing taxes to be paid in cotton and not only in cash<sup>334</sup>. Yet, these policies quickly met their limits for the simple reason that the available population was insufficient to achieve the objectives set out in Cairo, and the high mobility of Bijāwī groups meant that any increase in the pressure exerted upon them could result in their withdrawal toward the 'Aytbāy or the Red Sea Hills, further eroding the numbers of the workforce needed to undertake cash crops cultivation. Contrary to *dhura*, cotton required a long-term settlement that automatically placed them in a position where they could be more easily subjected to the extractive fiscal practices of the Egyptian colonial administration<sup>335</sup>. Some of the people residing in the area did not have the option

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331 Hassan Abdel Aziz AHMED, *Commercial Cotton Growing in the Sudan Between 1860 and 1925: A Study in Historical Geography*, *op. cit.*, p. 167–177.

332 Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismaïl. Tome III (seconde partie), L'Empire africain (1869-1873)*, *op. cit.*, p. 440.

333 Ghada H. TALHAMI, *Suakin and Massawa Under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885*, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

334 Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismaïl. Tome III (seconde partie), L'Empire africain (1869-1873)*, *op. cit.*, p. 521.

335 According to Samuel Baker, the Egyptian administration resorted to sending parties of soldiers collect the tribute when the tribes were the most vulnerable, during droughts, that is when they could be found near water points. He described this vividly when he wrote that "at any other season it would be as easy to collect tribute from the

to leave, or at least not as easily. In the 1860s (1270/80s), a third of the population of Kasalā was composed of Takrūrīs originating from Dār Fūr, Borno, Kano and beyond, who had stopped there on their way to the *hajj*<sup>336</sup>. The level of their participation in cultivation is unknown but was probably quite important given the more reticent attitude of Bijāwī communities.

In consequence, the Tāka governorate consistently failed, throughout the 1870s, to levy the projected fiscal revenues and so the budget was chronically in deficit, especially due to the cost of the upkeep of a large garrison in Kasalā<sup>337</sup>. Paradoxically, the decentralisation policies implemented under Saʿīd and Ismāʿīl made each governorate responsible for balancing its own budget. Deficits could no longer be covered by the surpluses of other provinces, thus increasing the pressure on governors to pursue yet more brutal operations of tax collection, that could only hinder the settlement of the population and the development of cash crop cultivations.

Confronted with this structural deficit<sup>338</sup>, the successive governors of Eastern Sudan were highly dependent on tributes and therefore on their relations with tribal leadership. Their attempt at controlling, instrumentalizing and formalizing their authority within the administrative framework set up by the Egyptian colonial power had important consequences. Responsible for the gathering of the tribute, tribal *shuyūkh* could decide its repartition and privilege certain groups over others, resulting in a sharp increase of their power compared to the situation prevailing before 1840. This system allowed them to strengthen their economic position since there was no direct control over the taxes effectively collected as long as the requested tribute was paid. To a certain extent, the limits between tribal and administrative authority tended to fade. Indeed, between the 1840s and the 1870s, the basis for tribute collection slowly moved from tribes to territories. As a result, *shuyūkh* could be asked to levy taxes on all the communities present in a certain area, regardless of their actual authority over them. This entailed that registers be kept and frequently updated not only of the groups under the fiscal authority of a specific *shaykh*, but also of the members of each groups, to serve as a basis for the calculation of what was essentially a capitation tax<sup>339</sup>.

The two dimensions of the colonial fiscality, territorial and scriptural, could be manipulated in various manners. In this regard, Douin refers to Munzinger's effort in 1873 (1289/90) to “restore

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gazelles of the desert as from the wandering Bishareens” (Samuel W. BAKER, *The Nile Tributaries of Abyssinia, and the Sword Hunters of the Hamran Arabs*, *op. cit.*, p. 58).

336 This mirrors later developments during the Condominium when the migration of Westerners was favoured by the colonial administration to compensate for the lack of local workers.

337 See in appendix [?] the tables [check]

338 It could be noted that in 1882, quite extraordinarily, the deficit of the Tāka province could be greater than Khartoum's where most of the administrative and military functions were concentrated. see appendix [?] table 4 [check].

339 Details on the exact methods employed for the calculation of tributes in Eastern Sudan (and in the Nilotic Sudan) could not be found. In his report, Lt.-Colonel Stewart only indicated that it “vari[ed] with the wealth, *i.e.*, the number of cattle, sheep, horses, &c., of the tribe” (*Report on the Soudan*, 1883, p. 13).

the responsibility of the tribes in their respective limits”. Mūsā Bey was accused of “having abused his high position to disorganise his tribe, with the result that three years later, it barely payed any taxes<sup>340</sup>.” What this disorganisation entailed exactly is a matter of speculation. It is clear, however, that Bijāwī *shuyūkh* could render their tribe “illegible” to the authorities in order to avoid taxation, for example in reducing their headcount by claiming that some clans had migrated to another location. Otherwise, the simpler solution was still to physically move to an area beyond the reach of the fiscal arm of the state, like the Red Sea Hills or the borderlands with Abyssinia. Until 1865, this was helped by the ambiguous authority exerted by the Ottoman administration in Sawākin over its immediate hinterland. The governors of the Red Sea Port were accused of having annexed Sinkāt and guaranteed to the tribes of the region that no tribute would be requested as long as taxes on the merchandises coming from Tāka could be collected, thus forming an enticing fiscal enclave within the Egyptian dominion<sup>341</sup>. Inversely, the rationales of tribute collection reinforced, or more aptly restructured, the relations between tribes and specific territories. Two clans of the Banī ‘Āmir thus fled the Buṭāna around 1871 (1287/8) to settle in the Qāsh Delta, complaining that being on the fiscal territory of the Shukriyya, the latter had systematically requested a tribute higher than the one imposed by the Egyptian administration. Surprisingly, in 1874 (1290/1) the matter was still unresolved, despite Munzinger’s appeal in favour of their official attachment to Tāka<sup>342</sup>.

This shows the overlapping and contradictory injunctions of the colonial fiscality: tributes were based on the tribe as a unit while collections were organised by areas. Because of the fiscal rivalry between provincial governors pressed to balance their budget, the departure of a clan represented a net loss. In the matter of the two Banī ‘Āmir clans mentioned above, the dispute between the governorates of Tāka and Khartoum had to be settled directly by the Khedive Ismā‘īl. This pursuit of the fiscal rights carried by tribal groups could lead to peculiar developments. As Munzinger was trying to avoid yet another deficit in the budget of the province under his command, he exposed in March 1874 (Muḥarram/Şafar 1291) to the authorities in Cairo that 609 individuals from the Hadanduwa, Banī ‘Āmir and other minor tribes of Tāka had migrated to al-Qadārīf a few years before. Their fiscal rights had been illegally seized by the Shukriyya who requested from them a tribute, even though they were inscribed on the tax registries of the latter. He requested that an order be sent to Khartoum’s governor so that they be sent back to Tāka. The final decision signals the absurd complexity of this system: the groups concerned would remain in the region of

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340 Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédivé Ismaïl. Tome III (seconde partie), L’Empire africain (1869-1873)*, *op. cit.*, p. 538.

341 Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédivé Ismaïl. Tome III (première partie), L’Empire africain (1863-1869)*, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

342 Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédivé Ismaïl. Tome III (troisième partie), L’Empire africain (1874-1876)*, *op. cit.*, p. 1097–1098.

al-Qaḍārif while the tribute would be collected by the governorate of Khartoum for Kasalā, after presentation of a document stating the names and the sums owed.

The Bijāwī *shuyūkh* knew well how to profit from the many inconsistencies and internal rivalries of the Egyptian administration. In 1870 (1286/7), Mūsā Ibrāhīm, the *shaykh* of the Hadanduwa and Muḥammad Āghā al-‘Awaḍ of the Ḥalānqa complained to Mumtāz Pasha of the governor of Tāka and obtained his dismissal<sup>343</sup>. The 1864-1865 mutiny in Kasalā revealed the delicate balance of powers that had been reached in Tāka. The local population may have taken pleasure in seeing the colonial administration failing to subdue their rebellious soldiers, but, in a rare moment of Bijāwī unity, rendered otherwise impossible by the bitter rivalry between the different tribal heads, Hadanduwa, Banī ‘Āmir, Ḥalānqa and others gathered to encircle the garrison and prevent further actions by the mutineers. Munzinger’s interpretation was that “the majority of the indigenous nobility (*noblesse indigène*) favoured the conservation of the Turkish regime”, based on the consideration that “the reigning nobility, which has its own set revenues levied by the Turks at the same time as their own taxes, does not want to risk its sure position for a state of disorder which could carry them too far”. Yet, according to him, the real purpose of the Bijāwī *shuyūkh* when they collected their men was “to prove to the viceroy that only the Arabs could save the government”, showcasing the dependency of the latter on their support, probably with the view to obtain greater autonomy<sup>344</sup>.

## Conclusion

Bijāwī communities from the sixteenth century to the late nineteenth century adopted a wide variety of sociopolitical organisations such as the trading networks of the Ḥaḍāriba, the loose Bishārīn confederation or the caste system of the Banī ‘Āmir<sup>345</sup>. The emphasis on tribes in the historiography says more about the predominance of state perspectives in historical writing than it does on actual Bijāwī structures. This was not, however, only an etic designation. Indeed, to some extent, Bijāwī genealogical traditions elaborated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were at the same time prompted by attempts from the colonial state (Egyptian or British) to make Bijāwī society more legible, and expressed a vernacular understanding, both descriptive and performative, of the evolution of Bijāwī social bodies in the wake of the great southern migration,

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343 Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismaïl. Tome III (seconde partie), L’Empire africain (1869-1873)*, *op. cit.*, p. 440.

344 Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismaïl. Tome III (première partie), L’Empire africain (1863-1869)*, *op. cit.*, p. 190–194.

345 A similar reflexion on the mutability of tribal frameworks can be found in Reuven Aharoni’s work on the relations between Bedouins and Muḥammad ‘Alī’s state. See Reuven AHARONI, *The Pasha’s Bedouin*, *op. cit.*, p. 33–63.

which made use of a grammar of self-identification developed in the Nile Valley. In other words, the partial and ambivalent tribalisation of the Bijāwī communities was not solely a process imposed from outside.

An analysis of the historical trajectory of Eastern Sudan's populations should be diachronic and spatialised. The settlement of Hadanduwa clans in the southern Bijāwī triangle cannot be reduced to simple territorial expansion, it also changed the driving dynamics of how these communities were internally structured and how their articulations with other groups were articulated. Unfortunately, the few sources at our disposal do not allow us to go much further than hypotheses, but it is likely that the primordial organisation of land rights, as well as its corollary, the territorialisation of Bijāwī identities, was moulded in the crux of the Qāsh Valley at the turn of the nineteenth century.

One of the important conclusions to draw from this last comment was that some internal transformations could be relatively endogenous. State influence may have been significant, for example with regard to the monopolisation of international trade relations by the Funj sultans in the seventeenth century, a decision which must have directly impacted the Ḥaḍāriba, but this should not preclude envisaging Eastern Sudan as an autonomous space with its own set of imperatives, including environmental constraints that may have been instrumental in causing the migration to the south. In that regard, parts if not all of the region could be construed as a form of *zomia*<sup>346</sup>, contracting or expanding in accordance with the relative strength of neighbouring states. For example, as was argued above, the fragmentation of the Funj sultanate in the late eighteenth century was a major factor in the expansion undertaken by the northern Bijāwī communities. Conversely, Egyptian penetration of Tāka in the 1840s probably resulted in some form of withdrawal toward the Red Sea Hills, the refuge area *par excellence*.

And yet, defining the region as a “nonstate space” and Bijāwī populations as “nonstate peoples” is misleading at tends to reify a distinction based on what they are not, rather than underscore the complexity, and originality, of their historical trajectory in their own right. The assumed incompatibility between tribal and state structures relies on ideal typical consideration of the former that has little, if any, basis in historical evidence. State dependency on Bijāwī participation was obvious all throughout the nineteenth century, for transport, to supply the necessary camels, for cultivation, etc., while conversely, tribal leadership did attempt to counter state action, but this was just one facet of a much more complex relationship in which they could find support for their own power<sup>347</sup>.

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346 James C. SCOTT, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2009, p. 33–63.

347 Philip S. KHOURY and Joseph KOSTINER, “Introduction: Tribes and the Complexities of State Formation in the

*“In a country like the Soudan it is always difficult to explain how a fanatical wave should spread over a population which has so little reason to listen to the preachings of fanatics”*

Augustus B. Wylde, ‘83 to ‘87 in the Soudan, 1888<sup>1</sup>

Despite the relative wealth of accounts from travellers, explorers, and traders who roamed through Eastern Sudan in the second half of the nineteenth century<sup>2</sup>, the political and religious aspirations of its populations remain obscure. European commentators focused their attention on this region as one of the theatres of imperial rivalries and commercial competition in the Red Sea<sup>3</sup>, and developed a narrative that overlooked the Bijāwī communities of the hinterland as well as other minor groups. Since these predominantly oral societies have left few documents that would allow us to unravel the many ties they shared with urban centres such as Sawākin and Maṣawwa‘, the latter have occupied a disproportionate place in historical accounts and were presented as isolates—inland islands stuck between the sea and the desert with no or few direct relations with the “African” hinterland<sup>4</sup> while Bijāwī communities have been deprived of their political agency—especially during the Mahdiyya—and their engagement framed primarily as reactions to state encroachments and not as reflexive decisions<sup>5</sup>. There is no doubt that the implementation of policies regarding trade (especially the slave trade) and cultivation had immediate consequences for these communities and affected the complex socioeconomic networks on which their livelihood depended. In 1881 and 1882 (1298-1299), distant rumours and puzzling news from an uprising in the West carried by caravans were harbingers of yet more seismic changes. In late July 1883 (Ramaḍān 1300), the arrival of a minor member of a Sawākinī merchant family which had lost its former preeminence may have easily gone unnoticed and his assault on the garrison of Sinkāt with a few dozen supporters, in front of most of the bourgeois population of the Red Sea port, remembered only as a quixotic attempt against the Egyptian colonial power. But this small tremor on one end of the web

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Middle East,” *op. cit.*, p. 3–5.

- 1 Augustus B. WYLDE, ‘83 to ‘87 in the Soudan, with an Account of Sir William Hewett’s Mission to King John of Abyssinia, London, Remington and Co. Publishers, 1888, vol. 1, p. 1.
- 2 See chapter 1.
- 3 Ghada H. TALHAMI, *Suakin and Massawa Under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885*, *op. cit.*
- 4 For a detailed reflexion on this perspective, see Jonathan MIRAN, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa*, *op. cit.*, p. 18–19.
- 5 For example, Johann A. W. Munzinger wrote in his report on the Kasalā mutiny of 1865 that the “*tiers état* has no political opinion” (Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédivé Ismaïl. Tome III (première partie), L’Empire africain (1863-1869)*, *op. cit.*, p. 193).



of relations that linked together the different populations of the region reverberated throughout the plains and hills of Eastern Sudan, leaving few communities untouched by the consequences of five years of protracted conflicts.

The succession of events observed during this period which coincides with the establishment of a stable Mahdist authority over most of Bijāwī territory—a process that was concluded in mid-1888 (late 1305)—is relatively well-known but was mainly told from the vantage point of the British officers stationed in Sawākin, a position which they left on fewer occasions that can be counted with both hands. The following development aims at qualifying this dominating narrative by transcending the chronological divide of 1883 (1300/1), replacing local actors at the centre of the analysis, framing this critical phase through the lens of the relationships they entertained with both the British and the Mahdists, and finally, when possible, zooming in to offer perspectives on the apprehension of the Mahdist movement from below.

Sources' availability for this period varies greatly with the consequence that a number of dynamics can be alluded to but not firmly confirmed. Even in the case of Sawākin, few detailed information prior to 1883 could be gathered. Indeed, the archive of the *muḥāfaza*<sup>6</sup> could not be located at the National Records Office (NRO) in Khartoum or at the Egyptian national archives (*Dār al-wathā'iq al-qawmiyya*) in Cairo<sup>7</sup>, maybe a reflection of the numerous administrative changes that had taken place in the decade before, and of the greater focus brought upon the southern regions and Maṣawwa'. The lack of local administrative sources could not be compensated by consular accounts, which only appeared in the context of the mounting struggle against the slave trade in the Red Sea, when Charles Zorhab, the British consul in Jidda between 1878 and 1881 (1295-1298), had called for the creation of consulates in Hodeida, Maṣawwa' and Sawākin<sup>8</sup>. The first British consul, Lynedoch N. Moncrieff (c. 1848-1883) was appointed the following year. The French had also considered the establishment of a vice-consulate in Sawākin in 1881, but in 1883 a decision had yet to be taken<sup>9</sup>. This means that prior to this date, direct testimonies on the political and economic life in the city are rare, in contrast with other Red Sea ports such as Jidda<sup>10</sup>, and to a lesser extent Maṣawwa'<sup>11</sup>. This situation was to change drastically with the arrival of the first

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6 See chapter 1.

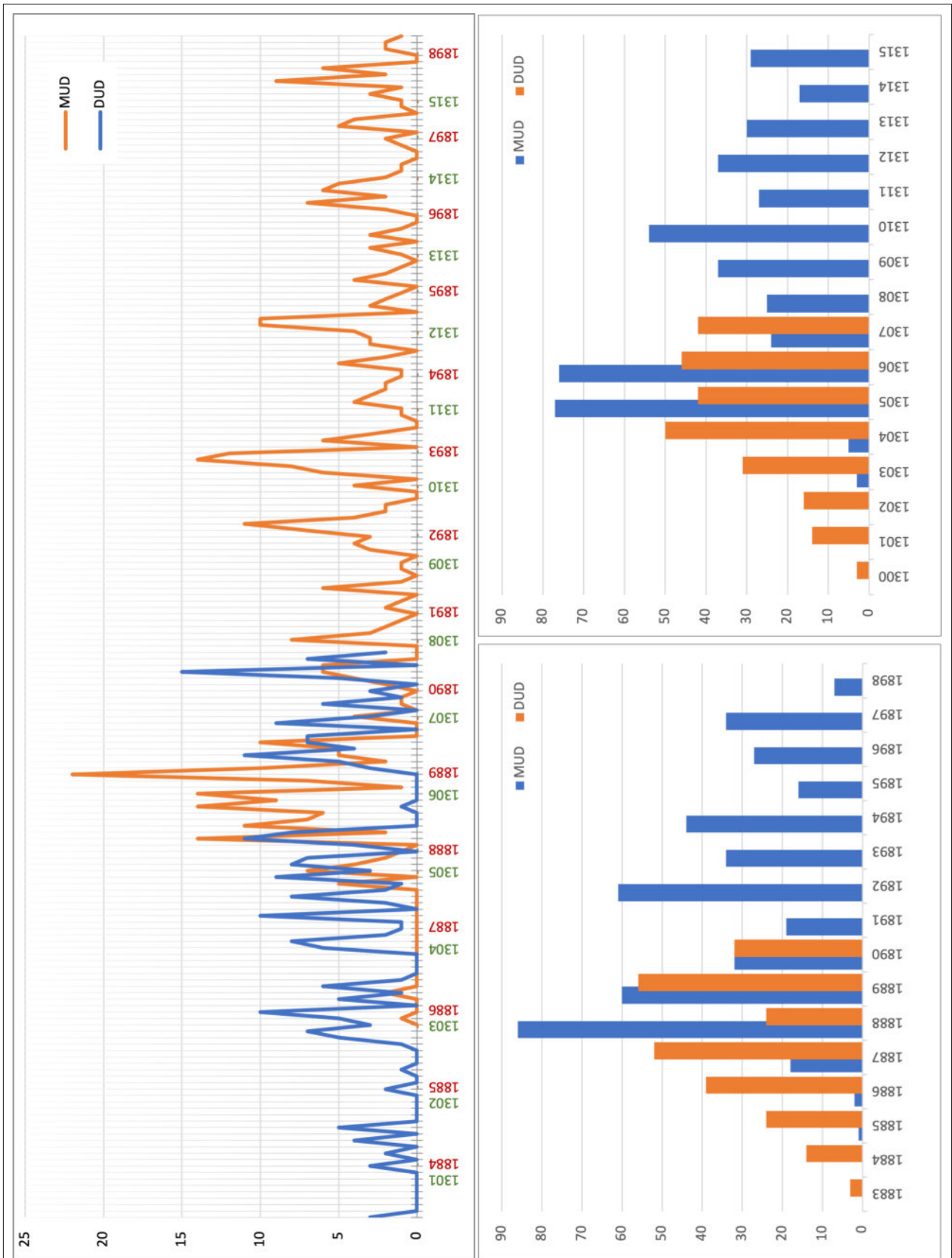
7 Based on searches on available catalogues, as access to the *Dār al-wathā'iq al-qawmiyya* could not be obtained.

8 Luc CHANTRE, *Pèlerinages d'empire: Une histoire européenne du pèlerinage à La Mecque*, Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2018, p. 128.

9 Gustave LOMBARD, "Le port de Souakim," *L'Exploration: journal des conquêtes de la civilisation sur tous les points du globe*, 1883, vol. 15, p. 294.

10 There is a rich literature on European consuls in Jidda in the nineteenth century. See, for example, Ulrike FREITAG, "Helpless Representatives of the Great Powers? Western Consuls in Jeddah, 1830s to 1914," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 2012, vol. 40, no. 3, p. 357–381. Both Johann A. W. Munzinger and Augustus B. Wylde held consular positions in Jidda prior to their appointment in Sawākin.

11 Jonathan MIRAN, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa*, op. cit.



**Fig. 2.1a-c:** Correspondence exchanged between ‘Uthmān Dīqna, the Mahdī and the Khalīfa (1883-1898)  
**Sources:** *Daftar ‘Uthmān Dīqna* (DUD) (letters from the Mahdī and the Khalīfa to various people in Eastern Sudan) and *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna* (MUD) (letters from ‘Uthmān Dīqna to the Mahdī and the Khalīfa)

British officers and administrators, especially since the spread of Mahdism to the region made Western observers more interested in understanding the local factors driving the insurrection.

The events which punctuated the establishment of Mahdism in Eastern Sudan can be traced with varying precision. The period from July 1883 to October 1884 (Ramaḍān 1300-Muḥarram 1302) was narrated in a source unique within Mahdist literary production: the *Notebook of 'Uthmān Diqna's Chronicles (Daftar Waqā'i 'Uthmān Diqna)*<sup>12</sup>. Constituted of three letters, it gives important details as to the events from the arrival in the region of its first Mahdist *'āmil*, 'Uthmān Diqna (see below), up to October 1884 (D. al-Ḥijja 1301). Francis R. Wingate and Na'ūm Shuqayr<sup>13</sup> from the DMI initially thought that these texts had been established after the Mahdī's death in June 1885 (Ramaḍān 1302) and sent to the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi. However, the historian Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm proved that they had been communicated directly to the Mahdī: the first letter c. June 1884 (c. Sha'bān 1301), while the second and third letters were probably written during a short period, as both were received at the same time between 21 October 1884 (1<sup>st</sup> Muḥarram 1302) and 11 January 1885 (26 Rabī' I 1302), that is between the last date mentioned in the *Waqā'i'* and the date at which the Mahdī received the last two letters. This production was essentially the result of the Mahdī's frequent complaints that his *'āmil* failed to keep him informed of his actions. Indeed, it took 'Uthmān Diqna almost a year after his appointment to send the first account of the situation<sup>14</sup>. Their author is unknown, but during that period, as the Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan was not yet fully developed, few men would have been able to write such an eloquent prose. For Abū Salīm, Muḥammad al-Majdhūb b. Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir al-Majdhūb, the son of the famed *shaykh* of the Majādhīb, is the most likely candidate<sup>15</sup>.

The original letters were never found, but they were preserved in two texts. The most extant source, by far, is the copy realised in Eastern Sudan and recorded in a notebook (*daftar*) found when the Mahdist administrative centre of Afāfit<sup>16</sup> was captured by a British expedition on 19 February 1891 (8 Jumādā II 1308). The significance of this document was immediately noted by the DMI which had it translated, albeit not comprehensively<sup>17</sup>. One of the folios of the first letter was lost,

12 A critical edition of this text was published by Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm (*Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*). An incomplete and often faulty translation was presented in the Appendix 2 (p. 16-24) of the "Report on the Dervish rule in the Eastern Sudan by Major F. R. Wingate. May, 1891" (DUL SAD 253/1). This text was included in the supplements of Wingate's main work (*Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan, op. cit.*, p. 509-521). Henceforth, it will be referred to as the *Waqā'i'* and page numbers based on Abū Salīm's edition.

13 Na'ūm b. Bishāra Shuqayr (1863-1922), a Greek orthodox Syrian-Lebanese, was an agent of the Egyptian DMI from 1890 to his death. Among other writings, he is most famous in Sudanese historiography for the first comprehensive history of Sudan in 1903 (*Tārīkh al-Sūdān al-qadīm wa al-ḥadīth wa jughrāfiyyat-hu, op. cit.*).

14 See chapter 4 for a longer development on the epistolary relations between the eastern province and central authorities in Umm Durmān.

15 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, p. 1-29.

16 Afāfit was situated in the immediate vicinity of the Egyptian garrison in Tūkar. Both locations (Afāfit and Tūkar) will be used indiscriminately to refer to the Mahdist headquarters, following Mahdist and British practices.

17 This translation was presented in "Report on the Dervish Rule in the Eastern Sudan by Major F. R. Wingate,

meaning that the two last pages are missing. However, this could be partially compensated since the *Waqā'i* was the main, if not unique source used by Ismā'īl b. 'Abd al-Qādir al-Kurdufānī (c. 1844-c. 1897) for his rendition of events in Eastern Sudan between 1883 and 1884 in his *Book of the Bliss of Him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdi (Kitāb Sa'adat al-mustahdī bi-sīrat al-Imām al-Mahdī)*<sup>18</sup>. This compensates for the missing pages from the *Waqā'i* while offering precious insights into the choices made by al-Kurdufānī when he picked elements from the original text. Besides, a comparison with another major text, the *Ṣahīḥ al-khabar*<sup>19</sup> by 'Alī al-Mahdī<sup>20</sup> (1878-1944) shows important similarities which entail that in the 1930s the latter had access to another copy of the *Waqā'i* since lost. The process of establishing a stable version of this text began in the 1960s<sup>21</sup> and was completed with the publication of Abū Salīm's edition entitled *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna* in 1974 (reedited in 1998)<sup>22</sup>. The value of this text should not be underestimated. Indeed, in Shaked's words, "Unlike so much that has been written on this subject [...] 'Uthmān Diqna's despatches are one of very scarce documents which present the Mahdist viewpoint of these events<sup>23</sup>". As a result, the *Waqā'i* constitutes the main vernacular source to confront the not so numerous accounts offered by British officers, journalists and other civilians.

The singularity of this document is exacerbated due to the relative scarcity of a much more common source for Mahdist studies: the correspondence exchanged between central authorities and provincial leaders. The *Waqā'i* was in itself the product of the dearth of communications from Eastern Sudan for the second half of 1883 and the first half of 1884 (mid-1301). After this sudden burst of archival light, darkness settled once again as few letters written by 'Uthmān Diqna between

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D.S.O., A.A.G., Egyptian Army", May 1891. This document can be found in the Wingate collection at Durham University (DUL SAD 253/1) and at the National Records Office in Khartoum (NRO Cairint 3/03/46).

18 For detailed analysis of Ismā'īl b. 'Abd al-Qādir al-Kurdufānī's life, see Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitāb sa'adat al-mustahdī bi-sīrat al-Imām al-Mahdī (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdi) by Ismā'īl b. 'Abd al-Qadir*, New Brunswick, Transaction Books, 1978, p. 10–31. The sole extant manuscript version of the *Sīra* is kept at Durham University (SAD 99/6/1-405). This text was quite forgotten until Abū Salīm published a photographic reproduction in 1964 before editing it in 1972 (*Sa'adat al-mustahdī bi-sīrat al-imām al-Mahdī, by Ismā'īl 'Abd al-Qādir al-Kurdufānī*, Beirut, Dār al-jīl, 1972). A few years later, Haim Shaked dedicated his PhD dissertation (D.Phil, University of London, London, 1969) to this document, that led to the publication of an abridged and commented translation (see above). This text will be referred to as the *Ṣīra* and page numbers based on Shaked's edition.

19 The *Ṣahīḥ al-khabar* was never published but a photographic copy of the manuscript is kept at the NRO (Mahdiyya 8/10/70) under the title *Awraq al-Mahdī* or *Daftar 'Alī al-Mahdī*. An abridged version of this text was eventually published by 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad Aḥmad Ḥasan in 1965 (*Jihād fī sabīl Allāh*, Khartoum, n.a., 1965).

20 'Alī al-Mahdī was the fifth son of Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī. Imprisoned from 1899 to 1905, he joined the administration of the Condominium upon his release, before resigning in 1929 to act the agent of his brother, the famed 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Mahdī. See Fergus NICOLL, "'Alī al-Mahdī's Oral History of the Mahdīa," *op. cit.*

21 For detailed comments on this process, see Haim SHAKED, "Three Manuscript Versions of a Mahdist Report of 'Uthmān Diqna's Campaign in the Eastern Sudan," in Claude Cahen and Charles Pellat (ed.), *Études arabes et islamiques : actes du XXIXe Congrès international des orientalistes*, Paris, L'Asiathèque, 1975, p. 188–194.

22 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*

23 Haim SHAKED, "Three Manuscript Versions of a Mahdist Report of 'Uthmān Diqna's Campaign in the Eastern Sudan," *op. cit.*, p. 192.

late 1884 and mid-1887 (early 1302 to 1305) were preserved (see fig. 2.1a-c)<sup>24</sup>. Fortunately, this can be partially compensated by looking at the letters which were sent by the Mahdī and the Khalīfa and gathered in the *‘Uthmān Diqna’s Notebook (Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna)*<sup>25</sup>, one of the four letter-books found in Afāfīt, alongside the *Muṣannaḥ al-Majdhūb*<sup>26</sup>, the *Muṣannaḥ al-Shaykh al-Ṭāhir* (or *Muṣannaḥ Barīs*) and the *Muṣannaḥ Ma’āl*<sup>27</sup>. Unfortunately, this document is incomplete: the pages 140 to 202 on which were copied the letters from May to December 1888 (Rajab 1305-Rabī‘ II 1306) are missing and their content is only accessible through the short summary presented in the index<sup>28</sup>. In any case, these letters, even if they systematically give in their *incipit* a short summary of the subjects broached to the original incoming letter, are by nature more allusive than those written by Mahdist leaders in Eastern Sudan and more indicative of the Khalīfa’s provincial policies than of the realities of Mahdist expansion in this province.

Consequently, until 1888 (1305/6) when Mahdist writings produced locally become exceptionally abundant, any account of the formative years of Mahdist rule in the Red Sea province is tributary to British sources. Military operations conducted in 1884 and 1885 (1301-1302) in Eastern Sudan are relatively well documented when British metropolitan troops were engaged<sup>29</sup>. They are much patchier for the subsequent years as the latter were replaced by a small Egyptian force. This is true for the diplomatic and military correspondence recorded and transmitted to the House of Commons and House of Lords, but also for the reports produced by Egyptian military

24 This is based on the letters edited in Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.* The letters edited by Abū Salīm can be found in NRO Mahdiyya 1/31/01 (letters 1-176), Mahdiyya 1/31/02 (letters 177-361) and Mahdiyya 1/31/03 (letters 362-480).

25 For a detailed description of the *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, see Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Fihris āthar al-imām al-Mahdī*, Beirut, Dār al-Jīl, 1995, p. 431–432.

26 The original document is held by Durham University (DUL SAD 99/1). It was copied by Majdhūb b. Abū Bakr b. Yūsuf.

27 For detailed descriptions of these three *muṣannaḥāt* (sing. *muṣannaḥ*), see Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Fihris āthar al-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, p. 427–429; 435–437; 420–421.

28 The English translation of this index was presented in the “Report on the Dervish rule in the Eastern Sudan by Major F. R. Wingate” (SAD 253/1) in the Appendix 3. The Arabic version of this index and the English drafts of its translation can be found in NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/01 and Mahdiyya 1/30/10.

29 While Gordon’s fate was discussed at length by a variety of commentators, the events in Eastern Sudan between 1883 and 1885 did not attract such attention. Most of the texts produced were testimonies by British officers almost entirely focused on warfare (Ernest GAMBIER-PARRY, *Suakin, 1885: Being a Sketch of the Campaign this Year*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1885 ; E. A. DE COSSON, *Days and Nights of Service with Sir Gerald Graham’s Field Force at Suakin*, London, John Murray, 1886 ; William GALLOWAY, *The Battle of Tofrek : Fought near Suakin, March 22nd, 1885, under Major-General Sir John Carstairs M’Neill, V.C., K.C.B., K.C.M.G., in its Relation to the Mahdist Insurrection in the Eastern Sudan and to the Campaigns of 1884 and 1885*, London, W.H. Allen, 1887). The journalists who so eagerly followed Wolseley’s failed expedition to Khartoum were rarer in Eastern Sudan, but some of them, like Bennet Burleigh (*Desert Warfare: Being the Chronicle of the Eastern Soudan Campaign*, London, Chapman and Hall, 1884.), were present to observe the first encounters between British and Mahdist forces in 1884. Finally, the early phase of the Mahdiyya in Eastern Sudan was also narrated by two civilians, a British trader established in the Red Sea region, Augustus B. Wylde (‘83 to ‘87 in the Soudan, with an Account of Sir William Hewett’s Mission to King John of Abyssinia, *op. cit.*) and, exceptionally, the spouse of one the British officers dispatched to Sawākin, Ernestine Sartorius (*Three Months in the Soudan*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1885). For a detailed bibliography, see Harold E. RAUGH JR., *British Military Operations in Egypt and the Sudan: A Selected Bibliography*, Lanham, Scarecrow Press, 2008.

intelligence. These are, according to Holt, of little use before 1887 (1304/5) and Wingate's appointment as Assistant-adjutant-general for Intelligence<sup>30</sup>. This may be a fair assessment but could not be confirmed since, of the 127 reports produced by the Sawākin branch, only the last 38 are available among the collections of the university of Durham<sup>31</sup>. In any case, they contain few valuable information on the interior as intelligence officers were inadequately knowledgeable about Bijāwī societies and highly dependent on the evidently biased testimonies of individuals who came to the Red Sea port. This only slowly changed after 1889 (1306/7) when the branches of Sawākin and Wādī Ḥalfa were reorganised, and more clearly in 1892 (1309/10), when a department of military intelligence (DMI) was created with Wingate as its director<sup>32</sup>.

With these limitations in mind, the following pages will endeavour firstly to pursue on the path trodden in the previous chapter to describe the more recent evolutions experienced by populations in Eastern Sudan in the 1870s in the wake of its greater integration to the world-system. The emergence in this region of the Mahdist movement led by 'Uthmān Dīqna will be the object of the second part. The third part will be dedicated to the *jihād* launched by Mahdist enthusiasts in 1883 (1300) against the Egyptian presence on the Red Sea littoral and the British forces that were dispatched to counter them. Finally, the last part will analyse the end of the local consensus in favour of Mahdism and the subsequent fragmentation of Bijāwī communities from 1886 (1303) onwards.

## **I. Eastern Sudan and the Experience of Economic Integration in the 1870s**

Often a savvy and experienced observer, Augustus B. Wylde (*c.* 1850-1903), a British trader and a vice-consul in Jidda between 1875 and 1878 (1292-1295) before settling in 1883 (1300/1) in Sawākin<sup>33</sup>, resorted, as many of his contemporaries, to explaining the expansion of Mahdism in Eastern as a “fanatical wave” (see epigraph), an irrational movement spreading like wildfire, for no discernible reason, among a population always suspected of being only superficial Muslims. And yet, in the 1870s, processes of economic integration and social transformation at work since the late eighteenth century were accelerated and produced a new set of tensions across Bijāwī societies. While sources are allusive, they point to a certain revolutionary feverishness, in the early 1880s. Understanding this context and the motives of discontent that drove some segments of the

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30 Peter M. HOLT, “The Source-Materials of the Sudanese Mahdia,” *op. cit.*, p. 114.

31 A full collection is kept at the NRO (CairInt [Mukhābarāt miṣriyya] 6/25/62-63) but access to these documents (as all of this fonds) was severely limited between 2017 and 2021 for security reasons.

32 Yigal SHEFFY, *British Military Intelligence in the Palestine Campaign, 1914-1918*, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 4–5.

33 Richard L. Hill, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 382-383.

population to join the Mahdist movement after 1883 is the object of this section. It will also attempt to draw as precise a picture as possible of the local networks that connected urban and pastoralist groups, the littoral and the hinterland. The point is not to develop a deterministic understanding of the millenarian uprising as an emanation of political tensions based on economic rivalries, but to set out structuring dynamics to emphasise, later on, the variability of individual and communal responses to the Mahdist *da'wa*.

### ***A) Resurgence, Resilience and Marginalisation: Trade and Traders in Sawākin***

#### *i) Local, Regional and International Trade Circulations in the Nineteenth Century*

Since the middle of the eighteenth century, trade in the Red Sea had been declining, affected by several disruptive factors including the degradation of the terms of exchange for coffee, a commodity that structured commercial circulations in the region; European penetration, whether commercial or military such as the French intervention in Egypt in 1798-1801 (1212-1216); and regional conflicts, like the ones opposing the Mamluks in Cairo and the Ottomans, or resulting from the Wahhābī expansion in the Ḥijāz in the early nineteenth century<sup>34</sup>. In the same period, the Greater Nile Valley was also subjected to important political perturbations that caused greater insecurity and so weakened internal trade networks<sup>35</sup>.

The Sudanese port was obviously dependent on trade activities from which it derived most of its wealth, but the distance that separated it from the riverain centres and the barrenness of its immediate surroundings also meant that its ability to sustain itself, including the mundane requisites of feeding its own population, hinged on its capacity to attract incoming flows from the hinterland. Because coral stone remained the main material, constructions from the late nineteenth century were as fragile as those from the century before. Habitations on the Qayf<sup>36</sup>, mostly wooden huts, were even more precarious. Therefore, the town still reflected with little delay its own economic fortune, as well as the balance between international and regional trade circulations.

Indeed, at the onset of the nineteenth century, when Burckhardt visited the region, the island of Sawākin laid mostly in ruin. The contraction in international trade expressed itself through a decrease of the number of Indian traders—mostly from the Banyan community—established on the

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34 Philippe PÉTRIAT, *Les grandes familles marchandes hadramies de Djedda, 1850-1950, op. cit.*, p. 23.

35 See chapter 1. This development was more contrasted with regard to Sawākin. On the one hand, the overall level of trade decreased in the second half of the eighteenth century because of higher levels of insecurity, but on the other hand, political instability in the Upper Nile Valley—the axis privileged by the Funj sultans—resulted in the growth of the forty-day road, but also, in a more subdued manner, of the Barbar-Sawākin road (Hassan Abdel Aziz AHMED, *Caravan Trade and Routes in the Northern Sudan in the 19th Century: A Study in Historical Geography*, MA diss., University of Durham, Durham, 1967, p. 38–39).

36 The mainland part of the town. See chapter 1.

island, replaced by Sawākinī and Ḥijāzī merchants<sup>37</sup>, a sign that Sawākin's trade was redeploying itself toward regional circulations, a development supported by the expansion of Egyptian influence. In the span of a decade, between 1811 and 1821 (1225-1237), Mehmet Ali had successfully extended his control on both shores of the Red Sea, firstly by defeating the Sa'ūd and expelling them from the Ḥijāz, and secondly by invading the Upper Nile Valley, thus bringing an end to the Funj sultanate. Egypt's influence would continue to grow throughout the century to eventually supplant the Ottomans as the main regional force, while their hold over the interior of the Nilotic Sudan enabled an ambivalent revival of trade<sup>38</sup>. This shift was visible in the mainland section which experienced a steady growth after the turn of the nineteenth century thanks to the settling of Bijāwī groups from the hinterland, bringing the population to around 8-10 000 inhabitants<sup>39</sup>. Hadanduwa and Ammār'ar came to the Qayf as "they hoped to gain a share of its market's prosperity" and joined the historical Bijāwī communities of the area, the Artayqa and the Ashrāf<sup>40</sup>. The synchronicity of this development with the larger movement of expansion toward the south led by these tribes supports the idea that the two may have been related and that environmental constraints played a role in prompting some of their members to look for opportunities in Sawākin.

There was, according to the historian Albrecht Hofheinz, a "degree of ethnic division of labour" that characterised activities in Sawākin. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the majority of the population established on the island were Ḥijāzī and Ḥaḍramī, often designated by foreign sources as "Arabs", that is non-Bijāwī. They owned most of the ships and were primarily engaged in exporting valuable commodities—gum, ostrich feathers, ivory, and slaves—with the other larger ports of the Red Sea, and importing essentially textiles, grain and scents<sup>41</sup>. They were

37 Andrew C. S. PEACOCK, "Suakin: A Northeast African Port in the Ottoman Empire," *op. cit.*, p. 43.

38 This revival was ambivalent for at least two reasons. Firstly, at the same time the Egyptian colonial administration was opening the southern territories to traders, it imposed monopolies on major commodities that constrained their action (Anders J. BJØRKELO, "Turco-Jallāba Relations 1821-1885," in Leif O. Manger (ed.), *Trade and Traders in the Sudan*, Bergen, University of Bergen, Department of Social Anthropology, 1984, p. 86–89; Anders J. BJØRKELO, *Prelude to the Mahdiyya*, *op. cit.*, p. 104–106). Secondly, many took up trade because of new opportunities, but also because of the stark impoverishment of the riverain communities caused by the new regime's fiscal policies (Abannik Ohure HINO, *Eastern Equatoria and the White Nile Trade: The Political Economy of a Frontier, 1840-1900*, D.Phil, Michigan State University, East Lansing, 1997, p. 66–97).

39 While the increasing size of the Qayf in the first half of the nineteenth century is well accepted, this trend is difficult to quantify. Burckhardt's assessment of 3 000 people living on the island and 5 000 on the mainland, was not updated in later estimates which proved suspiciously stable throughout the century, up to the Mahdiyya when the population was said to have diminished to 5 000 (Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 218–219; Colette DUBOIS, "The Red Sea Ports During the Revolution in Transportation, 1800–1914," in Leila T. Fawaz et al. (ed.), *Modernity and Culture: From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 66).

40 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 218. Na'ūm Shuqayr also mentions the Khāṣa, a section of the Banī 'Āmir, among the native groups of Sawākin (Na'ūm SHUQAYR, *Géographie du Soudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 133).

41 See chapter 4.



essentially outward-looking and dependent on international circulations. As for the Bijāwī elite established on the Qayf, it benefitted from several centuries of experience with regard to trade with the hinterland and had extensive relations with the main centres of the Upper Nile Valley and beyond. They often acted as middlemen but could also organise their own caravans to the interior, mainly to Barbar. In contrast with the “Arabs”, they focused on cheaper commodities and their range was more circumscribed<sup>42</sup>.

This balance shifted in the nineteenth century as result of the deterioration of long-distance trade. Bijāwī traders took advantage of the crumbling of the “Arab” merchants’ position to engage more actively in overseas circulations. The economic activities undertaken by the rest of the mainland population are more difficult to pinpoint, as they were often overlooked by foreign observers. The Bijāwī community that included newly arrived populations from the hinterland pursued a variety of occupations, mostly centred on the production of local goods as the weaving of baskets, the manufacturing of leather products or rugs but also related to services including the participation to the many functions associated with the organisation of caravans<sup>43</sup>.

The growing role of the Bijāwī community in trade circulations reflected the situation that prevailed in the rest of the Nilotic Sudan where the *jallāba* had thrived after the arrival of Egyptian rule and the opening of new avenues of profit. But from the 1840s onwards, foreign traders who had settled in Khartoum and other major trade centres had gradually acquired a dominant position on long-distance trade, until two decades later, when the *jallāba*, having accumulated enough capitals, began to impinge on their activities. They bitterly complained about it, hoping that the new Khedive, Ismā’īl (r. 1863-1879)—considered a proponent of progress and modernisation—would remedy the situation. They failed to obtain the reforms they had been seeking, whether because they had overestimated the Khedive’s ability to steer the Sudanese government toward new policies, or because the latter had decided to favour Sudanese merchants, as signalled by the governors’ actions<sup>44</sup>.

In Sawākin itself, while the Qayf had attracted a steady number of migrants from the hinterland since the beginning of the century, the revival of the island came later, in the 1860s (1276-1287), when the same foreign traders withdrew from the centre to settle on the Sudanese gateways where they could put their comparative advantage *vis-à-vis* international connections to better use, and so avoid the mounting challenge of the *jallāba*, circumvent middlemen, and avoid

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42 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 212–217; 263.

43 Examples of such activities could be found among those carried out by the early adherents of Muḥammad Majdhūb. See *Ibid.*, p. 263.

44 Alice MOORE-HARELL, “Decline in European trade in the Sudan from the mid-Nineteenth century,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 2003, vol. 39, no. 3, p. 65–80.

usurious transport rates<sup>45</sup>. At first, encouraged by Mumtāz Pasha’s administration, a number of Egyptians and Ḥijāzī settled as public employees and traders; they restored some of the houses, when they did not simply build them anew. To make room for this new enterprising population, Mumtāz Pasha imposed a form of preemption right on empty parcels, which could be bought if the owners were unable to build on it<sup>46</sup>. The introduction of Egyptian steamers linking the Sudanese port to Suez, and above all, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 (1285/6), which transformed the Red Sea into a crucial shipping lane, accelerated this trend and opened the port to newcomers, including some of these merchants who were disengaging from trade in the Sudanese heartland. More opportunities attracted entrepreneurs from more distant horizons who also settled on the island, so that in the 1880s (1297-1308), “Turks”, Egyptians, Indians (Banyan), Ḥijāzī, Greeks, and Italians<sup>47</sup> represented three quarters of all its inhabitants<sup>48</sup>. Between 1874 and 1883, the Red Sea port “rose to the height of its glory<sup>49</sup>”, a timeframe that matches the high point of European involvement in trade activities in Sawākin. However, foreign merchants hogged a disproportionate amount of the benefits accrued from this belated boom and their rise was achieved at the expense of the Bijāwī traders’ interests. Understanding why the latter failed to secure their position requires to analyse the connections of the port with its immediate hinterland.

*ii) Sawākin and Maṣawwa’ s Differentiated Trajectories in the 1870s*

The faltering role of Bijāwī traders in Sawākin contrasts with the situation in Maṣawwa’ where, according to the historian Jonathan Miran, Arab trading networks proved more resilient, allowing for the “spectacular success of the Massawan merchants” under Italian colonial rule<sup>50</sup>. This raises the questions of the reasons that underlay the different trajectories observed in the two main ports of the African Red Sea Littoral. The comparison is necessarily limited since after 1883 (1300/1) Sudanese trade was entirely overhauled by the effects of the Mahdist revolution. Sawākin, as the main outlet of exports from the Greater Nile Valley, was particularly affected by the disruption of trade routes caused by the initial phase of the uprising, a phenomenon that did not abate in Eastern Sudan until 1892 (1309/10)<sup>51</sup>. However, prior to this obvious disjunction, the two

45 Terence WALZ, “Egyptian-Sudanese Trade in the Ottoman Period to 1882,” in Thomas Spear (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 1–26.

46 Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ DIRĀR, *Tārīkh Sawākin wa-l-Baḥr al-Aḥmar*, *op. cit.*, p. 83–84.

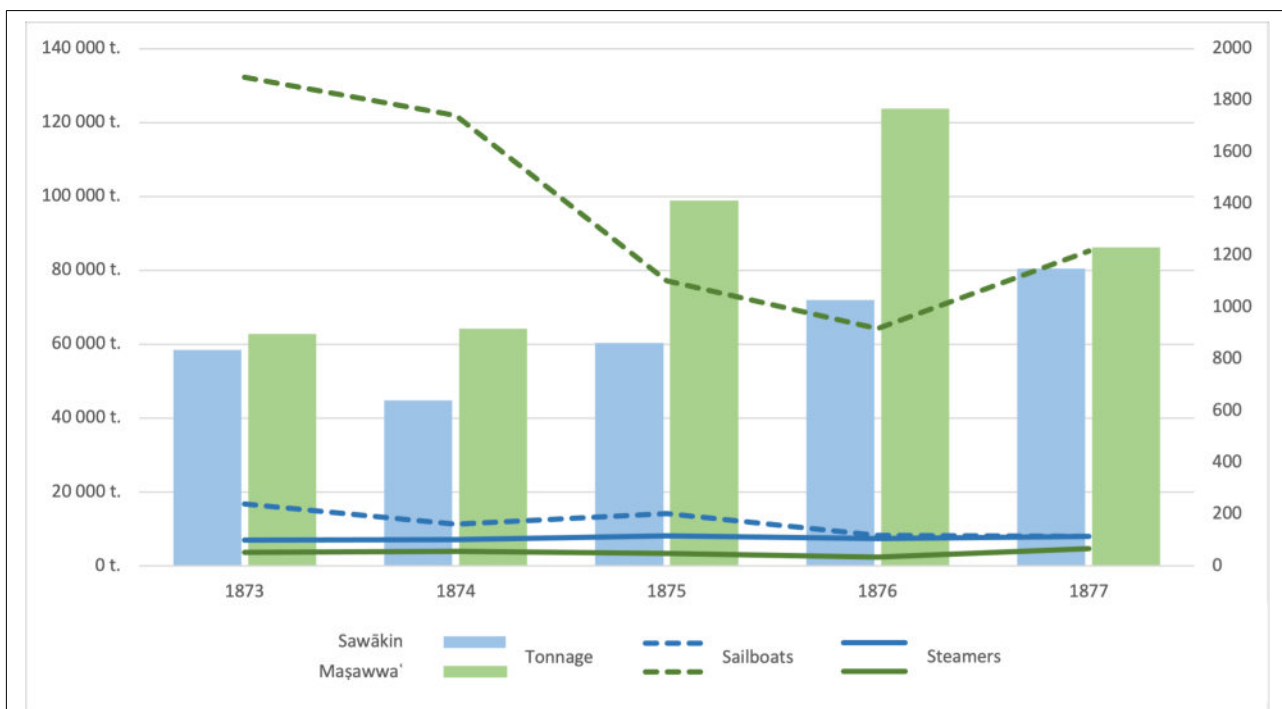
47 Prior to the 1880s, the number of Italians was quite reduced. The Mei spouses were a fixture of the Sawākin scene where they lived from the 1860s up to 1897. Augusto Mei headed the health agency of the Red Sea port (Massimo ZACCARIA, “Sawākin nel ricordo degli Italiani residenti (1880-1905),” *Storia urbana*, 1996, vol. 74, p. 11).

48 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

49 John F. E. BLOSS, “The Story of Suakin (Concluded),” *op. cit.*, p. 251.

50 Jonathan MIRAN, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

51 See chapter 4.



**Fig. 2.2:** Sailboats and steamers in Sawākin and Maṣawwa' (1873-1877)

**Source:** Frédéric Amici, *Essai de statistique générale de l'Égypte (1873-1877)* (vol. 1), Cairo, Imprimerie de l'état-major, Ministère de l'Intérieur, 1879, p. 74-75 and 79.

ports shared important similarities. They were both situated on internal islands within a sea inlet, economic activities were organised by a community distinct from the inland population, and Maṣawwa' as Sawākin had been subjected since 1865 (1281/2) and their lease from the Ottoman Empire to the Egyptian “civilizing mission”<sup>52</sup>.

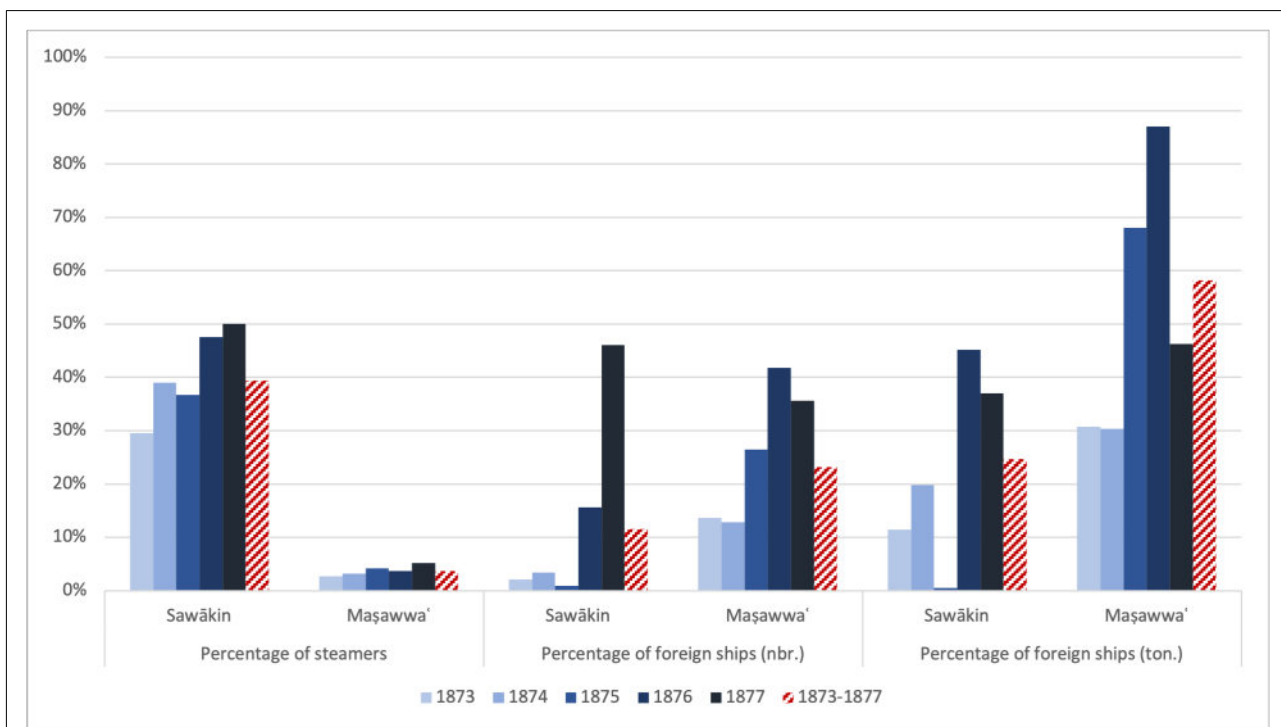
Still, the numbers produced by the Italian administrator Federico Amici for the bureau of statistics of the Egyptian Ministry of Interior<sup>53</sup> show a contrasting picture of their respective evolution between 1873 and 1877 (1290-1294)<sup>54</sup>. The expansion of Sawākin's role as a maritime hub was hindered by the poor quality of its harbour, both shallow and narrow, and the difficulties to access the riverain trade centres, confining it to the status of a regional, if not marginal, commercial port in the Red Sea. The value of its imports and exports in 1882 (1299/300) was 40% inferior to that of Maṣawwa'<sup>55</sup>. Yet, if in 1882 revenues generated by customs in the latter town largely exceeded that of Sawākin, the global tonnage of the ships that transited in the two ports did not differ widely, especially since the increase observed in 1875 and 1876 (1292-1293) was most likely

52 Ghada H. TALHAMI, *Suakin and Massawa Under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885*, *op. cit.*, p. 217–237.

53 Malak LABIB, *La statistique d'État en Égypte à l'ère coloniale : Finances, espace public et représentation (1875-1922)*, PhD diss., Aix-Marseille Université, Aix-en-Provence, 2015, p. 220.

54 Unfortunately, consolidated data on exports and imports from Sawākin is confined to these few years. Volumes and custom taxes are only available from 1883 onwards. Some elements can be gleaned by looking at consular reports in Jidda, the main outlet of Sawākin's exports, but these are also patchy for the 1860s and 1870s.

55 D. RODEN, *The Twentieth Century Decline of Suakin*, *op. cit.*, p. 2–5.



**Fig. 2.3** : Steamers and foreign ships in Sawākin and Maṣawwa' (1873-1877)

**Source:** Frédéric Amici, *Essai de statistique générale de l'Égypte (1873-1877)*, Cairo, Imprimerie de l'état-major, Ministère de l'Intérieur, 1879, vol. 1, p. 74-75.

due to the role of Maṣawwa' as a supply centre in the Egyptian-Ethiopian war<sup>56</sup>. In 1877, they were almost identical (see fig. 2.2). However, if overall tonnages were close, foreign involvement was markedly more important in Maṣawwa'. Unsurprisingly, it increased between 1873 and 1877, that is after trade was officially opened to Europeans in 1872 (1288/9) in the two Egyptian ports on the Red Sea. The rise was much more gradual in Maṣawwa' and involved larger ships (maybe due to supplies required by Egyptian troops), as the percentage in tonnage is higher (see fig. 2.3), but Sawākin and Maṣawwa' alike were subjected to the "European onslaught resulting from the activation of the Red Sea route<sup>57</sup>", the latter more radically than the former.

The resilience of Maṣawwa's merchants can only be explained by reasons intrinsic to local conditions, rather than by divergent foreign interventions in their respective trading spheres. Indeed, the most striking difference between the two African Red Sea ports is the much larger presence of sailing ships of small tonnage transiting through Maṣawwa'. The limited span of the data available calls for caution, but it is noticeable that while their numbers were in rapid decline between 1873 and 1876, they were rising again in 1877, while those in Sawākin kept on decreasing. The contrast appears clearly in the ratio of steamers to sailboats, 39,6% on average in Sawākin and only 3,7% in

<sup>56</sup> It should be noted that these tonnages excluded those of the warships.

<sup>57</sup> Ghada H. TALHAMI, *Suakin and Massawa Under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885, op. cit.*, p. 237.

Maṣawwa‘, a ten to one difference (see fig. 2.2).

The explanations given by Miran for the success of local traders in Maṣawwa‘ offer a framework to analyse the situation in Sawākin’s area. While the period from the early 1830s up to the 1860s (1245-1286) saw a dramatic expansion of trade activities in the Red Sea driven by the transport revolution and the establishment of Egyptian hegemony on both shores, this trend was further accelerated in the 1870s with the opening of the Suez Canal. This led to an unprecedented level of involvement of European traders in the region. The position previously occupied by al-Mukhā (Mokha) in international trade networks was transferred to Aden and Jidda. Higher competition and the restructuring of these international circulations brought the Maṣawwan merchants to invest local and regional networks more heavily. Eventually, trade connections were organised on a dual system: on the one hand, steamships and European capitals became a fixture of long-distance trade, while short-distance trade was undertaken by local merchants using sailboats. Connections with the international warehouses of Jidda and Aden were reinforced, but regional ports like Ḥudayda and Luḥayya, as well as smaller ports like ‘Aqīq, Hergigo or Zula, also attracted the attention of local traders in Maṣawwa‘. The crucial factor in explaining their astonishing success in competing against foreign merchants in this rapidly evolving situation was their ability to adapt and harness the economic production of the inland as well as that of the network of islands of the Dahlak archipelago off the Abyssinian coast (Dahlak al-Kabīr, Nukhra and Nura for the largest ones). More intense trade circulations in the southern Red Sea had important implications for these territories, leading to the diversification of pastoralists’ modes of production, the greater commodification of the local economy and the integration of regional markets within a wider web of economic interdependencies organised around Maṣawwa‘<sup>58</sup>.

Due to the lack of documentation to retrace trade activities in Sawākin between the early 1870s up to 1883 with precision, explaining why Eastern Sudan and the Sudanese Red Sea port followed a different trajectory shall remain conjectural. Accordingly, several hypotheses can be presented. Firstly, the structure of the Sudanese hinterland differed from the Abyssinian on several important aspects. It did not present, by far, the same density of small villages in its immediate periphery. Maṣawwa‘ could rely on a network of local markets which constituted as many “satellites” composed of an inner ring (Hergigo, Emkullo, and Hetumlo) and an outer ring (Aylet, Zaga, Gumhold, Asus, Deset, Emberemi and Zula for the most important). They allowed for the gradual concentration of commodities produced by rural and nomadic populations of the hinterland toward Maṣawwa‘. Such a structure was quite simply absent in Eastern Sudan. Sinkāt, Tūkar and

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58 Jonathan MIRAN, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa*, *op. cit.*, p. 65–75; 90–101.



**Fig. 2.4** : “The Rebellion in the Soudan, from sketches by an official who was employed in suppressing the slave trade in the Soudan” (1. Sheik Mohammed Taher, Principal Ulema, and Leader of the Eastern Soudan Insurrection – 2. Sinkat. Where Tawfik Bey, Governor of the Soudan, is Entrenched, Awaiting Aid – 3. Tāka. Where Commander Moncrieff was Killed, and Where Some Three Hundred Egyptian Soldiers and Bashi-Bozouks were Surrounded by the Rebels.

**Source:** *The Graphic*, 22 December 1883, p. 609.

Arkawīt were hardly urban settlements. Sinkāt was a strategic site on the main trading route linking Barbar to Sawākin. In that regard, it could be compared to Aylet which occupied a similar position. But in the latter case, the village, which may have comprised 500 huts in the 1880s, was a perennial settlement, whereas in the case of Sinkāt, travellers who went through described a seasonal installation of tents around what was first and foremost a military position. Most of those who came to this refreshing spot did so to avoid the summer heat in Sawākin. Even if the place boasted a small market (as well as silversmiths and blacksmiths), this was essentially a temporary relocation of some of the activities of the Red Sea port<sup>59</sup>. The same was true of Arkawīt, albeit on a smaller scale,

<sup>59</sup> Theodor von HEUGLIN, “Reise durch die Wüste von Berber nach Sauakin, September 1864,” *Mittheilungen aus Justus Perthes’ Geographischer Anstalt über wichtige neue Erforschungen auf dem Gesamtgebiete der Geographie*, 1866, vol. 13, p. 165–171 ; Georg SCHWEINFURTH, *Au cœur de l’Afrique, 1868-1871: voyages et découvertes dans les régions inexplorées de l’Afrique centrale*, translated by Henriette LOREAU, Paris, Hachette,



and in Tūkar, where a garrison similar to the one in Sinkāt was established<sup>60</sup>. These sites could not be considered as part of a larger network linking the hinterland to Sawākin. Early representations of Sinkāt (1) and Tūkar (2) (see fig. 2.4) emphasised their surveillance function. These positions were destined to control traffic on trade routes rather than forming hubs of exchange. Finally, another major difference resided on regional topographies. The Red Sea Hills represented a barrier that fractured Eastern Sudan from north to south, and did not offer a high potential for agricultural exploitation, as could be the case for the Abyssinian highlands with regard to the Semhar, particularly the upper valleys of the Anseba, the Baraka and Mereb,

The region nonetheless experienced some degree of economic integration and commodification of local productions. However, there was no compelling need to concentrate their output in Sawākin. Local markets were almost inexistent and, in any case, not organised in concentric circles around the Red Sea port, so an important proportion of those commodities left directly from one of the many small harbours of the Red Sea littoral. In the 1870s, local cotton cultivation, encouraged by Mumtāz Pasha, had some measure of success in the region of Tūkar, probably with the active involvement of some of Sawākin's elites<sup>61</sup>. Bijāwī communities, mostly Hadanduwa, also engaged in growing cotton in the valleys around Sinkāt<sup>62</sup>, but it concerned solely fragmented spaces around the Sudanese Red Sea port and exports remained minor compared to other goods that transited through Eastern Sudan<sup>63</sup>. The limits of economic integration were also visible in minor inlets to the north and south of Sawākin such as Shaykh Barghūth, Ruwāya, or 'Aqīq. They served as small trade posts for the export of domestic production (as well as contraband, including slaves) in combination with salt production, in the case of Ruwāya, that "brought a certain amount of work to [this] place, and made a concentration of the neighbouring tribes, which consisted of the Bishareen and Amarar sub tribes<sup>64</sup>". Yet, while these sites were integrated to regional circulations at the scale of the Red Sea, they were not part of a coherent local network. That left Bijāwī trading milieus less adaptable to the evolution of the Red Sea trade than

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1875, vol. 1, p. 22 ; Demetrius MOSCONAS, "La route de Souakim à Berber," *L'exploration*, 1884, vol. 17, p. 285.

60 For a description of the Egyptian position in Tūkar in early 1876, see Wilhelm JUNKER, *Travels in Africa during the Years 1875-1878*, translated by Augustus H. KEANE, London, Chapman & Hall, 1890, vol. 1, p. 62-63.

61 See chapter 1.

62 Ghada H. TALHAMI, *Egypt's "Civilizing Mission": Khedive Ismā'il's Red Sea Province, 1865-1885*, University of Illinois, Chicago, 1975, p. 207.

63 In 1880, before trade routes with the western provinces were disrupted by the Mahdist uprising, 117 000 qtr. (c. 5 300 t.) of gum Arabic, for a value of around E£ 140 000, and 18 000 qtr. of cotton (c. 800 t.) (both cleaned and uncleaned) for a value of around E£ 25 000 (values were estimated on 1883 prices, the earliest recorded at Sawākin) were exported from Sawākin. Cotton exports represented less than 20% of the value of gum exports. See HCPP, Egypt no. 11, "Report on the Soudan by Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart", inclosure 4 in no. 1 ("Exports from Suakin"), 1883, p. 34 and HCPP, Commercial no. 6, "Reports from Her Majesty's consuls on the manufactures, commerce, &c., of their consular districts. Part III", annex B.1, 1886, p. 217.

64 Augustus B. WYLDE, "The Red Sea Trade," *The Journal of the Manchester Geographical Society*, 1887, vol. 3, p. 185.

their Maṣawwan counterparts.

Lastly, historical circumstances are certainly crucial to explain the differentiated trajectories of the development of the hinterland local markets with their respective outlet on the Red Sea. These were essentially shaped by the specific dynamics of political integration of the Semhar and the Gwineb. The former remained relatively autonomous until the 1840s under the leadership of the *nuwwāb* (sing. *nā'ib*), even if their authority was already in decline since the first decade of the nineteenth century. Yet, they were able to preserve most of their political influence thanks to the repeated changes of authorities over Maṣawwa', between the Ottoman Empire and the Egyptians, as well as by the political turmoil that characterised the Abyssinian highlands between 1769 and 1855, the *Zemene Mesefint* (Ge'ez: "Age of Princes"). These competing state forces had few means and a faltering motivation to impose their control over the region. This left local powers with room to manoeuvre. A shift occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century when the reactivation of the Red Sea trade route prompted Egypt to reinforce its presence and assume greater control over Maṣawwa'. With more economic opportunities deriving from the growth of trade circulations, the power of the *nuwwāb* was also undermined by the growing influence of the merchant community in the Red Sea port. However, the networks which they had been established in the hinterland remained and were later reinvested by the traders of Maṣawwa'<sup>65</sup>. The interstitial but nonetheless strategic position occupied by Maṣawwa' as the main maritime outlet of the Abyssinian highland conferred to the Semhar an economic coherence, bolstered by the *nuwwāb*, which survived them.

In contrast with the situation predominating on the Abyssinian Red Sea littoral, no group in Sawākin and its hinterland could claim an authority close to the one exerted by the *nuwwāb*. The Ḥaḍāribā (the Ashrāf and Artayqa) would be interesting contenders if the near-impossibility to pinpoint the locus of their power and the extent of their influence in the first half of the nineteenth century did not strongly suggest that their political and economic role must have been much more discreet than their Abyssinian counterparts. Contrary to the *nuwwāb*, local elites in Sawākin had little opportunity to build a structured network in the hinterland. The Egyptian invasion of upper Nile Valley in the 1820s (1235-1245) brought a certain degree of stability and made accommodation with the new authorities necessary. This process was only compounded in the 1840s (1255-1265) with the annexation of Tāka when the colonial power gained control over the second main trading route to Sawākin. Willingly or not, the merchants of the main port of the Sudanese Red Sea littoral were fully integrated to the Egyptian sphere, and that before 1865 and the cession of Sawākin by the Ottomans. This contributed to the realignment of the whole region as it was pulled toward the Nile Valley, rapidly becoming the new centre of gravity, both economically and politically, leading,

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65 Jonathan MIRAN, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa*, op. cit., p. 42–64.



among other consequences, to the rerouting of grain of exports previously destined to the Red Sea market toward the riverain urban centres<sup>66</sup>.

## ***B) Winners and Losers of the Trade Game***

### *i) The Bijāwī Trading Elites Challenged*

The particular configuration of the relations between Sawākin and the hinterland had major consequences on how the different segments of Eastern Sudan's population were affected by the transformation of trade circulations between the 1860s and the 1880s (1276-1307).

Bijāwī traders found themselves quickly marginalised from Red Sea circulations. They could have attempted to redeploy their activities inland, but could not follow the example of their Maṣawwan colleagues for the reasons mentioned above. Yet, they may have explored other avenues. Artayqa and Ashrāf interest in cultivation in the Baraka delta and upstream the different *khayrān* that alimented derived from an attempt at diversifying their revenues. This failed in Tūkar, probably because of the absence of a sufficient workforce, as in Tāka. Egyptian agricultural investments may have been considered with mild optimism as an opportunity to seize, but this effort was short-lived. The country's bankruptcy in 1876 (1293) brought this dynamic to a halt, cutting almost all spendings, while the service of the debt—two-thirds of state revenues—required an overhaul of the fiscality that bode ill for Bijāwī merchants. At the same time, they must have felt relief when they learned that plans to build a railway between the littoral and the Nile Valley were indefinitely shelved<sup>67</sup>.

Indeed, the crux of the matter for this community was the preservation of its position as necessary middlemen. Their economic success relied almost uniquely on their long-standing contacts with the interior and their representatives in the trading centres. The mechanics behind their commercial operations remain quite obscure due to the lack of documentation<sup>68</sup>. The transport revolution taking place in the Red Sea had already severely weakened their position by rerouting

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66 See chapter 1.

67 D. RODEN, *The Twentieth Century Decline of Suakin*, *op. cit.*, p. 2–5 ; Colette DUBOIS, “The Red Sea Ports During the Revolution in Transportation, 1800–1914,” *op. cit.*, p. 64–68.

68 On that subject, the riverain *jallāba* are much better known (Anders J. BJØRKELO, *Prelude to the Mahdiyya*, *op. cit.*, p. 104–136). The papers of Muḥammad al-Sayyid Ṣiyām, collected within the framework of the “Suakin Project” under the supervision of the university of Khartoum in the 1960s would represent a major addition to our understanding of trading practices in the nineteenth century (D. RODEN, *The Twentieth Century Decline of Suakin*, *op. cit.*, p. 4). Ṣiyām owned a three-story house situated to the south of the island, near the causeway built by Gordon (Jean-Pierre GREENLAW, *The Coral Buildings of Suakin: Islamic Architecture, Plannings, Design and Domestic Arrangements in a Red Sea Port*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.), and may have been, significantly, the son-in-law of Muḥammad Bey b. Muṣṭafā Shināwī (Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State: Famine, Slavery, and Power in Sudan, 1883–1956*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 66). However, significant efforts to locate this collection by Yūsuf Faḍl Ḥasan, whom I abundantly thank, were unfruitful.

circulations toward the Suez Canal, making the complementarity between the western and eastern shores of the Red Sea less and less relevant. At the same time, the configuration of internal trade circulations had been the objects of many heated debates for the past few years. The “battle of routes”, as Wylde dubbed it, started around the same time as the implementation of the policies aiming at developing Eastern Sudan in the first half of the 1870s (1286-1296). Schematically, it opposed merchants from the Nile Valley who thought that a railway line connecting Barbar to Sawākin would significantly reduce transport costs<sup>69</sup> to the governmental authorities who were keen on developing the land route up to Egypt. Wylde, always an astute (and interested) commentator, noted that Gordon’s support for the Nile route, in line with Khedive Ismā‘īl’s first intentions, was “a military idea, and not a commercial one<sup>70</sup>”. Whatever the solution, it could only adversely affect Bijāwī traders in Sawākin who would thence either see a dwindling of the volume of goods transiting by the port, or lose their profitable control over the organisation of caravans across the Red Sea Hills. Wylde also observed that “the ten years from 1872 till 1882 (1288-1300) entirely did away with the importance of Jeddah and Hodeidah as marts for Soudan produce<sup>71</sup>”. The networks that had structured trade in the Red Sea for the past three centuries had been rapidly evolving since the mid-1850s. The balance between the long-distance international trading system connecting the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, the regional and the intercoastal systems, to use Miran’s nomenclature<sup>72</sup>, was severely altered by the introduction of steamships and the opening of the Suez Canal. In Sawākin, this meant that “trade [...] was rapidly falling into the hands of the Europeans, who, by shipping direct from London, could compete with and undersell the Arab merchants, who still adhered to the complicated way of getting their goods through Alexandria, Cairo, Suez, and Jeddah<sup>73</sup>”.

There are, here again, several ways to explain why Bijāwī traders failed to invest these new circulations when they realised that the trans-Red Sea trade was ailing. One of them had to do with capital accumulation, a matter in which their trajectory differed starkly from the riverain *jallāba* who had been successful in building up their wealth since the 1840s (1255-1265). As often in the history of nineteenth-century Sudan, vague comments designated high taxes and corruption as the

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69 Foreign traders were the main proponents of this argument. They thought that difficulties related to the organisation of transport was one of the main, if not the main obstacle to the development of their activity. Their primary wish was to mitigate their dependency on the services of certain tribes, among whom, for Eastern Sudan, the ‘Abābda, the Bishārīn and Ammār’ar (Alice MOORE-HARELL, “Decline in European trade in the Sudan from the mid-Nineteenth century,” *op. cit.*, p. 70).

70 Augustus B. WYLDE, “The Red Sea Trade,” *op. cit.*, p. 187.

71 *Ibid.*, p. 182.

72 Jonathan MIRAN, “Mapping Space and Mobility in the Red Sea Region, c.1500-1950,” *History Compass*, 2014, vol. 12, no. 2, p. 197–216.

73 Augustus B. WYLDE, “The Red Sea Trade,” *op. cit.*, p. 189.

main factors responsible in limiting the progress of export trade from Sudan<sup>74</sup>. It is true that a health tax on passengers, essentially pilgrims, was levied in the ports of the Sudanese Red Sea littoral, as well as, since 1879 (1296), a tax on transit certificates. But this could have hardly affected the merchants in Sawākin. Custom duties on exports were reported to be at 8% in Maṣawwa‘ and Sawākin and there is little reason to believe that this was deemed too high. However, despite Moore-Harrel’s claim that “[Foreigners] received no special favours and were treated the same as local traders<sup>75</sup>”, the principles behind trade taxation gave them an insurmountable advantage. Indeed, goods exported from Sawākin to the territories of the Ottoman Empire (including Egypt) were taxed at 8%, whereas the ones destined for international exportation were only imposed at a rate of 1%. Before 1869, this was of no consequence, as these commodities would have necessarily transited by an Egyptian port and be taxed again, but the opening of the Suez Canal enabled long-distance merchants to bypass this fiscal border<sup>76</sup>. As a result, Sudanese exports to Europe were less taxed than similar goods traded within the Ottoman sphere. In a context of intense economic competition in the Upper Nile Valley<sup>77</sup> in the 1860s and 1870s (1276-1297), Bijāwī traders saw their economic position slowly crumble as a few actors were holding an increasing share of the benefits thanks to their access to larger capitals and their control of the more profitable export routes, up to the point where they drove out smaller players. In Sawākin, this concentration was vividly expressed by the building of a huge *wikāla* (caravansary) with up to two hundred rooms, completed in 1881 (1298)<sup>78</sup>. Its owner, Muṣṭafā Shināwī Bey was without doubt the wealthiest trader in Sawākin. As head of the local Council, he yielded considerable influence on the city and on the organisation of caravans to the interior<sup>79</sup>.

74 John F. E. BLOSS, “The Story of Suakin (Concluded),” *op. cit.*, p. 249 ; D. RODEN, *The Twentieth Century Decline of Suakin*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

75 Alice MOORE-HARELL, *Gordon and the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 102–103.

76 The exact reason for the difference between the two rates is unclear. Based on British diplomatic correspondence (BNA FO 141/111, Morrice Bey to the Egyptian Government, 4 April 1877), Moore-Harell wrote that “On merchandise arriving from the interior, and which was not destined for export but was to be sold at the border, a tax of 8 per cent was imposed. On merchandise purchased at the border and exported right away, only 1 per cent was levied” (*Ibid.*, p. 103). This cryptic paragraph is of little use. Why would goods be brought to the border if not to be exported? Talhami’s explanation is certainly more convincing, even if the fiscal mechanism remains blurry. She solely ascribed the difference in rate to the Capitulations from which Europeans benefitted in Egypt and which had been indeed extended to Sawākin in 1865 when the port had been leased from the *wilāya* of Jidda (Ghada H. TALHAMI, *Suakin and Massawa Under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885*, *op. cit.*, p. 122). Douin is the only to mention that the dual rate was abolished in 1875 (Georges DOUIN, *Histoire du règne du Khédive Ismaïl. Tome III (première partie)*, *L’Empire africain (1863-1869)*, *op. cit.*, p. 1175–1177).

77 STERLING-DECKER, *Politics and Profits: The Development of Merchant Capitalism and its Impact on the Political Economy of Kordofan (1820-1898)*, PhD diss., Michigan State University, East Lansing, 1990, p. 146–200.

78 Jean-Pierre GREENLAW, *The Coral Buildings of Suakin: Islamic Architecture, Plannings, Design and Domestic Arrangements in a Red Sea Port*, *op. cit.*, p. 76–78.

79 John F. E. BLOSS, “The Story of Suakin (Concluded),” *op. cit.*, p. 253 ; Jonathan MIRAN, *Facing the Land, Facing the Sea: Commercial Transformation and Urban Dynamics in the Red Sea Port of Massawa, 1840s-1900s*, PhD diss., Michigan State University, East Lansing, 2004, p. 318 ; Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State*, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

Finally, British efforts aimed at reducing and then abolishing the slave trade in Egypt constituted another policy with far-reaching consequences for Eastern Sudan. The first attempt to ban the slave trade in Egypt in 1856 (1272/3) had paradoxically contributed to the better fortune of the merchants of Sawākin, as slave circulations were rerouted toward the Ḥijāz, then an expanding market<sup>80</sup>. As slave exports slowly began to shift in the 1860s from Egypt to the Red Sea Littoral and from whence to the Ḥijāz, their relative importance in the overall composition of trade circulations commenced to increase, albeit on a scale that remains to be established<sup>81</sup>. This means that when the Anglo-Egyptian Slave Trade Convention that banned all trade was signed in 1877 (1294), Eastern Sudan was bound to be disproportionately affected by this decision, despite the fact that British endeavours were rather ineffective and actual controls limited to a small number of coastal positions<sup>82</sup>. The exact consequences of this policy on Bijāwī traders are difficult to assess. With less capital, both social and economic, they were more likely to be subjected to the British Royal Navy's repressive measures, which had acquired through the 1877 Convention the right to search Egyptian ships. It also drove them to seek more discreet harbours from where to embark slaves on dhows, a practice that was not novel since fiscal evasion was another reason to avoid Sawākin. All these factors added up to amplify the divide between the upper and lower echelons of trading communities. On that regard, the British officer John D. H. Stewart (1845-1884) noted in 1883 that "up to now, although many of the smaller slave-dealers have been caught and punished, none of the really big firms engaged in the Trade have been molested<sup>83</sup>." In the interim, traders on the Qayf may have found themselves in greater contact with local tribal leaders in order to secure access to these inlets. This is all the more likely since slaves were not solely a commodity. They also carried some

80 Alice MOORE-HARELL, "Slave trade in the Sudan in the nineteenth century and its suppression in the years 1877-80," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 1998, vol. 34, no. 2, p. 113-128.

81 On the discussions of the numbers of slaves traded across the Red Sea and the effects of British abolitionist policies, see: Ralph A. AUSTEN, "The 19th Century Islamic Slave Trade from East Africa (Swahili and Red Sea Coasts): A Tentative Census," *Slavery & Abolition*, 1988, vol. 9, no. 3, p. 21-44 ; Janet J. EWALD, "The Nile Valley System and the Red Sea Slave Trade 1820-1880," *Slavery & Abolition*, 1988, vol. 9, no. 3, p. 71-92 ; Jerzy ZDANOWSKI, *Slavery and Manumission: British Policy in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf in the First Half of the 20th Century*, Reading, Ithaca Press, 2013 ; Benjamin J. REILLY, "A Well-Intentioned Failure: British Anti-slavery Measures and the Arabian Peninsula, 1820-1940," *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 2015, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 91-115.

82 In 1883, 117 men had been appointed to the suppression of the slave trade for the whole of the Egyptian Sudan, including Maşawwa', Harar, Berbera, Tadjurra and Zaylā. For Eastern Sudan, the budget provided for one inspector, one clerk and eleven soldiers at Kasalā, and one officer, one clerk and five soldiers at Sawākin. See HCPP, Egypt no. 11, "Report on the Soudan by Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart", inclosure 5 in no. 1 ("Budget for the Suppression of the Slave Trade for the Year 1883"), 1883, p. 37.

83 HCPP, Egypt no. 11, "Report on the Soudan by Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart", 1883, p. 24. Serels gave a clear example of differentiated, if only a few years later. In 1887, when Muḥammad al-Sayyid Şiyām was accused of having engaged in the slave trade. Kitchener intervened on their behalf arguing that they had only lent their guarantee to the real culprits and were innocent of any real wrongdoing. The fact that Şiyām belonged to the powerful Shināwī family that had been a stalwart of the Egyptian and British administration in Sawākin was crucial in ensuring that no actions were taken against them, contrary to "the slave brokers, the chief boatmen, and the owners of the dhows" who were all severely punished (Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State, op. cit.*, p. 66-67).

of the goods and so the reduction in servile trade had far-reaching consequences, among which the potential to increase transportation costs and making merchants more dependent on the tribal groups of Eastern Sudan responsible for organizing caravans from Kasalā or Barbar to Sawākin<sup>84</sup>.

*ii) Crisis in the Hinterland*

At the same time Sawākinī traders were experiencing significant shifts in their activity, the hinterland populations were also affected by the evolution of trade circulations. The reversal of grain exports most directly impacted Hadanduwa communities who had a near monopoly on their transport from Tāka to Sawākin<sup>85</sup>. As imports began to supplant exports, Hadanduwa networks quickly lost their pertinence. The road between Sawākin and Barbar had been attracting most of the increase in trade at the expense of the road connecting Kasalā to the Red Sea port. This could only cause tensions between the groups with stakes in the northern route, namely the Ammār'ar and the Hadanduwa. The overall axis constituted the border between their territories, but the route itself was divided in two with a southern option under Hadanduwa control through Sinkāt, and a northern option, through Handūb, under Ammār'ar control. In the 1870s, the task of surveilling and secure the first section of the route was entrusted to the Ammār'ar *shaykh* Maḥmūd 'Alī (see fig. 2.5) who came into an agreement with some sections of his tribe with the result that the northern option became prevalent<sup>86</sup> (see fig. 4.9). Trade circulations were tilting toward the Nile Valley with radically different consequences for Sawākin and Kasalā as it slowly disconnected the two main urban centres of the region. In Tāka, the road to the Nile was firmly in the hands of the Shukriyya who took up grain transport, relegating the Hadanduwa to a minor role in trade circulations.

More generally, Eastern Sudan's regional economy was not based on an immutable traditional organisation, but was susceptible to abrupt and rapid alterations. Pastoral populations, trading spheres and urban populations may have had few direct contacts with each other, they nonetheless coexisted and participated to the same socioeconomic system in which small changes could bring radical transformations, a pattern that seemed to accelerate in the late 1870s. In that perspective, local productions that were instrumental in the integration of the Semhar economy and were brought to Maṣawwa' in larger regionally dynamics of trade such as milk, goat skins, butter (ghee), fat, mats, nets and others<sup>87</sup>, also appeared eminently in the exports from Sawākin between

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84 Wylde wrote on this matter that "it was the only way that the slave merchants could exist and make profits by buying the high-class produce in the Soudan markets, and their slaves were used as transport" (Augustus B. WYLDE, "The Red Sea Trade," *op. cit.*, p. 182).

85 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

86 Hassan Abdel Aziz AHMED, *Caravan Trade and Routes in the Northern Sudan in the 19th Century: A Study in Historical Geography*, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

87 Jonathan MIRAN, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa*, *op. cit.*, p. 93–95.



**Fig. 2.5:** “Mahmoud Ali Bey, Sheikh of “Friendlies” and some of this tribesmen” (c. 1880s)

**Source:** Henry Russel, *The Ruin of the Soudan: Cause, Effect and Remedy – A Resumé of Events (1883-1891)*, London, Sampson Low, Marston & Company, p. 222.

**Comment:** Maḥmūd ‘Alī, the *shaykh* of the Ammār’ar Faḍlāb, is the man with a white beard holding a sword on the front row. The identity of the two officers on the right is not known.

1879 and 1881 (1296-1298)<sup>88</sup>. Items produced in both Tāka and Sāwākin were major commodities, but there again, the evolution of traded volumes during this period does not correspond to the previous assessment of a Sawākin “golden age” culminating in 1882 (1299/300), one year before the expansion of Mahdism in the region and the afferent disruption of trade circulations. Exports in goods emanating from the western and southern regions, respectively gum Arabic and ivory, which were central to long-distance trade in the Greater Nile Valley, were either stable or increasing<sup>89</sup>. Inversely, commodities produced by Bijāwī communities, namely skins and butter, were respectively divided by three and half and almost thirty in that period<sup>90</sup>. This collapse is all the more

88 HCPP, Egypt no. 11, “Report on the Soudan by Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart” (inclosure 4 in no. 1, “Exports from Souakin”), 1883, p. 34.

89 In 1879, 144 706 qantār (approx. 6 510 t.) of gum were exported from Sawākin, and 138 423 (approx. 6230 t.) in 1881. During the same period, exports in ivory increased from 30 449 awqa (approx. 38 t.) to 80 421 awqa (approx. 100 t.), an increase of over 260%. To put these last numbers in perspective, the gathering of 100 t. of ivory required the killing of more than 6 000 elephants. See Josiah WILLIAMS, *Life in the Soudan: Adventures amongst the Tribes, and Travels in Egypt, in 1881 and 1882*, London, Remington and Co. Publishers, 1884, p. 101.

90 Exports from Sawākin in skins amounted to 186 147 awqa (approx. 233 t.) in 1879 and 52 790 awqa (approx. 66 t.) in 1881. During the same period, exports in butter declined from 50 029 awqa (approx. 63 t.) to 1 726 awqa (approx. 2 t.)

striking that, simultaneously, exports from Abyssinia in what Stewart assumed to be lamb skins were multiplied by more than five<sup>91</sup>. Agricultural goods also collapsed, as was the case for cotton seeds from Tāka which were divided by more than thirteen in three years. However, this observation should be qualified with regard to other types of goods: exports in shells containing mother-of-pearl were multiplied by three, and that of mats followed a similar trend. Yet, these two products were not productions of pastoral groups, but rather emanating from urban populations, including those based in the Qayf.

These numbers point out to a wide crisis across the economic network linking the communities of the hinterland to Sawākin. It could have been an accounting artefact resulting from the 1877 ban on the slave trade, based on the idea that since the output of this local production was mainly destined for the Ḥijāz, as most of the slaves who were brought to the littoral, both would have transited through small harbours rather than the Sawākin customs<sup>92</sup>. Attempts at recovering these goods as imports in Jidda, proved unsuccessful, and so this theory could not be validated. Yet, it seems unlikely that only these particular goods would have been affected by this trend. Besides, one year before the collapse of regional production, Beyts, the British consul in Jidda, had commented on the fact “this article [ghee] has strangely varied” and that “owing to abundant rains in the Hedjaz and Soudan<sup>93</sup>, [it] has been cheap and plentiful<sup>94</sup>.” Thus, the rapid decrease in exports may have been caused by an important diminution in rainfalls in Sudan and Abyssinia, affecting the yield of cattle on the Red Sea Littoral.

All these elements paint an ambiguous picture of Eastern Sudan’s economic situation in the late 1870s. This is the result of contradictory trends for which Sawākin was a focal point. On the one hand, foreign trade had been on the rise since the 1850s after the abolition of state monopolies and the Barbar-Sawākin road had become the most important axis for exportations. The opening of the Suez Canal boosted this trend. Yet, on the other hand, domestic trade and the regional economic networks which were based on this system of exchange were experiencing more frequent and intense disruptions<sup>95</sup>. These were not contained to a single sphere but rippled across communities who were not these isolated units surviving solely on milk, but were inscribed within complex webs of interdependencies. In this context, some managed to make a profit, but it seems that as the stakes were rising, the economic arena was becoming a zero-sum game, and many others were becoming

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91 Exports increased from 92 260 pieces in 1879 to 490 750 in 1881.

92 Janet J. EWALD, “The Nile Valley System and the Red Sea Slave Trade 1820–1880,” *op. cit.*

93 As confirmed by records of the Nile flood. See Rory P. WALSH et al., “Flood Frequency and Impacts at Khartoum since the Early Nineteenth Century,” *The Geographical Journal*, 1994, vol. 160, no. 3, p. 272.

94 HCPP “Reports from her Majesty’s Consuls on the Manufactures, Commerce, &c., of their consular districts” (part. IV), 1878, p. 1382.

95 Yitzhak NAKASH, “Reflections on a Subsistence Economy: Production and Trade of the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898,” *op. cit.*, p. 50.

disgruntled by increased inequality.

*iii) The Mainland: Contestation and Millenarian Expectations*

The main scene to observe these acute transformations of Bijāwī societies was the Qayf, where old merchant families who had integrated in their midst Ottoman administrators and soldiers who had washed up on the shores of the African Red Sea littoral, lived side by side with the more vibrant, diverse and mobile community of predominantly Hadanduwa, but also Ammār'ar, Bishārīn and Banī 'Āmir tribesmen who had decided, for many different reasons, to permanently settle next to the port. The often contemptuous look laid upon them by foreigners was rarely observant of their social reality or their connection with the hinterland. For an Italian passing by the Red Sea port in the 1880s, "The Ghas [Qayf] is like a village for Sawākin where the indigenous population lives in filthy huts, a mixture of various tribes, and immoral black and red people<sup>96</sup>". Hofheinz thought that this influx of people, essentially Hadanduwa and Ammār'ar were seen as a threat by the Ḥaḍāriba and Artayqa elites who controlled the trade with the island's "Arab" merchants<sup>97</sup>. This may have been the case at first, but the differentiated downgrading of some segments of this community under the pressure from savvier and more worldly foreigners brought them to closer contact with this local working class.

With traders from all around the Red Sea and beyond stopping in the city, it was firmly connected with the outer world, more so than the Upper Nile Valley could be at that time. In 1872 (1288/9), Sawākin was connected to the Egyptian telegraph network *via* Barbar and to Jidda in 1882 (1298/9)<sup>98</sup>. But even without the benefit of these lines of communications, news spread quickly, and political turbulences in the Egyptian metropole were echoed locally. In 1881 and 1882, the 'Urābī Revolt must have been the talk of the city, with the participation of the officers garrisoned in Eastern Sudan as well as the traders' milieus. If no direct testimony could be found on the local apprehension of the nationalist movement which was unsettling Egyptian politics, there is however circumstantial evidence that people engaged with this topic. Wylde claimed that "after June and July 1882 [...] the Egyptians were talking about massacring the Christians at Suakin and Tokar<sup>99</sup>", drawing an obvious parallel with the Alexandria riot of 11 June 1882 (25 Rajab 1299)<sup>100</sup>. He added

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96 Massimo ZACCARIA, "Sawākin nel ricordo degli Italiani residenti (1880-1905)," *op. cit.*, p. 10.

97 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

98 Mostafa MINAWI, "Telegraphs and Territoriality in Ottoman Africa and Arabia during the Age of High Imperialism," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 2016, vol. 18, no. 6, p. 7–8.

99 Augustus B. WYLDE, '83 to '87 in the Soudan, with an Account of Sir William Hewett's Mission to King John of Abyssinia, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

100 Donald REID, "The 'Urabi Revolution and the British Conquest, 1879–1882," in Martin W. Daly (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt: Volume 2: Modern Egypt, from 1517 to the End of the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, vol.2, p. 231–237.



however that the “Arabs” had protected the “Christians” and so succeeded in thwarting the threat against them. Still, the position of the population of Sawākin may have been more ambiguous than Wylde made it out to be. The Sudanese historian Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Ḍirār mentions that a council (*majlis*) of some of the elites of the Red Sea port had convened and initially decided to partake in the revolutionary movement, before changing their mind<sup>101</sup>. They feared that the city would be punished by British bombardments, as had been the case for Alexandria on 11 July 1882 (25 Sha‘bān 1299). This initial sympathy from parts of Sawākin’s bourgeoisie for the ‘Urābist movement lasted after its defeat. ‘Alī Pasha al-Rūbī (d. 21 September 1891), a *liwā’* (major-general) of the Egyptian army and an eminent figure of the ‘Urābist movement<sup>102</sup>, was sentenced to twenty years of imprisonment in Maṣawwa‘ in 1882, before being transferred to Sawākin in 1884<sup>103</sup>. There, he was said to have been highly respected by the Sawākinīn<sup>104</sup>. The Red Sea port formed a very specific and turbulent environment, in part because of this proximity between different social bodies, small merchants, artisans but also disgruntled administrators and officers—particularly after the 1875-1876 war against Abyssinia which severely degraded conditions within the Egyptian army<sup>105</sup>—in a combination that is reminiscent of the social strata described by the historian Juan Cole as instrumental in the Egyptian uprising of 1881-1882<sup>106</sup>. While some observers in Cairo, foreign and Egyptians, misconstrued the Mahdist movement as an expression of the same discontent that had fed the political upheaval in Egypt, in Sawākin, this opinion still held some sway in the late 1880s, when ‘Urābist prisoners formerly held in captivity escaped and asked to meet the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi. They nonetheless made sure that their request was shaped for their Mahdist interlocutors and presented themselves as “desirous of religion (*rāghibīn al-dīn*)<sup>107</sup>”.

Ingenuous or not, this way to frame their engagement was in sync with the majority of Sawākin’s population which was described as adamantly Muslim or “fanatical”, in the vocabulary of that period. The establishment of a Comboni catholic school in 1885 (1302/3) by Italians who had fled from the interior stirred serious tensions that only slowly abated<sup>108</sup>. Before 1883 (1300/1) and the diffusion of the Mahdist uprising, excitement and millenarian anticipations were very much in the air, on both sides of the Red Sea<sup>109</sup>. In his 1884 report on the situation in Eastern Sudan, the

101 Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Amīr al-Sharq, ‘Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, p. 22.

102 Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan, op. cit.*, p. 51.

103 Other prisoners included al-Sayyid Bey Kandīl, the *ma’mūr* of Alexandria, ‘Umar Bay Raḥmī and the Bimbashi Aḥamd Effendi Hakki. See DUL SAD 542/8, Herbert S. G. Peacock, “Suakin Land Commission Report for 1905”, 1906, p. 13.

104 Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Tārīkh Sawākin wa-l-Baḥr al-Aḥmar, op. cit.*, p. 112–113.

105 Alice MOORE-HARELL, “The Turco-Egyptian Army in Sudan on the Eve of the Mahdiyya, 1877–80,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1999, vol. 31, no. 1, p. 19–37.

106 Juan R. COLE, *Colonialism and revolution in the Middle East, op. cit.*

107 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, letter 155.

108 Massimo ZACCARIA, “Sawākin nel ricordo degli Italiani residenti (1880-1905),” *op. cit.*, p. 14–15.

109 Luc CHANTRE, *Pèlerinages d’empire: Une histoire européenne du pèlerinage à La Mecque, op. cit.*, p. 89–90.

British officer Herbert C. Chermiside (1850-1929) made the intriguing comment that the Hadanduwa “Sherab” and “Meshab”, around 3 000 men, constituted the “backbone of [the] rebellion since 1878<sup>110</sup>”. Evidence to back this statement is flimsy, but discontent and unrest was already a reality before the introduction of Mahdism in the region<sup>111</sup>. Contrary to representations that framed the uprising as a rural and tribal movement, its first participants emerged in an urban setting (see below). Whereas neither of these two Hadanduwa clans could be identified with certainty<sup>112</sup>, the leader of the “Meshab” is a relatively well-known figure named ‘Umar Kisha, a Bijāwī trader who later held significant responsibilities in the Mahdist regime, in particular with regard to ivory exports, organised in coordination with Umm Durmān<sup>113</sup>.

Ultimately, the Diqnāb<sup>114</sup> remains the best-known family of Sawākin for the late 1870s, even if the prominent role played by ‘Uthmān Diqna in the Mahdist movement in Eastern Sudan had a powerful influence on how the trajectory of this family was depicted in the colonial literature. Still, several biographical moments echo directly the dynamics expounded above and testify of the disruption experienced by some segments of the merchants’ community in Sawākin.

‘Uthmān b. Abī Bakr b. ‘Alī Diqna<sup>115</sup> was born *c.* 1840 (1255/6) in a wealthy family of traders<sup>116</sup>. They traced back their ancestry to a man named ‘Abd Allāh al-Turkī, a Kurd from Diyarbakır who would have settled in the Red Sea port in the mid-sixteenth century when the city came under Ottoman control and integrated the Sawākinī community by marrying the daughter of the local *qādī*, the shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Alīm al-‘Abbāsī<sup>117</sup>. Whereas this story is most likely apocryphal, it nonetheless rests on the real process of assimilation of part of the Ottoman garrison within the local population. On his mother’s side, ‘Uthmān belonged to the Hadanduwa Bushāryāb, there too signalling the blend of hinterland populations settled on the Qayf with trading families to form a unique urban society<sup>118</sup>.

110 BNA WO147/44, “Tribes Inhabiting the Eastern Sudan, Report by Lieut.-Col. Chermiside”, Sawākin, 3 July 1884.

111 This vast movement of civil unrest was much more visible in other parts of Egyptian Sudan, including the Somali Coast, the Abyssinian hinterland, the Baḥr al-Ghazāl and Dār Fūr. See Alice MOORE-HARELL, *Gordon and the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 181–229.

112 Whereas identifying the “Sherab” as the Hadanduwa Shar‘āb is straightforward, the “Meshab” does not seem to refer to any known Bijāwī group settled in this particular region.

113 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 191. See chapter 4.

114 This family also appears in Mahdist sources as the Diqnāī.

115 The following account is mostly based on Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Ḍirār’s biography (*Amīr al-Sharq*, ‘*Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 19–23.) which borders on the hagiographic, but offers an interesting counterpoint to the narrative put forward in the colonial literature, best exemplified by Henry C. Jackson’s work, the only other biography on the Mahdist *amīr* (*Osman Digna*, *op. cit.*).

116 A persistent (and puzzling) rumour stated that ‘Uthmān Diqna was the son of George Vinet and born in the French city of Rouen in Normandy. Its origin is unknown. See Ernest GAMBIER-PARRY, *Suakin, 1885: Being a Sketch of the Campaign this Year*, *op. cit.*, p. 32–33.

117 The Diqnāb’s genealogical tree can be found in appendix [?].

118 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in*

Against descriptions by British commentators who depicted him as a man with limited horizons, mostly ignorant of the outer world<sup>119</sup>, ʿUthmān inserts the young ʿUthmān into the wider trading and scholarly networks that connected together both shores of the Red Sea and the Sudanese hinterland, up to Dār Fūr. Indeed, not content with having studied the Qurʾān under his father and later at the *bayt al-ʿulamāʾ* in Sawākin, he was said to have travelled to al-Mūkhā (Mokha) in Yemen, an important centre of learning—albeit in decline in the second half of the nineteenth century—where he received knowledge on more esoteric subjects such as astrology. Despite his scholarly inclinations, ʿUthmān Diqna was rapidly integrated to the family business and joined his famous “uncle<sup>120</sup>”, ʿAlī Diqna, in his journeys to the main trading centres of the Greater Nile Valley such as al-Ubayyīd, Rufāʿa and Barbar, as well as those of the western Arabian Peninsula, Jidda and Mecca. These commercial relations could be strengthened through marital unions and ʿUthmān Diqna is reported to have married within the Āl Ḍawī clan in Barbar.

Whereas the family headed by ʿAlī Diqna counted among the leading traders of the Sudanese Red Sea port in the 1860s, heading the Chamber of Commerce, a decade later, the Diqnāb’s fortune was at a low ebb. Most accounts ascribe their downfall to the capture of one of their boats involved in the slave trade with the Ḥijāz in 1877 (1294), shortly after the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian convention<sup>121</sup>, which would have led to the confiscation of most of their assets and the imprisonment of ʿUthmān Diqna and his brothers<sup>122</sup>. ʿUthmān offered a rather different perspective on this episode. According to him, ʿUthmān Diqna only had a share in a larger shipment which was seized not at sea, but in Jidda. Learning of the imprisonment of his associates, he would have crossed the Red Sea to plead their innocence and managed to convince the *wālī*, obtaining their release and the return of their goods. ʿUthmān thus exonerated the Diqnāb of any wrongdoing, a rather doubtful narrative. However, he added that the decision of the *wālī* had left the British dissatisfied, not so much because of the Diqnāb’s involvement in the slave trade, but because they wished to punish ʿUthmān Diqna for having successfully organised a cessation of all activities in Sawākin to obtain a decrease in taxes<sup>123</sup>. Ruined, ʿUthmān Diqna engaged in small trade with the interior (senna

*the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan, op. cit.*, p. 206.

119 See, for example, Augustus B. WYLDE, ‘83 to ‘87 in the Soudan, with an Account of Sir William Hewett’s Mission to King John of Abyssinia, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

120 ʿAlī Diqna was actually a cousin of ʿUthmān Diqna but “uncle” (*ʿamm*), or more precisely, “paternal uncle” was and is still used as an honorific title in Sudanese society.

121 This date looks suspiciously coincidental. Wylde, writing in 1887, did not offer a precise day for this event. But, after having resigned from his position as vice-consul of Jidda (1875-1878), he mentioned in a letter dated 8 February 1878 and destined to his father, William H. Wylde, that the H.M.S. *Wild Swan*, the ship said to have been responsible for capturing the *dhow* chartered by the Diqnāb, was returning from Aden. He travelled on that same ship from Jidda to Sawākin in early May 1878. Unfortunately, there is no reference to this particular incident in his correspondence. See DUL WYL/72/11-14.

122 Augustus B. WYLDE, ‘83 to ‘87 in the Soudan, with an Account of Sir William Hewett’s Mission to King John of Abyssinia, *op. cit.*, p. 21 ; Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna, op. cit.*, p. 23.

123 Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Amīr al-Sharq, ʿUthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, p. 22.

and ivory) and took up the supply of fresh water to Sawākin's ginnery, built in 1870 to process cotton from the Qāsh and Tūkar<sup>124</sup>. In 1881 (1298/9), when the 'Urābī revolt broke out, he was said to have been among the most ardent proponents of rebelling against Egyptian rule, but was banned from the town after a decision by the leading members of the council (*majlis*). In the meantime, he was credited with subversive endeavours such as gathering men by night outside of Sawākin to plot against the colonial government<sup>125</sup>. His activities had clear mystical overtones: based on a *zāyryja* (astrological table), he had predicted that he would lead the revolution against the unbelievers.

Whatever the biases of Ḍirār's account, it points out a situation of crisis in Sawākin, most likely prompted by the overall transformation of trade activities in the Red Sea, including the preeminence gained by foreign traders in the Sudanese port since the early 1870s. The unequal repartition of the benefits extracted from the increase in trade volumes, compounded by the alteration of slave trade routes in the region, caused a split within the local merchant class, between those with the necessary capital, connections and backing by the Egyptian government to engage in the rapidly emerging international market and those whose fate was more closely linked with regional trade circulations. Taxation was one of the main cogs of this process of differentiation and widened this gap, leading to the clear downgrading of 'Uthmān Diqna's family, from eminent members of the port's trading circles to contractors of more menial tasks such as providing water for Sawākin's nascent cotton industry.

Contemporary commentators were often suspicious of 'Uthmān Diqna's motivation for joining the Mahdist movement. They assumed that his arrest had rendered him bitter and that "he only joined [the Mahdī] from his hatred of the Egyptian Government and of Europeans<sup>126</sup>", an argument that had all the more weight for a British public opinion highly sensitive to the abolitionist discourse. While the previous development aimed at enlightening the socioeconomic factors at play and recasting the emergence of the Mahdist movement as situated at the junction of urban and rural dynamics, 'Uthmān Diqna's deeply religious background was also significant. According to Ḍirār, his mother, Nafīsa, had opened a *khalwa* to teach the Qur'ān, and after the birth of 'Uthmān and his brother, had left Sawākin to preach women in the hinterland to abandon the material world. For this, she was nicknamed *Sitt al-Banāt*<sup>127</sup>. If this was not unseen for women to engage actively in religious activities on the African Red Sea Littoral and reach positions of authority<sup>128</sup>, it nonetheless denotes a

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124 Augustus B. WYLDE, '83 to '87 in the Soudan, with an Account of Sir William Hewett's Mission to King John of Abyssinia, *op. cit.*, p. 21 ; D. RODEN, *The Twentieth Century Decline of Suakin*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

125 On this group, Jackson wrote that they were the "most disreputable of the people of Suakin" (*Osman Digna*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.)

126 Augustus B. WYLDE, '83 to '87 in the Soudan, with an Account of Sir William Hewett's Mission to King John of Abyssinia, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

127 Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Amīr al-Sharq*, 'Uthmān Diqna, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

128 Silvia BRUZZI, *Islam and gender in colonial northeast Africa*, *op. cit.*

personal environment marked by profound piety. Soon after, the Mahdist *da'wa* engulfed the Diqnāb and large sections of Bijāwī society in its project of Islamic revival.

## II. Bringing the Mahdist Da'wa to the East (1881-1883)

In contrast with accounts that set the starting point of Mahdist expansion in Eastern Sudan with the appointment of 'Uthmān Diqna as its *'āmil* on 8 May 1883 (1<sup>st</sup> Rajab 1883)<sup>129</sup>, there are converging (but tenuous) signs that meaningful contacts between Easterners and the Mahdist movement had occurred before. The *da'wa* of the Mahdī spread along the lines formed by religious and trading networks, often in combination. In the case of Eastern Sudan, merchants were certainly the main vectors of diffusion. News of extraordinary events in the West brought a handful of Easterners to travel to meet the Mahdī. They returned home carrying a powerful idea: the world would soon end and there was no time to lose to dedicate one's life to God.

The development below will begin with an overview of the Mahdist *da'wa*'s origins. The subsequent sections will endeavour to bring light to the local vectors that allowed for its diffusion in Eastern Sudan. This part's main objective is to show how the socioeconomic transformations outlined above in the context of the 1870s influenced the mobilisation in favour of the millenarian movement.

### A) *Ex Occidente Lux*

Muḥammad Aḥmad was already a famous figure in Nilotic Sudan before he announced his claim to the Mahdīship in June 1881 (Rajab 1298) and it is likely that his name had reached the hears of the Sawākīnīn before this date. Born in August 1844 (Rajab 1260)<sup>130</sup> in Labab Island<sup>131</sup>, about 20 km south of Dunqulā in a family which claimed *sharīfian* origins, Muḥammad Aḥmad b. 'Abd Allāh's life was articulated around three intertwined dimensions: his formation as a Muslim

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129 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

130 This dating remains debatable as it is based upon an oral statement made in the 1950s by the posthumous son of Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Mahdī, Sayyid 'Abd al-Raḥmān, to a former Egyptian administrator in Sudan, al-Shāṭir Buṣaylī 'Abd al-Jalīl, author of *Ma'ālim tārikh Sūdān wādī al-Nīl*, Cairo, Abū Faḍīl Press, 1955.. Previous works placed his date of birth between 1840 and 1847 (Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-imām al-Mahdī: Muḥammad Aḥmad bin 'Abd Allāh (1844-1885)*, *Lawḥa li-thā'ir sūdānī*, *op. cit.*, p. 59, note 1). One cannot help but notice that 1844 (1260) is also the date of birth of Muḥammad al-Mahdī, the son Muḥammad b. 'Alī al-Sanūsī, the founder of the Sanūsīyya *jarīqa*. The year 1260 *hijrī* marked the one thousandth anniversary of the disappearance of the twelfth *imām* in the Shiite tradition and was the focus of high expectations with regard to the return of the Hidden Imām. Curiously, references to this date could be found in Sunni texts in North Africa in the nineteenth century (Jonathan G. KATZ, "Shaykh Aḥmad's Dream: A 19th-Century Eschatological Vision," *Studia Islamica*, 1994, vol. 79, p. 159–160). In sum, it is most likely that 1260 was chosen above all for its symbolic value. Furthermore, an earlier birth date makes later dates more plausible. For example, it is more likely that Muḥammad Aḥmad joined the *khalwa* of Kutrānj (see below) when he was fifteen rather than eleven years old.

131 Also called Ashrāf Island.

scholar and a Sufi *shaykh*, his participation to the diasporic dynamics of the Dunqulā community, and his numerous and close contacts with the Egyptian colonial rule. These structured his *Umwelt*<sup>132</sup>. His father was a skilled artisan, a carpenter who built *sawāqī* (sing. *sāqiya*) and small embarkations with the help of his three other sons, who continued his trade after his death. This type of craftsmanship was particularly sought after<sup>133</sup>, and more generally, the Danāqla were competent cultivators who had developed tools uncommon in the rest of the Upper Nile Valley, allowing them to establish agricultural colonies in the western provinces, mainly in Kurdufān, in the eighteenth century. Around the same period, they began to invest trade routes—including the forty-days road from Kubayh to Asyūt—and founded market towns in Kurdufān, the most successful of which, al-Ubayyid, would later become the provincial capital<sup>134</sup>. The territorial unification achieved during the Turkiyya created new avenues for Dunqulāwī mobilities. Invested in the full range of economic activities available in the Greater Nile Valley, the Danāqla became *jallāba*, important traders in urban centres or petty itinerant sellers, and participated in the expanding slave trade in the southern regions. They also exported their technical skills further and often settled as artisans. The constitution of these diasporic communities accompanied the emergence of a Dunqulāwī identity, distinct from the other Nubians, both internally and externally.

The exact causes behind the Danaqlā's migrations are not known. Overpopulation is sometimes evoked with scant evidence to back it up. In the early nineteenth century, climatic factors such as the ones observed at the same latitudes in Eastern Sudan were probably more decisive. When ‘Abd Allāh, Muḥammad Aḥmad's father decided to move south c. 1849/50 (1265), one of the likely reasons was that local wood supplies had been overexploited. He had also secured a governmental contract to build boats, at a time when the penetration of the south was quickly gaining speed, and so had to move to the seat of the colonial regime in Khartoum. This was not, of course, the first encounter of Muḥammad Aḥmad's family with the Egyptian occupier. The Dunqulā region had seen the coming of Mamluks fleeing Cairo in 1812 and their settling in Dunqulā al-

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132 Unless stated otherwise, this sketch of Muḥammad Aḥmad's trajectory is based on the two main biographies devoted to his life by Muḥammad Sa‘īd al-Qaddāl (*Al-imām al-Mahdī: Muḥammad Aḥmad bin ‘Abd Allāh (1844-1885)*, *Lawḥa li-thā‘ir sūdānī*, *op. cit.*) and Fergus Nicoll (Fergus NICOLL, *The Sword of the Prophet: The Mahdi of Sudan and the Death of General Gordon*, *op. cit.*).

133 The erection of a waterwheel was a complex operation that necessitated expertise and experience. W. Bond, the governor of the Dongola Province between 1924 and 1926, noted “The Sagia [*sāqiya*] has to face most of the nightmares known to engineers. It is built on mud against the face of a crumbling cliff of earth, subject to erosion by river action at various levels ; it has to bear a heavy oscillating load for months on end, and has to rely for stability on gravity, friction, and string” (W. R. G. BOND, “Some Curious Methods of Cultivation in Dongola Province,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1925, vol. 8, p. 97).

134 Jay L. SPAULDING, “Early Kordofan,” in Endre Stiansen and Michael Kevane (ed.), *Kordofan Invaded: Peripheral Incorporation and Social Transformation in Islamic Africa*, Leiden, Brill, 1998, p. 56–57 ; Jay L. SPAULDING, “Pastoralism, Slavery, Commerce, Culture and the Fate of the Nubians of Northern and Central Kordofan Under Dar Fur Rule, ca. 1750-ca. 1850,” *op. cit.*, p. 409–411.

Urđī<sup>135</sup>, followed, shortly after by the troops of Mehmet Ali who invaded the region in 1820. However, the new authority was imposed to the local *kashafā*’ (sing. *kāshif*) without the profusion of violence that was observed more to the south.

Wherever they may have gone, they must have met with fellow Danāqla from their extensive diasporic community, a network which may have contributed more than any other to the foundation of a “Sudanese<sup>136</sup>” identity. But Muḥammad Aḥmad’s father died before reaching Khartoum, leaving the family to struggle in the colonial heartland. This is when Muḥammad Aḥmad began his education at the *khalwa* of the *fakī* Hāshim in Kararī (north of Khartoum), against the opinion of his family which he could therefore not support. But he proved to be a gifted student. His aptitudes led him to frequent several *khalāwī* (sing. *khalwa*) in Khartoum before attending the most prestigious educational establishments of the Upper Nile Valley, the *khalāwī* of Kutrānj from c. 1861 to 1863 (c. 1277-1279), then al-Ghubush, before settling in Umm Mariḥ<sup>137</sup> c. 1865 (c. 1281/2), where he joined Muḥammad Sharīf Nūr al-Dā’im (d. 1908), one of the preeminent Sufī *shuyūkh* of the Sammāniyya. During the following seven years, Muḥammad Aḥmad followed the teaching of his *murshid*, climbing within the ranks of the Sammāniyya, until he finalised his formation in 1868 (1284/5), date at which he was entrusted with greater responsibilities, including spreading the influence of the *ṭarīqa*, mainly in the Jazīra up to Sinnār, a period during which he established numerous contacts with other *shuyūkh* which were crucial in the early phase of the Mahdiyya.

Until 1871(1287/8), most of Muḥammad Aḥmad’s life had unfolded within the colonial sphere. Later renditions of his biography all insisted on his piety and extreme asceticism thanks to which he had gained the utmost respect of the men and women who crossed his path, but they also tended to emphasise his early hostility to the colonial regime. However, the opposition between, on one side, a native Sufī form of Islam embodied by the *fuqarā*’ and, on the other side, an alien orthodox Islam defended by the *ulamā*’ still needs to be assessed. According to Rex S. O’Fahey, “the evidence suggests a complex and far from uniform response<sup>138</sup>”. Indeed, Muḥammad Aḥmad’s own formation was exemplary of the numerous interconnections between these two spheres. Kutrānj, where he spent two years, was a place of high culture. The founder of the school, ‘Īsā b. Bishāra al-Anṣārī, had studied in al-Azhar, arguably the most prestigious institution of learning in

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135 From the Turkish *ordu*, meaning “military encampment”. This designation is used to distinguish it from the historical site of Dunqulā al-‘Ajūza (Old Dunqulā). Another spelling, Dunqulā al-‘Urđī, was adopted later. On the Mamlūk’s foundation of this town, see Arthur E. ROBINSON, “The Mamelukes in the Sudan,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1922, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 89–91.

136 In the nineteenth century, the *Sūdānī* was solely used to designate enslaved individuals from the southern provinces. It would come to be adopted as a national denomination in the 1920s. On this issue, see Elena VEZZADINI, *Lost Nationalism*, *op. cit.*, p. 35–37.

137 Umm Mariḥ was the birthplace of Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib b. al-Bashīr (1742/3-1824), the founder of the Sammāniyya in the Nilotic Sudan.

138 Rex S. O’FAHEY, “A Colonial Servant: Al-Salawi and the Sudan,” *Sudanic Africa*, 2001, vol. 12, p. 36.

the Muslim world, and so had most of his successors. This was also the case of Muḥammad Sharīf Nūr al-Dā'im with whom he entertained a close relationship. Muḥammad Aḥmad himself considered pursuing his education in Cairo c. 1863 (1279/80), before being convinced by the *shaykh* Muḥammad al-Ḍakkayr to stay and study in al-Ghubush. Obviously, an Azharī education was not anathema to him. Inversely, the colonial regime had no principled hostility toward the *khalāwī* and officials could hold varying positions. Whereas state sponsoring of institutions of education only became an official policy in 1866 (1282/3), a number of them benefitted from government grants (*iḥsānāt* sing. *iḥsān*) before this date. Popular stories of Muḥammad Aḥmad's refusal to eat food purchased with that money, on the basis that it had been collected through unlawful taxes, were probably later creations, and in any case, they reflected Muḥammad Aḥmad's vital concern for purity, rather than a political opposition to the Turkiyya.

Around 1871 (1287/8), the young disciple of the Sammāniyya had become a *shaykh* in his own right and so decided to establish his centre on Ābā Island, on the White Nile. This location had several advantages. Firstly, there was plenty of timber for his brothers to set their trade there. Secondly, this allowed him to distance himself from the colonial heartland. Indeed, until the 1850s, this space was still a frontier region controlled by the Shilluk *reth* (king)<sup>139</sup>. In that regard, it constituted a favourable ground to expand the Sammāniyya's influence. Muḥammad Aḥmad even managed to convince Muḥammad Sharīf Nūr al-Dā'im to establish a branch in the nearby locality of al-Arādayb in 1872 (1288/89).

Despite his new status, Muḥammad Aḥmad was still a relatively minor religious figure whose networks extended primarily in the Jazīra. There is no particular reason to believe he was known in Eastern Sudan, except for the fact that he had weaved dense relations with the Majādhīb during his sojourn al-Ghubush near their historical centre of al-Dāmar. But this was to change in 1878 (1295), when the growing rift between him and Nūr al-Dā'im, probably caused by his pupil's growing fame, took a radical turn. Indeed the latter decided to forsake his affiliation with his mentor to join the other major figure of the Sammāniyya, al-Qurāshī w. al-Zayn and married his daughter. At this juncture, Muḥammad Aḥmad's shift of allegiance was commented far away from Ābā Island. Al-Qurāshī's *khalwa* was located in al-Ṭayyiba, near Rufā'a where Muḥammad Aḥmad had relatives. His regular visits were witnessed by the young Bābikir Badrī who hints, albeit retrospectively, at the prestige and expectations that surrounded the rebellious *shaykh*<sup>140</sup>.

The following year, in 1879 (1296), Muḥammad Aḥmad left the Nile Valley for the first time and visited al-Ubayyīḍ. This proved to be a pivotal moment in his personal trajectory.

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139 David N. EDWARDS, "Post-Medieval Sudan and Islam (c. AD 1500-1900)," *op. cit.*, p. 277.

140 Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.



Kurdufān was then the theatre of intense disputes within the merchant community (not unlike the situation in Sawākin) which expressed themselves through proxy conflicts among rival groups, such as the revolt in 1875 (1291/2) of *shaykh* ‘Alī Kanūna (c. 1830-c. 1875) of the Ghudiyāt to protest the appointment of a Ja‘alī governor, Ilyās Pasha Muḥammad Umm Birayr (d. 1898)<sup>141</sup>. During his visit, not only could Muḥammad Aḥmad observe *in situ* the many tensions that plagued the colonial society in the borderlands, but he also established many contacts with important traders and prominent religious figures who were to play important roles when the Mahdist movement first spread in this region in 1882-1883<sup>142</sup>. Because of the many connections between Kurdufān and Sawākinī traders, it is likely that some of them were first made aware of the emergence of this new charismatic figure at that time.

Subsequent events followed one another with increasing speed. Shortly after Muḥammad Aḥmad had returned from al-Ubayyiḍ, he learned of the passing of his new mentor, al-Qurāshī w. al-Zayn, in February 1880 (Ṣafar 1297)<sup>143</sup>. He quickly travelled to al-Ṭayyiba to partake in the funeral commemorations. This is where Muḥammad Aḥmad met—in the disparate crowd of disciples and pilgrims busy building the tomb of their late *shaykh*—‘Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad Tūrshayn (1846-1899) from the Ta‘ā’īsha Baqqāra, a western community, who rapidly became one of his closest followers<sup>144</sup>. It may have been at his instigation that Muḥammad Aḥmad’s ambitions began to be affirmed more clearly, leading him to organise a second visit to al-Ubayyiḍ where his claim to the Mahdīship was probably expressed for the first time to individuals outside his immediate circle, but still not publicly<sup>145</sup>.

141 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 49 ; STERLING-DECKER, *Politics and Profits: The Development of Merchant Capitalism and its Impact on the Political Economy of Kordofan (1820-1898)*, *op. cit.*, p. 176–180. Ilyās Pasha was himself one of the most important traders in al-Ubayyiḍ. ‘Alī Kanūna died in the subsequent fighting against government troops at the battle of *khūr* ‘Ifaynāt (Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 48 and 182).

142 For a direct testimony of this visit, written half a century later, see Salih Mohammed NUR, *A Critical Edition of the Memoirs of Yūsuf Mikhā’il*, PhD diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 1962, p. 63–67 ; Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK (ed.), *Mudhakkirāt Yūsuf Mikhā’il: al-Turkiyya wa-l-Mahdiyya wa-l-ḥukm al-thunā’ī fī al-Sūdān*, *op. cit.*, p. 33–37.

143 The vast majority of accounts give 1878 (1295) for the date of his death. Among others ‘Abd Allāh Nūr al-Dā’im wrote that he passed away “the years, famously [known] among people as [the year] of mosquitoes” that is the year 1295 (‘Abd al-Maḥmūd NŪR AL-DĀ’IM, *Azāhīr al-Riyād*, Cairo, Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1973, p. 313). However, this dating is highly unlikely as it would mean that Muḥammad Aḥmad had left Nūr al-Dā’im, travelled to Ṭayyiba, then al-Ubayyiḍ and returned to Ṭayyiba in a matter of a few months. As a result, following the work of ‘Abd al-Jalīl ‘Abd Allāh Ṣāliḥ, 1880 (1297) is much more convincing (‘Abd al-Jalīl ‘Abd Allāh ṢĀLIḤ, *The Sammāniyya: Doctrine, History and Future*, n.a., n.a., n.a., p. 222–228).

144 While the veracity of Rudolf von Slatin’s text should always be considered with care, as the rest of the Wingate literature, he offers a vivid and credible account of the ‘Abd Allāh’s first encounter with Muḥammad Aḥmad seemingly based on the Khalīfa’s own recollection. See Rudolf C. SLATIN, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 126–132.

145 This second trip is also mentioned in Yūsuf Mikhā’il’s memoirs but cannot be dated with precision. See Salih Mohammed NUR, *A Critical Edition of the Memoirs of Yūsuf Mikhā’il*, *op. cit.*, p. 72–74.

Despite his secrecy, rumours surrounding Muḥammad Aḥmad were persistent and that well before he had announced being the Mahdī. He began spreading the Mahdist *da'wa* on 29 June 1881 (1<sup>st</sup> Sha'bān 1298) from whence “news of the new Mahdi spread like wildfire and people began to talk of natural wonders and miracles<sup>146</sup>.” Belated and ill-conceived attempts by the Egyptian government to squash the movement on 7 August (11 Ramaḍān 1298) and 12 August (16 Ramaḍān) were repelled, thus tremendously increasing the Mahdī's fame. Unsure that such a feat could be repeated, Muḥammad Aḥmad left Ābā Island on 17 Ramaḍān 1298 (13 August 1881). He had his followers ferried cross the White Nile and set out, once again, to the west. He headed for the Nūba Mountains to eventually settle in *jabal Qadīr* on 31 October 1881 (7 D. al-Ḥijja 1298), after having marched for more than two months.

Throughout his life, Muḥammad Aḥmad kept his eyes turned to the west, as most members of the Dunqulāwī diaspora who could be found in all parts of Nilotic Sudan, except in the eastern province where their presence was inconspicuous, and where the Mahdī never set foot. There were few relays for his message to spread in this direction, and yet, details about the first successes of the Mahdist movement must have reached Sawākin. In any case, news of the defeat of the first major expedition against the Mahdī led by Yūsuf Pasha Ḥasan al-Shalālī on 30 May 1882 (12 Rajab 1299)—seven months after the establishment of the Mahdist movement in Qadīr—and of the capture of the city of al-Ubayyiḍ on 19 January 1883 (10 Rabī' I 1300)<sup>147</sup> certainly reached the Red Sea port. 'Uthmān Diqna arrived shortly after the capital of Kurdufān had fallen into Mahdist hands to be inducted as *'āmil* of the eastern province. However, his appointment, without prior contact with the Mahdī, only makes sense if connections had already been established, including with close relatives to the future *'āmil*. Indeed, Sawākinī merchants had strong links with the trading centre of Barbar and may have been precociously aware of the Muḥammad Aḥmad's efforts to establish local relays. One of the Mahdī's former teachers, Muhammad al-Khayr 'Abd Allāh Khūjalī<sup>148</sup> (d. 1888), was among the first to be instructed to perform the *hijra*, at some point before 31 August 1882 (16 Shawwāl 1299)<sup>149</sup>.

The reach of Eastern Sudan's merchants extended much beyond Barbar and their presence in al-Ubayyiḍ is attested in August 1882 (Shawwāl 1299), before the siege of the city had begun. While their origin cannot be systematically established, those with a recognizable *nisba* belonged to Hadanduwa groups either from the vicinity of Sawākin (Qar'ībī and Shar'ābī) or of Kasalā

146 Fergus NICOLL, *The Sword of the Prophet: The Mahdi of Sudan and the Death of General Gordon*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

147 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 56; 58; 64 ; Fergus NICOLL, *The Sword of the Prophet: The Mahdi of Sudan and the Death of General Gordon*, *op. cit.*, p. 77–90; 103–113.

148 Formerly known as Muḥammad al-Ḍakkayr 'Abd Allāh Khūjalī.

149 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, Khartoum, Khartoum University Press, 1990, vol. 1, letter 50 ; Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 260–261.

(Wayl'alyābī and Shabūdīnābī)<sup>150</sup>. In February 1883 (Rabī' I/II 1300), they petitioned the secretary of the treasury, Aḥmad Sulaymān, to obtain that the goods which had been seized as booty be returned to them. The request was eventually accepted by the Mahdī who insisted that they had left the city before the Friday battle on 8 September 1882 (24 Shawwāl 1299) to go to the Mahdist camp of Kāba, a few kilometres from the city, and so could not be considered as enemies<sup>151</sup>. The letter does not say whether they had returned to Sawākin in the meantime, but this confirms that the Sawākiniyya was fully cognizant of the Mahdist uprising since its early phase, if only as passive onlookers.

More crucially, members of the groups which were to play such a pivotal role in the expansion of Mahdism to Eastern Sudan i.e. the Majādhīb and the Diqnāb (see below), had joined the Mahdī before the watershed moment represented by the capture of al-Ubayyid in January 1883 (Rabī' I 1300). Among the protagonists of the famed Sufī *ṭarīqa*, Majdhūb b. Abū Bakr b. Yūsuf went to Kurdufān in 1882 (1298/9). He quickly gained the recognition of the Mahdī who appointed him in April/May 1884<sup>152</sup> (Rajab 1301) as one of his delegates (*umanā'* sing. *amīn*)<sup>153</sup> whose functions were to support administrators, military leaders, as well as serve as advisors to the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi<sup>154</sup>. The same can be said, among the Diqnāb, of 'Umar b. Abū Bakr Diqna, the own brother of 'Uthmān Diqna<sup>155</sup>. While little is known of his role during the siege<sup>156</sup>, he participated in an expedition launched against the Nūba Mountains from February 1884 to June 1884 (Rabī' II-Ramaḍān 1301), and died during one of the violent confrontations of the “battles of the mountains” at *jabal al-Dāyir*<sup>157</sup>. As mentioned by the historian Abū Salīm, he was one of the few combatants to have been personally eulogised by the Mahdī<sup>158</sup>. This proximity may explain why 'Uthmān Diqna was so easily welcomed in al-Ubayyid. Relatives and acquaintances of his had already formed significant connections and been incorporated into the higher echelons of the Mahdist apparatus.

150 For the complete list, see Muḥammad Šāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Amīr al-Sharq. 'Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, p. 44.

151 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī, op. cit.*, letter 83.

152 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan, op. cit.*, p. 59 ; Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, Khartoum, Khartoum University Press, 1992, vol. 3, letter 332.

153 See chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion on the role of the delegates within the Mahdist state apparatus.

154 At that date, the Mahdī had already departed from al-Ubayyid to move against Khartoum. The Khalīfa had been left to supervise the affairs in al-Ubayyid, including to ensure the proper functioning of the treasury under its chief, Aḥmad Sulaymān. On this subject, see Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī, op. cit.*, letters 330 and 331.

155 Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna, op. cit.*, p. 24 ; Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, p. 3.

156 Jackson was mistaken when he wrote that 'Umar “had [...] died of disease contracted during the siege of El Obeid [al-Ubayyid]” (*Osman Digna, op. cit.*, p. 25).

157 Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitāb sa 'adat al-mustahdi bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdi (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdi) by Isma'il b. 'Abd al-Qadir, op. cit.*, p. 157–165 ; Enrico ILLE, “The Nuba Mountains between Coercion and Persuasion during Mahdist Rule (1881–98),” *Northeast African Studies*, 2015, vol. 15, no. 2, p. 13–14.

158 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī, op. cit.*, letter 378.

The presence of both Majdhūb b. Abū Bakr b. Yūsuf and ‘Umar b. Abū Bakr Diqna testifies of the precociousness of the mobilisation of the two families, the Majādhīb and the Diqnāb, in favour of the Mahdist revolution. Their decision, however, seems to have resulted from personal initiatives by individuals who had limited standing in their community of origin and whose early fervour may have been at least partially based on the social recognition they thought they could reap by investing the new dissenting movement and so bypass the internal hierarchy of the family institutions to which they belonged.

In that respect, their trajectory is exemplary of Mahdist leaders at large. A robust prosopographical study has yet to be conducted, but the tentative analysis of Richard H. Dekmejian and Margaret J. Wyszomirski exhibits this trend. Of their sample of 140 Mahdist leaders, a third of them were “commoners”, the largest category, slightly above tribal leaders and significantly more than religious leaders<sup>159</sup>. The egalitarian message at the core of the Mahdist *da‘wa* was particularly attractive for individuals who strived for social ascension and felt they had not received their fair share of the new commoditised market economy, particularly within groups such as the Diqnāb that had found themselves on the losing side of this dynamic.

These initial contacts were decisive since early adherents had more chances to integrate the group of the *ashrāf*, the companions of the Mahdī, and rise in the ranks of the movement to reach a position where they could contribute to shape policies, particularly so for men coming from Eastern Sudan where the Mahdī had few if any contacts, in contrast with the Upper Nile Valley or the Jazīra. This had very practical consequences reflected in the epistolary practices of the embryonic Mahdist administration. Letters were often written in the Mahdī’s own hand, but the name of the recipients were left blank only to be filled by his secretaries following the instructions of provincial appointees<sup>160</sup>. In the absence of other sources, men like ‘Umar Diqna and Majdhūb b. Abū Bakr Yūsuf informed the Mahdī’s vision and later the Khalīfa’s on authority structures in Bijāwī territories. Conversely, the fact that they were both members of groups that later monopolised power in Eastern Sudan should not be taken as unequivocal proof that the Diqnāb and the Majādhīb were necessarily predisposed to participating in the Mahdist movement. These pioneers moulded the dynamics of the latter’s expansion. Yet, qualifying this teleological reading is delicate for the

159 Richard H. DEKMEJIAN and M.J. WYSZOMIRSKI, “Charismatic Leadership in Islam: The Mahdi of the Sudan,” *op. cit.*, p. 211. The data is based on the notices of Richard Hill’s *Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan* (Londres, Franck Cass & Co., 1967) which deals predominantly with the higher levels of Mahdist leadership. A study extended to the lower echelons would certainly show an even higher proportion.

160 For an example, see Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 109. In this letter, the recipients were not indicated, but in the copy recorded in the *Daftar* of ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr al-Majdhūb, it was destined to the Bishārīn, the Shabūdīnāb, the Hadanduwa *mashāyikh* of Tāka, the Bayranāb and the “tribes of the east”. This reveals ‘Uthmān Diqna representations of influential communities and potential allies in the region. Therefore, it is not surprising the Ḥalānqa and Malhītkināb were not directly mentioned, as their influence had considerably waned since the Egyptian conquest of the 1840s (see appendix [?]).

simple reason that other less successful paths left few traces. In the case of Eastern Sudan, the Mahdī received a delegation from Sawākin (alongside several others from the Jazīra) while halting for several days in al-Qī‘a, near Khartoum, in October 1884 (D. al-Ḥijja 1301)<sup>161</sup>, but ‘Uthmān Diqna’s hold on power was probably already too mature to be challenged.

Moreover, if ‘Umar died in the Nūba Mountains, Majdhūb stayed alongside the Mahdī. He served as a relay between the central Mahdist power and the local network of the Majādhīb, to the extent that when ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Ṭayyib b. Qamr al-Dīn, a brother of the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir (see below) came to meet and pledge allegiance to the Mahdī in June 1885 (Sha‘bān/Ramaḍān 1302), the latter instructed Majdhūb to host him and all his retinue in his own domicile. The Mahdī even offered to meet them there<sup>162</sup>.

Whereas the men who had joined the Mahdī from Eastern Sudan were enlisted for the *jihād* in the West and asked to join the banner of the *shaykh* ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Nūr<sup>163</sup>, in early 1883, upon ‘Uthmān Diqna’s appointment as *‘āmil* of the East, the situation had changed and so the priorities of the Mahdist regime. With the settlement in the recently conquered capital of Kurdufān, Mahdist power shifted its attention from the stabilisation of its position in the western province to the projection of its influence to regions which had yet to be incorporated. This shift was also the consequence of strategic considerations. ‘Uthmān Diqna was all the better received that the Mahdī was intent on spreading the revolution to Eastern Sudan so as to impede the progress of a potential support force coming from Sawākin<sup>164</sup>.

### ***B) On ‘Uthmān Diqna’s Path: The Return to the East***

Thanks to the *Waqā’i*, the details of ‘Uthmān Diqna’s return to Eastern Sudan are relatively well known. He did not leave al-Ubayyīḍ immediately after having received from the Mahdī the letters he was meant to distribute and which stipulated that he had been appointed as *‘āmil*, c. June/July 1883 (Sha‘bān 1300). According to the author of the *Waqā’i*, the Mahdist troop did not stop until they reached the territory of the Bishārīn, meaning that they probably avoided passing

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161 Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitāb sa‘adat al-mustahdī bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdī (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdī)* by Isma‘il b. ‘Abd al-Qadir, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

162 More precisely, they were offered to stay at the house of Aḥmad Sulaymān, the *amīn* of the treasury, or at Majdhūb’s. The women accompanying ‘Abd Allāh al-Majdhūb mentioned that they preferred the second option, probably because of the family ties that united them with Majdhūb (see below). Quite mysteriously, the Mahdī added in this otherwise very short and mundane letter, that “the allegiance of the coast is not the objective (*wa bay‘a al-sāhil laysat al-gharaḍ*)” (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, Khartoum, Khartoum University Press, 1992, vol. 5, letter 806).

163 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 104.

164 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 27–28.

through Barbar which was still held by an Egyptian garrison in the summer of 1883 (mid-1300)<sup>165</sup>.

The destination of the small party changed at least once, when they learned in Aryāb that the “Turks” had moved from Sawākin to Sinkāt, an ordinary move for this season, prompting ‘Uthmān Diqna to alter his plan and head toward the district headquarter (*ma`mūriyya*) instead. While there was no doubt as to their final destination, namely Sawākin, the choice of the route was probably decided once they had reached the Nile. Four *da`wa* letters were copied in various compilations specific to Eastern Sudan (see above) which, it can be safely assumed, were not delivered to their recipients. Among them, one was destined to “al-Ṭayyib b. Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Majdhūb, all the *fuqarā`* of the Majādhīb, the sons of Ḥamad al-Majdhūb, and all the Ja`ālīn tribes<sup>166</sup>”, meaning that ‘Uthmān Diqna had stopped in al-Dāmar, but had been prevented from meeting with the Majādhīb. In the same token, the letter mentioned above, destined to “the Bishārīn, the Shabūdīnāb, the Hadanduwa *shuyūkh* of Tāka, the Bayranāb and others<sup>167</sup>”, is indicative that from al-Dāmar, they had considered heading south to travel alongside the ‘Aṭbara River up to Kasalā. The reasons why the northern route was privileged are not known. It is likely that delays put off their initial plans, and that the seasonal migration of part of Sawākin’s population to Sinkāt, in the Hadanduwa heartland, was seen as an opportunity not to be missed, as contacts would be easier to establish.

Notwithstanding this first deviation, they followed the usual caravan road connecting the Nile with the Red Sea port of Sawākin. On their first stop, probably in Awbāk, they met Bishārīn communities who all pledged allegiance to the Mahdiyya. The latter also informed them that the Egyptians under Tawfīq Bey had moved from Sawākin to Sinkāt<sup>168</sup>. The Mahdists continued their journey, but instead of pursuing to Sawākin, their “primary goal (*al-maqṣad al-a`zam*)”, they decided to head toward Sinkāt. Then, they reached Aryāb, the most important well on the Barbar-Sawākin route, where they repeated the same process with the Ammār’ar Mūsiyāb. They distributed the Mahdī’s letters and had them pledge allegiance, which they all accepted to do. They were fortunate to obtain the support of a *faqīh*, Aḥmad b. Ādam al-Qulhuyābī, who is described as the head (*ra`is*) of the Ammār’ar but whose direct affiliation to this tribe is uncertain. Abū Salīm suggests that he may have belonged to the Qādiriyya, as most of the Ammār’ar did, but this is also a

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165 Muḥammad al-Khayr ‘Abd Allāh Khūjalī was only appointed as *‘amil* of Barbar on 31 March 1884 (4 Jumādā II 1301). See Ibrāhīm ‘Akāsha ‘ALĪ, *Wilāyat Barbar fī ‘ahd al-Khalīfa ‘Abd Allāh (Ramaḍān 1302 – Rajab 1317 / June 1885 – November 1899)*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

166 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 110. In the *Murshid*, Abū Salīm indicated wrongly that the main recipient of this letter was Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir al-Majdhūb. It was later corrected in the *Al-āthār al-kāmila*.

167 *Ibid.*, letter 109.

168 It is unlikely that Egyptian authorities in Sawākin were aware of ‘Uthmān Diqna’s advance, and much more probable that Tawfīq Bey had moved to Sinkāt as was customary for most of the population of the harbour during the summer season. There is, throughout the *Waqā`i`*, a certain degree of confusion with regard Tawfīq’s movements.

conjecture<sup>169</sup>.

The small Mahdist group pushed forward, following the stations of the caravan route and arrived at the *khūr* of Kūkrayb where another well was situated. This time, they had attained Hadanduwa territory. Without more precisions, the author of the *Waqā'i* stated that they pledged allegiance to 'Uthmān Diqna. After Kūkrayb, they left the easiest northern road to Sawākin through Awshid, Awtāw and Handūb and headed to the district headquarter of Sinkāt. Before reaching this government position, the group split. Led by two *mulāzamīn* (officers) of the Mahdī, Awnūr and his brother Ṭaha, one side left carrying “some the many letters [written] by your Lordship and which were with us, some for the Hadanduwa, some for the Ammār'ar, and some for the *khulafā*' of the Khatmiyya, so as to hand them to their recipients<sup>170</sup>”. The other group continued to the south-east<sup>171</sup>, giving the Mahdī's letters to all the nomadic tribes they encountered, until they arrived at Qabāb, in late July (D. al-Qa' da 1300)<sup>172</sup>, where they met the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir b. al-Ṭayyib b. Qamr al-Dīn al-Majdhūb (1832/3-1890), the prominent figure of the Majādhīb in Eastern Sudan since the mid-1850s when his father sent him to Sawākin<sup>173</sup>. He immediately showed compliance to the Mahdī's *da'wa*, brought his letter to his forehead and pledged allegiance to 'Uthmān Diqna. He was seen by the author of the *Waqā'i* a most beneficial asset for the Mahdist cause since “his Lordship does not ignore how his position [is regarded] by the people, [and] a large group of people from Sawākin and from the nomads (*min ahālī Sawākin wa al-'urbān*) follow his lead<sup>174</sup>”.

From Qabāb, 'Uthmān Diqna then headed to Arkawīt, a Hadanduwa stronghold, where relatives of his resided. Paradoxically, for the first time, the reaction of the local populations was less enthusiastic than before. Out of fear of retaliations from the small body of troops that had been dispatched to this place to seize Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Faqīh Diqna (d. 1883), 'Uthmān's cousin, they initially prevented the Mahdists to approach. The *Waqā'i* stated that Aḥmad had managed to

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169 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

170 *Ibid.*, p. 33–34.

171 Jackson describes a lengthier journey, more to the north to *jabal* Haraythrī, following the *khūr* Haraythrī and then south to *khūr* Amayt. There is no other evidence to this itinerary, but it could explain why 'Uthmān Diqna's group had met a greater number of tribes than by following the direct route to Qabāb (Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna*, *op. cit.*, p. 26).

172 This was almost three months after having received his appointment by the Mahdī on 8 May 1883 (1<sup>st</sup> Rajab 1300). Even considering that their departure was delayed, arriving at the Red Sea Hills should not have taken so much time. There are, however, a few plausible explanations. During the summer of 1883, the Upper Nile Valley was still very much under Egyptian control and the small Mahdist expedition had to be discreet. They failed on that matter as a telegram was sent from Barbar to Sawākin, signalling the authorities that 'Uthmān Diqna had been spotted at al-Dāmar and was heading toward the Red Sea port (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 39). The holy month of Ramaḍān, which spanned most of July 1883, probably further slowed down the progress of the Mahdist troop. Still, another reason may have been that 'Uthmān Diqna was attempting to reach the greatest number of tribes on his way. The succession of encounters described as succinct episodes may have been more complex to organise than suggested in the *Waqā'i*.

173 John O. HUNWICK and Rex S. O'FAHEY (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 1 Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900*, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

174 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

gather the nomads and convinced them to attack the government's soldiers, but it is unclear how he could have done so. In any case, "When the Turks had wind of this, they saddled their camels at the first light of dawn and returned to [Sinkāt], as they had spent the night in fear of the evil [that might come] when sleeping<sup>175</sup>". That morning, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1883 (28 Ramaḍān 1300)<sup>176</sup>, 'Uthmān Diqna entered the camp and received the allegiance of most of those present.

The following day, after consulting with the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir, they decided to convene in the *khūr* Tāwī before marching against Sinkāt. They stopped for the night and on 4 August, they celebrated the *īd al-fiṭr* on the morning of the first day of Shawwāl 1300. They set out soon after and arrived at the encampment surrounding the Sinkāt garrison (*kāra*) in the late forenoon. There again, many pledged allegiance, with the exception of the *khulafā'* of the Khatmiyya who nonetheless accepted to act as intercessors with the governor (*muḥāfiẓ*) Tawfiq Bey. They asked for three days before any action be taken, but 'Uthmān Diqna refused and told them they will attack after the midday prayer (*ẓuhr*). Again, the representatives of the Khatmiyya communicated to the garrison the Mahdists' conditions and obtained another delay, until "[shadows] are three-feet-long". But the men gathered outside quickly saw that this time was being used by the Egyptian troops to reinforce their defences and the order was given to attack the eight-room barrack that was the only solid building. The Khatmī *khulafā'*, once more placed in an uncomfortable position, gathered their followers, moved away and observed the scene from a distance. The ensuing fight was confused. Some of the *fuqarā'* managed to enter, following al-Faqīh b. Muḥammad Diqna, another cousin of 'Uthmān and Aḥmad's brother. However, the door was shut by the defenders and most Mahdist adherents were blocked outside where they feverishly attempted to dig holes into the walls or climb them. Those inside found themselves in rooms "obscured by the smoke of guns", fighting hand-to-hand, while those outside fell under bullets fired by soldiers who had taken refuge on the rooftop. None of the Mahdists seemed to have had firearms and many resorted to "throwing whatever they would find, stones or clods of mud, to the houses<sup>177</sup>". 'Uthmān Diqna himself was shot three times, twice in his hands and once in his head, and hastily taken out. They all retreated to Arkawīt, leaving sixty casualties behind<sup>178</sup>. Most of the men (and in all likelihood women, but the *Waqā'i'* does not allude to their presence) belonged to a tight network of individuals articulated around the Majādhīb and the Diqnāb. They formed the nucleus of the Mahdist movement in Eastern Sudan upon 'Uthmān Diqna's return.

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175 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

176 This is the first date given in the *Waqā'i'*.

177 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

178 Na'ūm SHUQAYR, *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*, Beirut, Dār al-jīl, 1981, p. 420–424 ; Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna*, *op. cit.*, p. 30–32.



### C) Family Matters: The Early Dynamics of Mahdist mobilisation

One striking aspect of the first phase of the Mahdist expansion in the region was the extent to which it relied on family connections, and that from the onset, as seen above with regard to the early presence of ‘Umar Diqna and Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf alongside the Mahdī. The Diqnāb were particularly present in Arkawīt where ‘Uthmān Diqna had stopped before advancing against Sinkāt. There he had met his two cousins from the more prestigious branch of the family, Aḥmad (who had also been arrested in 1877 for slave trading) and al-Faqīh. ‘Uthmān himself could hardly mobilise his immediate relatives. ‘Umar had stayed in Kurdufān and his other brother, ‘Alī, is said to have passed away in 1880 (1297/8).

The Diqnāb paid a heavy price for their leading role in the uprising. Aḥmad and al-Faqīh were killed during the assault on Sinkāt. ‘Uthmān’s nephews<sup>179</sup>, Mūsā, died at the “second battle of the Coast” on 4 February 1884 (6 Rabī‘ II 1301), Madanī and Aḥmad at the “third battle of the Coast” on 28-29 February 1884 (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> Jumādā I 1301), and Aḥmad, one of his actual nephews, was killed during an encounter in Shaykh Barghūth the same year, probably alongside Muḥammad Nūr. The following year, Awshaykh, another nephew, and ‘Alī, ‘Uthmān’s own son, were among the casualties of the assault against the *zarība* erected by the British at Tūfrayk on 22 March 1885 (6 Jumādā II 1302). Muḥammad Fāy was killed in a skirmish near Sawākin in March 1888 (Jumādā II 1305), as was Muḥammad Ṭāhir ‘Alī Diqna near Kasalā in March 1896 (Ramaḍān 1313). To these already numerous losses must be added those who died of disease, like al-Ṭāhir b. Muḥammad Nūr who passed away in Adārāma in June 1892 (D. al-Qa‘da 1309). In total, the violent deaths of around a dozen male members of the Diqnāb were recorded, a number almost certainly underestimated<sup>180</sup>.

For all of the strength of their initial engagement, the Diqnāb did not monopolise positions within the Mahdist apparatus in Eastern Sudan, maybe because so few of them remained that were of age. Of ‘Uthmān’s two remaining sons, Muḥammad and Awhad, Wylde wrote that *c.* 1883 they were both under ten years old<sup>181</sup>. A brief look at the appointments between 1883 and 1885 (1300-

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179 The term is used here to designate first and second degree relatives.

180 The intensity of the Diqnāb’s engagement was noted by the Mahdī and the Khalīfa. As mentioned before, the former wrote a rare eulogy to celebrate the death of ‘Umar b. Abū Bakr Diqna on 20 July 1884 (25 Ramaḍān 1301) (*Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 13, p. 22-23; also Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 378). On another occasion, in January 1884 (Rabī‘ I 1301), he insisted that “[‘Uthmān] and [his] brothers who follow us should prepare themselves to abandon their personal desires and endure the afflictions (*shadā’id al-dunyā*) that bring closer to the Lord of Creation” (*Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 5, p. 11-13; also Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, Khartoum, Khartoum University Press, 1991, vol. 2, letter 209). Whereas the message of the Mahdī was quite generic, a letter written by the Khalīfa in August 1885 (D. al-Qa‘da 1302), after fightings with Anglo-Egyptian forces had ceased, was much more direct. He reminded that no wake should be organised for martyrs and that God will be kind to “your son, your relatives, and the *anṣār* of the religion” (*Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 22, p. 32-33).

181 Augustus B. WYLDE, *‘83 to ‘87 in the Soudan, with an Account of Sir William Hewett’s Mission to King John of Abyssinia*, London, Remington and Co. Publishers, 1888, vol. 2, p. 310.

1302) confirms this<sup>182</sup>. Of the five first *umarā'*, only one, Muḥammad Nūr, belonged to the Diqnāb. Furthermore, he had been appointed over al-Daqqā, in Banī 'Āmir territory, as well as part of the Abyssinian plateau, in Sanhīt and Amaydīb<sup>183</sup>. His ability to impose his authority on this area must have been doubtful, even considering 'Uthmān Diqna's early enthusiasm. In any case, he was killed before he had time to move in that direction.

If their names appear time and time again, they rarely occupied high ranks. For example, Muḥammad Fāy Diqna (d. 1888) participated in an operation against the Ammār'ar in the *khūr* Saytarāb in late 1887 (early 1305), but the detachment was placed under the authority of the *amīr* Idrīs Harūn<sup>184</sup>. In the early 1890s, two sons of 'Uthmān's cousin Mūsā b. Muḥammad al-Faqīh Diqna, Muḥammad and 'Abū al-Faṭḥ, had active but marginal roles. In early 1892 (mid-1309), the first was appointed in the greater region of Tibīlūl to collect grain and the second in Kūkrayb to levy taxes on caravans. Furthermore, the family, as every other social groups in Eastern Sudan, was not wholly united behind its head and in its commitment to the Mahdist movement. Muḥammad b. Mūsā, for example, was accused of having betrayed his uncle when he fled to al-Daqqā and made contacts with Italian officers in 1890 (1307/8). He was eventually pardoned, but may have given reasons to 'Uthmān Diqna to doubt their loyalty, up to the point that the Khalīfa himself had to intervene and request from him that he integrates members of the Diqnāb to the "people of [his] counsel (*ahl mashwara*)" in April 1891 (Ramaḍān 1308). His answer was non-committal: he declared that he would consult with them. In the meantime, probably as a sign of good will, he appointed a son of the late Muḥammad Fāy Diqna, al-Ṭāhir, at the head of the small group of *anṣār* at Umm 'Aḍām<sup>185</sup> on the bank of the 'Aṭbara, hardly a major position<sup>186</sup>.

While the Diqnāb's support had been instrumental in the initial phase of the uprising before slowly dwindling, the expansion of the Mahdist *da'wa* circulated primarily within the network of the eastern Majādhīb. Many of its members would eventually receive military command like Aḥmad b. Jalāl al-Dīn, al-Ḥājj Ḥamad, al-Fakī al-Ṭayyib Muḥammad, Majdhūb b. al-Fakī 'Abd Allāh al-Naqar or the own son of the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir, Muḥammad al-Majdhūb<sup>187</sup>. As the Diqnāb, several lost their lives during subsequent combats, including al-Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥājj 'Umar Qamr al-Dīn al-Majdhūb, one of the sons of the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir, who was killed at the "third battle of the

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182 See chapter 3.

183 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 117, appendix 7.

184 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 11, 21 and 22.

185 The location of this place could not be ascertained.

186 In January 1892 (Jumādā II 1309), the Khalīfa wrote another letter, this time to the Diqnāb themselves, exhorting them to assist 'Uthmān Diqna (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 221 and 242).

187 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – 'Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 35–36.

Coast”<sup>188</sup>. Such a commitment to the Mahdist cause was buttressed on the personal and intense bonds that existed between the Diqnāb and the Majādhīb. Indeed, ‘Uthmān’s cousin, the famous merchant ‘Alī Diqna, had gone to the Majādhīb of al-Dāmar in 1853/4 (1269) to request—two decades after Muḥammad Majdhūb’s departure from Sawākin—that a *khalīfa* be appointed there again<sup>189</sup>. ‘Uthmān Diqna, following the family tradition, was a disciple of the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir, and he hoped that having gained the latter’s support, his community would promptly engage in the Mahdist movement, since, in the words of the author of the *Waqā’i*, “it is well known [...] that a large number of people among the people of Sawākin and the nomads (*‘urbān*) follow his guidance<sup>190</sup>.”

The role of the Majādhīb is illustrative of the intertwining of family and religious networks as well as the latter’s preeminent role in the first stage of Muḥammad Aḥmad’s *da‘wa*. A cursory analysis of his early correspondence reveals that Sufi *shuyūkh* were not only the interlocutors privileged by the Mahdī, but also the main group to be entrusted with responsibilities regarding the nascent Mahdist community<sup>191</sup>. The first letter written after the public announcement of his claim to Mahdīship in June 1881 (Rajab 1298) was sent to Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Baṣīr (d. 1908), a respected Sufi figure from the Ḥalāwiyyīn (a community located on the Blue Nile near Wad Madanī), whose daughter Muḥammad Aḥmad had married<sup>192</sup>. He was to “encourage the populations [to perform] the *hijra* to [the Mahdī]”; collect “the rights of God Almighty (*ḥuqūq Allāh ta‘ālī*)”; receive the allegiance of the Mahdist followers since the Mahdī “ha[d] made so that pledging allegiance (*mubāya‘a*) to [al-Baṣīr] is pledging allegiance to [him]”; and, finally, bring “the beloved to renounce their homelands (*awṭān*) and their properties (*amwāl*)<sup>193</sup>”. Similar missions were given to other Sufi *shuyūkh* such as ‘Aṭā’ al-Mannān al-Ṣulayḥābī, Muḥammad al-Amīn Yūsuf al-Hindī (1817/8-1883) or Muhammad al-Khayr ‘Abd Allāh Khūjalī (d. 1888). They all evolved in interconnected networks: al-Hindī was a former pupil of the *khalwa* of Kutrānj, like the Mahdī, where he was taught the *tajwīd* (the correct way to recite the Qur’ān) by a member of the famed al-Ṣulayḥābī family, ‘Abd Allāh al-Ṣulayḥābī al-Burqāwī<sup>194</sup>. As for Khūjalī, he had strong ties with the *khalwa* of al-Ghubush where he had encouraged the young Muḥammad Aḥmad to pursue his education, as well as with the Majādhīb of al-Dāmar (see above).

188 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

189 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 255; 425–426.

190 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

191 ‘Awaḍ Jabār al-Darām ĀDAM, *Nizām al-ḥukm wa al-idāra fī dawla al-Mahdiyya bi-l-Sūdān (1885-1898)*, *PhD Diss., University al-Nīlayn, Khartoum, 2004.*, PhD diss., Jāmi‘at al-Nīlayn, Khartoum, 2004, p. 88; 94.

192 Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

193 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 15.

194 John O. HUNWICK and Rex S. O’FAHEY (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 1 Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900*, *op. cit.*, p. 277–278.

Therefore, it is not surprising that, besides the Majādhīb, ‘Uthmān Diqna’s first contacts to be mentioned by name in the *Waqā’i* are all religious figures, like the *faqīh* Aḥmad bin Ādam al-Qulhuyābī, probably a Qādirī *shaykh*<sup>195</sup>, and the local *khulafā’* of the Khatmiyya, Muḥammad al-Ṣāfī and ‘Abd Allāh Ḥamad Nūr<sup>196</sup>. As for al-Ṭāhir al-Majdhūb himself, he “met us [, offered us] his hospitality and welcome[d us], he took his letter and accepted it and placed it on his eyes and on his head and pledged allegiance [to us] thankful and joyful, may God be praised for this, for he was honoured by the letter of his lordship<sup>197</sup>.” That such a respected religious leader would lend his legitimacy was of tremendous consequence, especially since ‘Uthmān Diqna, except for his family ties, was probably not a renowned name among the communities of the region, whereas the latter, particularly the Hadanduwa, were favourably inclined toward the *ṭarīqa* of the Majādhīb. Yet the tendency by British officers to conflate tribal and Sufi affiliations was based on misguided conceptions on the potency of both social bodies, which were looser, more flexible and geographically differentiated than they cared to recognise. While the influence of the eastern Majādhīb should not be exaggerated<sup>198</sup>, their *baraka* was widely recognised and a force to be reckoned with that could sway entire communities. The *amīr* al-Khiḍir, just appointed by ‘Uthmān Diqna to undertake the siege of Tūkar, was welcomed by the local population thanks to the fact that “our *shaykh* al-Majdhūb had written to them a letter, since they are of his following, in which he ordered them to follow the *amīr* and not contradict him. And so they did. Especially their *shaykh* whose name is Mūsā b. al-Faqīh<sup>199</sup>.” Conversely, Mahdist leaders whose religious standing was not as obvious as for Sufi *shuyūkh* were also presented as pious characters. The Mahdist *da‘wa* insisted on religious virtue and tended to minimise tribal affiliations, considered as hurdles to the formation of a reformed society. ‘Alī Ṭalāb b. Muḥammad who led the first operation to cut the road between Sawākin and Sinkāt in October 1883 (D. al-Ḥijja 1301) was said to be “a righteous man, ascetic (*zāhid*), strongly determined (*qawī al-‘azm*), and with high interest for the religion (*dhū himma ‘āliya fī al-dīn*)”. Muṣṭafā ‘Alī Hadal, to whom the *imāra* of Kasalā was entrusted was “pious, ascetic, [and] devout (*rajul taqī, zāhid, ‘ābid*), who cares for [what is] good and righteous (*yazunnu fī-hi al-khayr wa al-ṣalāh*)”. As for ‘Alī b. Ḥāmid al-Jamīlābī, ‘Uthmān Diqna’s appointee in

195 Despite the emphasis in the *Waqā’i* on the support of the eastern Majādhīb, adherents of the Qādiriyya were also prompt to engage in the Mahdist movement (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 27).

196 *Ibid.*, p. 32–34.

197 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

198 Ḥammūdī only granted a subordinate role to al-Majdhūb. According to him, the leader of the Majādhīb in Eastern left Sawākin only once he had realised the attraction of the Mahdist *da‘wa* on his followers—most of them Hadanduwa or related to the Diqnāb—and decided to join them in Arkawīt. But he considers it likely that al-Majdhūb would have eventually decided to rally the Mahdiyya, even without the appointment of ‘Uthmān Diqna as *‘āmil* of the province. See Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 32–34.

199 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

Sinkāt, he was designated as a *faqih* on at least one occasion in the *Waqā'i*<sup>200</sup>.

The monopoly on faith professed by the Mahdī went against a tradition of relative concord between Sufī *ṭuruq* in Nilotic Sudan. This could only generate major tensions with other institutions, particularly, in Eastern Sudan, with the powerful Khatmiyya. Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mīrghanī II (b. 1848), who had succeeded his father Muḥammad al-Ḥasan<sup>201</sup> (b. 1819) in 1869 (1285/6) at the head of the Sudanese branch of the *ṭarīqa* in Kasalā, travelled extensively in Eastern Sudan in 1883 and 1884 (1301/2) in an attempt to counter the *da‘wa* of Muḥammad Aḥmad, mobilise support for the defence of their headquarter in Eastern Sudan and resist the Mahdist advance. Exhausted, he left Kasalā for Sawākin in January 1884 (Rabī‘ I 1301)<sup>202</sup>—a month before the siege of Kasalā began in earnest—leaving Sayyid al-Bakrī (d. 1886/7) as his representative. In May 1885 (Rajab-Sha‘bān 1302), the latter was severely injured in a fight with the Mahdist troops encircling the town. He eventually pledged allegiance to the Mahdiyya and was one of the intermediaries who negotiated the surrender of the town on 29 July 1885 (16 Shawwāl 1302). His adherents managed to evacuate him to the Ḥijāz where he died soon after. In the meantime, Sawākin had become a centre of anti-Mahdist propaganda. Whereas the *khulafā’* of the Khatmiyya had tried primarily to protect their own positions in Eastern Sudan, their potential influence was not lost on the Khedivial government which asked Muḥammad SIRR al-Khatm II (1844-1916) to go to the Red Sea port where he arrived in late December 1883 (late Ṣafar 1301). There, he met his brother ‘Uthmān Tāj al-SIRR (1849/50-1903) who resided in Sawākin, before being joined by their third brother, ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Maḥjūb (d. 1912), coming from the Ḥijāz. Muḥammad SIRR al-Khatm led the effort to rebut Muḥammad Aḥmad’s claim to the Mahdīship by writing letters that were meant to be widely distributed alongside the proclamation of the Khartoum’s *‘ulamā’* in April 1885 (Jumādā II-Rajab 1302), but his efforts met little success in the hinterland, and British plans to form an anti-Mahdist government headed by the Khatmī leader were abandoned<sup>203</sup>.

Despite its tenuous effects, the Khatmiyya’s opposition to the Mahdist movement was bitterly criticised by ‘Uthmān Diqna, a thought reflected in the text of the *Waqā'i*. Muḥammad SIRR

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200 *Ibid.*, p. 51, 65 and 73.

201 He was himself one of the sons of the founder of the *ṭarīqa*, Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mīrghanī (1793/4-1852).

202 Warburg dated his departure from June 1884 (“Islam in the Sudan under the Funj and the Ottomans,” in David J. Wasserstein and Ami Ayalon (ed.), *Mamluks and Ottomans: Studies in Honour of Michael Winter*, New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 213.), based on the work of Dhaher Jasim Muhammad (*The Contribution of Sayed ‘Alī al-Mīrghanī, of the Khatmiyya, to the Political Evolution of the Sudan, 1884-1968*, PhD diss., University of Exeter, Exeter, 1988, p. 12). January 1884, the date given by John Voll, seems more likely as it preceded the beginning of the siege.

203 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 32 ; John O. VOLL, *A History of the Khatmiyyah Tariqa in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 272–286 ; ‘Alī Ṣāliḥ KARRĀR, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 93–102 ; Silvia BRUZZI, *Islam and gender in colonial northeast Africa*, *op. cit.*, p. 25–30.

al-Khatm al-Mīrghanī's primary intention upon his arrival in Sawākin was said to "extinguish the light of God almighty (*irāda li-atfā' nūr Allāh*)", claiming "every day, [as] he sw[ore] on the Holy Book that the Mahdī is not born nor has appeared [and] that the Lord of life gave him the function to crush these movements." Besides, their role in organizing the men to fight the Mahdiyya was also noted: "They tell the people that they are their agents in the hands of God. They give a banner to all of those who want to fight us, may they be from the Turks, the English, the nomads. They call it the banner of the victory. They say every month that 'Uthmān Dīqna has died in this month<sup>204</sup>."

Yet, the antagonism of the Khatmiyya to the Mahdist movement was not a foregone development. Millenarian expectations were also rife in its midst, even if the Khatmī leadership could hardly be expected to accept claims emanating from a rival *ṭarīqa*. Some doubt may have crept up among its members and the initial response to the Mahdist *da'wa* was probably more fragmented than what history has retained, as shown by the ambivalent position adopted at first by the *khulafā'* of the Khatmiyya during the assault against the Sinkāt garrison on 5 August 1883 (1<sup>st</sup> Shawwāl 1300), during which they served as mediators between the two parties, before being allowed to leave the scene unharmed<sup>205</sup>. In any case, whatever the initial position of the local representatives of the Khatmiyya, they were soon forcefully inserted in the larger power dynamics that opposed the central Mahdist authorities and the Anglo-Egyptian forces. The latter's attempt at instrumentalizing the influence of the Khatmiyya to gain the support, or at the very least, to undermine the Mahdist fervour of the Bijāwī populations, left no room for the emergence of a local agreement, while, on the other side, Mahdist ideology insisted that opposition equated to disbelief (*kufṛ*). This *takfīrī* perspective subsumed all positions outside the Mahdiyya into a single block<sup>206</sup>. As a result, in al-Kurdufānī's rendition of the *Waqā'i'*, all references to the Khatmiyya were simply abandoned. Paradoxically, the constitution of an unambiguous line of divide between Mahdists and those who refused the claims of Muḥammad Aḥmad also led this author to minimise the role of the eastern Majādhīb in the first phase of the uprising<sup>207</sup>.

To a certain degree, this polarised vision had lasting consequences on the historiography. British officers used a simplistic grid in which affiliation to the *ṭarīqa* of the Majādhīb or the Khatmiyya was critical in predicting Bijāwī response to the Mahdist movement, despite the fact that

204 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

205 Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitāb sa'adat al-mustahdī bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdī (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdī) by Isma'il b. 'Abd al-Qadir*, *op. cit.*, p. 130–131; 134–135 ; Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

206 For a discussion on the intellectual origins of *takfīr* in Mahdist thought, see Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Al-khuṣūma fī Mahdiyyat al-Sūdān: kitāb fī tārikh fikrat al-Mahdiyya islāmiyyān wa sūdāniyyān*, Khartoum, Markaz Abū Salīm al-dirāsāt, 2004, p. 91–93.

207 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 16–17.

few tangible elements can be summoned to substantiate the deep-rooted rivalry between these *ṭuruq* before the Mahdiyya. This sprung from misconstrued conceptions as to the influence of Sufi *shuyūkh*—as shown by the insistence from British commentators, military and civilian alike, that Muḥammad Sirr al-Khatm could effectively counterbalance and stifle the Mahdist movement<sup>208</sup>—and the nature of the relations between tribal groups and Sufi organisation, both thought as coherent and close structures. This perspective was echoed by all subsequent historians of the Mahdiyya in Eastern Sudan. Jackson could write in this regard that “Had the Hadendoa and the other Beja people of the Red Sea Province been at this time adherents of the Mirghania sect, Osman Digna, as a follower of the Magadhib, could never have obtained the following that he ultimately came to command<sup>209</sup>”. For Ḥammūdī, the main reason behind the loyalty of the Faḍlāb Ammār’ar or the Banī ‘Āmir to the Egyptian regime laid primarily on their adherence to the Khatmiyya<sup>210</sup>. Holt himself defended this idea writing that “The Mahdist cause in the eastern Sudan was [...] provided with a ready-made revolutionary army in the adherents of the Majādhīb, notably the Hadanduwa tribe of Bija<sup>211</sup>”.

These rudimentary assessments of the dynamics at work in the initial stage of Mahdist expansion in Eastern Sudan overlooked their ambiguity and complexity. The apprehension of the Mahdī’s claims by local populations could vary quickly. They were fluid and not necessarily coherent, individuals shifting from one position to the other with relative ease. Later, both the British and the Mahdists tried to impose a rigid grid, dividing groups between opponents and supporters and ascribing reversals of allegiance to fickleness, greed, or hypocrisy, but this was the manifestation of political will, not a reflection of reality. Family ties were primordial in its beginning and based on personal bonds that could not be reduced to an affiliation to the Majādhīb’s *ṭarīqa*. It is only in a second phase that the larger Sufi network enabled the integration of a certain local elite. Wylde, as others at that time, put too much emphasis on the influence of the Majādhīb, but his comment that “dervish schools” were instrumental in laying out the path to their

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208 John O. VOLL, *A History of the Khatmiyyah Tariqa in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 279–280. Their enthusiasm, however, soon faded. Donald A. Cameron (1856-1936), the British consul in Sawākin from 1885 to 1888 (Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 94.), and arguably the author of the first ethnographical study of Bijāwī populations (Donald A. CAMERON, “On the Tribes of the Eastern Sudan,” *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1887, vol. 16.) was quite critical with regard to Muḥammad Sirr al-Khatm II, noting that “The Cairo Sheikh is revered by the natives of Suakin, but his knowledge of local tribes is very limited. He does not appear to have made any progress in grasping the situation since last year”. In this respect, he compared badly with ‘Uthmān Tāj al-Sirr whom Cameron described as “a serious, quiet man, who realises the difficulties of the whole problem in Eastern Sudan” (BNA FO 633/56, Correspondence no. 60, Mr. Cameron to Mr. Egerton, Suakin, 30 August 1885).

209 Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

210 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

211 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

mobilisation is nonetheless significant<sup>212</sup>. Indeed, many of the men who held religious, judicial and administrative positions in Eastern Sudan had been educated in one of their establishments<sup>213</sup>, such as the *qāḍī* of Sawākin, ‘Abd al-Qādir Ḥusayn and his brother, Muḥammad Nūr, the *imām* of the mosque, who abandoned their positions to join ‘Uthmān Diqna<sup>214</sup>. Those were not tribal leaders attempting to free themselves from governmental encroachments but individuals in direct contact with globalised trade and “a good many of the leading rebels own[ed] property in the town and at Gêf [Qayf]<sup>215</sup>”. At a wider scale, the *ṭarīqa* represented a nodal point between local traders, the working class of the Qayf and the populations of the hinterland. Colonial officials were quite myopic as to the nature of this social organisation and the economic interests that were shared by these groups. Sterling-Decker’s comment, with respect to Kurdufān, that Sufī *ṭuruq* should not be reduced to their religious dimension but could be defined “as pole[s] around which a commercial interest group could be formed<sup>216</sup>” can be extended to Eastern Sudan. While this should not be considered as the sole factor for Mahdist mobilisation in this region, the crisis experienced by some segments of its population in the late 1870s resulted in a momentary convergence of their political action.

The first few days after ‘Uthmān Diqna’s return to Eastern Sudan had been confusing. Egyptian authorities were unsure whether the *‘āmil* would be able to garner support on the eve of Sunday 5 August (30 Ramaḍān), they had even summoned the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir and Aḥmad Diqna to Sinkāt to negotiate in an attempt to drive a wedge between them and ‘Uthmān. The next day, it was evident that this would come to nothing. A few hours after the last shots were fired, a troop of Hadanduwa Busharyāb and Ḥāmdāb arrived on the scene, intent on throwing their lot with the millenarian uprising. The scale of the struggle had just shifted.

### III. Fighting the Jihād in Eastern Sudan (1883-1885)

Mahdism in Eastern Sudan could not rely solely on the networks of the Diqnāb and Majādhīb. The setback endured from Egyptian troops in Sinkāt had made that perfectly clear. This required to obtain the rallying of other communities and their active participation in the *jihād*. In that respect, pledging allegiance to the new regime was not enough. The sections below will

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212 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 53–54.

213 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

214 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

215 Augustus B. WYLDE, *‘83 to ‘87 in the Soudan, with an Account of Sir William Hewett’s Mission to King John of Abyssinia*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

216 STERLING-DECKER, *Politics and Profits: The Development of Merchant Capitalism and its Impact on the Political Economy of Kordofan (1820-1898)*, *op. cit.*, p. 173.



endeavour to examine two crucial dimensions of Mahdist mobilisation in the region and qualify the dominant historiography with regard to the role of urban populations in the millenarian movement compared to that of Bijāwī pastoralists, and the tremendous implications of the religious aspect of the struggle waged against the “enemies of God”.

### ***A) From the City to the Countryside: Visions of Rebellion***

#### *i) Enticing an Urban Revolt*

The fact that mobilisation transcended evident social divisions allows to revise the predominant interpretation of the Mahdist mobilisation’s first phase proposed by Abū Salīm as an opposition between, on the one hand, urban populations from Sawākin (and Sinkāt) predominantly affiliated to the Khatmiyya, and, on the other hand, pastoral nomads following the Majādhīb<sup>217</sup>. On the contrary, urban populations, ensconced within the network of the Majādhīb, were the first to be targeted by ‘Uthmān Diqna. The origin of the preminent Sudanese historian’s misapprehension originated in the ‘āmil’s choice to head toward Qabāb, Arkawīt and Sinkāt. That he was also looking for the support of his kin is not in doubt, however all three locations were not towns *per se*, but temporary settlements for the city dwellers trying to escape the scorching heat and oppressive humidity that afflict the littoral during the summer months<sup>218</sup>. The territory in which the Mahdist movement was deployed in Eastern Sudan was fully integrated to urbanity, not a distant, backward, and apolitical hinterland where tribal emotions could propagate unchecked. When he went to these three sites, ‘Uthmān Diqna’s objective was not so much to mobilise Bijāwī groups as to obtain the support from the populations of Sawākin.

He may have hoped that the entire city would rise against Egyptian rule, but he was fully aware of the distinction between the island’s elite and the people of the Qayf. Of the letters he took with him from al-Ubayyid, four copies were preserved, including two that were mentioned above. The first of the two others was addressed to the “people of Sawākin” (*ahālī Sawākin*), while the second one was to be communicated to the “mainland people of Sawākin” (*ahālī burūr Sawākin*). If most of the text is similar, subtle variations suggest that both groups’ support for the Mahdist cause was considered on different terms. The community living on the island was enjoined to recognise ‘Uthmān Diqna as their ‘āmil, and, if the “Turks” refused to surrender, to wage the *jihād* against the governorship (*muḥāfaẓa*). The wording of the letter destined to the Qayf followed closely this text, but while the islanders were instructed to leave—in case some of them decided to remain loyal to

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217 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

218 Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

the Egyptian power—the people of the mainland were instructed to ask the “Turks” and the islanders to accept the Mahdī’s *da‘wa*. If the latter refused to submit, the Qayf should welcome those leaving the city and exterminate the others<sup>219</sup>. This detail is a significant indication of the rivalry between the two Sawākinī communities as a factor in the Mahdist mobilisation in Eastern Sudan.

‘Uthmān Diqna, however, overestimated the level of support he could draw from the inhabitants of the Qayf. While some testimonies were recorded after the British intervention of early 1884, sources are much rarer for 1883, but Wylde arrived in Sawākin just as the Mahdist movement had begun<sup>220</sup>. He recounted “how surprised [the townspeople] were at the behaviour of the natives [and] in great fright for their property”. Few among them “had any love for the Egyptian rule, and still less for the new teachings of Mahdism and its division of property”. But their dependency to trade activities that appeared to be now partly in the hands of Europeans was shared by the people of the Qayf. While some were “entirely in favour of the Mahdī”, namely the followers of the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir and the Diqnāb, “the majority had everything to lose by the rebellion, as they made all their money out of the merchants and the cotton cleaning factories<sup>221</sup>”. Yet, Mahdists accusations were mainly directed against the elites of the island who, in their eyes, embodied the opposition and prevented the mainland from joining them. Aḥmad al-Shinqaytī, the head of the religious council was condemned by the author of the *Waqā’i‘* for supporting the Egyptian government’s propaganda against the Mahdist movement. This was not simply the expression of a struggle between orthodox Islam and the Sufi-inspired Mahdist uprising since he extended his denunciation to all the “leaders of the people of the country (*‘umad ahl al-balad*)” and quite particularly al-Shināwī, the greatest trader in Sawākin and a proponent of Egyptian imperial projects in the region, who was suspected of using his wealth to finance the resistance to Mahdism<sup>222</sup>.

The ambiguity of the Sawākinīn’s attitude was perhaps most evident during the 5 August 1883 (1<sup>st</sup> Shawwāl 1300) attack against the Sinkāt garrison, when some of them watched the fighting as bystanders. In a report, the British consul Moncrieff reckoned that several hundreds inhabitants of Sawākin had taken part in the assault and subsequently returned to the Red Sea port. Moncrieff added about this awkward situation that “though they are known, it is considered better,

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219 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letters 111 and 112.

220 Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 382–383.

221 Augustus B. WYLDE, *‘83 to ‘87 in the Soudan, with an Account of Sir William Hewett’s Mission to King John of Abyssinia*, *op. cit.*, p. 8–9.

222 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 76 ; Jonathan MIRAN, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa*, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

for the time at least, to ignore the fact<sup>223</sup>.”

The appeal to the populations of Sawākin was partly based on strategic considerations. Without control of the port, any attempt by Anglo-Egyptian forces to land troops and head to Barbar or Kasalā would be rendered much more arduous. This was ‘Uthmān Diqna’s primary mission when he was appointed to the *‘imāla*. However, this focus on urban populations was also the reflect of the Mahdī’s misgivings as to the enlistment of tribal groups within the Mahdist movement which was seen as a potential obstacle to the formation of the new social order he had envisioned<sup>224</sup>. Furthermore, he could not ignore the fact that tribal structures had been coopted by the Egyptian colonial administration, particularly so in Eastern Sudan, meaning that their heads had stakes in the old regime. Mūsā b. Ibrāhīm, the famous *shaykh* at the head of the southern Hadanduwa during their “golden age” passed away in 1883 (1300/1), but no significant steps were actually taken by the Mahdists to try to bring his son, Muḥammad b. Mūsā, to their side. The latter eventually fled to Eritrea before finding refuge in Sawākin and throughout the Mahdiyya, his role remained marginal<sup>225</sup>. On the contrary, the Mahdī himself repeated his calls to the Sawākinīn a year after ‘Uthmān’s arrival in the region, granting them *amān* (assurance of protection) and pardon, and allowing them to pursue their trade if they decided to leave. The Mahdī even suggested that he would come to Eastern Sudan and that on this occasion he would examine claims of the Sawākinīn who saw their property looted or confiscated as a result of their rallying the Mahdist movement, seemingly in view of compensating their loss and so convince others to follow their example<sup>226</sup>. To some extent, the Mahdī’s tropism toward urban communities could also be observed in Maṣawwa‘. While few documents attest of direct contacts, its population was also targeted thus prompting a visit by Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Tāj al-Sirr’s to “discourage the people to join the Mahdiyya<sup>227</sup>” as the message of the millenarian movement gained numerous followers among the Muslim populations of the Eritrean coastal lowlands<sup>228</sup>. These extraordinary efforts met with little success and ‘Uthmān Diqna’s attempt at mobilizing the populations of Sawākin to seize the port failed. Most of Mahdist supporters in Eastern Sudan, on par with similar dynamics in other provinces, would integrate the millenarian movement through tribal mobilisation.

#### *ii) The mobilisation of Bijāwī Pastoralists*

Despite its distinct urban inclination, the Mahdist *da‘wa* resonated among pastoral and

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223 HCPP Egypt no. 1, Correspondence no. 8, Consul Moncrieff to Sir Malet, Sinkāt, 24 August 1883, 1884.

224 See chapter 5.

225 Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1937, vol. 20, no. 2, p. 199–200.

226 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letters 369, 371 and 373.

227 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

228 Haggai ERLICH, “1885 in Eritrea: ‘The Year the Dervishes Were Cut Down,’” *Asian and African Studies*, 1975, vol. 10, no. 3, p. 287–290.

semi-pastoral populations where tribal affiliations were the prime form of social organisation. In Eastern Sudan, letters were addressed to the main Bijāwī tribes, *i.e.* the Bishārīn, Hadanduwa Shabūdīnāb and Bayranāb and Ammār'ar<sup>229</sup>. It was not limited to Bijāwī populations and extended, with some success, beyond the confines of their territory to reach the region's outer ring toward the Ḥabbāb, 'Ad Tamaryam and Sabdarāt living on the Eritrean northern littoral and the Semhar, Maṣawwa's immediate hinterland. This was a planned effort as in August 1884 (Shawwāl 1301), eleven letters were also written by the Mahdī to the main Muslim communities of the northern Abyssinian plateau—including the powerful 'Ad Shaykh and 'Ad Hasrī but also the Bayt Ma'lā, the Aflanda, etc.—as well the inhabitants of the urban and trade centres like Maṣawwa', Aylet [ 'Ā'ila ], Asus [ 'Asūs ] or Hergigo [ Ḥarqīqū ] and Zula [ Zulā ]. More distant populations were also targeted, such as the Somali or the people of Harar. He exhorted them to join the Mahdiyya and appointed an *amīr* for each province<sup>230</sup>. In each case, the word “tribe” (*qabīla*) was used, whether to designate an actual tribal structure, or a much more heterogeneous group as in “the tribe of the *bandar* (trade centre) of Maṣawwa'”. The term's ambiguity was in part the result of 'Uthmān Dīqna's patchier knowledge of these regions—“people” (*ahālī*) was favoured to refer to the population of Sawākin in Mahdist correspondence—but also an attempt to give shape to a particular sociopolitical body in the hope that it could be integrated to the movement in its entirety and placed under a single authority sponsored by the Mahdist leadership. In that regard, both the Mahdists and the British tended to read the mobilisation of Eastern Sudan's communities through a tribal prism and both sides endeavoured to classify them according to their attitudes. Lt.-Colonel Chermiside was one of the first to rationalise this type of nomenclature by distinguishing between “friendly”, “neutral” and “loyal” tribes<sup>231</sup>. The vocabulary may have varied, Mahdist authorities dividing groups between “obedient” and “hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*)” but the process was quite similar. In both cases, this amounted to an attempt to make the shifting political situation in Eastern Sudan more easily legible to state authorities by defining groups and relying on tribal hierarchies.

Of course, reality was more complex and tribal dynamics deeply fragmented. For once, communities in Eastern Sudan were only loosely attached to segmentary structures. The authority *shuyūkh* could summon varied considerably from a group to another and depended on the leader's influence and the context. As seen in the first chapter, a tribal head had few means at his disposal to

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229 See, for example, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 109.

230 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04 (doc. 1), DUL SAD 253/1, “Report on the Dervish rule in the Eastern Sudan by Major F. R. Wingate. May, 1891”, appendix VI.C, letter 38 and Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, p. 392.

231 For an example, see the table presented by Lieut.-Col. Chermiside in BNA WO 147/44, “Tribes inhabiting the Eastern Sudan”, Suakin, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1884.

impose his decisions. Inherited legitimacy was not sufficient to sway entire communities to mobilise for the Mahdiyya. One of the heads of the Ammār'ar thus told the Khalīfa in July 1887 (Shawwāl-D. al-Qa' da 1304) that he had wanted to join the Mahdiyya but had failed to convince his tribe, and, according to 'Uthmān Diqna, "he was stripped from the commitment of his people (*insalakha min 'ahd ahl-hu*)<sup>232</sup>". This did not stop Mahdist authorities from trying, time after time, to co-opt tribal leaders in the hope that they bring their group to submit. This was the Khalīfa's plan with the appointment of the children of Ṭaha b. Ḥamad Hisāy—first Muḥammad Aḥmad in July 1887 (D. al-Qa' da 1304) and then Ḥamad, to replace his deceased brother in September of the same year (D. al-Ḥijja 1304)—over the Ammār'ar Mūsiyāb without any discernible result<sup>233</sup>. Later, in November 1891 (Rabī' II 1309), yet another brother, Aḥmad Bākāsh, came to find 'Uthmān Diqna and offer him to rally some Ammār'ar clans to the Mahdist cause with a similar outcome. Often, as in the case above, once dispatched, these appointees would disappear for months only to reappear when the failure of their mission could not be dissimulated anymore, if they came back at all. The repetition of the same doomed policy was not so much a sign of incompetence by Mahdist authorities than the recognition that no other tool was available to actually exert their authority on those distant, scattered and mobile communities<sup>234</sup>. There was, nonetheless, from the part of the Mahdist leadership, a reluctance to resort to established tribal leaders. Neither the *nāzir* of the Hadanduwa nor that of the Ammār'ar were directly contacted. This testifies of the frailty of their authority.

When possible, religious figures were privileged as they could transcend tribal divides. Aḥmad b. Ādam al-Qulhuyābī, described as a "religious leader" (*za 'īm dīnī*)<sup>235</sup> and whom 'Uthmān Diqna had first met in Aryāb, was instrumental in raising both the Bishārīn and some sections of the Ammār'ar, to the point where he was appointed to take control of the 'Aṭbara road. In other cases, Mahdist mobilisation in Eastern Sudan was conducted by men who had little standing within these local tribal hierarchies, following a pattern similar to what could be observed in the movement elsewhere. This was, to some extent, the case for 'Uthmān Diqna, but also for Muṣṭafā 'Alī Hadal, to whom the *imāra* over Kasalā was entrusted. From the Hadanduwa Shar'āb, he was said to have been an artisan who specialised in the making of ivory bracelets for women<sup>236</sup>. However, it cannot be excluded that some of this disregard for tribal dynamics was a consequence of the Mahdī, the Khalīfa and their *amīr*'s lack of actionable knowledge on the organisation of powers in the region.

232 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 6.

233 *Daftar 'Uthmān Diqna* (letters 105 and 116, p. 105 and 111). (*Ibid*).

234 See chapter 5 for details on the main response to this failure, that is attempts at settling down nomadic and semi-nomadic populations in specific territories for control purposes.

235 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – 'Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*

236 Na'ūm SHUQAYR, *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*, *op. cit.*, p. 573.

The administrative correspondence exchanged between the political centre and ‘Uthmān Diqna makes mentions of the main groups but clans are rarely referred to and, in general, details with regard tribal leadership is vague.

The British were also at pain to understand Eastern Sudan’s complicated tribal relations. They too noted the lack of authority of local heads: “Tribal politics and autocratic feudalism have shown (as in the case of Hamed Dow, Sheikh of the Amarars) that even powerful Sheiks are not always strong enough to force their tribesmen to join the commonwealth of religious fanaticism with their wives and families and goods<sup>237</sup>.” While this seemed to play in their favour, as it limited the propagation of the Mahdist *da’wa*, British officers, among whom Maj.-General Graham himself, were forced to recognise that they could not utter a serious explanations as to why some particular Bijāwī segments had preserved contacts with them, writing that “the most powerful Sheikh of the Amarars, a Mousayah [Mūsiyāb], Hamid Mahomed, has never shown any special desire to side with us, so that it is the more striking that these scattered tribes should again evince a disposition to espouse our side, crushed as they have been under the terrorism of Osman Digna<sup>238</sup>.” To a certain degree, they were aware that the tribal categories they deployed to describe the evolution of the balance of power in the region were fragile and confusing constructs. Between 1883 and 1885 (1300-1303), officers insisted that the Hadanduwa formed the bulk of ‘Uthmān Diqna’s supporters, to the point where the two denominations overlapped. But in the final briefing which laid out options to deal with the millenarian rebellion, Lt.-General Graham again felt obliged to write “[i]t must be remembered that this man [‘Uthmān Diqna] is not the leader of a collected and organised body<sup>239</sup>”.

Understanding mobilisation logics requires not to negate tribal factors but to qualify them through a non-deterministic approach. Affiliations exerted a gravitational pull, particularly so because they were intertwined with socioeconomic dynamics, but tribal engagement was not uniform. Unfortunately, individual trajectories are impossible to reconstruct and always subsumed within larger tribal bodies. The first censuses available date from 1887 (1304) when the mobilisation of entire tribes or clans was already a declining practice to be replaced by an autonomous and Mahdist-centred organisation articulated around banners (*rāyāt*)<sup>240</sup>. Even leaders remain difficult to follow and when this is feasible, their tribal affiliation, let alone that of the men under their command, can only be guessed. This is compounded by the fact that both Mahdist and

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237 BNA FO 633/54, Affairs of Egypt no. 1 (1885), correspondence no. 90, Col. Chermiside to Col. Watson, Suakin, 6 November 1884.

238 BNA FO 32/6127, Letter from Maj.-General Graham to General Wolseley, Suakin, 22 April 1885.

239 BNA FO 633/55, Affairs of Egypt no. 18 (British Military Operations in the Soudan), 1885, Correspondence no. 10, General Wolseley to the Marquis of Hartington, Suakin, 13 May 1885.

240 See chapters 3 and 5.

British archives present a gap between 1885 and 1887 (1303-1305) (see above) that represents a considerable hurdle to observe the evolution of Mahdist enlistment. Nonetheless, a granular analysis based on circumstantial evidence offers some insights as to the characteristics of the participation to the millenarian uprising. In that regard, Guido Levi's testimony is particularly precious<sup>241</sup>, as he was the only foreigner to have visited a Mahdist camp in Eastern Sudan and wrote about it.

Firstly, within the same group, age was an obvious factor favouring engagement, probably in relation with the Bijāwī age class system<sup>242</sup> described in the twentieth century but of which no mention could be found in Mahdist documents (as almost all aspect of Bijāwī social organisation). Youth itself was not particularly valued in Mahdist discourse, in contrast with piety or devoutness, and so few remarks are made about the age of combatants. Nonetheless, during one of the early confrontations with Egyptian forces at the so-called battle of *khūr* Abīnt on 15 October 1883 (13 D. al-Ḥijja 1300), the *anṣār* were joined by “weak [individuals]” (*ḍi ‘āf* sing. *ḍa ‘īf*), that is youngsters of the Qār‘īb tribe, whose participation to the *jihād* was celebrated<sup>243</sup>. In early 1884 (mid-1301), Levi remarked the presence of teenagers who trained with their seniors in the handling of swords, spears and shields<sup>244</sup>.

Secondly, the direct participation of women was limited, probably more so than in other regions of Nilotic Sudan. Whereas some women had been among the early disciples of the Mahdī, followed him in his *hijra* and even played a part in the fightings between 1881 and 1885 (1298-1302)<sup>245</sup>, the stricter gender segregation that characterised Bijāwī societies meant that the groups that rallied ‘Uthmān Diqna were almost entirely formed of men. Women were not present in the

241 An Austrian Jew born in Trieste and a former captain of a merchant ship, he settled in Sawākin c. 1880 where he claimed to have befriended local figures, including the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhīr (Jacob M. LANDAU, “Two Plans for the Establishment of a Jewish Homeland in the Sudan early in the Twentieth Century,” in *Middle Eastern Themes: Papers in History and Politics*, London, Frank Cass, 1973, p. 84). In early 1884, he thought that he could put his connections to use and attempt to solve the crisis in Eastern Sudan which was based, according to him, on a misunderstanding. Of his own accord, but after having notified British officers of his intent, he left Sawākin on 20 January with a letter to the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhīr and headed to the Mahdist camp of al-Tamanīb. Nothing came out of the two weeks he spent there, mostly confined to a hut, and upon his fortunate escape and return to Sawākin, he failed to receive the recognition he thought he deserved for his feat. The disdain with which he was treated by British officers carried antisemitic overtones. Ernestine Sartorius, the spouse of George Sartorius Pasha (1840-1912), an officer who served under Valentine Baker and was killed at the first battle of the Coast, described him as “small and spare, speaking several languages very fairly, and [...] a little off his head” (Ernestine SARTORIUS, *Three Months in the Soudan*, op. cit., p. 221). Levi Guido's resentment was probably the main reason for the writing of his unique experience. Yet this is a rare description of the life of Mahdist combatants in Eastern Sudan. He is also mentioned in Bābikīr Badrī's autobiography c. 1892-1894 (c. 1310-1312) as “Khalīfa Guido the jew” to whom he had sold the gum shipment he had brought from Umm Durmān (Bābikīr BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, op. cit., p. 158–159; 164; 181).

242 According to Antonio L. Palmisano, young Ammār'ar men were incorporated into the *hunkul*, the warrior class age, until they married and had children (Antonio L. PALMISANO, *Ethnicity: The Beja as Representation*, op. cit., p. 53).

243 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, op. cit., p. 52 ; Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna*, op. cit., p. 36.

244 Guido LEVI, *Osman Dekna, chez lui: récit de mon séjour au camp des révoltés.*, Cairo, J. Serrière, 1884, p. 35.

245 Nawar el-Sheikh MAHGOUB, *Sudanese Women during the Mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, op. cit., p. 38–53.

camp itself in early 1884, where only a few “black female slaves” could be found, but remained with the children at the nearby site of the family camp, combatants coming back and forth between the two<sup>246</sup>. However, two years later, when ‘Uthmān Diqna returned to the region of Sawākin after having spent several months in Kasalā, he was at pains to assert his full authority. In that context, the Khalīfa wrote a proclamation on 28 April 1886 (24 Rajab 1304) to the *anṣār* enjoining them to obey and follow their appointed *‘āmil*. The same day, a copy was produced but sent this time to the “*anṣāriyyāt*”, the “female *anṣār*”<sup>247</sup>. This reference is quite extraordinary and unique. It points to the central role held by women in this Mahdist community, as well as to their almost complete invisibilisation.

Finally, Bijāwī participation to the Mahdist movement was probably based on an individual choice but realised through small primary units of a few men, rarely more than a dozen. In one of the rare mentions of mobilisation patterns, the author of the *Waqa’i* noted boastfully that “the people, at that time [mid-1884], were joining the religion of God by swathes (*afwājān afwājān*)”, but immediately qualified this by adding that “[they] enter[ed] [the Mahdist movement] alone and in pairs (*firādān wa azwājān*)”<sup>248</sup>. This reflected the importance of family connections—well illustrated in the case of the Diqnāb and the Majādhīb—that affected most groups, like the Ḥasanāb established near Tūkar. One of the members of this community, al-Khiḍir b. ‘Alī was appointed by ‘Uthmān Diqna to head the siege of Tūkar and at least one of his brothers, Maḥmūd, followed him, only to die at the second battle of the Coast. In the same manner, Ṭāhir b. Qīlāy was instrumental in bringing some Bishārī segments to the Mahdist side, and he too lost a brother at the third battle of the Coast<sup>249</sup>. The involvement of one family member could gradually bring others to join. Further evidence can be found of this dynamic in the first available reports on troop numbers in 1889 (1306), admittedly in a context that had already undergone significant changes. In June (Shawwāl) of that year, groups that were unambiguously composed of Bijāwī men, such as the one headed by Awḥājī Ḥasan al-Kimaylābī, could count only three adults and one youngster. Another party under Muḥammad Abū Fāṭima from the Ashrāf, a community mostly based around Tūkar, included nine adults<sup>250</sup>. Yet, large bodies could be summoned on particular occasions and for brief periods. This is what happened hours after the first assault against the Sinkāt garrison on 5 August 1883 (1<sup>st</sup> Shawwāl 1300) when a few hundreds combatants from the Hadanduwa Bushāryāb—the tribe to which ‘Uthmān Diqna’s mother belonged— and Ḥāmdāb arrived on the battlefield only to discover

246 Guido LEVI, *Osman Dekna, chez lui, op. cit.*, p. 16.

247 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna* (letter 62, p. 69).

248 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, p. 74.

249 *Ibid.*, p. 59; 63.

250 NRO Mahdiyya 5/05/23A (p. 0).



that the fightings were already finished<sup>251</sup>. Yet, communications by the Mahdist leadership on deserters reveal that if combatants moved together, primary units related to a specific family, clan or location reappeared immediately when individuals decided to leave. For example, among the men and women who had followed one of the members of al-Hindī family from the region of Wad Madanī, they were eight to return to their village (*hilla*) of al-Shabārqa, c. September 1888 (D. al-Ḥijja 1305)<sup>252</sup>. Because of the structure of archival records, more is known about non-Bijāwī communities such as the one mentioned above, but it is near certain that Bijāwī mobilisation followed similar lines.

### ***B) Fighting the Infidels and Dying for God***

Mahdist mobilisation in Eastern Sudan from August 1883 to July 1885 (Shawwāl 1300-Ramaḍān 1302) was primarily aimed at Egyptian authorities, before the coming of British reinforcements in early 1884 (mid-1301) when it became clear that the situation was on the verge of becoming uncontrollable and Sawākin directly threatened by Mahdist forces. While other dimensions underlay Bijāwī communities' support for the war (see below), there is little doubt that the religious aspect of this struggle was then at its highest and informed the modalities of warfare itself.

#### *i) Mahdist Warfare in Eastern Sudan: Seeking Martyrdom*

The vast majority of the men who took part in the uprising were not soldiers and most of them had little if any military experience. There are no records of training being organised<sup>253</sup>. Besides, units were seldom coordinated and the main tactic was limited to one direct, frontal and deadly assault, as against the Sinkāt garrison on 5 August 1883, when 'Uthmān Diqna seems to have been unable to hold his men back while waiting for the arrival of reinforcements, with devastating effects. British officers had, unsurprisingly, simplistic views on Mahdist tactics. According to them “the Arab method of fighting [was] the oldest in the world with brave troops”, that is “tactics [...] of shock and charge<sup>254</sup>”. They failed to consider that this was not due to a lack of imagination—although there was no reason for Mahdist *umarā'* to possess military competences, with the important exception of those who had participated to slave raids in the southern provinces—but the crystallisation of ideological, social and logistical imperatives<sup>255</sup>.

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251 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

252 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 87.

253 This, however, cannot be excluded. Upon his arrival in the Nūba Mountains, the Mahdī instructed his men to become acquainted with firearms (Ḥātīm al-Ṣiddīq Muḥammad AḤMAD, *Al-jaysh fī al-Mahdiyya (1881-1899)*, Khartoum, Dār jāmi'at al-za'īm al-Azharī li-l-ṭibā'a wa al-nashr, 2016, p. 59).

254 C. COOPER KING, “Soudan Warfare,” *Royal United Service Institution Journal*, 1885, vol. 29, no. 131, p. 892.

255 Strategic choices that could appear flawed if judged according to classical rationale could be explained when these

First and foremost, the *jihād* waged by the men who took part in the Mahdist movement did not answer primarily to considerations based on military efficiency. Fighting was a trial by ordeal, and victories signalled the assent of God. In the same manner as the first encounters between the followers of Muḥammad Aḥmad on Ābā Island and the Nūba Mountains in 1881 and 1882 (1298-1299), when Egyptian expeditions had been defeated by “the Mahdi’s sickly, half-famished, and almost naked Arabs<sup>256</sup>”, had had a tremendous effect to legitimise his claims and spread his fame throughout the Nilotic Sudan, successes gained over troops dispatched from Sawākin were seen and narrated as miraculous. In that respect, the fact that civilians (to the extent where this characterisation is meaningful in this context) could have the upper hand was an immediate manifestation of God’s support to the Mahdist cause. This was at least how the first combats were narrated in the *Waqā’i’*. When an Egyptian officer, Kāzīm Effendi, led his troop toward Tamaynīb in early December 1883 (early Ṣafār 1301)<sup>257</sup>, its author put forth his arrogance. Kāzīm would have said that they would easily defeat the Mahdists who had committed a mistake by splitting so as to hold several positions, especially since “they were not distinguished fighters” (*jihādiyya laysa la-hā tamyīz*), whereas he had handpicked those who were to follow him. But “he was negligent of God Almighty’s will (*ghaflat-hu ‘an qadrat Allāh ta ‘āllī*)<sup>258</sup>. The same reasoning applied to the victory obtained by a small Mahdist force joined by “some weak individuals (*ḍi ‘āf*), most of them were children” over two hundred soldiers led by the Bakbāshī Maḥmūd Effendi Khalīl the month before at the battle of *khūr* Abaynt<sup>259</sup>. God’s presence on the battlefield prompted accounts of supernatural events as when “thirteen thousand English” (a vastly overestimated number) organised a sortie from Sawākin on 27 March 1884 (29 Jumādā I 1301) and, before even reaching the Mahdist camp, “their heart was filled with terror by God and they returned [to Sawākin,] but not all of them came back. The others disappeared, it is not known how, as the earth had swallowed them<sup>260</sup>”. The English were obvious opponents and deserved the wrath of God, but the latter’s intervention could also be aimed at those who had refused the Mahdī’s *da ‘wa*. In a clash that took place on the first day of Ramaḍān 1301 (26 June 1884), a number of enemies were killed, including five who were from Sawākin and

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imperatives were taken into account, as showed by Ismat Hasan Zulfo in his brilliant analysis of the battle of Karārī on 2 September 1898 (Ismat Hasan ZULFO, *Karari: The Sudanese Account of the Battle of Omdurman*, London, Warne, 1980).

256 Rudolf C. SLATIN, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

257 The motives behind this action are ambiguous. The author of the *Waqā’i’* claimed that the main aim of this operation was the capture of ‘Uthmān Dīqna and al-Ṭāhir al-Majdhūb, but it is more likely, following Jackson’s interpretation, that the intention of Kāzīm Effendi was to reach Sinkāt and relieve the besieged garrison (Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna*, *op. cit.*, p. 41).

258 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

259 *Ibid.*, p. 68; 52.

260 Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitāb sa ‘adat al-mustahdi bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdi (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdi) by Isma‘il b. ‘Abd al-Qadir*, *op. cit.*, p. 141 ; Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

belonged to the Khatmiyya, among whom one *khalīfa*. Mahdist soldiers reported afterwards that “fire [had] burned some of the skin of the Sawākiniyya, as for all those who lie on the Mahdiyya<sup>261</sup>”.

Maybe because until January 1885 (Rabī‘ I-II 1302) Mahdists in Eastern Sudan were the only ones to have been in direct contact with British troops, in contrast with most of Nilotic Sudan’s populations, rumours were particularly rife. One of them had reached the ears of the Mahdī himself in March 1884 (Jumādā I 1301), namely that ‘Uthmān Diqna had fought against “a hundred horsemen of the enemy clad with plates of iron and [that] when [he] defeated them [he had] found water inside the plates and when the plates were taken off you found the soldiers to be virgin girls”. Understandably, Muḥammad Aḥmad added “I was much surprised to hear this and that you did not write to me about it<sup>262</sup>.”

The miraculous dimension of the movement’s success in Eastern Sudan also conditioned how fighting was conducted. One of its core aspects resided in the strong emphasis in early Mahdist discourse on fighting with cold weapons. The Mahdī had written to all the *khulafā’* and *umarā’* on 21 April 1884 (13 Jumādā II 1300) that “the Lord of all existence (*sayyid al-wujūd*) informed me that our victory [will come] by the spear and the sword and that we have no need for the rifle, as it is of no benefit to us. Even if it were beneficial, it would bring people the utmost pressure (*tashdīd*) and claim (*ta’yīd*) for their possession in their coveting for this ephemeral world, and with this, their betrayal of God (*khadhla-hum Allāh*)”. The use of firearms contravened the Prophetic example and undermined trust in God (*tawakkul*). The Mahdī’s motives may also have been tainted by political considerations, since later in his letter, he instructed each *amīr* to summon the *maqādim*, tell them of his order, and have them gather all the firearms from the men in their unit, without exception, and make a record which should be transmitted to the Khalīfa or whomever had been delegated by the Mahdī for this task<sup>263</sup>. However, this also favoured the use of swords in combats, initially at least out of necessity due to the rarity of firearms in Eastern Sudan. In that view, the British journalist Steven Burleigh who witnessed the operations in early 1884 (mid-1301), noted that the “[t]he practice of the Arabs, both at El Teb [al-Ṭayb] and Tamaai, was to rush down upon us with a thick round cow or rhinoceros hide shield in their left hands, grasping in the same hand a sword or spear<sup>264</sup>.” Depictions of combats related in the *Waqā’i’* reflected this injunction. Leading the assault against the Sinkāt garrison on 5 August 1883 (1<sup>st</sup> Shawwāl 1300), ‘Uthmān Diqna’s cousin, al-Faqih Muḥammad Diqna, “burst through the door with a solid shield (*bi-junān [sic] thābit*) and mowed

261 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

262 This is based on a translation realised by Egyptian Intelligence (NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/02). For the original text, see Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 274.

263 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 100.

264 Bennet BURLEIGH, *Desert Warfare*, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

the Turks with his sword. If one of the Turks protected himself from him with his rifle, he would cut it in half and kill his owner after. Once he had entered, he struck with his sword to his right while he was stabbed with a knife from his left. This is how he died a martyr<sup>265</sup>.”

There too, engaging the enemy was construed as a way to vindicate God’s will. The protection the latter would provide to followers of the Mahdist cause was deemed sufficient. During the siege of Sinkāt, the *fuqarā*’ would place themselves in front of the fort and before being fired at, “they would scream to [Egyptian soldiers] as a reply: ‘Fire your guns again, because this shot will not be useful’, and so they would shoot again<sup>266</sup>”. Bullets would fall among the combatants, but it would no affect on them, “as if their motive had been snatched (*surr-hā qad suliba*)<sup>267</sup>”. This was not an isolated remark and probably referred to stories circulating on the siege of al-Ubayyīd, about which al-Kurdufānī, the author of the *Ṣīra*, had mentioned that the horsemen sent in late August 1882 (early Shawwāl 1299) to encircle the city were immune to the shots fired at them. According to him, this miracle was repeated on numerous occasions during the Mahdiyya, God intervening to decrease the potency of the rounds shot at the *anṣār*. They would pay little more attention to the shells falling among them, because they knew them to be ineffective, but also because they wished to die<sup>268</sup>. Much later, in his autobiography, Bābikir Badrī sarcastically mentioned that he had adopted a similar sacrificial behaviour and, as soon as he had joined the Mahdist movement, “had exposed [him]self in the attacks on the government steamers without precautions, longing for martyrdom”, to the annoyance of his superior who put an end to this<sup>269</sup>. This was also al-Tāhir b. ‘Umar b. Qamr al-Dīn al-Majdhūb’s frame of mind when he participated to the third battle of the Coast. Prior to the battle, he said to his companions: “if I am injured before I could enter [the British square], take me by my legs and bring me until I am in their midst (*al-buḥbūhā*), so that I be very close from the enemies of God and strike them, even with my last breath of life. Then, bury me [there], so that I can have a respite from the evil of the world (*shu`m al-dunyā*)<sup>270</sup>”

The real nature of combat was somewhat concealed in the British officers’ account. Imperial tropes of disciplined soldiers holding the square against hordes of uncivilised foes shaped their narratives. It allowed them to present themselves as reluctant conquerors, defending themselves against irrational and futile acts of aggression, and offered avenues to showcase their gallantry

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265 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, op. cit., p. 45.

266 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, op. cit., p. 54 ; Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitāb sa‘adat al-mustahdī bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdi (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdi) by Isma‘il b. ‘Abd al-Qadir*, op. cit., p. 135.

267 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, op. cit., p. 54.

268 Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitāb sa‘adat al-mustahdī bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdi (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdi) by Isma‘il b. ‘Abd al-Qadir*, op. cit., p. 111.

269 Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, op. cit., p. 18.

270 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, op. cit., p. 64.

when confronted with such an enemy. The “Fuzzy-Wuzzies<sup>271</sup>” of Kipling’s fame were indiscriminate opponents, praised for their courage, but whose motives were not worth investigating. Some of the correspondents embedded in British units were certainly not indifferent to the influence of this imperial mythology, but their point of view sometimes differed so slightly as to offer a different perspective on the nature of combat. For Melton Prior, “[t]he pluck and fanaticism of these Arabs was remarkable, for suddenly you would see one man dart out from amongst the others and make a dash for our square<sup>272</sup>”. Among the officers, Emilius A. de Cosson was one of the few to deviate from the narrative put forth in military accounts of large waves of Mahdist warriors pouring on British lines, probably a result of his conflict with the army’s leadership. He too described this pursuit of martyrdom, as “a single man, would run out from the rest at a sort of jog-trot, and boldly approach the levelled line of rifles, brandishing sword or spear in the air with an exaggerated affectation of defiance, which would have been absurd, had it not been pathetic, and apparently quite content to make one cut or thrust at an unbeliever before riddled with bullets<sup>273</sup>.”

Other motives including loot, territorial expansion and access to resources may have bolstered Bijāwī involvement in the Mahdist movement, but these different testimonies all confirm the intensity of the religious belief that propped up their mobilisation, contrary to the vision of thinly Islamised population predominant at that time.

Combatants died alone but fought in small groups, probably the same primary units around which the Mahdist army was articulated. Burleigh described the assaults in “[b]roken and irregular rushes [that] were made at us by clusters of [Mahdist combatants]<sup>274</sup>”. There was little sense of a larger group solidarity, orders were vaguely followed, among other reasons because higher echelons had few relays to pass down their instructions. While some measure of professionalisation was undertaken as early as 1882 (1299/1300) with the creation of the *jihādiyya*, a body composed of slave-soldiers equipped with firearms<sup>275</sup>, Mahdist military remained throughout its eighteen years of existence highly dependent on the long-term engagement of civilian populations. Coercive measures were employed but there was no true system of conscription and the religious imperative to wage the *jihād* remained the first argument they put forward. This means that despite later attempts to establish a clearer hierarchy, the army in the East never stopped being dependent on

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271 This derogatory term was popularised by Rudyard Kipling in an eponymous poem published in 1892 and part of a volume entitled *Barrack-Room Ballads and Other Verses* (London, Methuen) in which he praised the military valour of Bijāwī fighters.

272 Melton PRIOR, *Campaigns of a War Correspondent*, London, Edward Arnold, 1912, p. 187–188.

273 E. A. DE COSSON, *Days and Nights of Service with Sir Gerald Graham’s Field Force at Suakin*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

274 Bennet BURLEIGH, *Desert Warfare*, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

275 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

volunteers and its internal structure reflected the composite and heterogeneous social bodies that temporarily participated to the war effort. By the same token, the heavy losses incurred in the first combats of 1883 and early 1884 (1300-1301) were not solely military setbacks, but also dangerous challenges to the authenticity of the Mahdī's claims, and significant deterrents for the wavering segments of Bijāwī communities.

The lethality of these encounters had to be mitigated and Mahdist tactics evolved rapidly so as to diminish the high number of casualties caused by firearms. With the defeat of several large expeditionary corps, Mahdist leadership disrespected Muḥammad Aḥmad's instruction and distributed the looted weapons among their men<sup>276</sup>. Conversely, frontal assaults became rarer as they were replaced by tactics closer to guerrilla warfare including through the organisation of ambushes. On several occasions, defensive trenches were dug in an attempt to mitigate the deadly effects of artillery and rifle shots<sup>277</sup>. While the Mahdī did not condone this adaptation of Mahdist warfare and maintained his condemnation of firearms, he seems to have recognised the need for a more efficient military tool by enjoining his *'āmil* "not to rely on the multitude [of combatants], but on a chosen elite of men<sup>278</sup>".

*ii) Boundless Violence: The Brutalisation of Bijāwī Societies?*

The conflictuality caused by the numerous confrontations between Mahdist, Anglo-Egyptian and Bijāwī forces from 1883 to 1885 (1300-1302), and less evidently, in the subsequent years, reached an intensity that had not been observed in Eastern Sudan since at least the 1840s. The extent to which this was associated with a shift in the degree of violence enacted by all parties is difficult to assess. Comments made by colonial administration of the Condominium in the early twentieth century on the loss of population in Nilotic Sudan were political statements on the destructive results of Mahdist rule, rather than objective estimates. Besides, the impact of war is impossible to distinguish from other causes, including the catastrophic famine of 1889-1890 (1306-1307). Finally, any analysis of the level of violence exerted during the Mahdiyya is undermined by the lack of direct testimonies on war practices among the Bijāwī for the nineteenth century.

There is, however, little doubt that Bijāwī societies witnessed a form of brutalisation—to use the concept coined by George Mosse<sup>279</sup>—during the phase of Mahdist expansion in Eastern Sudan. Facing soldiers of firearms with swords, spears and shields, the first encounters proved particularly lethal for the early Mahdist followers. On the other side, the latter were responsible for

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276 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

277 BNA FO 633/55, Correspondence no. 53, Commodore Molyneux to Admiral Hay, Suakin, 12 February 1885.

278 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 209.

279 George L. MOSSE, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990.

the massacre of large numbers of people, as was the case when the whole of the population which had withheld a lengthy siege in the garrison of Sinkāt attempted a sortie in the direction of Sawākin, on 8 February 1883 (10 Rabī‘ II 1301). They were ambushed by the Mahdists and six hundred men, women and children were killed. Only five men, including the *qāḍī* of Sinkāt, and thirty women managed to reach the Red Sea port<sup>280</sup>. Some degree of caution should nonetheless be observed with regard comments on the colonial trope of the “fanatical” nature of Mahdist warfare. On other occasions, Mahdist response was much more measured. When the garrison of Tūkar surrendered, the remaining residents were spared and the Mahdists even began to fraternise with them, that is until the British troops began to approach the town, at which point they considered killing them. A religious figure of the Ashrāf named Sayyid Abū Bakr successfully convinced them not to do so<sup>281</sup>.

Nonetheless, this violence was not limited to the *anṣār* and permeated other groups. When Maḥmūd ‘Alī and his men had raided a Mahdist position a month before, in January 1883 (Rabī‘ II 1301), the author of the *Waqā’i* assumed that their intention was to “eradicate them (*li-yata’aṣṣaluhum*)”<sup>282</sup>. Furthermore, British soldiers in operation in this theatre also seem to have resorted to extreme violence. In this regard De Cosson was troubled by “the knowledge that some of the enemy’s wounded have been shot in cold blood”. He added: “To my disappointment I found some among my friends who were little shocked at the practice, while a few seemed actually to uphold it, saying, in short, that the wounded Arabs were so retentive of life and so actuated by bitter hate that they would struggle up and stab any man who approached them, even when they were desperately wounded, and that it was better some of them should be killed in this way, than that our men should suffer<sup>283</sup>.” This was justified by another British officer on the ground that the occupation of certain positions were utterly inefficient in curbing the military capacity of the Mahdists. Consequently, “the only warfare [this savage foe] understood was to kill or be killed<sup>284</sup>.”

The causes for the diffusion of such a high level of violence were multiple. Brian Ferguson and Neil Whitehead expounded the theory that war in a tribal zone was generally generated by expanding states, and, in that respect, increased violence within native warfare was the result of a culture contact<sup>285</sup>. Jeffrey Blick proposed a similar idea when he wrote, “[t]his is a pattern that is common when state-level societies contact tribal societies and introduce western commodities and technologies: the effect on the traditional society and such institutions as warfare is drastic. Among

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280 Na‘ūm SHUQAYR, *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*, *op. cit.*, p. 430.

281 Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

282 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

283 E. A. DE COSSON, *Days and Nights of Service with Sir Gerald Graham’s Field Force at Suakin*, *op. cit.*, p. 217–218.

284 William GALLOWAY, *The Battle of Tofrek*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

285 R. Brian FERGUSON and Neil L. WHITEHEAD, *War in the Tribal Zone: Expanding States and Indigenous Warfare*, Sante Fe, School of American Research Press, 1992, p. 15.

highly bellicose peoples, the introduction of murderous weapons has the potential to be absolutely devastating to the society<sup>286</sup>.” Indeed, the extended use of firearms probably contributed to some extent to higher numbers of casualties, but more importantly, Mahdist expansion in Eastern Sudan was responsible for two distinct but intertwined dynamics that were instrumental in raising the lethality of local conflicts. On the first hand, Mahdist discourse emphasised a clear divide between groups that pledged allegiance to the new regime and those who opposed it. Neutrality ceased to be an option. In need to justify the failure of the first assault against Sinkāt, the author of the *Waqā’i* suggested that “God [...] wanted to delay the matter of these Turks to another time so as to reveal the hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*) among us whom the *fuqarā’* could then eradicate<sup>287</sup>.” Following the logics of *tafkīr* enunciated by the Mahdī, the enemy was condemned not only for his political opposition to Mahdist rule, but also for negating the *da’wa*. They were thus relegated outside of the *umma* and assimilated to unbelievers who did not benefit from any form of protection, including the respect reserved to the dead. Wanting to check whether the garrison of Sinkāt had received supplies, Bijāwī combatants who had encountered by chance a small patrol, killed all twenty of them and “opened their stomachs to see what they contained” while “another boasted [to Guido Levi] of having odiously abused corpses...”<sup>288</sup>

Secondly, in relation with Ferguson and Whitehead’s theory of violence induced by cultural contact, the Mahdist movement profoundly disrupted common relations between Bijāwī (and non-Bijāwī) communities. The breaking down of the tribal order has left few obvious traces but some groups, such as the Ḥalānqa, were almost entirely wiped out in a few years, a process that seems to have been unprecedented. The dense network of interrelations between the different Bijāwī communities did not preclude violent confrontations but limited their scope. Besides, there existed different mechanisms to avoid the spiralling of internecine feuds and vendettas. In this context, Mahdist authorities were an external actor with hegemonic ambitions that relied almost solely on violence to impose its domination and assert its legitimacy. Paradoxically, ‘Uthmān Dīqna’s failure to assert a Mahdist monopoly on legitimate violence meant that it became one of the protagonists of a conflict that engulfed almost all the communities of Eastern Sudan, as well as a vehicle of tribal oppositions.

#### IV. From One to Many: Jihād and Civil Wars in Eastern Sudan (1883-1888)

The military operations which took place between 1883 and 1885 (1300-1302) in Eastern

286 Jeffrey P. BLICK, “Genocidal Warfare in Tribal Societies as a Result of European-Induced Culture Conflict,” *Man*, 1988, vol. 23, no. 4, p. 657.

287 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 44–45.

288 Guido LEVI, *Osman Dekna, chez lui*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.



Sudan have been the focus of many historical accounts. These state-centred narratives have placed undue emphasis on direct confrontations between the Mahdists and the main forces of the region—Egyptians, British and Abyssinians—at the expense of a more comprehensive picture centred on Bijāwī communities. The predominant interpretation by British contemporary commentators of their participation in the Mahdist uprising resorted to essentialist conceptions, insisted on the superficial nature of its religious dimension, and emphasised the ethno-tribal homogeneity of the movement. Therefore, their motivations required little more explanation than the mention of a set of ungrounded assumptions *vis-à-vis* Bijāwī society: an inherent opposition to any form of state control, an irresistible attraction to booty, and limited defences against charismatic and manipulative figures whose influence could spread unchallenged<sup>289</sup>. Noting that most of ‘Uthmān Diqna’s early supporters came from the Bushāryāb, Thomas H. Owen, an officer of the Sudan Political Service, remarked that they are “to this day the most ruffianly and bellicose in the [Hadanduwa] tribe” and added that “they [were] not pronouncedly interested in religion nor fanatically minded”, so that “their adherence depended upon the single personality of Osman Digna<sup>290</sup>”. When socioeconomic factors were taken into consideration, they were often reduced to their most immediate manifestations. For example, Andrew Paul had no qualms using the explanation given by Gordon himself for the Hadanduwa mobilisation in favour of Mahdism, namely that the Egyptian government had failed to pay them the entirety of the sum agreed upon for camels rented as transportation for Hicks’ expedition in 1883 (1300/1)<sup>291</sup>.

Consequently, according to most analyses, the Bijāwī mobilisation hardly needed explaining. This state perspective expressed itself in two ways. Firstly, the primary characterisation of local communities was entirely determined by their position towards the Mahdist forces and placed on a spectrum that distinguished between “loyal” or “friendly”, “neutral” and “rebellious” tribes. Secondly, because of the need to chart Eastern Sudan’s political landscape, tribalism became the sole lens through which the situation was understood. To some extent, the same was true of Mahdist authorities with the crucial difference that the latter strived to suppress these affiliations, even if pragmatism brought them to rely ever more heavily on them. While tribal and clan affiliations were relatively loose and fluid, this dual pressure crystallised these groups into political blocks.

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289 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

290 Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 196–197. The question of the etic representations associated with the Bijāwī communities was discussed in detail in chapter 1.

291 Andrew PAUL, *A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 106 ; Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 15–16.

### *A) Mapping Bijāwī mobilisations: The Extension of the Domain of Struggle*

Despite their strong emphasis on tribal structures, British officials were able to take a step back and formulate their understanding of the fluctuating situation in Eastern Sudan through a more geographical lens. This was the case with Wingate, one of the most acute observers of these events, who was able to briefly abandon tribal nomenclatures to put forward territorial dynamics. For example, he distinguished the populations of the littoral, the Gwineb, from those of the Qāsh, based on the greater participation to the Mahdist uprising of the former compared to the latter, regardless of their affiliation<sup>292</sup>. As for Owen, he interpreted Hadanduwa mobilisation in favour of the Mahdist movement as the revival of their century-old imperialist expansion toward the southern Bijāwī triangle, a process that had been suspended by the Egyptian intervention in the Qāsh in the 1840s. Operations in the vicinity of Kasalā allowed them to strengthen their hold over the region at the expense of the Malhītkināb and the Ḥālānqa, while the Bishārīn were ousted from Qūz Rajab<sup>293</sup>.

While these considerations still overemphasised tribal homogeneity, they opened up perspectives for mapping Mahdist mobilisation in Eastern Sudan. The northern Bijāwī communities, the ‘Abābda and the Bishārīn Umm ‘Alī, were not directly affected. In general, the ‘Aytbāy, including the Atmur Desert, remained out of reach and so these mobile populations managed to avoid being entangled in the conflict. On the contrary, although their participation remained limited, communities settled on the ‘Aṭbara, mainly the Bishārīn Umm Nājī but also some Hadanduwa and Ja‘alī clans were more fully incorporated into the Mahdist movement. Figures like Ṭāhir b. Qīlāy and Abū [Abda]—appointed as *umarā’* in 1884 and 1885 (1301-1302)—succeeded in rallying around them a number of Bishārī sections and take control on what was otherwise a crucial axis of communication between Kasalā and the Nile Valley<sup>294</sup>. This process became much more intense from 1891 (1308) onwards, after the withdrawal of ‘Uthmān Dīqna and his forces to Adarāma<sup>295</sup>. To the south, the response of local communities depended mainly on access to the highlands and strategic depth. The Banī ‘Āmir were relatively successful in fending off the Mahdist advance and, in their majority, chose to avoid direct contact by moving up the Baraka and Anseba Valleys, toward the south-east<sup>296</sup>. The Rashāyda, a non-Bijāwī group, took similar steps and managed to put some distance between them and Mahdist forces<sup>297</sup>. Still to the south, the Ḥabbāb—

292 Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 246; 330.

293 Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 198.

294 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 64 ; George E. R. SANDARS, “The Bisharin,” *op. cit.*, p. 140–141.

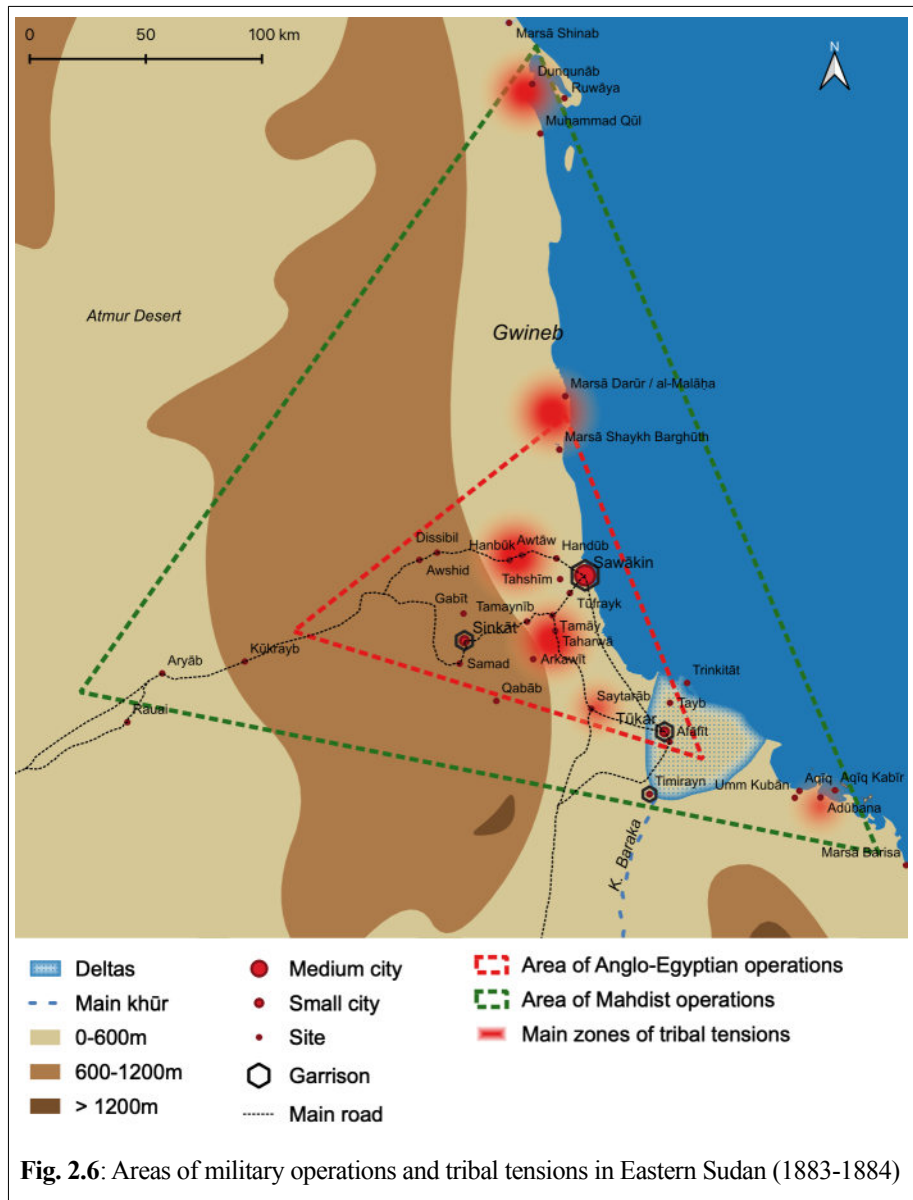
295 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Dīqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 18. See conclusion.

296 Siegfried F. NADEL, “Notes on Beni Amer Society,” *op. cit.*, p. 52.

297 The Rashāyda communities had left the Ḥijāz in the 1870s to settle in Eastern Sudan. While some of them had moved inland toward the ‘Aṭbara and were consequently directly affected by the expansion of Mahdism in the region, most of them had stayed near the littoral (William C. YOUNG, “From Many, One: The Social Construction

the main community on the littoral between ‘Aqīq and Maṣawwa‘ beside the Banī ‘Āmir—did not benefit from the same access to the highlands as the latter. For that reason, but also because of internal rivalries, they found themselves quite intensely embroiled into Mahdist politics<sup>298</sup>.

The military operations that pitted Egyptian and British forces against Mahdist rebels, however, were confined to a much more limited perimeter formed by a triangle connecting Shaykh Barghūth to the north, Sinkāt to the west



and Tūkar to the south (see fig. 2.6), that is the territories where colonial influence could be felt with the greatest intensity. It results from these observations that the Mahdist *da‘wa* was first deployed in a space which was essentially Sawākin’s immediate hinterland—among the summer stations of Sinkāt, Arkawīt and Qabāb, or the cotton cultivations of the Baraka delta—and was taken up by communities with deep connections with the port’s urban populations and the economic networks that had developed since the 1870s. Mahdist mobilisation in Eastern Sudan was an expression of the tensions resulting from the differentiated integration of these local communities within the fabric of the new colonial economy. Actors such as the Majādhīb, but also small traders, the milieu from which ‘Uthmān Diqna emanated, found themselves increasingly marginalised by the economic transformation of the region, a process that had begun with the cession of Sawākin

of the Rashāyida Tribe in Eastern Sudan,” *Northeast African Studies*, 1997, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 89–90).  
 298 Idrīs Ibrāhīm JAMĪL, *Al-Ḥabāb mulūk al-baḥr al-aḥmar wa ahl al-sāda*, *op. cit.*, p. 344–397.

and Maṣawwaʿ in 1865, and accelerated in the following decade with the ever more important presence of foreign traders and the development of long-distance trade to the detriment of more regionalised circulations.

The uprising, however, was not limited to this inner triangle but took place on larger territory, an outer triangle defined to the north by the harbour of Ruwāya, the caravan station of Aryāb to the west and ʿAqīq to the south, another harbour (see fig. 2.6)<sup>299</sup>. This space was still defined by its ties with global circulations but colonial control was much more precarious. Therefore, as the attention of Egyptian authorities was monopolised by events in the vicinity of Sawākin from 1883 (1301) onwards and most their resources consumed in an attempt to maintain their hold over the colonial heartland, the uprising rapidly extended to these peripheral regions. The fragile *status quo* that had been imposed by allocating access to certain sources of revenue to specific groups—mainly articulated around the organisation of trade (and to lesser extent local productions of salt and grain)—was severely undermined. Not coincidentally, the territories that were the most affected by the uprising and witnessed significant tribal tensions were all situated on tribal borders. Competition between rival groups, which had been stifled by the Egyptian power through policies designed to balance the centrifugal tendencies of Bijāwī communities by interesting some of them to the profits of the colonial economy and ensure some form of delegation of authority, was suddenly revived.

In this space, several sites experienced early signs of Mahdist mobilisation and internecine tensions and reveal the congruence between political dynamics and economic factors. The first one was situated at Ruwāya, a small natural harbour more than two hundred kilometres north of Sawākin. This place was important because it was the outlet of an alternative trading route to the southern ports, but also because this was the site of the main salt mines on the Sudanese Red Sea littoral<sup>300</sup>. On 24 December 1884 (6 Rabīʿ I 1302), around a thousand rebels, mainly from the Bishārīn, took over this position. Commodore Molyneux remarked that “[i]t is curious that the Bishari, a Nile tribe, but extending to the Red Sea north of Roweyya, should have become actively hostile now on the coast while being friendly on the Nile, and having held aloof during last summer when Osman Digna was at the zenith of his power, and when Roweyya was comparatively a place of some importance to the Egyptian Gov[ernment], as then the salt works were in full operation ; now they are stopped, as usual at this time of year, owing to the rains, and the people employed have returned to Jeddah”. He added that he thought that one of the objectives was to capture camels from the Ammārʿar to sell them to the British, and another to seize a “stock of cotton cloth” of

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299 See chapter 4 for a detailed discussion on these harbours’ role in regional trade circulations.

300 In Mahdist documents, this site is consistently referred to as al-Malāḥa, based on *milḥ*, salt in Arabic.

which the rebels are said to be in dire need<sup>301</sup>. Indeed, these Bishārī communities were keen to exploit their newly gained access to the small harbours of this region and invest trade circulations. In 1885 (1302/3), they were supplying the Mahdists with large quantities of grain arriving at *khūr* Shin‘ab, a few kilometres to the north of Ruwāya. They were also trading in slaves and contraband with Jidda, before the British Royal Navy bombarded their settlement in August 1885 (Shawwāl-D. al-Qa‘da 1302)<sup>302</sup>.

More to the south, rivalries between some Hadanduwa and Ammār‘ar clans over the Sawākin-Barbar route and particularly the section between Aryāb and Handūb was the main motor of several years of intense tensions which frequently spilled over the southern part of the route near Arkawīt (see fig. 2.6). Some Ammār‘ar sections had been made responsible of this trade route’s segment by the Egyptian authorities, and this had prompted, over the previous ten years, a shift of the main road from Sinkāt to Handūb, at the expense of the Hadanduwa communities settled there. Colonel Chermiside was keen to see the relation between the advantageous position the Ammār‘ar close to Maḥmūd ‘Alī had gained as “carriers on the Berber road”, and the fact they would be “in favour of law and order, and would welcome any initiative from Suakin<sup>303</sup>”. Conversely, Augustus Baker, then the British consul in Sawākin (1883-1885), ascribed a “sudden revival of [‘Uthmān Diqna’s] popularity among the Hadendowa tribes<sup>304</sup>” to the news (then unconfirmed) of the fall of Barbar to the Mahdists. The rationale was quite simple. As long as both ends of the most important trading route in Eastern Sudan had remained in the hands of Egyptian authorities, the Bijāwī communities had no interest in siding with the camp that could not guarantee their economic survival. To some extent, this also explained tensions over the beginning of the Sawākin-Kasalā route, particularly near *khūr* Saytarāb.

The ports of ‘Aqīq and ‘Aqīq al-Kabīr (on the island) constituted the main features of the third area of internecine tensions in the region. Already populated by a variety of communities the greater Tūkar area was, as seen above, crucial for the regional economy. Gradually invested by some Artayqa clans from Sawākin and under constant pressure from Hadanduwa groups, the development of cultivation entailed a contraction of the pastures available to the Banī ‘Āmir pastoralists who would bring their cattle during the summer months<sup>305</sup>. The siege and subsequent surrender of the Tūkar garrison on 24 February 1884 (26 Rabī‘ II 1301) disrupted the precarious

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301 BNA FO 633/54, Correspondence no. 121, Sir Baring to Earl Granville, Cairo, 29 December 1884, and WO 147/44, “Diary of the principal events at Suakin subsequent to the Departure of Major-General Graham (3<sup>rd</sup>, April 1884)” (Part IV.- 25<sup>th</sup> October to 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1884), April 1885.

302 Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

303 BNA FO 633/54, Correspondence no. 90, Colonel Chermiside to Colonel Watson, Suakin, 6 November 1884.

304 BNA FO 633/53, Correspondence no. 160, Mr. Egerton to Earl Granville, Cairo, June 6 1884.

305 See chapter 1 and figure 1.2.

balance which had prevailed hitherto. Attempts were made by the Mahdists to gain control of the island the same year<sup>306</sup>, but they had no means to transport all their men across the water. Two emissaries were sent to its residents with letters from ‘Uthmān Dīqna asking them to submit. The inhabitants of ‘Aqīq al-Kabīr were not impressed. They cut the hands of one of them while the other barely escaped. The *fuqarā*’ decided to harass the populations of the mainland, mainly Banī ‘Āmir, Ḥabbāb and Rashāyda and seized the grain they found in underground granaries (*maṭmūra* pl. *maṭāmir*)<sup>307</sup>. However, outnumbered, they could not hold to this position and they retreated as the Banī ‘Āmir mustered to push back. The death of their head *shaykh*, ‘Alī Bakhīt, during their advance was a watershed moment and had lasting consequences<sup>308</sup>. This episode ended in a stalemate and the region of ‘Aqīq somewhat of a borderland between, to the north, the Mahdists, and to the south, “the bulk of the Beni Amer, the Rachidas [Rashāyda], Ashruffs [Ashrāf], and Habbabs [who were] still professing loyalty and anxiety to crush the Hadendowas<sup>309</sup>”.

All in all, the previous development shows the necessity to consider local economic factors to explain the Mahdist mobilisation. It did not emerge in a vacuum but within a complex set of circumstances that mirrored recent inflexions of larger economic dynamics. Whatever their significance, the role granted to these local circumstances should not negate the religious potency of the Mahdist *da‘wa*. On the contrary, Mahdist mobilisation subsumed these tensions and served as a canvas for their expression. In that regard, the military operations undertaken by Anglo-Egyptian troops, while holding the centre stage of most contemporary accounts (including the Mahdists’), revealed the authorities’ incomprehension of the situation and proved to be mainly pointless.

### ***B) Anglo-Egyptian Military Operations in Eastern Sudan (1883-1885)***

If ‘Uthmān Dīqna had hoped to quickly seize control of the hinterland by capturing Sinkāt and, soon after, throwing his forces against Sawākin with the expected backing of the inhabitants of the Qayf (see above), the defeat he suffered before the walls of the Egyptian garrison was a massive setback. Shortly after, on 14 September 1883 (12 D. al-Qa‘da 1300), troops dispatched from Sinkāt in an attempt to crush the *anṣār* who had withdrawn to Arkawīt were successfully pushed back in the *khūr* Qabāb. After a period of consolidation, ‘Uthmān Dīqna revised his initial strategy of direct confrontation and undertook to isolate the different Egyptian positions from one another. The telegraph line between Sawākin and Kasalā was cut and men sent to surveil the road between the Red Sea port and Sinkāt. On 24 October (23 D. al-Ḥijja), reinforcements sent to this last position

306 This is not precisely dated in the *Waqā‘i*’.

307 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 96–98.

308 BNA 633/54, Correspondence no. 121, Sir Baring to Earl Granville, Cairo, 7 December 1884.

309 BNA FO 633/53, Correspondence no. 9, Commodore Molyneux to Admiral Hay, 15 January 1885.

were ambushed in *khūr* Abaynt and annihilated. At that time, the newly appointed *amīr* ‘Alī b. Ḥāmid was sent to besiege Tūkar and in early December (late Muḥarram 1301), al-Khiḍir b. ‘Alī was entrusted with the same mission for Kasalā.

The first major battle of this new Mahdist offensive occurred on 5 November 1883<sup>310</sup> (4 Muḥarram 1301). At al-Tayb, between Trinkitāt and Tūkar, a small Egyptian troop headed by Maḥmūd Ṭāhir Pasha—a *liwā’* sent with the express mission of putting an end to the uprising in Eastern Sudan—attempted to reach Tūkar but fell into yet another Mahdist ambush, the same day that an Egyptian force was destroyed on the road between Kasalā and Tūkar. After the “first battle of the Coast”, all hinterland roads were effectively cut. An attempt to reopen the path to Sinkāt on 2 December 1883 (1<sup>st</sup> Ṣafar 1301) met the same fate. On 4 February 1884 (6 Rabī’ II), a much larger troop led by Valentine Baker Pasha was again defeated at al-Tayb. This time, the “second battle of the Coast” grabbed the attention of the British government and public opinion, among other reasons because it involved a well-known British officer<sup>311</sup>. This caused a panic in Sawākin, where the population was convinced that ‘Uthmān Diqna would immediately set out to march against the town. This was compounded by yet another defeat, on 8 February 1884 (10 Rabī’ II 1301), when the soldiers and their families attempted a sortie from Sinkāt and were all killed.

In a belated effort by the British to avoid the total collapse of Egyptian control over Eastern Sudan, the decision was taken to dispatch three battalions under the command of Maj.-General Graham on 11 February 1884 (15 Rabī’ II 1301), the same day that Gordon arrived in Barbar, heading toward Khartoum with the mission to organise the evacuation of Egyptian and European elements from the Nilotic Sudan. While the British took over Sawākin and the Rear Admiral William Hewett (soon to be replaced by the Colonel Chermiside) assumed command of its garrison, Maj.-General Graham organised an important expedition in yet another attempt to rescue the garrison of Tūkar. The advancing troops defeated the Mahdist forces set against them on 29 February 1884 (1 Jumādā I 1301) at the “third battle of the Coast”, but failed to build on their advantage. Other operations were conducted so to push back the Mahdist who were dangerously closing down on Sawākin, first against the Mahdist camp at Tamāy on 13 March 1884 (14 Jumādā I 1301) and against Tamaynīb, ‘Uthmān Diqna’s headquarter, on 27 March 1884 (29 Jumādā I). These last actions brought an end to the first British campaign in the region. Despite these successes, the hinterland remained firmly in the hands of the *anṣār*<sup>312</sup>.

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310 Coincidentally, the day Hicks Pasha’s army was defeated in Kurdufān. While Maḥmūd Ṭāhir managed to return to Sawākin, Lynedoch N. Moncrieff, the British consul in Sawākin since 1882, was killed during the battle.

311 Valentine Baker (1827-1887) was the younger brother of the famous explorer Samuel Baker (1821-1893). See Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 68–69.

312 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 46–72 ; Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna*, *op. cit.*, p. 52–84 ; Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-*

British direct involvement in the region only resumed a year later, in February 1885 (Jumādā I 1302), when it was decided that an attempt would be made to connect with General Wolseley's Nile expedition if it ever managed to advance up to Barbar. Better prepared and rich of the experience gained during the 1884 campaign, it was tactically more successful, but insignificant from a strategic point of view, mainly because its objectives were irrelevant even before it was decided, let alone when troops arrived in the region. It is telling that the operations conducted during the two following months were not mentioned in Holt's narrative, and, despite its scope, only alluded to in Wingate's<sup>313</sup>. At the centre of this second expedition was the project to build a railway from Sawākin up to Barbar. While the advantage the British hoped to gain from connecting the Red Sea to the Nile Valley were muddled, even for those responsible of its realisation, technical difficulties and the hostility of the Mahdists plagued its construction. The bridgehead only reached Awtaw, not much more than 50 km from Sawākin and still 400 km from Barbar (see fig. 2.8)<sup>314</sup>. A costly endeavour, this failed experiment was nonetheless the blueprint of the Sudan Military Railway which was instrumental during the 1896-1898 Anglo-Egyptian conquest of the Upper Nile Valley<sup>315</sup>. With the decision of the British government to withdraw from the Sudan on 21 April 1885 (6 Rajab 1302), all outside operations were suspended and no major expedition was to be undertaken for the next six years<sup>316</sup>.

Whereas the 1885 campaign had no significant impact on Mahdist influence in Eastern Sudan, despite several crushing blows being dealt to its military, efforts by Colonel Chermiside to organise the evacuation of the Egyptian garrisons of the region were somewhat more successful. Assisted by the Abyssinians whose help was obtained through the signing of the treaty of Adwa in June 1884 (Sha'bān 1301), Egyptian forces at Amaydīb and Sanhīt (Keren) withdrew safely toward Maṣawwa' in April 1885 (Jumādā II-Rajab 1302)<sup>317</sup>. The situation in Kasalā, besieged since November 1883 (Muḥarram 1301), was much more pressing. The *mudīr* of the garrison, Aḥmad Bey 'Iffat (c. 1830-1885), successfully defended the town against a Mahdist assault on 21 June 1884 (26 Sha'bān 1301), but when he was ordered to retreat with his troops to Maṣawwa' in August (Shawwāl), he replied that this was not possible anymore. Six months later, in January 1885 (Rabī' I-II 1302), a large body of Banī 'Āmir was defeated before the walls of Kasalā, thus putting an end

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*Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi, op. cit.*, p. 49–53. There exists a consequent literature on British operations in Eastern Sudan. For a more detailed approach focused on military aspects and an extent bibliography, see Anaël POUSSIER, *Le conflit au Soudan-Est : se battre pour Sawākin (1883-1891)*, Master 2, Université Paris-I Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, 2012.

313 Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan, op. cit.*, p. 245–246.

314 Richard L. HILL, "The Suakin-Berber Railway, 1885," *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1937, vol. 20, no. 1, p. 107–124.

315 Edward M. SPIERS, "The Sudan Military Railway," *op. cit.*

316 Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State, op. cit.*, p. 53–58.

317 The garrisons of al-Qallābāt and al-Jīra were also evacuated.



at British efforts to encourage the formation of a “tribal Muslim front” to contain the progress of Mahdism. On 23 May (8 Sha‘bān), the nearby eponymous village of Khatmiyya was captured and on 15 June (2 Ramaḍān), another Mahdist assault against Kasalā was repelled but time was playing against the besieged. The British tried to pressure Yohannes IV’s eminent general *rās* Alūlā (1827–1897) to march on Kasalā, but he was reluctant to do so, among other reasons because he worried about the recent arrival of Italians in Maṣawwa‘ in February 1885 (Rabī‘ II–Jumādā I 1302). Kasalā eventually surrendered on 30 July 1885 (17 Shawwāl 1302)<sup>318</sup>. ‘Uthmān Diqna arrived shortly after and gathered men in an attempt to expand the Mahdist movement in Abyssinia where the former *qāḍī* of Sawākin, ‘Abd al-Qādir Ḥusayn, had already made important strides in rallying some of the Muslim populations of the region. The crushing defeat he suffered at Kūfīt on 23 December 1885 (16 Rabī‘ I 1303) against *rās* Alūlā definitely ended large Mahdist operations in the region. Subsequently, the Mahdist-Ethiopian conflict moved to the south, to the region between al-Qaḍārif and Gondar<sup>319</sup>. This put an end to the first phase of the conflict to which thousands had participated. Once Anglo-Egyptian forces had been forced to retreat behind the walls of Sawākin, the fragile consensus that had prevailed among the Bijāwī in the two first years quickly broke down.

### ***C) The End of Consensus: Toward the Bijāwī Civil Wars***

In the inner triangle in which the confrontation between the Mahdists and Anglo-Egyptian forces played out, native opposition to Mahdist rule was embodied by Maḥmūd ‘Alī Bey. Often depicted only as an Ammār’ar leader, he was first and foremost a colonial agent<sup>320</sup>. Barely two months after ‘Uthmān Diqna’s arrival, he led the first expedition to Arkawīt that was repelled at the battle of Qabāb on 14 September 1883 (12 D. al-Qa‘da 1300) (see fig. 2.7), at which occasion he lost one of his sons<sup>321</sup>. His multifaceted identity was put forward in the *Waqā’i’* where he was described as the “head (*ra’īs*) of the Turks”, a member of the Khatmiyya, and a *shaykh* of the Ammār’ar. The fact that the Egyptians fully delegated the first reaction to the Mahdist movement’s expansion to a local *shaykh* signals his standing for the colonial administration. He is again mentioned in late February 1884 (late Rabī‘ II 1301) when he attempted to attack a Mahdist camp near Sawākin<sup>322</sup>. British officers overestimated his influence and the strength of his position as a leader of a representative segment of the Bijāwī populations. Of Ammār’ar origins, he benefitted

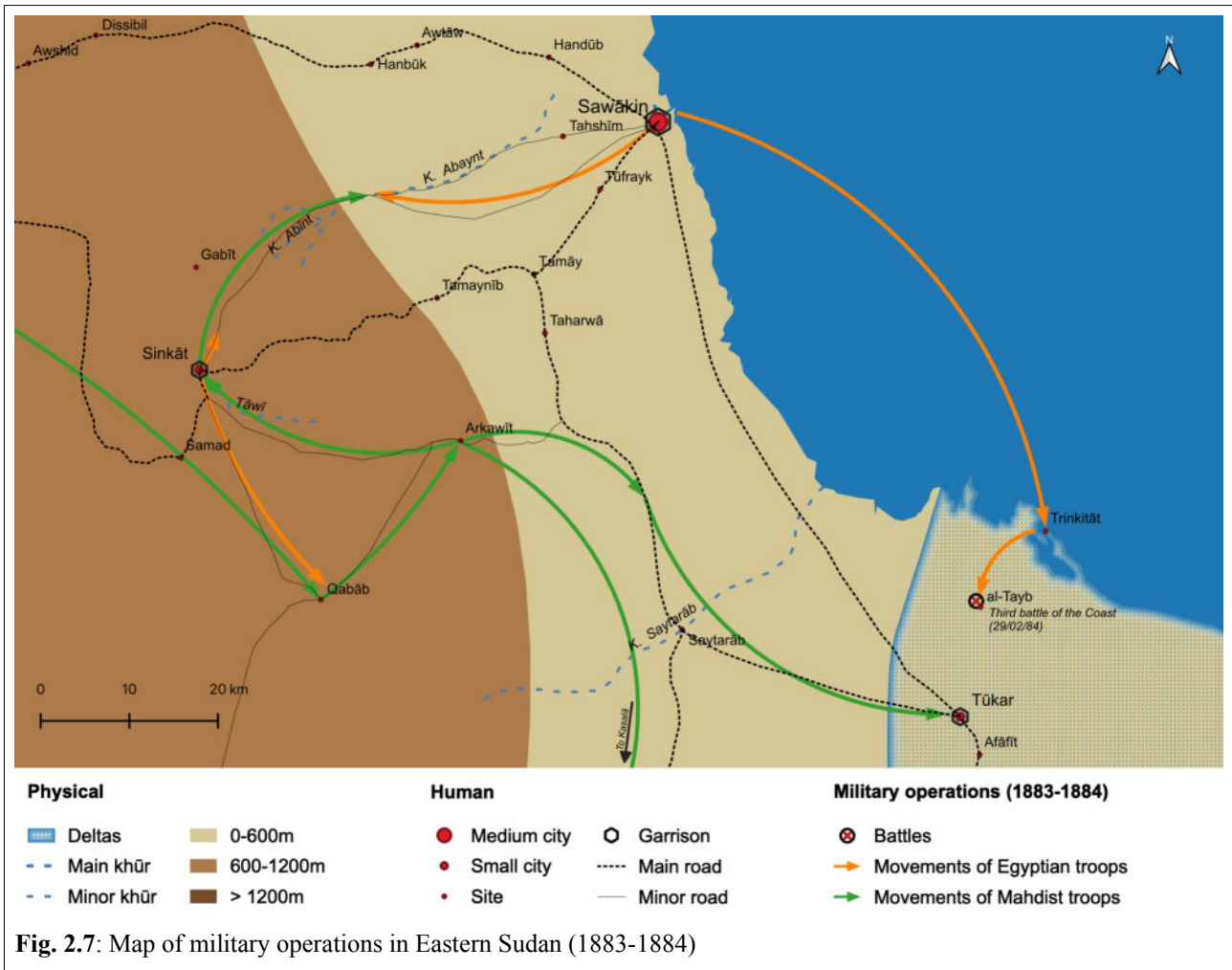
318 For a detailed account, see Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Amīr al-Sharq. ‘Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, p. 95–110.

319 Haggai ERLICH, “1885 in Eritrea,” *op. cit.*

320 Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945, op. cit.*, p. 85–86.

321 Another of his sons had initially decided to join the Mahdist forces, against his father’s will.

322 Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitāb sa‘adat al-mustahdi bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdi (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdi) by Isma‘il b. ‘Abd al-Qadir, op. cit.*, p. 131;

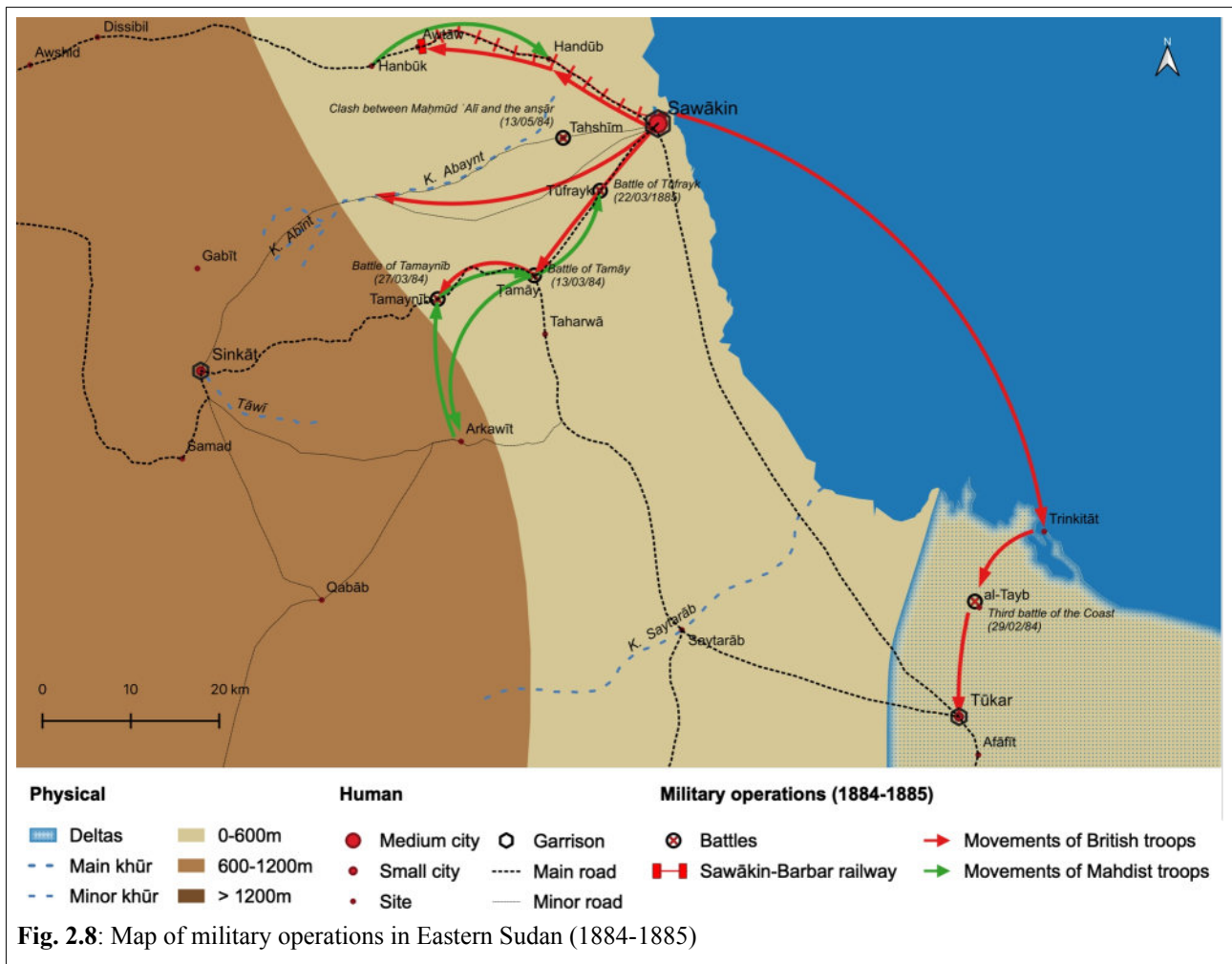


from his relations with certain groups of the hinterland but not from a wide support, and his role was, at first, that of an intermediary.

Profiting early on from the largesse of the newly arrived British forces led by Maj.-General Graham, Maḥmūd ‘Alī whose role had been hitherto relatively minor, was entrusted with keeping the well of Tahshīm (see fig. 2.8), one of the few watering places scattered in the vicinity of Sawākin. The men he gathered for this task were not defined by the author of the *Waqā’i* in tribal terms, but solely referred to as “all of the nomads who were in Sawākin, and some from the people of Sawākin<sup>323</sup>”, hinting to the fact these formed a diverse group<sup>324</sup>, not necessarily the beginning of an Ammār’ar coalition. On 13 May 1884 (16 Rajab 1301), Maḥmūd ‘Alī’s expedition clashed with a Mahdist force dispatched to Tahshīm. The *Ṣīra*, for once more precise than the *Waqā’i*, hints that Maḥmūd ‘Alī may have been somewhat hesitant at first, and that the people accompanying him, that is the group of nomads and city dwellers he could muster in Sawākin, prodded him to fight, a

323 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, p. 73.

324 Not only were the members of this group ill-defined, but “women and songstresses (*qiyān*)” also participated to the expedition (*Ibid*).



nuance which had disappeared in the *Waqā'i*. This hesitation also affected the nomads, probably a more homogeneous group affiliated to the Ammār'ar, who were incited to fight but who fled almost as immediately as they were attacked by the Mahdists, a panic which led them to abandon numerous donkeys and camels, as well as forty-nine of their wives<sup>325</sup>.

The real turning point happened in June 1884 (Sha'bān 1301) when the *anṣār* occupied the well of Handūb (see fig. 2.8). On this occasion, the first mentions of tribal groups appear in the *Sīra*: the Ammār'ar Faḍlāb and Shatrāb, led respectively by Maḥmūd 'Alī and Muḥammad Ādam 'Alī Rikāb. By settling in Handūb, the *anṣār* initiated a push to the north which rapidly put them head to head with the Ammār'ar populations settled near *khūr* Arba'āt and effectively cut the most direct road between Sawākin and Barbar, thus undermining the Ammār'ar's ability to extract profits from said trade. Regional circulations were, however, not considered as important as local ones in which some of the same Ammār'ar groups had a stake in. Indeed, the *Waqā'i* and the *Sīra* directly referred to these economic issues<sup>326</sup>, stating that “[the Ammār'ar] gain more from their disbelief,

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73–74.

<sup>326</sup> Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitab sa'adat al-mustahdi bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdi (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdi)* by Isma'il b. 'Abd

their refusal of the Mahdiyya and their entry into obedience toward the Turks, since they bring their cattle (*mawāshī*) and their milk to Sawākin and they buy [there] what they lack<sup>327</sup>. If this could not be quantified, the weight of these local networks was significant for all the actors involved. Obviously, the Ammār'ar clans who regularly traded in Sawākin knew well the benefits they derived from this system of exchange, but the Mahdist leadership kept on underestimating seafare transport, insisting that cutting supply lines from the hinterland to the Red Sea port would be sufficient to subdue the town.

Whereas Maḥmūd 'Alī sided with the Anglo-Egyptian administration in Sawākin to defend the profits he garnered from the control over a limited segment of the Sawākin-Barbar trade route, Mahdist encroachment to the north and their attempt at controlling the first trade station of importance threatened a much wider group with direct interests in these circulations. To some extent, the Mahdists themselves were causing the tribalisation of their opposition. The first clash happened on 25 June 1884 (1<sup>st</sup> Ramaḍān 1301) and saw the defeat of the Ammār'ar Shatrāb and Faḍlāb gathered in the *khūr* Dimm from whence they retreated. Some of the trade was redirected to natural harbours north of Sawākin, but Shaykh Barghūth, arguably the largest of those sites, was raided by the Mahdists *c.* 9 July (15 Ramaḍān)<sup>328</sup>. At this point, the main dynamics of Ammār'ar opposition experienced a shift. After the initial setback they had suffered at *khūr* Dimm, they gathered once again, but soon split as to the attitude to adopt. Those who had been in direct contact with the Mahdists, the Shatrāb and Faḍlāb, including the sons of Maḥmūd 'Alī, chose to submit to 'Uthmān Diqna's envoy, Aḥmad Ādam al-Qulhuyābī. The others, from the 'Alyāb, the Raḥmāyāb and the party of 'Alī Ḥujār, raided the Mahdists, most probably in an attempt to retrieve some of the cattle they had previously lost. These nomad groups were the same ones who had contacted Maḥmūd 'Alī and asked him to intervene on their behalf to obtain weapons from the British<sup>329</sup>.

Maḥmūd 'Alī's position within British narratives as their main intermediary and the one who deciphered local politics for them—through a particular lens, a defect that some British officers remarked upon—had important consequences on how the conflict was framed. The historian Steven Serels revamped this narrative by recasting the phase that came after the initial *jihādī* struggle against Anglo-Egyptian forces as local civil wars that pitted against each other

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*al-Qadir, op. cit.*, p. 143.

327 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, p. 82.

328 See chapter 4.

329 Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitab sa'adat al-mustahdi bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdi (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdi) by Isma'il b. 'Abd al-Qadir, op. cit.*, p. 144–145.

different segments of indigenous society<sup>330</sup>. This differed significantly from British understanding which privileged a tribal framing and tended to insist on the alien nature of Mahdism in Eastern Sudan. The shift from a struggle mostly devoted to fighting Egyptian and then British forces to an all-encompassing internal conflict resulted directly from the impact of the Mahdist movement on communities, the breaking down of authority structures and the vacuum of power caused by the gradual Egyptian withdrawal.

Participation or opposition to the Mahdist movement was instrumentalised by individuals in subaltern positions to challenge authority structures and reshape them to their advantage. This was the case among certain segments of the Ammār'ar and explains, in part, the fully-fledged engagement of Maḥmūd 'Alī against the Mahdists. According to Ḥammūdī, his main motivation to oppose the Mahdists represented a bid to seize the *naḥāra* of the Ammār'ar. In that regard, he could hope to benefit from the temporary support he mustered from the British in Sawākin to gain the upper-hand against his local adversaries. Indeed, when the colonial administration stopped its policy of supplying the opposition, both of his sons left the Red Sea port discreetly and joined 'Uthmān Diqna<sup>331</sup>. The same is true within the Ḥabbāb, even if on inverted terms. Tribal relations were not, by far, the sole factor determining a community's attitude toward the Mahdiyya. Economic factors and internal politics were also crucial. Among the Ammār'ar, a *shaykh* like Muḥammad Ādam Sa'adūn not only participated to the early phase of Sawākin's siege in late 1883, but was also injured during the first raid launched by Maḥmūd 'Alī and his men against the *anṣār*<sup>332</sup>.

The hurried end of British operations in Eastern Sudan in late April 1885 (Rajab 1302) suddenly pushed many communities that had strived until then to avoid committing to one side, to reconsider their position. Maybe more than the cessation of military activities, hesitations as to whether the British would maintain their position at Sawākin was particularly hurtful to their attempts to gain the trust of certain Bijāwī groups. Maj.-General Graham and Colonel Chermiside said as much when they confided to their superior, General Wolseley, then on his way back from the Nile Campaign, that "Everything in this correspondence turns upon whether we will or will not promise to establish a settled Government in the Suakin district. As H.M. Government is not prepared to enter into any such arrangement, and as our troops are now about to be withdrawn, all the negotiations referred to in these papers, fall to the ground<sup>333</sup>." Plans to occupy Tūkar or al-Tayb and maintain a small garrison manned by "irregulars or Bashi-Bazouks" were also considered too

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330 Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

331 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – 'Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

332 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

333 BNA FO 32/6127, Letter from Gal. Wolseley to the Marquis of Hartington. Forward letter from Maj.-Gal. Graham and Colonel Chermiside, May 5 1885.

risky and consequently shelved. This was compounded by “the constant change of Governors [which] has had a bad effect<sup>334</sup>” (see fig. 2.9).

This could have been the time at which Mahdist authorities acted decisively and imposed their uncontested authority over the whole of Eastern Sudan. However, several events contributed to drastically reduce their ability to assert their domination. Firstly, the unexpected death of the Mahdī on 22 June 1885 (9 Ramaḍān 1302) was a severe blow to the Mahdist cause. For Consul Cameron, this was the reason for the defection of the Ja‘aliyīn, the Ḥalānqa and Shukriyya who were besieging Kasalā with the Hadanduwa and who “reproached the latter for

Term	Governor-general
12/1881-10/1883	‘Ala’ al-Dīn Pasha Şiddīq
10/1883-02/1884	Suleiman Pasha Niazi
02/1884-04/1884	Rear-Admiral Hewett
04/1884-07/1884	Colonel Ashburnham
07/1884-09/1884	General Fremantle
09/1884-10/1885	Lt.-Colonel Chermiside
10/1885-02/1886	Colonel Nixon
02/1886-03/1886	Maj.-General Warren
03/1886-05/1886	General Hodding
05/1886-08/1886	Major Watson
09/1886-01/1888	Colonel Kitchener
01/1888-11/1888	Major Rundle
11/1888-09/1889	Colonel Kitchener
09/1889-08/1892	Colonel Holled Smith
08/1892-05/1894	Major Hunter
05/1894-09/1894	Major Wingate
09/1894-[?]/1895	Major Hunter
[?]/1895-[?]/1896	Lt.-Colonel Lloyd

Fig. 2.9: Sawākin’s governors-general (1881-1896)

making them follow that impostor, and refused to have anything further to do with them<sup>335</sup>”. When the garrison eventually surrendered to the delegates sent by the Mahdī himself on 29 July 1885 (16 Shawwāl 1302), tensions in the region were rife and the situation particularly volatile, sufficiently so that ‘Uthmān Diqna decided—without waiting for direct instructions from the Khalīfa<sup>336</sup>—to leave the region of Sawākin on 26 August (15 D. al-Qa‘da) and head toward the southern capital of Eastern Sudan<sup>337</sup>.

Anglo-Egyptian withdrawal was a success for the Mahdists, but it also deprived the movement of its *raison d’être*, a fact compounded by the Mahdī’s death, and the leadership void caused by ‘Uthmān Diqna’s departure. He appointed one of his nephews, Muḥammad Mūsā, to represent him during his absence<sup>338</sup>. The Khalīfa worried about rumours of yet another British operation from Sawākin, and as soon as he was informed that ‘Uthmān Diqna had left the region and engaged in hostilities with the Abyssinians, he instructed him to head back north. From Umm Durmān’s perspective, the conflict initiated by the ‘āmil of Eastern Sudan against the forces of *rās*

334 BNA FO 633/56, Correspondence no. 77, “Memorandum on the Present Condition of Affairs at Suakin” by Capt. Watson, Suakin, 6 April 1886. See also no. 8 [check]

335 BNA FO 633/56, Correspondence no. 61, Mr. Cameron to Mr. Egerton, Suakin, 9 September 1885.

336 The Khalīfa wrote to the Mahdist ‘āmil on 24 August (13 D. al-Qa‘da) to inform him of the surrender of Kasalā. Coincidentally, he wrote him a second letter five days later asking him to send someone of trust to oversee the division of the loot now in the hands of the Hadanduwa. He does not seem to have considered that this would be done by Diqna himself. See *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna* (letters 25 and 26, p. 34-35).

337 Şalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

338 *Ibid.*

Alūlā were of little strategic value. In October 1885 (Muḥarram 1303), the Khalīfā expressed his concern that he may be neglecting the areas surrounding both Kasalā and Sawākin. He nonetheless maintained his trust in ‘Uthmān Diqna, stating that the latter was free to act as he saw fit in accordance with the interests of the religion (*maṣlahāt al-dīn*). But later in the month, the tone had become more imperative: ‘Uthmān Diqna was to return immediately to Sawākin. As often, local *umarā’* were relatively autonomous and central authorities had few means at their disposal to ensure obedience. The Khalīfā had to repeat his order three times in the following months before ‘Uthmān Diqna finally decided to heed it and initiate, on 15 January 1886 (9 Rabī’ II), the displacement of a thousand men to Tamāy, after having appointed one of his cousins, Muḥammad Fāy ‘Alī Diqna, in charge of Tāka, with ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf in charge of the treasury<sup>339</sup>. Six days later, he had reached the Mahdist headquarter near Sawākin whence he endeavoured to consolidate Mahdist authority in the region.

The tremors of the internecine crisis caused by Maḥmūd ‘Alī’s actions in 1884-1885 (1301-1302) had largely subdued after ‘Uthmān Diqna’s departure for Kasalā. His deputy had avoided direct confrontation and local communities had adopted a wait-and-see attitude. This was to change in May 1886 (Sha‘bān 1303) when the *amīr* Muḥammad Ādam Sa‘adūn, joined by Muṣṭafā Hadal, was sent to the *khūr* Arba‘āt in a first attempt to collect taxes over the Ammār’ar, but the Mahdist detachment was ambushed and suffered heavy losses, prompting ‘Uthmān Diqna to attempt the mobilisation of some northern Hadanduwa clans against the Ammār’ar gathered at the harbour of Shaykh Barghūth, but this failed. Emboldened by their early success, a larger Ammār’ar party attacked the Mahdist position of Tahshīm on 17 June (13 Ramaḍān). In response, ‘Uthmān Diqna ordered the execution of two preeminent figures: Ḥamad Maḥmūd, the *nāzīr* of the Ammār’ar, and the shaykh of the Hadanduwa Nūrāb<sup>340</sup>.

Decapitating the local leadership furthered the breaking down of tribal structures and Ammār’ar hostility toward Mahdism. This echoed the larger policy enacted by the Khalīfā of “splitting up the big headships” or drastically reducing their influence, as had been the case with regard to the Hadanduwa *nāzirate* near Kasalā when important Hadanduwa *shuyūkh*, including Muḥammad Mūsā, were summoned to Umm Durmān by the Khalīfā and arrested, only to be released later. The Hadanduwa drum (*naḥās*), Manṣrūra, was also confiscated and carried to the new capital<sup>341</sup>. However, the Khalīfā himself appears to have had qualms about the implementation of such harsh measures and asked from his *‘āmil* to be more conciliatory with refractory groups.

339 See chapter 3 for a detailed discussion on the formation of the Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan.

340 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfā ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 58–60; 97–99.

341 Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 199.



### ***D) Tribal Policies and British Interventions in Eastern Sudan (1886-1888)***

Mahdist efforts to affirm their authority through coercion seemed inefficient and ‘Uthmān Diqna was summoned to Umm Durmān<sup>342</sup> during the summer of 1886 (Ramādān-D. al-Ḥijja 1303)<sup>343</sup> and left Tamāy on 13 August 1886 (14 D. al-Qa‘da) to stay in the Mahdist capital until c. October 1886 (c. Muḥarram 1304)<sup>344</sup>. Early on, the Khalīfa had become dubious as to the results from a repressive policy in Eastern Sudan, a territory he considered as strategic. He had already sent an emissary to ‘Uthmān “bidding him to be more clement and conciliating”, to little avail<sup>345</sup>.

In ‘Uthmān Diqna’s absence, the rebellious groups made headway with the active support of Kitchener, newly appointed in Sawākin in July 1886 (Shawwāl 1303). After their successful attack against Tahshīm, they turned their attention to the main Mahdist position in the region, Tamāy, which they captured on 7 October 1886 (8 Muḥarram 1304), several hundreds *anṣār* dying in an attempt to defend their position<sup>346</sup>. A month later, on 9 November 1886 (12 Ṣafar 1304), a push against Tūkar, the last Mahdist stronghold was organised but this time the *anṣār* led by Mūsā al-Fakī prevailed, bringing temporary relief to Mahdist positions in Eastern Sudan<sup>347</sup>. ‘Uthmān Diqna only returned to Kasalā in December 1886 (Rabī‘ I 1304), after a brief detour via al-Qaḍārif. In Umm Durmān, at the instigation of the Khalīfa, he had been acquainted with Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Abū Qarja (d. 1916), a Dunqulāwī like the Mahdī<sup>348</sup>, who was appointed to accompany the ‘*āmil* of the East. According to Ḥammūdī, the Khalīfa explained the spread of Bijāwī opposition by the Mahdists’ inability to capture Sawākin. Consequently, Abū Qarja’s role may have been primarily military, that is to make the *anṣār* in the East benefit from the expertise he had gained during the siege of Khartoum<sup>349</sup>. However, shortly after the two men had departed, the Khalīfa had a change of mind. ‘Alī b. Ḥāmid al-Jamīlābī, a minor but ambitious Mahdist commander of Bijāwī origin<sup>350</sup> (as

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342 This was, almost certainly, the first encounter between the Khalīfa and the ‘*āmil* of Eastern Sudan since the latter’s visit to al-Ubayyīd in early 1883 (mid-1300). See chapter 3 for more details on the Khalīfa’s practice to summon his agents in Umm Durmān.

343 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna* (letter 64, p. 70-72).

344 Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan, op. cit.*, p. 299. and *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna* (letters 64 to 67, p. 70-75).

345 Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 199.

346 On 1<sup>st</sup> November 1886, just a few days after ‘Uthmān Diqna had left Umm Durmān, he wrote to the Khalīfa to inform him that he had received information on Sawākin from Muḥammad Aḥmad Diqna. With his own letter, he transferred some of the missives that had been sent to him. The Khalīfa answered him quickly to tell him that he had “read each letter one by one up to the small annex that announced to you, my beloved, that some of your people had died as martyrs”. See *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna* (letter 79, p. 84).

347 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi, op. cit.*, p. 62–63 ; Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State, op. cit.*, p. 111.

348 Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan, op. cit.*, p. 279.

349 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, “Al-amīr Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Abū Qarja,” *Majallat al-Dirāsāt al-Sūdāniyya*, 1979, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 155. This hypothesis is sensible but is not backed by evidence, for the simple reason that the three individuals involved, the Khalīfa, Abū Qarja and ‘Uthmān Diqna were all in Umm Durmān. As a result, there is no scriptural trace of this discussion and the matter does not appear to have been mentioned in later correspondence.

350 On his return to the region of Sawākin in December 1886 (Rabī‘ I 1304), he claimed that he had been appointed as



shown by his *nisba*) had travelled to Umm Durmān in November 1886 (Ṣafar 1304) and in a meeting with the Khalīfa claimed that local opposition was above all the result of ‘Uthmān Diqna’s heavy-handed treatment of local populations, who had thus taken their *‘āmil* in detestation.

Two policy shifts were impelled based on this observation. Firstly, the Khalīfa declared in a letter dated 23 November 1886 (25 Ṣafar 1304)<sup>351</sup> that the tribes located near Sawākin who refused ‘Uthmān Diqna’s leadership could, instead, rally Abū Qarja who would be assisted in this matter by al-Jamīlābī himself. So as to appease the situation, the latter was dispatched to Tūkar c. December<sup>352</sup> to attempt to gain the support of the local tribes before the coming of ‘Uthmān Diqna. He probably argued that he could bring the Hadanduwa Jamīlāb to the fold and avoid the exacerbation of tensions among Bijāwī communities. ‘Alī b. Ḥāmid was not the sole tribal entrepreneur who attempted to obtain some form of recognition by central authorities. In early July 1887 (Shawwāl 1304), a man named Muḥammad Aḥmad Ṭaha Ḥamad Hisāy had also come to Umm Durmān and promised the Khalīfa that he could obtain the submission of the Ammār’ar, as a result of what he was appointed as their *‘āmil* and ‘Uthmān Diqna and Abū Qarja were to suspend all operations in this territory<sup>353</sup>. This marked a first step toward the institutionalisation of Mahdist rule in Eastern Sudan based on the appointment of local leaders emanating from the Bijāwī communities. To some extent, this could be construed as an embryo of a native administration. This became even clearer soon after, in December (Rabī’ I-II 1304), when the Khalīfa decided to modify the terms of his first decision<sup>354</sup> by making Abū Qarja responsible for all matters related to “the nomads (*‘urbān*) from the people of the areas of Sawākin and Kasalā and those attached to them”, because they had expressed “a total aversion of the religion, and persisted [in this way] claiming that they had been pushed to agitation, trouble and disobedience (*al-hayjān wa-l-tuthāqil wa-l-‘aṣyān*) by their refusal of the *imāra* of [...] ‘Uthmān Diqna<sup>355</sup>”. With this decree, military matters were separated from the day-to-day management of relations with local populations. Paradoxically, an external actor with no connections to Eastern Sudan was chosen to be the main interlocutor of the Bijāwī populations, someone who had no stakes in the local balance of power and no affiliations that could make him suspect of nepotism toward his own group. Conversely, the appointment of leaders emanating from

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*‘āmil* by the Khalīfa. ‘Uthmān Diqna and Abū Qarja had to remind him that he was second to Abū Qarja (*Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 81, p. 86-88).

351 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna* (letters 75, 77 and 78, p. 82-84).

352 The chronology of ‘Uthmān Diqna and Abū Qarja’s return from Umm Durmān to Kasalā is blurry. They left in the last days of October 1886 for Rufā’a before heading toward al-Qadārif. The *amīr* of the East left Abū Qarja there to return to Kasalā where he arrived in in early January 1887. However, ‘Uthmān Diqna mentions in one of his letters sent on 6 January 1887 (10 Rabī’ II 1304) (*Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 81, p. 86) having visited Ja’aliyīn settled on the ‘Aṭbara, which makes little sense.

353 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 6.

354 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna* (letter 79-82, p. 84-88).

355 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna* (letter 80, p. 85-86).

local communities aimed at grounding the movement by resorting to the services of people who did not belong to the group of early enthusiasts and religious figures but individuals with better standing within said communities.

This was not the solution favoured by ‘Uthmān Dīqna who now had to share his authority with Abū Qarja (and to a lesser extent with al-Jamīlābī), a situation that only could (and did) cause internal tensions between the two leaders<sup>356</sup>. They nonetheless both agreed that force was still the best way to subdue local communities. However, they realised that all their efforts would be hampered by the overall power balance between tribal structures in Eastern Sudan. The same reason why rebellious groups could not unequivocally repel Mahdist presence, namely their fragmentation, gave the *anṣār* a significant but insufficient advantage to make their power indisputable, since they too depended on the mobilisation of Bijāwī groups which all demonstrated a tendency to splinter and vanish. The most straightforward way to extricate themselves from this conundrum was to alter recruitment and resort to troops from non-Bijāwī communities. This was the reason for the belated return of the two Mahdist leaders during the winter 1886 (early 1304) as they attempted to recruit men in al-Qaḍārif for ‘Uthmān Dīqna and in the Buṭāna for Abū Qarja<sup>357</sup>. Accordingly, the *‘āmil* and his second had also requested greater manpower from the Khalīfa who had not abandoned his project to take Sawākin<sup>358</sup>. For that reason, the latter also dispatched Ja‘alī and Dunqulāwī combatants but in smaller numbers.

This brought about a major transformation of the composition of Mahdist forces in Eastern Sudan through the addition of non-native combatants. Before, the few non-Bijāwī integrated into the army came mostly from the various populations established in Tāka<sup>359</sup>. All of this changed in February 1887 (Jumādā I 1304), when Abū Qarja finally arrived in Kasalā with 3 000 fighters, mainly from the Baqqāra and Shukriyya. The territory around Kasalā had stayed relatively quiet since the surrender of its garrison in July 1885 (Shawwāl 1302) and the contestation headed by Maḥmūd ‘Alī the following year had had few echoes among the local populations, among other reasons because Ammār’ar presence was rare. However, in early 1887 (mid-1304), the situation began to deteriorate rapidly as the settling of a high number of combatants from other provinces caused unrest among the Hadanduwa communities. The reasons for these exacerbated tensions were multiple. Firstly, local communities seemed to have resented being ruled by a “foreigner”, the

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356 See chapter 3.

357 Ṣalāh al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fi Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Dīqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 62–67; 121–124. ‘Uthmān Dīqna left Umm Durmān around October 1886 (Muḥarram 1304) and spent several months in al-Qaḍārif. He arrived in Kasalā in December 1886 (Rabī‘ I 1304) (Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 331).

358 They had asked quite specifically for westerners (*awlād al-‘arab*) and slave-soldiers from the *jihādiyya*, as well as support from the *anṣār* encamped in Barbar. See *Daftar ‘Uthmān Dīqna* (letter 114, p. 110).

359 Beside the Hadanduwa, Banī ‘Āmir, Siqūlāb and Ḥalānqa groups could also be found near Kasalā.

Diqnāb having few connections in Tāka, a feeling only compounded by the fact that ‘Uthmān Diqna’s power now relied heavily on “foreign” combatants<sup>360</sup>. Besides, in this context as in others, the concentration of a large force proved to be very problematic as local resources were insufficient to provide for all the combatants and their families. Consequently, some of the Baqqāra were sent down the *khūr* Baraka, probably to find pasture for their mounts, where they immediately collided with the Jamīlāb and Shabūdīnāb who were settled near *khūr* Awdayb and who accused their new neighbours of having robbed them. Maybe to externalise this violence, one of the few large expeditions toward the Abyssinian highlands was organised around May 1887 (Sha‘bān 1304). The region around the *jibāl* al-Bāzāt (Bazeh) and al-Bāriyyāt (Barea), between the *khayrān* of the Qāsh and the Baraka was raided<sup>361</sup>. People were killed, villages burned down, and around 500 men, women and children were captured as slaves<sup>362</sup>. Shortly after, ‘Uthmān Diqna was summoned for the second time to Umm Durmān. He did not stay there long as he was back in Kasalā in late August 1887 (D. al-Qa‘da 1304), however, he seems to have had time to convince the Khalīfa of the necessity to change course in the treatment of native communities. Brute force, the solution he recommended, was required to consolidate Mahdist power in Eastern Sudan and to finally capture Sawākin.

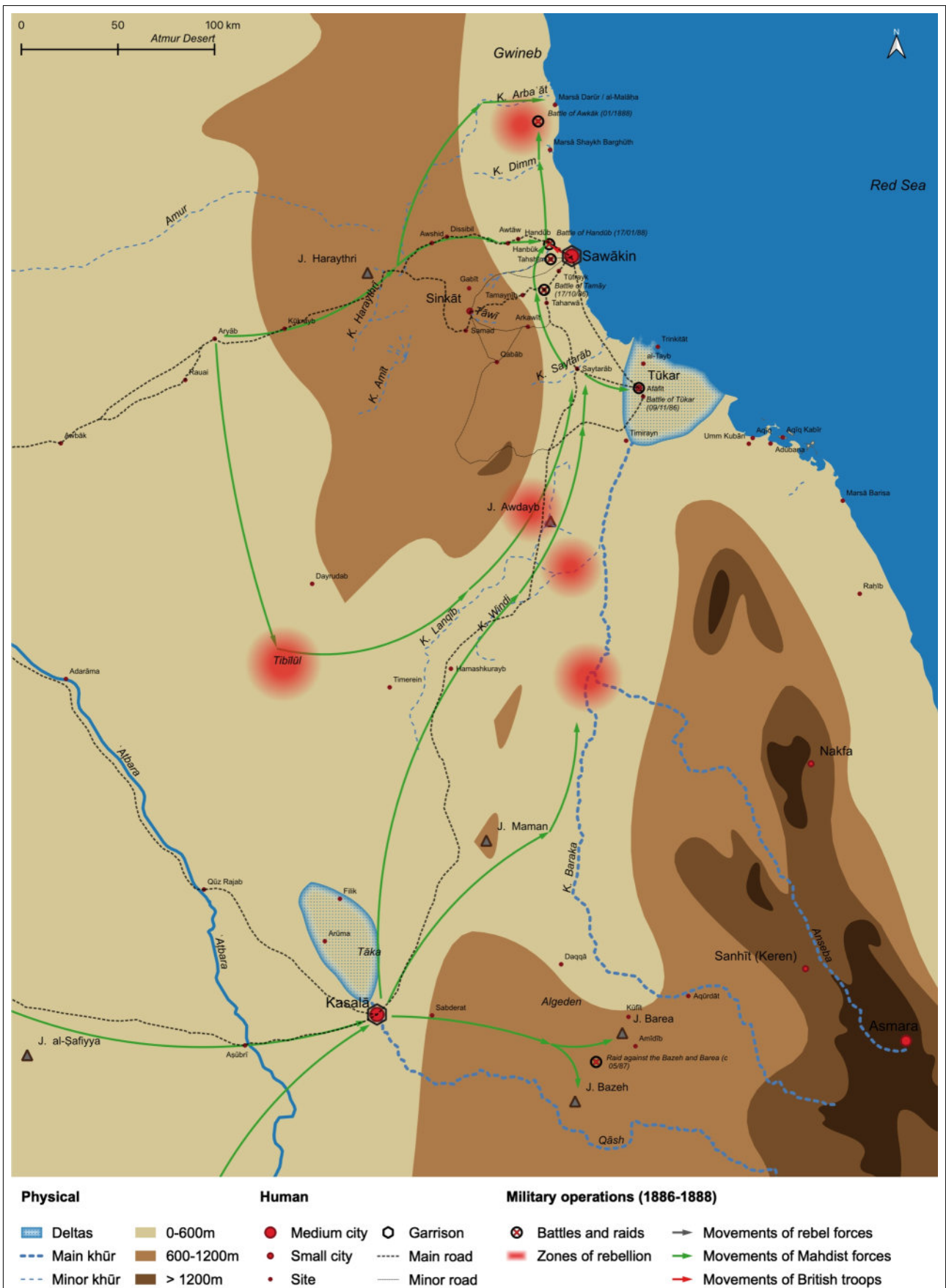
Upon his return, the *‘āmil* could not fail to observe that the situation had worsened: most of the *khūr* Baraka, especially the region near Awdayb, was in revolt. Even more worrying, he could not count on the support of the Hadanduwa anymore, the same tribal group that had been the backbone of the Mahdist movement in Eastern Sudan. Indeed, in August 1887 (D. al-Qa‘da 1304), Muḥammad Fāy Diqna, the *‘āmil*’s deputy, began to collect the *zakāt* on cattle from local communities with the assistance of the Baqqāra. As in the north, the reaction to this encroachment on their property was met with defiance by the Hadanduwa. Some of their leaders, like Walad al-Hadāb, even threatened to abandon Mahdism<sup>363</sup>. These rebellious groups now blocked the main route between Kasalā and the Red Sea littoral. Several *umarā’* had been dispatched to different areas with the objective to obtain the rallying of local tribes. Idrīs Harūn was sent to the Ḥabbāb and Muḥammad w. Ḥāmid to the Bānī ‘Āmir to the south while ‘Awaḍ al-Karīm Kāfūt was tasked with gathering the Ammār’ar and Bishārīn in al-Malāḥa, at the northern extremity of the zone that Mahdist authorities could claim as under their control (see fig. 2.10), but the former was prevented

360 See chapter 5 for a detailed analysis of the tensions between Bijāw and foreign groups.

361 It was headed by ‘Alī b. Ḥāmid al-Jamīlābī who must have come to Kasalā some time before, maybe so as to gather troops before returning to Sawākin’s area.

362 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 7.

363 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 99–100.



**Fig. 2.10:** Map of military operations related to the Mahdist pacification of Eastern Sudan (1886-1888)

from doing so and attacked by Hadanduwa groups<sup>364</sup>. This must have been all the more troubling for the Mahdist leadership that the Hadanduwa-led contestation threatened the entire Mahdist project since it fractured the province by preventing them from accessing the littoral directly. Furthermore, attempts to co-opt local leaders seemed to have run their course. Muḥammad Aḥmad Ṭaha Ḥamad Hisāy's mission toward the Ammār'ar was short-lived: he died around September 1887 (D. al-Ḥijja 1304-Muḥarram 1305). His brother, Ḥamad was appointed as their *rā'is*<sup>365</sup>, but his role never amounted to anything significant. This marked the failure of the policy of accommodation and appointment of local leaders promoted by the Khalīfa. The man who more than anyone else embodied this approach was 'Alī b. Ḥāmid al-Jamīlābī. He was the one who had initially convinced the Mahdist ruler that 'Uthmān Diqna's handling of the Bijāwī communities was counter-productive (see above). Thence, he had been sent back to Sawākin's area in December 1886 (Rabī' I-II 1304) after he had promised he could bring his fellow Jamīlāb to submit and recognised Mahdist authority. Due to the lack of sources, the exact outcome of his mission is not known, however, six months later, in July 1887 (Shawwāl 1304), he had informed the 'āmil that he needed some *anṣār* to be sent to him, a sign that he had overstated his persuasive power<sup>366</sup>.

As a result, in September 1887 (D. al-Ḥijja 1304), as the rainy season was nearing its end, 'Uthmān Diqna launched a large and coordinated campaign to obtain the pacification of the Bijāwī territory. He identified five hotspots of rebellion—the *khūr* Baraka ; near the *khūr* between the *khayrān* of Awdayb and the Baraka ; in Awdayb itself ; at Tibīlūl; and on the other side, up Sinkāt, at Awkāk—and planned to send expeditions to each of them. The first expedition launched along the *khūr* Baraka had a chance encounter with Muḥammad w. Abī Fāṭima, the *muqaddam* of the Ashrāf, who must have felt the danger of his position and rallied Kasalā with some of his men at the end of the month. Another detachment was sent against Tibīlūl and there too exerted great violence against local populations<sup>367</sup>. In the meantime, the reversal of the accommodation policy was confirmed when the Khalīfa proclaimed on 12 September 1887 (23 D. al-Ḥijja 1304) that the property and women captured from the Hadanduwa should be considered as loot, and would only be returned after they submitted<sup>368</sup>.

British officers in Sawākin could only observe the evolution of the situation from a distance.

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364 No direct sources relating this attack could be found, however, 'Uthmān Diqna mentions this event in a letter he wrote to the Khalīfa on 3 October 1887 (15 Muḥarram 1305). It probably occurred during the summer of 1887 (Ramaḍān-D. al-Qa'da 1304). See Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 11.

365 *Ibid.*, letter 10.

366 *Ibid.*, letter 4.

367 *Ibid.*, letters 11 and 15.

368 *Daftar 'Uthmān Diqna* (letter 111, p. 107-108).

Short of having the manpower to directly intervene in the hinterland—an option opposed by the vast majority of civilian and military leaders in London and Cairo—they were dependent on the forces mustered by Bijāwī leaders against the Mahdists, primarily Maḥmūd ‘Alī. They understood relatively well that the central issue was tribal fragmentation. Mahdist power could only assert itself in the region because of its internal cohesion. Ultimately, the *anṣār* did not represent an overwhelming military body, especially since it was submitted to the same centrifugal forces that expressed themselves by the frequent turnover of men, but it could still muster sufficient numbers for targeted raids that allowed them to pick out rebellious groups one by one. Against this “Hadendowa federation<sup>369</sup>”, in Chermiside’s words, British had favoured, since early 1885 (mid-1302), the formation of an Ammār’ar force and saluted the organisation of “a great meeting of Amarars and other tribes [that] is rumoured to be about to take place for discussing their position relatively to Osman Digna and the English<sup>370</sup>.” However, for all the emphasis put on tribal structures, they could not help but notice that the latter were imperfect tools to think Bijāwī societies. Even the Maj.-General Graham, the unfortunate commanding officer of the 1884 and 1885 campaigns recognised his frustration with the fact that “there is no kind of federation at the head of which one representative tribe is empowered by the rest to treat on matters affecting the whole body<sup>371</sup>”. While the exact mechanisms that structured mobilisation in Eastern Sudan remain somewhat blurry, the fact that Hadanduwa communities appeared more tightly knitted in their support of the Mahdist movement than other groups, and, conversely, the Banī ‘Āmir in their opposition, is related to their historical trajectory since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. More hierarchical and cohesive groups played prominent roles during the Mahdiyya and dynamics such as Hadanduwa expansion found a second breath with the establishment of Mahdist power<sup>372</sup>.

The British were highly critical of their Bijāwī interlocutors’ inability to form lasting tribal alliances that could effectively oppose Mahdist rule. They read the regular failure of these efforts according to a racial prism, putting blame on the cowardice and lack of decisiveness of the leaders they supported, thus disregarding the specificities of Bijāwī social structures that impeded such process, first among which the deep fragmentation and dispersion of families and clans over a wide territory. Colonial constructs regarding tribes blinded British officers as to their ability to affect political change through the proxy of local communities. The many reversals of the “friendlies” was

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369 BNA FO 633/53, Correspondence no. 78, Mr. Egerton to Earl Granville, Cairo, 10 May 1884 and Correspondence no. 177, Mr. Egerton to Earl Granville, Cairo, 23 June 23 1884).

370 BNA FO633/54, Correspondence no. 38, Maj.-General. Graham to the Marquis of Hartington, Suakin, 14 April 1885.

371 BNA FO 32/6127, Letter from Maj.-General. G. Graham to General Wolseley, Suakin, 22 April, 1885.

372 See chapter 1.

analysed only as a reflection of these groups' position in favour or against the "government". They lacked a more realistic perception of their own marginality in regional politics, quite particularly as it had been made clear that contrary to Mahdist forces, they would not directly intervene in the interior. Based on that premise, most Bijāwī communities navigated Mahdist assertions of authority by bending whenever resistance seemed too costly, and could, without much hesitation, rally a raid as long as it kept the *anṣār* out of their own territory, notwithstanding the fact that they could mitigate their own losses through loot. The fluidity of the political scene also meant that British officers were reluctant to materially assist Bijāwī groups. They feared, not without reason, that supplies such as weapons or grain would eventually find their way to the hands of Mahdist forces.

Yet, officers stationed in Sawākin possessed a high level of autonomy, as Kitchener best exemplified. Arrived in July 1886 (Shawwāl 1303), he defended a much more proactive policy to support the parties hostile to Mahdism in Eastern Sudan. Despite the relative failure of the movement he had contributed to organise during the second half of 1886 (1303/4) (see above), he set out to retry this tactic the following year. Once again, Maḥmūd 'Alī was the cornerstone of his plan to deal a fatal blow to the *anṣār* by going against Tūkar. A motley group of combatants headed by Aḥmad b. Maḥmūd 'Alī gathered in the *khūr* Saytarāb in November 1887 (Ṣafar 1305), supplied by the British with grain and weapons. In Kitchener's mind, this was a race against the clock before the *'āmil* of the East left Kasalā with a large body of men that would definitively tip the balance of power in his favour. As in 1886, Maḥmūd 'Alī seems to have been plagued by indecision, while with every day that went by waiting, the assortment of men around seemed more and more uncertain as to their chances of success.

The settlement of a rebel force in the heart of Sawākin's hinterland, near the mouth of the *khūr* Baraka, was a powerful challenge to Mahdist authority and a dangerous signal for other Bijāwī communities. In keeping with his original plan, 'Uthmān Diqna sent forces to Awdayb at the *wādī* Taharwā in December (Rabī' I). The combatants who had joined Maḥmūd 'Alī, the majority of them from Ammār'ar groups, scattered in the northern Red Sea Hills without fighting<sup>373</sup>. In the wake of this success, another expedition led by Zakaryā Faḍl Allāh et al-Ṭāhir Muḥammad 'Alī Diqna was organised in January 1888 (Rabī' II 1305) against Ammār'ar sections to the north, but Mahdist leadership had underestimated their capacity for mobilisation so that the *anṣār* were vastly outnumbered and around 200 of them died that day<sup>374</sup>. The Khalīfa himself lost patience. He

373 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – 'Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 67–74.

374 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 21 and 22. In this last letter, 'Uthmān Diqna gave a rare indication on the casualties' identity: 50 Westerners including six from the Baqqāra Ta'ā'isha, nine from Bornū and fifteen from Jima'; 56 from the *jihādiyya* (in addition to what 27 were captured); 84 Hadanduwa and a few from other tribes. Casualties seem representative of the initial composition of the Mahdist

instructed his *‘āmil* to be more careful and make sure that the *anṣār* always had an overwhelming advantage over their enemies<sup>375</sup>. He also called for the eradication of the entire Ammār’ar community. The emissaries sent to other regions were called back, all the men available gathered, and a large expedition placed under Shā’ib Aḥmad left Handūb on 12 January 1888 (27 Rabī’ II 1305). Two days later, the Ammār’ar who had once again gathered after avoiding combat in Taharwā were severely defeated, losing 700 men. Unable to believe that all the endeavours undertaken since mid-1887 could have been in vain, Kitchener abandoned the policy of distant support upheld by his predecessors to directly engage the *anṣār* on 17 January in Handūb while most of the enemy forces were still farther north. The operation failed and Kitchener was shot through the jaw, forcing him to return to Sawākin and seek treatment in Cairo. Lt.-Colonel Holved-Smith, his more careful successor, would wait three years before launching any large-scale military operations in the hinterland. Most Bijāwī groups quickly sought to submit to Mahdist authorities. The sons of Maḥmūd ‘Alī, Aḥmad and al-Ṭāhir left Sawākin on 19 August 1888 (10 D. al-Ḥijja 1305) to find the conditions of a truce with ‘Uthmān Diqna<sup>376</sup>.

The pacification’s last phase was entrusted to al-Nūr Zāyd, the *amīr* of the Mahdist army at Aryāb, who was ordered to launch raids against the last rebellious tribes. For the first time, in late April 1888 (Sha‘bān 1305), three *anṣār* were sent by ‘Uthmān Diqna to guide him through Bijāwī land<sup>377</sup>. It was suggested that he divide his army into three groups: one against the Ammār’ar in al-Malāḥa, the other against the Hadanduwa Shabūdīnāb in Tibīlūl, before heading toward the *wādī* al-Laḳīb against the Jamīlāb up to the *khūr* Saytarāb, while the last group should join the *‘āmil* directly (see fig. 2.10)<sup>378</sup>. In May 1888 (Ramaḍān 1305), other raids were launched against the Hadanduwa Ḥāmdāb, Qar’īb and Jamīlāb settled near Arkawīt by Khāṭir Ḥamīdān<sup>379</sup>, but before the summer had started, the *‘āmil* of Eastern Sudan decided to suspend pacification operations. After almost twelve months of intense organised repression, he had finally gained the upper hand and feared that further actions might irrevocably alienate Bijāwī communities and prevent their submission<sup>380</sup>.

Mahdist power had considerably evolved in the three years that had elapsed since the end of the second British campaign of 1885 (1302). The movement planned by the *‘āmil* for al-Nūr’s

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forces since the *‘āmil* had indicated that over the 2 000 combatants he had dispatched, half of them were Hadanduwa.

375 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna* (letters 134 and 136, p. 121 and 122).

376 Ṣalāh al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 73–81.

377 All three of them belonged to the ‘Ammār’ar. They were Muḥammad walad Ṭālib who had visited the Khalīfa in 1304 (1886/7), Aḥmad w. Ismā‘īl from the ‘Ammār’ar Kurbāb who had also come to Omdurman (his brother died there from smallpox), while the third one, Ḥāmid w. ‘Uthmān, was from the Ammār’ar ‘Alyāb, but ‘Uthmān Diqna added that he was of *sharīfī* origin.

378 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 42 and 47.

379 *Ibid.*, letter 54.

380 *Ibid.*, letter 61.



troops showed a new understanding of spatial dynamics and constituted an affirmation of hegemonic authority over the whole of Eastern Sudan. While the capture of Sawākin and the success of the *jihād* remained the first objective, this could only be attained with men whose participation raised many other considerations among which those raised by the need to achieve territorial control and find local political relays. Consequently, the Mahdist provincial power in Eastern Sudan experienced with an array of solutions which, in turn, informed policies in Umm Durmān. Paradoxically, as it attempted to marshal Bijāwī forces, it also began to moul and shed its properly indigenous aspects to assume state functions.

## Conclusion

The development above was an attempt to ground the history of the Mahdiyya in a specific territory. It aimed at qualifying a common narrative that emphasised the alien character for most provinces of this religious and political movement to systematically consider its expansion from a territorial perspective. It strived to draw a picture of a region profoundly affected by global and regional dynamics to which its population attempted to adapt. In that respect, it diverges significantly from previous accounts by putting forward the complexity of the motives that drove participation in the *jihād*. Since the 1860s and with greater intensity in the 1870s, Eastern Sudan's economy witnessed a greater integration within world circulations with important consequences for both the urban and pastoral communities of the region. Contrary to what was long assumed, the initial success of Mahdism was not founded on pure opportunism from the part of Bijāwī nomads enticed by the perspective of booty and driven by an irresistible desire for conflict, but hinged on the complex interactions between the different segments of a population with diverse aspirations.

In that respect, a short passage of Guido Levi's narration of his time in 'Uthmān Diqna's camp clearly negates the image of fanatical warriors entranced by a millenarian message they did not fully understand. Indeed, several days after his arrival, one of the sons of the famous Maḥmūd 'Alī had come to the camp to meet with the *'āmil* and offer his services. His was accompanied by a man whom Levi recognised and described as "an entrepreneur in camel transport from Souakim". Whereas Maḥmūd 'Alī's son remained cold and distant, his friend quipped with him: "Well, [...] where is this Babour (railway) of which you spoke to me before, and which was to carry goods from Souakim to Berber at the price of one *thalaris* per camel load?". Levi recounted that others who understood Arabic laughed, before all resumed their conversation in Bijāwiye<sup>381</sup>. Levi does not say—and probably did not know—whether this man had decided to join the Mahdist movement, but

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381 Guido LEVI, *Osman Dekna, chez lui, op. cit.*, p. 38.

if he did, the context through which he was considering recent events was far more nuanced than what later accounts made it to be.

Conversely, family, clan and tribal relations also played a major role in the mobilisation. The Diqnāb and Majādhīb were central actors and remained so throughout the period. Group solidarities were serious affairs and instrumental in the movement's early diffusion in Eastern Sudan. Yet, they did not constitute deterministic factors but potential communities which could serve as vectors for mobilisation or be deeply splintered by antagonist positions<sup>382</sup>. This last case was all the more likely that Mahdism's appeal was profoundly individualistic. Religious considerations, often snubbed by contemporary observers, are fundamental to explain the forms of warfare adopted by the *ansār*.

While military considerations informed all of the Mahdist authorities' decisions—the capture of Sawākin remained the main objective from 1883 to late 1888 (1300-1306)—, meeting the needs dictated by the *jihād* had tremendous consequences on how the movement organised itself, gradually developing state functions and adopting a state gaze, notably with regard to the use of a tribal framework. To some extent, the first phase of this process ended in the summer 1888 (late 1305), once 'Uthmān Diqna had asserted his domination over most of Eastern Sudan's territory. This respite allowed for the establishment of a mature administration which could serve the needs of the large force now stationed a few kilometres from Sawākin.

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382 See introduction.



*It is not hidden from your distinguished knowledge and understanding that the matter of the treasury is a heavy burden—except for outstanding personalities—especially in a foreign place, where guests must necessarily be hosted by its secretary, not only the camel-post and their likes, but also brothers with whom he must share his meal, as is customary, whose demands know no limits, from greatly significant to inconsiderable, and who [request] assistance for their salaries, the quarter of which is not placed in their requisite ration.*

*[There are] also the errors and the losses about which he has not heard a word [before], for which he is unjustly cursed and asked to do what he has no power to do, for which no remedy to this confusion was provided to him, and the consequence[s] of which are so feared that you grope around to find something befitting or an authorisation for its equivalent which will [allow you] to rest and recover.*

*[There are] also the receipt of the deed, the request for the authorisation, the letter with the seal and the signature of the representative for every matter, significant or not, which I would validate even if it did not resemble [the original]. The one who knows does not know. The gracious sir requests the chamois to be laid before the letter. I was not carried in this adventure in which I was involved, because I am neither one of the horses [...] nor one of the horsemen [...]¹.*

From Muḥammad al-Nūr Ḥusayn² to Muḥammad al-Majdhūb, son of the departed Abū Bakr (2 May 1890 / 12 Ramaḍān 1307)

In contrast with the relative wealth of studies dealing with the Mahdist central institutions, their provincial equivalent has not benefitted from the same academic attention. The construction of a network of power relations at the scale of the Upper Nile Valley and their evolution through time are still quite obscure, among other reasons because regional studies were mostly thought out in isolation with one another. This indicates a tendency to dismiss the state building ambitions of the Mahdiyya and the coherence of the efforts made toward that objective. This chapter aims at exploring these dynamics in the context of Eastern Sudan and put them in regard with the available data on other provinces.

The Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan only came into existence once territorial control had been achieved in August 1885 (Shawwāl/D. al-Qa‘da 1302). In that regard, it is significant that the first traces of an effective regulatory apparatus appear in the context of the

1 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 21.

2 Muḥammad al-Nūr Ḥusayn was the *imām* and *khaṭīb* of the mosque of Sawākin when he left, with his brother ‘Abd al-Qādir, to become of the first followers of ‘Uthmān Dīqna in 1883 (1301). See Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Amīr al-Sharq, ‘Uthmān Dīqna, op. cit.*, p. 48–49; 53 ; Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna, op. cit.*, p. 54.

surrender of Kasalā's garrison. In a direct echo of what happened in the west, the need to set up a proper administration was strongly connected with the issues raised by the capture of a large amount of loot. As in al-Ubayyid in early 1883 (early 1300), the nascent state attempted to monopolise the recently acquired riches, but this was not so much an expression of greed by some Mahdists (while this was also possible) but the result of fears that unequal, unchecked, and so unfair distributions would stoke resentments, reinforce tribal dynamics and eventually fragment the movement, maybe permanently. This was, however, only of the early stages of the establishment of a Mahdist administration. The later coming of important numbers of foreign fighters and the mass mobilisation of combatants in a last attempt to overcome Anglo-Egyptian defences at Sawākin were crucial in the relocation of the nucleus of administration from Kasalā to Tūkar in late 1888 (early 1306).

The first part of this chapter will outline the foundational principles in the establishment of a Mahdist administration as promulgated by Muḥammad Aḥmad in the early phase of the Mahdiyya, between 1881 and 1885 (1298-1302). The main perspective of this analysis will be to reveal the evolving nature of the relations between the Mahdist central authorities and the regime's provincial representatives. The second part will focus on the specificities of the formation of a provincial administration in Eastern Sudan with an emphasis on the institutional aspect. Lastly, the third part will offer insights on the driving dynamics that regulated the moral economy of this bureaucracy, considered both from within, with regard to the power balance between the different actors involved in managing the Mahdist community, and from the perspective of the relations between Umm Durmān and the provincial headquarters.

## **I. The Organisation of the Mahdist Provincial Administration**

When 'Uthmān Diqna reached al-Ubayyid in early 1883 (early 1300) to seek his appointment as *'āmil* of Eastern Sudan, the modest administrative apparatus that had emerged in the early phase of the Mahdist movement was at a turning point. After the capture of Kurdufān's capital, the Mahdist power found itself responsible for a much larger number of people—way beyond the relatively small group of followers who had taken part in the early phase of the uprising—and unprecedented quantities of resources. This, in turn, prompted a major overhaul of the Mahdist power structure to adapt to this new situation. The two sections below will endeavour, firstly, to outline the main characteristics of the early organisation of the millenarian movement, and secondly, to analyse the process through which it morphed into a territorialised state apparatus.

## A) *The Foundations of a Mahdist Administration*

The first form of bureaucratic governance emerged with the foundation of the treasury (*bayt al-māl*<sup>3</sup>). Its name was a direct reference to the early Islamic institution, founded, according to the tradition, in 641 (20) by the Caliph ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (634-644)<sup>4</sup>. It was created after the *hijra* of Muḥammad Aḥmad and his followers toward the Nūba Mountains in August 1881 (Ramaḍān 1298). Little is known about the exact functions it performed since no records of its operations have been preserved. It was first mentioned in a letter dated of late November 1882 (Muḥarram 1299), meaning that it must have been created almost immediately upon the *anṣār*’s arrival in *jabal* Qadīr in late October (early D. al-Ḥijja 1298). On this occasion, the Mahdī asked that weapons and horses be sent to the treasury to be entered into its reserves<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, its initial task with which it was entrusted was to manage the booty<sup>6</sup> (*ghanīma*) quite particularly items that could serve the war effort and on which the Mahdī claimed a monopoly<sup>7</sup>. At this point, it can be safely assumed that the treasury was little more than a guarded building in which the few goods that the *anṣār* had managed to snatch from their enemies were kept. According to the historian Fayṣal Muḥammad Mūsā, the formation of the treasury was the result of this first accumulation of booty<sup>8</sup>. Abū Shūk and Bjørkelo defended a similar idea, writing that it was “a mere store for keeping and distributing the booty<sup>9</sup>”. It was first headed by Aḥmad Sulaymān (d. 1891), a Maḥasī settled in Rufā‘a where the Mahdī had relatives<sup>10</sup>, who had been among his earliest followers and kept his position of *amīn* of the treasury until 1885 (1302/3), when he was dismissed by the Khalīfa and sent to Fashūda where he was eventually executed for his alleged involvement in a plot conceived by some *ashrāf*<sup>11</sup> to depose

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3 The name of treasury evolved throughout the period. Initially called the treasury (*bayt al-māl*) or treasury of the Muslims (*bayt māl al-muslimīn*), from 1890 (1307/8) onwards, it was designated as the public treasury (*bayt māl al-‘umūm*). It will be referred to as the central treasury.

4 Its Ottoman namesake had much more limited prerogatives, mainly geared toward the managing the inheritance of individuals who had passed away intestate. For an example of this function, see Isabelle GRANGAUD, “Le Bayt al-māl, les héritiers et les étrangers. Droits de succession et droits d’appartenance à Alger à l’époque moderne,” in Sami Bargaoui et al. (ed.), *Appartenance locale et propriété au nord et au sud de la Méditerranée*, Aix-en-Provence, Institut de recherches et d’études sur les mondes arabes et musulmans, 2015, p.

5 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 25. The treasury in Tūkar also supervised closely strategic commodities like weapons and mounts. See chapter 4.

6 Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK, “The Case of the Mahdist Public Treasury in the Sudan - 1881-1898,” *Die West Des Islams*, 2006, vol. 46, no. 2, p. 149. The term *ghanīma* will be translated indistinctly by booty and loot.

7 Such items were thus exempted from the rules that normally applied to all loot. See chapter 4 for a detailed description of these norms.

8 Fayṣal al-Ḥājj Muḥammad MŪSĀ, “Bayt al-māl fī dawlat al-Mahdiyya bi-l-Sūdān - Idārat-hu wa ḥisābāt-hu,” *Dirāsāt Ifrīqiyya*, 1986, vol. 2, p. 121.

9 Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK and Anders J. BJØRKELO (ed.), *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897*, *op. cit.*, p. xii.

10 Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

11 Muḥammad Sa‘īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādīyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 174 ; Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK and Anders J. BJØRKELO (ed.), *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897*, *op. cit.*, p. x-xviii ; Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK, “The Case of the Mahdist Public Treasury in the Sudan - 1881-1898,” *op. cit.*, p. 150.

‘Abdullāhi. As for the institution itself, his role during the treasury’s two first years of existence is limited to a unique reference in a small addendum in a letter dated December 1882 (Şafar 1300) in which the Maḥdī requested from Maḥmūd w. ‘Abd al-Qadīr (d. 1885), his uncle and later the governor of al-Ubayyīḍ (1883-1885)<sup>12</sup>, that Aḥmad Sulaymān’s instructions be followed<sup>13</sup>, an indication of the gradual consolidation of bureaucratic authority. If the *amīn* of the treasury held some power locally, control over the territories outside the immediate vicinity of *jabal* Qadīr was exerted by representatives appointed by the Maḥdī.

Initially, this delegation of authority empowered members of the Sufī network constituted by Muḥammad Aḥmad during his formative years and later as an eminent *shaykh* of the Sammāniyya in the Jazīra. Most of his men belonged to his close circle of acquaintances. In the first letter written after he had publicly announced his claim to the Maḥdīship on 30 June 1881 (1<sup>st</sup> Sha‘bān 1298)<sup>14</sup>, he appointed Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Başīr (d. 1908), his father-in-law, as his *nā’ib* (representative; pl. *nuwwāb*) and enumerated the three essential functions that the latter was to undertake<sup>15</sup>. Firstly, he was to “encourage the populations [to perform] the *hijra* to [the Maḥdī]” and receive pledges of allegiance. Secondly, he must organise local taxation as the “secretary (*amīn*) of the rights of God Almighty (*huqūq Allāh ta‘ālī*)”—that is responsible for the collect of the *zakāt* and the *‘ushr*, the two main levies of the Maḥdist state<sup>16</sup>. Finally, he was supposed to foster the transformation of the local communities under his authority by bringing them to renunciate the material world. Similar deputations were granted to other well-known Sufī *shuyūkh* like ‘Aṭā’ al-Mannān al-Şulayḥābī<sup>17</sup> on 29 November 1881 (7 Muḥarram 1299)—after the Maḥdī’s arrival in *jabal* Qadīr<sup>18</sup>—, or Muḥammad al-Amīn Yūsuf al-Hindī (1817/8-1883<sup>19</sup>) in June/July 1882 (Sha‘bān 1299)<sup>20</sup>. While the wording of appointment letters differed slightly from one another, the overall objective of these appointments was the same: to serve as local relays of the Maḥdist *da‘wa*.

In the early days of the Maḥdiyya, the term *nā’ib* could convey a second meaning more akin to that of a local agent. It entailed a different set of prerogatives. The first mention of such a role can be found in a letter addressed to ‘Asākīr w. Abū Kalām (d. c. 1903<sup>21</sup>) on 26 June 1882 (9

12 Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

13 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Maḥdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 76.

14 *Ibid.*, letter 15.

15 ‘Awaḍ Jabar al-Darām ĀDAM, *Nizām al-ḥukm wa al-idāra fī dawla al-Maḥdiyya bi-l-Sūdān (1885-1898)*, *PhD Diss.*, University al-Nilayn, Khartoum, 2004., *op. cit.*, p. 88; 94.

16 See chapter 4 for a detailed analysis of Maḥdist fiscality.

17 In all likelihood, ‘Aṭā’ al-Mannān, from the Shāyqiyya, was then settled in Jawāda (30 km north of al-Manāqil) in the Jazīra (John O. HUNWICK and Rex S. O’FAHEY (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 1 Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900*, *op. cit.*, p. 83).

18 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Maḥdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 25.

19 John O. HUNWICK and Rex S. O’FAHEY (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 1 Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900*, *op. cit.*, p. 277–278.

20 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Maḥdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 46.

21 ‘Asākīr Abū Kalām was the head of the Jama‘a, a community settled near Abā Island on the White Nile. The

Sha‘bān 1299), when the Mahdī instructed him to seize the inheritance of Jabar al-Dār al-Ḥamīdī, who had died as an “unbeliever”, with the consequence that his wife and children were to be considered as booty, and so be enslaved<sup>22</sup>. In almost all cases, these agents were described as “*nuwwāb* of the Mahdī for the rights of God<sup>23</sup>”, but they were also in charge of settling legal matters, like ‘Asākīr. Another of these representatives was a man named Ṭaha al-Bashīr to whom the Mahdī confirmed in a letter dated 15 October 1882 (2 Dhū al-ḥijja 1299), that he was “[the Mahdī’s] *nā’ib* for the Muhammadan *shari‘a* and the service of knowledge (*nā’ibān ‘an-nā fi al-shar‘ al-Muḥammadī wa khadāmat al-‘ilm*)<sup>24</sup>”.

The terminology points to small but nonetheless crucial differences between these two types of representatives that anticipate later developments. The Sufi figures appointed as *nuwwāb* were relays of the Mahdist *da‘wa* in distant territories still under Egyptian control. Consequently, they were quite autonomous and the Mahdī granted them a wide authority. *In fine*, they were supposed to promote Mahdism and strive for its expansion by exhorting their community to perform the *hijra*, or, if this proved impossible, to serve as relays in the wider Mahdist archipelago. In contrast, the scope of the other *nuwwāb*’s mandate was more limited. They were not made responsible for the displacement of local communities or deemed qualified to receive the allegiance of new adherents. Most of them, like Muḥammad w. Mūḍawwī, ‘Abd al-Hādī w. Yasin, Bilāl w. ‘Asākīr, al-Faqīh al-Zamzamī and Muḥammad w. Salūl, were members of the Jama‘a, the predominant community on the western bank of the Nile, opposite Ābā Island. Their most important function remained unstated: it was to maintain the connection between the Jazīra, the birthplace of the Mahdist movement and the Nūba Mountains where the *anṣār* had sought refuge and so ensure that those travelling to *jabal* Qadīr could do it unharmed. In that respect, they were much more closely dependent on the Mahdī’s authority than Sufi representatives. The territory under their control was already considered as part of the Mahdiyya (in its geographical meaning) and so their tasks were confined to the implementation of Mahdist rule in day-to-day affairs, upholding the *sharī‘a* and collecting taxes.

However, as shown in the figure 3.1, the predominant term used in the early years to designate Mahdist agents was *khalīfa* (deputy or successor; pl. *khulafā’*). Had the Mahdī kept the movement he initiated in a purely Sufi framework, the appointments of *khulafā’* would have been

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Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi had met him on his travel east and he had proved instrumental in helping the Mahdī and his disciples to reach the Nūba Mountains by crossing his territory (Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 62 ; Rudolf C. SLATIN, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 128 ; Mekki SHIBEIKA, *The Sudan and the Mahdist Revolution of 1881-1885*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.)

22 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 35.

23 *Ibid.*, letter 47.

24 *Ibid.*, letter 58.



expected, following common Sufi practices of nominating representatives responsible for organizing a local community around a *ṭarīqa*<sup>25</sup>. To some extent, this was the case in the first phase, when the title of *khalīfa* overlapped with that of *nāʾib*<sup>26</sup>. In its first occurrence in early November 1881 (Muḥarram 1299), a few days after the Mahdists had reached *jabal* Qadīr, ‘Aṭā’ al-Mannān al-Ṣulayḥbī was thus presented as “a *nāʾib* for me and a *khalīfa* over you (*nāʾibān ‘an-nī wa khalīfat<sup>an</sup> ‘alay-kum*)<sup>27</sup>”. The two functions could be granted to the same man but did not exactly entail the same responsibilities. As mentioned above, the *nāʾib* was to act as an intermediary, and in that respect, he was authorised to receive pledges of allegiance (*mubāyaʿa*) and work in favour of the establishment of the religion (*iqāmat al-dīn*), while the *khalīfa* was meant to be the leader of a community. In the case of the *shaykh* ‘Aṭā’ al-Mannān, the populations of the *jabal* Funj, “its nomads (*urbān*) and its *hamaj*<sup>28</sup> up to the limits of Banī Shanqūl and *jabal* Qabā” were to follow his command. Unlike the *nuwwāb*, *khulafāʾ* were not meant to gather men and prompt them to undertake the *hijra* to Qadīr, but to wage the *jihād* in their own region, with the aim of disrupting the Egyptian response to the Mahdist movement by multiplying the fronts. Therefore, a *khalīfa* was primarily the holder of a military position. As the appointee of the Maḥdī, he was given prominence over other local leaders, so as to establish the basis for an effective military hierarchy. Of the three letters related to ‘Aṭā’ al-Mannān’s appointment, one of them was destined to six of those local figures, as well as to “all the *mashāyikh* and *anṣār* of the religion all together”, ordering them to obey their *khalīfa*. In contrast with the *nāʾib*, the *khalīfa*’s authority was more clearly asserted. Local *shuyūkh* were warned that once “they are gathered in a camp (*ribāt*), for the *jihād* or a mobilisation order, no one from the army should leave or scatter but with the authorisation of the *khalīfa*<sup>29</sup>”. The main difference, at first, between *khalīfa* and *amīr* was based on geographical

25 See the introduction for a short discussion of the evolving role granted to *khulafāʾ* in the context of the emergence of centralised Sufi *ṭuruq*.

26 The same could be said of the position of *muqaddam* (supervisor, administrator pl. *maqāḍīm*) which was very much a term borrowed directly from the vocabulary of Sufi *ṭuruq* designating the main assistants of a local *shaykh* (Martin W. DALY (ed.), *Al Majdhubiyya and al Mikashfiyya: two Sufi Tariqas in the Sudan*, Khartoum, The Graduate College, 1985, p. 106–110). In the Mahdist context, its meaning was rapidly restricted to subaltern military leaders.

27 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Maḥdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 24. See for other examples *Ibid.*, letters 33 and 65.

28 This a particularly fascinating example of intertwined understandings of social and ethnic categories in late-nineteenth century Sudan. While *urbān* was consistently employed in Mahdist correspondence to identify pastoral nomads, without defining them ethnically or tribally, the Hamaj were a “pre-Arab, pre-Funj grouping in the Blue Nile region south of Sennar near the Ethiopian border” (Carolyn FLUEHR-LOBBAN et al., *Historical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 77). In the Maḥdī’s writing, *hamaj* did not so much refer to a political community than to a socioeconomic group. This is indicated in a subsequent letter sent to ‘Aṭā’ al-Mannān himself in which these communities were defined with greater precision with reference to the “awlād Abī al-Lakaylik, the people of Qūlī, the people of [Warīkat] and Awbūt and other locations, the shaykh [who is] the son of the *mālik* of the *urbān* Rufāʿa, the *ʿAtāmala*, Banī Ḥusayn, and Jalās, and all the tribes of the Blue Nile” (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Maḥdī*, *op. cit.*, letters 24, 25 and 33).

29 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Maḥdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 25.

proximity. The few occurrences of this designation in the early Mahdist correspondence are reserved to individuals that were in immediate contact with the centre of Mahdist authority in the Nūba Mountains, and so, answered directly to the Mahdī<sup>30</sup>.

Few definitive conclusions can be drawn from this short overview because of the small number of documents that have been preserved for the first eighteen months of the Mahdiyya. The risk is to systematise and find coherence in a nomenclature that was characterised by its flexibility. In more than one instance, different titles were used concomitantly for the same leader. However, while the following years witnessed significant changes in the overall structure of Mahdist provincial authorities, some of its later characteristics are already apparent in this genealogical analysis. Firstly, while the emphasis was put in this period on concentrating manpower in Kurdufān where the millenarian movement first tried to establish itself, a mission prescribed by the Mahdī to the *nuwwāb*, other agents were already active in organizing local communities to participate to the expansion of Mahdism to certain areas adjacent to Qadīr. They formed the embryo of the Mahdist provincial organisation. One fundamental aspect of this nascent structure was the deep ties between military concerns and territorial administration. In the case of the *khulafā*, their authority was grounded in their role of mobilizing men and bringing them to fight the “Turks”. War matters trumped all other concerns and so, since its inception, the Mahdist movement disrupted local hierarchies by subsuming all other forms of leadership within the Mahdist fold. Finally, notwithstanding the indeterminateness that prevailed then (and later), the Mahdī’s correspondence hinted at the recognition of separate spheres between temporal questions and religious ones. The conformity of Islamic practices and the application of the Mahdist interpretation of Islamic law in the provinces were considered as a distinct field. All in all, this nomenclature reveals a triptych of positions that formed the basis of the organisation of power: the *nuwwāb* who acted as the Mahdī’s representatives prefigured the ‘*umalā*’ (sing. ‘*āmil*’), semi-autonomous provincial governors, a post often cumulated with that of military leader (*khalīfa* and later *amīr*), then as later, while the second type of *nuwwāb* were the agents of the central authority.

### ***B) Law and Order: Becoming a Mahdist State (1883-1885)***

The months following the capture of al-Ubayyid in January 1883 (Rabī‘ I 1300) represented an important inflexion in the structuring of the Mahdist power. However, rather than a complete overhaul, it resulted from incremental changes during the formative phase of the regime, often adopted because of the constraints imposed by strategic considerations. With the stabilisation of the Mahdī’s rule came the need to clarify its internal hierarchy and better define its agents’ respective

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30 *Ibid.*, letters 47 and 49.

jurisdictions, though the ambiguities of the former system were not fully dispensed with. The Mahdī's correspondence, our main source, retained numerous traces of the tentative institutionalisation of Mahdist authorities. His writing reveals the overlapping phases of this unfinished process. Territorial incorporation within the Mahdiyya was concomitant to the rationalisation of the revolutionary movement but answered to different vectors. Provincial administrative structures were the last to emerge.

*i) The Institutionalisation of the Mahdist Administrative Apparatus*

Between 1883 and 1885 (1300-1302), a series of measures were adopted that led to a significant evolution of Mahdist power structures. The first outcome of this process was the institutionalisation of the treasury in 1883 in the wake of two events. Firstly, after the surrender of al-Ubayyid, Aḥmad Sulaymān was officially appointed at the head of the treasury in April/May 1883 (Jumādā I 1300)<sup>31</sup>. In the meantime, Mahdist headquarters were moved from Qadīr to al-Rahad, north of the Nūba Mountains, where it settled for the five months that the siege of the Kurdufānī capital lasted. In line with its previous role, the first task devolved to the treasury was the management of the consequent booty collected from al-Ubayyid. The need to clarify the rules that applied to loot was compounded by the victory gained by the *anṣār* at Shaykān on 5 November 1883 (4 Muḥarram 1301) when important quantities of military equipment were seized which the Mahdist power wanted to appropriate.

This was concomitant to a tectonic shift in the division of loot with far-ranging consequences. In an effort to assert his control over resources, the Mahdī decided to do away with tradition and requested that the entirety of the goods taken from the enemy be brought to the treasury, and not only the fifth (*khums*) to which he could previously claim, a decision that was denounced by some of the *anṣār* as a reprehensible innovation (*bid'a* pl. *bida'*). As a result, the treasury was bound to see its redistributive role greatly increased, especially since the Mahdī initiated at the same time the formation of a regular army in order to be less dependent on spontaneous mobilisations and local authority figures. In addition, taxes, mainly the *zakāt*, began to be levied in a more orderly fashion. Previous calls by the Mahdī to his representatives to collect dues were probably more symbolic than anything else, a sign of allegiance rather than an effective way to finance the movement. There are no traces of these sums being sent to *jabal* Qadīr or al-Rahad. However, as the nascent Mahdist state found itself responsible for an ever larger number of combatants, often accompanied by their families, resources were avidly sought after and parties sent for what were the first missions of tax collections organised under the aegis of the Mahdist

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31 *Ibid.*, letter 97.

leadership<sup>32</sup> toward the different communities in Kurdufān<sup>33</sup>.

These policies were enacted once the Mahdist movement had ensured its hold over a significant portion of Nilotic Sudan's western provinces and thus had become less susceptible to be crushed by the Egyptian repression, a reality brutally confirmed by the annihilation of Hick's expedition at Shaykān. Gordon himself had mused on the possibility of recognizing the sovereignty of a "Sultanate of Kordofan" headed by Muḥammad Aḥmad and abandoning Egyptian claims over these territories<sup>34</sup>. Yet, the evolution of the treasury cannot be understood without being connected to the fact that for the first time since the beginning of the uprising, the *anṣār* were now in control of an important bustling urban centre that served as a commercial hub. As a result, trade relations became a domain of intervention for the treasury, albeit on terms that are still quite obscure. Coincidentally, as mentioned in chapter 2, one of the earliest direct references to the treasury appeared in relation with the complaint of Sawākinī merchants who asked for the return of the goods that had been looted from them, leading the Mahdī to order Aḥmad Sulaymān to deal with this matter in early February 1883 (Rabī' II 1300)<sup>35</sup>. From the rural and arguably remote location of Qadīr, the Mahdists had moved to one of the most important nexuses of Nilotic Sudan's trade routes. More than a year later, in November 1884 (Ṣafar 1302), as the treasury was still located in al-Ubayyīd, Aḥmad Sulaymān wrote a letter in which he described the main aspects of his actions. In that document, he took care to specify that his administrators knew the requirements of trade for having participated themselves in this economic activity<sup>36</sup>. Yet, the rapid expansion of the treasury's missions required people to run and record these operations. Because of al-Ubayyīd's economic importance, a number of agents who previously worked for the Egyptian administration were present and rapidly incorporated into a treasury in dire need of qualified personnel<sup>37</sup>. They would, henceforth, constitute the main group within the Mahdist central bureaucracy<sup>38</sup>. This was, of course, reinforced after the Mahdists took control of Khartoum. Eventually, according to Holt's estimates, of the 152 employees of the central Mahdist administration, 63 were Egyptians or *muwallad*, and

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32 According to Holt, these operations were not entrusted to the treasury but to the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi (Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 127).

33 *Ibid.*, p. 125–126 ; Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 174–181 ; Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK, "The Case of the Mahdist Public Treasury in the Sudan - 1881-1898," *op. cit.*, p. 149–151.

34 Fergus NICOLL, *Gladstone, Gordon and Sudan (1883-5): How British Policy Created a Victorian Icon*, PhD diss., University of Reading, Reading, 2011, p. 73 and 152.

35 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 83.

36 Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

37 Yūsuf Mikhā'īl's testimony is unique in the details he gave about this process. For the hiring of his relative, Jūrjyūs [Gorgios] Effendī Mikhā'īl as a clerk of the Mahdist administration fulfilling the same tasks as during the Turkiyya, that is tax collection from the pastoral communities of Northern Kurdufān, see Salih Mohammed NUR, *A Critical Edition of the Memoirs of Yūsuf Mikhā'īl*, *op. cit.*, p. 147 ; Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK (ed.), *Mudhakkirāt Yūsuf Mikhā'īl: al-Turkiyya wa-l-Mahdiyya wa-l-ḥukm al-thunā'ī fi al-Sūdān*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

38 As shall be seen below, this was not as clear with regard to the provincial administration.

between a fourth and a third had worked in the administration of the Turkiyya<sup>39</sup>.

These measures announced a larger shift toward the centralisation of Mahdist authority and the end of tribal structures as the main vector of the uprising, as it had been the case for all of 1882 (1299/300). With the bureaucratisation of Mahdist power, more and more *umanā*' (sing. *amīn*), including the head of the treasury, Aḥmad Sulaymān, became more present in the Mahdī's correspondence, a trend that can be observed in figure 3.1.

Alongside the steady reinforcement of the administrative apparatus, the concentration of power in the centre of the Mahdist power from 1883 (1300/1) onwards took another form: that of the establishment of a better defined hierarchical structure. Henceforth, the Mahdī would be the only source of authority. The reordering of the chain of command began at the highest echelon, namely the position of the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi al-Ta'ā'īshī. A proclamation of the Mahdī written just a week after the surrender of al-Ubayyīd thus indicated that he was given authority over all the other components of the Mahdist movement as "*khalīfa* of the *khulafā*" and "*amīr* of the army". The Mahdī went further as he stated, about the Khalīfa, that "he is of me, and I am of him (*huwa min-nī wa anā min-hi*) [...] so act with him as you would with me." In the same letter, the Mahdī emphasised the preeminence of his appointee but instead of forming a new title, recycled those in use since 1881 (1298/9), proclaiming that "the Khalīfa is the leader of the Muslims" (*al-khalīfa huwa qādat al-muslimīn*)" and "our *nā'ib* in all matters of the religion<sup>40</sup>". Next to the Khalīfa, two others were appointed to mirror the successors of the Prophet Muḥammad: the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi was associated with Abū Bakr and signed accordingly "Khalīfat al-Ṣiddīq"; 'Alī b. Muḥammad Ḥilū (d. 1899), one of the early followers of the Mahdī from the Daghaym Baqqāra, represented 'Umar; and finally, Muḥammad Sharīf b. Ḥāmid (d. 1899<sup>41</sup>), the son-in-law of the Mahdī, was anointed as 'Alī. Famously, the last spot was offered to Muḥammad al-Mahdī al-Sanūsī (1844-1902), but the latter declined<sup>42</sup>. At this stage, the constitution of the new leadership was centred around the three *khulafā*' 'Abdullāhi, 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Ḥilū and Muḥammad Sharīf b. Ḥāmid, among which the former was to be a *primus inter pares*<sup>43</sup>.

With the preeminent position granted to the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi, the balance of power tilted toward the western communities. However, as pointed out by the historian 'Awaḍ Jabar al-Darām

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39 Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK and Anders J. BJØRKELO (ed.), *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897*, *op. cit.*, p. xii; xvi–xvii.

40 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 81.

41 Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 47; 273.

42 For a detailed analysis of the relation between the Mahdiyya and the Sanūsiyya, see 'Alī Ṣāliḥ KARRĀR, "Al-Sanūsiyya wa-l-Mahdiyya: dirāsa fikriyya li-l-ḥarakatayn," *Majallat al-dirāsāt al-sūdāniyya*, 1979, vol. 6, no. 1, p. 1–40. For the Mahdī's invitation to become his *khalīfa* in May 1883 (Rajab 1300), see Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 115.

43 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 119–120.

Ādam, an aspect of this decision has often been overlooked. Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh, the Mahdī’s own brother had become the undisputed leader of the Mahdist army from June to September 1882 (Rajab to Shawwāl 1299), that is between the victory over Yūsuf Pasha al-Shallālī’s troops near *jabal Qadīr*<sup>44</sup> and the first assault against al-Ubayyid, the “Friday battle”, fought on 8 September (24 Shawwāl), when he died under Egyptian bullets<sup>45</sup>. The circle of family members around the Mahdī was further reduced by the death of another of his brothers, ‘Abd Allāh, and his nephew Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh, at the same battle. As a result of these losses, the Mahdī was obligated to revise the overall structure of the leadership, especially since a number of other high-ranking Mahdist officials, like the first *qādī al-islām*, Aḥmad Jubāra, were killed the same day<sup>46</sup>. Contrary to what had been assumed with regard to the timing of the three *khulafā*’s appointment<sup>47</sup>, the layout of the new hierarchical order adopted by the Mahdī was essentially a response to the decimation of his closest supporters. Henceforth, while its use did not suddenly disappear, the term *khalīfa* was gradually restricted to designate ‘Abdullāhi, wad Ḥilū and Muḥammad Sharīf, and its overall presence in the Mahdī’s correspondence, as shown in the figure 3.1, decreased over time since these three men stayed at his side<sup>48</sup>.

Once these new positions at the summit of the hierarchical order had been settled, the question of the organisation of the lower degrees of the Mahdist apparatus was tackled in a proclamation published less than two months later, on 6 March 1883 (25 Rabī‘ II 1300). It was the first document to attempt to define the prerogatives of the Mahdī’s agents. He exhorted them to see to the application of the *sharī‘a* and the execution of its penal sanctions (*hudūd* sing. *ḥadd*) and show mercy to slaves. He also informed them that legal cases connected to events that had occurred before 30 May 1882 (12 Rajab 1299)—the day the first major expedition against Qadīr led by al-

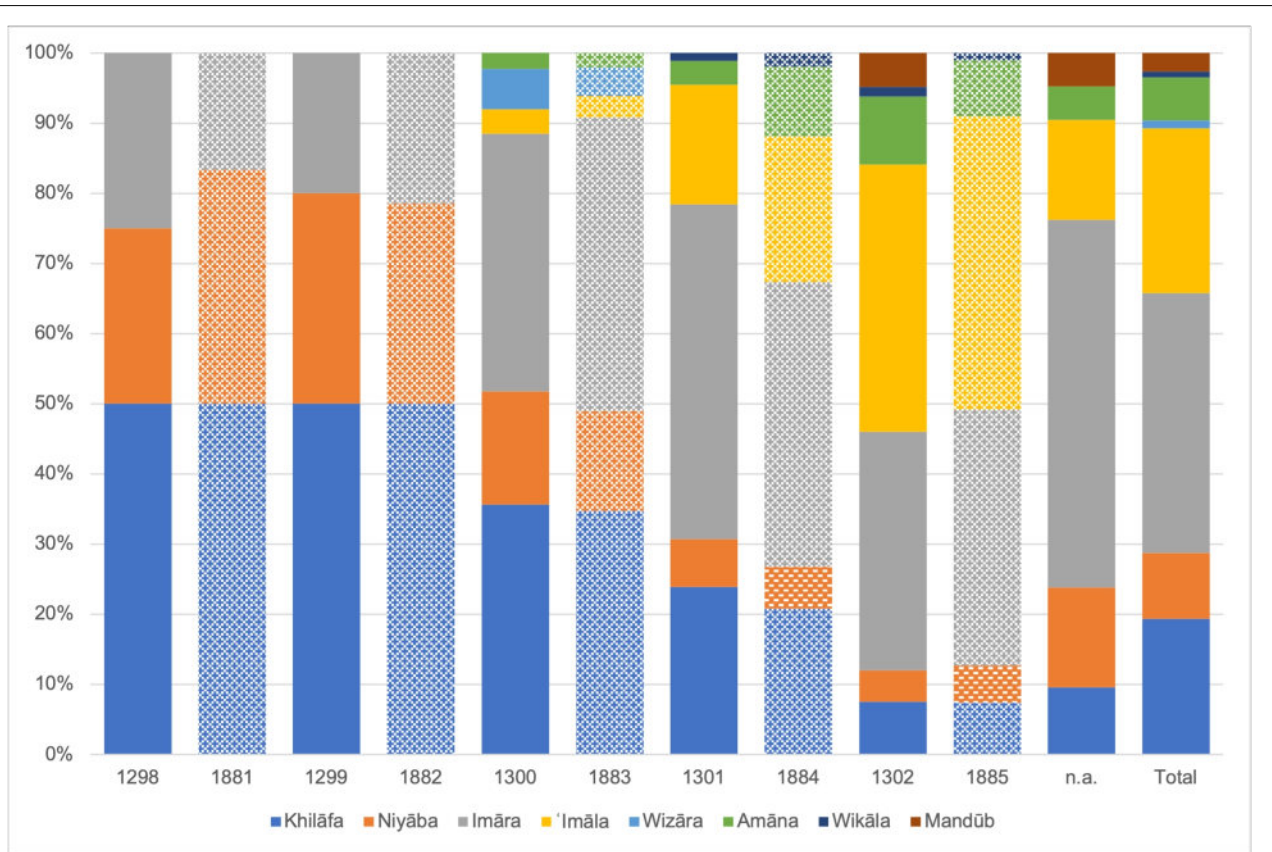
44 The Mahdī is said to have changed the name of *jabal Qadīr* into *jabal Māsā* in reference to a widespread tradition in North Africa that predicted the apparition of the Mahdī in the Maghreb in a place of that name (Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitāb sa‘adat al-mustahdi bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdi (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdi)* by Isma‘il b. ‘Abd al-Qadir, *op. cit.*, p. 212). For an example of this tradition’s expression, see Mercedes GARCÍA-ARENAL, “Imam et Mahdi : Ibn Abī Mahallī,” *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 2000, vol. 91–94, p. 157–180.

45 ‘Awaḍ Jabar al-Darām ĀDAM, *Nizām al-ḥukm wa al-idāra fī dawla al-Mahdiyya bi-l-Sūdān (1885-1898)*, *PhD Diss., University al-Nilayn, Khartoum, 2004.*, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

46 Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitāb sa‘adat al-mustahdi bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdi (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdi)* by Isma‘il b. ‘Abd al-Qadir, *op. cit.*, p. 114 ; Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

47 There is a certain confusion in Holt’s comments about this matter. He seems to ignore that this title appears in sources in reference to other individuals than ‘Abdullāhi before 1883 (1300/1). He focused his attention on the question of whether the *khulafā*’ were appointed before the *hijra* (as stated by Slatin), or after (according to Ohrwalder) (Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 119–120). As for Abū Salīm, he considered that the appointment of the three *khulafā*’ had come after the victory over al-Shallālī’s troops in late May 1882 (Rajab 1299) (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Maḥmūm wilāyat al-‘ahd fī al-Mahdiyya*, Khartoum, Central Records Office, 1965). This date is indeed particularly significant with regard to the formation of the Mahdist state (see below), but there is no evidence that these appointments were made before 1883 (1300/1).

48 As mentioned in the note on language, the capitalised version of *Khalīfa* refers solely to the *Khalīfa* ‘Abdullāhi.



**Fig. 3.1** : Relative presence of Mahdist titles in the Mahdī's correspondence (1881-1885)

**Sources:** *Al-āthār al-kamīla*, vol. 1-5.

**Methodology:** This chart presents the result of a simple lexicographical analysis of the Mahdī's letters edited in *Al-āthār al-kamīla li-l-imām al-Mahdī* (1990-1992) by Abū Salīm. It is based on a survey of each occurrence of the most common terms used to designate Mahdist officials. Due to the limited number of letters available for the first years (numbers for 1298 are based on four instances, and for 1299, on only thirty), the point of this study is less to offer a quantified perspective, than to bring to light significant shifts and so inform the meaning granted to each position.

Shallāli was defeated, an event also named the battle of Māssa—could not be adjudicated, apart from some exceptions (see below)<sup>49</sup>. The text of this letter itself reflected the overlapping temporalities of the Mahdist administrative development. Indeed, it was addressed to “all the *khulafā'*, the *umarā'*, the *nuwwāb*, the people [who have] pledge[d] allegiance, all the *anṣār* of the religion, and those who follow those [previously] mentioned”. Abū Salīm commented that this text, which could be found in ten different versions, had known minor but significant amendments. The term *khulafā'*, in this association with the *umarā'* and the *nuwwāb*, was clearly meant to designate the provincial leaders, and not the three newly-instated “great” *khulafā'* (*khulafā al-kubrā*). Whereas the word was present on the letter-book of al-Nujūmī, it had been crossed over in the Yale

<sup>49</sup> Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmīla li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 87 ; Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

manuscript<sup>50</sup>, thus indicating that when the latter was copied, the ambiguity of the initial wording was manifest and the restriction of the term *khalīfa* to the three closest associates of the Maḥdī then firmly confirmed.

As the use of *khalīfa* declined, military leaders and provincial governors, two positions often occupied by the same person, were now all designated as *umarāʾ* (see fig. 3.1), that is until April/May 1884 (Rajab 1301), when the Maḥdī announced that this term would be replaced by *ʿāmil* (pl. *ʿumalāʾ* / *ʿummāl*). He gave no reason for his decision, but it came after the surrender of al-Fāshir, the capital of Dār Fūr, on 15 January 1884 (16 Rabīʿ I 1301), and the withdrawal of the first British expedition in Eastern Sudan led by General Graham<sup>51</sup>, and shortly after he set out from al-Rahad to besiege Khartoum in early April (early Jumādā II 1301). He could feel confident as to the ultimate success of the movement he had initiated and the evolution of the terminology could represent a greater attention toward civilian matters, even if the *jihād* remained the main priority. *ʿĀmil* was a more neutral title which did not convey the same nuance of military fame as *amīr*. In the same proclamation, the Maḥdī warned against using the terms of *shaykh* or *sayyid*, and enjoined his *ʿumalāʾ* to be calm and steady (*muhtadiyāʾ*)<sup>52</sup>. These instructions signalled an inflexion toward the normalisation of the Mahdist regime thanks to the nearing end of the phase of internal conquest, and the realisation of a society of equals, a core tenet of the Mahdist *daʿwa*.

Finally, this overhaul of Mahdist positions also affected the *nuwwāb*, a term which came to be reserved for delegates entrusted with specific missions, as the movement's initial reliance on Sufi figures to serve as local relays had waned. When it appeared in the Maḥdī's correspondence, it designated individuals effectively acting as political commissars, responsible for regulating the Mahdist body. In March 1883 (Jumādā I 1300), the Maḥdī scolded one of his *umarāʾ*, Muḥammad b. al-ḥājj Aḥmad, for the behaviour of his men in the aftermath of the first battle of al-Ubayyīḍ (the Friday Battle of September 1882). He enjoined him to place his trust in God, a likely reference to previous complaints about the scarcity of food, since he noted that “the people are not missing their subsistence, they have been missing their religion (*diyāna*)”, and so the Maḥdī had appointed a few delegates<sup>53</sup> from among his companions to enforce religious morals in the troops, so that Muḥammad b. al-ḥājj Aḥmad can fully dedicate himself to religion<sup>54</sup>.

The actual results of this restructuring are difficult to assess, since it never came to

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50 For a description of these letter-books, see Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Fihris āthar al-imām al-Maḥdī*, *op. cit.*, p. 438-443 ; 432-434. For an earlier example of the term *khalīfa* being dropped from copies of a letter of a Maḥdī, see Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Maḥdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 53.

51 See chapter 2.

52 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Maḥdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 326.

53 Henceforth, in that particular meaning, the term *nāʾib* will be translated by delegate.

54 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Maḥdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 90.



completion. Until the appointment of the three *khulafā'*, the Mahdī's experimented different forms of organisation. There is little beyond the terminology to map these changes with precision, but Abū Salīm defended the idea that the title of *wazīr* (vizier; pl. *wuzarā'*), which made an ephemeral appearance in several letters in early 1883 (mid-1300)<sup>55</sup>, could testify of these aborted attempts to establish a new frame for the movement. Former uses were never fully abandoned and lingered, forming several layers that made the Mahdist organisation difficult to apprehend. While the title of *khalīfa* was supposed to be restricted to the Mahdī's closest aides, it still appeared on numerous occasions to refer to local agents, as in September 1883 (D. al-Qa'da 1300) to designate Rizayqāt leaders<sup>56</sup>. The same was true for *nā'ib*, which appeared in Zuqal's title when he was appointed *amīr* of Dār Fūr in Muḥarram 1301 (November 1883) or the appointment of al-Ḥusayn 'Abd al-Wāḥid over the populations of the 'Aṭbara in February 1884 (Rabī' II 1301)<sup>57</sup>.

As for the relations between the different echelons, whether because the participants to the Mahdist movement were unsure as to the hierarchical structure, or took issue with it, the Mahdī had to write yet another proclamation in October 1884 (D. al-Ḥijja 1301) in which he declared, with a hint of annoyance, that "I have pointed out more than once that the brothers [should act] in accordance with their *umarā'*, their *umarā'* with their *khulafā'* and all of them with the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi<sup>58</sup>".

#### ii) Mahdist Territorial Incorporation and Centralisation

In the same foundational text dated 6 March 1883 (26 Rabī' II 1300) in which the groundwork of organizing the lower administrative and military levels was laid out, the Mahdī focused his attention for the first time on his agents in the "other areas" (*sā'ir al-jihāt*) meaning beyond the territory under his direct control. According to this proclamation, "every *amīr*, *khalīfa*, *muqaddam* and *nā'ib* is responsible for the affairs (*umūr*) and the lawsuits (*qaḍāyā* sing. *qaḍīyya*) in his area (*fī jihat-hi*), so as to adjudicate them, as well as [responsible] for the welfare of the companions (*rāḥat al-aṣḥāb*) as enacted by God through the religion<sup>59</sup>". Besides the redistributive policy aimed at providing for the *anṣār* and maintaining mobilised troops, the crux of Mahdist territorial control was expressed through the imposition of the legal norms it promoted, before other state functions like tax collection were implemented. The conditions set by the Mahdī regarding the admissibility of petitions depended on temporal but also spatial factors that informed his apprehension of Mahdist territoriality.

55 *Ibid.*, letters 97, 115 and 116.

56 *Ibid.*, letter 130.

57 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letters 184 and 241.

58 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, p. 285, letter 420.

59 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 87.

As mentioned before, only cases initiated after 30 May 1882 (12 Rajab 1299) could be submitted to the authorities<sup>60</sup>. The historian Aharon Layish understood this restriction as a refusal “to recognize the validity of legal proceedings under the Ottoman law, not even during the transitional period from Turco-Egyptian to Mahdist administration<sup>61</sup>”, but this explanation is not fully convincing. Why would the Mahdist regime refuse to reexamine legal decisions and uphold their result if it considered the legal doctrine on which they were based unsound? In all likelihood, the Mahdī felt his meagre administration would soon be overwhelmed by demands would he accept to consider all claims. Land matters were particularly sensitive, but there too the Mahdī decided to reduce the prescription period from fifteen or ten years to seven. Consequently, the majority of land transfers that had occurred during the Turkiyya were deemed legal and definite<sup>62</sup>. This decision showed great respect for the *res judicata*, in contrast with the revolutionary aims of the Mahdist movement<sup>63</sup>. The new power did not engage in the upheaval of the socioeconomic balance of the Upper Nile Valley, taking care not to threaten directly the interests of the emerging Sudanese bourgeoisie, including the protection of its newly-acquired land titles. Indeed, their support was still very much required, especially in the regions that remained under Egyptian control. In Sawākin, for example, the British entrepreneur Augustus B. Wylde noted that “few [among its inhabitants] had any love for Egyptian rule, and still less for the new teachings of Mahdism and its division of property<sup>64</sup>.”

It was also pragmatism that dictated the Mahdī’s position on which claims could be received by his agents. He wrote in the same letter that “the matter that impedes the establishment of the religion (*iqāmat al-dīn*)—or of which this is feared—should be dismissed, so as to undermine the movements [of opposition] and the rest of the enemy, particularly in the regions where there are ongoing fightings<sup>65</sup>”. All considerations other than military were secondary in the regions that were yet to be fully integrated into the Mahdiyya. A widespread movement of legal revisionism would have brought few benefits, and so admissible claims emanating from individuals located in disputed territories were confined to those that could hinder the mobilisation of the population, that is cases

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60 There is certain amount of confusion concerning the date after which cases could be entertained by Mahdist agents. Layish argued that only those based on incidents that had occurred after the capture of al-Ubayyid on 19 January 1883 could be presented. This error seems to have emanated from the ambiguous wording of the Mahdī’s decree. Later iterations of the same decision confirm the date of 30 May 1882. See the letters 107 and 108 in Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-Āthār al-Kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, vol. 1.

61 Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī‘a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

62 Depending on the status of the land: fifteen years for *milk* property (full rights over the land) and ten for *mirī* property (rights on the usufruct only). See *Ibid.*, p. 79–80.

63 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Al-ard̄ fī al-Mahdiyya*, Khartoum, Shu‘bat abḥāth al-Sūdān - Kulliyat al-adab, jāmi‘at al-Khartūm, 1970, p. 26–29.

64 Augustus B. WYLDE, ‘83 to ‘87 in the Soudan, with an Account of Sir William Hewett’s Mission to King John of Abyssinia, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

65 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 87.

related to matters of debt (*dayn*), deposition in trust (*amāna*), orphans' property (*māl al-aytām*), and the status of free men and women (*hurayya*).

The situation was quite different in regions deemed to be firmly under Mahdist control or where Egyptian presence was limited. By choosing *ex post* the battle of Māssa on 30 May 1882 (12 Rajab 1299) as limit for the admissibility of claims, the Mahdī proclaimed that he considered that Kurdufān (with the notable exception of al-Ubayyid) had fallen under his authority on that day. He could then impose his legal monopoly. Further away, matters were more complex. Indeed, a year later, the Mahdī instructed his *amīr* at the tribunal of Dārā<sup>66</sup>, 'Abd al-Ṣamad Sharfī, on the treatment of complaints (also petitions, *da 'āwā* sing. *da 'wā*). Those presented by "Muslim nomads (*al-'urbān al-muslimīn*)" could only be adjudicated if they were posterior to their submission to the Mahdist authorities and their public declaration of opposition (*taslīm-hum wa mujāharat-hum*) to the Turks<sup>67</sup>. Because of the difficulties raised by distance, 'Abd al-Ṣamad was made responsible for attesting to the incorporation of the region's different tribes within the Mahdist realm and was given free range to determine a date. However, if he was unable to ascertain when a particular community had joined the movement, then he could resort to using, there too, the 30 May 1882 (12 Rajab 1299). A last aspect of this territorialisation of the Mahdist rule of law appears in the treatment regarding voluntary homicides. Islamic law allowed deaths to be either compensated by the payment of blood money (*diyya*) or punished by retribution (*qiṣās*), but at some point after the conquest of al-Ubayyid, the Mahdī decided that only retribution would be accepted. Layish interprets this as an attempt to intensify the deterrence against collaboration with the Egyptian regime. However, he adds that this was also a way to enter all homicides within the framework of public criminal law rather than its private equivalent<sup>68</sup>. As a result, Mahdist authorities were affirming their new role in local affairs and placing themselves as a central actor.

Petitions were crucial in Mahdist Sudan, as in most of the Ottoman world, to ensure direct communications between communities and Mahdist leaders. It reflected deeply rooted practices within the Ottoman Empire, unfortunately much better known outside of Nilotic Sudan<sup>69</sup>, as in Egypt<sup>70</sup>. Therefore, it is not so surprising that the first expression of territorial incorporation within

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66 Situated in South Darfur, Dārā was the site chosen by Rudolf von Slatin to establish his headquarter when he confronted the rebellion of the Rizayqāt Baqqāra which started in June 1882 (Rajab/Shā' bān 1299). Slatin and his men surrendered the position to the Mahdists in December 1883 (Ṣafār 1301). See Richard HILL, *Slatin Pasha*, London, Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 15–19.

67 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 239.

68 Aharon LAYISH, *Shari'a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 179–182.

69 Petitions sent to the Mahdist authorities have yet to be fully investigated. Unfortunately, few of them seem to have been preserved, alongside most documents related to the application of law in Mahdist Sudan. While the initial text is often missing, some of the responses emanating from Umm Durmān can be found in NRO Mahdiyya 3/01/02 for the period 1302–1305. See Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Al-ḥaraka al-fikriyya fī-l-Mahdiyya*, *op. cit.*, p. 133–136.

70 For a contemporary example, see John CHALCRAFT, "Engaging the State: Peasants and Petitions in Egypt on the

the Mahdiyya—the first step to the establishment of provincial structures—was legal. While the administrative tools of the Mahdist state were formed in the wake of al-Ubayyid’s surrender in early 1883 (mid-1300), the gradual expansion of the Mahdist rule of law depended on a more complex timeline and was based on a contrasted vision of territorial integration. In its early phase, when the Mahdist power was confined to Kurdufān, it asserted itself through the integration of the region’s various communities into a new legal order before it morphed gradually into effective control in 1883 (1300/1).

The capture of al-Ubayyid was nonetheless a watershed moment with regard to the formation of provincial administrations. Shortly after, the Mahdī instructed his agents that “each of you is to rule over the populations of his area and his district (*jihati-hi wa nāhiyati-hi*)” and serve as relays for his edicts. He added: “Do not let anyone come back to us doubtful about this<sup>71</sup>”. The establishment of a precarious pyramidal structure of hierarchical relations between the different layers of the Mahdist apparatus was to serve in a vast movement of power centralisation. By defining their functions, he aimed at reminding them that their authority derived from him only. To some extent, this signified the end of the revolutionary phase of the Mahdiyya based on spontaneous mobilisations and uprisings which were only endorsed *a posteriori*. Forms of localised authorities that were established without predetermined plan were thus integrated within the sphere of the central authority exerted by the Mahdī from his headquarters in al-Ubayyid.

This process had two major consequences on Mahdist power. Firstly, once its territorial basis was consolidated in Kurdufān, the pattern that had dominated the early phase of the movement began to change. Early supporters came to the Mahdī to join the ranks of the *anṣār*. Most, if not all of them remained within the boundaries of the region, even those who were sent fighting to the Nūba Mountains or on the borderlands with Dār Fūr. This was the case, as noted before, of ‘Uthmān Diqna’s own brother, ‘Umar, or of Majdhūb b. Abū Bakr b. Yūsuf. The established Sufī figures who were instrumental in disseminating the Mahdist *da‘wa* were enjoined to perform the *hijra* and come to Qādīr or al-Rahad, but few of them did so. After 1883, visiting the Mahdī became mandatory to be granted responsibilities. These appointees were rapidly sent back with a new mission: participate in the expansion of the Mahdist territorial order. In this regard, ‘Uthmān Diqna’s appointment as *amīr* of Eastern Sudan on 8 May 1883 (1 Rajab 1300) is a clear testimony of this reversal. A month before him, the Mahdī had met ‘Abd Allāh al-Sanūsī who had pledged allegiance and, him too, was sent back to be the Mahdī’s *khalīfa* over the Ḥarayna and Qur‘ān, two communities that belonged to

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Eve of Colonial Rule,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2005, vol. 37, no. 3, p. 303–325.  
71 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 87.

the Ḥawāzma Jawāma‘a<sup>72</sup> from northern Kurdufān<sup>73</sup>. Due to the lack of real control over most of the territories of the Upper Nile Valley and the East in 1883, there were numerous exceptions and appointments could still be achieved from a distance, but the shift was nonetheless significant.

Secondly, the issue faced by the Mahdī was that despite his endeavours to gain more control over his provincial representatives by directly appointing them, those who had participated to the movement since its inception or joined it soon after had also profited from the disruption caused by the Millenarian uprising and saw their local influence greatly expanded. The centrifugal tendencies had to be reined in for the Mahdī to assert his supreme authority.

To the west, the trajectory of al-Mannā Ismā‘īl is exemplary of this brutal reversal of policy. A member of the Jawāma‘a tribe, al-Mannā was one of the most famous Sufi *shuyūkh* of Nilotic Sudan’s western provinces with Mūsā Muḥammad al-Aḥmar. He belonged to the Sammāniyya like Muḥammad Aḥmad to whom he was close and whom he supported when the latter proclaimed being the Expected Mahdī. Al-Mannā was instrumental in the mobilisation of communities in Kurdufān where he undertook, in June 1882 (Sha‘bān 1299), to besiege the Egyptian garrison of al-Ṭayyāra. When the town finally surrendered two months later, he showed himself to be cruel and left few survivors. As he joined the Mahdī on his way to besiege al-Ubayyīd, later chroniclers reported that al-Mannā had pushed him to attack the city, resulting in the unfortunate defeat of the Friday Battle and the death of a large section of the Mahdist leadership (see above). They blamed his lust for loot, a serious offence that served as the basis for a number of grave accusations such as misappropriation of booty, unfairness to his men, and lack of commitment to the Mahdist *da‘wa*. However, while accounts differ as to the exact reasons of his demise, they all point to his ambition. The combatants who followed him were said to have been as numerous as the Mahdī’s. A spectator to the rise of the future Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi, he strongly resented being sidelined in the revamped organisation founded in the wake of al-Ubayyīd’s fall, claiming the title of *khalīfa* for himself as well as the attributes of this position such as requesting to be accompanied by twenty guards. The appointment of Mūsā Muḥammad al-Aḥmar at the head of the Jawāma‘a in March/April 1883 (Jumādā I 1301) was yet another blow to his ambitions. He remained unconvinced by the Mahdī’s affirmation that “there is no difference whether the *imāra* is in your hand or the hand of your brother as long as this is destined to all” and his supporters multiplied clashes against those of al-Aḥmar’s. Wingate thought that the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi had seized the opportunity to eliminate a potential challenger, but there is no indication that the Mahdī did not order himself the execution of

72 ‘Awn al-Sharīf QĀSIM, *Mawsū‘at al-qabā‘il wa al-ansāb fī al-Sūdān wa ashshār asmā’ al-a‘lām wa al-amākin*, Khartoum, Maktabat Āfiruqāf [Agro-Graph], 1996, vol. 2, p. 572 ; ‘Awn al-Sharīf QĀSIM, *Mawsū‘at al-qabā‘il wa al-ansāb fī al-Sūdān wa ashshār asmā’ al-a‘lām wa al-amākin*, Khartoum, Maktabat Āfiruqāf [Agro-Graph], 1996, vol. 5, p. 1863.

73 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 85.

al-Mannā that occurred c. May 1883<sup>74</sup> (c. Rajab 1300)<sup>75</sup>.

The centralisation process did not always imply such direct sanctions. Al-Mannā's influence in Kurdufān threatened the Mahdist movement in its core region. More peripheral actors were dealt with greater subtlety and with more considerations to local factors. The Mahdī's effort to gain greater control over his provincial representatives led to the gradual replacement of some of those local leaders by Mahdist *homines novi*, men whose ascension within the new regime was not based on their Sufi or tribal authority. Muḥammad 'Uthmān Abū Qarja (d. 1916)—who later became a major figure in the Mahdist province of Eastern Sudan<sup>76</sup>—was one of those men who belonged to the circles involved in the growing trading activities of the Greater Nile Valley, quite often at subaltern levels but sometimes with a precious military experience gained by participating to slave raids in the south<sup>77</sup>. He joined the Mahdī in the early days of the movement and was instrumental in the first confrontations with the Egyptian troops in South Kurdufān and then again at the battle of Shaykān. Sent to the Blue Nile in late 1883 or early 1884, he was appointed before 3 March 1884 (4 Jumādā I 1301) as *amīr* of the Jazīra in lieu of Muḥammad b. al-Ṭayyib al-Baṣīr, the Mahdī's own father-in-law<sup>78</sup>.

There were several reasons for the Mahdī to wish to replace al-Baṣīr. Muḥammad Aḥmad realised that the local leaders who had joined him had proved essential in the success of the early mobilisation, but also that they were quickly becoming responsible for the emergence of a whole new set of issues. Quite crucially, the superior authority conferred to these Mahdist agents *vis-à-vis* other tribal heads or Sufi holymen tended to disrupt local balances of power. Fears of nepotism were rife and their influence over communities jeopardised the establishment of a Mahdist social order. A series of three letters, all sent in January 1884 (Rabī' I 1301) put this idea in perspective. Two of those<sup>79</sup> dealt with the conflict between al-Qurashī b. al-Ṭayyib al-Baṣīr, one of the brothers of Muḥammad, and 'Abd al-Jabbār b. al-shaykh Nūr al-Dā'im, one of the three sons of the *shaykh* Nūr al-Dā'im<sup>80</sup> (d. 1853). 'Abd al-Jabbār had previously written to the Mahdī to complain about the treatment inflicted to him by al-Qurashī, a complain which was subsequently transmitted to his

74 His death was mentioned in a letter dated 11 May 1883 (4 Rajab 1300). His following and followers were admonished in another undated letter (*Ibid.*, letters 114 and 120).

75 Alexander R. C. BOLTON, "El Menna Ismail; Fiki and Emir in Kordofan," *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1934, vol. 17, no. 2, p. 229–241 ; Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, "Mas'alat al-Shaykh al-Mannā," *Dirāsāt Ifrīqiyya*, 2001, vol. 16, no. 26, p. 19–38.

76 See chapter 2.

77 The exact nature of Abū Qarja's occupation remain undetermined. Some sources mention his employment as a boat driver for the trading house 'Aqqād & Co. while others recount his involvement in the slave-trade empire of the famed Zubayr Raḥma Maṣūr (Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 279 ; Ṣalāh al-Tijjānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, "Al-amīr Muḥammad 'Uthmān Abū Qarja," *op. cit.*).

78 Aḥmad 'Uthmān Muḥammad IBRĀHĪM, *Al-Jazīra fī khilāl al-Mahdiyya, 1881-1899*, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

79 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letters 226 and 227.

80 'Abd al-Jalīl 'Abd Allāh ṢĀLIḤ, *Shaykh 'Abd al-Mahmūd shaykh Nūr al-Dā'im al-Ṭayyibī: His Scholarly, Religious and Social Legacy (1845-1915)*, Khartoum, n.a., 2020, p. 67.

brother Muḥammad. This could be considered an isolated matter were it not for a third letter of admonition against the lure of the material world, warning Muḥammad “not to elevate himself secretly (*bāṭinān*) above the lowest of the *fuqarā*’, but to consider [himself] their equal (*i ‘taqīd al-musāwāh li-hum*)”. Tensions among Mahdist groups in the Jazīra were indeed intense. The heavy losses incurred during the clashes with the governmental troops resulted in the contestation of al-Baṣīr’s authority and a quasi-mutiny<sup>81</sup>. The Mahdī was informed that “numerous *fuqarā*’ are reluctant to unite with [the *anṣār*]” and so, with a view on “harmony and sparing the blood”, he decided to appoint Abū Qarja as their *amīr*<sup>82</sup>. Despite his initial successes, Ṣāliḥ al-Makk, at the head of the Egyptian detachment in the Jazīra, was forced to retreat to Fadāsī, a few kilometres north of Wad Madanī, and entrench himself with his men there. Probably worried that the conflict with the Mahdists had taken an unnecessary emotional turn and that al-Baṣīr may prove unwilling to refrain his followers from perpetrating violent retributions if they surrendered to them, Ṣāliḥ al-Makk asked the Mahdī that another more detached intermediary be sent to them to negotiate their surrender. For all these different reasons, Abū Qarja was ordered to travel to the Jazīra in the early months of 1884 and, on 27 April 1884 (8 Jumādā 1301), he met with the Egyptian officer who laid down his arms<sup>83</sup>. The greater influence exerted by the central Mahdist authorities over agents who had benefitted for the two previous years of almost unlimited autonomy brought up new tensions. Al-Baṣīr’s reaction to the Mahdī’s decision is not known but the evolution of his behaviour leaves little doubt as to his displeasure with Abū Qarja’s arrival. He launched several accusations against the latter, including that he had disrespected the Mahdī’s orders. Besides, as was the case for al-Mannā, al-Baṣīr resented having been overlooked for *khulafā*’ positions. The Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi thought that his insubordination had to be sanctioned, but the Mahdī pardoned one of his earliest followers<sup>84</sup>. He nonetheless exhorted him, six months later to show a more positive attitude toward the Khalīfa, the two other *khulafā*’, and the secretary of the treasury, that is all of the higher echelons of the Mahdist apparatus to which he was henceforth a subordinate figure<sup>85</sup>.

The slow integration of atomised and scattered sites of mobilisation across the Greater Nile Valley, quite particularly in the Jazīra, into a centralised structure of power did not go without causing significant resistance. When the Mahdī left the Jazīra in August 1881 (Ramaḍān 1298) followed by a few disciples, few of those who supported his message but had decided not to perform the *hijra* could have envisaged that two years later, they would have to renegotiate their

81 Aḥmad ‘Uthmān Muḥammad IBRĀHĪM, *Al-Jazīra fī khilāl al-Mahdiyya, 1881-1899, op. cit.*, p. 207.

82 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī, op. cit.*, letter 255.

83 Aḥmad ‘Uthmān Muḥammad IBRĀHĪM, *Al-Jazīra fī khilāl al-Mahdiyya, 1881-1899, op. cit.*, p. 93.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 208–212.

85 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, Khartoum, Khartoum University Press, 1992, vol. 4, letter 264.

position within a larger organisation which had already adopted some of the hallmarks of a state. Former loyalties were not forgotten, as was the case for Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Baṣīr, but the rapid restructuring of the movement meant that these local leaders were at best obsolete and at worst obstacles to the overhaul of the Mahdist organisation. With the territorial anchoring of the movement, most of these leaders failed to convert their moral authority into a governmental legitimacy that could be accepted, beyond the local networks they had initially mobilised, by neighbouring communities. The solution was to appoint a more neutral leader, if possible distant from the religious, political and tribal dynamics that characterised a certain area and where their only source of leverage would be their privileged connection to the Mahdī, later the Khalīfa. Whereas the Mahdī initially sent letters in the hope of bringing in men, after 1883 (1300/1), he began to send men in the hope to receive letters. To write these, small administrations had to be set up in these new provincial centres.

### *iii) Nuclei of Local Bureaucracies in Mahdist Provinces*

The circumstances under which provincial treasuries were founded are as murky as the ones that prevailed in *jabal Qadīr*. Indeed, only scattered mentions of such institutions could be found in the Mahdī's correspondence before 1885 (1302). Whereas the transformation of the central treasury from 1883 (1300/1) onwards is relatively well documented, references to its branches in the rest of Nilotic Sudan are rare and give few indications on the operations they conducted or the extent of their jurisdiction. That those were present in areas outside of the Kurdufānī centre of the Mahdist uprising is not in doubt, however, the dire lack of sources limits the scope of this analysis. As in Qadīr, the first provincial treasuries were probably little more than a warehouse where booty and the product of the *zakāt* were gathered, maybe under the authority of a head clerk. When al-Mannā Ismā'īl was arrested *c.* May 1883 (*c.* Rajab 1300), his father and son were arrested alongside, as well as the *amīn* of the treasury<sup>86</sup>. No other evidence of the existence of a provincial administration could be found before this date.

If references to provincial treasuries are somewhat more abundant for the next two years, from 1883 to 1885 (1300-1302), in the Mahdī's correspondence, it is often uneasy to determine whether he alluded to an actual institution or an ideal organisation. For example, in July 1884 (Ramaḍān 1301), the Mahdī instructed Muḥammad al-Khayr 'Abd Allāh Khūjalī, soon to become the *'āmil* of Barbar, to allow the lease of land, a practice otherwise banned, if the owner could not cultivate it himself<sup>87</sup>. He added that the *'ushr* should be levied from the rent and the product

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<sup>86</sup> Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, "Mas'alat al-Shaykh al-Mannā," *op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>87</sup> The question of the Mahdī's position on land ownership and usufructuary rights is complex. For a short discussion of this particular measure, see Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī'a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*,



deposited in the treasury, but in this case as in others, it is unclear whether this attested of the presence of a treasury in Barbar or just enunciated a normative framework<sup>88</sup>.

However, it is certain that with the expansion of Mahdist territorial control, the foundation of local bureaucracies became a necessity, quite particularly to implement the new Mahdist fiscality and serve the needs of the *anṣār*. The shift to more stable institutions was connected to the Mahdist successes in conquering major urban centres, a process that started with al-Ubayyid in January 1883 (Rabī' I 1300), but stopped for a year until the surrender of al-Fāshir in January 1884 (Rabī' I 1301), followed by Wad Madanī in April 1884 (Jumādā II), Barbar in May 1884 (Rajab), Khartoum in January 1885 (Rabī' II 1302), Dunqulā and Kasalā in July 1885 (Shawwāl), and, finally, Sinnār in August 1885 (D. al-Qa' da). On each occasion, as in al-Ubayyid, the main vector pushing for the formation of a provincial treasury was the need to assert control over the booty. In October 1884 (Muḥarram 1302), two months after his comments on land use in the Barbar area, the Mahdī sent a much longer set of instructions to Khūjalī, on the manner with which to deal with the immense loot collected when this important trade centre had submitted. For the first time in the Mahdī's correspondence, the ambiguity was lifted when he ordered his *'āmil* to appoint someone to head the treasury<sup>89</sup>.

The path followed by Mahdist authorities in Eastern Sudan shared elements with the one described for Barbar. The initial establishment of an administration in this region is difficult to locate within Mahdist sources. 'Uthmān Dīqna failed to communicate regularly with the Mahdī and between his appointment and the first letters received by Muḥammad Aḥmad, a year had elapsed<sup>90</sup>. From 1883 to 1885, only seventeen letters from the Mahdī to 'Uthmān Dīqna have reached us<sup>91</sup>. The first and only reference to a treasury can be found in one of them, sent on 18 March 1884 (20 Jumādā 1301), in which the Mahdī stated that the property of those who had repented should nonetheless be entered in the treasury<sup>92</sup>. But as this instruction was sent at the same time as the Mahdī's reproach against 'Uthmān Dīqna for not keeping him updated, the Mahdī had little means of knowing whether such institution existed or not. Yet, short from an actual administration, there is no doubt that resources were collected in one place. When Guido Levi visited the Mahdist camp of Tamaynīb in late January 1884 (late Rabī' I 1301), he was told by several merchants who had joined the movement that "all the sums of gold and silver, jewels and other objects of value from the booty

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p. 87–88.

88 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 403 ; Yitzhak NAKASH, "Fiscal and Monetary Systems in the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898," *op. cit.*, p. 369.

89 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 454.

90 See chapter 2.

91 Of those seventeen letters, ten can be found in the *Daftar 'Uthmān Dīqna*. For the index of these letters, see in the *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix IV.

92 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 273.

seized during various battles have been handed over to Dekna [Diqna] who [...] gathered them in a special hut, “the house of the treasury” – it was the treasury of the people<sup>93</sup>”. The intensity of the confrontation with Egyptian and later British troops caused the Mahdists to relocate their camp on several occasions prevented the formation of a more elaborate institution. Besides, as no real urban centre had yet to be captured, the loot emanated primarily from defeated expeditions and most of the military equipment was quickly redistributed.

The foundation of a true treasury came later, in a context that bore many similarities with the events that led to the surrender of the main Egyptian force in the Jazīra to Abū Qarja the year before (see above). Surrounded in November 1883 (Şafar/Rabī‘ I 1300), Kasalā, the capital of Tāka, was besieged since February 1884 (Rabī‘ II 1301). It held as long as possible, but on 5 January 1885 (18 Rabī‘ I 1302), the Mahdists inflicted crippling losses on the garrison during an attempted sortie and on 11 April (25 Jumādā II), they isolated the town from the neighbouring Sufī centre of al-Khatmiyya<sup>94</sup>. In May (Rajab), a decision had to be taken so Egyptian officers and local notables convened and wrote to the Mahdī that they were ready to surrender, provided that they would not deal directly with the *umarā’* at the heads of the troops surrounding them, but with emissaries dispatched specifically for this task. They feared that the many conflicts experienced by the loosely united Mahdist forces gathered in the area would lead to unfettered violence once the garrison had laid down its arms. In the meantime, they still hoped that the efforts engaged by Lt.-Colonel Chermiside to organise their evacuation with Ras Alūla’s assistance would come to fruition. Asking to surrender to delegates was a practical way to stall the Mahdists<sup>95</sup>. The Mahdī, aware of the tensions between the different military commanders of the forces in Tāka, had already written to Muşţafā ‘Alī Hadal on 10 May 1885 (25 Rajab 1302) to enjoin him to pacify his relation with another *amīr*, ‘Awaḍ al-Karīm Kāfūt<sup>96</sup>. Nine days later, he appointed two delegates, al-Ḥusayn Ibrāhīm Zahrā and Ibrāhīm ‘Ālim, to receive the capitulation of the garrison, but also to put an end to the strife that divided the *anşār*<sup>97</sup>.

An issue crucial to the Mahdī was that the consequent booty collected once the town had fallen into Mahdist hands be recovered in its entirety and divided with caution so as to not further dissensions within the camp. He instructed his delegates to be careful in how they seized the loot and redistributed it. To assist them in their task, he also appointed a man named Idrīs ‘Abd al-Raḥīm whose sole responsibility was to collect the weapons, the ammunition and the men of the Sudanese

93 Guido LEVI, *Osman Dekna, chez lui, op. cit.*, p. 24.

94 Muḥammad Şāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Amīr al-Sharq, ‘Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, p. 102–108.

95 See chapter 2.

96 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī, op. cit.*, letter 681.

97 Şalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi, op. cit.*, p. 57 ; Muḥammad Şāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Amīr al-Sharq, ‘Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, p. 106–107.

*jihādiyya*. Furthermore, the Mahdī was adamant and repeated several times his desire that detailed reports be sent to him<sup>98</sup>. It may have been to fulfil this function that ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf was first summoned by the Mahdī to join his delegates on 25 May 1885 (10 Sha‘bān 1302)<sup>99</sup>. It was also probably upon a recommendation of his brother Majdhūb b. Abū Bakr Yūsuf who was then the main representative of Eastern Sudan in Umm Durmān<sup>100</sup>. More importantly, the head of the Mahdist state was convinced that ‘Abd Allāh would be a precious addition to the small delegation since “he has expertise and proficiency (*dirāya wa ma‘rifa*) in the Arabic language and the language of those regions, as well as knowledge of the affairs of this country<sup>101</sup>”.

The dispatch of this delegation was the impulse to the establishment of a Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan. The management of loot was its primary objective<sup>102</sup>, but it should not be forgotten that this encompassed concerns larger than the simple accumulation of wealth. In a context where the Mahdist central authority in the provinces was precarious and wielded by temperamental military leaders who answered first and foremost to their own agenda, the balance which was painfully maintained through missives was seen as too fragile to sustain the temptations arising from the capture of an important town. The Mahdī had to send representatives and, if possible, an intermediary like ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr who could cross the bridge between the many factions, both inside and outside the walls of Kasalā. But he died before he could witness the capture of the regional capital of Tāka, since the garrison finally surrendered on 29 July 1885 (16 Shawwāl 1302). ‘Uthmān Diqna, who had been kept informed of the dispositions taken to ensure that the surrender went as smoothly as possible, departed from his camp near Sawākin a month later, on 26 August 1885 (15 D. al-Qa‘da), after having appointed Muḥammad b. Mūsā Diqna, his nephew, as his representative. Since the ‘*āmil* of Eastern Sudan had not been able to come to Umm Durmān to pledge allegiance to the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi, he did so in Kasalā, probably to the Mahdī’s delegates.

The exact date of ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf’s arrival in Kasalā is not known. The Khalīfa, who had just recently succeeded the Mahdī, wrote to him on 14 September 1885 (4 D. al-Ḥijja 1302) to inform him that he was aware of his desire to come to Umm Durmān, but since the

98 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 747.

99 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 3.

100 Indeed, when the famed shaykh al-Ṭāhir al-Majdhūb, leader of the Majādhīb, wished to bring modifications to the prayer prescribed in the rātib, he first wrote to his brother-in-law, Majdhūb, who in turn transferred the inquiry to the Mahdī. It was only natural that, a few months later, in early June 1885 (late Sha‘bān 1302), when ‘Abd Allāh, one of the brothers of the *shaykh*, finally came to Umm Durmān with a large following to meet the Mahdī and pledge allegiance to him—a journey his ageing sibling could not undertake anymore—they were hosted by Majdhūb himself (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 617 and 805).

101 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 750. See also, in the same volume, the letter 755 to ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr containing similar comments.

102 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 765.

“victory of the religion” was not completed, he thought it more suitable for him to stay with ‘Uthmān Diqna in Kasalā<sup>103</sup>. ‘Abd Allāh must have put himself to work quickly. Indeed, in a report he issued in March 1887 (Jumādā II 1304), he summarised all revenues and expenses in Kasalā since 6 October 1885 (26 D. al-Ḥijja 1302), quite probably the date at which he took over the responsibilities afferent to the treasury. A month later, on 10 November 1885 (2 Ṣafar 1303), he transmitted detailed information on the booty that had been collected and signed this report “*amīn* of the *mudīriyya* of Kasalā”. The internal organisation of the document’s sections confirms that he arrived after the final surrender of the city. Indeed, the first one recorded the gold and silver coins, and ivory collected as booty and was established by a man named Muḥammad Ḥamza, “during his term (*‘ahd*)”, whereas all subsequent accounts were completed under ‘Abd Allāh’s supervision. Among those, one touched on the money “collected by the *‘umalā’* through loot and divided among the hands of the *fuqarā’*”. It was duly counted and reinserted in the overall bookkeeping<sup>104</sup>. This entire operation must have taken some time since the final account of the gold and silver sent to the Holy Spot with Mūsā w. Maḥmūd of the camel-post was only finalised in late December 1885 (Rabī‘ I 1303). On that occasion, more than 4 000 coins and 5 rtl. (2,25 kg) of melted gold were brought to the capital, where they arrived in January 1886 (Rabī‘ II 1303) with the documents produced by ‘Abd Allāh<sup>105</sup>.

In the meantime, the Khalīfa urged ‘Uthmān Diqna to return rapidly to Sawākin after the failed military operations against Ras Alūlā which culminated with the inconclusive battle of Kūfīt on 23 September 1885 (13 D. al-Ḥijja 1302). Upon his departure in January 1886 (Rabī‘ II 1303), the *‘āmil* entrusted Kasalā to one of his nephews, Muḥammad Fāy b. ‘Alī Diqna<sup>106</sup>. As for ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf, he remained *amīn* of the treasury<sup>107</sup>, assisted by yet another member of Diqnāb, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Diqna<sup>108</sup>. No other reference to a treasury located in the northern parts of Eastern Sudan could be found, meaning that Kasalā had then become the main and only

103 NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56B, document no. 1.

104 NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/66A, p. 1-3.

105 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 44. Previous letters containing instructions regarding the division and distribution of the loot made no mention of a treasury in Kasalā. See for example, in the *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, the letter 30 dated 30 September 1885 (3 D. al-Ḥijja 1302).

106 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 327. See also, for a similar but unsourced affirmation Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna*, *op. cit.*, p. 115 ; Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 57–58.

107 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 57–58.

108 The same letter indicated that Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Diqna died in Tūkar in 1888/9 (1306), however the exact nature of his relationship with ‘Uthmān Diqna could not be ascertained. Inversely, both Muḥammad b. Mūsā, appointed in Tamāy in 1885 and Muḥammad Fāy b. ‘Alī Diqna in Kasalā the same year—two distant nephews of ‘Uthmān Diqna—belonged to the other (and more prestigious) branch of the Diqnāb. There is a simple reason for this shift: one of ‘Uthmān Diqna’s sons and two of his direct nephews had died in the fights in 1884 and 1885, leaving him with less options than before. However, it also may be that the greater weight carried by this side of the family was considered as an advantage in the process of imposing Mahdist authority in Eastern Sudan.

administrative centre for this province. The Khalīfa confirmed this appointment and wrote to the *‘amil* of the East on 15 January 1886 (9 Rabī‘ I 1303) that ‘Abd Allāh was “[his] representative for these areas (*jihāt*), that is the areas of Tāka and the *ṣa ‘īd*<sup>109</sup> up to where Allāh wants a presence other than His”. He added “This is why this must be communicated by you to all the communities of natives (*ma ‘āshir al-ahālī*) of Tāka, from among the Hadanduwa, the Banī ‘Āmir, the Bishārīn, and others, and the communities of natives of the *ṣa ‘īd* and the Atbara River, so that they follow his command<sup>110</sup>”, thus establishing on the same occasion the boundaries of ‘Abd Allāh’s prerogatives, a sign of the greater structuring of provincial administrations initiated under the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi’s rule.

## II. The Mahdist Administration in Eastern Sudan

As the year 1303 *hijrī* (9 October 1885) began, Eastern Sudan had witnessed two years of intense conflict, but since the surrender of Kasalā a few months before, the entire region could now be said to be firmly controlled by Mahdist authorities, with the major exception of Sawākin. Paradoxically, the formation of an administrative organisation under ‘Abd Allāh b. Abū Bakr Yūsuf is almost invisible in sources and cannot be related to an increase in the available archival material. On the contrary, the work achieved by the Kasalā treasury in the following three years has left very few traces. This is manifest in a letter-book of 132 letters—seized at Afāfīt by the DMI in February 1891 (Rajab 1308)—which very probably belonged to Abū Bakr Yūsuf’s family<sup>111</sup>. In all likelihood, ‘Abd Allāh remained in Kasalā as *amīn* of the town’s treasury throughout the period, from October 1885 to April 1888 (Muḥarram 1301-Sha‘bān 1305)<sup>112</sup>. And yet, only two letters of this letter-book were written by ‘Uthmān Dīqna to the head of the treasury, in January and February 1886 (Rabī‘ II - Jumādā I 1303), as the Mahdist *‘amil* had just left the region to head back north toward Sawākin. The next letter was sent after an almost two-year hiatus between August 1886 (D. al-Qa‘da 1303)

109 The *ṣa ‘īd*, the “upstream region”, is a common geographical designation in Egypt, in contrast with Nilotic Sudan. In the context of Eastern Sudan, it can be found in a few other occasions (see for example Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 10, 91 and 278). Its meaning is uncertain, but, in all likelihood, referred to the regions of the Upper ‘Aṭbara, at the foothills of the Abyssinian Plateau, up to al-Qallābāt (see fig. 0.1).

110 NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56B, document no. 2.

111 Of the 132 letters copied in this letter-book, 75 were either written by or destined to ‘Abd Allāh and his brother Majdhūb b. Abū Bakr Yūsuf. The index of this letter-book was translated in the “Report on the Dervish rule in the Eastern Sudan by Major F. R. Wingate. Appendix VI (A)”, May 1891 (DUL SAD 253/1). A copy of the original index in Arabic, realised by the DMI, can be found at the NRO (Mahdiyya 1/30/06). Unfortunately, the letter-book itself could not be located.

112 In September 1885 (D. al-Qa‘da/D. al-Ḥijja 1302), even before ‘Abd Allāh had been placed at the head of the treasury, the Khalīfa had authorised ‘Uthmān Dīqna to prevent him from performing the *hijra* to Umm Durmān, if he considered his presence indispensable (*Daftar ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, letter 32). There is at least one mention of him in that position in November 1887 (Ṣafar/Rabī‘ I 1305) (Ṣalāh al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Dīqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 69).

and April 1888<sup>113</sup>. As for the work of the treasury itself, it was almost never mentioned. The first direct reference made by the Khalīfa to Kasalā's treasury only came in May 1886 (Rajab 1303)<sup>114</sup> and in July 1887 (D. al-Qa'da 1304) in 'Uthmān Diqna's correspondence<sup>115</sup>. The lack of documents mentioning the treasury, and more generally, the daily operations of the Mahdist administration in Kasalā is not surprising. The official correspondence only rarely made direct comments on those, whatever the province, and when it did, it was in relation to general regulations, such as the confiscation of assets from certain recalcitrant tribes and their subsequent entry in the treasury, and not about the actual functions performed by the institution. The administration headed by 'Abd Allāh Abū Bakr must have produced budgetary records similar to the ones found in Afāfīt, if not perhaps in the same volumes, however they were seemingly lost or destroyed<sup>116</sup> as for most of the other provinces' accounting books (see above).

This dearth of sources for the period between 1885 and 1888 (1302-1306) is all the more problematic that this coincides with the phase of institutionalisation of the provincial administration. In 1885, the *ad hoc* system implemented in the first years of the Mahdiyya had run its course. The capture of Khartoum, soon followed by the withdrawal of British forces, left the *anṣār* in command of most of Nilotic Sudan. The Mahdī may have had other plans, but his unexpected death on 22 June 1885 (9 Ramaḍān 1302) meant that the task of establishing a proper provincial administration fell to his successor, the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi. The latter had to adapt Mahdist power structures to a new context. Since victory had been assured in the Sudanese heartland, the mass mobilisation of its population did not entail the same urgency as before. Henceforth, Mahdist troops were primarily engaged in peripheral battlefronts, mainly on the northern and eastern borders of the new state, and the *jihād* was waged by individuals who were now part of a professionalised army. Consequently, the focus of Mahdist governance was directed toward regulating local communities and increasing fiscal revenues to cater for the needs of the central state, quite particularly to cover for its large military expenses.

Since the Khalīfa's accession to the highest echelon of the Mahdist state was concomitant to this process, historical analyses have insisted on aligning the restructuring of the provincial administration with this crucial political transition. The following sections diverge from this narrative. They aim at emphasizing continuities between the blueprint laid out by the Mahdī and the

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113 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

114 *Daftar 'Uthmān Diqna*, letter 63.

115 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 5.

116 There is a possibility that this set of documents was seized by the Italians when they took control over Kasalā in 1894, but this should require further investigation to establish the veracity of this hypothesis. The only surviving accounts can be seen in NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/66A. They cover a wide period, from September 1885 to September 1887 (D. al-Qa'da 1302-Muḥarram 1305), but compared to the thousands of pages produced by the treasury in Tūkar, these 24 months are summarised in 15 pages.

organisation set up by his successor, and qualifies the notion that the main impulsion for these changes came solely from Umm Durmān. While focused on Eastern Sudan, it will also attempt to place Eastern Sudan's trajectory in perspective with other Mahdist provinces<sup>117</sup>.

### ***A) Provinces in the Making: Toward the 'Imāla***

#### *i) The Definition of Mahdist Provinces*

The first phase of the formation of Mahdist provinces (*'imālāt* sing. *'imāla*) came with the definition of their boundaries. According to the historians al-Qaddāl and Spaulding, this process began barely a few weeks after the Khalīfa took control of the central government in September 1885 (D. al-Ḥijja 1302)<sup>118</sup>. What is still the dominant framework to understand the global structure of Mahdist provinces was formulated by Holt (see fig. 3.2). Eight "Military provinces" were located on the outer ring of the Mahdist territory, they had their own treasury and were headed by military leaders. In contrast, "metropolitan provinces" were, as indicated by their name, all located in the centre, around Umm Durmān. They did not possess their own treasury but depended on the central institution. Their *'umalā*'s were confined to administrative and fiscal matters. He also defined what he dubbed "vice-provinces" that were fundamentally fiscal units<sup>119</sup>. The zones that were thus delineated resembled closely the governorates defined during the Egyptian colonial regime<sup>120</sup>.

Attempting to represent these provinces' limits by following Holt's "instructions" brings forward the complexity of these administrative divisions<sup>121</sup>, but also the limits of his interpretation of the Khalīfa's textual development. Drawing neat boundaries on a map can be misleading on several counts: firstly because these evolved throughout the Mahdiyya; secondly because a graphic representation cannot fully render the intertwined dimensions of their definition; and lastly because of biases present within Holt's approach to the Mahdiyya's organisation of power.

Holt himself recognised that his typology did not emanate from Mahdist sources but was meant as a heuristic tool. The structure he outlined is based on a single document from 1896/7

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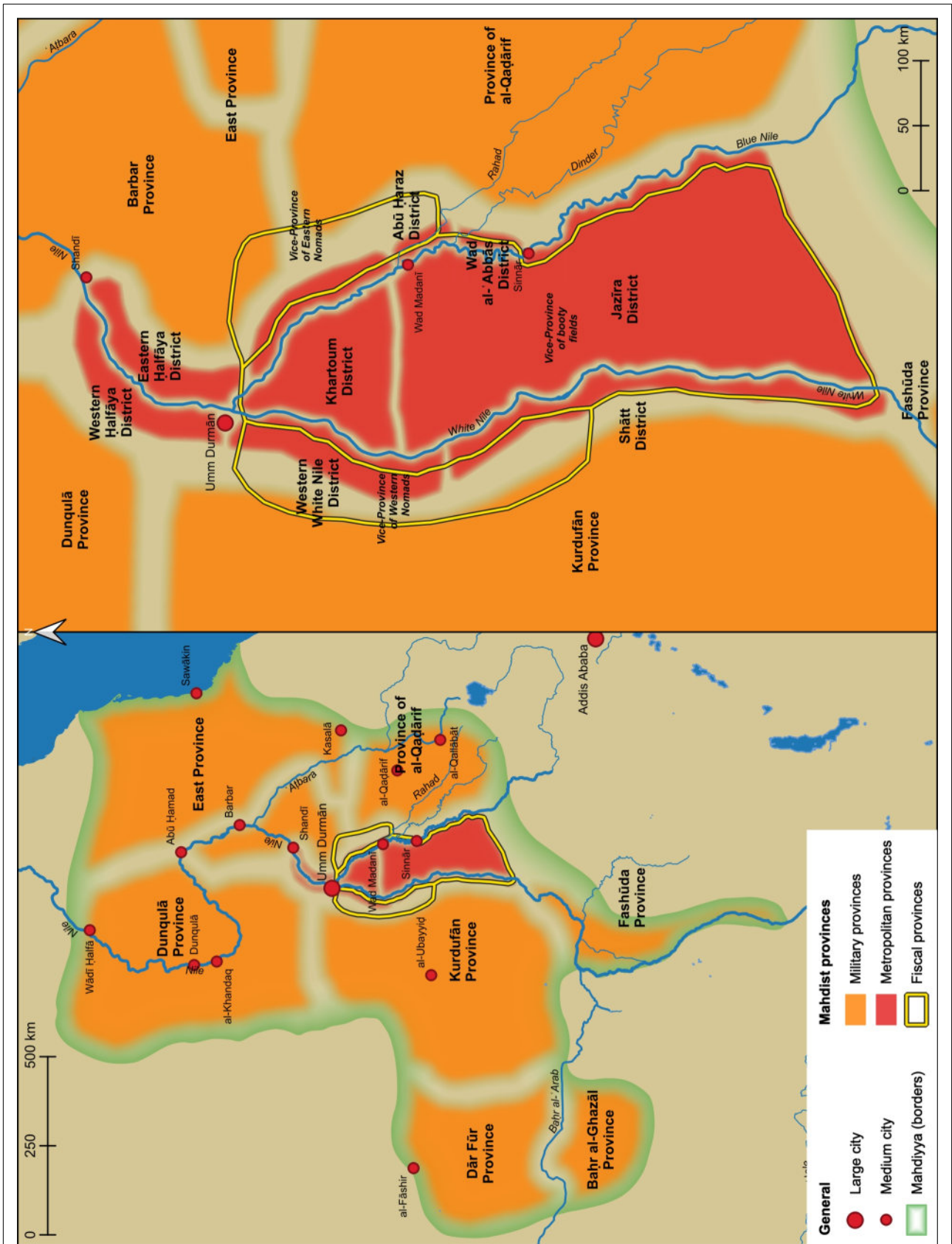
117 Regional studies of the Mahdiyya were at their heyday in the 1970s (see introduction). Their attention to administrative dynamics varies from one study to the other. The most important works quoted in this section deal with Kurdufān, Dunqulā, Barbar and the Jazīra.

118 Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898, op. cit.*, p. 148–149 ; Jay L. SPAULDING, "Administrative Reform in the Mahdist State: An Example From the Rubatab, 1303/1885," *Sudanic Africa*, 1995, vol. 6, p. 11–16.

119 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan, op. cit.*, p. 243–246.

120 A map representing the governorates of Nilotic Sudan under Egyptian rule can be seen in Stewart's *Report on the Soudan*, p. 39–40.

121 To the best of our knowledge, the Mahdist regime and its administrations never produced a single map. This was probably not so much due to a lack of competence rather than to the fact that maps were not considered the most efficient vessel to communicate spatial knowledge. For a discussion of this issue in the context of the Sokoto Caliphate, Stephanie ZEHLE, "'Where is My Region?'" Geographical Representation and Textuality in Sokoto," *Islamic Africa*, 2018, vol. 9, p. 10–33.



**Fig. 3.2** : The provinces of Mahdist Sudan (c. 1890)

**Source:** Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970, p. 243-246.



(1314), that is the last years of the Mahdiyya. Its potential evolution is not questioned, and it fails to represent the numerous adjustments it experienced in a decade. For example, Barbar and Dunqulā, placed under a single *‘āmil* in 1885 (1303), were separated the following year. Around the same time, c. 1887 (1305) the provinces of Kurdufān and Dār Fūr were fused to form the “province of the West (*‘imālat al-ghurūb*)”, a path followed by the Jazīra districts, united under Aḥmad al-Sunnī in 1889 (1308) to form a single province. Some parts such as the province of Shātt were entrusted to the *‘āmil* in al-Ubayyīd after the appointment of Maḥmūd w. Aḥmad in 1890 (1307), and Kurdufān itself was eventually split from Dār Fūr and attached to the central province in 1895 (1313)<sup>122</sup>. Explaining these numerous changes solely by the personal character of the Khalīfa’s rule and the lack of stability in provincial administration does not do justice to the complex nature of the Mahdist government. Territorial divisions were shaped by an array of factors. Considerations regarding the historical presence of certain communities, their attitude toward the Mahdiyya, or specific policies of the central authority all contributed to the evolving definition of provincial boundaries depending on shifts of allegiances, military needs, local rivalries, etc.

Indeed, the territorialisation of Mahdist power was a hybrid construct. Provincial limits were not solely spatial, but also social and economic. These were informed by geographical thresholds and landmarks such as the *Ḥajr al-‘asal* near the sixth cataract or the Baḥr al-Ghazāl; by tribal territories; and by the nature of the predominant economic activity in a given area. For example, the boundaries of the “metropolitan” provinces—articulated around the Jazīra and placed under the Khalīfa’s direct authority—did not overlap with tribal limits, but reflected the socioeconomic characteristics of local communities. These could be situated on the same territory and yet answer to different administrative structures. For example, while sedentary populations located on the banks of the White Nile were integrated into the Western White Nile District (*‘imālat sharq al-‘Ādik*<sup>123</sup> *al-baḥrī*), nomadic communities—with which the former entertained dense relations that bonded them together—belonged to the Western Nomads vice-province (*‘imālat al-bādiyya al-gharbiyya*) (see figure 3.2). These spaces were not blank canvases that the new regime carved for administrative purposes but inhabited territories. Therefore, the particular organisation of the central provinces is indicative of the relative weakness of tribal structures of authority in that region compared to other parts of Nilotic Sudan. Beyond these central provinces, such divisions did not exist and provinces coincided more closely with historical regions and tribal territories, as was the case for Kurdufān and Dār Fūr, as well as for Eastern Sudan, which encompassed all of Bijāwī

122 Aḥmad ‘Uthmān Muḥammad IBRĀHĪM, *Al-Jazīra fī khilāl al-Mahdiyya, 1881-1899*, *op. cit.*, p. 122–124 ; Ibrāhīm ‘Akāsha ‘ALĪ, *Wilāyat Barbar fī ‘ahd al-Khalīfa ‘Abd Allāh (Ramaḍān 1302 – Rajab 1317 / June 1885 – November 1899)*, *op. cit.*, p. 47–48 ; ‘Awaḍ ‘Abd al-Hādī AL-‘ATĀ, *Tārīkh Kurdufān al-siyāsī fī-l-Mahdiyya, 1881-1899*, *op. cit.*, p. 63–67.

123 Al-‘Ādik is the native name for the White Nile.

territory.

Yet, the biases revealed by Holt's approach are somewhat more problematic. Provinces (*'imālāt*) and districts (*aqālīm* sing. *iqlīm*) are amalgamated without sufficient consideration for their differentiated nature and scale, especially since they were all incorporated into a single designation of "metropolitan provinces". In contrast, "military provinces" are implicitly described as incomplete structures or crude attempts to replicate a model defined in Umm Durmān. By opposing these two provincial organisations, based on little evidence, Holt accentuated the centralised character of the Mahdist state beyond what is warranted. Indeed, as shall be demonstrated below, the formation of Mahdist provinces responded, in part, to endogenous factors and relations between the central province and the others more balanced than formerly stated. Besides, while the Khalīfa's decisions were instrumental in giving formal recognition to these administrative limits, the process was already under way under the Mahdī's rule.

In the case of Eastern Sudan, provincial borders were evoked in early 1884 (1301) after Aḥmad al-Quluhyābī and Ṭāhir b. Qīlāy were dispatched by 'Uthmān Dīqna to raid an Egyptian position on the 'Aṭbara. Having failed to gain the upper hand, they withdrew with their troops to Barbar. Contrary to Sinkāt, Tūkar or Kasalā, they were informed by the Mahdī that their authority on this area was only temporary and they were to wait for his final decision<sup>124</sup>. He eventually appointed Muḥammad Khayr 'Abd Allāh Khūjalī to be the head of this province. On 19 May 1884 (23 Rajab 1301), 'Uthmān Dīqna was instructed that his authority extended "from Sawākin up to the 'Aṭbara River" and that he could choose his *umarā'* at his discretion. Beside Barbar, the main point of tension was whether the southern parts of Eastern Sudan fell within his perimeter. The Mahdī attempted to resolve the issue by confirming Muṣṭafā 'Alī Hadal as 'Uthmān Dīqna's *wakīl* in Tāka (Kasalā being still besieged). Al-Ḥasan Ḥāshī and Aḥmad b. Ṭaha b. Abū Ṭāhir, two native Mahdist leaders, were also given positions and reminded that they must obey the *amīr* of the East. The formalisation of 'Uthmān Dīqna's authority and the definition of its limits were meant to avoid local power struggles. Indeed, in the early summer 1884 (c. Sha'bān 1301), the situation was quite confused. A Hadanduwa man named 'Ammāra w. al-Ḥasan had mistaken participation to the Mahdist movement with pure banditry and had been "cutting roads and looting the product of legal taxes"<sup>125</sup>. More dangerous to the Mahdist order, a small group from this region had visited the Mahdī and taken without his knowledge a letter with his seal<sup>126</sup> to Hadanduwa nomadic

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124 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

125 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letters 315-317.

126 Probably a template that can be filled accordingly, as was the case for the first *da'wa* letters sent with 'Uthmān Dīqna in the summer 1883 (see chapter 2).

communities and others, one can assume to try to build their authority locally in the hope that it would be subsequently recognised *de facto* by the Mahdī<sup>127</sup>. This confusion had to be addressed, particularly so as Tāka would be visited by the *‘āmil* of the east more than a year later. The stabilisation of the Mahdist hierarchical order was introduced alongside its spatial expression. In that perspective, the Khalīfa only pursued a policy initiated by the Mahdī. Shortly after he took the head of the Mahdist state, the Khalīfa reaffirmed the perimeter of ‘Uthmān Dīqna’s authority, particularly as to Kasalā, on 13 September 1885 (3 D. al-Qa‘da 1302)<sup>128</sup>.

Compared to the examples mentioned above, Eastern Sudan’s provincial borders were rather stable over time, with the notable exception of its most southern areas. On his way to Umm Durmān where he had been summoned by the Khalīfa to attend a council (*majlis* pl. *majālis*) with other *umarā’*, in the wake of the decisive battle of Tūshkī (4 August 1889), ‘Uthmān Dīqna stayed some time in Kasalā where he witnessed the lack of authority of Ḥāmid b. ‘Alī. Once in the capital, he suggested the transfer of the city to the *‘imāla* of al-Zākī Ṭamal with al-Qaḍārīf and al-Qallābāt<sup>129</sup>, a proposal that was not validated by the Khalīfa. This was quite clearly an ongoing debate, as barely a few months later, in September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307), an *‘āmil* named Madanī ‘Uthmān Qamar al-Dīn wrote that he thought that the region of Tāka and its tribes would soon be placed under his authority. The town and the Upper ‘Aṭbara were eventually detached from Eastern Sudan in January 1891 (Jumādā I 1308), when Abū Qarja was appointed as its *‘āmil*. In a letter to ‘Uthmān Dīqna, he communicated the Khalīfa’s instruction that they should delineate the limits of their respective authority<sup>130</sup>. Abū Qarja did not stay long enough for this to happen, and so this task fell to his successor, Musā‘id Qaydūm. The matter had become all the more urgent since, in the meantime, ‘Uthmān Dīqna had had to withdraw from Tūkar in February 1891 (Rajab 1308). As he settled in Adārāma on the ‘Aṭbara, several letters were exchanged between the Mahdist leaders and the Khalīfa to ascertain the new limits of their jurisdiction. The ambiguous nature of these borders is well illustrated for the Ja‘aliyīn populations who resided on the banks of the ‘Aṭbara—an internal border (*ḥudūd dākhila*)—and wished to be attached to ‘Uthmān Dīqna, implying that the territory they occupied would be detached from the *‘imāla* of ‘Alī Abū Sabīb. In early 1892 (mid-1309), the authority of these different actors was yet to be fully delineated. ‘Uthmān Dīqna had to remind his nephew Muḥammad Mūsā Dīqna not to infringe on Kasalā’s territory and collect local taxes (*ḥuqūq ahliyya*) only from the communities that had been formerly attached to him<sup>131</sup>. In March of the same

127 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, letter 12, p. 20-22.

128 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, letter 28, p. 36-38.

129 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Dīqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

130 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), p. 60 and 63.

131 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 216, 247 and 253.

year (Sha‘bān 1309), the matter was settled. Musā‘id Qaydūm ruled up to Qūz Rajab on the ‘Aṭbara and *jabal al-Ṣafiyya* in the open land (*khalā’*), in the Buṭāna. As for ‘Uthmān Diqna’s territory, it began downstream from Qūz Rajab, and extended on both banks to include the nearby *widyān*, “that is the *wadī* [Hasalīt] and the *widyān* opposite (*hidhā’*) to it in which there are [‘Uthmān Diqna’s] fields and current inhabitants (*mākithīn*)”. The need to ensure that the latter could sustain their livelihood within the borders of this new territory was ensured by including “the water places (*manāhil*) from which they draw water, al-[Shaq] and al-[Qalayta]<sup>132</sup>, [...] at a distance of four or five hours<sup>133</sup>”. The establishment of administrative divisions was only the framework of Mahdist provincial power. Its operations required the appointment of agents and the formation of a local administration.

### *ii) Administering the Mahdist State*

Before the formalisation of provincial administrations, the authority was between the hands of local representatives who had declared themselves supporters of the Mahdī. From 1883 (1300/1) onwards, Muḥammad Aḥmad initiated a process to transform this network of atomised actors into a hierarchical structure, and most of these agents had to step down and transfer their position to direct appointees of the Mahdī (see above).

With the arrival of the Khalīfa at the head of the state, this process was furthered resulting in the purge of most of the former provincial ‘*umalā’*, replaced by members of the Baqqāra whose loyalty he deemed more reliable. Whereas in 1885 (1302/3), a majority of the provinces were between the hands of the *ashrāf*, the companions of the Mahdī, a decade later, in 1896 (1313/4), all provincial governors—with the notable exception of ‘Uthmān Diqna—belonged to the Ta‘ā’īsha Jubārāt, the community of the Khalīfa<sup>134</sup>. Spaulding noted that this dynamic also affected the lower echelons of the provincial administration. In the district of the Rubāṭāb in the Barbar province, the mistrust with which the Mahdī’s appointees were considered, trickled down to their subordinates<sup>135</sup>. Political tensions between his partisans and the Khalīfa’s violently erupted in the open in March-April 1886 (Rajab/Shā‘bān 1303) and again in November 1891-January 1892 (Rabī‘ I-Jumādā II 1309)<sup>136</sup>, thus prompting important changes in the provincial personnel.

While the trend of the “westernisation” of the ‘*umalā’* is clear, describing it through a single narrative as the result of the gradual personalisation, monopolisation and tribalisation of the

132 The localisation of these sites could not be ascertained.

133 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 270.

134 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan: 1881-1898: A study of its origins, development and overthrow*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 141; 246.

135 Jay L. SPAULDING, “Administrative Reform in the Mahdist State: An Example From the Rubatab, 1303/1885,” *op. cit.*

136 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 141–146.

Khalīfa's power, fails to represent the balance that he attempted to introduce among provincial authorities. The *'āmil 'umūm* (general governor) was sovereign within his province, with the important limit that until 1889 (1306/7), when most of external major military operations were suspended, relations between provincial and military leaders were uneasy, especially as their prerogatives and responsibilities overlapped. In Eastern Sudan, 'Uthmān Dīqna held both civilian and military authorities until the appointment of Abū Qarja in 1887 (1304/5) which was a major source of tensions (see below)<sup>137</sup>.

But more importantly, the *'āmil* was dependent on a number of subalterns of various statuses who were the representatives of Mahdist power at the lowest levels. The province of Barbar was divided into three districts (*iqlīm* pl. *aqālīm*), each divided in several sub-districts (*qism* pl. *aqsām* or *khatt* pl. *akhtāt*)<sup>138</sup><sup>139</sup>. This was also true for the provinces of Dunqulā, Kurdufān and the Jazīra<sup>140</sup>, while there are no traces of such organisation in Eastern Sudan. As far as available sources go, these terms were never used in 'Uthmān Dīqna's correspondence. Each of these spaces were headed by the *'āmil al-qism* or *'āmil al-khatt*. They could be either administrative agents appointed by the *'āmil* or community leaders who requested to be vested as its representative. However, the distinction between the two was rather porous and depended mostly on the characteristics of the community. Imposing administrative agents was easier in an urban context, whereas, in Eastern Sudan as elsewhere, the vast majority of Mahdist agents in nomadic groups had strong connections with said groups. The military title of *muqaddam* (pl. *maqādīm*) was used to designate these individuals even if their authority extended beyond the confines of the banner they may have raised<sup>141</sup>. This represented the main administrative sub-division that could be observed in this region and it was community-based rather than territorial. Whatever their title, they occupied a crucial position within the Mahdist provincial administration, at least because they were the main relays of the *'āmil*'s policies, and because they had some latitude in their application since the Khalīfa was

137 'Awaḍ Jabār al-Darām ĀDAM, *Nizām al-hukm wa al-idāra fī dawla al-Mahdiyya bi-l-Sūdān (1885-1898)*, PhD Diss., University al-Nilayn, Khartoum, 2004., op. cit., p. 112–114.

138 This designation seems to have been used only in the Dunqulā and Jazīra provinces. In the former, another level existed, the *muqaddamiyya*, under a *muqaddam* (pl. *maqādīm*) of which there is no trace for the other Mahdist provinces. The *maqādīm* belonged to the local elite and their main task was to assist tax collectors (*mandūb* pl. *manādīb*) by establishing preliminary censuses on people they were familiar with (Makkāwī 'Alī AḤMAD KHĀṬIR, *Imālat Dunqulā fī 'ahd al-dawla al-mahdiyya (1302-1314 h. / 1885-1896)*, MA diss., Islamic University of Omdurman, Omdurman, 2000, p. 103–104.) As for the Jazīra, the *khatt* is a division of the district, and so could refer to an administrative level that would match that of the *muqaddamiyya* in Dunqulā (Aḥmad 'Uthmān Muḥammad IBRĀHĪM, *Al-Jazīra fī khilāl al-Mahdiyya, 1881-1899*, op. cit., p. 119).

139 Ibrāhīm 'Akāsha 'ALĪ, *Wilāyat Barbar fī 'ahd al-Khalīfa 'Abd Allāh (Ramaḍān 1302 – Rajab 1317 / June 1885 – November 1899)*, op. cit., p. 95–98.

140 'Awaḍ 'Abd al-Hādī AL-'ATĀ, *Tārīkh Kurdufān al-siyāsī fī-l-Mahdiyya, 1881–1899*, op. cit., p. 64–67.

141 See for example, the Hadanduwa *maqādīm* who were sent to Umm Durmān in December 1888 (Rabī' II 1306) and repented to the Khalīfa for their lack of enthusiasm toward the Mahdist movement. In that context, they were first and foremost representatives of their own communities (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Dīqna*, op. cit., letter 118).

averse to his *'umalā'* circulating within their province, as himself left Umm Durmān only once in the thirteen years of his rule, the day his armies were overrun at the battle of Kararī. Eastern Sudan, there too, was an exception, since 'Uthmān Diqna undertook regular movements between Sawākin's area and Kasalā. It can only be compared to Maḥmud w. Aḥmad pendulum-like circulation between al-Fāshir and al-Ubayyid, once the two provinces had been united (see above). Their influence was not lost on newly-appointed *'umalā'* who would frequently resort to dismissing numbers of these local relays to put new people in place. Despite the hierarchy that subordinated the *'umalā'* *al-khaṭṭ* or *al-qism* to the *'āmil 'umūm*, they entertained ambiguous relations in part because the Khalīfa could intervene in their appointment as well initiate direct communications with them, thus bypassing his own representative<sup>142</sup>.

Overall, the Khalīfa was anxious that the powers held by these different actors balance each other, even if he kept insisting on the supremacy of the *'āmil's* authority. The system was not as sophisticated in Eastern Sudan as in other provinces, or maybe less legible to the foreign eye of the Khalīfa. In Kurdufān, some villages that depended on the *'āmil* of the Jawāma'a asked in August 1886 (D. al-Qa'da 1303) whether they could be placed under Aḥmad al-Hāshimī's authority. The head of the Mahdiyya refused arguing that since the latter was the deputy of the province's *'āmil* (then 'Uthmān Ādam), this would imperil the ability of the population to petition him<sup>143</sup>.

Similar principles were at the basis of the relations between the *'āmil* and the treasury. In theory, each province had its own treasury, and yet, in reality, the matter is astonishingly obscure, in part because most of the provincial archives were never recovered. As a result, even their exact number at any given date is still up for debate<sup>144</sup>. The treasury and its administration was a provincial actor in its own right. Its head did not answer to the *'āmil* but to the *amīn* of the central treasury<sup>145</sup>. Both worked in close contact and their relation was more reciprocal than what could be expected. Because access to the treasury's resources was always a source of frictions, this balance was often threatened (see below). Nonetheless, as shall be seen in detail in the case of the treasury in Tūkar, against all odds, it managed to assert some degree of independence. This was not coincidental but embedded in the structure of the institution itself. In the wake of the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi's accession to power, the *amīn* of the central treasury appointed by the Mahdī, Aḥmad

142 This was not unique to the Khalīfa. On 22 December 1884 (4 Rabī' I 1302), the Mahdī wrote to Muṣṭafā 'Alī Hadal to inform him that he had appointed Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Ḍawī as *amīr* over his people, the Ḥumrān (a minor branch of the Artayqa), to succeed his father (*Ibid.*, letter 506).

143 'Awaḍ 'Abd al-Hādī AL-'ATĀ, *Tārīkh Kurdufān al-siyāsī fī-l-Mahdiyya, 1881–1899*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

144 In his account, Joseph Ohrwalder—an Austrian father imprisoned in Umm Durmān until 1892 (1309/10)—mentioned the existence of nine branches of the treasury in Dunqulā, Barbar, al-Qallābāt, Karkūj, the Jazīra, Fashūda, in Kurdufān, Lado and *jabal* al-Rajjāf, seemingly unaware of the presence of at least another treasury in Tūkar (Yitzhak NAKASH, "Fiscal and Monetary Systems in the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898," *op. cit.*, p. 369).

145 Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

Sulaymān, was dismissed and replaced by Ibrāhīm ‘Adlān, a Kurdufanī merchant. The latter was responsible for the overhaul of the treasury’s internal organisation by dividing it in different departments each placed under a single *amīn*<sup>146</sup>.

These reforms were then gradually implemented through the dispatch of more experienced *umanā*. The first provincial treasury to be targeted was Barbar’s where the administration only took its definitive form after the dismissal of its *‘āmil*, Muḥammad al-Khayr ‘Abd Allāh Khūjalī in May 1887 (Ramaḍān 1304). The main actor of this process was al-Nūr Ibrāhīm al-Jirayfāwī, from the Ḥalāwiyīn, who had worked before for the administration of the Turkiyya, and who was appointed as the new *amīn* of the treasury. However, the departments he set up deviated from the model of the central treasury in that they were not meant to handle different functions such as purchase or bookkeeping but were organised according to specific sources of revenues<sup>147</sup>. One can only speculate as to the advantages of this horizontal organisation but it allowed for a better compartmentalisation of the treasury’s holdings and so was more efficient in preventing embezzlement, an accusation frequently brought against Mahdist administrators<sup>148</sup>. Al-Jirayfāwī also introduced measures aimed at increasing trade and its taxation. Finally, he decided that the responsibility for tax collection and expenses would belong to the *umanā* only, thus isolating the daily operations of the treasury from the *‘āmil*’s intervention. In 1890, he returned to Umm Durmān to head the central treasury and was credited for having initiated its division in separate entities, following a pattern that he had tried out in Barbar (albeit with important variations). His perspectives on trade circulations and how they should be managed were also influential in the Mahdist capital. The treasury in Eastern Sudan took its achieved form in late 1888, that is a year and a half after al-Jirayfāwī’s arrival in Barbar. It is probable—unfortunately no evidence could be found to confirm this—that his influence had reached Tūkar and Kasalā, as well as the other provinces. Their treasuries gradually became financial institutions entrusted with complex tasks and not only warehouses<sup>149</sup>.

### ***B) The Mahdist Administration from Handūb to Tūkar (Afāfīt)***

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146 Yitzhak NAKASH, “Fiscal and Monetary Systems in the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898,” *op. cit.*, p. 368–371 ; Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK and Anders J. BJØRKELO (ed.), *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897*, *op. cit.*, p. xii–xv.

147 The five main departments were dedicated to tax collection, deposits (*amānāt*), contributions (*tabarru‘āt*), the *khums*, and money.

148 Bābikir Badrī admitted diverting small amounts of *dhura* from each handout when he was the clerk of the granary’s head in Ṣaraṣ c. 1887 (1304/5). When he was eventually denounced and dismissed, he had accumulated “more than an *ardeb* of grain”, that is around 144 kg (Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 51).

149 Ibrāhīm ‘Akāsha ‘ALĪ, *Wilāyat Barbar fī ‘ahd al-Khalīfa ‘Abd Allāh (Ramaḍān 1302 – Rajab 1317 / June 1885 – November 1899)*, *op. cit.*, p. 75–85 ; ‘Awaḍ Jabar al-Darām ĀDAM, *Niḏām al-ḥukm wa al-idāra fī dawla al-Mahdiyya bi-l-Sūdān (1885-1898)*, PhD Diss., University al-Nilayn, Khartoum, 2004., *op. cit.*, p. 126–131.

‘Uthmān Diqna returned to Sawākin’s area in January 1886 (Jumādā I 1306). The Mahdists then held several positions around the Red Sea port. They were settled in Hashīn in June (Ramaḍān) and in Tamāy until October (Muḥarram 1304) when the *anṣār* were surrounded by the Ammār’ar and their camp eventually captured. There was also a Mahdist position in Tūkar in which the tribes were to be concentrated in late 1886 (early 1304)<sup>150</sup>. It is unclear whether ‘Alī b. Ḥāmid who was entrusted with establishing a camp managed to attract and settle the neighbouring tribes in Tūkar. This seems unlikely as he asked for reinforcements. As a result, in late July 1887 (early D. al-Qa‘da 1304), around a thousand men and their families under Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh Fanā were said to have settled in Tūkar<sup>151</sup>, and this location still constituted the main Mahdist position in December 1887 (Rabī‘ I/II 1305)<sup>152</sup>.

This was to change rapidly with the success of the Mahdist campaign to subdue the rebellious tribes of the region<sup>153</sup> that led the *anṣār* to focus their attention on Sawākin. After the defeat and withdrawal of the Ammār’ar at Taharwa, the *anṣār* pushed north and settled at Handūb where ‘Uthmān Diqna finally arrived on 16 December 1887 (30 Rabī‘ I) from Kasalā<sup>154</sup> where he had left ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf, with responsibilities greater than heading the treasury, since the Mahdist *amīr* made him his deputy (*wakīl*), that is as his direct representative<sup>155</sup>.

Once Handūb had been occupied, all the direct routes connecting Sawākin to the hinterland were cut. The preparation of the siege and the pressure exerted against the town in 1888 (1305/6) required the mobilisation of important numbers of men. This led to a major shift in the balance of Mahdist activities toward the north. Indeed, of the two previous years, most of 1886 and 1887 (1303-1305), ‘Uthmān Diqna himself was only present six months in the region, having spent the majority of his time in Kasalā and in visits to Umm Durmān. Called upon by the *‘āmil* to join him, Muṣṭafā ‘Alī Hadal arrived at Handūb from Kasalā at the end of March 1888 (Jumādā II/Rajab 1305) with reinforcements. He was followed in April by Abū Qarja with a large troop<sup>156</sup> and one can surmise that after Muṣṭafā ‘Alī Hadal’s departure, Abū Qarja assumed the command of Kasalā, until he was himself replaced by Ḥāmid ‘Alī<sup>157</sup>. But Abū Qarja was clearly reluctant to follow this order. Not only did he postpone his departure from Kasalā, but he also decided not to go on to Handūb

150 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 60–63.

151 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 4.

152 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

153 See chapter 3

154 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 73; 101.

155 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 27.

156 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

157 *Ibid.*, p. 84; 126.



where he was expected, choosing instead to settle in Tūkar where he had ordered beforehand for a field to be prepared and accommodations to be built<sup>158</sup>. After ‘Uthmān Diqna complained to the Khalīfā, he was eventually ordered to proceed to Handūb where he arrived on 30 April 1888 (18 Sha‘bān 1305). Tūkar, as mentioned above, had been an important Mahdist camp for at least a year, but Abū Qarja’s halt prefigured the later long-term stabilisation of the Mahdist administration in Afāfīt.

In the meantime, it is likely that Abū Qarja had taken with him—as he moved from Kasalā—some of the administrators working at the treasury there and now required to run the administration of the ever increasing Mahdist presence in Handūb. ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr had stayed behind, but his coming was prepared by none other than his two brothers, Majdhūb and probably al-Amīn (he is not named). The “Majdhūbayn”, as they called themselves, wrote to the *amīn* of Kasalā on 22 April 1888 (10 Sha‘bān 1305) to inform him that food was plentiful in the region of Tūkar and that the beginning of the warm season could not yet be felt—according to them, God’s blessing of the *mujāhidīn*’s endeavours. More importantly, they explained that the lack of camels made the transfer of the men from Tūkar to Handūb an issue. However, houses had been built in Tūkar to host the main Mahdist *umarā*’, including the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir, and some of Kasalā’s records (*sijillāt* sing. *sijill*) had already arrived<sup>159</sup>. Only ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr himself was missing. He was summoned a first time by ‘Uthmān Diqna in April 1888 (Sha‘bān 1305) and again in June and early September 1888 (late D. al-Ḥijja 1305)<sup>160</sup>. He eventually arrived in Tūkar c. late September 1888 and joined ‘Uthmān Diqna at Handūb, accompanied by 150 combatants, on 19 November 1888 (16 Rabī‘ I 1306)<sup>161</sup>. It seems, however, that the new head of the treasury did not stay in Handūb but quickly returned to Tūkar, where he was on 4 December 1888 (29 Rabī‘ I 1306), in time to supervise the building of the *zarība* around the treasury as well as his own house<sup>162</sup>. Coincidentally, this is also the date of the first official decision<sup>163</sup> recorded by the treasury of Tūkar and signed by ‘Abd Allāh<sup>164</sup>. The latter’s coming may have been postponed in part because his brother, Majdhūb, was effectively heading the administration in Handūb, thus making the presence of ‘Abd Allāh less urgent<sup>165</sup>.

158 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 37.

159 NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56, document no. 3.

160 NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40, document no. 5.

161 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 115.

162 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A) and NRO Mahdiyya 5/01/05, p. 56.

163 See below for a detailed description of this file.

164 NRO Mahdiyya 5/01/02.

165 This remains hypothetical as the only letter indicating Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf’s presence in Handūb is dated of the year 1306 (1888/9), thus covering the whole period between September 1888 and August 1889. While ‘Abd Allāh was responsible for bringing troops from Kasalā to Handūb, including the *jihādiyya*, ‘Uthmān Diqna made clear in one of the several letters he wrote to his *amīn* that he should hurry to come, even if this meant by himself, as ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf had mentioned before that he could not find more than a thousand camels. Military matters were subordinate to the transfer of the administration. See NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40, document no. 7.

Despite the dominance obtained by the Mahdists over most of the recalcitrant tribes, the new regional power was not much closer in obtaining their active support and their contribution to the *jihād*, something about which ‘Uthmān Diqna complained bitterly. Of the 12 000 men which were promised to him by the diverse parties of the region, an extravagant number, he could not help but notice that many were missing. Among others, the Hadāb family of the Hadanduwa had pledged to bring 4 000 men with them, but a census conducted shortly after in late February 1888 (Jumādā II 1306) numbered only 652 over the 1 500 who had supposedly left with the expedition. Not more than two weeks later, the *‘āmil* reported that in addition to those who had disappeared on the way from Kasalā to Tūkar, 410 additional men had deserted since. He added in a letter to the Khalīfa that a similar observation could be made with regard to the other groups such as the Ḥalānqa, Ḥumrān, Sabdarāt and Shukriyya, all originating from the greater Tāka region to which they had returned in large numbers<sup>166</sup>. A month later, the situation had not improved and ‘Uthmān Diqna gauged that the whole army counted only 3 500 men<sup>167</sup>.

[transferred to chapter 5: check the connection]

Despite ‘Uthmān Diqna’s repeated complaints that he lacked the sufficient manpower to efficiently besiege Sawākin, such a concentration of combatants in a limited region and that for almost a year, from December 1887 to December 1888 (Rabī‘ I 1305-Rabī‘ II 1306), put tremendous pressure on available resources. This was compounded by the fact that no cultivation could be undertaken in Handūb and so the entire force in this position was dependent on grain grown in the Tūkar Delta<sup>168</sup>. The data is lacking to evaluate the number of individuals who were directly supported by the Mahdist administration. Desertions were rife and the groups present in the region highly unstable. However, the extended duration of this operation led the *anṣār* to request in September 1888 (Muḥarram 1306) that their families be moved to the region so that they can be reunited with them<sup>169</sup>. At the same time, ‘Uthmān Nā’ib arrived with reinforcements, bringing yet more foreign troops to Eastern Sudan<sup>170</sup>, and increasing the pressure on food resources. Those factors made the deployment of an efficient administration all the more pressing, a task undertaken by ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf from Tūkar.

Dwindling numbers of combatants and low motivation threatened Mahdist efforts to seize the Red Sea port. The swiftness of the British advance during the battle of Jummayza and the severe defeat inflicted to the besiegers definitely killed all hopes from the *anṣār* to ever overcome the

166 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 23, 26 and 31.

167 *Ibid.*, letter 37.

168 See chapter 4.

169 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 92.

170 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

defences of Sawākin. This failure and lingering suspicions about Abū Qarja's loyalty<sup>171</sup> led the Khalīfa to summon him to Umm Durmān for a second time in six months at the end of the year 1888<sup>172</sup>. The main objective of this imposed visit was to stress to the unruly *amīr* that he was under the authority of 'Uthmān Diqna and shall obey him. The content of their discussion is not known but he managed to fend off the accusations against him. He also communicated to the Khalīfa his misgivings about the location of the camp at Handūb and the sustainability of such a position. On this occasion, he probably echoed concerns expressed by some of the lower ranks of the Mahdist leadership engaged in the siege of Sawākin. Already in June 1888, during Ramaḍān (1305), five commanders, Muḥammad Aḥmad Shaykh Idrīs, Muḥammad al-Nīl, Aḥmad Badawī, al-Ḥasan Ḥāshī, and Faḍl Allāh Karār had directly written to the Khalīfa to complain about the lack of food. They went so far as to assert that they had had no other choice but to "sell their animals (*zawāmil*), their slaves (*khaddām*), the weapons for the *jihād* which were in their hands, and their captives", forcing 'Uthmān Diqna to dispel those claims as wild exaggerations. If indeed grain had been scarce, the situation had improved and distributions had been maintained. In no case could these malcontent officers have received only a quarter of grain (approximately 6 kg) for 75 days as they claimed<sup>173</sup>. Nonetheless, the *āmil* could hardly deny that desertions had been frequent, a trend which seemed to accelerate in the following months. In November 1888 (Rabī' I 1306), this had already prompted the Khalīfa to enjoin his agent in Eastern Sudan, regarding the *anṣār*, "to treat their elder as a father, their young people as sons, their equals [in age] as brothers, to bring them to God with wisdom, good preaching (*al-maw'iza al-ḥasana*), and charity to their family (*ishra*) and exhort them to join forces (*taḥazzub*) and be diligent (*ijtihād*) in the matter, and [strive for] agreement among themselves<sup>174</sup>."

Abū Qarja's stake in defending a policy of withdrawal from Handūb can only be guessed. He may have realised before the rest of the Mahdist leadership, and quite particularly 'Uthmān

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171 In this regard, Wingate noted that Abū Qarja was not a "staunch upholder of the tenets of his late master Mohammed Ahmed; and this latter fact probably gave rise to the idea that he intended to submit to the Egyptian government." However, in this particular occasion, these suspicions were not fully unsupported since the authorities in Sawākin initiated a correspondence with Abū Qarja. However, the Mahdist leader never committed to anything (Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan: Being an Account of the Rise And Progress of Mahdiism, and of subsequent events in the Sudan to the present time*, London, Macmillan and co., 1891, p. 453–454). He was once again accused of treasonous communications with the enemy, this time with the Italians, after he was appointed in Kasalā in early 1891. This probably led to his downfall and exile in Equatoria (Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – 'Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 141). For a short biography of Abū Qarja, see Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, "Al-amīr Muḥammad 'Uthmān Abū Qarja," *op. cit.*

172 Abū Qarja and other *umarā'*, namely Ḥamad al-Nīl Ḥāmid and Aḥmad Badawī, were summoned by the Khalīfa on 15 June 1888 (6 Shawwāl 1305) and left on 6 July. They had all arrived in Umm Durmān before 31 July. See the index of the *Daftar 'Uthmān Diqna* and Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 62. See also *Ibid.*, letter 145.

173 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 63.

174 *Ibid.*, letters 119 and 120.

Diqna, that besieging Sawākin was a vain endeavour. Whatever the real dependency of the city to the hinterland, it could always import supplies from elsewhere. It was probably clear to him that the strategy which had worked in Sinkāt, Tūkar and Kasalā could not be reproduced. However, other considerations may have played a role in his defence of a withdrawal to Tūkar. Abū Qarja actively tried to position himself as the representative of the interests of the non-native groups of *anṣār* and the low-level officers who oversaw them<sup>175</sup>. The transfer of the main camp from Handūb to Tūkar would have allowed him to heed their main complaint, namely the lack of available food, and at the same time gain the upper hand vis-à-vis ‘Uthmān Diqna. Indeed, the Khalīfa had granted the latter authority over military matters, while Abū Qarja was to be responsible for local affairs. The abandonment of the siege and of the wider policy of active confrontation with the garrison of the Red Sea port could help to strengthen Abū Qarja’s position. The settling of the main camp in Tūkar would constitute an opportunity for him to gain greater control over the treasury and place himself at the centre of Mahdist authority, especially since a withdrawal from Handūb would be construed as the failure of ‘Uthmān Diqna’s strategy.

For all these reasons, Abū Qarja recommended to leave their current position and settle the troops in Tūkar. He himself left Umm Durmān around 21 December 1881 (16 Rabī‘ II 1306)<sup>176</sup>, unaware that his argument was about to gain much more traction in the wake of the massive setback suffered by the Mahdist forces at the battle of al-Jummayza the day before, on 20 December. The Khalīfa recognised the validity of Abū Qarja’s claims and must have realised that Sawākin would probably not be captured in the foreseeable future. On 10 January 1889 (7 Jumādā I 1306), in a letter to ‘Uthmān Diqna, he recognised that their efforts to cut the Red Sea port from its access to the supplies of the hinterland were doomed to fail as they could always obtain more “by way of the sea”. Having heard of the dire conditions imposed on the *anṣār* in Handūb, he ordered ‘Uthmān Diqna to “transfer the camp to Tūkar or an area in which you consider that [there will be] subsistence (*ma’āyish*) for the welfare of the *anṣār* and pastures for their livestock and horses”, leaving the *‘āmil* make the final decision as “the one present (*al-shāhid*) sees what the absent does not<sup>177</sup>”. Sign that this was considered an important question, the Khalīfa wrote three times in a short period of time to convey his order to ‘Uthmān Diqna<sup>178</sup>. He also asked that the families of the *anṣār*

175 Abū Qarja’s general concern for the welfare of the *anṣār* is difficult to substantiate. However, in August 1889 (D. al-Ḥijja 1306) he did instruct ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr to keep the earnings of the sale of the goods he had deposited at the treasury, after having levied the *ushr* on them, so as to pay the army. See *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 50.

176 Salah al-Tijānī Ḥammūdī stated wrongly that Abū Qarja had left on 21 December 1881 from Tūkar to report on the losses incurred by the Mahdists at the battle of al-Jummayza. The date given both in the *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna* and the *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna* show that this was indeed the date at which he had left Umm Durmān.

177 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 111–112.

178 Indeed, according to the index of the *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, three letters were sent to convey the Khalīfa’s

be displaced, as well as “the disabled (*‘awāthil*), the elderly (*‘awājiz*) and the departed (*marwāḥil*)”. On 2 February (30 Jumādā I 1306), the Mahdist *‘āmil* wrote to his *amīn* in Tūkar, ‘Abd Allāh, to be prepared for the coming of the combatants from Handūb<sup>179</sup>.

The camp was actually moved a month later, on 11 February 1889 (9 Jumādā II 1306). As ‘Uthmān Diqna left Handūb, he burned the huts which had been built. In the course of the previous year, the position had grown in size and, according to Wingate, there were around 2 000 of those fragile houses, homes to up to 12 000 people<sup>180</sup>. Moving all of them was no easy matter. Camels had to be rented from the local communities against the promise that the treasury would ultimately pay them. The families had to be transferred with the wounded and the sick, but “they could not find a sufficient number of camels<sup>181</sup> to transport all the luggage of the *ansār*, such as their mats, their pots, their food and their water (*mashrab*). So ‘Uthmān gathered them in one place and burned everything [in front of the people].” Ḥamad Muḥammad Khayr, a *mujāhid* and the author of these words, had barely arrived in Tūkar that the owners of the camels asked for their dues. Himself destitute, he turned to the *‘āmil* and the treasury which both failed to give him anything. In last resort, he petitioned the Khalīfa in April 1889 (Sha‘bān 1306) with his testimony of this harrowing displacement to ask for his debts to be reimbursed<sup>182</sup>.

Even as this relocation became one of the many expressions of the enduring rivalry between ‘Uthmān Diqna and Abū Qarja, Tūkar was a crucial position on the Sudanese Red Sea Littoral and had been considered as such since the very early days of the Mahdist movement in the region. Its importance was already raised in the *Waqā’i’* whose author noted that “[Tūkar] is of greater significance for the Turks than Awkāk, because this a place of cultivation<sup>183</sup>.” Afāfit, in the immediate vicinity of Tūkar, was the site chosen for the Mahdist new headquarter. In 1885 (1302) already, the British journalist Steven Burleigh who had accompanied Graham’s second campaign, noted that most of the Mahdist combatants who had fought at the battles of the Coast (at al-Tayb) came from that area. Indeed, “in every hut [they] found traces of loot taken from Baker Pasha’s

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decision to ‘Uthmān Diqna. The first letter was copied in one of the missing sections of the *Daftar*. Its date is not known. This is also the case for the beginning of the second one but most of the end of the letter detailing the order to transfer the camp has been preserved, alongside its date of writing. A third letter was sent on 19 January 1889 (16 Jumādā I 1306). The texts of the second and third letters are almost identical. See *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, p. 202-203.

179 NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/62B, document no. 33.

180 Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 450.

181 Numbers quickly reached surprising levels. No less than 300 camels were asked by ‘Uthmān Diqna to the head of treasury in Tūkar on 28 February 1889 (13 Sha‘bān 1306) for the transfer of “the whole of Ahmed Mohammed Kheir [Khayr]”, Abū Qarja’s *wakīl* (*Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 31). The lack of transport animals and the local communities’ reluctance to part with their capital had severe consequences on the shipment of grain. See chapter 4.

182 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 6 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 9.

183 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

force<sup>184</sup>.

From 1885 to 1887 (1302-1304), as the attention of the *‘āmil* of the East was turned toward Kasalā and then asserting his authority in the hinterland near Sawākin, Tūkar remained marginal. At some point in the first half of 1887 (1304), Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh Fanā left the capital of Tāka with a thousand men and set up camp in Tūkar. In October of the same year, the position had stabilised and money and grain from Umm Durmān were brought there to be distributed among the *anṣār*<sup>185</sup>. Threatened during the winter 1887-1888, as local opposition to the Mahdist movement had reached its apex, Tūkar was spared from a direct assault, once contemplated, as Maḥmūd ‘Alī’s coalition dwindled<sup>186</sup>. Therefore, when Abū Qarja decided to settle in Tūkar in early March 1888 (Rajab 1305), several hundreds men and their families had occupied this position for a year already. The larger withdrawal imposed to ‘Uthmān Diqna the following year further consolidated Mahdist presence in this spot. With the stabilisation of its headquarters, the provincialisation of Eastern Sudan could start in earnest. The formation of a treasury was crucial in this process.

### ***C) The Treasury of Tūkar and its Branches***

#### *i) The Departments and Administrators of the Tūkar Treasury*

The treasury in Tūkar was formed in several stages. The first available documents—part of the many orders and receipts that were preserved—were issued in October 1888 (Ṣafar 1306), shortly after ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf had arrived in the area. Most of them were destined to Muḥammad Yūsuf—the uncle of ‘Abd Allāh and al-Majdhūb<sup>187</sup> and the *amīn* of the *‘ushr*—and signed by ‘Abd al-Qādir Ḥusayn and Muḥammad al-Amīn ‘Ammār, two *nuwwāb* of the *sharī‘a* attached to the treasury and whose main function was to serve as professional witnesses, the reason for their signature’s ubiquity. These individuals constituted the core of the institution. As the *‘ushr* was essentially collected in kind, and represented, by far, the main source of income for the administration in Eastern Sudan, its *amīn* had control over stored goods and so occupied a pivotal position. While the site was already occupied and could boast its own treasury as early as November 1887 (Rabī‘ I 1305), then under Maḥmūd Nūrī Barakiyya<sup>188</sup>, plans were made early on to transform it so as to accommodate larger bodies—despite the intended concentration of Mahdist forces in Handūb. As a result, at first, one of the main items distributed by the treasury were palm

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184 Bennet BURLEIGH, *Desert Warfare*, *op. cit.*, p. 81–85. See also Nawāl ‘Abd al-‘Azīz MAHDĪ RĀDĪ, *Afāfī fī tārikh al-Sūdān al-ḥadīth*, Cairo, al-Maṭba‘a al-tijāriyya al-ḥadītha, 1985, p. 6–9.

185 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 4 and 12.

186 See chapter 2.

187 NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/62A, document no. 24.

188 NRO Mahdiyya 5/17/58B, document no. 1.

leaves mats (*bursh* pl. *burūsh khūṣ*) used for the construction of huts<sup>189</sup>. Unsurprisingly, the second department to be set up was also related to tax collection, particularly the *zakawāt* (sing. *zakāt*). First mentioned in late December 1888 (mid-Rabīʿ II 1306), it was headed by Ḥasan Mūsā<sup>190</sup>.

However, its organisation was fragmentary, the share of functions that were to be realised in Tūkar and not in Handūb still undefined, and the departments were formed only in view of managing an emerging fiscal system. This all changed in the wake of the defeat inflicted by British forces to the Mahdists entrenched before the walls of Sawākin in late December 1888. The decision to withdraw most of the *anṣār* to the Baraka Delta prompted a restructuring of the treasury, all of the sudden entrusted with much greater responsibilities. This is the time when a consistent archival trace could be exhumed for most of its departments. Beside servicing in-kind tax collections and distributions, a true accounting department (*muḥāsaba*) was established in January 1889 (Jumādā I 1306) and Muṣṭafā Muḥammad al-Jilānī appointed as its first *kātib*. Cash revenues and expenses were dealt with by another department (*qalam al-naqdiyya* or *ṣundūq al-naqdiyya*) which was founded around the same period and placed under the supervision of al-Bashīr Aḥmad Ḥusayn, previously responsible for goods' distributions, including the mats referred to above<sup>191</sup>. Other departments were founded to handle specific domains in the following months, including a department dedicated to cattle (*qalam al-mawāshī*), to sales (*qalam al-mabyūʿāt*), in relation with Tūkar's market, and to slave trading (*qalam al-raqīq*)<sup>192</sup>. The granary (*shūna*) was founded even later, around May 1889 (Shawwāl 1306). Finally, some crucial activities were organised and supported through the treasury. A tailor (*awsṭam* or *qundughlī*) named Ḥasan made *jibab* (sing. *jibba*<sup>193</sup>) and trousers for the combatants, and, as seen in the introduction, the treasury could also request the assistance of its own carpenter, Yūsuf Khaṭīb, and his assistant, ʿAlī w. Badawī<sup>194</sup>.

Bearing in mind the lacunary nature of the available documentation, the situation was quite confused for the first few months and the prerogatives of the different administrators overlapped

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189 NRO Mahdiyya 5/14/50, documents no. 1-4. This is more clearly stated in a later document from July 1889 (D. al-Qaʿda 1306): “The brother Ādam ʿAbd Allāh from our group did not have a domicile for his spouse (*ḥarīma*) and his hands are empty from money to buy what he needs for the building, so it was necessary to write to your Excellence with the hope that you will give to the mentioned six palm leaves mats” (NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40).

190 NRO 5/15/52, document no. 1.

191 NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/64, documents no. 3-4; and Mahdiyya 5/18/64, documents no. 12-17.

192 The first mention of the *amīn* of the livestock dates from January 1889 (Jumādā I 1306) (NRO Mahdiyya 5/17/58A, doc. 3). For examples of transactions recorded by the department of sales, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/15/51B doc. 1-20. In May 1889 (Ramaḍān 1306), materials were given by the treasury for the building of a *rākūba* (a small shed) for the slaves (NRO Mahdiyya 5/14/50 document 63). While matters related to slave ownership occupied an important place in the dealings of the Tūkar treasury (see for example NRO Mahdiyya 5/15/51A, document 7), no traces of purchases or sales could be found prior to this date.

193 The *jibba* was the long garment worn by the *anṣār*. The patches of fabric, also present on the version worn by Sufi holymen in Nilotic Sudan, symbolised their entire dedication to religion and their abandonment of the material world.

194 NRO Mahdiyya 5/03/11.

until the departments responsible for tax collections, the *'ushr* and the *zakāt*, were officially separated from the offices managing their yields. The family of 'Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf trusted the nodal positions of this new organisation. His brother Majdhūb took over the granary from Ḥasan Ibrāhīm [Abū] Barnūs, while his uncle, Muḥammad Yūsuf, remained responsible for the *'ushr*, and was appointed as 'Abd Allāh's when the latter was absent<sup>195</sup>. For obvious reasons, the *umanā'* had to be literate and versed in accounting practices. There was no standardised process for the recruitment of administrative personnel. As shown by Yūsuf Mikhā'il's testimony, Egyptian Copts were recruited and integrated in the Mahdist administration, as was the case for his relative, Jurjyūs (George), subsequently renamed Ismā'īl, who was hired by the head of banner in need of an accountant. Clearly, the former administrator of the Turkiyya followed the highest bidder, in this case the one able to provide him with enough camels to transport all his family<sup>196</sup>. There were few reasons for them to seek a position in Eastern Sudan, even if the example of Yūsuf Khaṭīb shows that the vagaries of life could lead to unexpected outcomes. While the matter was not raised in the correspondence, finding suitable candidates must have proved difficult and some positions were never filled. In line with Mahdist practices, salaries were somewhat modest. 'Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf, the head *amīn*, received a monthly stipend of 40 r., his direct subordinates, the heads of the departments, 10 r., and lower positions between 2 and 3 *riyāl*. They also received some grain, like the combatants, but the fact that their wage was paid in cash set them apart. Without being extravagant, these sums were not negligible. In normal times, when the *ardabb* of grain cost around 5 r., even the lower echelons could buy their rations with their salary, however, as it reached more than 15 r. in average in the following two years<sup>197</sup>, the value of these wages decreased sharply. In June 1889 (Shawwāl 1306), when grain reserves were at the lowest, the servants of the treasury complained bitterly about the situation and requested the arrears on their salaries, now crucial due to the overall lack of grain<sup>198</sup>. The first laying out of all treasury positions happened shortly after, not so much as part of the gradual bureaucratisation of Mahdist power in Eastern Sudan, but in response to the food crisis of 1888-1890 (1306/7).

The lower echelons were not always satisfied with their salary, especially in these trying times. Ibrāhīm Naṣr who worked at the granary complained that he was paid 3 r. only. He remarked that "we have nothing else, except for God's reward", however, his resentment was prompted by the treatment he and his colleagues received from some *maqādim* who showed distaste (*nafar*) toward

195 For examples, NRO Mahdiyya 5/17/58A, document 17; Mahdiyya 5/09/40C, documents 40 and 47; and Mahdiyya 5/17/57, documents 90-100.

196 Salih Mohammed NUR, *A Critical Edition of the Memoirs of Yūsuf Mikhā'il*, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

197 This number is based on calculations derived from the daily accounts in kind and those of the granary of the Tūkar treasury. See chapter 4.

198 NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56C, document no. 15.



them and did not hesitate to go over their head to address directly their request to their *amīn*<sup>199</sup>. Still, the authorities, recognizing the value of their work, made a particular effort and managed to pay more than two thirds of their salaries during the five last months of 1306 (April-August 1889). The men must have found other advantages since the majority of them kept their position throughout 1889 to 1891 (1306-1308). In the complete absence of details on these individuals, names tend to indicate that some of them belonged to the local Bijāwī elite. For example, it is almost certain that the head of the accounting department, Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Jilānī was part of a major Artayqa family. To some extent, this was also true of subaltern positions. In June 1889 (Shawwāl 1306), the department dedicated to the *‘ushr* was responsible for storing goods and consequently employed six attendants (*muḥāfiz*) under a *muqaddam*, including two whose *nisba* is related to the Malhītkināb and who probably followed ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf when he was transferred from Kasalā to Tūkar. They may have held similar positions for traders established in Tāka. In the granary, six corn measurers (*kayyāl* sing. *kāyil*) ensured the daily tasks of weighing the grain deposited and distributed to the combatants. As for the *zakāt* department, four assistants (*musā’id*) worked alongside their *amīn*, Ḥasan Mūsā. All in all, thirty-five men worked for the treasury in 1889 (1306/7)<sup>200</sup>. Contrary to what may have been assumed, the small group they formed was not formerly disconnected from its surrounding communities. Traders such as Aḥmad ‘Antar or Sāliḥ al-Khamīsī occupied a liminal position, both working for and with the treasury<sup>201</sup>.

The banners also had their own administrative personnel. Their daily work has left few if any traces. No ledgers could be found that would indicate that they produced their own accounts. Responsible for the correspondence of their *amīr*, their main administrative mission was to assist him in his relations with the treasury. Their appointment was communicated to the latter since they were paid by the treasury itself<sup>202</sup>. This was the case for Muḥammad ‘Umar ‘Abbūdī who was chosen to realise the secretarial work of the banner of Abū Qarja in September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307). On this occasion, Abū Qarja asked that he receive the same stipend as the ones who work in Adūbana<sup>203</sup>.

Indeed, the move to Tūkar did not mean that all other sites were abandoned. Activities in Handūb were suspended for a time, before being resumed in 1890 (1307), among other reasons because it was still crucially positioned on the Barbar-Sawākin road and thus controlled trade circulations with the Nile Valley. Records are at best patchy, but in June 1890 (D. al-Qa‘da 1307),

199 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 63.

200 NRO Mahdiyya 5/03/11.

201 See chapter 4.

202 For the salaries of the *umarā’* and their *kuttāb* in the second half of 1306, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/04/17.

203 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, documents no. 29 and 33 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letters 19 and 27.

the treasury of Handūb sent a summary of its activities to Tūkar<sup>204</sup>. To a lesser degree, the same was true for Tamāy<sup>205</sup>. However, access to the sea was primordial to the Mahdist authorities who focused their attention on the inlet of Adūbana, around fifty kilometres from Tūkar. A reduced but permanent administration was set up as early as March 1889 (Rajab 1306) under Aḥmad Muḥammad Maḥmūd with several assistants. Representatives of the *shari‘a* were also stationed there to serve as relays with the treasury of Tūkar and control the legality of local operations<sup>206</sup>. Shortly after, in July 1889 (D. al-Qa‘da 1306), twenty-six men from the banner of Ḥamad al-Nīl Ḥāmid were dispatched to settle at Umm Kubbān and secure the road between the port and the Mahdist headquarters in Eastern Sudan<sup>207</sup>. For a year, this was the main point of contact with the resources of the outer world. The thawing of the relations with Sawākin and the revival of trade circulations in 1890 (1307) prompted the reinvestment of former positions closer to the Red Sea port, Handūb in the north, and Trinkitāt on the littoral. This latter site was not as important as Handūb, but three *umanā’* were nonetheless present there in January 1890 (Jumādā II 1307): al-Makkī Muḥammad al-Makkī who represented the treasury, Muṣṭafā b. al-Ḥājj ‘Alī the delegates of the Khalīfa and Faḍl al-Ḥājj ‘Alī for Abū Qarja<sup>208</sup>. All these branches were directly, albeit imperfectly supervised by the administration of the treasury. Some of their accounts were preserved but the limited periods they cover would indicate that records were not kept with the same attention as in Tūkar<sup>209</sup>.

Besides its economic functions related to the overall management of a large body of men and women, the treasury was also responsible for hosting and providing for Mahdist officials, may they be from the postal service (*hajjāna*), only staying temporarily in Tūkar, or delegates dispatched by the Maḥdī. In the first case, it appears that they were accommodated in the treasury itself<sup>210</sup>. As showed by the text that introduced this chapter, this activity was burdensome in its own right and seemingly highly resented by the administrators. One of the reasons for this is expounded in the rest of the letter. The treasury was the central node of Mahdist power and was engaged with the entirety

204 NRO Mahdiyya 5/20/68, document no. 15.

205 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

206 NRO Mahdiyya 5/13/48, document no. 20), 5/19/63, documents no. 93; 99 and 109.

207 *Report on the Dervish Rule* Appendix VI (A), letter 47. See also NRO Mahdiyya 5/14/49, document no. 100; Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 29; and Mahdiyya 5/15/51D, documents no. 4 and 6.

208 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 3 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letters 110-112.

209 No extant accounts from Handūb, Adūbana or Trinkitāt seems to have survived, though receipts and summaries can be found in a number of locations. Among other examples, accounts related to *‘ushr* levies in Adūbana can be seen in NRO Mahdiyya 5/20/67A. Expenses and revenues for early 1307 (late 1888) are stated in Mahdiyya 5/20/68, documents 11 and 12. The same box contains a few documents related to Handūb in documents 14 and 15. As for Trinkitāt, the expenses incurred in Rabī‘ I 1308 (October 1890) can be found in NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40C.

210 For example, one small party came from Barbar in *c.* June 1887 (Ramaḍān/Shawwāl 1304), as ‘Uthmān Diqna wished to investigate an incident which had taken place on the road, he met them “in the treasury”. See Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 5.

of the millenarian communities. Supplying the troops was at the core of its mission, but it also concentrated a wide array of activities as the institution that warranted the legality of all operations. Due to the lack of liquidities, it managed deposits and credits. At the death of an *anṣār*, his assets could be entrusted to the treasury until they were reclaimed by a relative. This was the basis for Yūsuf Muḥammad al-Burnawī's claim, presented in September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307), to recover the 12 *riyāl* previously owned by his late brother, Muṣṭafā<sup>211</sup>. Debts incurred in the payment of services, including the renting of camels (as was the case for the transfer of the camp from Handūb to Tūkar) or the purchase of equipment could be brought to the administrators in Tūkar who would then evaluate their relevance, as well as their ability to reimburse them<sup>212</sup>.

Of course, this attention geared toward ensuring the validity and traceability of the treasury's operations was best expressed in the obsessive bookkeeping practices displayed in their recording.

#### *ii) Bookkeeping at the Tūkar Treasury*

Abū Salīm claimed that by 1888 (1305/6) the accounting system used by Mahdist administrations had stabilised, a result of the actions of Ibrāhīm 'Adlān, the second *amīn* of the central treasury from 1886 to 1888 (1303-1307). This remark is clearly related to the large amount of documents from the Tūkar treasury, however, there is a risk that availability has been mistaken for stability<sup>213</sup>.

Otherwise, Abū Shūk and Bjørkelo's comments regarding bookkeeping practices in the central treasury are also valid for the provincial treasury in Tūkar, with some notable exceptions. Most records were structured by daily operations of credits and debits. Some of them ended with a monthly summary. No annual or semi-annual accounts were produced, in line with the absence of a proper budget. This followed common pre-*Tanzimāt* Ottoman practices, not the modern techniques introduced by Mehmed Ali in Egyptian administration in 1839, including the determination of expected revenues and expenses<sup>214</sup>. While the relation between bookkeeping during the Turkiyya and that during the Mahdiyya shall remain obscure, as no records of the former were kept, either

211 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 60.

212 For one of many examples, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/17/58A, document no. 1.

213 Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK and Anders J. BJØRKELO (ed.), *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897*, *op. cit.*, p. xiii. Unfortunately, the 1989 edition of Abū Salīm's *Al-ḥaraka al-fikriyya fī al-Mahdiyya* could not be consulted and so the reference could not be checked. Most of the remarks below are based on the introduction of Abū Shūk and Bjørkelo's edited volume.

214 Schematically, the former accounting method, the *merdiban* ("staircase" or "ladder" in Ottoman Turkish), was abandoned first in Egypt and then in the rest of the Ottoman Empire in the late 1870s as the state accounting system to be replaced by the double-entry bookkeeping method, dominant in Europe. See Murat BIRDAL, *The Political Economy of Ottoman Public Debt: Insolvency and European Financial Control in the Late Nineteenth Century*, London and New York, Tauris Academic Studies, 2010, p. 8–9; 39 ; Batuhan GÜVEMLI, "The Role of Accounting in the Industrialization Efforts of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th Century," *De Computis*, 2017, vol. 27, p. 74–100.

destroyed by the *anṣār* when they stormed Khartoum, or deliberately burned by Gordon in a symbolic gesture meant to emphasise that the extractive policies of the former regime were over, the most modern aspects of Egyptian accountancy were not adopted by the Mahdist administration. This is true at the macro and micro levels. Indeed, fractions (*kusūr*) were noted as symbols<sup>215</sup>, following the *siyāqa* method of bookkeeping upheld in most of the Ottoman Empire, including Egypt, from whence it was introduced in Nilotic Sudan during the Turkiyya. Beyond symbols for fractions, words such as months or repeated expressions were recorded in shorthand versions and sometimes reduced to a single letter. Modernisation efforts across the empire led to its abandon in the 1880s (1297-1307) in the Ottoman empire. In Egypt, this process had begun in the 1820s (1235-1245) but was not completed half a century later, in 1878 (1295), when an ordinance was promulgated to request that areas in *faddān* be expressed in *qīrāṭ*. In 1886 (1303/4), another one was enacted ordering the fractions to be written plainly and banning the old symbols<sup>216</sup>. In Egyptian Sudan, these measures had yet to be fully adopted when the Mahdist regime was founded and so they were still used in accounting records. For unknown reasons, while five signs only were used in the books of the central treasury, the whole array (fifteen symbols) can be found in those from the provincial treasury of Tūkar<sup>217</sup>. Despite the manifest relations between Egypto-Ottoman methods of accounting and the ones followed by the Mahdist administration, the latter also betrayed the influence of bookkeeping practices employed by traders in the Greater Nile Valley and the Red Sea<sup>218</sup>. In the end, the system adopted was syncretic. The limited impact of the Egyptian drive toward accounting reforms in Nilotic Sudan is revealed by the persistence of discarded practices. In Eastern Sudan, the Tūkar treasury was run by an eclectic assortment of local Sufi figures, traders and former administrators of the Turkiyya who established an accounting system that was both original and rooted in a shared administrative culture.

The variety of documents and formats defies generalisation. Yet, a few remarks on the

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215 According to the British diplomat and Minister of Education in Egypt, Edward T. Roger (1831-1884), “it is difficult to understand why they have adopted these conventional and arbitrary signs, unless it be, either that they are the remnant of some very ancient system, or else that the accountants have invented them in order to mystify the uninitiated, and thus to keep their business or profession in their own hands.” (“Dialects of Colloquial Arabic,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1879, vol. 11, no. 3, p. 379). This last interpretation has since been abandoned and the use of symbols henceforth understood as a measure against falsification (Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK and Anders J. BJØRKELO (ed.), *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan*, 1897, *op. cit.*, p. xxv).

216 Yacoub ARTIN, “Signes employés dans la comptabilité copte en Égypte pour la transcription des fractions,” *Bulletin de l’Institut d’Égypte*, 1890, vol. 2, no. 10, p. 291–292.

217 See Appendix 5.

218 While traders’ accounts contemporary to the Mahdiyya could not be located, the museum of Sawākin founded by Muḥammad Nūr Hadāb and dedicated to the history of the region displays commercial accounts for the year 1325 (1907/1908) donated by Hāshim Bābikir Aḥmad. They present close similarities with Mahdist accounts. To a lesser degree, this also true of the later accounts of the trading house ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Yūsuf Bā Nāja in Jidda for 1366 (1946) as featured in Philippe Pétriat’s Ph.D. dissertation (*Les grandes familles marchandes hadramies de Djedda, 1850-1950*, *op. cit.*, p. 454–460).

overall structure of Mahdist accounting in Eastern Sudan can still be suggested. In almost all cases, calculations were presented by columns, from the least detailed to the right to the most detailed to the left<sup>219</sup>. Temporal divisions were common and the first three columns often served to calculate the outcome for a distinct year, month and finally day, while the remaining columns presented details for each operation. But some of the accounts were organised by type of operation such as purchase, loan, taxation, etc. All in all, if these two sets of orders were complementary, the absence of proper monthly and yearly budgets meant that the overall structure of administrative recording was determined by the nature of each operation as it reflected the internal division of the treasury into several departments. Besides, most of provincial accounting ledgers were organised on a double page presenting credits on the right and debits on the left. These last terms were chosen, despite their vagueness, to reflect the fact that, as for accounts produced by the central treasury, Mahdist administrations did not clearly distinguish between revenues (*irādāt* sing. *irāda*) and assets (*uṣūl* sing. *aṣl*), as well as between expenses (*maṣrūfāt* sing. *maṣrūfa*) and liabilities (*khuṣūm* sing. *khaṣm*)<sup>220</sup>.

These characteristics were shared by the majority of the accounts produced by the Tūkar treasury. Among these, several types of accounts can be distinguished (see fig. 3.3). The most important set was, arguably, the one dedicated to recording the different commodities deposited and withdrawn from the treasury's stores. Besides a wide array of trading goods—over a hundred—, other commodities such as slaves and livestock were also entered in these records. Grain collected from the harvests of nearby fields and through taxation on commerce was not brought to the treasury itself but to the granary where all movements were recorded daily on a separate ledger (see below), before being added to the folder where all other commodities were counted. Three other categories dealt with more trivial matters. A small section recorded the inputs and outputs of the tailoring workshop, another one the items found and previously not present in the inventory (*mawjūdāt*) and finally, one was dedicated solely to shrouds.

Contrary to this first ensemble, the second set of records was organised according to the type of operation and not by type of good. Furthermore, it did not differentiate between incomes in kind or in cash. Some of these files are missing but the remaining ones present the proceeds of 'ushr taxation. Loans (*maṭlūbāt* sing. *maṭlūba*) represented another central part of Mahdist provincial economy. The files for other sources of income like *zakawāt* (sing. *zakāt*) and booty (*ghanīma*) could not be located. This is also the case for more minor revenues such as sales—essentially of goods collected from the merchants through the 'ushr and livestock seized as loot—and surpluses

219 See appendix [?] for an example of this structure.

220 Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK and Anders J. BJØRKELO (ed.), *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897*, *op. cit.*, p. xxii–xxiii.

Type	Section	Organisation	Structure	Units	Files
Daily transfer accounts	daily monetary accounts <i>ḥisābāt yawmiyya bi-l-naqdiyya</i>	chronological (month, day)	debits / credits	<i>riyāl</i>	5
	daily in-kind accounts <i>ḥisābāt yawmiyya bi-l-ṣanf</i>	chronological (month, day)	debits / credits	unit (‘ <i>adad</i> ), <i>qinṭār</i> , <i>ṭāqa</i> , <i>ardabb</i>	5
	daily accounts of the granary <i>ḥisābāt yawmiyyat al-ghilāl / al-shūna</i>	chronological (month, day)	debits / credits	<i>ardabb</i> , bag ( <i>kīs</i> )	3
Commodities accounts	operations on goods and articles <i>ḥāṣil al-baḍā’i’ wa al-aṣnāf</i>	thematic (goods)	debits / credits	unit (‘ <i>adad</i> ), <i>ṭāqa</i> , <i>qinṭār</i> , <i>ardabb</i>	3
Operations accounts	goods attached to merchants <i>badā’i’ muta’allaqa al-tujjār</i> operations on the ‘ <i>ushr</i> <i>ḥāṣil al-’ushr</i>	thematic (individuals) chronological (month)	debits / credits	<i>riyāl</i> , unit (‘ <i>adad</i> ), <i>ṭāqa</i> , <i>qinṭār</i> , <i>ardabb</i>	2
	operations on loans <i>ḥāṣil al-maṭlūbāt</i>	thematic (individuals)	debits / credits	<i>riyāl</i>	3
	operations on commissions <i>ḥāṣil al-’uhad</i>	thematic (individuals)	debits / credits	<i>riyāl</i>	1
Expenses accounts	expenses of the banners and the treasury <i>maṣrūfāt al-rāyāt wa bayt al-māl</i>	thematic (banners / dept.)	debits	<i>riyāl</i> , unit (‘ <i>adad</i> )	8
	salaries and pays <i>murattabāt wa māhiyyāt</i>	thematic (ind. / dept.)	debits	<i>riyāl</i> , <i>ardabb</i>	4
Circumstantial accounts	collect in the provinces of Kasalā and al-Qaḍārif <i>al-taḥaṣṣūl min mudiriyyāt Kasalā wa al-Qaḍārif</i>	chronological (month, day)	debits / credits	<i>riyāl</i> , unit (‘ <i>adad</i> )	2

Fig. 3.3 : Typology of accounts of the Tūkar treasury

Sources: NRO Mahdiyya 5/01-08/01-39.

(*fuyūdāt* sing. *fuyūd*), a category to which were attached, for example, goods found on board of a stranded ship in January 1889 (Jumādā I 1306)<sup>221</sup>.

Mirroring the accounts described above and mostly dedicated to sources of credits, another group of accounts dealt primarily with debits. The different expenses incurred by the Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan, e.g. for the greater part distributions to the banners and the payment of salaries and wages (*murattabāt* sing. *murattab* and *māhiyyāt* sing. *māhiyya*), were recorded separately. Commissions (‘*uhad* sing. ‘*uhda*) could be entrusted to individuals. In most cases, this meant that they were given a sum of money to buy specific goods, often grain, from one of the harbours of the Red Sea littoral.

These three groups, the inventory of the treasury, records of the sources of income and their equivalent for expenditure, were articulated together through two sets of records. These were not only accounting instruments but revealed the inner dynamics that shaped the administrative

<sup>221</sup> NRO Mahdiyya 5/01/04B.

practices of the Tūkar treasury. Indeed, each new entry required its symmetrical and so involved another department, thus ensuring that each movement was approved by two different *umanā*. Each new credit or debit was first recorded in the pertinent file and then in the records of daily operations. This happened whether a particular movement involved a conversion from or to a monetary value. The scriptural method employed is counter-intuitive. In these ledgers, movements were recorded by referring to the account on which an amount of money or quantity of goods was first entered as a positive and then transferred to its mirror account as a negative.

For example, on Sunday 17 March 1889 (14 Rajab 1306), several individuals who had been entrusted with collecting grain from the neighbouring fields of the Baraka Delta returned from their mission and deposited the product of their levies at the granary. On this day, Aḥmad Yasin came with 19 ard. 9,5 qard. (around 2,8 t.) of *dhura* gathered from seven different groups, but most of it from the Sawākiniyya (2,1 t). When he arrived, the quantities and origins were recorded, as well as the reference to the initial authorisation, the mention of the *amīr* Shā'ib Aḥmad's knowledge of the operation as Aḥmad Yasin's superior, and finally, the fact that the area from which this grain had been gathered was at least nominally under the authority of a man named Shamma al-ḥājj Qurayshī<sup>222</sup>. Other less crucial commodities were not recorded daily in a specific ledger, as was the case for grain, but directly into a more encompassing document that kept track of all goods entering and leaving the stores of the treasury, including the granary. This is where the *dhura* brought back by Aḥmad Yasin was then logged<sup>223</sup>. Unfortunately, as often for Tūkar's administrative archives, the first page is missing and so this exact operation cannot be followed through. However, the same template was used for later parts of the same document<sup>224</sup>. In each case, an administrator had recorded the name of the persons responsible for collecting the grain previously delivered to the granary, the reference of the order that constituted the legal basis for this levy and, finally, the page and number of the operation as recorded in the daily account of the granary. Simultaneously or shortly after, yet another record was made of this grain deposit. On 18 March (15 Rajab), an administrator of the Tūkar treasury wrote down the details of this operation. It also referred to the file summing up daily operations in the granary but contrary to the overall inventory, the sources of this collection were included. Indeed, this third stage was meant to connect this information to other sets of accounts. All operations for a given day were summarised as a transfer from one account to

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222 NRO Mahdiyya 5/03/12, p. 1.

223 NRO Mahdiyya 5/04/16.

224 In the main inventory (see the appendix [?] for references), each item was recorded on a double page, presenting—as usual—credits on the right and debits on the left. Every time a new kind of commodity was brought, another section was created, meaning that the most common commodities can be found in the first pages of the file. By the time a page, either for credits or debits, had been filled, thus necessitating a new double page to be used, a whole array of commodities had already been presented. This explains why, in the case of the file NRO Mahdiyya 5/04/16, operations related to *dhura* are introduced on the first double page and then again eighty pages later.

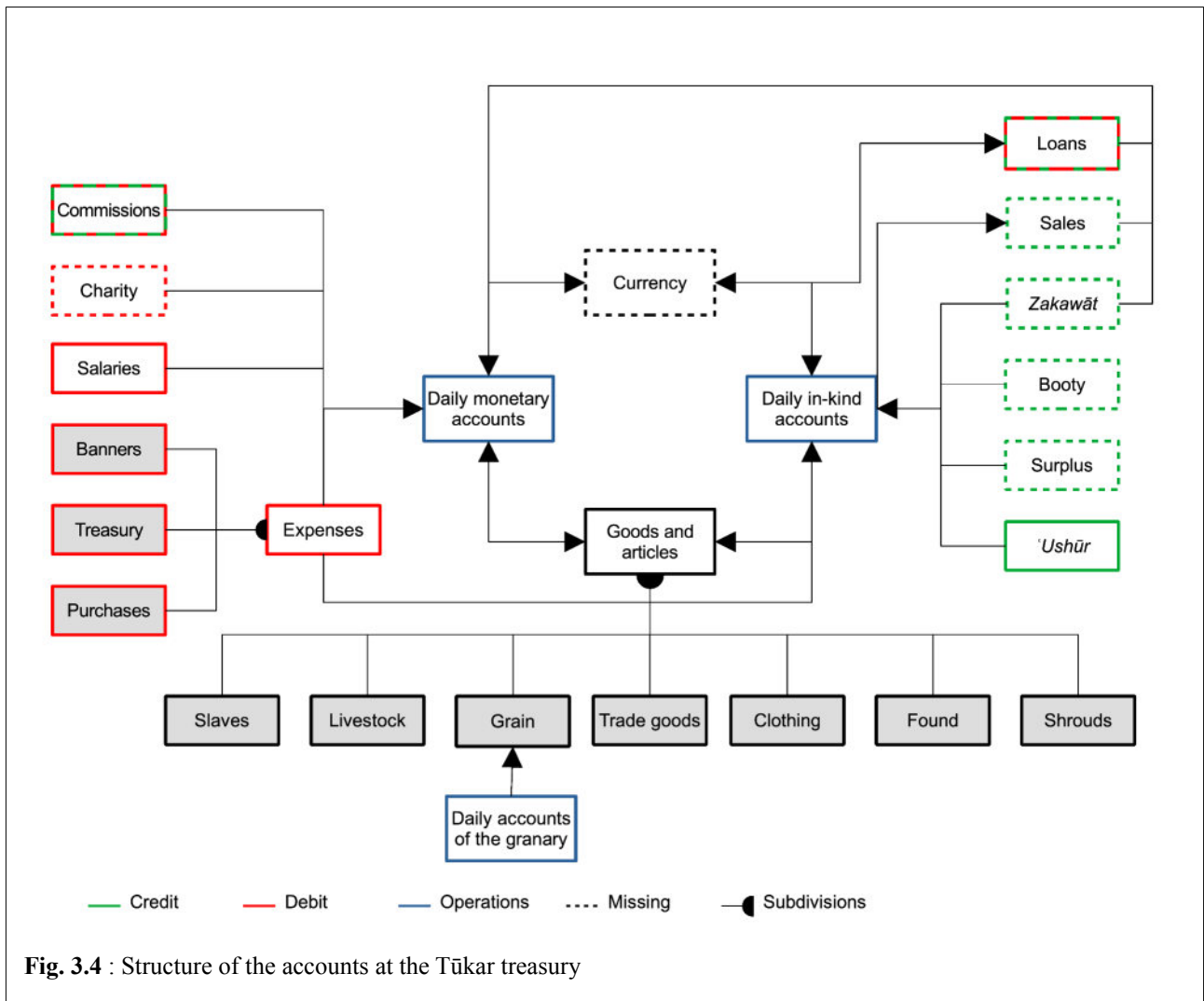


Fig. 3.4 : Structure of the accounts at the Tūkar treasury

another and numbered. In most cases, this was laid out as a transfer between two single accounts, but it happened frequently that several accounts were involved. As regards the operation above, it was described as a transfer “from the account of the article in the granary to the accounts mentioned [below] (*min ḥisāb al-ṣanf bi-l-shūna ilā ḥisābāt madhkūra*)”, that is the account of the *‘ushr* and that of loans<sup>225</sup>. Indeed, whereas ten percent of the harvest was seized as legal payment for the *‘ushr*, necessities of the day, quite particularly the need to feed the large body of men and women that had congregated in Tūkar, led the Mahdist administration to appropriate half of the grain, meaning that the forty supplementary points were considered loans to be compensated later. Following the treasury’s practices in budgetary postings, the source account was increased while the recipient account mirrored this with a decrease. Logically, this play on budgetary writings should be completed with the addition of a last entry in the relevant ledgers, that is—for the example expounded in this paragraph—in the accounts related to the *‘ushr* and loans. However, this

225 NRO Mahdiyya 5/02/08B, p. 11-12.



information appears neither in the first one nor in the second<sup>226</sup>. It is arduous to determinate whether this signals that some of the accounts referred to in the daily accounts were purely budgetary instruments, or, more prosaically, lost or misplaced<sup>227</sup>.

Such intensive bookkeeping required the mobilisation of very significant resources. Yet, the benefits accrued from such an elaborate organisation are far from obvious. The hypothesis developed in the final part of this chapter is that the heart of Mahdist accountancy in Eastern Sudan (and in the other provinces) did not lie on the numerous ledgers but on the vast scriptural body of receipts and authorisations that can be found in their thousands in the treasury's archive. What mattered was the monitoring of transactions, distributions and transfers of cash, goods and grain. The attention with which this was carried out signals the utmost importance granted to these operations' legality, so as to avoid imbalances within the Mahdist provincial power that could jeopardise the movement's ultimate objective: the founding of a new society.

### III. Balancing Powers in a Provincial Context

#### *A) The Making of a Mahdist Moral Economy*

##### *i) Accounts and Receipts*

Not unlike pre-Tanzīmāt Ottoman accounting practices, Mahdist bookkeeping showed little interest in carrying out the two main functions devolved to this type of administrative production: drawing up inventories and budgetary estimates, or, in other words, evaluating what resources are actually present in the treasury's storeroom, and predict future needs. In this perspective, the finance documents of the Tūkar treasury were not budgets *per se* but more akin to public accounts.

The historians Abū Shūk and Bjørkelo portrayed this characteristic solely as a deficiency, despite their remark that such previsionary budgets were introduced in Egypt by Mehmet Ali and subsequently in Nilotic Sudan<sup>228</sup>, meaning that a lack of competencies cannot have been the reason for the approach adopted by the Mahdist power. They suggested that the Mahdist government lived

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226 See, respectively, NRO Mahdiyya 5/05/19 and NRO Mahdiyya 5/04/15.

227 An early inventory of all the documents seized at the Tūkar treasury may have been established by the DMI but this report could not be located. Another list was outlined by the historian and archivist Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm (*Al-ḥaraka al-fikriyya fī-l-Mahdiyya*, *op. cit.*, p. 136–139.), but changes in the reference system used at the Sudanese national archives render any comparison difficult. Furthermore, Abū Salīm's classification is impressionistic at best. As a result, attempts to identify missing folders were not successful. Other efforts were thwarted by the lack of resources. The folder NRO Mahdiyya 5/01/01 was almost certainly misplaced, but four years were not enough to locate it.

228 In the absence of budgetary accounts from the Turkiyya, the main example for such records can only be found in HCPP, Egypt No. 11, "Report on the Soudan by Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart", 1883, p. 37 (Inclosure 5 in No. 1, "Budget for the Suppression of the Slave Trade for the Year 1883").

“from hand to mouth”, unable to plan, and so required frequent extraordinary levies to replenish its coffers in a context of quasi-permanent state of war, high military expenses and limited resources. They inferred from the rusticity of the Mahdist administration’s handling of state finances that “the budgets create an illusion of sophistication unsupported by the realities of economic life<sup>229</sup>”. The nature itself of these records is a matter of discussion. Noting their rudimentary character and emphasizing the fact that these were more akin to final inventories or balance sheets than proper budgets, Abū Shūk and Bjørkelo followed an economicist perspective that led to the dismissal of their overall significance within Mahdist governmentality, without disputing their validity.

Indeed, many aspects of Mahdist bookkeeping severely constrain the functions assured by these accounts. Among other examples, a direct outcome of the accounting practices described in the previous section was that accountants would have been hard-pressed to calculate the amount of money in the treasury’s possession and compare it to the amount of coins physically present<sup>230</sup>. Though not impossible, there was seemingly no need to determine such information. Similarly puzzling, commodities were also often added together regardless of their nature or the unit under which they were stated. In that sense, this internal structure echoed the influence of commercial accounts<sup>231</sup>, embedded, however, into a much more complex external organisation. In the absence of real inventories, projections were much more difficult to develop. Consequently, none of the main Mahdist actors in Eastern Sudan seems to have ever used a number from the myriad of calculations realised by treasury’ administration. They are totally absent from the correspondence between ‘Uthmān Diqna and the Khalīfa, with the exception of troops censuses. However, the surprising complexity of accounting practices upheld by the administrators of the Tūkar treasury should not be dismissed as the Byzantine workings of a state apparatus out of touch with reality. The cost of maintaining such obsessive bookkeeping in a context where paper itself was a precious commodity cannot have been pointless<sup>232</sup>.

The picture drawn by Abū Shūk and Bjørkelo is accurate only up to a certain point. There are several reasons to qualify this underwhelming vision of Mahdist budgets. First of all, these

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229 Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK and Anders J. BJØRKELO (ed.), *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897*, *op. cit.*, p. xix, xxx.

230 This explains why there are so few references to the different currencies used in the context of the Red Sea trade. Most cash transfers and prices are stipulated in *riyāl*, without attention to the variety of currencies that circulated in the late 1880s in the region, both foreign like the Maria Theresa thaler or the *riyāl majīdī*, or minted by the Mahdists like the *riyāl maqbūl*.

231 No example of commercial accounts produced in Sawākin during the Mahdiyya or before could be located. A few documents from 1907 (1325) displayed in the Hadāb Museum—an institution dedicated to Sawākin’s local history—show striking similarities with Mahdist accounts that cannot be coincidental.

232 As Bābikir Badrī was engaged in trade with Sawākin, he met Abū al-Faṭḥ Diqna, a relative of the Eastern Sudan’s *‘āmil* whom the latter had made responsible of tax-collection at Kūkrayb. He must have lacked all resources as he resorted to asking the Bābikir whether he could give him an “account-book” (Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 156).

comments were based on the only accounts available for the central treasury, those from March to December 1897 (Shawwāl 1314 to Rajab 1315), when Mahdist Sudan was already facing the British-led colonial advance from Egypt. While finding an extended period devoid of some form of political or economic turmoil would be difficult, the gradual occupation of the northern territories that prepared the final conquest of 1898 (1315/16) was highly disruptive to the Mahdist state apparatus and shall not be served as an unequivocal template to understand the whole of Mahdist financial practices. Abū Shūk and Bjørkelo's insistence on the disproportional weight of forced contributions (*tabarru`āt* sing. *tabarru`*) imposed on merchants in the Mahdist central budget for 1897 (1314-1315) neglected to reinsert these requisitions in the peculiar context of an attempted mass mobilisation of resources and men to keep the invader at bay. Unfortunately, the very same can be said of the period covered by the records from the Tūkar treasury. Secondly, notwithstanding the requirements of the Mahdist state in this moment of crisis, it is likely that the central government was more blunt in its relations with the populations than provincial administrations that entertained more balanced and reciprocal relations. In Eastern Sudan, mutual dependency between local authorities and the populations at large was exemplified by the care with which the loans requested from traders were considered. Far from forced levies (even if merchants may have had little room to oppose requisitions) the record of which was only a simulacrum of fair governance, the Mahdist leadership was mindful of the need to reimburse at least part of these sums<sup>233</sup>. Thirdly, revenue sources of the Mahdist state diverged from their equivalent during the Turkiyya on one crucial point that rendered estimates more complex to calculate. Contrary to the Egyptian colonial regime, the Mahdist state did not request tributes and so its revenues depended solely on proportional taxation that is, by definition, more volatile than capitation. Considering the relatively low level of accuracy reached by estimates realised by the Egyptian administration in Nilotic Sudan in the 1870s<sup>234</sup>, and the nature of Mahdist fiscal apparatus, it is hardly surprising that treasuries, both central and provincial, refrained from giving projected revenues.

Therefore, they must be seen in their materiality, as scriptural practices loaded with meaning, rather than a process geared toward the management of local resources. What mattered was not so much whether such commodity was present in sufficient quantities or would be after a certain period of time, but to keep track of all cash and goods seized by the state. The point was less to be able to use them than to control them. If this had allowed for a close management of

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233 See chapter 4 for a detailed discussion on the loans contracted by the Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan.

234 On average, between 1870 and 1879, the Egyptian colonial administration collected 77% of expected revenues. However, this number hides significant disparities, both through time and between provinces. For example, in 1872, only 67% of expected revenues entered the coffers of the state. Some provinces, quite particularly the Tāka (see chapter 2), had abysmally low rates of return. Indeed, that same year, 93% of the revenues estimated for that region were lost. On average, less than half (44%) of the revenues were successfully levied. See appendix [?].

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم الحمد لله الذي هدانا لهذا الذي كنا لنهتدي لولا أن هدانا الله

والحمد لله رب العالمين سنفقنا في يوم الجمعة المبارك في شهر ربيع الأول سنة ١٣٠٦

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واما الاغنام من عشش الاغنام يكون معلوم ومن مخصوص الاضار الذروين معناه خذاه

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 في هذا اليوم طالعنا  
 محمد بن  
 ربيع الاول  
 سنة ١٣٠٦

٥٠ طاهر طيش  
 ١٢٠ عنتم

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Fig. 3.5: Example of a receipt from the Tūkar treasury dated June 1889 (Shawwāl 1306)  
 Source: NRO Mahdiyya 5/15/52, document 11.



resources, in a larger context of an all too real acute scarcity, the cost of these bookkeeping activities may have been vindicated, but this was not the case. With a few rare exceptions, the numbers produced by the administration in Tūkar are never referred to in the correspondence. They were not used to convey information but to signal relations.

Drawing on the intricate web of relations that connected the different sets of accounts kept by the Tūkar treasury reveals an administration obsessed with avoiding misappropriations and corruption. No commodity or sum of money could be entered or expended without the knowledge of the heads of at least two departments. The complexity and redundancy of Mahdist budgets in Eastern Sudan meant that falsifications required the intervention of several individuals, thus lowering the chances of their occurrence. All in all, these records show a paradoxical disinterest toward a quantitative management of resources. In contrast, the movements of all commodities that had passed through the treasury could be tracked with relative ease. Contrary to early depictions of a despotic power concerned solely by control over the population and its own preservation, administrative practices such as the ones observed in Eastern Sudan were an integral part to a Mahdist moral economy that emphasised legibility, legality and accountability. As a result, the second largest set of documents are receipts, issued in quite staggering numbers considering their limited use.

They testify of the complex network within which every administrative action was embedded as a way to guarantee its conformity with the moral economy the Mahdist power attempted to promote. Not all documents were as complex as the one presented above (see fig. 3.5). In this receipt dated June 1889 (Shawwāl 1306), four groups were involved. Firstly, Shanqarāy Muḥammad Nūr and Abū Fāṭima, two Bijāwī *umarā'*, announced having sent to the treasury with a man named Mūsā 'Īsā al-Hākūlābī 50 bundles (*tāqa*) of fabric and 150 sheep. Of the first, 36 were collected as payment for the *zakat al-fīṭr*—a levy for which some *anṣār* had been dispatched to assist them—and the remainder through the *'ushr*, probably based on the value of cattle. The sheep were all seized for the *'ushr*. This first message was destined to the *amīn* of the treasury, 'Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf, who is the author of the second message—written three days later—in which he informed Muḥammad Yūsuf, the *amīn* of the *'ushr*, and as such, the supervisor of the main storehouse, that of the 190 items received (one of the many occurrences where very different commodities were added up), the 140 sheep had been sent to the *amīn* of the sales, who, therefore, must have received another receipt. Muḥammad Yūsuf promptly confirmed having received the fifty bundles of fabric and recorded them within his itemised accounts. In this case, he distinguished between the forty-seven pieces of Indian calico (*khām*), one *shāmī* calico and two blankets (*wilāya*). He signed and sealed his response which he sent back to 'Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf who in turn

wrote to the clerks (*kuttāb* sing. *kātib*) of the treasury to ask them to record this operation in the ledger of daily accounts in kind. This time, the rationale was not the types of commodities that had been deposited, but their origin. Of the fifty pieces of fabric, thirty-six were meant to be recorded in the account of the *zakāt al-ḥiṭr*, and fourteen in the account of the *‘ushr* on livestock (*mawāshī*). A fifth message should have been sent by the clerks to confirm these records. It does not appear in this case but they are certainly responsible for having added the number of the operation and the page where its details could be found. In total, a relatively simple administrative operation of tax collection had mobilised at least five individuals and three different accounts, notwithstanding the sheep that were sold, leading to yet another set of interventions in Mahdist budgets.

*ii) The Balance of Power within the Mahdist Provincial Administration*

The complex system described above aimed at preventing corruption but also at avoiding too large a concentration of power between the hands of the treasury’s *amīn*. The latter, because of his prerogatives over the management of resources, was a major actor of Mahdist provincial powers, especially as he answered directly to the *amīn* of the central treasury rather than the *‘āmil*. Consequently, local administrations had some leeway in their application of the *‘āmil*’s instructions and could oppose requests by *umarā’*. To some extent, they formed a potential counterweight to the authority of these military officials and so relations with administrators of the treasury were scrutinised.

In the case of Eastern Sudan, the main components of the administrative body were all members of the Majādhīb. They capitalised on the experience garnered when they occupied positions in the administration of Sawākin, such as clerks in the tribunals, while some others were *imām* or *mu‘azzin*. At the onset of the Mahdist revolution, they had abandoned their employment and their properties were confiscated<sup>235</sup>. The exact extent of their role in the Tūkar administration is difficult to assess. Direct family members occupied important positions, but the larger network of individuals who had a connection with the Majādhīb could seldom be determined. There is no doubt, however, that they constituted a body that ‘Uthmān Diqna could trust, as showed by ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr’s long-term appointment at the head of the treasury and his brother, Majdhūb, to supervise the granary. Furthermore, when ‘Uthmān Diqna left Tūkar to meet the Khalīfa in Umm Durmān in October 1889, Majdhūb was appointed as his deputy (*wakīl*) in his absence (Ṣafar 1307)<sup>236</sup>. The responsibilities granted to their third brother, al-Amīn, are more obscure than the ones

235 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 116 ; Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

236 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letters 81 and 82.

entrusted to his siblings. However, the fact that he was the recipient of a few requests from combatants signals his influence in the administration, even as he probably did not hold an official position. In any case, al-Amīn b. Abū Bakr Yūsuf was evidently close with the Majādhīb since he was appointed as the deputy (*wakīl*) of the banner of the *shaykh* al-Majdhūb himself in May/June 1889 (Ramaḍān/Shawwāl 1306)<sup>237</sup> and, a few months later, accompanied him to Umm Durmān in September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307)<sup>238</sup>. The concentration of members of the Majādhīb nebula in Tūkar was an ongoing process. In October 1888 (Ṣafar 1306), Majdhūb and ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf had petitioned the Khalīfa to authorise their father to come back to Eastern Sudan<sup>239</sup>, with success. In the same vein, upon ‘Abd Allāh b. Abū Bakr Yūsuf’s return to the Mahdist headquarter in July 1890 (D. al-Qa‘da 1307), he arranged for other family members to join him, including ‘Abd Allāh al-Ṭayyib al-Majdhūb, one of the brothers of the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir, then residing in Kasalā<sup>240</sup>.

While the *‘āmil* was supposed to follow the Khalīfa’s instructions, a number of matters could simply not be ascertained from Umm Durmān or required a quick response. Because of the provincial authorities’ dependency on the mobilisation of local communities, collegiality was a central feature of the exercise of power, and in the early phase of the movement, ‘Uthmān Diqna gathered his council every day<sup>241</sup>. Next to local elites and military leaders, administrators from the treasury must have been present, especially considering the strong ties between the *‘āmil* and the Majādhīb. Between 1889 and 1891 (1306-1308), the period for which documentation is the richest, the power held by Mahdist authorities is concentrated between ‘Uthmān Diqna’s hand, a situation resented by a number of influential commanders that fractured the revolutionary community. This resulted from the stabilisation of Mahdist authorities in Tūkar after the failure of Sawākin’s siege, but could also be ascribed to a larger shift in modes of government favoured by the Khalīfa who seem to have sought to give his provincial representatives more autonomy, maybe in relation with the realisation of the limits of the highly centralised structure he had initially supported<sup>242</sup>. In Eastern Sudan, the overwhelming weight of the *‘āmil*’s power was compounded by the specificities of the Mahdist power’s territorial imprint. Contrary to other provinces, the absence of district divisions (*aqsām* sing. *qism*) meant that the *‘āmil* had few established local relays who could

237 NRO Mahdiyya 5/02/06, p. 14.

238 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, documents no. 40, 44 and 45 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letters 17 and 21.

239 The location of Abū Bakr b. Yūsuf prior to this date could not be ascertained.

240 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letters 12, 113 and 114.

241 Guido LEVI, *Osman Dekna, chez lui, op. cit.*, p. 27.

242 One of the manifestations of this shift can be observed in the Khalīfa’s insistence that petitions should be addressed through the proper chain of command and that direct communications should be reserved for last resort appeals. For example, Ḥasan Muḥammad al-Kindī, who had accused Abū Qarja of having misappropriated 425 r. from the men of his banner, was reprimanded for having petitioned the Khalīfa before informing local representatives. See NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 12 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 6.

contribute to negotiate the terms of his authority. In the few cases where leaders of the millenarian movement were settled outside Tūkar, their appointment was temporary and emanated directly from the command centre. It did not constitute, as could be the case elsewhere, the recognition of a leader's local influence. The setbacks that marked the beginning of the year 1891 (mid-1308) and led to the sudden withdrawal of Mahdist troops from Tūkar shifted the overall balance of power, reinforcing in its wake the need to better associate other actors in the decision process so as to garner their support. This resulted in the Khalīfa's repeated injunctions to strive toward the integration of 'Uthmān Diqna's relatives to his decisions<sup>243</sup>.

Besides other *umarā'* and *umanā'* of the treasury, the balance of power may also have been tilted through interventions from representatives of the judiciary. Judges formed the last pillar of the provincial triptych. However, the terms of their role is astonishingly obscure<sup>244</sup>. As for the administrators of the treasury, the *'āmil* had no authority over them. They answered directly to the *qāḍī al-Islām*, and through him to the Khalīfa. They were the main interlocutors to those who wished to air their grievances against the *'āmil*, their own leaders or the administration, even if people often resorted to writing directly to the Khalīfa<sup>245</sup>. Beyond these somewhat vague remarks, the exact conditions through which the “representatives of the noble sharī'a (*nuwwāb al-sharī' al-sharīf*)” carried out their functions are elusive. The first mention of a judicial system in Eastern Sudan dates from September 1887 (D. al-Ḥijja 1304) when the Khalīfa wrote to 'Uthmān Diqna and Abū Qarja to confirm their decision to appoint the *shaykh* Aḥmad w. Jābir as the judge (*qāḍī* pl. *quḍā*) for the district of Sawākin<sup>246</sup>. The term *qāḍī* however is seldom used and appears neither in the *'āmil*'s official correspondence nor in administrative documents, contrary to *nā'ib al-sharī'*, with a few exceptions<sup>247</sup>. There are no other traces of a judge in Tūkar<sup>248</sup> for a year and a half, until February 1889 (Jumādā 1306), when three *nuwwāb* appeared on the rolls of the treasury alongside Aḥmad w. Jābir: Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf—who cumulated this role with his other functions in the

243 See chapter 2.

244 While the legal framework has been thoroughly analysed by Ahmed El Bessaty (*Les "Ah'kām wa-l'Ādāb" de l'imām al-Mahdī*, PhD diss., Université de Paris (EPHE), Paris, 1969.) and Aharon Laayish, as noted by the latter, no records from the courts seem to have survived (*Sharī'a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, op. cit., p. 3). This considerably limits our understanding of the practices of the Mahdist judicial system, especially in the provinces.

245 al-Jāk Ibrāhīm IBRĀHĪM, “Al-nizām al-qāḍā'ī fī al-dawla al-mahdiyya bi-l-Sūdān,” *Dirāsāt Ifrīqiyya*, 2001, vol. 25, no. 63–88.

246 *Daftar 'Uthmān Diqna*, p. 105-106. The *shaykh* Aḥmad w. Jābir could belong to the famous line of Islamic scholars, the Awlād Jābir, who were so influential in the eighteenth century (Peter M. HOLT, “The Sons of Jābir and their Kin: A Clan of Sudanese Religious Notables,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 1967, vol. 30, no. 1, p. 142–157). There is, however, no direct proof of this.

247 Another reference to a *qāḍī* in Eastern Sudan can be found in a letter written by the Khalīfa to the Mahdist leadership in this province in late April 1889 (late Sha'bān 1306). In another instance, in January 1890 (Jumādā I 1307), the *quḍā* of Tūkar wrote to 'Umar Ḥasan, the *'āmil* of al-Qaḍārif to obtain the payment of sum of 70 r. for a man named Muḥammad al-Mukwarī. See *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letters 34 and 97.

248 A judge (*qāḍī al-'umūm*) was present in Kasalā in 1306 (1888/9) (NRO Mahdiyya 5/21/71, document no. 20).



treasury—, ‘Uthmān Muḥammad Faraḥ and ‘Abd Allāh Ḥasan. At that time, the judiciary was already a substantial organisation since ten other people were referred to as working for it including a secretary, seven emissaries (*mursal*) and two translators (*turjumān*). The same individuals were still present on the ledger for 1307<sup>249</sup>. Besides, judges could also be appointed in the other Mahdist positions, like Muḥammad al-Nūr Ḥusayn who was said to be the judge at Adūbana in September 1889 (20 Muḥarram 1307). With the further mention of a prison in the official correspondence<sup>250</sup>, all these elements support the idea of a well-grounded judicial institution in Eastern Sudan. This only renders the utter lack of scriptural traces such as legal decisions or referrals to the *qāḍī al-Islām* all the more intriguing. Indeed, of the thousand documents produced by the treasury in Tūkar, only a single letter could be located that referred directly to the activities of the judges<sup>251</sup>. While this is not surprising as a similar observation could be made for other Mahdist provincial administrations<sup>252</sup>, the reasons for such glaring absence are still hypothetical. In the case of Eastern Sudan, it is likely that most of the proceedings were conducted orally, following Bijāwī practices, especially since most of the population was not fluent in Arabic, as confirmed by the hiring of translators. They must have been relatively independent, at least in a local context, as no direct intervention from the *umarā’* could be found.

Mahdist provincial power was far from monolithic. While the authority of the *‘āmil* was meant to be supreme, the numerous and repeated injunctions of the Khalīfa to the combatants and other leaders to consider it as such signal its frailty. Power in Eastern Sudan was fragmented and constantly renegotiated, each part vying to assert its autonomy and increase its influence. For example, in early 1890, as Trinkitāt began to attract more traders than Adūbana, three representatives were appointed: “al-Makkī Muḥammad al-Makkī for the treasury, Muṣṭafā b. al-Ḥājj ‘Alī for the *umanā’* and Faḍl al-Ḥājj ‘Alī for Abū Qarja<sup>253</sup>”. The wavering balance that characterised

249 NRO Mahdiyya 5/0417, p. 5-18 and Mahdiyya 5/06/24, p. 25-31.

250 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letters 74 and 76.

251 This exceptional (and undated) letter raises more questions than it answers. Its author, a man named Muḥammad Ḥāmid ‘Umar [Sha‘fayn] from the Artayqa community of Tūkar, informs one of the *nuwwāb*, Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf, of his dispute with the widow of Abābākr Shanqarāy. He affirms that he had granted to her late husband the usufruct (*al-infā’ fī ghallat-ha*) of a piece of land out of charity but that after his passing, she claimed full property over it. Despite having consulted with another of the judges, Aḥmad w. Jābir, the plaintiff was requested to inform Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf of his case. The latter may have held a superior position in the provincial judiciary, but this is not reflected in the salaries of the judges which are all equal. Furthermore, the letter does not refer to an actual legal decision thus keeping the matter of the judicial procedures implemented in this context as unclear as before. See NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 67).

252 Mentions of legal proceedings are equally rare for the Mahdist administration in al-Qaḍārīf. See for one of the very few available examples, the letter sent by ‘Ā’isha bt. Muḥammad to ‘Umar Ḥusayn, the local *‘āmil*, in December 1889 (Jumādā I 1307) to request the reimbursement of a loan made by her sister to the treasury before her death. Exceptionally, local judges wrote their decision directly on the letter (NRO Mahdiyya 1/2/70, document no. 84). For references to judges in the Dunqulā province, see Bābikīr BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 53 and 72.

253 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 3.

the relations between the different segments of Mahdist provincial authority could easily lead to intense internal conflicts most often fuelled by various attempts at controlling the treasury and its resources.

*iii) Conflicts and Power Plays over the Treasury*

Indeed, since the early phase of the Mahdiyya, the central treasury—and later its provincial branches—was the object of much suspicion prompted by the Mahdī's effort to monopolise resources. Aḥmad Sulaymān, the first *amīn*, endeavoured to put these misgivings at ease by claiming that he was not looking for self-enrichment and enjoined the *anṣār* to monitor his actions and report them if needed<sup>254</sup>. However, because of the centralisation of loot impelled by the Mahdī and its corollary, i.e. the introduction of wages for a permanently mobilised force, the men and women who had joined the movement were entirely dependent on its handouts. Depleted stocks directly threatened this organisation and prompted sometimes violent reactions by the combatants. In June 1884 (Sha' bān 1301), Aḥmad Sulaymān complained to the Mahdī that destitute people were surrounding the treasury and harassing the clerks. The matter was put to rest as the Khalīfa was instructed to move the crowd away and ensure that only those who had been authorised by the *amīn* himself could approach. However, his position was still quite dangerous and not much later, a man named Muḥammad Karīb and his brothers attacked the *amīn* and hit him, to the Mahdī's utter displeasure<sup>255</sup>.

Tensions over the treasury were greatly exacerbated in the following years as food resources began to dwindle in the wake of the perturbations caused by the uprising. The issue reached its climax during the famine of 1306 (1889/1890), prompting some Hadanduwa to attack the treasury in February 1889 (Jumādā II 1306) as 'Uthmān Diqna had left the camp and appointed Muḥammad Ādam as his deputy<sup>256</sup>. All things considered, it is surprising that such incident was not repeated, maybe because the local population knew that the reserves of the granary were as depleted as those in the rest of the country. In any case, relations between the *anṣār* population and the treasury were tense. So much so that the *kayyāl*, Ibrāhīm 'Umar, wrote to 'Uthmān Diqna to complain of the violence he was subjected to whenever a detachment was formed for a raid and they came to the granary to obtain supplies. In the latest instance of such behaviour, he reported the issue first to Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf and then to the *'āmil* of the banner in question, to no avail. He added that he had been working at this position for a long time and the 3 r. he received for his trouble were not

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254 Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898, op. cit.*, p. 176.

255 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī, op. cit.*, letters 348 and 349 ; Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī, op. cit.*, letter 592.

256 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 30.

worth the hassle. Either this harassment stopped or he would ask to be discharged<sup>257</sup>.

In other instances, the treasury itself was the battleground of competing ambitions. The rivalry between ‘Uthmān Diqna and Abū Qarja was mostly based on the latter’s resentment caused by his subordinate position to the *amīr* of Eastern Sudan. Tensions were rife, accusations were thrown around, sometimes reaching the ears of the Khalīfa. Shortly after his appointment, Abū Qarja had been quick to observe the deep ties that united the Diqnāb and the Majādhīb, so much so that in late July 1887 (D. al-Qa‘da 1305), he had accused them of prodding ‘Uthmān Diqna to declare himself independent from the Khalīfa’s authority in Umm Durmān<sup>258</sup>. His denunciation of their alleged incitation to *fitna* was a very serious charge. It was aimed at undermining the position of a group which constituted the closest allies of ‘Uthmān Diqna. However, it was also a cunning way to try to wrest some influence over the treasury, an institution on which the Majādhīb had had a hand since its establishment<sup>259</sup>.

Control over the treasury’s resources was indeed quite strategic. Once the dust had settled on the no-man’s land in front of Sawākin after the battle of al-Jummayza that saw the severe defeat of the Mahdist troops besieging the city on 20 December 1888 (15 Rabī‘ II 1306), the withdrawal to Afāfit where Abū Qarja had established a temporary camp opened a new phase in the dispute the latter had entertained with ‘Uthmān Diqna since early 1887 (mid-1304). The transfer of the Mahdist headquarters from Handūb brought tensions within the Mahdist camp. So much so that on 25 March 1889 (22 Rajab 1306), the *ansār* and the local tribes came very close to open conflict. After having consulted with the different protagonists of this unfortunate event, ‘Uthmān Diqna, Abū Qarja, some of the *maqādim*, and the delegates who had been dispatched to monitor the situation in Eastern Sudan (see below) transmitted their testimonies and grievances to the Khalīfa in a series of letters written on 30 March 1889 (29 Rajab 1306)<sup>260</sup>, thus giving us a rare and nuanced insight as to the motives of this confrontation. The *amīr* of Eastern Sudan complained of Abū Qarja’s attitude, noting that since his return in February 1889 (Jumādā II 1306), he had shown to be duplicitous with regard to his acceptance of ‘Uthmān Diqna’s authority. While he would publicly state his approval, ‘Uthmān Diqna “noticed from his behaviour that inwardly (*fi al-bāṭin*) he did not assent”. His main clue came from the *ansār* who seemed distant, and who eventually recognised that they were taking their directions from Abū Qarja, leading him to conclude that he was losing his influence over them. The delegates tried to bring Abū Qarja to better dispositions and so offered him to be appointed as a

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257 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 63 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 51.

258 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fi Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 36; 125.

259 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

260 Two of these letters can be found in Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 157 and 158. The argument presented here follows closely Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī Ḥammūdī’s argument.

deputy for the detachment<sup>261</sup> (*sariyya*) as well as the affairs of the treasury (*shu'ūn bayt al-māl*). However, he would have to consult with 'Uthmān Diqna and obtain his approval. They also asked the latter to put this by writing and seal it, before gathering the heads of the detachment to inform them of what was offered, quite probably so as to cut Abū Qarja from the support he had benefitted hitherto. With a deal in their hand, they went back to Abū Qarja, but he flatly refused the agreement they had devised. Threatening him to write directly to the Khalīfa to inform him of the situation—which they eventually did—did not make him budge<sup>262</sup>.

Abū Qarja's statement—part of the larger file sent to Umm Durmān—was meant to exonerate him from inducing a break within the Mahdist army. It illuminates the crux of the rift between the two leaders. Firstly, he reminded the delegates that their suggestion to appoint him as deputy had for objective to “prevent the honourable 'Uthmān Abū Bakr Diqna from taking decisions which would wrong the *anṣār*<sup>263</sup>”, something that the *amīr* himself would probably not have formulated in those terms. Abū Qarja refused this new distribution of power based on the argument that the modalities of the understanding had been dictated by 'Uthmān Diqna himself, and aimed at protecting his position as they stipulated that “[Abū Qarja] could not report any action without his instruction and his agreement”, to what Abū Qarja concluded that this would not allow him “to prevent the *anṣār* being wronged, accomplish what is required by the religion (*maṣāliḥ al-dīn*) and the distribution[s] of the treasury in a sustainable manner (*maṣūnat<sup>am</sup>*) while following the instructions of the honourable 'Uthmān”. This eventually brought him to his main grievance, namely that “the treasury had made distributions to some of the people of the country who did not deserve it (*'alā mā yastaḥiqqūna-hu min ahl al-waṭan*)”. In consequence, Abū Qarja demanded that “the *amīn* of the treasury be dismissed for the prejudice he had caused to the army<sup>264</sup>”.

The context explains why Abū Qarja's grievances echoed the dissatisfaction of some of the *anṣār*. The lack of abundant food supplies resulted in chronic shortages<sup>265</sup> and constituted one of the reasons summoned by the Abū Qarja and taken up by the Khalīfa to justify the transfer of the camp from Handūb to Tūkar. This state of affairs was fuelling tensions between the different components of the Mahdist army in Eastern Sudan. Contrary to the Bijāwī groups in the region, the men and

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261 In this context, to the extent that a single body of men is designated by this expression, it most probably refers to all the Mahdist troops and not solely the groups transferred from Kasalā since 1887 (1304/5).

262 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – 'Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 129–130.

263 Abū Qarja did not directly accuse 'Uthmān Diqna of misappropriation, as he used the expression “*li-sadd dharā'i' taḍarrur al-anṣār*”, which, according to Islamic law terminology, refers to the blocking of legal actions so as to prevent illegal consequences.

264 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – 'Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 130–132.

265 Ḥammūdī makes the claim that this was due to the early phase of the famine of the *Sanat sitta*, but does not produce evidence to back it. See chapter 4 for a detailed account of this famine and its effects in Eastern Sudan.

their families who had been displaced from Kasalā could not rely on local economic networks. In a subsequent letter sent to the Khalīfa on 17 May 1889 (18 Ramaḍān 1306), Abū Qarja explained that “distributions were made by the treasury to the people of the country for their combatants, their families and their horses, on equal terms (*musāwat-hum fī dhālika*) with the *muhājirīn*<sup>266</sup> and the *anṣār* while those are the weakest [...] of the group of the detachment (*aḍ‘āf jamā‘at al-sariyya*) as they do not own camels, cows, sheep and so forth. This is one of the most important aspects that caused the predicament suffered by the army in Handūb, and that did not afflict at all the people of the country (*ahl al-balad*), since, when they learned of their equality [of treatment] with the *anṣār*, they stored away their stocks (*iddakharū mawjūdāt-hum*)<sup>267</sup>.”

Contrary to what Abū Qarja claimed, the question of the equality treatment between the *anṣār* and the combatants from the local communities was not a new subject. In early 1888 (mid-1305), when the Mahdists had thrown all of their forces against the rebellious tribes, ‘Uthmān Diqna had complained bitterly that this effort was crippled by vast movements of desertions and that the men he was promised often disappeared. Of the 12 000 men he had hoped to mobilise, less than 3 000 had joined him. The reason for this is that “they hate the *jihād* and wish to be with their families and possessions which are in Tāka” and not, ‘Uthmān Diqna insists on this, because “they found themselves in distress and had to resort to this [returning to Tāka] since everything the *anṣār* received from the treasury, they received the same<sup>268</sup>.”

Abū Qarja’s intentions were not mysterious. He wished to gain a foothold within the treasury then managed by the Majādhīb, close allies of ‘Uthmān Diqna, so as to control part of the distribution and strengthen his position. Interestingly, two dynamics appear to have been at play in his strategy to muster support. The first one was the consequence of Abū Qarja’s lack of tribal influence. Dispatched by the Khalīfa with an array of combatants linked with a diverse ensemble of tribal groups, he could not benefit from the same level of legitimacy as that of other leaders who may have commanded smaller but more cohesive groups of combatants. The second dynamic stemmed from the resentment of the lower echelons of the Mahdist army. When the delegates consulted them in order to discover their grievances, they wrote to the Khalīfa that 125 of the *maqādīm* had expressed discontent toward ‘Uthmān Diqna’s leadership. Abū Qarja attempted to capitalise on this tension and presented himself as the defender of the interests of the *maqādīm* and the small *umarā’*, those who felt that the Majādhīb-controlled treasury was unduly geared toward serving the needs of local communities<sup>269</sup>.

266 That is those who were displaced, forcefully or not, from the region of Tāka since 1887 (1304/5).

267 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, op. cit., p. 138–139.

268 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, op. cit., letter 23.

269 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, op. cit.,

Abū Qarja's efforts proved unfruitful. As he had been warned, the delegates wrote to the Khalīfa who, in a letter dated 1<sup>st</sup> May 1889 (29 Sha‘bān 1306) confirmed and imposed the initial agreement drafted with ‘Uthmān Diqna's approval. The administration of the treasury remained untouched. Still, some of his concerns regarding the accountability of the Tūkar treasury's work were taken into consideration. The secretaries were instructed to prepare a report presenting the revenues and expenses and communicate them to the central treasury, who in turn would transmit them to the Khalīfa himself<sup>270</sup>. A brief period of calm followed the events of March 1889 (Rajab 1306) but, as noted above, Abū Qarja kept on sending letters to the Khalīfa denouncing the ways distributions were handled by the treasury and the bitterness this caused among segments of the Mahdist army, writing on that regard that “the situation in which the army of this *ribāṭ* finds itself is marked by aversion (*nufūr*) and dissensions (*ikhtilāf*)”. He concluded by suggesting that the only way to remedy this state of affairs was to appoint an “*‘āmil* from the family of the Khalīfa (*min āl bayt al-siyāda*)<sup>271</sup>”.

### ***B) The Relationships with the Central Authorities***

Abū Qarja's appeal to the Khalīfa was not uncommon. Central authorities in Umm Durmān were often called upon to settle matters or petitioned for specific grievances. The legitimacy that derived from conforming to the Khalīfa's decrees could easily be instrumentalised, sometimes without much regard to their original intent.

The Mahdist state had all the characteristics of a highly centralised regime. Most, if not all, decisions required the direct assent from the Mahdī and later his successor, the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi. Queries, information and orders were almost uniquely transmitted through letters. This correspondence formed a vast network throughout Nilotic Sudan. This vast corpus has been extensively mined by historians. Indeed, it represents the first source of most historical writings dedicated to that period. However, this focus on the relations between the political centre and provincial administrations has led to overstating the real influence the former had on the latter. Read *in extenso*, the correspondence exchanged between the Khalīfa and ‘Uthmān Diqna, as well as a few other leaders in Eastern Sudan, reveals a more nuanced picture. Many factors conspired to severely limit the potency of the instructions that emanated from Umm Durmān. Misunderstandings were common, often fuelled by the Khalīfa's lack of knowledge about the specificities of a region he had never visited. Delays in communications also doomed his ability to respond efficiently to sudden evolutions. In such instances, an advisory council (*majlis istishārī*) composed of the heads of the

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p. 133; 147.

270 *Ibid.*, p. 137–138. The original letter can be found in the *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 280, p. 220.

271 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

army, local elites, the representative of the *shari‘a* and the *amīn* of the treasury could be convened and settle a matter before the news had reached Umm Durmān<sup>272</sup>. Finally, despite the bombastic prose used in his letters, the Khalīfa had few means of imposing his will hundreds of kilometres away in an area where he had no alternative relays. This left ample room for Mahdist provincial leaders, like ‘Uthmān Diqna, to wilfully ignore his orders and adopt delaying tactics that were all the more credible due to the many challenges faced by maintaining constant communications over great distances and hostile environments. Consequently, the rhetoric displayed by central authorities as to their ability to steer local situations simply did not match reality. Still, reference to the central power was far from meaningless, firstly because its influence was not limited to missives but also entailed summons to the capital and the dispatch of delegates—both more efficient manners to convey orders—, and secondly because the legitimacy of all decisions could, at one point or another, be challenged before the Khalīfa.

*i) An Epistolary State*

The formation of an epistolary network was constitutive of the Mahdist movement. The administration of the previous regime, the Turkiyya, may have produced a comparable amount of communications, but it has left few direct archival traces. Evidently, Muḥammad Aḥmad’s epistolary practices were deeply influenced by contacts within Sufī networks. The yet-to-be Mahdī was declaring, as early as October–November 1880 (D. al-Qa‘da 1297) that he was sending letters to rally people who opposed the decline of Islam<sup>273</sup>. Yet, the correspondence was not a purely instrumental way of conveying orders and information. Al-Kurdufānī, the Mahdī’s first biographer, dedicated a whole section of the *Ṣīra* to the matter, thus revealing its pivotal role. He argued that “since communication by correspondence was a custom of the Prophet and since the Mahdi was his *khalīfa* and so followed in his footsteps, he dispatched letters to the people of Islām, in which he called them to God and [enjoined them] to revive the Custom of the Prophet. These letters are numerous and some of them will be mentioned in the *Sīra* as a form of blessing (*‘alā wajhi al-tabarruk*)<sup>274</sup>.” Al-Kurdufānī was right to insist on the religious value with which this correspondence was imbued. Before morphing into an administrative tool and a pillar of Mahdist governmentality, letters were the main instrument of the *da‘wa*. In this respect, the Mahdī reminded Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Yūsuf al-Hindī in June/July 1882 (Sha‘bān 1299) that he was ordered by

272 Ibrāhīm ‘Akāsha ‘ALĪ, *Wilāyat Barbar fī ‘ahd al-Khalīfa ‘Abd Allāh (Ramaḍān 1302 – Rajab 1317 / June 1885 – November 1899)*, *op. cit.*, p. 75–76.

273 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 9.

274 Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitab sa‘adat al-mustahdi bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdi (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdi) by Isma‘il b. ‘Abd al-Qadir*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

God and His Prophet to perform the *hijra* and to “send letters to all his agents to inform them of [his Mahdīship] (*amranī bi an ukātiba bi-hā jamī‘ al-mukallaḥīn*)<sup>275</sup>”.

Religious considerations superseded practicality in Mahdist correspondence and affected their form, including the style used to write the letters themselves. Indeed, in 1882/3 (1300) the Mahdī instructed the clerks appointed to draw up his legal rulings (*aḥkām* sing. *ḥukm*) and so to abandon the “way they wrote under the Turks and follow the ‘*uthmānī* way that follows the *Maṣḥaf*”<sup>276</sup>. While the language found in most Mahdist communications may, at times, have been somewhat convoluted, there was an appreciation on the part of the Mahdī of the need to take into account the Nilotic Sudan’s linguistic diversity. As noted before, ‘Abd Allāh b. Abū Bakr Yūsuf’s fluency in Bijāwiye was decisive to his appointment as *amīn* in Kasalā in 1885 (1302). Al-Kurduḥānī added with regard to these language issues that “the Mahdi’s letters—like the Prophet’s—are written in a manner that would enable their recipients to understand them, for the Mahdi is the Successor of the Prophet and so follows in his footsteps. An informant told the author that the Mahdi had said: ‘Verily, the Prophet [...] speaks with us now in the speech (*kalām*) of the people of our time.’ The author interprets this as the language and the terms with which people are acquainted at present, so that they would easily understand the meaning and come to God in the shortest time”<sup>277</sup>.

The attention paid to official correspondence also meant that the rigid pattern adopted by the Mahdī was disseminated to most of his interlocutors and knew no noticeable evolutions when the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi succeeded him. After a lengthy and highly formulaic greeting, the majority of letters began with referring to the last letter exchanged and offering a summary. As transportation was often a gamble<sup>278</sup>, it was vital to acknowledge each arrival, so that the conversation could be pursued. There was a significant amount of repetition from one letter to the other—the same events were usually described and commented across several letters—so as to reduce the level of information losses and avoid a complete break in communications. A similar logic explains that distinct topics were dealt with in separate letters, with the result that it was not uncommon for ‘Uthmān Diqna to write two or three letters on the same day. The point there again is to ensure the continuity of the discussion between the Khalīfa and his provincial administrators.

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275 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 46.

276 *Ibid.*, letter 161.

277 Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitāb sa‘adat al-mustahdī bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdī (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdī) by Isma‘il b. ‘Abd al-Qadir*, *op. cit.*, p. 67–68.

278 Letters were easily lost. In one instance, in February 1884 (Rabī‘ II 1301), the Mahdī had to send three times the same letter to Ḥayāt b. Sā‘id before the last one finally reached him (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 234).



For all these reasons, the camel-post (*hajjāna*<sup>279</sup> or *būṣṭa*) played a crucial part in the relationships between the political centre and the provinces. As such, they were the main concern of the treasury—as seen in the epigraph of this chapter—which was responsible for their welfare while they were waiting in Tūkar, as well as finding replacement mounts for their return to Umm Durmān<sup>280</sup>. In addition to letters, the camel-post could also carry some military equipment and, on some occasions, prestigious items of loot such as swords sent to the Khalīfa as gifts. Small groups could also accompany the camel-post on their way back to Umm Durmān so as to form less vulnerable groups. This was ‘Uthmān Diqna’s solution when he sent his son in September 1893 (Rabī‘ I 1311)<sup>281</sup>. Indeed, roads were not always safe. Attacks on representatives of the Mahdist state were dealt with swiftly, particularly so when the camel-post was targeted. Its role in connecting the different administrations was not lost on rebellious groups and could fall victim to local tensions. This is what happened to the unsuspecting Ibrāhīm [Kashīwāy], ‘Alī Qā’idāy, Muḥammad Aḥmad Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ who had left Tūkar, heading toward Kasalā, in March 1890 (Sha‘bān 1307). After their departure, one of them, Muḥammad Aḥmad, came back saying they had been attacked by the Jamīlāb and [Samlāb<sup>282</sup>] in the Red Sea Hills. Everything had been taken from them but he had managed to escape. A large expedition was quickly organised with a hundred horsemen. Once they located the perpetrators, they killed twenty of them. Among their belongings, they found the saddles of the camel-post. As for the letters, they had been burned<sup>283</sup>.

The first purpose of the communications from the capital to the provinces was the dissemination of controlled information throughout Nilotic Sudan. In that respect, military conquest was followed shortly after by the need to publicise the writings of the Mahdī. As soon as Dār Fūr had been subjected to Mahdist rule by Muḥammad Khālid Zuqal in early 1884 (mid-1301), the Mahdī enjoined him to copy his letters and distribute them to all the areas so that their inhabitants can abide by his proclamations (*manshūr* pl. *manshūrāt*). He should do the same with the *Rātīb*, the Mahdī’s devotional prayer-book<sup>284</sup>. The Khalīfa’s more prosaic correspondence was not imbued with the same value, however, important news could also be the object of a wide diffusion and ultimately, be copied in a letter-book. Many examples can be found in ‘Uthmān Diqna’s

279 The institution is named after the plural of the Arabic term for camel riders (sing. *hajjān*).

280 For an example of the expenses incurred by the treasury for the camel-post, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/08/35B, p. 131 and 154.

281 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 137 and 338.

282 This Bijāwī group could not be identified.

283 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 7. On the day this particular letter was written, 27 March 1890 (5 Sha‘bān 1307), eight other letters were also issued by Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf (documents no. 6-14), as replacement for the lost correspondence, including the monthly reports of the treasury for Jumādā I and Jumādā II 1307 (document no. 8).

284 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 252.

compilation, may it be for good news, such as the success of the *amīr* Ḥamdān Abū ‘Anja against the Abyssinians and the sack of Gondar in January 1888 (Jumādā I 1305)<sup>285</sup>, or more ambivalent developments like the repression of the revolt initiated by the *ashrāf* in Umm Durmān in late November 1891 (Rabī‘ II 1308)<sup>286</sup>. These letters participated directly to the Mahdist propaganda and aimed at favouring obedience to the regime as well as enthusiasm for the *jihād*. To build morale, they were read out loud to all the men congregated around their leader, a scene vividly described by Guido Levi during his visit of the Mahdist camp in early 1884: “At the centre of this circle, which I estimate to be of two thousand people, came and took his place Osman Dekna [‘Uthmān Diqna]. Everyone was armed, some carrying spears, others long sabres, others guns. They sat down, squatting on their heels in the Arab way. The emir also squatted down, and from a book in his hand he took out a letter which he began to read aloud.” Levi surmised soon after that the text read by the *āmīr* was a letter from the Mahdī<sup>287</sup>.

His correspondence was treated with a level of respect that amounted to devotion. The most important proclamations were meticulously consigned in letter-books<sup>288</sup>, four of which were found in Afāfīt in February 1891 when the Mahdist headquarter in Eastern Sudan was raided by the British<sup>289</sup>. They constituted as many compendiums of the Mahdī’s jurisprudence and declarations of historical importance. The status of the *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna* is more ambiguous as it associated the Mahdī’s major legal rulings with subsequent letters from the Khalīfa that often dealt with more mundane matters. In that respect, it was meant as a record of all written interactions with the central authorities, but, as often with the Tūkar treasury’s scriptural output, no external mention of its use could be found. These productions were local and, as far as it could be ascertained, the work of some of the *umanā’* of the treasury. The Khalīfa attempted to regulate these compilations and define a commonly agreed corpus. The most manifest expression of this endeavour came from the setting

285 On this particular occasion, this information was deemed sufficiently important that ten days after having communicated the news of the Mahdist victory over the Abyssinians, the Khalīfa had Abū ‘Anja’s original letter copied and sent to ‘Uthmān Diqna. See *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letters 143 and 144, p. 128.

286 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 240. On the revolt itself, see Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 197–203.

287 Guido LEVI, *Osman Dekna, chez lui*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

288 For a more general analysis of this format, see Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Al-ḥaraka al-fikriyya fī-l-Mahdiyya*, *op. cit.*, p. 141–181. See also John O. HUNWICK and Rex S. O’FAHEY (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 1 Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900*, *op. cit.*, p. 311–319.

289 The first of these four letter-books is the *Maṣnaf al-Majdhūb* (DUL SAD 99/1), containing 75 of the Mahdī’s proclamations. It was probably the work of al-Majdhūb b. Abū Bakr Yūsuf. In all likelihood, this was also the case of the *Maṣnaf Ma’al* (NRO Mahdiyya 8/01/06) but only 30 proclamations have been preserved. The *Maṣnaf Durham* (SAD 97/3) belonged to Wingate’s private collection before being donated to the university of Durham (a copy can be found at the NRO under the reference CairInt 11/01/08). It contains an array of letters, proclamations and transcribed audiences (*majālis* sing. *majlis*). Another letter-book is kept at the French national archives, so its name, the *Maṣnaf Bārīs*. It could not be located as the reference given by the Sudanese historian Abū Salīm points to a version of the *Ṭabaqāt* of Wad Ḍayf Allāh and not a copy of the Mahdī’s proclamations. See Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Al-ḥaraka al-fikriyya fī-l-Mahdiyya*, *op. cit.*, p. 119–120.

up of a printing house in Umm Durmān that produced lithographed versions of sanctioned compilations<sup>290</sup>. None of these, however, seem to have reached Eastern Sudan with the result that the provincial administrators had some agency regarding the documents they chose to canonise.

Communications from the provincial centres toward Umm Durmān also involved more complex dynamics than the simple transfer of information. There again, central authorities had little means to ensure that orders were being followed. This left the Mahdī to bitterly complain about ‘Uthmān Diqna’s lack of responsiveness. He did it in several letters, the first one on 9 January 1884 (10 Rabī’ I 1301), twice on 18 March 1884 (20 Jumādā I 1301), and yet again on 19 May 1884 (23 Rajab 1301)<sup>291</sup>. On his first admonition, the Mahdī scolded ‘Uthmān Diqna for not having kept him informed of the situation in Eastern Sudan. Some people had told him that the *amīr* was waging the *jihād* against the defectors (*makhdhūlīn* sing. *makhdhūl*), but the only confirmation that had reached him had come from an unexpected source: a telegram from the governor of Sawākin found among the possessions of the *ḥukumdār* Hicks after his death at the battle of Shaykān on 5 November 1883 (4 Muḥarram 1301)<sup>292</sup>. The Mahdī’s exasperation is clear in the two letters sent on 18 March 1884. The first of them dealt essentially with the treatment to implement toward the different factions of opponents to the Mahdist rule, distinguishing between those who had pledged allegiance but refused to take part to the *jihād*, those who remained associated with the “Turks” and finally, those who repented from their previous error. But the Mahdī concluded his letter by once again reprimanding ‘Uthmān Diqna, noting that he had “only heard from your side, without messengers (*rusul*) from you, or even a letter<sup>293</sup>”. The Mahdī himself must have doubted the effect of his allusion to the neglect of his *‘āmil*, and immediately started out writing a much more direct letter, entirely dedicated to solving this communication issue. He began by tackling the crux of the problem, “time has passed and passed, and you did not inform us of what has happened between you and the enemies of God, yet we are longing for this and expecting [news on what has happened] there.” If the Mahdī stated that this absence of communication was unacceptable, he added that he excused ‘Uthmān Diqna if his letters followed the “bad manners (*isā’a adab*)” and showed the “influence of the way[s] of the former people of God (*āthar ṭarīq ahl Allāh al-sābiq*)”, hinting at the idea that his *amīr* may have recoiled from writing out of fear from not respecting the new Mahdist practices. He was to rest assured, what mattered now was that all actions be done according to the prescriptions of the Qur’ān and the Sunna. In that respect, the Mahdī “love[d] the news coming from the people

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290 *Ibid.*, p. 53–54 ; John O. HUNWICK and Rex S. O’FAHEY (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 1 Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900*, *op. cit.*, p. 308–311.

291 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letters 210, 273, 274 and 315.

292 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 210.

293 *Ibid.*, letter 273.

(*nās*), so that he can make them benefit from the rulings (*aḥkām*) of the Book of Good and the Sunna of the Messenger of God [...], lest they gradually advance to a blind and deaf corruption.” The Mahdī was well aware of the limitations of his position. From a distance, lacking efficient means of communication and often sufficient knowledge of the local situation, the Mahdī was highly dependent on the information given to him by his representatives. His main task, however, was not to provide direct instructions which would probably be outdated once they reached their intended recipient. He was striving to impose a common norm, based on the canonical texts of Islam as he interpreted them, and spread a language of power. What is striking in the text quoted above is that it lacked a direct reference to strategic concerns. The Mahdī was confounded by some of the rumours which had reached him from Eastern Sudan, but the most urgent matter was not to obtain details on the military campaigns undertaken by the Mahdist forces in this region, but rather to receive news “from the people”. This reflected the concern tackled in the first letter, which dealt solely with the handling of the local populations, whereas, for all he could know, the Red Sea littoral was still the scene of intense combats. Still, the Mahdī must have had some further doubts as to ‘Uthmān Dīqna’s propensity or ability to comply to his request. He then resorted to shame ‘Uthmān Dīqna by comparing him to more efficient *‘umalā’* such as Muḥammad Khālīd Zuqāl, the previous *mudīr* of Dāra and now the *‘āmil* over all the west, “[who] writes to us always and ever (*dā’imān wa abadān*)”. To be absolutely sure that his *‘āmil* in the east would comprehend his intent, he even included a copy of a letter from Zuqāl, so that “you understand what is in it and that you and your companions learn from their method (*naḥj*)<sup>294</sup>”. ‘Uthmān Dīqna’s reaction was belated but consequential. To make amends for past neglects, three long letters were produced that summarised the early phase of the Mahdiyya’s penetration of Eastern Sudan. The *Waqā’i’* was indeed a remarkable source<sup>295</sup>. While no news from Eastern Sudan had reached the Mahdist headquarter for a full year, from 1884 (1301/2) onwards letters were more frequent but hardly more regular (see fig. 2.1), in contrast with the Khalīfa’s disillusioned requests for information as to local developments.

[2 pages transferred to chapter 5: check the articulation + add paragraph on how letters were accompanied with other documents]

In contrast with the state of the army, the operations of the treasury in Tūkar were little supervised. This changed in the wake of the conflict which opposed ‘Uthmān Dīqna and Abū Qarja and which the delegates were in pain to resolve definitively. In addition to his decision to grant Abū Qarja control over the treasury, the Khalīfa instructed the two Mahdist leaders in Eastern Sudan in early May 1889 (early Ramaḍān 1306) to send him a monthly report on the revenues and expenses

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294 *Ibid.*, letter 274.

295 See chapter 2.

(*al-wārid wa-l-munṣarif*), which he would certify before sending them to the secretary of the central treasury, Ibrāhīm ‘Adlān<sup>296</sup>. ‘Uthmān Diqna replied that he would do as instructed and that the delegates would be kept informed of the proceedings of the treasury. There are, however, few traces of these dispatches<sup>297</sup>, and their regularity is difficult to assess<sup>298</sup>.

The vast majority of letters written to Eastern Sudan were destined to a few individuals, first among which, by far, ‘Uthmān Diqna. Contacts were concentrated to a limited number of Mahdist leaders and the Khalīfa expected that information be communicated to him through a single canal. The writing of letters was imbued with a political dimension. Once Abū Qarja had arrived to Kasalā to assist ‘Uthmān Diqna in his relations with local populations, the two Mahdist leaders soon came head to head. The Khalīfa did not fail to notice this, among other reasons because each was sending him his own letters, and so, in May 1887 (Sha‘bān 1304), he ordered them to write to him conjointly. Control over this line of communication was crucial as it allowed to frame matters in a certain light. In that regard, petitions directly sent to Umm Durmān, thus bypassing local authorities, could easily be construed as an act of defiance. Conversely, the Khalīfa tried to prevent suspicions and rivalries by informing his main interlocutors that he had been writing to others. For example, because of ‘Alī b. Ḥāmid al-Jamīlābī’s ambiguous position in the new hierarchy of Mahdist leadership in Eastern Sudan, when the Khalīfa wrote to him, he informed ‘Uthmān Diqna and Abū Qarja<sup>299</sup>.

#### ii) *Visiting the Holy Spot: Summons and Pilgrimages*

Not all matters could be solved through epistolary means. To obtain direct information, the Khalīfa regularly summoned his ‘*umalā*’ to come visit him, sometimes for extended periods of time. Besides those organised for exceptional reasons, the Khalīfa had instituted yearly councils for the *Rajabiyya* (on 27 Rajab) and the *‘īd al-Adḥā* (on 10 D. al-Ḥijja). All government agents were required to spend *‘īd* in Umm Durmān and could not return before its end<sup>300</sup>.

‘Uthmān Diqna was no exception and he too participated in these visits. After his departure

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296 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 175. The Khalīfa’s letter dated 1<sup>st</sup> May 1889 (29 Sha‘bān 1306) is mentioned in *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 35. Copies of these reports were kept by the Tūkar treasury. See NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/66B.

297 The accounts from the treasury of Kasalā for the period from 16 Rajab to the end of Sha‘bān 1307 (March-April 1890) and of Tūkar, probably for a similar period, were sent to the central treasury in Umm Durmān where they were received by al-‘Awaḍ al-Marḍī, just as he was transferring his position to al-Nūr Ibrāhīm. He communicated this information to ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr in Tūkar. See *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 107.

298 Such documents could not be found in other archival sets and those dispatches are not referred to in the available correspondence. However, the massive loss of documentation from the central treasury precludes any definite conclusion.

299 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letters 85 and 93.

300 Bābikīr BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 144 ; Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

from al-Ubayyid *c.* June 1883 (Sha‘bān 1299), events in Eastern Sudan prevented him from going back to the Mahdī who died before the ‘*āmil* of the East had the chance to see him again. Busy managing the aftermath of Kasalā’s surrender and organizing military operations in Abyssinian territory, he failed to join the other leaders of the movement for the ceremony held in front of the Mahdī’s tomb on 20 September 1885 (10 D. al-Ḥijja 13032) at which they all pledged allegiance to ‘Abdullāhi. The ‘*āmil* was eventually summoned to the new capital on 19 July 1886 (17 Shawwāl 1303) and left Eastern Sudan a month later, on 13 August (14 D. al-Qa‘da), almost exactly three years after his arrival in his ‘*imāla*. He stayed there a few weeks, before returning east *c.* late October (Muḥarram 1304), after the end of the festivities. He stopped first in al-Qaḍārif and reached Kasalā in December (Rabī‘ I)<sup>301</sup>. Henceforth, summons to Umm Durmān became more regular. ‘Uthmān Diqna was asked to participate in the yearly council of the *umarā’*. He received the Khalīfa’s order in July 1887 (Shawwāl 1304) and left at some point at the end of the month<sup>302</sup>. For unknown reasons, he did not stay to attend the celebrations of the end of the Islamic year. Indeed, by 13 August, the ‘*āmil* had already left the capital, probably to handle the growing opposition of certain Bijāwī communities near Kasalā<sup>303</sup>. He remained in Eastern Sudan throughout 1888 (1305/6) where he headed the pacification of the region and organised the siege of Sawākin. As in 1883-1885 (1300-1302), military operations took precedence over other considerations.

Abū Qarja who had arrived in Kasalā in February 1887 (Jumādā I 1304), shortly after ‘Uthmān Diqna’s return, became the main intermediary of the Khalīfa. He replaced him at the council where he was summoned on 15 June 1888 (6 Shawwāl 1305) of that year, alongside two other *umarā’*<sup>304</sup>. Contrary to the ‘*āmil* who had made a very brief appearance the year before, Abū Qarja remained there five months, from July to December 1888 (Shawwāl 1305-Rabī‘ II 1306), in part to defend himself against the numerous accusations brought against him.

The following year, ‘Uthmān Diqna could not escape his duties. Mahdist defeats in Sawākin in late December 1888 (late Rabī‘ II 1306) and in Tūshkī, near Abū Sinbal, in early August 1889 (early D. al-Ḥijja 1306), as well as intense difficulties in food supplies, prompted the Khalīfa to call for an extraordinary council to reassess the policies of the Mahdist state. The ‘*āmil* left Tūkar on 7

301 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 99, 121 and 124 ; Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 299 and 331. For the dating of ‘Uthmān Diqna’s return, see the *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letters 70-78, p. 64-71.

302 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 99–100 ; Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 341.

303 See chapter 2.

304 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 62. The whereabouts of Abū Qarja between July 1888 and March 1889 are difficult to ascertain. He was in Umm Durmān in December 1888, however, it is unclear whether he had been back in Eastern Sudan in the meantime. Ḥammūdī implies that this was the case but does not offer evidence for this (Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 111–112). ‘Uthmān Diqna’s silence in his correspondence on the actions of his deputy would indicate that the latter had indeed remained in the capital.

October (11 Ṣafar 1307) and arrived to Umm Durmān, after a stop in Barbar, a month later. Exceptionally, he was accompanied by the *amīn* of the treasury, ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf, who, contrary to his brother, had probably never met the Khalīfa before. Discussions were quite long and ‘Uthmān Diqna only left the capital in late December. As for his 1887 (1305) visit, his return journey was an occasion to tour the neighbouring province, staying a few weeks in al-Qallābāt and al-Qaḍārif. He arrived in Kasalā in early March 1890 (late Rajab 1307) and in Tūkar on 22 August (6 Muḥarram 1308) where he had been absent for almost a year<sup>305</sup>. The withdrawal of the Mahdist headquarters from Tūkar to Adārāma on the ‘Aṭbara after the Anglo-Egyptian expedition of February 1891 (Jumādā II) required yet another discussion with the Khalīfa with regard to the course to follow in Eastern Sudan. Probably because this touched the whole region, ‘Uthmān Diqna visited the capital accompanied by Muḥammad al-Zākī ‘Uthmān, Barbar’s *‘āmil*, around May-June 1891 (D. al-Ḥijja 1308-Muḥarram 1309)<sup>306</sup>.

These visits were not limited to high-ranking Mahdist officials. Tribal leaders, including Bijāwī *shuyūkh*, were often ordered to come to the capital. This represented a power move by the Khalīfa who had no scruples keeping them hostage or imprison them for long periods of time. For example, once the two sons of the “traitor Maḥmūd ‘Alī”, Aḥmad and al-Ṭāhir, had discreetly left Sawākin by night amid the festivities of the *‘īd al-Aḍḥā* 1305 and proclaimed their adherence to the Mahdiyya c. mid-August 1888 (c. 10 D. al-Ḥijja<sup>307</sup>), they quickly expressed their desire to perform the *hijra* to Umm Durmān and visit the Khalīfa. Considering that two months later they had not yet left and that ‘Uthmān Diqna suggested sending them with a “strong escort”, there is all the reasons to believe that their wish had very much been suggested to them. Indeed, the Khalīfa’s suspicion as to the sincerity of their rallying to the Mahdist movement would not be assuaged until he personally saw them, as he requested, again, from his *‘āmil*, in November (Rabī‘ I 1306). After many prevarications, they finally left a few weeks later<sup>308</sup>.

Leaders were not always summoned because the Khalīfa was unhappy about their behaviour. One of the main issues of the central authorities was access to reliable information. Asking tribal heads to come to Umm Durmān, allowed the Mahdist ruler to hear a different point of view than his *‘āmil*’s. This was the reason for the summoning of the heads of obedient tribes in April 1888 (Sha‘bān 1305)—as the Bijāwī civil war was still raging—each of them carrying a letter

305 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 190 and 203.

306 *Ibid.*, letters 226, 288 and 229.

307 According to Abū Salīm, the letter that contained this information was written on 16 D. al-Qa‘da which is very probably wrong. The right date must be 16 D. al-Ḥijja 1305, after the *‘īd al-Aḍḥā* celebrated from the 10 to 14 D. al-Ḥijja, although this could not be confirmed by using British sources, among other reasons because intelligence reports prior to May 1889 (Ramaḍān 1306) are not available. See *Ibid.*, letter 70.

308 *Ibid.*, letters 124 and 126.

with details on their community's main characteristics (see above)<sup>309</sup>. Insights were difficult to obtain, quite particularly on Eastern Sudan and the Bijāwī tribes on which the Khalīfa must have had only vague ideas. But there were local relays in Umm Durmān. As opposition to Mahdist rule became impossible to ignore in the summer 1887 (late 1304), 'Uthmān Diqna gave the Khalīfa a list of four Ammār'ar who resided in the capital, with their clan affiliation, and could advise the Mahdist ruler would he wish for locals to explain to him the intricacies of Bijāwī politics<sup>310</sup>.

Lastly, these trips were seldom realised by single individuals. Some presented personal requests to their *'āmil* to undertake a pilgrimage to the Holy Spot to see the Mahdī's tomb and, if they were lucky, come across his successor. Those may have travelled by themselves, but in most cases, visits to Umm Durmān were collective undertakings<sup>311</sup>. When one of Maḥmūd 'Alī's sons finally left for Umm Durmān in December 1888 (Rabī' II 1306), he was accompanied by 26 persons. In the same manner, when 'Uthmān Diqna departed from Barbar to attend the *'īd al-Aḍḥā* in July 1892 (D. al-Ḥijja 1309), 1 591 people accompanied him, some from the *'āmil*'s own group, but most from the Ja'aliyīn based in the region who seized the opportunity to visit the capital<sup>312</sup>.

### *iii) Checks and Balances: The Role of Delegates*

Summons to Umm Durmān raised several issues. The authority of the *'umalā'*, in Eastern Sudan as in other regions, was always somewhat fragile. Travelling to Umm Durmān was a lengthy endeavour and visits could last months. In the meantime, they were absent from their headquarters where they had left a deputy (*wakīl*) whose authority was often even less respected than their *'āmil*'s. The risks of insubordination, if not open rebellion, were quite high. Secondly, the *'umalā'* themselves, quite particularly when they thought that the Khalīfa may be displeased with their actions, could use an infinite set of delaying tactics to postpone their trip. Finally, the Mahdist ruler was still very dependent from what was being told to him. He had little means to ensure that policies decided in the capital during conversations with his *'umalā'* would be actually implemented. Furthermore, communications between the centre and the provinces were so slow that several weeks, if not months, elapsed between the moment a letter was sent and when the response was received. This was quite impractical for rapidly evolving situations. For all these reasons, the Khalīfa needed his own agents in the provinces who could report to him independently and

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309 *Ibid.*, letter 40.

310 *Ibid.*, letter 6.

311 In a letter written in late December 1890 (mid-Jumādā I 1308), two men, 'Alī Kabjā'an and Muḥammad Ibrāhīm explained that they had obtained to accompany Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf to Umm Durmān, but unfortunately, they had nothing to pay for provisions or a mount, and so asked the treasury whether they could receive some help. (NRO Mahdiyya 5/20/70D, document 12).

312 Ibrāhīm 'Akāsha 'ALĪ, *Wilāyat Barbar fī 'ahd al-Khalīfa 'Abd Allāh (Ramaḍān 1302 – Rajab 1317 / June 1885 – November 1899)*, *op. cit.*, p. 77.



supervise provincial administrations. As seen at the beginning of this chapter, such a system had already been sketched during the Mahdī's rule, even if the Khalīfa is the one who systematised it.

Indeed, since the very beginning of the development of Mahdist provincial authorities, the central power dispatched what could be dubbed political commissars, that is agents sent to circumscribe the influence of local leaders and endeavour to prod them into conforming to the policies enacted by the Mahdī.

For example, in the early days of the Mahdiyya, in 1881/2 (1299), Aḥmad 'Umar w. Baqādī<sup>313</sup> was appointed by the Mahdī as his representative with authority over "his family, his people, his following and his disciples". The Mahdist leader added in the letter of his appointment that the man carrying it, Muḥammad al-faqīh Ḥusayn<sup>314</sup>, was to remain with him "to assist [him] and help [him] in the matter of establishing the religion<sup>315</sup>". There were other instances of a similar attempt at supervising provincial agents. On 10 February 1883 (2 Rabī' II 1300), the restless and often insubordinate 'Asākir Abū Kalām was told of the coming of the *shaykh* Aḥmad al-ḥājj al-Badrī, a holyman of the Blue Nile and among the first to be called upon by the Mahdī<sup>316</sup>, to serve as his advisor on "all the matters of *sharī'a*" and "to instruct you on the matters of the religion, the duties of the prayer, the *zakāt*, and he should be helped for the building of the mosque<sup>317</sup>". A month later, in March 1883 (Jumādā I 1300), the Mahdī detailed the missions entrusted to these delegates in his correspondence with Muḥammad b. al-ḥājj Aḥmad, his representative in Kāba<sup>318</sup>. He explained that since "Muslims were keen to find excuses [not to establish the religion], [he] appointed representatives to do it on his behalf and assume some of his burden<sup>319</sup>". This effort was not confined to the territories solidly integrated to the Mahdist realm since companions were also dispatched to Dār Fūr and Zaghāwa territory, there again to ensure the performance of the religious prescriptions<sup>320</sup>.

Because the delegates were external actors, they could also be entrusted "with righting the

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313 Little is known about Aḥmad w. 'Umar w. Baqādī and his involvement in the Mahdiyya. A letter dated April 1885 (Rajab 1302) mentions his death from smallpox and the appointment of his son, al-Ḥasan (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 702). He originated from a famous family of *fuqahā'* (sing. *faqīh*) from the Kawāhla located in the Jazīra since the eighteenth century (Khadiga Karrar AL-TAYYIB, *Aspects of Sufism in the Sudan*, MA diss., University of Durham, Durham, 1975, p. 93.) and whose most famous member was 'Alī b. Ḥammūda al-Kahlī al-Aswadī (d. 1803), called 'Alī wad Baqādī, Aḥmad's great-grandfather. His grandfather was impaled by the Egyptians in 1830 (1245/6), according to Hill for "disaffection". His father, 'Umar al-Sanūsī 'Alī (d. 1857) was also a renowned scholar (Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 46; 365).

314 This is the only occurrence in which this man appears in the Mahdī's correspondence.

315 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 65.

316 Aḥmad w. al-Ḥājj al-Badrī belonged to a group of holymen of the Jazīra among the first to join the Mahdiyya. He was appointed at their head 13 July 1883 (26 Sha'bān 1299). See *Ibid.*, letters 26 and 41.

317 *Ibid.*, letter 84.

318 Kāba was the main Mahdist camp during the siege of al-Ubayyīd.

319 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 90.

320 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 95.

situation (*ṣilāḥ al-aḥwāl*) in [a] region and putting an end to the discords and rancors (*fitan wa daghā'in*) there for the welfare of the Muslims and the Servitors [of God]<sup>321</sup>". Their intervention was not always well received and that for the very same reason they had been chosen by the Mahdī: they were foreign to the matters at hand. In February 1884 (Rabī' II 1301), the Mahdī wrote to all of the *anṣār*, especially the Mahdist leadership, to blame them for having "neglected my representatives and my helpers (*a'wān* sing. *'awn*), and chose rather to accuse me with insinuation[s], insult my companions and helpers and hurt me through them<sup>322</sup>". Shortly after, in May 1884 (Rajab), the Mahdī extended the use of delegates, this time to assist the main holders of offices within the central authority, and appointed four men for this mission: Aḥmad 'Umar w. Baqādī who was mentioned above; Muḥammad 'Abd al-Karīm<sup>323</sup>—to whom the *'imāla* of Sinnār was entrusted in February 1885 (Jumādā I 1302)<sup>324</sup>—; Muḥammad Sulaymān, the brother of Aḥmad Sulaymān, the famous *amīn* of the central treasury; and al-Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf who subsequently played such an important role in the Tūkar administration, alongside his brother. The Mahdī felt it necessary, in view of the opposition triggered by his previous appointments, to clarify their functions and their position in the Mahdist hierarchy. This long text offers precious insights into the role he wished delegates to perform. He wrote that:

*"The most important of the missions is to consult one another and monitor all of the matters, so that all of you become like myself in achieving what is right [...]. The task assigned to you is that you take care [...] of what concerns me, and what I am obligated to do with regarding what is presented to me, and what I am obligated to do regarding what arises from the affair[s] of the Muslims, like their petitions, their letters, their requests, and their daily needs (ḥawā'ij). So what the Khalīfa 'Abd Allāh must do, advise him on it; what the representatives [of the sharī'a] must do, advise them on it; on what Aḥmad Sulaymān must do as well; and what the qādī [al-islām] must do, advise him on it<sup>325</sup>."*

The Mahdī tried to walk a narrow path between conferring to his envoys some authority and avoiding the backlash their interference could cause, particularly from the higher echelons of the Mahdist hierarchy. Therefore, he forbade them from going against a decision taken by the *qādī* but

321 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 375. This letter was sent in July 1884 (Ramaḍān 1301) to al-Ḥusayn 'Abd al-Wāḥid Nūr al-Dā'im who was the grandson of the famed *shaykh* of the Sammāniyya Muḥammad Sharīf Nūr al-Dā'im, himself the grandson of the founder of the order in Sudan, *shaykh* Aḥmad al-Tayyib al-Bashīr.

322 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 244.

323 Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

324 The city only fell into Mahdist hands 19 August 1885 (8 D. al-Qa'da 1302), but Muḥammad 'Abd al-Karīm was already designated as *'amil* of Sinnār in the letters the latter exchanged with the Mahdī before this date. See, for example, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 788. For details on the siege of Sinnār and the role played by Muḥammad 'Abd al-Karīm, see Aḥmad 'Uthmān Muḥammad IBRĀHĪM, *Al-Jazīra fī khilāl al-Mahdiyya, 1881-1899*, *op. cit.*, p. 94–104.

325 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 332.

added they could do so “if you saw a flaw (*khilal*) in what is presented to you”. They should then discuss it among them and come to an agreement on what was right (*ṣawāb*). In brief, he granted the delegates three functions. Firstly, they were to act as advisors to high officials. Secondly, they were supposed to be the Mahdī’s representatives and, in that respect, make sure of the legality of all decisions. Lastly, they served as intermediaries between the Mahdist community at large over their leaders, a function that was meant to be eased by the fact that they had no direct authority over neither. Attempts at controlling and regulating the action of the Mahdist regime in the provinces were met with suspicion and proved difficult to implement, and yet, they were instrumental in defining the nature of the Mahdist presence in specific territories, especially since legal matters were central to their mission.

The first emissaries to have been dispatched to Eastern Sudan were tasked by the Mahdī to negotiate the surrender of Kasalā’s garrison in the summer of 1885 (mid-1302), as mentioned above. On this occasion, al-Ḥusayn Ibrāhīm Zahrā<sup>326</sup>, and Ibrāhīm Aḥmad ‘Ālim were sent to Tāka’s capital where they met ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf<sup>327</sup>. But they were not meant to stay beyond their mission and so could not be considered as true delegates. To some extent, the same could be said of Muḥammad Ayra. A Tankīrābī<sup>328</sup> trader, he was reported to have been present in al-Ubayyīḍ before the coming of ‘Uthmān Diqna<sup>329</sup>, he met with the Khalīfa in early 1886 (mid-1303) on whom he made quite an impression since the latter decided to send him to Kasalā to assess the situation and report back in Umm Durmān<sup>330</sup>. The results of this mission must have been modest since no other mention was made of it<sup>331</sup>.

Actual delegates were sent later, and that on at least two distinct occasions. The most significant mandate began in early 1889 (mid-1306) when the Khalīfa appointed four delegates in Tūkar. Muḥammad Khālīd, al-Ṭāhir al-Majdhūb, al-Shafī‘ Aḥmad Raḥmat Allāh, and Ismā‘īl Aḥmad were tasked with supervising the transfer of the camp from Handūb to Tūkar and solve the ongoing crisis between ‘Uthmān Diqna and Abū Qarja<sup>332</sup>. Two of them stayed in Tūkar for several months until October 1889 (Ṣafar 1307). Another team of two delegates was appointed in April

326 For a detailed account of al-Ḥusayn Ibrāhīm Zahrā’s life, see Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *‘Ālim al-Mahdiyya: al-Ḥusayn Ibrāhīm Zahrā wa a ‘māl-hu*, Khartoum, Al-mu’assasa al-‘amma li-l-ṭibā‘a wa al-nashr wa al-tawzī‘ wa al-i‘lān, 1999.

327 Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitab sa‘adat al-mustahdi bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdi (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdi) by Isma‘il b. ‘Abd al-Qadir*, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

328 A section of the Hadanduwa located, as many others, near the Qāsh Delta.

329 Muḥammad Ṣālīḥ ḌIRĀR, *Amīr al-Sharq, ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

330 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 53, p. 62.

331 Not much is known about his trajectory. However, he is noted as the leader of a small banner under ‘Uthmān Diqna in late 1890 (early 1308). See NRO Mahdiyya 5/08/35B, p. 11.

332 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 82; 129. There is wealth of documents related to their mission. For the letter announcing the coming of the delegates, see *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 258, p. 205/

1891 (Sha‘bān 1307), after the Mahdist headquarters in Eastern had been relocated to Adārāma, under the pressure of Anglo-Egyptian forces<sup>333</sup>. The third occurrence is more ambiguous. Since Abū Qarja had succeeded Ḥāmid ‘Alī as ‘*āmil* of Kasalā in January 1890 (Jumādā I/II 1307), his actions had raised many suspicions, including that he may be entertaining communications with the Italians, recently established in Eritrea<sup>334</sup>. The Khalīfa sent Musā‘id Qaydūm to Tāka to assess the situation, but the ‘*āmil*’s reluctance or inability to produce the accounting books which had been handed to him during the transfer of power only reinforced those doubts. While Musā‘id confided his first impressions to the Khalīfa on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1891 (1 Jumādā I 1309), definitive proof was still required. Eventually, Musā‘id wrote on 6 January 1892 (5 Jumādā II) that he had found a witness, a man named Sharīf Aḥmad Dābāy, who could testify that Abū Qarja had been selling firearms, about 100 Remington rifles, to the Italians in Sanhīt in June 1891 (D. al-Qa‘da). Besides, a few days later, Musā‘id also claimed that he had gotten hold of a correspondence between Abū Qarja and the agent of the Italians in Kasalā, Abū Bakr Mantāy, thus attesting of communication between the two sides. He had a copy made under the supervision of the *qāḍī* Sulaymān Shādhālī. In the tense context of the revolt of the *ashrāf* on 23 November 1891 (20 Rabī‘ II), the Khalīfa would not take the risk that Abū Qarja may join the rebels. He was promptly called back to Umm Durmān and sent to the province of Equatoria in what was an exile in all but name<sup>335</sup>.

In the two first cases, the decision to appoint delegates came as a response to the dramatic changes experienced by the Mahdist power: in December 1888 (Rabī‘ II 1306), when the failure of Sawākin’s siege became evident, and in February 1891 (Rajab 1308), after the capture of Tūkar by Anglo-Egyptian troops and the Mahdist withdrawal to the ‘Aṭbara. They were prompted by two main motives: to assess the state of available forces and report on the operations of the administration. Contrary to what might be expected, these initiatives did not derive solely from the centre. In mid-1888 (late 1305), at the onset of the food crisis that plagued the following years, several *umarā’* complained directly to the Khalīfa about the conditions in the camp in Handūb and requested that people be sent from Umm Durmān to assess the situation<sup>336</sup>. Besides, the attention brought Eastern Sudan was not exceptional. In April 1889 (Sha‘bān 1306), four delegates were sent to Dunqulā, so as to report on the action of its ‘*āmil*, Yūnus al-Dikaym<sup>337</sup>.

One of the underlying reasons for using delegates was that not all the early adherents of the

333 These two delegates were Makkī Abū Ḥarāz and al-Ṭāhir Tatāy. See Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 222.

334 This was not the first time that Abū Qarja’s behaviour had raised concerns in Umm Durmān, as seen above.

335 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 142–145.

336 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 63.

337 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 3. See also *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 8.

millenarian movement possessed the necessary skills, both logistical—for the conduct of the *jihād*—and legal—for the establishment of the Islamic standards imposed by the new regime—to reliably perform the missions entrusted to them. The Mahdī had coalesced around him individuals from a variety of backgrounds, some who benefitted from the support of their community, some of who had no local standing. Delegates were supposed to remedy their potential administrative shortcomings and homogenise Mahdist governmentality.

The choice of delegates was driven by different considerations. As regards those who were appointed by the Khalīfa in late 1888 (early 1306), two groups can be distinguished. Muḥammad Khālid Zuqal and Ismā‘īl Aḥmad had probably never been to Eastern Sudan before. The former had been the *‘āmil* of most of the Mahdist western territories centred around Dār Fūr under the Mahdī, but had since fallen into disgrace when he backed the *ashrāf* against the Khalīfa in late 1885-early 1886 (mid-1303)<sup>338</sup>. Placed under house arrest in Umm Durmān for the past two years, Muḥammad Khālid may have welcomed the possibility of leaving while the Khalīfa removed a dangerous rival from the centre of power, considering that he could do little harm in a region he had no connections with. Ismā‘īl Aḥmad is a much lesser known figure. The DMI thought he was the Mahdī’s nephew<sup>339</sup>, an idea that bears some credit since one of the sources mentioning him is a letter he wrote directly to Muḥammad Aḥmad asking for family members to be added to the list of beneficiaries of the treasury’s pensions<sup>340</sup>. These individuals were nonetheless pertinent choices, at least Muḥammad Khālid who had served several major functions under the Mahdiyya as well as the Turkiyya<sup>341</sup> and who could make the administrators of the Tūkar treasury benefit from his experience. His reputation had reached Wingate’s ears who noted in his 1891 report on Eastern Sudan that “the attempt at establishing a regular form of government is said to be due entirely to the Emir Zogal, who was formerly Mudir of Darra, in Darfur, when the Egyptian government was in occupation of the Sudan, and had shown himself to be a man of considerable ability. From this date accounts appear to have been most carefully kept and the various regulations strictly enforced<sup>342</sup>.” Wingate vastly exaggerated Muḥammad Khalid’s influence, since the overhaul of the Tūkar treasury had been impelled by ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr several months before (see above) and no radical change in the quality of the records<sup>343</sup> can be observed after the arrival of the delegates

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338 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 143–145.

339 As all statements emanating from officers of the DMI, this should be taken with a pinch of salt. Indeed, this information would have been more convincing had they not mistaken his name for Muḥammad. See DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin), no. 91 (17-30 September 1889). Muḥammad Khālid was also a cousin of the Mahdī.

340 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 885.

341 Muḥammad Khālid was the governor of Shaqqa in 1879 (1296/7) and the acting-governor in Dāra in 1882 (1299/300), two localities in Dār Fūr (Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 261).

342 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, p. 4.

343 There might nonetheless be some truth in Wingate’s comment. While most accounts had been initiated before, both the daily accounts of the granary and detailed records on goods and articles were started in Rajab 1306 (March

around late March 1889 (late Rajab 1306)<sup>344</sup>. The head of the DMI was keen to underscore that a structured government could not be the result of an endogenous process but must derive from the former coloniser's influence<sup>345</sup>. Accompanying these two foreigners, the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir al-Majdhūb was arguably the most famous figure in that part of Eastern Sudan, and, as seen in the second chapter, one of the main actors of the Mahdist movement. He had undertaken the journey to Umm Durmān in May 1887 (Shaʿbān 1304) to visit the Khalīfa and had stayed in the Mahdist capital until his appointment<sup>346</sup>. The identity of al-Shafīʿ Aḥmad Raḥma could not be determined with certainty, among other reasons because his name varies from one letter to another. In one of them, he is designated as “al-Shafīʿ Aḥmad al-Majdhūb”, maybe an indication that he belonged to the Majādhīb. As such, he may have accompanied the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir, thus explaining his presence in Umm Durmān<sup>347</sup>. As the two other delegates left in late September 1889 (early Ṣafar 1307) with the *ʿāmil* of the East to answer the Khalīfa's summon to an extraordinary council, al-Shafīʿ Aḥmad was ordered to stay in Tūkar alongside al-Ṭāhir al-Majdhūb, another sign that he was a native from the region<sup>348</sup>.

The individuals appointed by the Khalīfa were quite different from one another, some were extremely famous while others were almost unknown; some originated from Eastern Sudan, the others may have never travelled there before; some had already administered large territories or important organisations, the others certainly not. The Mahdist ruler tried to balance these different characteristics to avoid causing the opposition that such interference had provoked in the past. This notion of balance also affected the way the delegates performed their mission.

Their prerogatives were rather large, but they held no direct power in the sense that their authority did not impose itself in a clear manner over all the other actors, although they had been entrusted with the supervision of the granary, and so they held some control over a crucial commodity<sup>349</sup>. Yet, their ability to impact the management of the community in Tūkar depended

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1889) (see appendix [?]), around the time of the delegates' coming. As a former merchant of the Dunqulāwī diaspora in Kurdufān and Dār Fūr, Muḥammad Khālīd would have been well acquainted with these types of accountancy. Evidence is, however, only circumstantial and no other element appears to back it.

344 Unfortunately, the letter announcing the delegates' arrival to the Khalīfa was lost. The latter's correspondence with ʿUthmān Dīqna shows that he was informed of this at the latest on 13 April 1889 (14 Shaʿbān 1306), meaning that their arrival had probably occurred a bit more than two weeks before (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ʿUthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 169).

345 Despite all his reservations toward Muḥammad Khālīd, the Khalīfa certainly valued his skills, considering the rest of his career. Indeed, shortly after his return to Umm Durmān, he was again appointed as delegate in early 1890 (mid-1307), this time in Dunqulā and Abū Ḥamad, with the mission to encourage trade (Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 195).

346 *Daftar ʿUthmān Dīqna*, letter 95, p. 96.

347 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 22.

348 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 61 and Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ʿUthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 178.

349 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 39.

mostly on their legitimacy as guardians of the Mahdist moral economy and the interstitial position they occupied within the network of relations that structured the Mahdist community. Only they could scold the two highest officials, ‘Uthmān Diqna and Abū Qarja, on the running of the camp with such virulence. After an extended period of observation during which they acquainted themselves with the situation, they came to the conclusion that as “they watched the army and the ‘*umalā*’ with respect to [their] handling of religious matters, [they] saw nothing but laziness and lateness for the communal prayers, in abidance to the *rawātib*, and in the performance of public displays ordered to [the *anṣār*]”<sup>350</sup>. Furthermore, the combatants often left the camp without authorisation, they did not respect the army’s organisation and some even deserted to Sawākin. They quickly communicated their initial assessment to the Khalīfa. Their supervision did not stop at purely religious matters but extended to the governance of the community. They showed themselves very critical toward the administrators in Adūbana, Aḥmad Muḥammad Yasin al-Nīla, Qamr al-Dīn ‘Umar and al-Amīn ‘Abd al-Dā’im, whom they accused of not respecting the regulations previously established. They noted, rather annoyed, that when “‘Abd al-Ḥamīd and those with him were appointed [to Adūbana], they were sending [the] accounts every fifteen days and brought [to Tūkar] what they had levied to distribute it among the *anṣār*. The ‘*āmil*’ was informed of the amount of the proceeds for each month.” But since the personnel had been changed, they had to wait two months to receive the first report<sup>351</sup>. They did not shy from addressing harsh criticisms to more central figures of the treasury. Majdhūb Abū Bakr himself received a strongly worded letter in which he was blamed for not having briefed Khāṭir Ḥamīdān on the rules that governed loot collection before the *amīr* left on a raid<sup>352</sup>.

But their most important function was to serve as intermediaries between the different groups of the Mahdist community. In that regard, they were the main recipients to a number of petitions. These could be presented by everyone and were fundamental to the Mahdist moral economy as they ensured the observance of the core tenets outlined by the Mahdī. Those steps were taken to ensure the accountability of the leaders, a clear echo to the drive for social justice which underlay the millenarian movement since its inception. As early as 1883 (1300/1), Muḥammad Aḥmad had written a proclamation in which he forbade the *anṣār* to intervene in the affairs of the administration but exhorted them to inform their ‘*āmil*’ of any wrongdoing they may have witnessed. Maybe so as to drive his point, the following letter requested that “anyone who has been wronged by me [the Mahdī], [...] the *khulafā*’, the *umarā*’, [or] the *ashrāf* should come forward<sup>353</sup>”. If the

350 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 61 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 49.

351 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 23 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 35. Few copies of such reports were preserved. For an example, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, documents no. 54-56.

352 NRO Mahdiyya 5/21/71, document no. 53.

353 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letters 147 and 148.

extent of the application of this principle is difficult to gauge<sup>354</sup>, evidence shows that petitions addressed to the Mahdist administration were frequent and, for the available cases, led to actual investigations. One of the rare documents detailing the entire process, a dispute started in February 1889 (umādā II 1306) between several *maqādīm* and the leader of their banner, Shā'ib Aḥmad, comprised 27 letters and involved the four delegates recently arrived at Afāfīt, the twelve chiefs of the banner, the two *umarā'*, 'Uthmān Diqna and Abū Qarja, as well as the Khalīfa, to which the initial petition had been duly communicated. Accused of appropriation of funds and victuals by his men, the secretary of the treasury was eventually asked to produce the accounting records and check the legality of each transfer, an operation that was the mainspring of such fastidious bookkeeping<sup>355</sup>.

In that capacity, they received an all array of demands. For example, several petitions were presented to them by *anṣār* who had incurred important expenses, like hiring camels, to come to Tūkar either from Handūb or Kasalā, and now asked to be reimbursed<sup>356</sup>. At the height of their influence, in mid-1889 (late 1306-early 1307), most requests transited at one point or another through their hands, thus granting them enormous power. They acted as a filter and so could channel the allocation of the treasury's resources or regulate access to certain services. They were even responsible for authorising visits to Umm Durmān, even the most important *umarā'* of Eastern Sudan such as Shā'ib Aḥmad, Muḥammad Fanā, Daf' Allāh Khandaqāwī, Khāṭir Ḥamīdan and Muḥammad Shaykh Idrīs<sup>357</sup>. In the same manner, even if the delegates had no judiciary role *per se*, they had some influence on the procedure. An *anṣārī* named Aḥmad Ṭāhir asked them in November 1889 (Rabī' I 1307) for assistance to bring his uncle 'Abd al-Qādir Ṭāha who accused the group of Akkad Mūsā of having killed his son so that he could bring his case before the judges of the *sharī'a muḥammadiyya*<sup>358</sup>.

Delegates embodied the ambiguities of Mahdist governmentality. In spite of the fact that they were directly appointed by the Khalīfa, their role was not to take over the whole of the provincial administrative apparatus but report on local conditions, steer the community toward greater conformity to the Mahdist central principles, and alleviate internal tensions by serving as buffer between the different factions. The meaning of their action reflects much more complex and intricate relationships between central and provincial authorities than the ones described by contemporary British observers who based their views on a simplistic interpretation of the regime as

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354 The matter was, however, considered sufficiently important that the Mahdī wrote a letter to the *amīn* of the treasury, Aḥmad Sulaymān, to instruct him to have copies of this proclamation be made so as to display them on the walls (presumably of the treasury) and in the markets (*aswāq*) (SAD 99/1, *Maṣnaf al-Majdhūb*, p. 43).

355 NRO, Mahdiyya 1/30/03, document no. 1.

356 For example, see NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 22

357 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 1 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 11.

358 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 46 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 34.



despotic and brutal.

## Conclusion

Since the very early days of the Mahdiyya, the question of how to manage populations in distant areas and supervise their leaders once they had proclaimed their support occupied a central position in the Mahdī's political thought. The transformation of the revolutionary movement into a state organisation was a gradual process. It entailed the incorporation of fragmented groups scattered across Nilotic Sudan under a clear hierarchical structure; the dismissal of its first adherents, mainly Sufi *shuyūkh*, whose autonomy was seen as threatening to the Mahdī's authority; and the progressive territorial expansion of the Mahdist rule of law.

In contrast with previous assessments that emphasised the role of the Khalīfa in the institutionalisation of the provincial administration, this chapter endeavoured to show that not only continuities with the process initiated by Mahdī were important, but also that a significant part of the structure established in Eastern Sudan (as in other regions) was shaped by local decisions related to endogenous circumstances. Despite its limitations, the administrative apparatus centred around the Tūkar treasury was a complex institution that attempted to answer to specific needs with very limited resources, and not an inchoate imitation of a central treasury that could only function thanks to the work of former administrators of the Turkiyya. Consequently, provincial autonomy was a reality that should not be discarded outright, and the model elaborated by Holt that distinguished between "military" and "metropolitan provinces"<sup>359</sup> be abandoned in favour of a more cautious approach that underlines the numerous mutual influences between the centre of power and the provinces, as well as between the latter, through the circulation of men and administrative practices.

The final part of this chapter was centred on this very aspect. It showed that the provincial administration played a crucial role in maintaining a balance between the different sources of authority. The complex administrative procedures implemented by the treasury were aimed at realizing the Mahdī's principles of a just and fair government. As such, the treasury could also become one of the main battlegrounds for the competing ambitions of Mahdist leaders, as the ones that caused the rift between 'Uthmān Diqna and Abū Qarja. These developments were followed closely by the Khalīfa who relied almost exclusively on the dense epistolary network founded by the Mahdī to surveil his agents throughout Nilotic Sudan. However, letters could only do so much to solve these rivalries and other tensions that emanated from these communities. Summoning

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359 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 244–249.

leaders to Umm Durmān allowed the Mahdist ruler to gain access to better and more direct sources of information, but even yearly meetings were difficult to organise, especially since they caused problematic power vacuums in provincial headquarters that often resulted in further internal challenges and conflicts. Therefore, delegates were instrumental in mitigating these issues and reassert the influence of the central authority. And yet, the system developed by the Khalīfa did not conform to his alleged heavy-handedness, but signalled, on the contrary, a keen understanding of local dynamics and an attempt to avoid unnecessary reactions to external interferences.

In this general description of the Mahdist provincial administration, the variability of local configurations was noted on several occasions. Provinces, like Eastern Sudan, did not display the same features, like territorial sub-divisions. Unlike former interpretations, these differences should not be construed as a deficit, but as adaptations to particular and evolving contexts. Making sense of these specificities requires to renew our understanding of the connections that held together the different political spaces of the Mahdist polity. This does not negate the centralised character of the Mahdist state, although a close examination of the provincial administration's practices reveals a much more contrasted picture. Relations between the political centre and the outer territories were more reciprocal than formerly described. Experiments and adaptations could be carried out in a provincial context only to be endorsed *ex post* by the Khalīfa, sometimes maintained deliberately in a state of nebulous ignorance as to the details of the situation. In addition, certain aspects of local policies or the local organisation of power could be transferred from one province to another or even make their way to Umm Durmān. This relative provincial autonomy was particularly true when considering the way the treasury in Tūkar performed its central function, namely the management of resources, the topic of the next chapter.



“Someone [...] came to us from the fort (qaqara) [of Sawākin], from among the Christians, who describes himself as a journalist (jurnaljī) from London who purported to have been sent from the country of the English to understand the reason of this current war [...] and whether we love trade or war, so that he can inform his people.”

Letter from ‘Uthmān Diqna to the Khalīfa (30 January 1889 / 29 Jumādā I 1306)<sup>1</sup>

“Merchants are one of the pillars of the Mahdist state.”

Bābikir Badrī, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri* (1969)<sup>2</sup>

When Rudolf C. Slatin published in 1896 the account of his long sojourn in Umm Durmān, he expressed the prevailing opinion among British officials regarding the effects of the Mahdiyya on the region’s economy by pointing to the “horrors and cruelties [...] enacted by the Khalifa and his followers in order to maintain their position of ascendancy” as the cause of the ruin of Nilotic Sudan where “at least seventy-five per cent of the total population has succumbed to war, famine, and disease, while of the remainder the majority are little better than slaves<sup>3</sup>”. The regime’s failure to foster Nilotic Sudan’s economic development was seen as the sign that an imperial intervention was required. Unable to provide for its population, the Khalīfian state was described as both morally and economically bankrupt.

Later analyses challenged this assessment by underlining its propagandist nature as part of the “Wingate literature<sup>4</sup>”, but the dominant narrative remained attached to a simplistic interpretation of the Mahdist economy that reduced its evolutions to two main phases. The first one saw, during the early years of the millenarian movement, the establishment of a “booty economy” almost entirely geared toward mustering resources for the war effort. It was followed, once the latter had stabilised and morphed into a state structure, by a second phase during which economic resources were hoarded by the ruling group and used to ensure the survival of the autocratic order established by the Khalīfa<sup>5</sup>. This characterisation of Mahdist Sudan’s political economy echoed the opposition

1 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 150.

2 Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

3 Rudolf C. SLATIN, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 623.

4 Gabriel R. WARBURG, “The Wingate Literature Revisited,” *op. cit.* See introduction.

5 Yitzhak NAKASH, “Fiscal and Monetary Systems in the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898,” *op. cit.*, p. 368.

that was assumed to exist between the Mahdī and the Khalīfa regarding the handling of economic matters. On the one hand, it was posited that because of the Mahdī's *da'wa* that forcefully exhorted the *anṣār* to give up the material world (*dunyā*), dedicate their life to the *jihād* and place their faith in God (*tawakkul*), the nascent Mahdist organisation had little interest in defining economic policies, but confined its action to the management of the resources necessary to drive the “Turks” out of Nilotic Sudan, a task entrusted to the central treasury. On the other hand, since the Khalīfa's primary objective was to strengthen his authority against the challenges raised by the riverain communities, most economic resources were monopolised and used to buy the loyalty of the western groups that formed the base of his power. Thus, this narrative emphasised an artificial opposition between two caricatural attitudes: complete disengagement or unbounded predation. But whatever the point of view chosen, it led to the same result: the disqualification of Mahdist policies. This suspicion naturally extended to the massive volume of records produced by the administration during the Khalīfa's rule, considered as a bureaucratic output detached from economic realities<sup>6</sup>.

The historian Muḥammad Sa'īd al-Qaddāl was at the origin of a major shift for the study of the Mahdiyya's economic history. In his groundbreaking work, *The Economic Policy of the Mahdist State, 1881-1898 (Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya)*, published in 1986, he endeavoured to overcome the shortcomings of the dominant interpretation. He focused his attention on unearthing the larger dynamics that shaped Mahdist economic policies, especially during the Khalīfa's rule, and criticised past analyses that confined the matter to the organisation of the central treasury<sup>7</sup> and interpreted the regime's actions almost solely through a normative and administrative prism. In that regard, al-Qaddāl pioneered a new interest in the Mahdiyya's financial documentation, which, he argued, could be mobilised to inform our understanding of these dynamics. This path was followed soon after by Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Shūk who first edited the only extant monthly records produced by the central treasury<sup>8</sup>.

The analysis presented below is very indebted to the approach developed by these authors, which it attempts to further. Indeed, while al-Qaddāl adopted a more encompassing lens than before to analyse economic policies as a whole, at the scale of Nilotic Sudan, he remained attached to the discourse of the centralised state in which the vast majority of the policies were decided in Umm Durmān and then imposed on Mahdist agents elsewhere. As for the aspects of the regime examined in the previous chapters, adopting a provincial perspective allows us to significantly enrich this narrative. Firstly, it strives to balance the economistic inclination that dominates in al-Qaddāl's

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6 See chapter 3.

7 Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 15. For example, Fayṣal al-Ḥājj Muḥammad MŪSĀ, “Bayt al-māl fī dawlat al-Mahdiyya bi-l-Sūdān - Idārat-hu wa ḥisābāt-hu,” *op. cit.*

8 Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK, *The Fiscal Administration of the Mahdist State in the Sudan (1881-1898)*, *op. cit.*

writing so as to retrieve the localised political and social dimensions of the Mahdist economic role. The objective is to insert the regime's economic policies within webs of power dynamics that expressed themselves with acuteness during fiscal levies. Like other communities of Nilotic Sudan, Bijāwī populations were quite reluctant to contribute to the Mahdist budget. Collecting taxes always implied violence or its possibility. The proceeds of such levies were often underwhelming and their contribution to Mahdist budgets limited, but taxation entailed political domination and the recognition of the legitimacy of the Mahdist authority<sup>9</sup>. Not only is context crucial to understand the economic relations between the treasury and the Bijāwī populations, but a reflexion on the temporality of their unfolding is also necessary. Despite its relative brevity, the Mahdiyya observed tremendous economic changes that should be closely charted to understand the factors that influenced seemingly counterintuitive decisions, so as to avoid generalisations based on events that occurred during exceptional circumstances.

However, insisting on the necessity to consider economic relations as one aspect of a more complex social and political reality does not imply that Mahdist sources cannot be used to offer insights based on a quantitative analysis. As a matter of fact, the development below very much tries to reconcile both approaches by reading financial statements as social constructs as well as a reflection of an objective economic reality. In that respect, it departs from al-Qaddāl's disregard for the ordinary bureaucratic production of Mahdist treasuries, which, according to him, has little value beyond the information it gives on the inner organisation of the provincial administration. Following this argument, he considered that the great number of receipts and attestations then produced was indicative of the population's lack of consent and of the Mahdist apparatus' inability to affect and regulate economic relations<sup>10</sup>.

On the contrary, the analysis put forward in this text argues in favour of the relevance of this documentation. It is based on the extensive financial records produced by the Tūkar treasury and preserved in the NRO, and, to a lesser extent, on the much more patchy records of the central treasury, the Dunqulā treasury, and some other minor collections like the ones produced in al-Qallābāt or al-Qadārif. A list of these sources was established by Abū Salīm<sup>11</sup>.

The three next sections are structured around the three resources managed by the Mahdist administration in Tūkar: cash, goods and grain. Each of these resources is studied through a specific perspective. The first one tackles the matter of fiscal levies. It is meant to serve as a bridge with the

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9 Matthew S. Benson made a similar argument concerning the colonial administration of the Condominium. See Matthew S. BENSON, *Taxation, Local Government and Social Control in Sudan and South Sudan, 1899-1956*, PhD diss., University of Durham, Durham, 2019, p. 76–94.

10 Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

11 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Al-ḥaraka al-fikriyya fī al-Mahdiyya*, 2nd ed., Beirut, Dār al-jīl wa-l-nashr wa-l-ṭibā'a wa-l-tawzī', 1981, p. 136–139.

previous chapter by focusing on the normative aspect of taxation and its function in the Mahdist moral economy. Against past assessments, it attempts to demonstrate the legalism of the Mahdist administration in its dealing with local populations. Because of its position between the Red Sea littoral and the Nile Valley, Eastern Sudan was a hub for trade circulations, which the Mahdists tried to regulate and capture. In the process, they came head to head with British authorities in Sawākin who instrumentalised and manipulated trade interests in an attempt to undermine Mahdist power in the region. Finally, the last section is dedicated to the question of agricultural resources, particularly cultivation in the Baraka Delta and the solutions found by the Mahdist administration to feed the thousands of men, women and children who had gathered in Tūkar, in a context of almost total collapse of food supplies.

### **I. Taxes, Loot and Loans: Financing the Mahdist Government**

Opposition to the fiscal practices of the Turkiyya was one of the most important vectors of mobilisation behind the uprising headed by Muḥammad Aḥmad. Initially, the matter remained confined to its symbolic dimension. Refusing to pay the levies imposed by the colonial regime and participating in collecting the *zakāt* was the most direct way, short of performing the *hijra* to join the Mahdī, to manifest a community's integration into the new polity. This rationale began to shift in early 1883 (early 1300) with the Mahdī's decision to stabilise the groups of combatants and offer them stipends to eliminate their dependency to personal sources of income. Consequently, financing this large body of men, often accompanied by their families, became one of the recurring issues of the Mahdiyya. The theoretical framework that defined and constrained Mahdist levies will be the object of the first section. In contrast with previous studies, the documentation produced by Tūkar's treasury allows for an analysis that is not limited to the normative aspects of Mahdist fiscality, but offers insights into the complex modalities of its implementation, as will be shown in the second section.

Fiscal resources, however, were often insufficient to cover the important costs incurred by the provincial administration to provide for the numerous combatants under its responsibility. Other sources of income were required. Looting could be resorted to, but, unlike what British commentators may have suggested, this activity did not unfold in a legal vacuum. On the contrary, the matter was very much discussed, especially with regard to the division of the booty. The same was true of another source of revenues: loans. While these were long considered as thinly disguised forced contributions, the situation in Eastern Sudan reveals a much more nuanced reality founded on the intense interrelations between the Mahdist administrations in Kasalā and Tūkar and

merchants. This topic will be discussed in the third section.

The conclusion will tie these different elements together to outline the main characteristics of the treasury's budgets in Tūkar, and will compare these with the finances of the central treasury, and other provincial institutions.

### ***A) The Theoretical Framework of Mahdist Fiscality***

Whereas the corpus of letters written by the Mahdī allows for a certain degree of precision in the description of the Mahdist administration's development between 1881 and 1885 (1299-1302), taxation is relatively invisible in these documents, especially compared to the role granted to fiscality in historiography to explain the resonance of the Mahdist call among the Sudanese populations. Not only are regulations little discussed in these texts beyond brief references to the Quranic framework, but their actual application almost entirely eludes us since no administrative records of this period seem to have been preserved. As for the regime of the Khalīfa, most of the information available deals with the central treasury and offers little insight into the actual process of tax collection beyond the limits of the "metropolitan province"<sup>12</sup>. The risk, however, is to interpret the lack of sources and their relative silence toward the question as the sign of the arbitrary nature of all levies and the absence of an organised system. A close analysis of the Mahdī's correspondence challenges this vision. The fiscal system established gradually from 1881/2 (1299) onwards was meant to pay for the increasing expenditures of a regime in formation, whether to finance the war effort, or to mitigate the effects of the conflict on the population through distributions of money and grain to the widows and orphans of the *anṣār*, and, more generally, the destitute.

As for the fiscal system proper, at least in the early phase of the Mahdist regime, it rested entirely on the *zakāt* (pl. *zakawāt*) or alms-giving. While levies were mentioned early on, the precise modalities of these operations were only defined later. Indeed, the first attested references to the *zakāt* in the Mahdī's letters appeared in February 1882 (Rabī' I 1299), a few months only after the millenarian movement had settled in Qadīr. It was intimately linked with the territorialisation of Mahdist power in the *jabal Nūba*, particularly the populations around Kalūqī [Kalogi] who were enjoined to pay the *zakawāt* and abide by the *sharī'a*. A few months later, in June 1882 (late Rajab 1299), a similar order was given to those living on the other side of the country, in the Banī Shanqūl area, near the border with Abyssinia<sup>13</sup>.

However, the formalisation of the *zakāt* only came two years later. In a letter dated

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12 See chapter 3.

13 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letters 28 and 33.



January/February 1884 (Rabīʿ II 1301), the Mahdī gave the first set of instructions as to the calculations of the *zakāt*, giving an outline of the rates that should be applied: one-tithe, that is 10%, on the produce of rainlands and 5% for irrigated land. As for gold and silver, it should be taxed at a quarter-tithe, that is 2,5%<sup>14</sup>. Further information was given in a letter to the Jaʿaliyīn settled in al-Qaḍārif dated 14 December 1884 (25

	1298	1299	1300	1301	1302	n.a.	Total
Loot	0	9	20	36	59	15	139
Khums	0	0	1	2	1	0	4
Fayʿ	0	0	0	4	15	0	19
Zakāt	0	5	6	9	20	4	44
Fiṭra	0	2	0	2	1	1	6
ʿUshr	0	0	0	2	2	0	4

**Fig. 4.1:** Mentions of the main sources of revenues in the Mahdī's correspondence

**Sources:** *Al-āthār al-kāmila*, vol. 1-5

**Methodology:** This table is based on a simple lexicographic analysis. For example, in 1299 (1881/2), the word "loot" (*ghanīma* pl. *ghanā'im*) appeared nine times in the letters written by the Mahdī.

Ṣafar 1302) as to the *niṣāb*, i.e. the minimum amount of a property on which the *zakāt* could be levied, as well as the rates of levies imposed on livestock. Thus, the *niṣāb* for camels was five and then their owner was asked one ewe for every five camels. Cattle could be taxed if they exceeded thirty at a rate of one veal up to that number and an older animal every forty. The *zakāt* was also required from herds of small cattle (sheep and goats) larger than forty animals. One ewe was levied for every eighty animals<sup>15</sup>. Lastly, the matter of the fiscality applicable on trading goods is particularly confusing. According to the historian al-Qaddāl, the rate of taxation depended on the origin of the merchant: 10% for those coming from the *dār al-ḥarb*, 5% for *dhimīs* and 2,5% for those from the *dār al-Islām*<sup>16</sup>. However, this affirmation could not be confirmed and the Mahdī's correspondence seems to be silent on the subject. Furthermore, the enactment of a distinct tax dedicated to trade is debatable. While the *ʿushr* (pl. *ʿushūr / aʿshār*)<sup>17</sup> appears in some authors' writings like al-Qaddāl or Weiss as a tax separate from the *zakāt*<sup>18</sup>, there are scant traces of this particular term in the letters of the Mahdī, as shown in figure 4.1, and almost all its occurrences refer to the original meaning of the word, i.e. a levy of ten per cent<sup>19</sup>. The sole exception appears in

14 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 243. The same text can be found in the letter 247 of the same volume, at the end of a lengthy exposition on how to perform the prayer.

15 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 489; Aharon LAYISH, *Sharīʿa and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 262–264. The same set of instructions relative to the *niṣāb* and rates of levies can be found in the letter 680.

16 Muḥammad Saʿīd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

17 The *ʿushr*, that is the tithe, based on the maximum rate that could be imposed on foreign traders.

18 Muḥammad Saʿīd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 144; Holger WEISS, "The Mahdiya in the Sudan: An Attempt to Implement the Principles of an Islamic Economy," in *Obligatory Almsgiving – An inquiry into Zakāt in the Pre-Colonial Bilād al-Sūdān*, Helsinki, Finnish Oriental Society, 2003, p. 216.

19 See, for examples, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 243 and 247.

a letter dated to late March 1885 (Jumādā II 1302) in which the Mahdī enjoined “all the brethren to present the tithes (*a ‘shār*), the *zakawāt* and the spoils (*ghanā ‘im*) to the treasury<sup>20</sup>”, but the use of plurals does not warrant a firm distinction between *zakāt* and *‘ushr*.

The case of the *zakāt al-fīṭr*—more commonly referred to in Mahdist correspondence as the *fīṭra*—as an autonomous taxation is undeniable. It was a levy made once a year at the time of the *‘īd al-fīṭr*, between the end of Ramaḍān and the beginning of Shawwāl. Its introduction followed a pattern similar to that of the *zakāt*. The first mention of this tax occurred in October 1882 (D. al-Ḥijja 1299). The Mahdī’s comments are somewhat unclear, but this yearly tax had already been tested, to the extent that he complained that the *niṣāb* used on this occasion had been the object of discussions among the people (*‘awām*). That he considered this talk as calumny (*iftirā ‘*) suggests that he had been accused of tampering with the legal rate, a wrongful innovation he strongly condemned. The second mention came a few days later in an unrelated letter. As he announced to the populations of the lower White Nile the appointment of an *amīr*, he reminded them that they should obey him and “pay the *zakawāt* on grain (*ḥubūb*) and livestock (*mawāshī*) [as well as] the *zakāt al-fīṭr*”. However, there again, the Mahdī gave no indication as to the rate that should be applied<sup>21</sup>. Similar instructions were given to other groups in February 1884 (Rabī‘ II 1301) without more precisions<sup>22</sup>. Contrary to the *zakāt* which was based on available capital (may it be livestock, grain, or goods), the *zakāt al-fīṭr* was essentially a poll tax, most often paid in grain at a fixed rate of 8 rtl.<sup>23</sup> or two piastres by individual<sup>24</sup>.

All in all, the Mahdī remained faithful to Quranic prescriptions, allowing for the *zakāt* to be levied on animals, grains, gold and silver and articles of trade<sup>25</sup>. The wording of his instructions closely followed the common stipulations found in *ahādīth* (sing. *ḥadīth*) collections, hinting at the fact that conformity with the framework imposed by the *sharī‘a* was then privileged over measures adapted to Sudanese societies, as confirmed by the vocabulary used to define the *niṣāb* on grain. The units of measure in which the minimum surface was expressed, a *wasq* of 60 *ṣā*<sup>26</sup>, are not endogenous to Nilotic Sudan and do not appear in later Mahdist administrative records. However,

20 This letter was quoted in a somewhat unconvincing translation in Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 127. The original letter can be found in Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 689.

21 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 58 and 59.

22 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letters 236 and 238 ; Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 454 ; Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 925.

23 Approximately 900 grammes.

24 Muḥammad Sa‘īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

25 Holger WEISS, “The Mahdiya in the Sudan: An Attempt to Implement the Principles of an Islamic Economy,” *op. cit.*, p. 217 ; Yitzhak NAKASH, “Fiscal and Monetary Systems in the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898,” *op. cit.*, p. 368.

26 The *wasq* means literally the “load”, while the *ṣā* is a cubic measure. Its value in a Sudanese context could not be determined.

the fiscal system implemented by the Mahdist movement was not shaped solely by references to Islamic scriptures. From the perspective of the Mahdī and his followers, the most relatable experiences of state formation were to be found among the great Western sultanates, the Keira in Dār Fūr and the Mabā in Wadāy, as well as the string of smaller sultanates that occupied the border region between the former, namely Dār Tāmā, Dār Masālīt and Dār Silā. Quite particularly in the two latter cases, studied by the Dutch historian Lidwien Kapteijns, fiscal systems were also centred around the *zakāt* and *zakāt al-fiṭr*, and similar rates were imposed on livestock and grain<sup>27</sup>.

And yet, Mahdist fiscality was neither the direct application of *sharī'a*-based prescriptions nor an import of neighbouring modes of taxation. Despite claims of Islamic orthodoxy, it stumbled upon the socio-economic specificities of the Greater Nile Valley. As a result of these tensions, the Mahdī had to partially adapt the regulations of the *zakāt*, among other reasons to reflect the particular structure of *sāqiya* culture. In this respect, in a letter to one of his '*umalā'* in the Jazīra dated April/May 1884 (Rajab 1302)<sup>28</sup>, he allowed for differentiated modes of calculations depending on the type of ownership, thus signalling his willingness to take into account the evolution of property in land in the nineteenth century and its radical effects over Sudanese society<sup>29</sup>. In the same manner, Muḥammad 'Uthmān 'Abd Allāh Balalnā al-Ḥalāwī, most likely a delegate sent by the Mahdī, was asked upon his arrival in Rufā'a in June 1885 (Sha'bān 1302) by Muḥammad 'Uthmān Abū Qarja, the region's '*āmil*, to give indications on the rates, but also whether the *zakāt* should be paid for 1301 (1883/4) and 1302 (1884/5) or just the latter year. The Mahdī's answer reflected the spatial understanding of the Mahdist power as he insisted that the *zakāt* should be paid from the date a territory could be considered under Mahdist control, that is after the defeat of Hicks on 5 November 1883 (4 Muḥarram 1301)<sup>30</sup>. The Mahdī nonetheless adopted a conciliatory position and accepted that since the first payment had occurred in June 1885 (Sha'bān 1302), eight months only into the year, the remainder could be smoothed in the third year.

Overall, the fiscal system implemented by Mahdist authorities diverged from the one imposed by the Egyptian colonial regime on several points such as lower rates, fewer taxes, and a fiscal base calculated on harvests rather than a fixed base. Furthermore, as noted by the historian Abū Salīm, under Mahdist rule, the main factor for the definition of the *zakāt*'s rate was not the cultivated surface, as was the case before, but the input of labour. In other words, "the rate of *zakāt*

27 Lidwien KAPTEIJNS, *Mahdist Faith and Sudanic Tradition: the History of the Masalit Sultanate 1870-1930*, London, Kegan Paul International, 1985, p. 146–154 ; Lidwien KAPTEIJNS, "Dār Silā, the Sultanate in Precolonial Times, 1870-1916," *Cahiers d'Études africaines*, 1983, vol. 23, no. 92, p. 451–453.

28 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 323.

29 Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī'a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

30 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letters 337 and 338. See chapters 2 and 5 for more details on the territorialisation of Mahdist power.

[was] inversely related to the effort expended in producing the growth from which *zakāt* [was] due: the higher the effort, the lower the tax rate<sup>31</sup>.” This last point is not coincidental and implies a keen understanding by the Mahdī of the mechanisms that had led to an ever-increasing fiscal pressure on the sedentary populations of the Upper Nile Valley. By taking into consideration the division of labour within the area irrigated by a single *sāqiya*, and providing for differentiated rates between high and low labour intensity types of cultivation, the new tax system was more flexible while limiting adverse effects. One can conjecture that this system made all the more sense in a period of vast military mobilisation. With men leaving their fields, the repartition of the fiscal imposition among the remaining individuals and within a community was an important matter.

Beyond economic imperatives, the new taxation system was first and foremost presented as a break from the practices of the “Turks”, the Egyptian colonial regime<sup>32</sup>. By describing the latter’s taxes as *jizya*, i.e. the poll tax levied on non-Muslims, the Mahdī entailed that Sudanese populations had been taxed as unbelievers, and, one can surmise from this, unfairly<sup>33</sup>. In that regard, taxation participated directly in the alleged reversal of the religious norms that led to the characterisation of the former regime as un-Islamic, in manner akin to *takfīrī* ideology. The Mahdī claimed, conversely, having restored the *sharī’a*’s framework<sup>34</sup>.

The effort by the Mahdist power to distinguish itself from the colonial regime was fully conscious. In an undated letter sent to the delegates for the *zakawāt* to scold them for their behaviour, the Mahdī mentioned that “we have been informed that [the agents] were positioned in the markets and when they found the owner of commercial goods (*baḍā’i*), dates and others like sesame, they tried to find out if he had an attestation (*waraqā*) and did not leave his path until they had seized [something] from him by means of the *zakawāt*. God forbid that this may resemble the duties (*jamārik*) [imposed] by the Turks[!]”<sup>35</sup> Warnings against unlawful levies came hand in hand with a strong emphasis on the necessary legality of all fiscal decisions, a core factor in the bureaucratic path followed by both central and provincial administrations and their reliance on a dense network of authorisations and receipts (see below) meant to guarantee that formal procedures had been respected and could be challenged if it was not the case.

Hence, the acceptability of Mahdist taxes among the population was bolstered by the

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31 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Al-ard̄ fī al-Mahdiyya*, *op. cit.*, p. 16–17 ; Muḥammad Sa’īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 154 ; Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī’a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 263–264.

32 For an analysis of the fiscal system under the Turkiyya, see Hassan Abdel Aziz AHMED, “The Turkish Taxation System and its Impact on Agriculture in the Sudan,” *op. cit.*

33 For an example, see Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 53. See also Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī’a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

34 Holger WEISS, “The Mahdiya in the Sudan: An Attempt to Implement the Principles of an Islamic Economy,” *op. cit.*, p. 205.

35 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 930.

combination of these elements: they abided by Quranic principles; they were more adapted to the Sudanese context and arguably significantly lower than what these populations had experienced before; and notably, they were not requested by the former colonial regime. In that respect, the Mahdī had found a solution to the larger issue of the levies' legitimacy. Slatin highlighted the tensions that had risen from the transformation of the fiscal system throughout the nineteenth century. In a discussion on the causes of the Mahdist uprising in the Western provinces, he claimed that discontent was rife toward tax-gatherers, who included "a considerable number of Sudanese, who lost no opportunity of enriching themselves and of putting their relatives in positions of secondary importance, to help them to this end". While that explanation pointed to nepotism as particularly problematic, Slatin qualified his own argument by underlining the political dynamics at play. Indeed, when Ilyās Pasha Muḥammad Umm Birayr, a famous Ja'alī merchant to whom Kurdufān was entrusted in 1878-1879 (1295-1296)<sup>36</sup>, dispatched his assistant to collect taxes from *makk* Ādam Umm Dabbalū, the latter flatly refused arguing "I pay for goods I buy from merchants, but I do not pay tribute to them<sup>37</sup>." If there is no direct reference to this issue in the Mahdī's writings, the latter was certainly aware of the matter, at least because he had visited the same *makk* during his second visit to Kurdufān c. April-June 1881 (Jumādā I-Jumādā II 1298), just a few months before he openly claimed the Mahdīship, and because the first destination of the *hijra* toward the Nūba mountains was said to have been the Taqālī kingdom, *makk* Ādam's fiefdom<sup>38</sup>.

In that respect, the symbolical dimension of *zakāt* levies was considerably more important than the economic one. Throughout the body of sources produced during the early phase of the Mahdiyya, almost no mentions could be found of transfers from Mahdist agents to the central authorities of the revenues collected through the *zakāt*. Like the *bay'a*, paying the *zakāt* signalled the integration of a given community within the Mahdist polity. Conversely, calls by the Mahdī to cease all payments to the Egyptian administration<sup>39</sup> translated into a break with the former regime of legitimation found defective by local rulers like *makk* Ādam. To some extent, the new fiscalit was meant as a restoration of the social hierarchical order disrupted by the farming of levies.

However, the aim of Mahdist fiscality extended beyond the formation of a new unified polity submitted to the leadership of Muḥammad Aḥmad. It was also thought of as a tool in the radical reorganisation of communities. Indeed, Mahdist writings heavily insisted on the role of

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36 Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 180 ; Ahmad Ibrahim ABU SHOUK, "Governors of Kordofan (1821-1955)," *Sudanic Africa*, 1997, vol. 8, p. 76. The main source for his mandate can be found in Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK (ed.), *Mudhakkirāt Yūsuf Mīkhā'il: al-Turkiyya wa-l-Mahdiyya wa-l-ḥukm al-thunā'ī fi al-Sūdān*, *op. cit.*, chapters 1 and 3.

37 Rudolf C. SLATIN, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 133–134.

38 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 53–54 ; Janet J. EWALD, "Experience and Speculation: History and Founding Stories in the Kingdom of Taqali, 1780-1935," *op. cit.*, p. 276.

39 Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK, "The Case of the Mahdist Public Treasury in the Sudan - 1881-1898," *op. cit.*, p. 148.

taxation to achieve personal and collective reform<sup>40</sup>. Confronted with important resistance in collection, the Mahdī was regularly obliged to remind his followers and the newly submitted populations of the meaning of the *zakāt*. On such occasion, as in a letter dated 20 November 1884 (1 Šafar 1302) and addressed to various groups settled near al-Qaḍārif, he reminded them that “God has imposed dues over you, He shall take them from your rich [to give it] to your poor for your purification (*tathīr*) and your chastening (*tazkiya*), so do not be niggardly with God by giving what He has imposed upon you from the obligatory dues (*al-ḥuqūq al-wājiba ‘alay-kum*)<sup>41</sup>.” A similar message was conveyed in an earlier letter dated January/February 1884 (Rabī‘ II 1301) when the Mahdī wrote that “[through] the *zakāt*, we shall extract some of the wealth, bit by bit, [...] until the love for possessions is dislodged from your heart by relying on God, so that God satisfies you in everything<sup>42</sup>”. The redistributive dimension of the *zakāt* was associated with the personal gain obtained by the voluntary surrender of one’s wealth, mirroring the call for asceticism that underlay the Mahdist *da‘wa*, thus assimilating the *zakāt* to “a ritual and a state instrument for social justice<sup>43</sup>”.

These different elements should lead us to question the assessment found in most of the narratives of the first phase of the Mahdist regime that describe the latter as purely predatory and based on a loot economy<sup>44</sup>. The centrality of loot in the Mahdist financial system is incontestable, even if the volumes are unknown. This is reflected in the figure 4.1, but it should be remembered that the majority of those occurrences appeared in warnings against the lure of loot and more generally material possessions. The solution to this issue was to centralise all the plunde collected in the treasury, a decision eventually taken in March/April 1883 (Jumādā I 1300) shortly after the capture of al-Ubayyid<sup>45</sup>. Contrary to looting, there is no evidence that the Mahdī had instructed his agents to transfer the output of the *zakāt* to the central treasury. Henceforth, two parallel systems were established: on the one hand, a war economy based on looting and headed by the central treasury responsible for the upkeep of large numbers of combatants who had abandoned their previous livelihood to dedicate themselves to the *jihād*; and, on the other hand, a localised fiscality,

40 Holger WEISS, “The Mahdiya in the Sudan: An Attempt to Implement the Principles of an Islamic Economy,” *op. cit.*, p. 206.

41 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 475.

42 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 243. The content of the *da‘wa* is often quite abstract and, unsurprisingly, buttressed by quotations from diverse surahs. In this letter, the Mahdī developed an analogy susceptible to speak more directly to his followers. He compared earthly possessions with *dammūr*, a rough fabric made of cotton, produced in Nilotic Sudan and which could serve as small change in transactions. He wrote: “So, for example, the *dammūr* fabric (*thiyāb*) we have in Sudan, it has value (*qadr*) [here], and if you wanted to bring it to Egypt to profit from it in Egypt, it would not be reasonable for you to burden yourself with it. [...] And so is the material wealth (*māl al-dunyā*), on one side, it is valuable in life, but it has no value in the afterlife.”

43 Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī‘a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

44 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

45 See chapter 3.

managed through the cooperation of Mahdist representatives appointed in specific territories, and the produce of which was seemingly redistributed locally.

Thus, characterizing the Mahdist fiscal system as predatory reflects the biases of the documentation available, which is focused on the central institutions and military matters. The marginal position occupied by discussions on the implementation of the *zakāt* should not be construed as indicating its neglect by Mahdist authorities. Quite the contrary, Makkī Shibayka rightly insisted on its centrality. The *zakāt* was, according to him, the “vein of life in the body of the Mahdiyya<sup>46</sup>”. But the role played by conventional fiscality, in contrast with the exceptional nature of forced levies, may have been concealed by the minimal attention granted to provincial administrative structures, particularly during the first phase of the Mahdiyya, and to a lesser extent during the Khalīfa’s rule<sup>47</sup>.

## ***B) The Taxation of the Bijāwī Communities in Eastern Sudan***

### *i) Locating the Zakāt and the ‘Ushr*

As noted in the previous chapter, the founding of a provincial administration in Eastern Sudan was only achieved after the fall of the main urban centre of the region, Kasalā, in 1885 (1302/3). Prior to that, while the ‘*āmil* ‘Uthmān Diqna had probably set up some form of bureaucratic control over resources, it must have remained limited in scope and left no traces in the documentation. This means that a fiscal system only came into existence in the context of the Khalīfa’s effort to stabilise the administrative structures of the Mahdist state.

The rather vague fiscal framework established by the Mahdī was not greatly clarified by his successor. The latter’s attention was brought almost exclusively on the working of the central treasury, much less so on defining fiscal policies at the provincial level. ‘Isā wad al-Zayn, the deputy (*wakīl*) of Maḥmūd w. Aḥmad in Dār Fūr and Kurdufān from *c.* 1891 to 1897 (*c.* 1307-1314)<sup>48</sup>, claimed that “the rate [of ‘*ushr*] from time to time was fixed by the Khalīfa and communicated to [him]<sup>49</sup>” but no other source, primary or secondary, confirmed this. Indeed, with regard to Eastern Sudan, fiscal matters were seldom discussed within the Khalīfa’s correspondence with ‘Uthmān Diqna. In the ‘*āmil*’s *Daftar*, a single letter was recorded that dealt directly with the

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46 Quoted in Muḥammad Sa‘īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898, op. cit.*, p. 152.

47 In this regard, it could be noted that Holt’s seminal study of the Mahdist state is devoid of remarks on the provincial administration prior to 1885.

48 Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan, op. cit.*, p. 224.

49 J. A. REID, “Story of the Mahdist Amir (Isa Wad el Zein),” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1926, vol. 9, no. 2, p. 80, quoted in ‘Awaḍ ‘Abd al-Hādī AL-‘ATĀ, *Tārīkh Kurdufān al-siyāsī fī-l-Mahdiyya, 1881–1899, op. cit.*, p. 70.

subject of tax collection<sup>50</sup>. This was not the result of the division of tasks between members of the provincial administration, as the letters sent to ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf, the *amīn* of Tūkar’s treasury, are similarly mute on the subject<sup>51</sup>. Consequently, the fiscal system implemented in the wake of the Khalīfa’s accession to power resists generalisation, as revealed by the divergent assessments offered by historians<sup>52</sup>. Therefore, the following attempt at laying out the principal characteristics of Mahdist taxation in Eastern Sudan lies almost entirely on observations derived from descriptive rather than prescriptive sources, namely the thousands of receipts gathered by the treasury.

Following Makkī Shibayka, the father of Mahdist studies, al-Qaddāl considered the *zakāt* as the most important element of Islamic fiscality and so a “pillar of the Mahdist state”, even as he recognised that its evolutions throughout the Mahdiyya hindered most attempts to draw a comprehensive framework<sup>53</sup>. Eastern Sudan was not different from the rest of Mahdist territories and details are hazy at best. Nonetheless, a few conclusions can still be drawn. The *zakāt* was meant to be collected on money<sup>54</sup> (*zakāt al-naqdiyya*), livestock (*zakāt al-mawāshī*)<sup>55</sup>, and to a lesser extent, on grain (*zakāt al-‘uyūsh*). These three categories appear in what may have been the first financial report communicated to Umm Durmān to sum up the treasury’s operations in Eastern Sudan from Jumādā II 1304 to the end of the year (February 1887 to September 1887)<sup>56</sup>. Documents emphasise the primacy of money for *zakāt* levies. Essentially, the *zakāt* was a 2,5% tax on capital, quite particularly monetary capital, levied on individuals. For example, on the first day of Rabī’ II 1308 (14 November 1890), 1,5 r. was collected from a man named Awshaykh Ḥasan from the local community of the Ammār’ar Nūrāb, on the basis (*rakān*<sup>57</sup>) of a 60 r. holding. The same day, Aḥmad w. al-Raḍī from al-Qaḍārif had given 5 r. for holdings amounting to 200 *riyāl*<sup>58</sup>. In the same manner, traders coming to Eastern Sudan were asked to declare the cash they had come with and surrender 2,5% of the total sum. This was attested by British officers and their Egyptian counterparts from the DMI who had access to the full set of documents now held by the National Records Office

50 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 228, p. 225.

51 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A).

52 See, among others, Ibrāhīm ‘Akāsha ‘ALĪ, *Wilāyat Barbar fī ‘ahd al-Khalīfa ‘Abd Allāh (Ramādān 1302 – Rajab 1317 / June 1885 – November 1899)*, *op. cit.*, p. 85 ; Makkāwī ‘Alī AḤMAD KHĀṬIR, *‘Imālat Dunqulā fī ‘ahd al-dawla al-mahdiyya (1302-1314 h. / 1885-1896)*, *op. cit.*, p. 113–118.

53 Muḥammad Sa‘īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 152–153.

54 See, for examples, the levies dated from December 1888 (Rabī’ II 1306) in Mahdiyya 5/13/48, document no. 25; from August 1889 (D. al-Ḥijja 1306) in NRO Mahdiyya 5/15/52, document no. 1; and November 1890 (Rabī’ II 1308) in NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 116.

55 An example of such levy can be found in NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 117B. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 302.

56 NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/66A, p. 19-20.

57 This is the term used in the documentation. The exact spelling could not be checked as this word could not be found with this meaning in the usual dictionaries.

58 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 116.



concerning Tūkar's treasury, and who stated, somewhat allusively, that the *zakāt* represented a "2,5 % of all imports or existing property<sup>59</sup>", without specifying what both terms meant.

However, cash was a rare commodity in Eastern Sudan beyond trading circles<sup>60</sup>. One of the very few sources that mentioned the matter, a letter sent in May 1889 (Ramaḍān 1306) by Ḥamad Awal b. 'Abd Allāh, probably a subaltern Mahdist agent, to the *amīn* of the treasury, pointed to the ambiguity that prevailed as to the basis of the *zakāt*, writing that "for all those who did not know the procedure of the *zakāt*, they are in [a state of] confusion and disarray (*li-kull lam 'arifūna wajh al-zak[a] fī-hum al-khalīṭ wa al-takhlīṭ*)". In a very hesitant hand, he added that the "difference is on the quantity of grain and [the number] of male camels and what resembles it (*al-tafrīq 'adad al-ghilāl wa al-jimāl al-dhukūr wa mā ashbah-hu*)<sup>61</sup>". His omission of cash is indicative of the specificities of capital accumulation in Eastern Sudan. As a result, local communities could also pay the *zakāt* with heads of livestock. The percentage that was then used could not be retrieved as receipts and reports never seem to state the size of the herds from which these animals were collected. In all likelihood, these levies were performed annually, but in this case as in other aspects of Mahdist fiscality in Eastern Sudan, evidence is rather conjectural<sup>62</sup>. Finally, in a few instances, grain or goods were handed as payment<sup>63</sup>, but in the case of the former, the only mention of a *zakāt al-'uyūsh* appears in the report mentioned above for the first half of 1887 (late 1304). Despite the *zakāt* occupying the centre place in the Mahdī's discussions of the effects of taxation on cultivation, grain production in Eastern Sudan is never referred to as being subjected to this type of levy.

Information on the *zakāt al-fitr* is more sparse, but more coherent. As prescribed by the Mahdī, it was fundamentally a capitation. Contrary to what may have been expected, combatants were also subjected to fiscal levies<sup>64</sup>. To some extent, the Mahdist community was the perfect target for the *zakāt al-fitr*, since details on each group was easily available thanks to the censuses that were regularly conducted<sup>65</sup>. While Bijāwī communities were certainly expected to pay it, obtaining a headcount represented an indomitable hurdle for the limited resources of the Mahdist administration confronted to groups whose skills to avoid state scrutiny were already famous. Conversely, because the treasury was the main if not sole provider for the *anṣār*, their whereabouts

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59 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, p. 4.

60 For a discussion on the introduction of foreign currencies in the region, see Steven SERELS, "The Circulation of Modern Currencies and the Impoverishment of the Red Sea World, 1882–2010," in Steven Serels and Gwyn Campbell (ed.), *Currencies of the Indian Ocean World*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 141–164.

61 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 116.

62 One of the few documents that clearly mentioned this particular *zakāt* gives the "value of *zakawāt* on livestock for the year 1306 (*qīmat zakawāt mawāshī 'ām 1306*)". See NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/61B, document no. 1. A similar expression can be found for the year 1307 in NRO Mahdiyya 5/06/29B. The same document mentions the *zakāt* paid by a trader, Ādam Salīm al-Maṣawwa'ī, there again sorted by year.

63 NRO Mahdiyya 5/15/52, documents no. 8–11.

64 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 117.

65 See chapter 5.

were infinitely easier to assess. For instance, in mid-June 1889 (mid-Shawwāl 1306), shortly after *īd*, the banner of the *amīr* Shā'ib Aḥmad which comprised 638 individuals—323 combatants and 315 household members—collectively paid 159,5 r. for the *fiṭra*, that is 6 qr. (a quarter of a *riyāl*) for every person<sup>66</sup>.

Beyond the different types of *zakawāt*, the second tax was the *'ushr*. If the *zakāt* was meant as a tax on capital, the *'ushr* was perceived as a levy on production. It was described in Wingate's report quoted above as "one-tenth of all property arriving in the country, or the produce of the country itself (camels, cows, sheep, goats, dhura, cotton, crops and slaves). Paid in money or in kind<sup>67</sup>". Indeed, it primarily concerned traders who were required to pay ten percent of the value of their goods, often by simply giving out ten percent of them whenever they arrived in Tūkar, sometimes directly in the Red Sea harbour of Adūbana (see below). However, the difference between the two is constantly blurred in available documents. When Aḥmad Muḥammad Maḥmūd informed the *amīn* of the treasury of the goods he had levied from the trader Aḥmad 'Abbās in early May 1889 (early Ramaḍān 1306), he simply notified him that they had been collected for the *'ushr* and the *zakāt*, without offering more details on the repartition between the two levies. Yet, the *'ushr* represented by far the main source of income for Mahdist provincial authorities, to the extent that the *zakawāt* on livestock and grain almost entirely disappeared from the sources after 1888 (1305/6), probably because their proceeds were so small as to not be recorded or even collected. Paradoxically, whereas the *zakāt* occupied a central position in Mahdist fiscality, it represented only a minor contribution to Eastern Sudan's budget, as reflected by the absence of a dedicated folder to this type of taxation<sup>68</sup>.

This discrepancy between the primacy of the *zakāt*, the backbone of the Mahdist fiscal system, and the predominance of the *'ushr* can be explained in several ways. Firstly, the polysemy of the term *'ushr* may have led to its eventual absorption of the *zakāt*. Indeed, it represented a specific tax, essentially on trade commodities, but also more generally a rate of ten percent—a tithe. It is likely that levies on livestock and grain were thought as *zakawāt* but appeared as *'ushr* in the relevant reports since this may have been the rate applied to the former, and without doubt, was the rate applied to the latter (see below). As a result, the *zakāt* came to mean only a tax of 2,5%. Secondly, this differentiation may have been reinforced by the treasury's internal dynamics. Because other departments were responsible for livestock and grain—two commodities that required very specific types of storage—, the *amīn al-zakawāt* saw his role confined to dealing with cash. As he lost his oversight over the collect of grain and cattle, the term *zakāt* may well have

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66 NRO Mahdiyya 5/13/48, document no. 21.

67 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, p. 4.

68 See chapter 3.

disappeared from the reports to avoid confusion. Finally, whatever the meaning granted to a tax on production, the distinction between capital and taxable output was simply impossible to assess in Eastern Sudan's context, resulting in the abandonment of these two *zakawāt* to be replaced solely by tithes on entire herds or annual grain yields<sup>69</sup>.

*ii) The Implementation of the Mahdist Fiscal Policy*

Issues in defining the characteristics of the Mahdist fiscal framework should not imply that such framework did not exist. On the contrary, the small administrative core responsible for the levy of taxes had to adapt to a specific socio-economic environment. Ḥasan Mūsā, the *amīn al-zakawāt*<sup>70</sup>, from 1888 to 1891 (1306-1308) only had a few assistants (*musā'id*) with him, probably never more than three<sup>71</sup>. Due to the complexities inherent in tax collection in Eastern Sudan, his role was restricted to dealing with cash, since he was systematically designated as *amīn zakawāt al-naqdiyya*<sup>72</sup>. Other types of levies on livestock, trading goods and agricultural production were managed by other departments. This arrangement reflected the particularities of each sector.

Predominant in the region, Bijāwī communities were semi-nomadic and as such famously elusive. Tapping into their wealth was one of the priorities of the new government but also one of its more daunting endeavours. The collapse of the Egyptian colonial regime entailed the end of the tributary system which was at the heart of its fiscal policy beyond the Nile Valley. The new power had few incentives to reinstate such organisation and initiate discussions with tribal leaders. Quite the contrary, the Mahdist social project led to the overhaul of local authorities through the appointment of representatives<sup>73</sup>, a process which was carried on by the Khalīfa. Consequently, levies had to be performed directly on communities themselves subjected to greater fragmentation after the disappearance of the Hadanduwa *shaykhship*. One can assume that the first true efforts to collect the *zakāt* from the neighbouring groups only started after 'Uthmān Dīqna's return from Umm Durmān to Kasalā in December 1886 (Rabī' I 1304) and, in all likelihood, once he had been joined by Abū Qarja and the reinforcements the latter brought with him in February 1887 (Jumādā I 1304)<sup>74</sup>. Attempts at levying taxes on cattle were met with immediate resistance. The communities of the

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69 The mention, above, of the *zakāt* on livestock being based on the number of "male camels" could well be related to the issue of distinguishing between animals that must be considered as capital, and the others which should be taxed as production.

70 Ḥasan Mūsā was among the first to be appointed at the Tūkar treasury in early December 1888 (16 Rabī' II 1306), as attested by the letter sent by 'Uthmān Dīqna to the secretaries (*kuttāb* sing. *kātib*) in which he informed them of his decision. See NRO Mahdiyya 5/10/41, document no. 14.

71 For the sources for this affirmation, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/03/11, Mahdiyya 5/06/24 and Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 116.

72 See, for example, NRO Mahdiyya 5/14/49, document no. 24.

73 See chapter 3.

74 However, this cannot be asserted with complete confidence since, as noted before, the period from late 1885 to early 1887 (1303-1304) is characterised by a paucity of documentation.

southern Bijāwī triangle may have been unhappy about the previous situation, but, until that point, the conflict that opposed the Mahdist leadership to some Ammār'ar clans had remained confined to the northern parts of Eastern Sudan. The summer of 1887 was a pivotal moment of the civil war, as 'Uthmān Diqna ordered in August 1887 (D. al-Qa'da 1304) that tithes ('*ushūr*') on livestock be collected as zakāt payment, at the same time as the *zakāt al-fitr*<sup>75</sup>. Hadanduwa groups, which had been hitherto relatively accepting of the new power, began to actively resist this compounded fiscal pressure<sup>76</sup>. A month later, in September 1887 (Muḥarram 1305), "God's dues (*ḥuqūq Allāh*)" were also requested from Banī 'Āmir communities. In the particular context of the Bijāwī civil war, Mahdist *umarā'* in Eastern Sudan may have been more interested by the taxation's symbolic dimension, the recognition of the Mahdiyya's authority over all lands up to the Ethiopian plateau, than by the yield of these levies<sup>77</sup>.

The negative externalities of tax collection were not lost on the Khalīfa, with the failure of the previous regime to legitimate wealth extraction looming large. Indeed, acceptability was one of the central concerns of the Mahdist administration. As early as December 1885 (Ṣafar-Rabī' I 1303), barely a few months after he had succeeded the Mahdī, the Khalīfa had written a proclamation for the agents in charge of collecting the *zakāt* and the loot to be honest in their dealings<sup>78</sup>. Abusive, confiscatory and illegal levies were a major topic of concern for central authorities, yet the Mahdist apparatus—including at the provincial level—quickly realised that the main challenge presented by semi-nomadic groups was to ensure that they would not be taxed several times by various Mahdist representatives in different locations<sup>79</sup>. Unable to fully settle these groups<sup>80</sup> and unwilling to resort to tributes—a fiscal modality that would have implied some form of restoration of the large *naẓirates* and so the disengagement from one of the central tenets of Mahdist governmentality—local authorities had few options to contemplate. In a direct echo of the hurdles encountered by the Egyptian colonial regime in Eastern Sudan (and elsewhere) with regard to

75 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 104. As mentioned before, the *fītra* was supposed to be collected shortly after the *īd al-fītr*, that is in Shawwāl. In 1304 (1886/7), it began in late June 1887.

76 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – 'Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 66. The British administrator of the Sudan Political Service (SPS) Thomas Owen gave a slightly different timeline to the spread of discontent to the southern Bijāwī triangle. According to him, Muḥammad Fāy, 'Uthmān Diqna's distant nephew, was the one responsible for alienating the neighbouring Hadanduwa communities. However, he too singles out taxation as the main factor for their rebellion (Thomas R. H. OWEN, "The Hadendowa," *op. cit.*, p. 198–199).

77 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 14.

78 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (B), letter 10.

79 For example, in mid-December 1888 (mid-Rabī' I 1306), 'Uthmān Diqna informed his *amīn*, 'Abd Allāh Abū Bakr, that the Nūrāb had already paid the *ushr* on their livestock, and instructed him to make sure that no one would call on them to pay it again. See *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 17, p. 55.

80 An option that was nonetheless contemplated and attempted on several occasions throughout Mahdist rule in Eastern Sudan. See chapter 5.

collecting taxes from these populations<sup>81</sup>, the Khalīfa and his representatives focused their attention on better defining territorial boundaries. This process, which found its roots in the establishment of provincial administrations, was furthered in the early 1890s (late 1300s), in the wake of the Mahdist withdrawal from Tūkar, when the *anṣār* became more reliant than ever before on the Bijāwī communities' goodwill. In January 1892 (Jumādā II 1309), the subtle relationship between administrative boundaries and taxation was laid out by the Khalīfa who asked his *ʿāmil* in Eastern Sudan to instruct Muḥammad Mūsā to refrain from entering the territory that had been placed under Kasalā's authority, so that he should only collect "domestic taxes (*ḥuqūq ahliyya*)" from the people who are directly under ʿUthmān Diqna's authority<sup>82</sup>. Rather than a break with former practices, the Mahdist provincial administration initiated a shift in the scale and intensity of their territorial presence, so as to ease tax collection. Representatives were appointed for specific territories and communities. Such was the case for al-Amīn Muḥammad Diqna who was dispatched to Awdayb in February 1894 (Shaʿbān 1311) to collect taxes from the nomadic groups present in the area, particularly the Jamīlāb. A year and a half later, the same was true about Qīlāy Awr w. ʿAlī Rikāb for the ʿAytbāy with regard the Qarʿīb and Samrār, while Muḥammad Mūsā Diqna was entrusted with the same mission for the Jamīlāb and Bushāryāb<sup>83</sup>.

Once livestock was collected, some, mainly sheep, could be distributed directly for the combatants and their families' subsistence. Camels and cattle, in contrast, were entrusted to the *amīn* responsible for livestock (*mawāshī*), where they joined the larger herd constituted through loot (see below). This position was occupied by Abū Fāṭima Abū Falīdī, but throughout the period, the latter was often designated as the *amīn* of sales (*mabyūʿāt*). Indeed, while some of the goods collected through taxes imposed on traders were sold, most of them were seemingly stored in the treasury, and later distributed. For obvious reasons, keeping livestock raised challenging issues, notably with regard to the lack of available pastures or forage that precluded the concentration of large quantities of animals at the same place. Treasury binders mentioned wages given to shepherds, but this could only be a temporary solution and the pressure must have been high to sell cows, camels and sheep quickly. That was Abū Fāṭima's main preoccupation, all the more so because this represented a significant source of cash in a region where it was scarce. As a result, records of these sales abound<sup>84</sup>.

Livestock was only one of the commodities available at Tūkar's market, but it certainly

81 See chapter 1.

82 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ʿUthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 247.

83 *Ibid.*, letters 350 and 405.

84 For example, in December 1892 (Jumādā I 1310), the livestock collected through *ʿushr* levies was immediately sold and monetised to pay for the loan of camels to transport grain to the Mahdist camp (*Ibid.*, letter 309).

attracted a number of individuals, nomads who came to sell their milk, butter and leatherwork, petty traders trying to make a living from the spoils of war, and merchants engaged in international trade through the Upper Nile Valley and the Red Sea. All converged toward the Mahdist headquarter where, reluctantly, they paid the taxes pertaining to trading. For obvious reasons, this type of taxation was very much correlated to the trade policies implemented by the Khalīfa, and more generally to the climate that prevailed with regard to commerce<sup>85</sup>. While flows of commodities observed important variations, there were a few constants as to the manner through which this activity was taxed.

Firstly, all trading goods were taxed at ten percent whether they were meant for import or export. There may have been differences depending on the status of the trader, Muslim, *dhimmi* or trader from the *dār al-ḥarb* (see above), but these were not detectable in the documents produced by the treasury. Therefore, all traders were likely taxed at the same rate. The Mahdī's prescriptions were nevertheless echoed locally, with a twist. The treasury in Kasalā, in its accounts from September 1885 to March 1887 (1303-1304), drew a distinction between the “*‘ushūr* on trade” and the “*‘ushr* on goods brought from areas outside the Mahdiyya’s spring (*baḍā’i’ min al-jihāt al-khārija ‘an nab‘ al-Mahdiyya*)”. This distinction reflected the progression of the territorialisation of the Mahdist regime<sup>86</sup>. It was still mentioned six months later, in September 1887 (Muḥarram 1305)<sup>87</sup>, but whether it was still operative is unclear<sup>88</sup>. As the centre of Mahdist power in Eastern Sudan shifted from Kasalā to Tūkar, this distinction was definitely abandoned, probably on the consideration that all goods arriving in the Sudanese Red Sea markets were by definition coming from outside Mahdist territory, whereas Kasalā was also a regional centre. As noted before, there may very well have been a specific tax on capital, the only one that was accurately described as *zakāt*.

Initially, the main position at which the tithe on trading goods was collected was Handūb, after which goods were allowed to proceed on the Sawākin-Barbar road<sup>89</sup>. In September 1888 (D. al-Ḥijja 1305), a system destined to tax trade was already in place and it distinguished clearly the *‘ushr* from the *zakāt*, but the details of its operations were still vague for the Khalīfa, a sign that its establishment was quite recent<sup>90</sup>. With the transfer of the treasury to Tūkar, most of the proceeds of

85 The question of the trade policies implemented by the Anglo-Egyptian authorities and the Mahdist power will be the object of the section II.

86 See chapter 5.

87 The accounts distinguished between the “*‘ushr* [on] trading good[s] brought from the area of Maṣawwa’ (*‘ushr biḍā’a tijāriyya al-wārid min jihat Maṣawwa’*)” and, less certainly, the “*‘ushr* on salt (*muṣliḥ*) from Malāḥa and Tūkar”.

88 NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/66A, p. 9 and 17.

89 See chapter 1 for a detailed description of this road.

90 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 85.

the *'ushr* on trading goods were sent and stored there<sup>91</sup>. Henceforth, the taxation of trade was organised through a small network of outposts organised around Tūkar. It was also somewhat reformed c. May 1889 (Ramaḍān 1306) following the arrival of the delegates in Eastern Sudan that sealed the new status and the delegation of matters related to the treasury to Abū Qarja<sup>92</sup>. Throughout the Mahdiyya, different entry points were used by traders. Sawākin was of course the main harbour but access to its facilities varied greatly during that period, as did the Mahdist authorities' attitude toward trade undertaken with their enemies. In the second half of the 1880s, some of these circulations were rerouted toward small inlets: first Trinkitāt and then Adūbana, the main harbour between 1888 and 1891. In the wake of the Anglo-Egyptian advance launched against the Mahdist headquarter in February 1891 (Rajab 1308), all these positions were abandoned and tax collection on trade concentrated in Kūkrayb, one of the main stops on the road (see fig. 4.9). At this strategic but isolated position, 'Uthmān Diqna appointed one of his close relatives, Abū al-Faṭḥ b. Mūsā Diqna<sup>93</sup>.

By chance, Bābikir Badrī—then a trader based in Umm Durmān—was travelling regularly to Sawākin and left a detailed description of the workings of what was essentially a customs house and a small market in the desert, at the moment when Abū al-Faṭḥ was in charge, in 1892/3 (1310). Eager to maximise his earnings, Badrī, as other traders, wanted to avoid paying taxes which he deemed confiscatory. He quickly established personal relations with Abū al-Faṭḥ based on their common participation to the Mahdist movement and their active involvement in the *jihād*. If Badrī was still bound to pay five *riyāl* for each camel carrying his goods, he managed through interrelations, small favours and gifts to obtain significant abatements, like having his entire stock of textiles estimated at one of the fabrics' lowest valuation, and so pay the *'ushr* on this rather than their actual worth. When arrangements could not be found, Badrī used numerous techniques to smuggle goods and evade Mahdist officers' scrutiny. On at least two occasions, he placed his most expensive perfume in small tins hidden inside larger pots of the cheap *majmū'* fragrance. Despite all these stratagems, Badrī maintained that taxation on trade was much too high, claiming that he had no other option than to smuggle at least some of his goods, since, according to his own calculations, if he paid all levies, he would only manage to preserve around 12% of his initial capital after a roundtrip to Sawākin<sup>94</sup>. This appraisal and condemnation of tax levels was adopted somewhat

91 For example, in late March 1889 (late Rajab 1306), the Mahdist representative in Adūbana dispatched around 1200 pieces of fabric levied through the *'ushr* to Tūkar. See NRO Mahdiyya 5/13/48, document no. 20.

92 *Daftar 'Uthmān Diqna*, letters 287-289, p. 225-226. See also Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 176.

93 His name first appears in 'Uthmān Diqna's correspondence in July 1892 (Muḥarram 1310). At this date, he is already the main Mahdist representative in Kūkrayb (*Ibid.*, letter 289). He remained at this location at least until November 1894 (Jumādā I 1305) (*Ibid.*, letter 385).

94 Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 155–156; 158; 186; 190–191.

uncritically by later historians, including al-Qaddāl<sup>95</sup>, among other reasons because it fitted neatly with the larger narrative put forth by British officers like Wingate of a Mahdist regime bound to collapse due to the population's discontent, quite particularly the trading class, which had played such an important role in supporting the uprising in its early phase. However, in his comments, Badrī sidestepped other considerations, such as the fact that he was taking part in the gum trade, a commodity on which the Mahdist state had claimed a monopoly. As a result, of the 88% of capital he claimed was seized as levies by fiscal agents, taxes based on enforcing a state monopoly represented a whole 33 percentage points. Traders dealing with other goods were not taxed at the same level. Furthermore, Badrī skilfully omits to mention the profits realised in Eastern Sudan to keep the total capital constant from his departure up to his return to Umm Durmān. Finally, whereas he boasts several times about his gains in his autobiography, he never places them in relation with the initial capital he had left with, thus shrouding the validity of his assessment. In any case, whatever the actual additional costs brought by taxation, they did not prevent him from becoming a wealthy member of the new Mahdist society.

This is not to say, however, that proper levels of taxation were not an object of discussion within the Mahdist administration. The Khalīfa's attention was focused on the collect itself rather than rates. Indeed, as noted by Badrī, from Sawākin to Umm Durmān, the same goods could be taxed three times—the first time in Kūkrayb, then in Barbar, and finally in Umm Durmān—each time at the same rate of ten percent. The Mahdist state's policy regarding that issue was somewhat ambiguous. Originally, the *'ushr* on trading goods was meant to be paid only once, and until 1889 (1306), this seems to have happened in Handūb. That situation became more complex with the transfer to Tūkar as it raised important practical problems if proceeds collected in Handūb were not forwarded to Tūkar, something the administration complained about<sup>96</sup>. Repeated levies on the same trade route signals the relative weakness of central institutions. In September 1888 (D. al-Ḥijja 1305), the Khalīfa enquired about the circumstances under which trade was conducted in Eastern Sudan. He had learned from his *'āmil* in Barbar that Bijāwī merchants had come to the downstream trade centre presenting certificates (*taṣrīḥāt* sing. *taṣrīḥ*) signed by 'Uthmān Diqna that they had paid the *'ushūr* and the *zakawāt* and, therefore, should not be stopped and taxed again<sup>97</sup>. Consequently, the decision must have been taken by 'Uthmān Diqna himself independently from instructions by the Khalīfa. For all of the authoritarian tendencies that the latter could display, his control over provincial internal policies was fragile, causing the different *'umalā'* to compete among themselves for resources, including the revenues they could derive from the *'ushr* on traded

95 Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898, op. cit.*, p. 167.

96RNRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 27.

97 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, letter 85.



goods. The Khalīfa himself was ambivalent about the necessity of a unified tax system. In May 1889 (Ramaḍān/Shawwāl 1306), at the moment of the revamping of the administrative organisation in Eastern Sudan, he approved of the *'ushr* being collected twice, once in Adūbana where most of the “people of the East (*ahālī al-sharq*)” arrive with their goods, and again in Tūkar where they sell these goods<sup>98</sup>.

The lack of control over these operations was not restricted to the central state. Even within provinces, *'umalā'* struggled to keep expressions of local autonomy at bay. Indeed, smaller amounts could be levied along the way, even between the harbour of Adūbana and Tūkar. Daf' Allāh Khandaqāwī, one of the *umarā'*, had been appointed at Umm Kubbān in July 1889 (D. al-Qa'da 1306) to protect the road of the littoral. However, he immediately began to request one *riyāl* for each saddlebag (*rahl* pl. *riḥāl*) of sugar and four for each of grain. Another tax of a quarter of a *riyāl* for each camel also seems to have been asked at that point. The fact that the *amīn* of the treasury in Tūkar wrote to 'Uthmān Diqna to inform him of this would point to the fact that, once again, these levies had not been previously sanctioned<sup>99</sup>.

Obviously, these discrepancies were instrumentalised by traders in their attempt to avoid taxation. In January 1891 (Jumādā II 1308), a merchant named Mūsā [Kabsa Arai] complained to 'Uthmān Diqna that Muḥammad Maḥmūd<sup>100</sup>, the *'amil*'s representative in Handūb, had refused to pay the *'ushr* on his goods. The same Muḥammad Maḥmūd had to ask that 'Uthmān Diqna deliver a specific order stipulating that Mūsā had to pay the *'ushr*<sup>101</sup>. One of the central issues was the way these dues were collected. In principle, the *'ushr* could be paid in kind or in cash<sup>102</sup>. The norm seems to have been to simply take ten percent of the goods, but this frequently proved to be unpractical and so the bulk of the *'ushr* would be levied in-kind while the remainder was paid in cash<sup>103</sup>. On other occasions, there was simply no other choice, as was the case with regard to slaves. Nevertheless, traders could also choose to pay the entirety in cash. This was the decision made by Ṣāliḥ al-Khamīsī, a major trader in the area, who imported significant amounts of grain. Rather than surrender ten percent of the 115 bags of grain (*'aysh*) he had brought with him, he paid 82 r. from a total value of 820 *riyāl*<sup>104</sup>. As each bag was valued at 8 r. or 5,5 r., it was in al-Khamīsī's interest to

98 *Daftar 'Uthmān Diqna*, letter 288, p. 225. See also *Ibid.*, letter 176.

99 NRO Mahdiyya 5/15/51F, document no. 18.

100 In all likelihood, this was Muḥammad Naṣr b. Maḥmūd 'Alī who had replaced his brother Aḥmad after his passing in December 1890 (Jumādā I 1308). See *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter no. 117, p. 66.

101 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letters no. 118 and 120, p. 66.

102 For an example of a report on the collect of *'ushr* in kind, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 113. As for its equivalent in cash, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, documents no. 107-109 and 111. Another example can be found of cash payments by traders in NRO Mahdiyya 5/13/48, document no. 8.

103 For example, a trader named 'Alī Muḥammad present in Tūkar in January 1889 (Jumādā I 1306) handed over three bundles of diverse fabric (*mushakkilāt*) over the 33 he had brought with him (alongside other goods) and paid the remainder with 8 *qirāt* of *riyāl*. See NRO Mahdiyya 5/17/59E, document no. 1.

104 NRO Mahdiyya 5/17/58A, document no. 17.

pay the *'ushr* in cash, since these estimates were well under market value in the context of the lingering effects of the *Sanat Sitta* famine. Lastly, there was yet another reason to favour payment in cash rather than in kind, which is that traders were embedded in networks of debts. Instead of handing over some of their goods, it was more expedient to obtain some form of reimbursement for the numerous loans contracted by the Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan through tax credits<sup>105</sup>.

Finally, the *'ushr* was also levied on agricultural production. There are few details regarding these levies in the Tāka region, beyond the mention in the accounts for March to September 1887 (Jumādā II to D. al-Ḥijja 1304) of revenues derived from the sale of grain, probably from the neighbouring fields and from the rental of waterwheels (*sawāqī* sing. *sāqiya*). In contrast, reports on the tithe imposed on harvests are much more complete for the Tūkar region between 1888 and 1891 (1306 to 1308). The subject will be analysed in greater details in the section dedicated to food supply in this chapter, but a few general comments can be offered on the specific topic of tax collection.

Naturally, the scope of levies on grain depended on the seasonality of cultivations in Eastern Sudan and were, therefore, highly irregular. The almost complete failure of cultivation in early 1890 (mid-1307) only exacerbated this fact. In the twenty-seven months for which records exist, two months contain nearly 80% of all grain deposits in Tūkar's granary (see fig. 4.12). While the period in question was marked by exceptional circumstances, the basis of Mahdist fiscality is rather straightforward: local authorities seized 10% of all harvests for the *'ushr*<sup>106</sup>. Besides this levy, grain could also serve to pay the yearly *zakāt al-fiṭr* instead of cash, as was the case in June 1889 (Shawwāl 1306)<sup>107</sup> and the going rate was a sixth of a *kīla* (4 qkl., around 2 kg) per person, combatant and family members alike. Grain prices underwent great variation, but paying the *fiṭra* in grain rather than cash remained advantageous throughout the period, even at the height of the *Sanat Sitta* famine<sup>108</sup>. Of course, at that point, scarce resources meant that this had long ceased to be an option.

In the end, all these different levies proved insufficient to meet the needs of the Mahdist

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105 For examples of tax rebates to reimburse previous loans contracted by the treasury, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/62B, documents no. 52, 53, 56 and 57. See also NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 115.

106 Examples of receipts related to the *'ushr* on grain can be found in NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, documents no. 110, 112, 114.

107 Examples of receipts related to *fiṭra* payments in grain can be found in NRO Mahdiyya 5/15/52, documents no. 8 and 10; and Mahdiyya 5/15/53, documents no. 2-4, 6-7, 9.

108 See fig. 4.13 for variations in grain prices. With monthly averages ranging from 8,2 r. to 17,4 r. per ardabb between 1306 and 1308 (1889-1891), a sixth of a *kīla* would have cost between 2,7 qr. and 5,8 qr., numbers that are both inferior to 6 qr., the cash rate for the *fiṭra*.

state. As long as the movement was expanding, it could rely on the massive amounts of cash and equipment collected as loot, but once the regime had stabilised—out of fear of alienating populations of Nilotic Sudan—it refrained from abusive confiscations. Fiscality was constrained by the framework established by Muḥammad Aḥmad within Islamic tradition and avenues to increase revenues were limited. Some taxes were discreetly increased. The amount of cash requested by the *zakāt al-fiṭra* witnessed a three-fold increase, from two to six qr. while its equivalent in grain more than doubled (see above). Another way to augment fiscal inputs was to collect the *‘ushr* at several locations, a practice which was directly condoned by the Khalīfa. And yet, to feed the men, the Mahdist administration had to collect a much higher share of the harvests. On that matter as on others, the needs of the state largely exceeded what could be obtained through direct taxation.

### ***C) Other Resources: Loot and Loans***

The problem was compounded by the Eastern Sudan’s specificities, most of which conspired to render levies more difficult than in other territories. In that regard, Mahdist concerns directly echoed those of the regime they had just toppled. Egyptian authorities also faced important hurdles to extract wealth from the region to the extent that in 1882 (1299/1300), Eastern Sudan incurred the largest deficit among all provinces<sup>109</sup>. The reasons for this are well-known. Bijāwī communities were mobile and careful not to be overly dependent on a single resource, as signalled by their wide geographical repartition across distinct and complementary production spaces, the Gwineb, the hills and the ‘Aṭbāy<sup>110</sup>. Despite powerful local environmental constraints, these groups were less susceptible than riverine populations to being cornered into submission by state authorities since moving further away—out of reach of the state’s hand—was always a possibility. In addition, Mahdist leaders were keen to avoid the appearance of impropriety. Because of the disruptive nature of Mahdist authority with regard to tribal leaderships, its authority lay mostly on its claim to the restoration of an unadulterated form of Islam, in contrast with the perceived corruption of the government imposed by the Egyptian colonial power. This allowed the Mahdists to frame their opponents as unbelievers and so deny them the protection offered by the Islamic rule of law. Conversely, deviations from proclaimed norms immediately sapped the fragile foundations of their domination. These inner tensions were most acute with respect to loot.

#### *i) Raids and Loot*

Loot was the main source of income of the Mahdist combatants in Eastern Sudan in the

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109 See appendix 2.

110 See chapter 1.

early years of the movement. The capture of the main provincial garrisons of the region allowed them to acquire the necessary equipment and supplies. As the vast majority of the rebel forces was indigenous, their needs were limited: the men who heeded the *da'wa* could easily return to their community. The surrender of Kasalā's garrison represented a major shift. Indeed, the loot collected was enormous. The initial report stated the seizure of 2 493 gold coins (including 1415 British pounds<sup>111</sup>) and 105 silver coins (almost exclusively French), as well of 22 horns filled with expensive civet musk. This was completed by 'Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf upon his arrival who counted more than a hundred kilos of gold and three hundred kilos of silver, mainly from the melting of jewellery. Besides, the secretary of the newly founded treasury in Eastern Sudan managed to retrieve some of the booty that combatants had kept for themselves or received without proper authorisations, 465,25 r. worth of coins and fabrics and two additional kilos of silver<sup>112</sup>. For the period running from September 1885 (D. al-Ḥijja 1302) to March 1887 (Jumādā I 1304), a year and a half after the surrender of Kasalā to the Mahdists, the treasury reported that it had collected more than 85 000 r. in loot, a sum that dwarfed all other sources of revenue and the majority of which, it can be assumed, was seized immediately after the capture of the city. All in all, it represented nearly 60% of all Mahdist incomes in that year and the management of such large volumes jump-started the formation of the Mahdist provincial administration in Eastern Sudan, just as the booty collected after the surrender of al-Ubayyīḍ had prompted the structuration of the Mahdist state apparatus. In the next six months, from March 1887 to late September 1887 (Jumādā II-D. al-Ḥijja 1304), this proportion had fallen to less than 12%, for a total of 4 335 r.<sup>113</sup>.

That is not to say that all looting had ceased in 1885 (1302/3). Because of its geographical position, Kasalā was a convenient starting point to launch expeditions against neighbouring non-Muslim communities. If Mahdist penetration of the Ethiopian highland was prevented by Ra's Alūlā's decisive intervention at the battle of Kūfīt (23 September 1885)<sup>114</sup>, limited raids were regularly undertaken in the following two years, leading to the capture and enslavement of significant numbers of individuals. The largest of these expeditions took place around July 1887 (Shawwāl-D. al-Qa'da) among the people of the *jibāl* al-Bāzāt and al-Bāriyyāt<sup>115</sup> between the Qāsh and the Baraka. Villages were burned down and five hundred men, women and children were captured: the former were sent to Umm Durmān to be sold by the central treasury or sent to al-

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111 In the text, "*riyāl afrānkī*". For conversion rates, see Anders J. BJØRKELO, *Prelude to the Mahdiyya*, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

112 Colonel Chermiside reported that 6 000 camels had been required to transfer the loot from Kasalā to Umm Durmān (Henry RUSSELL, *The Ruin of the Soudan: Cause, Effect, and Remedy - A Résumé of Events, 1883-1891*, London, Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1892, p. 134).

113 NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/66A, p. 1-24.

114 Haggai ERLICH, "1885 in Eritrea," *op. cit.*

115 The Barea and Bazeh regions in Eritrea.

Nujūmī in Dunqulā, while the latter were meant to be sold in the district<sup>116</sup>. However, the proceeds of these expeditions never matched the sums previously collected<sup>117</sup>. With ‘Uthmān Diqna’s attention focused on the north and Sawākin, Kasalā lost its position as a rear base for forays into Abyssinian territory, and most Mahdist operations against their powerful western neighbour were conducted from al-Qadārif, more to the south, in the larger framework of the war waged by the Mahdist power against its Ethiopian rival<sup>118</sup>.

The end of the Bijāwī consensus in 1886 (1303/4), after three years of struggle against Egyptian and British forces, and the beginning of the Bijāwī civil<sup>119</sup> war meant that raids which were supposed to target external communities were redirected against internal opponents. The contestation that began in the north in early summer 1886 (Sha‘bān 1303) when the *amīr* Sa‘adūn was dispatched by ‘Uthmān Diqna to levy taxes from the Ammār’ar herd spread the following year to the southern Bijāwī territories, as similar attempts to collect the *zakāt* from Hadanduwa communities were pursued in August 1887 (D. al-Qa‘da 1304). The Mahdist failure to contain challenges to their authority required a change in the use of raids. Not coincidentally, expeditions into Abyssinian territory ceased in the summer 1887 (Shawwāl 1304), at the same time the Mahdist leadership’s attention was redirected toward squashing the nascent rebellion<sup>120</sup>. While ‘Uthmān Diqna had refrained from waging an all-out war against the Ammār’ar, the risk of a larger surge of opposition and the fragmentation of Bijāwī communities in a struggle opposing all against all prompted the *‘āmil* to adopt a much tougher stance, with the Khalīfa’s agreement, who instructed his representative in September of the same year (D. al-Ḥijja 1304) to notify Hadanduwa leaders that their property (*amwāl-hum*) would be confiscated and considered as loot if they refused to submit and repent<sup>121</sup>.

This brutalisation of Mahdist provincial policies failed to deliver satisfactory results. In the context of the pacification campaign, a series of punitive raids were launched. In January 1888 (Rabī‘ II 1305), the expedition headed by Zakaryā Faḍl Allāh against the Ammār’ar in al-Malaḥa met with unexpected resistance and suffered heavy losses from the hands of the rebels. As a result, in the larger context of a renewed effort to centralise Mahdist provincial authorities in Eastern Sudan, the Khalīfa instructed his *‘āmil* to be more prudent and send detachments large enough to

116 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 7.

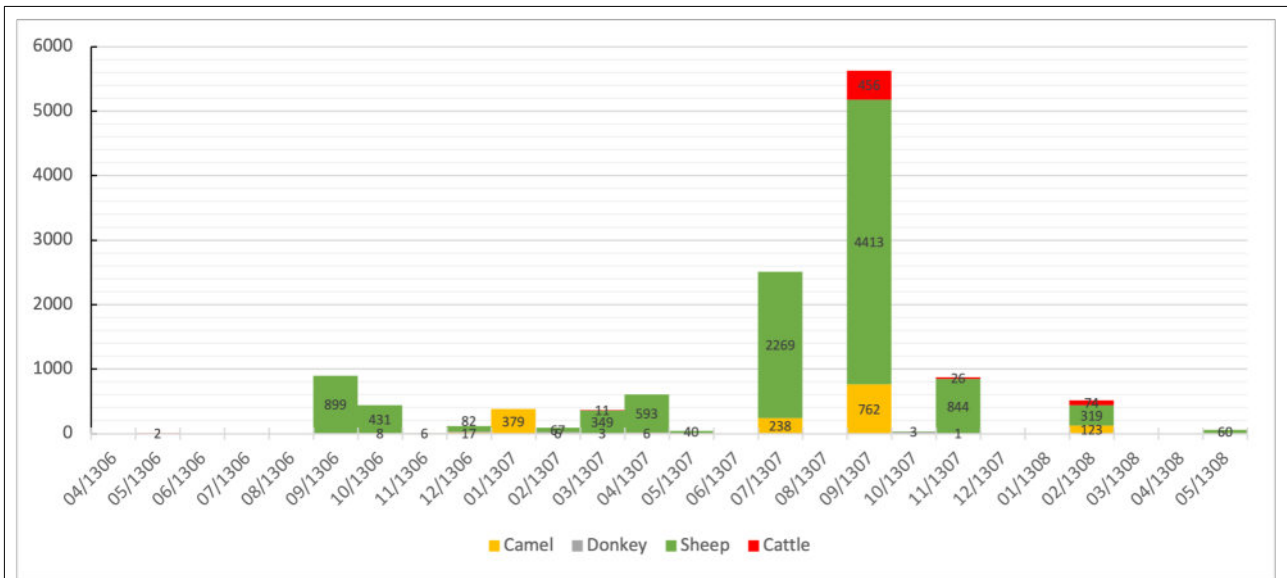
117 For a more detailed analysis of the role of slave-trade in Mahdist Eastern Sudan, see below.

118 Muḥammad Sa‘īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha: Dirāsa fī al-siyāsa al-dākhiliyya wa-l-khārijīyya li-dawlat al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, Beirut, Dār al-jīl, 1992 ; Iris SERI-HERSCH, “‘Transborder’ Exchanges of People, Things, and Representations: Revisiting the Conflict Between Mahdist Sudan and Christian Ethiopia, 1885-1889,” *op. cit.*

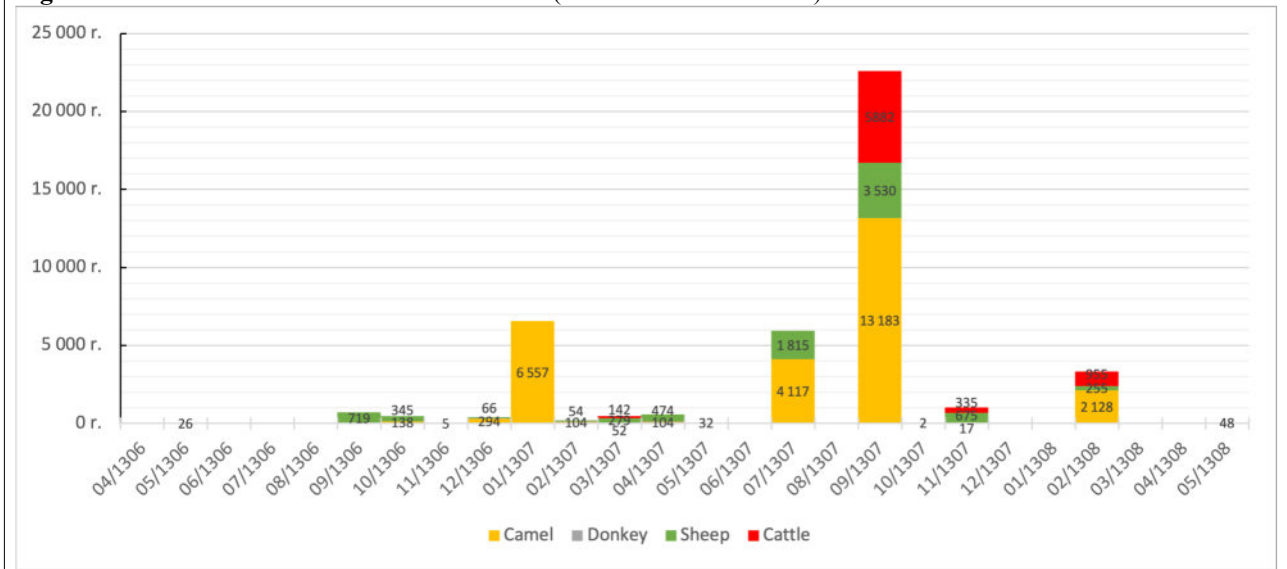
119 See chapter 2.

120 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 60–67.

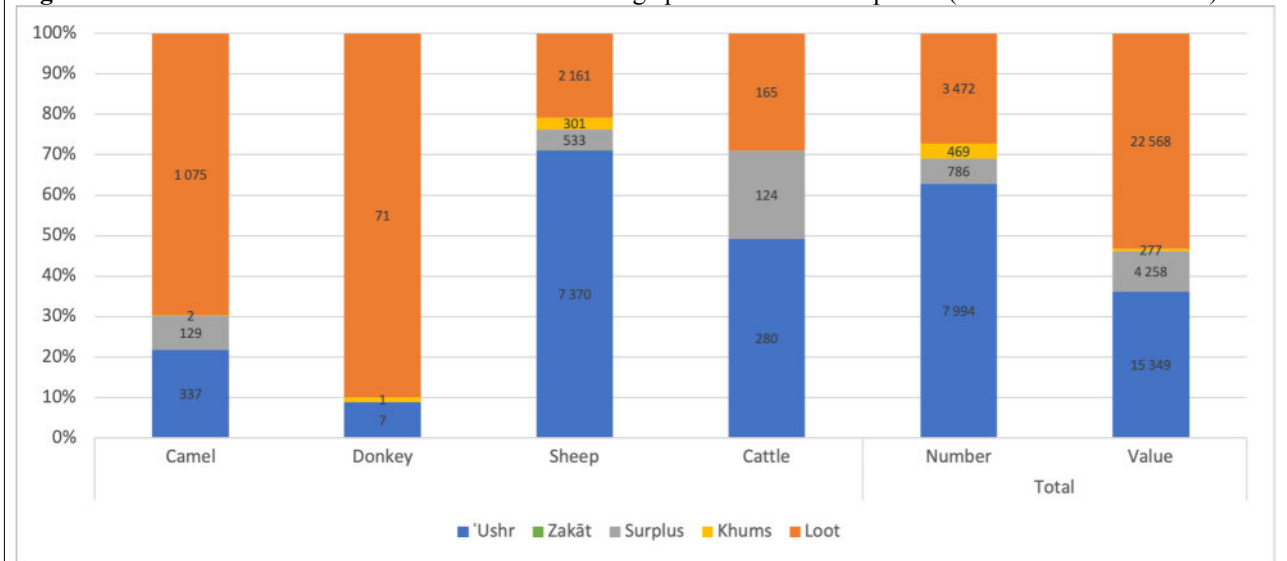
121 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 111, p. 107-108.



**Fig. 4.2a:** Livestock collected in absolute number (1888-1891 / 1306-1308)



**Fig. 4.2b:** Livestock collected in value based on the average price for the whole period (1888-1891 / 1306-1308)



**Fig. 4.2c:** Sources of collected livestock (1888-1891 / 1306-1308)

Sources: NRO Mahdiyya 5/04/16; Mahdiyya 5/05/21; and Mahdiyya 5/06/27A.

ensure their domination over rebellious communities<sup>122</sup>. The following months witnessed a much greater level of coordination between the different raiding parties, including through the dispatch of three *anṣār* to the *amīr* al-Nūr Zāyid in Aryāb to assist him<sup>123</sup>. The direct targeting of Bijāwī property and more pronounced centralised control over these operations led to the significant strengthening of Mahdist authority in the region. With the submission of most Ammār'ar and Hadanduwa communities, 'Uthmān Diqna's attention could return to the siege of Sawākin.

In the meantime, raids—besides those directly aimed at the surrounding area of the Red Sea port—were suspended. Mahdist defeat at the battle of Jumayza in late December 1888 (mid-Rabī' II 1306) and the subsequent displacement of their headquarter to Tūkar further prevented their organisation. They were only resumed almost a year later, in May 1889 (Ramaḍān 1306), firstly to prevent further attacks against the Adūbana-Tūkar trade route<sup>124</sup>, and secondly to the north, toward communities settled near Arkawīt and Handūb. In the latter case, large numbers of sheep were seized, as seen in figure 4.2a, in all likelihood, in relation with need to provide sheep for *'īd al-aḍḥā*. A similar increase can be observed for the months prior to Ramaḍān 1307, also noticeable in figure 4.2a. In the following two years, raids would follow patterns initiated prior to the relocation of the treasury to Tūkar in their planning as well as in their objectives. They almost exclusively targeted territories located in the southern part of the Sudanese Red Sea littoral where Banī 'Āmir, Ḥabāb and Rashāyda communities dwelled and constituted attempts to further Mahdist territorial control toward the south. Contrary to what was the norm until 1888 (1305/6), they implied large numbers of men and were not solely punitive or prompted by military considerations but aimed at imposing Mahdist power on specific groups. The first of these expeditions took place in February 1890 (Jumādā II/Rajab 1307) at Abū Qarja's initiative who took advantage of 'Uthmān Diqna's departure to Umm Durmān the month before. As noted by the historian William C. Young, his intentions were made clear when “he decided to establish a new military headquarter in [*khūr*] Balatāt [and] sent word to Tūkar that his wives and children should be sent there and even ordered his men to plant crops there<sup>125</sup>.” His endeavour was short-lived as he was forced to withdraw soon after and summoned to Umm Durmān. However, similar operations were engaged by the *amīr* Wad Badawī in the summer 1890 (Shawwāl-D. al-Ḥijja 1307) and then by 'Uthmān Diqna in January

122 *Daftar 'Uthmān Diqna*, letters 134 and 136, p. 121-123.

123 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – 'Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 84–85.

124 British and Mahdist sources differ as to the groups responsible for these attacks. DMI reports claimed that “the Beni Amer have been very active in raiding upon the southern part of the Tokar district and Osman has despatched one or two expeditions against them” (DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin), no. 82, 16 May-27 May 1889), while 'Uthmān Diqna attributed the same attacks to “hypocrites” from Sawākin (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muharrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 171).

125 William C. YOUNG, “From Many, One: The Social Construction of the Rashāyida Tribe in Eastern Sudan,” *op. cit.*, p. 95.

1891 (Jumādā II 1308), this time with several thousand men<sup>126</sup>.

While the *‘āmil* of Eastern Sudan had to cut his expedition short when informed of the British advance on Tūkar, the two first raids yielded important booty, as showed in figures 4.2a and 4.2b including significant number of cows, since cattle rearing was much more prevalent in the Southern Bijāwī triangle than in the north<sup>127</sup>. However, the distinction between loot and levies was blurry at best. Considering cattle and sheep, figure 4.2c shows that more than half of all animals were collected as *‘ushr*. Camels, on the other hand, were much more susceptible to have been seized as booty. This reflected the differentiated treatment reserved to the various communities in the region but also the military value of camels. The latter were more likely to have been acquired as the result of a conflict. In that respect, loot served several functions. Firstly, it signalled Mahdist domination over refractory groups in the same way that, on the other end of the spectrum, the *‘ushr* indicated the latter’s recognition of Mahdist power. It was also the easiest manner to enrich the coffers of the treasury. The concentration of these operations over a short period in 1890 (1307) was directly linked with the dire state of food supply in Eastern Sudan in the context of the *Sanat Sitta* famine. In *khūr* Balatāt where he was settled, Abū Qarja had gathered over a thousand camels and was said to have butchered some of them for his men while sending the remainder to Tūkar where they were also eaten. In the same perspective, raiding constituted a valve through which to free some of the pressure on the local resources. Not only could livestock and, more rarely, grain be seized as loot which would alleviate some of the tensions in the Mahdist camp, but, even if unsuccessful, the mere fact that men departed from the camp meant that, at least temporarily, requests on the treasury would abate. The convergence of these dynamics have already been exposed by Slatin when he wrote that “the immense crowds which had collected round El Obeid began to exhaust the water supply; and, to reduce the pressure, the Mahdi despatched Abu Anga with a large force, against Jabal Dair<sup>128</sup>, where the Nuba tribes were offering a stubborn resistance to his rule<sup>129</sup>.”

The previous discussion show that it is necessary to contextualise raiding and looting. British contemporaries assumed that looting was the corollary of the Mahdist authorities’ weakness and inability to ground their political legitimacy in a provincial setting. And yet, the functions devolved to raids evolved notably from 1885 to 1891, leading to their greater centralisation and a stronger control over looting. Thus, unauthorised actions could be condemned by the administration

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126 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 124 (7-21 January 1891) and no. 126 (15 February-1 March 1891) and Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 219.

127 See chapter 1.

128 Incidentally, it is during this campaign which started in February 1884 that ‘Umar b. Abū Bakr Diqna, ‘Uthmān Diqna’s brother, was killed. See chapter 2.

129 Rudolf C. SLATIN, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 281.



which then endeavoured to return seized items to their rightful owners, often causing the discontent of the raiding party<sup>130</sup>. The targets of Mahdist raiding expeditions revealed an ever-shifting and complex political landscape while the status attributed to seized property was an indicator of the relationship between Mahdist provincial authorities and specific communities.

*ii) The Khums and Economic Relations with the Central Authorities*

Even more complex was the way the proceeds of loot were integrated into the budget of Tūkar's treasury. According to al-Qaddāl, a distinction must be made between booty (*ghanīma*) acquired as punishment for collective behaviours, namely opposition to the Mahdist movement in a context of war, and confiscations (*tajrīd*<sup>131</sup>) imposed on individuals as one of the main forms of sanction for *ḥadd* offences. This determined the fate of the related proceeds. In the first case, following canonical regulations deriving from the *sharī'a*, only a fifth (*khums*) of the booty was meant to be kept by the treasury and the remainder was to be distributed among the combatants; while, in the second case, it was entirely entrusted to the authorities. If property had been acquired in a context of war but as a result of an "unconditional surrender"<sup>132</sup>, the loot was then considered as *fay'*, and also fully appropriated by the authorities<sup>133</sup>.

In Eastern Sudan, the *fay'* remained marginal as this particular type of booty was mostly related to the seizure of land property held either by the higher segments of Sudanese urban communities or by the colonial state itself. This form of appropriation remained marginal in Eastern Sudan due to the particular nature of land ownership in the region and the term *fay'* is almost entirely absent from administrative records, beside an indirect and unique mention of "fields of the treasury (*aṭyān bayt al-māl*)", hinting to the fact that some land may have fallen under that category<sup>134</sup>. In the same manner, confiscations rarely appear in Mahdist sources. This may well reflect the potency of tribal structures that resisted individual sanctions. Indeed, in one of the few available examples, the confiscation of a quarter bundle (*tāqa*) of Indian calico (*khām*) in April 1889 (Sha'bān 1306) was imposed on the Sha'yāb for having assaulted some *anṣār*<sup>135</sup>. Conversely, the sole mention of confiscations in the correspondence between the Khalīfa and his *'āmil* in

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130 NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56C, document no. 7.

131 Al-Qaddāl mobilises the word *taghnīm* with a meaning closely related to *ghanīma* as was the case in the Mahdī's normative writings (Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī'a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 219). However, the Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan only used *tajrīd*.

132 Frede LØKKEGAARD, "Fay'," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Leyden, Brill, 1965, vol. II/ p. 869–870.

133 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Al-ard fī al-Mahdiyya*, *op. cit.*, p. 32–34 ; Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādīyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 149 ; Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK, "The Case of the Mahdist Public Treasury in the Sudan - 1881-1898," *op. cit.*, p. 156.

134 NRO Mahdiyya 5/03/12.

135 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 97; and NRO Mahdiyya 5/02/09D.

Eastern Sudan referred to sanctions applied to merchants trading in places controlled by the “enemies of God<sup>136</sup>”.

Setting aside matters related to specific forms of booty—of little consequence in the Eastern province—, it must be noted that the issue of its division was at the heart of the relations between the central authorities, the *anṣār* and the provincial administration. Indeed, as mentioned before, major adaptations were introduced by the Mahdī in 1883 (1300/1), first among which was his decision to disregard legal norms that stipulated that only a fifth of the loot could be kept by the state so as to appropriate it entirely, thus engaging a process by which a large number of individuals found themselves entirely dependent on state distributions<sup>137</sup>. But the untimely death of the Mahdī did not leave him time to settle the rules which were to be followed by his representatives regarding loot collected in the provinces. This was a crucial topic for the Khalīfa in the wake of Kasalā’s surrender. As early as September 1885 (D. al-Ḥijja 1302) he had written to ‘Uthmān Diqna that “when [he] arrive[s], [he] should examine all that was gathered as loot in Kasalā and al-Khatmiyya<sup>138</sup>, collect the *khums* according to the *shar‘* and handover the *khums* to the beloved al-Ḥusayn Ibrāhīm Zahrā’ and the other *umanā’* who are with him so that they bring it to us<sup>139</sup>”. This respected the original intention of the Mahdī, namely that the whole of the booty be entrusted to the authorities, but also innovated by transforming the *khums* into a direct transfer from the provincial treasury to its central counterpart. However, the implementation of these instructions was limited. While a significant volume of loot was indeed transferred to Umm Durmān (see above), it was restricted to specific commodities (mainly gold and silver), in line with the Mahdī’s prescription that strategic resources such as horses, firearms, black powder and coins be excluded from the division of booty<sup>140</sup>. According to the DMI agent Na‘ūm Shuqayr, the revenues of local treasuries were allocated to the payment of the wages of the administrators and the local elite. The surplus was supposed to be sent to Umm Durmān with the reports showing expenses and revenues<sup>141</sup>. But no such transfer was ever recorded by Eastern Sudan’s provincial administration. In the Kasalā treasury budget, the revenues between October 1885 (D. al-Ḥijja 1302) and March 1887 (Jumādā II 1304) amounted to around 147 000 r. of which 140 000 r. or 95% were spent locally. There is no trace of the remainder being surrendered to the central treasury<sup>142</sup>. The Khalīfa appears to have realised

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136 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 20.

137 See chapter 3.

138 A small village next to Kasalā where the powerful Khatmiyya *ṭarīqa* had set up its headquarters.

139 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 30, p. 43.

140 Abū Salīm M.I. (dir.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 238 cited in Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī‘a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan: The Mahdī’s Legal Methodology and Doctrine*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2016, p. 234.

141 Na‘ūm SHUQAYR, *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*, *op. cit.*, p. 911–912 ; Yitzhak NAKASH, “Fiscal and Monetary Systems in the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898,” *op. cit.*, p. 382.

142 NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/66A, p. 9.

quickly that requesting such transfers may be counter-productive considering the number of men and women whose livelihood and participation to the *jihād* directly depended on the state's ability to cover their expenses. In May 1886 (Rajab 1303), the leader of the Mahdist movement reminded his *'āmil* that the *khums* was “God's and His Prophet's command (*farḍ Allāh wa li-Rasūl-hu*)”. However, he did not repeat his injunction for its transfer to the capital but warned 'Uthmān Diqna not to neglect this imperative and send him detailed reports<sup>143</sup>.

Little changed with the settling of the treasury in Tūkar. In April 1889 (Sha'bān 1306), a distinct office of the *khums* (*ṣundūq khums*) was founded and placed under al-Amīn 'Abd al-Dā'im, but it was not maintained: four months later, its secretary had been put in charge of receiving the *'ushr* on grain<sup>144</sup>. Discreet and ambiguous references to the *khums* could nonetheless be recovered from Tūkar's budget. In April 1889 (Sha'bān 1306), the secretary of the department of money still divided the entire cash revenues for this month: 7 289 r. was entered as “legal claim of the treasury (*ḥaqq bayt al-māl*)”, while the remainder, 1 686 r., that is a bit less than 20% of the entire sum, was marked down as “loan of the *khums* (*maṭlūb al-khums*)<sup>145</sup>”. The particular format of this budgetary inclusion confirms the main motive behind the abandonment of *khums* remittances to Umm Durmān: the treasury in Tūkar was structurally in deficit. Revenues from *khums* were entered as a loan from the central treasury to its provincial counterpart, and its *amīn* may even have entertained the possibility that these sums would eventually find their way into the coffers of the capital. The same formula was applied the following month<sup>146</sup> with the addition of a new account entirely dedicated to the *khums*, the (small) proceed of which originated from “the fifth of the loot brought from the vicinity of the fort (*qayqara*) of Sawākin at the time of the siege”. The sum indicated bore no relation to the theoretical division of the entire budget. Indeed, another month later, in June 1889 (Shawwāl 1306), it had completely disappeared. The *khums* was derived solely from the meagre resources acquired from looting, often through the sale of looted livestock. This did not, however, fully erase the particular status of this revenue. The remnant of the *ṣundūq khums*, now robbed of its title, managed specific expenses, namely the purchase by its secretary, al-Bashīr Aḥmad Ḥusayn, also the head of the Tūkar market as *muḥtasib*, of mats (*bursh/burūsh* pl. *abrāsh*) to the extent that he was also designated as *amīn al-burūsh*<sup>147</sup>. These mats were weaved from palm fronds (*khūṣa*)—probably extracted from the dum palms that grow in the *khūr* Lanqayb in the upper part of the *khūr*

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143 *Daftar 'Uthmān Diqna*, letter 63, p. 69.

144 NRO Mahdiyya 5/03/11.

145 NRO Mahdiyya 5/02/09C, p. 52.

146 This time, accountants had distinguished between the “*maṭlūb al-khums*” and the “*maṭlūb bayt al-māl*”. How they comprehended that second expression remains problematic. Throughout Mahdist documents emanating from the Tūkar treasury, *maṭlūb* is used to designate a loan.

147 See, for example, NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/64, document no. 3.

Baraka—and served as external shrouds (*kafan* pl. *akfān*) to bury the dead<sup>148</sup>.

The rapid cessation of *khums*' transfer does not mean that there were no circulations between the central and provincial treasuries. If no cash transfer was ever recorded, this was within the realm of the possible. In May 1889 (Ramaḍān 1306), the head of the central treasury wrote to 'Uthmān Diqna to request help to cope with the arrival of a large army of Baqqāra Ta'ā'īsha in Umm Durmān. A monetary contribution does not seem to have been expected. A month later, Ibrāhīm 'Adlān thanked the 'āmil of Eastern Sudan for having sent gum, wax and wood<sup>149</sup>. Inversely, important sums of money could be sent from Umm Durmān to the provinces, as was the case on at least one occasion in Eastern Sudan, when the Khalīfa decided in March (Rajab 1306)—just as the Mahdist community was settling in Tūkar—to help them by sending 6 090 r., a sum that represented 85% of all cash revenues for this month<sup>150</sup>.

With the Mahdist withdrawal from Tūkar to Adarāma in February came yet another shift in the financial relations between Eastern Sudan and the capital. Since his appointment as 'āmil of Eastern Sudan in 1883 (1300), 'Uthmān Diqna made no direct mention of *khums*-related issues until March 1893 (Sha'bān 1310). For the first time, 'Uthmān Diqna informed the Khalīfa that the *khums* had been withdrawn from the booty seized during the raid against Arkawīt and the *jabal* al-Jamīlāb—4 000 sheep and 50 camels—and entrusted to one of the *anṣār*, a man named al-Ghālī Muḥammad Aḥmad, to bring it to the central treasury with a letter to its *amīn*, al-'Awaḍ al-Mardī. A year later, in September 1894 (Rabī' I 1312), a fifth of the proceed of 'Alī Mūsā Diqna's raid against Tūkar was there again supposed to be sent to Umm Durmān<sup>151</sup>. This pertained to a larger movement of recentralisation of provincial incomes. In another discussion dated January 1893 (Jumādā II 1310), the 'āmil had also affirmed, albeit in an obscure manner, that part of the yield of the *ushr* levied in Kūkrayb station on goods imported from Sawākin would be divided between “what belongs specifically to the central treasury from the department of the *fay*' [and sent] to its required destination (*li-maḥal muqtaḍā-hu*) and what belongs here [Adarāma] to us to distribute it to the *anṣār* as assistance<sup>152</sup>”. This demonstrated a curious evolution towards a practice which had actually never been implemented before in the region, up to the use of a term, 'department of the *fay*'', without precedent for this administration.

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148 The evolution of *khums* records can be observed for the months of Sha'bān to Shawwāl 1306 (April-June 1889) in the last three sections (C-E) of NRO Mahdiyya 5/02/09 (see appendix [?]). The mention of their provenance is located in the budget for D. al-Qa'da 1306 that can be found in the first section (A) of NRO Mahdiyya 5/02/10, p. 52. As for most (if not all) purchases, a commission had been given to al-Bashīr Aḥmad Ḥusayn, the record of which can be found in the commission accounts (*ḥāṣil al-'ahd*) for the year of 1307 in NRO Mahdiyya 5/07/31, p. 15.

149 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letters 36, 42 and 43, p. 58.

150 NRO Mahdiyya 5/02/9B, p. 41.

151 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 325 and 376.

152 *Ibid.*, letter 314.

In the end, while the political significance of loot should not be underestimated, particularly so for what it reveals of the relations between Umm Durmān and the provinces, it remained marginal in the overall budgetary balance of Tūkar's treasury. Transfers ordered by the Khalīfa may have been instrumental in the relocation of the Mahdist community, but they were exceptional and circumstantial. 'Uthmān Dīqna's administration was constrained by its limited access to resources and raids were not a sustainable source of income. The solution? Borrowing.

### *iii) Loans and Contributions*

The extensive process of commodification and monetisation of Nilotic Sudan's economy since at least the second half of the eighteenth century was accompanied by the development of different financial tools<sup>153</sup>. Despite his injunctions to abandon the material world, the Mahdī could not ignore the transformations witnessed by Sudanese communities and their integration into vast economic networks. Central to his concerns was the regulation of loans and the prohibition of interest, a tenet of Islamic law he would naturally seek to uphold. However, for all of his inflammatory rhetoric, Muḥammad Aḥmad was also aware of the penetration of trade activities in the population, even if at immensely varying levels, and thus elaborated a legal framework that allowed economic actors to circumvent the strict ban on usury by charging a fee that could then be subtracted from a loan<sup>154</sup>. The matter was not considered only through a regulatory lens. The Mahdī was also attentive to local economic dynamics. With regard to debt, it is not surprising that the problem arose in relation to the trading milieus of Sawākin, one of the main trade hubs in Nilotic Sudan. As his newly-appointed *'āmil* was trying to entice its population to abandon the confines of the Red Sea port to join the movement he had introduced in the region, the Mahdī instructed him to impose a moratorium on the settlement of all of debts. Since their leaving would entail either the confiscation of their property by the "Turks", the Anglo-Egyptian administration, or to risk being assaulted and plundered by bandits (*umm qarānja*), the Mahdī feared that their relinquishing of worldly affairs would be prevented by obliging them to pay back debts they would have no means to reimburse<sup>155</sup>. This indicated, once again, a keen understanding by Mahdist leaders of the intricacies of the commercial sector in Sudan.

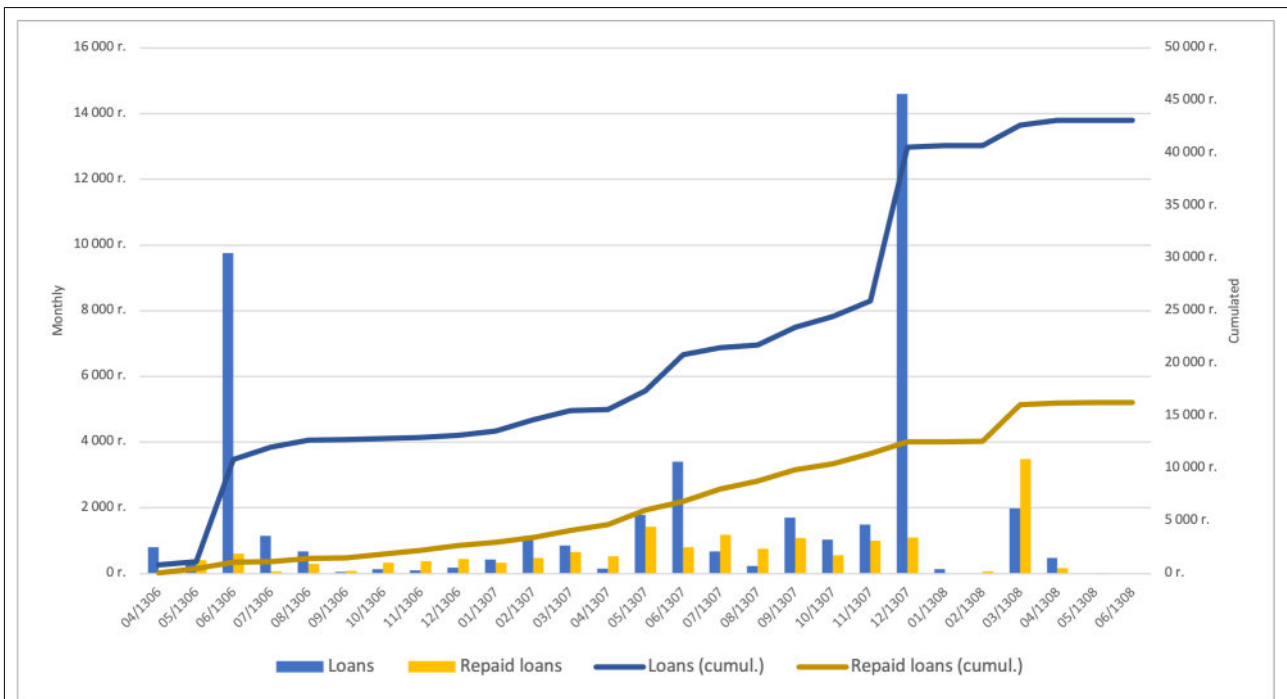
However, the millenarian movement's interest in debt was not limited to its use by the

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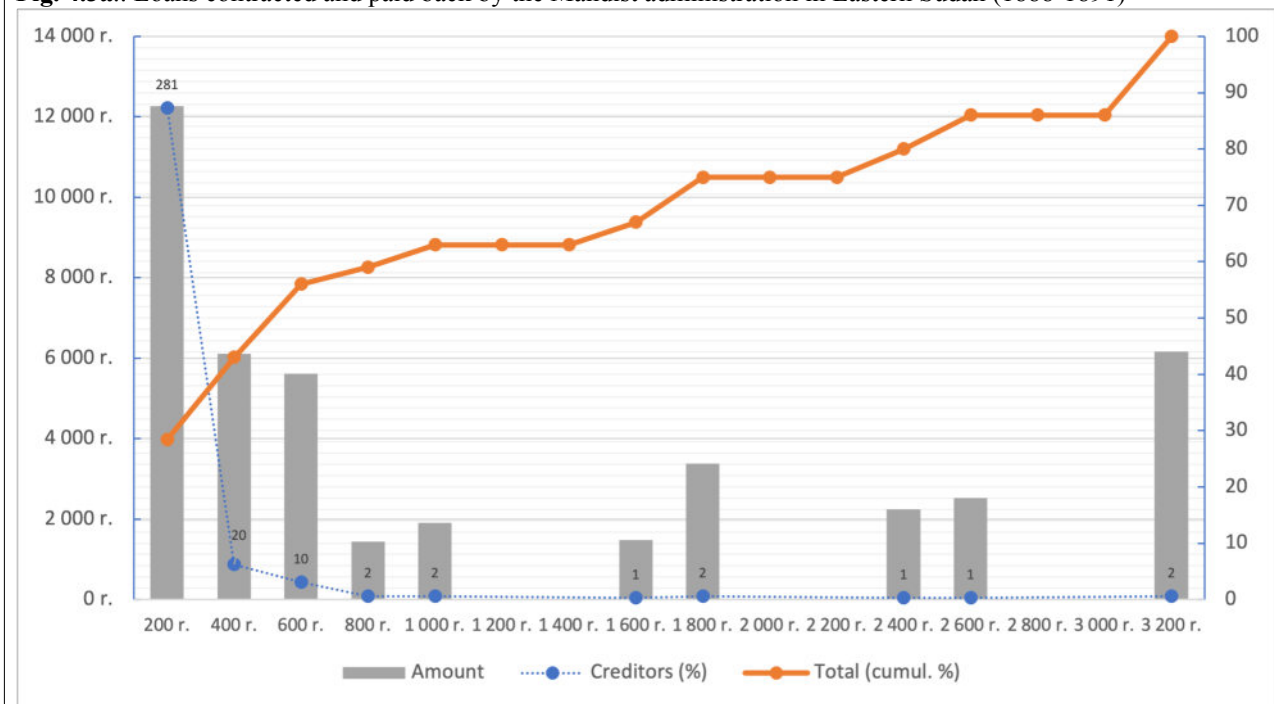
153 Anders J. BJØRKELO, *Prelude to the Mahdiyya*, *op. cit.*, p. 104–136.

154 Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī'a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 89–92. This dynamic was not unique to Nilotic Sudan, but could be observed in the entire space of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. See on that topic Fahad Ahmad BISHARA, *A Sea of Debt: Law and Economic Life in the Western Indian Ocean, 1780-1950*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017. In nineteenth-century Sudan, the question was thoroughly analysed in Hengameh Ziai's Ph.D. dissertation (*Ploughing for the Hereafter: Debt, Time, and Mahdist Resistance in Northern Sudan, 1821-1935*, PhD diss., Columbia University, New York, 2021.), unfortunately, her work was still inaccessible at the time of writing.

155 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 373.



**Fig. 4.3a:** Loans contracted and paid back by the Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan (1888-1891)



**Fig. 4.3b:** Creditors of the Tūkar treasury (1888-1891)

**Fig. 4.3:** Loans and reimbursements by the Mahdist treasury of Tūkar (1888-1891)

**Sources :** NRO Mahdiyya 5/05/19; Mahdiyya 5/07/32; Mahdiyya 5/04/18; and Mahdiyya 5/06/27B.

population, but also encompassed its gradual mobilisation by the administration, a process that is little documented. First occurrences of loan issuances in Mahdist administrative sources date from June 1886 (Ramaḍān 1303). On this occasion, the *nāẓir* of the Hadanduwa, the famous Mūsā Ibrāhīm, loaned 277 r. 14 qr. to Aḥmad Ibrāhīm<sup>156</sup>. The administration did not seem to be involved

<sup>156</sup> It is unclear whether Aḥmad Ibrāhīm belonged to the Mahdist administration. An Egyptian soldier of Kasalā's

beyond recording this agreement. But on the same page, three other individuals saw their bags of grain seized against a recognition of debt. This time, the records were more extensive and the administration had recognised legal witnesses (*shahīd* pl. *shuhadā'*) to attest the validity of the operation, thus inserting itself within the web of local economic relations. More importantly, the Mahdist movement in Eastern Sudan had gained access to a pool of potential lenders, mostly traders who had succeeded in achieving some form of capitalistic accumulation and could thus be asked to contribute financially to the provincial budget.

In the following eighteen months, from September 1885 (D. al-Ḥijja 1302) to March 1887 (Jumādā II 1304), the Mahdist administration in Kasalā resorted to borrowing 14 705 r. “since the treasury is empty”, that is around 10% of its overall cash revenues, a sum that included almost 100 000 r. collected as booty (see above). During the same period, the only regular revenue to be more important was the *zakāt* collected on livestock for around 20 000 *riyāl*. The share of loans in the budget grew exponentially once the proceeds of the loot had been entirely consumed. From March to September 1887 (Jumādā I 1304-Muḥarram 1305), recorded loans amounted to more than 29 000 *riyāl*<sup>157</sup>. Once the treasury had settled in Tūkar, access to capital would become more precarious and Kasalā remained central to gather funds.

The next few years can be analysed with much greater precision thanks to loan records being one of the few undamaged and so extant administrative sources for Eastern Sudan. While loans contracted in 1887 (1304/5) were meant to provide for the force then engaged in the Bijāwī civil war, the subsequent period was witness to two stark increases in levels of indebtedness, as shown in figure 4.3a. The first one, in February 1889 (Jumādā II 1306), resulted from the recognition by ‘Uthmān Diqna of the debts contracted by his relative, Muḥammad Aḥmad Diqna, who had governed Tūkar and Ṭamāy (Taṣṣalaḥ) while the ‘*āmil* was away in Handūb. In the second instance, debts were contracted by ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf to finance the transfer of troops from al-Qaḍārīf to Tūkar in July/August 1890 (D. al-Ḥijja 1307)<sup>158</sup>.

Loans were complex operations that reflected a great variety of realities. Actual monetary loans were only one minor input. Exact numbers cannot be given, a frustrating feature of Mahdist accounting practices, but it can be noted that in 1887 (1304/5) cash entries derived from loans amounted to 1 454 r., that is less than 5% of all the cash deposited in the Kasalā treasury. Taking into account the fact that some of the cash loans were used for purchases and so entrusted as commissions (*‘uhda* pl. *‘uhad*), around 960 r. during the same period, cash represented less than

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garrison bore that name and may have borrowed money from the Hadanduwa *nāzir* to assist his community (*awlād al-rīf*). The head of the Ḥakūlāb in Tāka was also named Aḥmad Ibrāhīm. See Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 118 and 199.

157 NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/66A, p. 5 and 17.

158 NRO Mahdiyya 5/02/09, p. 1-66 and Mahdiyya, p. 51-88.

10% of the value of all loans. Indeed, traders had no interest in parting with their cash. Conversely, the overwhelming majority of the treasury's credit was based on goods. Again, this entailed very different situations. The most central commodity seized by the Mahdist administration was grain, particularly *dhura*, sometimes in important volumes, as was the case in late January 1890 (early Jumādā II 1307), when Abū Qarja and Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf obtained 323 bags of grain (around 15,5 t.) from Muḥammad al-ʿUtaybī al-Makkāwī for a total value of 1944 r.<sup>159</sup>. Unable to pay their supplier immediately, the Mahdist administration resorted to buying this grain on credit. Sometimes, other food supplies were acquired alongside grain, such as fat, baskets of dates, wheat or rice<sup>160</sup>. Expensive military equipment, notably horses, could also be purchased on credit<sup>161</sup>. However, loans were not exclusively driven by the Mahdist administration's needs. If the Kasalā accounts for 1887 (1304/5) quoted above reported a loan of 6 263 r. of grain<sup>162</sup> collected by one of the *maqādīm*, Muḥammad Ismāʿīl<sup>163</sup>, it also mentioned a very substantive loan of 4 640 r. related to the value of calico (*khām*). Far from being a decision imposed by the treasury, it had seized this significant stock of fabric until they could find its legal owner, Ḥāmid Kantibāy, who had seemingly disappeared. Accountants duly noted having distributed some of it to the *anṣār* but the accounts were closed before its status could be asserted. In the same fashion (but for much smaller amounts), the treasury was also the inheritor in last resort of all the *anṣār*. Until their rightful heirs could be determined, a complex matter considering the displacements and fragmentation incurred by communities engaged in the *jihād*, the treasury could make decisions, including selling some of the inheritance, as long as it kept a record of it.

As a result, recognitions of debt were evidently crucial documents. They were also relatively straightforward. The first part stated the amount of money or quantity of a given good that was borrowed and the identity of the lender. It was usually written in the name of the latter, but in most available documents, several lenders were recorded on the same document which was signed by only one of them or a trusted witness. The second part was written by the administrator who attested the loan and asked the clerks of the treasury to record it. In turn, the agents of the treasury

159 NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40C, document no. 44. A letter sent by al-Majdhūb Abū Bakr to ʿUthmān Diqna informing him of this transaction can be seen in NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 14.

160 For example, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40C, document no. 56.

161 See, for example, NRO Mahdiyya 5/17/58A, document no. 1. In May 1894 (D. al-Qaʿda 1311), ʿUthmān Diqna informed the Khalīfa that “a few people from the Nile River area (*jihat baḥr al-Nīl*) had come to [him] to sell horses and [that he] bought some, most through debts (*bi-wajhi al-dīn fī al-aghlāb*), he gave them the necessary attestations, and every time he finds something in the treasury, he pays them back one after the other”. See Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ʿUthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 353.

162 A rough estimate would indicate that at 3 r. the *ardabb*, this credit could have allowed for the purchase of nearly 290 t. of grain. Indeed, the same document valued the 1621,8 ard. in the possession of the treasury at 121 563 qr., that is 4 862 *riyāl*. See NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/66, p. 14.

163 NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56, document no. 6.



could then certify having received such order, but this was not systematic<sup>164</sup>. An attestation (*sanad* pl. *sanadāt*) was handed over to the lenders in question, however, for obvious reasons, no example could be located in Mahdist archives<sup>165</sup>.

Because of its role as the institution that recorded and so guaranteed loans, the treasury represented a nodal point in this economic network, whereas its role within the chain of command was much more unstable. Decisions were not taken through a clear hierarchy, thus signalling the porosity between public and private matters as well as the deep fragmentation of the Mahdist leadership. Indeed, there was no definitive protocol for contracting loans. Distance and difficult communications meant that local actors often resorted to borrowing money or goods without prior authorisation, postponing the validation of their loan to a later date. Combatants could enter deals without consent and request *ex post* that their loans be reimbursed by the treasury. This was what a man named ‘Alī al-Ḥājī Aḥmad attempted when he asked his commander, a minor *amīr* by the name of Ḥamad Muḥammad Khayr, to intercede in his favour with Abū Qarja so that the treasury settled the residue of the six-*riyāl* debt he had contracted for the acquisition of a slave<sup>166</sup>. This was not exceptional and other examples could be found. The matter was rendered even more complex as loans could circulate among the *anṣār* and move down the ladders of the hierarchy, leading combatants to borrow from their own *muqaddam*, himself already indebted to other persons. In December 1889 (Jumādā I 1307), Muḥammad Bābikir and Aḥmad Sharīf, two small Mahdist officers, complained bitterly (in hesitant Arabic) to the *amīn* of the treasury that “the ‘āmil Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Abū Qarja had contracted debts for [their] welfare and their creditors (*hal [sic] al-duyūn*) never stopped beleaguering [them] to the extreme (*hal [sic] al-duyūn ḍayyaqū‘ā ‘alay-nā qayātī [sic] al-ḍīq*) to send them their due. [They] had borrowed from them before some money and some food, and [their creditors] are harassing them, in particular Ḥasan Ibrāhīm [Barnūs] to whom [they] owed the sum of 64 *riyāl*<sup>167</sup>”.

The man pressuring them to pay their debt back was not a trader but one of the Mahdist *umarā’*. ‘Uthmān Diqna had entrusted him with the mission to transfer some of the combatants and their families from Kasalā to Tūkar. Since the authorities were unable to pay for transport and supplies, he had to advance 600 r. of his own money, but this still proved insufficient and in July

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164 For examples of cash loans, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40C, document no. 43 or Mahdiyya 5/20/70B, document no. 15.

165 They are, however, clearly mentioned in a letter written by ‘Uthmān Diqna to the Khalīfa in February 1894 (D. al-Qa‘da 1311). In this document, he mentioned that creditors would come to him asking to be reimbursed with their attestation in their hand. See Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 347.

166 NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40C, document no. 17. Another *nāṣir*, Muṣṭafā Muḥammad al-Jīlānī, also purchased a slave thanks to credit obtained from ‘Abd al-Khāliq ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Hindī and asked the treasury to reimburse his loan to the amount of 40,5 r. in December 1889 (Jumādā I 1307). See NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 46.

167 NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40C, document no. 45.

1889 he borrowed another 100 r. from one of the main lenders to the Mahdist administration, the Kasalā-based trader ‘Abd al-Khāliq ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Hindī (see below), before asking the treasury to take over this new debt. His efforts were in vain and several months later, in February 1890 (Jumādā II 1307), the *amīr* Barnūs had yet to resolve his budget issues. Either through consolidation or simply by opening a new line of credit, the *amīr* and ‘Abd al-Khāliq had found an agreement. Barnūs would carry the latter’s goods to Tūkar where they were to be sold and the profits used to reimburse the initial loan. However, Barnūs had distributed all the gains on the spot to the families with him, leading him to ask the treasury to reimburse the entirety of his loan, now amounting to 864 r.<sup>168</sup>.

This gave shape to a close intertwining of economic relations between the Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan and merchants, as the latter began to have a growing stake in the stability of Mahdist power in the region and the success of its military operations. To some extent, they became the financiers of the raids. In early 1890 (mid-1307), when Abū Qarja mobilised a detachment to head south along the Red Sea shore, he bought a bit more than 300 bags of grain from Muḥammad al-‘Utaybī, a merchant from “the peoples of the east (*ahālī al-sharq*)”, mentioned above with respect to that same transaction. At 6 r. the bag, Abū Qarja could only put up half of the 1 800 r.—a rather significant sum of money—asked by the trader. In the subsequent weeks, the *amīr* looted the Rashāyda and got hold of more than 900 camels as booty. He distributed four fifths of the animals, around 700 heads, to the *anṣār* with him, and sent the remaining fifth (*khums*), 200 camels, to Tūkar. Of these, a hundred were given to the combatants for military purposes while the last 100 animals were given to Muḥammad al-‘Utaybī as reimbursement for the residual 900 r. of the initial debt<sup>169</sup>.

This strong interdependence between merchants and the Mahdist power was founded on a network of indebtedness made particularly dense due to the fact that administrators had little control over who could resort to loans as well as structural difficulties to pay them back in a context of currency scarcity. Since it nonetheless recognised most debts, it had to find other ways to reimburse them. One of the most important techniques was to offer tax rebates, as the ones mentioned previously for the *‘ushr*. This connected the different local Mahdist administrations together so as to respond to the merchants’ demands. On one occasion, Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf who had borrowed 100 r. from the trader Aḥmad Ṭāhir to buy *dhura* for the *anṣār*, asked the officers positioned in the harbour of Trinkitāt to refund his taxes<sup>170</sup>. However, the boundaries between public and private finances were blurred further when merchants indebted to each other could, like ‘Īsā Aḥmad did in

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168 NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/62B, documents no. 36; and Mahdiyya 5/15/51F, document no. 24.

169 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 13.

170 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letters 112 and 128, p. 65 and 67.

May 1890 (Ramaḍān 1307), solicit the intervention of the *amīn* of the Tūkar treasury to order a tax rebate for his creditor, ‘Alī al-Ḥārdala “who will soon set sail and has the intention of takings things from the harbour [of Trinkitāt]<sup>171</sup>”. In that respect, the treasury gradually became responsible for some form, albeit tightly constrained, of money creation through debt, and acted as a total institution responsible for controlling and validating operations, even when those fell outside of its purview<sup>172</sup>.

These relations closely associated the Mahdist administration with a narrow group of traders. Indeed, debts were heavily concentrated in the hands of a few merchants. As shown in figure 4.3b, almost 90% of all lenders (281 individuals) were creditors for less than 200 r.; in fact, the average loan for this group was just under 44 *riyāl*. These small loans were not insignificant, since they added up to 12 000 r., but only represented 30% of all debts incurred by the treasury and had mostly been issued internally, by borrowing from the *anṣār* themselves, as well as from Bijāwī individuals engaged in petty trade. Conversely, around 12,5% of all lenders, 41 individuals, were responsible for 60% of all loans. This situation had two main consequences.

Firstly, it curtailed the ability of the treasury to resort to imposed contributions. There again, boundaries between proper loans and requisitions were quite porous, and the Mahdist power regularly resorted to confiscatory practices. These were made easier by the stabilisation of the Mahdist authority in a few locations that attracted a variety of individuals, from major traders to locals coming to acquire some goods. This opportunity was not missed and a few hundred *riyāl* were thus collected at the gates of Tūkar and Adūbana during the summer of 1889 (D. al-Qa‘da-D. al-Ḥijja 1306) by Daf‘ Allāh Khandaqāwī—outside of any legal framework—to be immediately redistributed to the combatants and their families. The proceeds of these levies amounted to around 800 r. and were entered in the treasury’s records as “assistance (*musa‘āda*)”<sup>173</sup>. However, this was not the favoured method: the treasury attempted, whenever possible, to avoid it. A case in point is the regime under which levies on harvests were managed. Mahdist authorities required large amounts of grain to feed the combatants and their families in volumes that the *‘ushr* could not meet. A complementary levy was thus conducted that amounted to 40% of the yield, or half of it—with the *‘ushr*—, and was recorded as a loan (*maṭlūb*). There is no particular reason to consider that this designation was deceitful or aimed at avoiding resistance toward what was essentially a confiscation. On the contrary, there is ground to believe that their intent was quite genuine: ‘Uthmān Diqna himself, upon sending instructions to the *amīn* of the treasury had assured him that

171 NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/63, document no. 79.

172 For an example of such operations, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/62B, document no. 55. In this case, the transaction had failed. The debt owned by ‘Abd Allāh Shamsī to ‘Abd al-Khāliq ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Hindī was meant to be deducted from the *‘ushr* the latter had to pay in Trinkitāt, but the closing of the harbour prevented this.

173 NRO Mahdiyya 5/20/68, document no. 9; and Mahdiyya 5/13/48, document no. 23.

he would pay this debt back upon his return<sup>174</sup>. The administration painstakingly recorded the circumstances under which each levy had been conducted; the following year, probably taking stock of their inability to actually reimburse this debt, the authorities reverted to collecting it as “assistance” thus avoiding potential claims; finally, their attitude toward merchants shows that the matter of reimbursements was taken seriously.

Contrary to the communities engaged in cultivation in Eastern Sudan’s few arable areas concentrated near the main *khayrān*, traders benefitted, by definition, from a much greater mobility. Harsh fiscal measures could easily drive them away, thus draining the pool of credit on which the Mahdist administration depended. Still, this relation was not unidirectional. Traders too relied on Mahdist authorities to access the internal Sudanese market or the Red Sea markets. This situation required some form of balance between the needs of Mahdist authorities and the merchants’ interests, with the result that the level of indebtedness of the former was a recurring topic of discussion. This was particularly true between 1888 and 1891 (1306-1308) in a context of intense food scarcity. Already in January 1889 (Jumādā I 1306), ‘Uthmān Diqna had reported to the Khalīfa the concerns of Kasalā’s traders with regard to the loans contracted by Abū Qarja. They were asked to wait for his return before the matter could be settled<sup>175</sup>. A year later, in late January-early February 1890 (Jumādā II 1307), Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf worried about the lack of goods in the treasury, especially grain. He noted in a letter to the *‘āmil* that all of it had been distributed and that the treasury “[was] still indebted with the merchants for 5 000 *riyāl*, besides the debts previously known to [him]”. In Handūb, at the same moment, Aḥmad Maḥmūd ‘Alī shared Majdhūb’s apprehension. He too complained that fiscal revenues were insufficient to cover for grain purchase and that he had had to resort to loans. But now, he found himself unable to pay them back. The following month (Rajab 1307), the situation had deteriorated further. The treasury in Tūkar still owed around 3 000 r. and finding supplies that could be bought on credit was becoming increasingly difficult<sup>176</sup>. The problem abated with the ebb of the famine, and so questions of credit became more discreet in Mahdist sources. However, a powerful sign of the Mahdist authorities’ continuous attention over matters of debt was that in 1894 (1311) ‘Uthmān Diqna could easily sum his administration’s situation to the Khalīfa. Of all of the loans contracted since 1885/6 (1303), the *‘āmil* claimed that around 22 800 r. were still due, to what he added “but due to the dispersion of the creditors, and that some of them entered the forts [*qayāqir* sing. *qayqar*], 9 000 r. could be subtracted, so around 13 000 r. remain, with their owners present in the regions of the Mahdiyya (*bilād al-Mahdiyya*) among whom the creditors for 9 000 r. are present with [him] in the camp [of

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174 NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/62B, document no. 33.

175 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 143.

176 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, documents no. 3, 27 and 29.

Adarāma], and the rest, for a sum of 4 000 r., are in the regions of the Mahdiyya.” His issue was that while he was indeed responsible for some of these loans, as revealed by the presence of his seal on loan receipts, most of them had been issued by the *umanā*’ of the Tūkar treasury (and their deputy). Yet, he was the one being badgered by these creditors who “constantly ask to be reimbursed from [him], especially those who are not in the camp but elsewhere in the districts of the Mahdiyya. Every time [they] meet [him] or ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr, they present their request based on the attestations in their hands, at times by themselves and at times through the religious courts (*maḥākīm* sing. *maḥkama shara’iyya*)<sup>177</sup>”.

The easiest solution would have been to unilaterally write off their debt. The Mahdist administration was clearly reluctant to do so, but nonetheless decided to wipe out several thousands of *riyāl*<sup>178</sup> in October/November 1890 (Rabī’ I 1308) by transforming loans in “donated surplus (*fuyūdāt wahbiyya [sic]*)”. The ‘*āmil*’s proclamation at the origin of this decision could not be located and the issue does not seem to have been discussed with the Khalīfa. Therefore, his justification remains unknown. More importantly, it was seemingly spread over the entire pool of creditors, small and big alike. Contrary to what may have been assumed, prominent traders were not favoured to ensure their collaboration. A correlation test between the sums borrowed and the share of these that were reimbursed found no relation between the two. On average, a third of all loans were paid back<sup>179</sup> with important individual variations but none that could be attributed to their level of participation in the Mahdist economy.

The DMI’s examination of the Tūkar administrative documents in early 1891 (mid-1308) also noted the importance of loans for the Mahdist power in Eastern Sudan. Wingate, its author, observed that “the cash in hand was not sufficient to meet payments, and in the registers it is shown that the Beit-el-Mal [treasury] borrowed from some 300 merchants upwards of 28,000 dollars”. But he concluded, against all evidence, that these sums, “it is needless to say, have never been repaid<sup>180</sup>”. He was wrong. As shown by figure 4.3a, the Mahdist administration strived to avoid spiralling indebtedness in a context of extreme tensions over food supplies. Furthermore, this was

177 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 347.

178 The folder dedicated to loan records for 1308 (NRO Mahdiyya 5/04/18) indicate reimbursements for Rabī’ I to the amount of around 3 480 r., including 3 080 r. that can be safely assumed to have been cancelled. As for daily monetary accounts for the same period (NRO Mahdiyya 5/07/33C), they recorded the cancelling of nearly 6 800 *riyāl*. This is, by far, the largest discrepancy between the two sources. Accountants may have lacked time to register the effects of ‘Uthmān Diqna’s decision before the capture of Tūkar in February 1891 (06/1308), but this fails to explain how a total could have been reached in the daily monetary accounts.

179 The result of Pearson’s correlation test was  $r = 0,007$ . The global rate of reimbursement is 37,5% but fall to around 30% if the debt cancellation of Rabī’ I 1308 (October/November 1890) is taken into account.

180 See *Report on the Dervish Rule*, p. 6. A similar comment was made with regard grain, stating “Osman Digna seized half of the total crops of the Tokar District in addition to the “Ushr.” This, [the ‘*āmil*] explained, was on loan, and that he would repay the owners, but as may be anticipated, the loan was never repaid: this system of extortion on legitimate grounds appears to have been frequently practised.”

not related to specific, however dramatic, sets of circumstances. From 1885 to 1887 (1302-), Kasalā accounts show that reimbursement rates were even higher, close to 50% for the entire period<sup>181</sup>. The Mahdist leadership was conscious of the need to keep their budget somewhat under control.

#### ***D) Conclusion: Mahdist Eastern Sudan through its Budget***

Understanding Mahdist budgets is not a straightforward process as they differ significantly from Western accounting practices. Indeed, they do not rely on notions of assets and liabilities, nor do they try to identify surpluses or deficits. In that respect, the modalities of Mahdist accounting echo its true purpose, control over cash and commodities' flows, rather than the provisional balancing of incomes and expenses. Indeed, Mahdist budgets are essentially relational, structured around scriptural transfers from accounts to another account. The focus was on keeping track of these movements and not calculating a proper budget. Operations were recorded daily, credits (*uṣūl*) on the right page and debits (*khuṣūm*) on the left one. A final balance-sheet was sometimes but not systematically drawn at the end of each month, firstly by looking at all operations from the point of view of credited accounts, and then secondly, from that of the debited accounts, without paying attention to actual effect of the operations on the budget. This is not to say that some interpretation of budgetary practices as assets and liabilities were not possible. In fact, on several occasions, the accountants of the Tūkar treasury introduced a distinction between revenues (*irādāt*) and payment or settlement (*tasdīd*). This had, however, no implication and the practice soon disappeared<sup>182</sup>.

Another hurdle for understanding the main blocks of Eastern Sudan's finances is the divide between monetary and in-kind accounts. Paradoxically, early budgets from 1885 to 1887 (1302-1304) associated the two much more closely by attributing values to stocked goods and recording transfers in terms of their monetary value rather than in absolute numbers<sup>183</sup>. From 1888 (1305/6) onwards, this approach seems to have been abandoned not to be resumed<sup>184</sup>, the central accounting principle of commodity monetisation being replaced by that of money commodification. Currency was considered not as a unit of account but as a good, more instrumental than other assets and thus deserving its own folder (like grain), but a good nonetheless that could be added and subtracted without, for example, taking into accounts the coins' respective values, applying exchanges rates or gauging their worth in gold and silver<sup>185</sup>.

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181 From September 1885 to March 1883 (D. al-Ḥijja 1302-Jumādā II 1304), the treasury paid back 7 100 r. from 14 000 r. of loans. See NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/66, p. 9.

182 These tentative developments can be observed in NRO Mahdiyya 5/01/05A-B.

183 These budgets are the ones presented in NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/66.

184 Unfortunately, lack of sources and access to the available ones prevents us from confirming this hypothesis. Indeed, the early budgets mentioned above were all drawn for the benefit of the Khalīfa. It is unclear whether monetisation was a characteristic associated with budgets transferred to Umm Durmān or with early budgets.

185 See chapter 3 for a more detailed presentation of Mahdist bookkeeping practices.

The DMI's overview (fig. 4.4<sup>186</sup>), based on the administrative documents seized in Tūkar in early 1891 (mid-1308), echoes both these issues. Firstly, it completely circumvented the question of translating Mahdist accounts into a balance sheet, to present only incoming flows, awkwardly designated as "imports". Secondly, the structure of the table placed all five items (slaves, livestock, grain, goods and money) on the same level and, tellingly, made no attempt to weave their

Date. (English dates approximated.)	Slaves.	Cattle, Camels, &c.	Dhurra, in Sacks (3rd Ardeb).	General Goods, Cloth, &c., in Pieces.	Money in Rials (Dollars).
Ramadan, 1306 (May, 1889) ..	55	199	16,722	7,826	4,239
Shawal, 1306 (June, 1889) .. ..	..	440	180	1,720	11,231
El Kada, 1306 (July, 1889) .. ..	..	6	..	2,600	7,964
El Higgeh, 1306 (August, 1889) ..	11	110	546	3,051	7,528
Moharram, 1307 (September, 1889)..	..	379	..	127	1,483
Safar, 1307 (October, 1889).. ..	5	91	509	150	7,228
Rabia Awal, 1307 (November, 1889)	5	365	284	1,104	3,545
Rabia Tani, 1307 (December, 1889)..	2	606	269	2,161	3,493
Jamad Awal, 1307 (January, 1890)	1	46	595	1,343	5,425
Jamad Tani, 1307 (February, 1890)	2	..	477	64	6,279
Rajab, 1307 (March, 1890) .. ..	17	2,507	82	107	3,916
Shaban, 1307 (May, 1890) .. ..	2	..	556	63	5,656
Ramadan, 1307 (May, 1890) .. ..	32	5,636	211	59	1,7668
Shawal, 1307 (June, 1890) .. ..	1	28	110	137	2,603
El Kada, 1307 (July, 1890) .. ..	1	870	336	8	4,299
El Higgeh, 1307 (August, 1890) ..	..	1	198	546	19,171

Fig. 4.4: "The imports of the Beit-el-Mal of Tokar (Afafit) from Ramadan, 1306 (May, 1889), to Zuel Higgeh, 1307 (August, 1890), extracted from the Official Book of Accounts forwarded to Omdurman"

Source: *Report on the Dervish Rule*, p. 6.

respective evolutions together. The narrowness of the British officers' focus, despite their access to the entirety of the Mahdist documents from Tūkar, reflected Wingate's vision of Mahdist power, that of a predatory regime which benefitted from little local support. As a result, the expenses of the Tūkar treasury were invisibilised. The following development will attempt to outline the main aspects of Eastern Sudan's budgets.

186 The original chart in Arabic can be found in NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/65B, document no. 4. It was almost certainly based on the copies of the monthly reports sent to Umm Durmān (NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/66B).

Daily monetary accounts spread over five folders<sup>187</sup>, but they are lacunary: the folder (or folders) dedicated to the period from Muḥarram to Ramaḍān 1307 (September to May 1890) is missing<sup>188</sup>. As a result, these accounts are not continuous but divided in two blocks of nine (period 1) and eight months (period 2). They are, nonetheless, the largest source related to the Mahdist economy<sup>189</sup>. Aḥmad Ibrāhīm Abū Shūk and Anders Bjørkelo’s examination of the accounts of the central treasury only spans ten months<sup>190</sup>. According to the historian al-Qaddāl, the budgets of provincial treasuries were similar to those of the central institution with variations that depended on local economic factors. Unfortunately, sources are lacking to compare the budgets of Tūkar’s

187 NRO Mahdiyya 5/01/05; Mahdiyya 5/02/09; Mahdiyya 5/02/10B-C; Mahdiyya 5/06/29; and Mahdiyya 5/07/33. See appendix [?].

188 They could, however, be retrieved by using the summaries sent to the Khalīfa in Umm Durmān, starting with NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/66B, which covers that period. This source could not be consulted in time but credit numbers were reported in the DMI report (see fig. 4.4) and integrated in fig. 4.5c.

189 A preliminary study of these monetary accounts can be found in Anaël POUSSIER, “Le pouvoir des chiffres : les pratiques comptables de l’autorité mahdiste au Soudan-Est (1883-1891),” *Sources. Material & Fieldwork in African Studies*, 2020, no. 1, p. 199–272.

190 Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK, *The Fiscal Administration of the Mahdist State in the Sudan (1881-1898)*, *op. cit.*; Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK and Anders J. BJØRKELO (ed.), *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897*, *op. cit.* The same accounts were initially edited by al-Qaddāl (*Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 202–208.) and these were the ones used in the development below because of major issues with Abū Shūk and Bjørkelo’s work. The two historians took into consideration the differentiated values of the *riyāl qūshlī* (the Sudanese designation for the Maria Theresa thaler) and the *riyāl maqbūl* based on an exchange rate of 25 to 1, and 30 to 1 for the *riyāl majīdī*, to present the accounts of the central treasury under a single currency. To do so, they claim to follow “the rate of set by the Bayt al-māl itself” but do not link this affirmation to a source (Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK and Anders J. BJØRKELO (ed.), *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897*, *op. cit.*, p. xvii). There are several reasons to believe this exchange rate overvalues foreign dollars. Firstly, adding coins with such a wide difference of value would make little sense. Secondly, this rate does not fit with their respective metallic content. The first Mahdist silver *riyāl* was based on the composition of the Ottoman *riyāl majīdī* the value of which was supposed to be close to that of the Austrian *riyāl qūshlī* (MTt) (Yitzhak NAKASH, “Fiscal and Monetary Systems in the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898,” *op. cit.*, p. 375–377). The *riyāl maqbūl*, the currency introduced by the Khalīfa in 1886 (1304) was said to have kept 40% of the first *riyāl*’s value. For the *maqbūl* to be worth 25 *qūshlī* would mean that it would have preserved 4% only of its initial value. The Mahdiyya experienced five other debasements starting in 1891 (*abū šidr*) and then in 1892 (*abū kibis*), 1893 (*‘umla jadīda*), 1894 (*abū hilāl*) and 1897 (*abū shalāya*). Compared to the initial *riyāl maqbūl*, the loss of value of each new coin was significant but no records indicate a 96% devaluation. Even the percentage of decrease in value is somewhat doubtful. According to Slatin, the first silver *riyāl* contained seven parts of silver and one part of copper and the later *riyāl maqbūl* four of silver and four of copper (H. S. JOB, “The Coinage of the Mahdi and the Khalifa,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1920, vol. 3, no. 3, p. 177). Notwithstanding the value of copper, the *maqbūl* would still be worth around 60% of the first silver *riyāl*. In another instance, Slatin stated that the *riyāl qūshlī* equalled one *riyāl ‘umla jadīda* and the *riyāl majīdī* eight (Rudolf C. SLATIN, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 542). According to their metallic value, one *riyāl qūshlī* would then be worth two and half *riyālāt maqbūl*, certainly not twenty-five. Lastly, these rates do not fit local realities. For instance, in October 1890 (Ṣafar 1307), the carpenter Yūsuf Khātib (see the introduction) received 10 r. *qūshlī* as stipend for the month of Muḥarram 1307 (NRO Mahdiyya 2/70/01). If that sum was worth 250 r. *maqbūl*, he would have received a considerably larger stipend than the *‘amil* himself. All in all, the rate put forward by Abū Shūk and Bjørkelo is probably erroneous. Little can be said without access to the source on which this affirmation was founded, however, a likely explanation is that the treasury had established a rate stipulated not in *riyāl* but in *qirsh* or *qirāt*. Valued at 25 *qurūsh*, the *riyāl qūshlī* would have been worth 1,25 r. *maqbūl*, maybe half its actual value, in line with the Mahdist administration’s sustained efforts to support Mahdist currencies against foreign dollars. While significant, such a difference of value between the two *riyālāt* would not have warranted separate lines of accounting. It may have been even lower. Indeed, Wingate reported that “the Mejidieh [*majīdī*] dollar is valued at 3½ piastres more than the “Makbuul” dollar” (DUL SAD Intelligence Report (Main series), “General Military Report on Egyptian-Sudan for 1891”, p. 15, 1892).



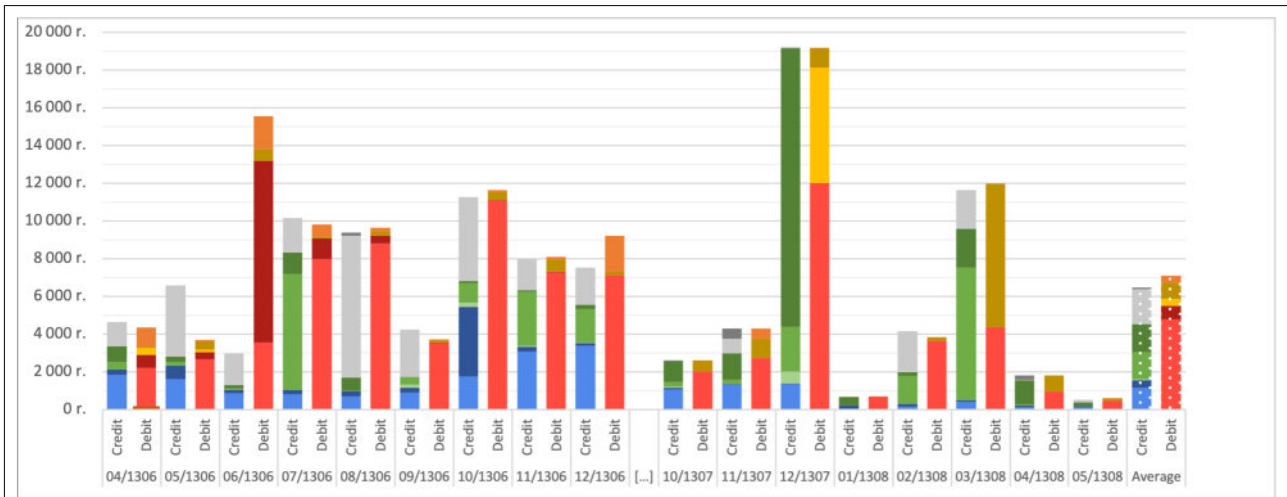


Fig. 4.5a: Monetary credits and debits in absolute numbers (1888-1891)

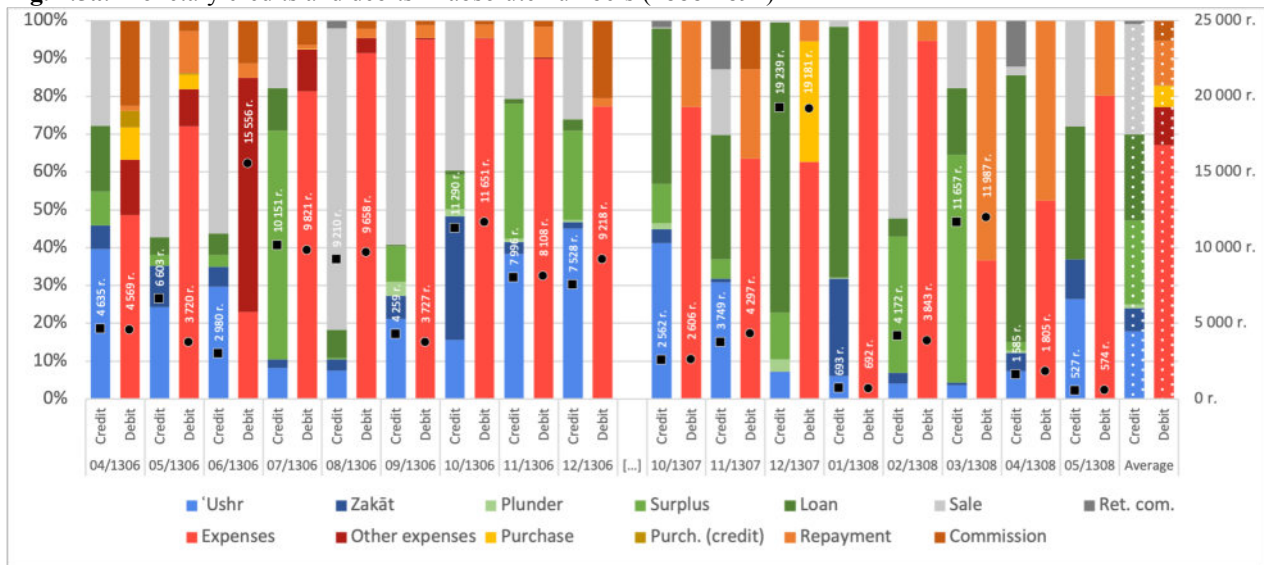


Fig. 4.5b: Monetary credits and debits in percentage (1888-1891)

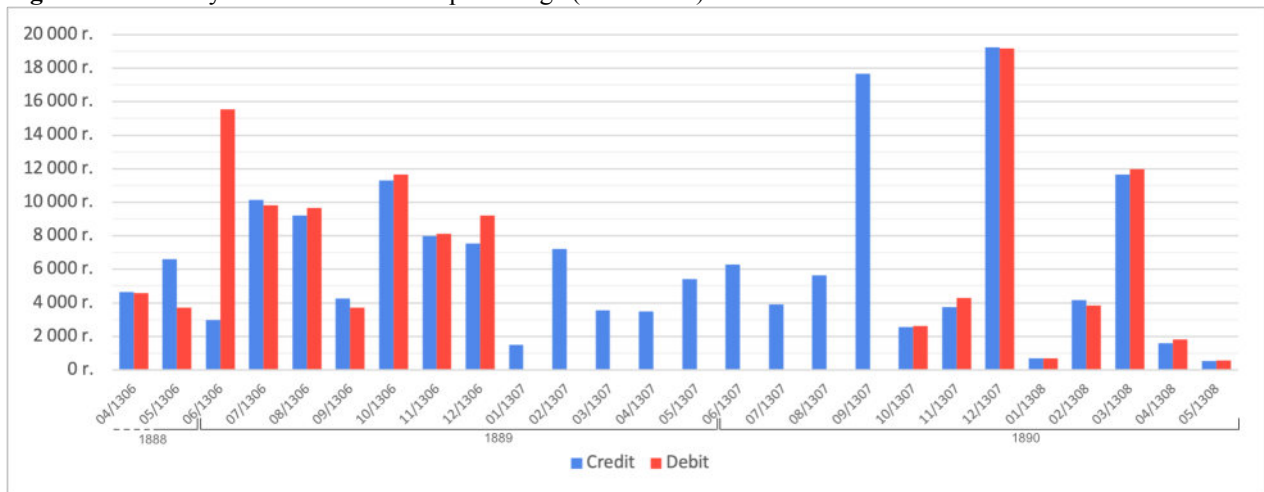


Fig. 4.5c: Overall Mahdist monetary credits and debits (1888-1891)

Fig. 4.5: Monetary budgets from the Tūkar treasury (1888-1891)

Sources: NRO Mahdiyya 5/01/05; Mahdiyya 5/02/09; Mahdiyya 5/02/10B-C; Mahdiyya 5/06/29; Mahdiyya 5/07/33; and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, p. 6.

Methodology: The fig. 4.5a and 4.5b represent the sources of cash credits and debits in absolute numbers and in proportion. In fig. 4.5b, black squares and circles indicate the total value of the monthly credit and debit. Fig. 4.5c integrates the data from the *Report on the Dervish Rule* to offer a broader vision of Mahdist monetary budgets.

treasury with that of other provinces<sup>191</sup>. Besides the central treasury, some sparse accounts are available from the treasuries of Kasalā, Dunqulā, and al-Ubayyid that will be used to better situate the Mahdist province of Eastern Sudan.

A first review of these accounts reveals two significant characteristics. Firstly, as shown in figures 4.5a and 4.5c, monthly accounts were balanced, credits almost perfectly covering debits, with the exception of Jumādā II 1307 (January/February 1890) when the treasury assumed the debts incurred by Muḥammad Aḥmad Diqna in the *‘āmil*’s absence, thus incurring an important deficit. Mahdist authorities in Eastern Sudan never managed to accumulate funds and all revenues were systematically spent. Finances were in constant tension, leading the treasury to withhold payments, including salaries, as indicated by the several letters of complaints on that subject<sup>192</sup>. Secondly, in direct relation with that previous comment, Tūkar’s budgets were characterised by great variability. Credits and debits ranged from around 500 r. to more than 19 000 r., and amounted, on average, around 6 500 *riyāl*. If massive loan cancellations were to be discarded, the high bar of these budgets would still reach around 10 000 *riyāl*. Doing so, however, would conceal the great volatility that characterised Mahdist finances in Eastern Sudan. This was caused by numerous factors including the high seasonality of agricultural production—entirely dependent from rainfalls and floods (in contrast with irrigated cultures of the riverine regions)—, as well as that of trade circulations in the Red Sea. Both were affected by political factors such as the mobilisation of men for the *jihād*, population displacements and the numerous shifts in British and Mahdist trading policies. Finally, this volatility was compounded by the 1306 famine that further disrupted local and regional economies. Consequently, no pattern could be determined for the budgets’ evolution even if the nature of such conclusion is limited by the scope of the available sources. This intense variability is also reflected in the budgets’ breakdown. A simple look at the figure 4.5b shows that sources of revenue as much as expenses could vary considerably.

Compared to other treasuries (see fig. 4.6), Eastern Sudan’s budget was quite modest. This was obviously true compared with the central treasury. For the period from June to November 1897 (Muḥarram to Jumādā II 1315), the latter garnered revenues ranging from 49 000 r. to 92 000 r., for an average of 68 000 *riyāl*. Even considering the devaluation undergone by the Mahdist currency from 1891 (1308/9) onwards, its budget remained considerably more important than Tūkar’s<sup>193</sup>. This picture, though, cannot be generalised. The sharp contrast between a central administration whose

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191 This would require a significant amount of work within the NRO so as to establish a detailed catalog of the Mahdiyya collection.

192 See, for example, the complaint of the *umarā’* who claimed in 1889/1890 (1307) that they had not received their salary for two months and petitioned the delegates, with Abū Qarja’s support, to obtain their salary’s worth in grain (NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 43).

193 Muḥammad Sa’īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898, op. cit.*, p. 201–208.

	Zakāt	'Ushr	Third	Contrib.	Plunder	Currency	Sales	Rents	Loans	Others	Total
<b>Umm Durmān</b>	01-06/1315 (6 months)										
Monthly avg.	3177 r.	283 r.	12 288 r.	4 388 r.	28 977 r.	9 893 r.	3 108 r.	3 732 r.	0 r.	2 263 r.	<b>68 109 r.</b>
Percentage	5 %	0,4 %	18 %	6 %	43 %	15 %	5 %	5 %		3 %	100 %
<b>al-Ubayyiḍ</b>	01-12/1304 (12 months)										
Monthly avg.	514 r.	0 r.	0 r.	484 r.	3 583 r.	0 r.	0 r.	0 r.	0 r.	270 r.	<b>4 852 r.</b>
Percentage	11 %			10 %	74 %					6 %	100 %
<b>Dunqulā</b>	12/1304 (1 month)										
Monthly avg.	834 r.	161 r.	47 086 r.	4 588 r.	3 040 r.	3 750 r.	820 r.	3 210 r.	0 r.	525 r.	<b>64 014 r.</b>
Percentage	1 %	0 %	74 %	7 %	5 %	6 %	1 %	5 %		1 %	100 %
<b>Kasalā</b>	12/1302-01/1305 (25 months)										
Monthly avg.	1 465 r.	591 r.	0 r.	0 r.	3 569 r.	0 r.	1 027 r.	23 r.	646 r.	7 r.	<b>7 328 r.</b>
Percentage	20 %	8 %			49 %		14 %	0,3 %	9 %	0,1 %	100 %

**Fig. 4.6:** Monthly averages from the central and provincial treasuries's revenues in *riyāl*.

**Sources:** Umm Durmān, al-Ubayyiḍ and Dunqulā (Muḥammad Sa'īd al-Qaddāl, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya*, Khartoum, Khartoum University Press, 1986, p. 186, 238-239); Kasalā (NRO Mahdiyya, 5/19/66, p. 1-24).

budget is ten times larger than its provincial counterpart should be qualified. Indeed, whereas the treasury in al-Ubayyiḍ reported revenues for the year 1304 (1886/7) amounting to 58 000 r. for a monthly average of 4 850 r., a number close to Tūkar's, the treasury in Dunqulā recorded revenues of 64 000 r. in D. al-Ḥijja 1304 (August-September 1887), in the same range as in the capital. Conversely, al-Qaddāl also claimed that Umm Durmān's income for the whole year 1314 (1896/7) was 67 009 r., that is less than 6 600 r. per month on average<sup>194</sup>.

The main factor behind those wide budgetary variations resides in the complex interactions between the irregular but somewhat predictable fluctuations of income and the violent swings of expenditures required by the abrupt implementation of political and military decisions. The share of plunder in Mahdist budgets could be overwhelming, in contrast with the previous development with regard to Tūkar. For the year 1304 (1886/7), it represented 74% of all revenues for the treasury in al-Ubayyiḍ and for 25 months from late 1302 to late 1304, almost 50% of revenues in Kasalā<sup>195</sup>. In Umm Durmān, loot provided for "only" 43% of the central treasury's income, but with the benefits accrued from the manipulation of exchange rates and exceptional contributions, the share of circumstantial revenues reached 64% of the total. As for Dunqulā, the third collected from the value of gum Arabic in one single month amounted to over 47 000 *riyāl* (see fig. 4.6). These revenues were not stable and because of the structural deficit of provincial Mahdist administrations unable to set aside some form of reserve, sudden increase in expenditures were immediately problematic. Loans could be mobilised to smooth credits and debits and so respond to new needs, often prompted by military developments. However, Eastern Sudan appears to have been quite unique in that

194 *Ibid.*, p. 202; 256–258.

195 NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/66A, p. 9-24.

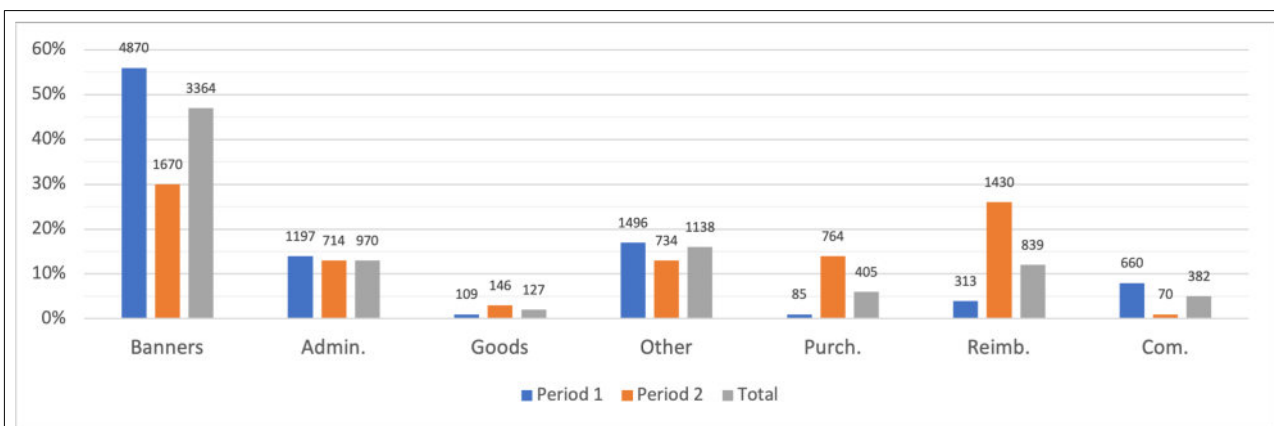


Fig. 4.7a: Overall expenses of the treasury (1888-1891)

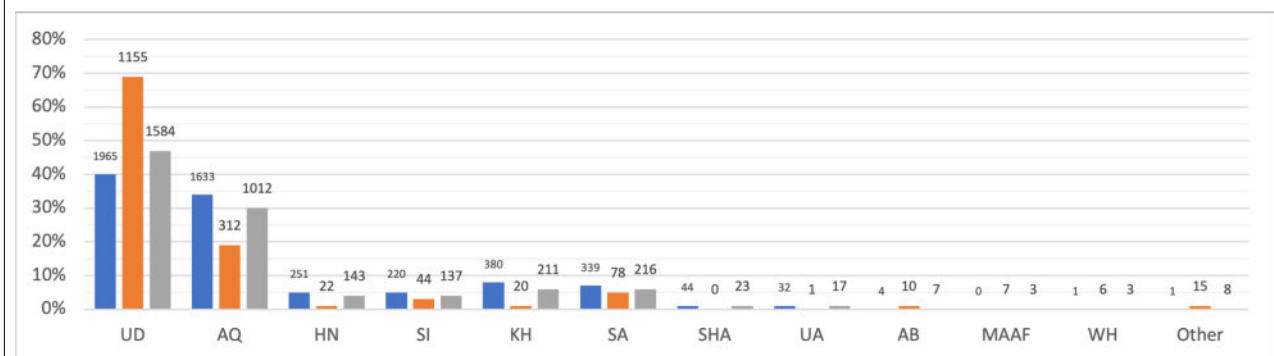


Fig. 4.7b: Expenses for the banners (1888-1891)

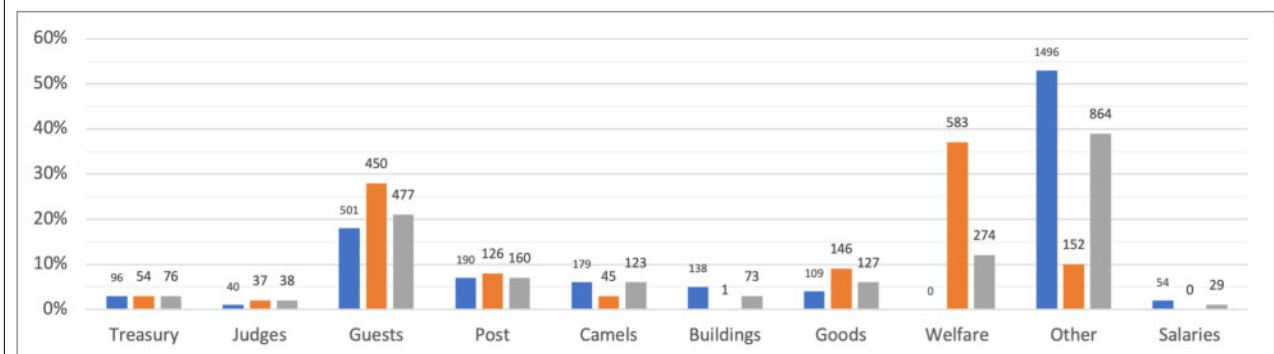


Fig. 4.7c: Expenses of the administration (1888-1891)

Fig. 4.7: Expenses of Tūkar's treasury (in *riyāl*) (1888-1891)

Sources: NRO Mahdiyya 5/01/05; Mahdiyya 5/02/09; Mahdiyya 5/02/10B-C; Mahdiyya 5/06/29; Mahdiyya 5/07/33.

Heads of the banners: UD = 'Uthmān Diqna / AQ = Abū Qarja / HN = Ḥamad al-Nīl / SI = Muḥammad Aḥmad Shaykh Idrīs / KH = Khāṭir Ḥamīdān / SA = Shā'ib Aḥmad / SHA = al-Sayyid Ḥāmid 'Alī / UA = 'Uthmān 'Alī / AB = Aḥmad Badawī / MAAF = Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh Fāna Khandaqāwī / WH = Walad al-Hindī

Methodology: These charts represent the aggregate for period 1 (December 1889-August 1890 / Rabī' II-D. al-Ḥijja 1306), period 2 (June 1890-January 1891 / Shawwāl 1307-Jumādā I 1308) and the average. The numbers above each bar indicate the real amount in *riyāl*.

regard. Borrowing does not feature within the budgets of any other provincial administrations, with the exception of Barbar where the treasury took loans in June 1892 (D. al-Ḥijja 1309) and in April 1894 (Shawwāl 1311) but failed to pay them back<sup>196</sup>. The significance of this specificity is limited

<sup>196</sup> Ibrāhīm 'Akāsha 'Alī, *Wilāyat Barbar fī 'ahd al-Khalīfa 'Abd Allāh (Ramaḍān 1302 – Rajab 1317 / June 1885 – November 1899)*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

by the deeply fragmentary nature of Mahdist budgetary sources. Yet, the fact that Tūkar, Kasalā and Barbar, the three main Mahdist positions in Eastern Sudan, all attempted to raise loans suggests that some capital could be mobilised, probably due to the benefits accrued from trade with Sawākin and more generally the Red Sea, and the Mahdist leadership thought it more interesting to form financial bonds with merchants rather than resorting to forced contributions.

The heart of the Mahdist conundrum was that regular levies were chronically insufficient to cover the expenses incurred by being responsible for a large number of individuals. Monthly averages for levies on *zakāt* and *'ushr*, the two pillars of Mahdist fiscality, ranged from 1 to 11% for the treasuries, respectively of Dunqulā and al-Ubayyid, and only represented 5% of the revenues of the central treasuries for the periods defined above. There again, Eastern Sudan appears to have been some exception as it reached almost 25% on average (1888-1891) (see fig. 4.5a-b), and 28% in Kasalā (1885-1887) (see fig. 4.6). On the other hand, while not necessarily very expensive to maintain, the presence of significant numbers of combatants and their families drew heavily on Mahdist finances. On average, costs related to the banners represented around 45% of all expenses (see fig. 4.7a). These were concentrated on the *'āmil*'s banner whose authority derived in part from the fact that he controlled directly a force greatly superior to that of any of its subalterns. The attempt at balancing this influence is obvious in figure 4.7b. Whereas less than ten percentage points separated 'Uthmān Diqna's and Abū Qarja's share of all banners' expenses in the first period, with the latter's removal from Tūkar, the former came to monopolise almost 70% of these. Once other expenses are removed, mostly incurred by the repatriation of the massive debt contracted by Muḥammad Aḥmad Diqna, the second expenditure item was the administration with around 12% of all expenses. As expected, its budget is much more stable than the military one. Stipends paid to administrators, judges and personnel represented only a fraction of the spending dedicated to the delegates. Their supervision of the treasury allowed them to redirect some of the expenses to their benefit<sup>197</sup>. Costs incurred by the posts and transport, including salaries and the renting of camels, were quite significant, a sign of the attention brought by Mahdist authorities on communications. Finally, reimbursements may have been erratic but still represented, on average, more than 10% of Tūkar's whole expenditure.

The remarks on the budget of the Mahdist administration in Tūkar, because of their focus on monetary transactions, only offer a partial view of its integration within the regional economic dynamics defined by trade circulations. More than in any other region, Mahdist leadership in Eastern Sudan had a stake in regional commerce as an additional source of income. The section below will attempt to fill this gap.

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<sup>197</sup> See chapter 3.

## II. Trade and Economic War in Eastern Sudan

More than any other aspects of the history of Eastern Sudan during the Mahdiyya, the evolution of trade relations throughout the 1880s and 1890s constituted a shared history between Anglo-Egyptian authorities, Mahdists leaders, Sudanese or foreign traders and Bijāwī communities. With the closing of the Egyptian border in the north, the Sudanese Red Sea littoral became the main interface between the outside world and the Upper Nile Valley. Travellers and aspiring disciples from the Muslim world frequented its shores, in the hope that they would be allowed to continue to Umm Durmān and witness the prophecies' fulfilment with their own eyes<sup>198</sup>. More numerous were the traders and smugglers, two very much overlapping categories, who attempted, more modestly, to reach the Mahdist headquarters in Tūkar and the trade centres of Kasalā and Barbar so as to gain access to local markets and the commodities from which they derived significant profits.

In that context, the Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan could have been a distant spectator to these circulations, but its role was central and multifaceted. Firstly, the Mahdist treasury was highly dependent on trading activities, much more so than other provinces, as a source of revenue through the *'ushr* (and to a lesser extent the *zakāt*), as well as on traders themselves who were requested to finance its debts (see above). It had, therefore, a direct interest in the continuation of commerce. Besides, as some of the goods collected through taxation or loot were sold in Tūkar's market and other minor places, the Tūkar treasury and its branches were active participants in these economic circulations. Traders, importers and exporters alike, knew they could find most of the goods they were looking for there, or, at least, enter in contact with like-minded individuals. In that respect, Tūkar was a major commercial hub for the entire Nilotic Sudan. Finally, due to its position, Mahdist administrators were responsible for the regulation of trade circulations and the enforcement of the policies adopted in Umm Durmān. However, because of its position within commercial flows, it was also able to inform and influence some of these policies, particularly with regard to its regular interactions with Anglo-Egyptian authorities in Sawākin.

While still centred on the Mahdist administration, the following section aims at uncovering the network of interactions between the different groups engaged in trade, and how it shaped both Mahdist and British policies. To avoid a narrative that would be solely grounded on their antagonism, the development below will begin with a description of the structure of trade flows in Eastern Sudan and of its main actors, before offering an analysis of the goods that circulated on these axes. The last section will delve into the matter of the fluctuating policies adopted by both sides, the uneasy process of trial and error, reversals and censures, that articulated their distinct rationales.

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<sup>198</sup> See chapter 5 for examples of such circulations.

### *A) Doing Business in a Time of War*

As observed previously, the evolution of trade circulations in the whole Upper Nile Valley had immediate echoes in Eastern Sudan. The region had witnessed a significant decline of trade flows during the first half of the nineteenth century up to the 1860s (1276-1286) when the opening of the Sudanese South led to its revival with an increase in the trade of slaves as well as exports of elephant tusks, ostrich feathers, and gum Arabic, to mention only the most important commodities. The Khedive Ismā'īl's decision to sign the Anglo-Egyptian convention for the suppression of the slave trade in 1877 (1294) and its subsequent order to ban traders from the southern provinces negatively impacted trade flows in Eastern Sudan, not so much because of the region's reliance on this activity, but because the slave trade was closely connected to other forms of circulations<sup>199</sup>. This downturn was one of the motives behind the Mahdist mobilisation in the region. Indeed, both domestic and foreign trade began to decrease in the 1870s (1286-1297) after a decade of vigorous growth<sup>200</sup>.

The expansion of the millenarian movement headed by 'Uthmān Dīqna in Eastern Sudan and the beginning of military operations further disrupted trade circulations, especially for Sawākin which was immediately defined by the Mahdists as their primary target<sup>201</sup>. Numbers reported by British consular services in the Red Sea port are eloquent (see fig. 4.8). The value of trade operations in the Red Sea port, which exceeded 400 000£ in 1882 and 1883 (1299-1301), fell the following year to less than 150 000£. Most of that sharp decrease resulted from the contraction of imports which came near a total halt in 1884 (1301/2) and remained in this state for the next five years, while exports, if they stayed moribund, did not experience such a drop. The reasons for this divergence were quite simple. Most of the imports that transited through Sawākin came from other provinces—above all gum Arabic from Kurdufān—where Mahdism had spread almost two full years before it had reached Eastern Sudan. This early decline is noticeable in figure 4.8a. In contrast, imports were less sensitive to perturbation in the hinterland because Sawākin itself was a major town with important needs and because in 1884 and 1885 (1301-1303), military operations undertaken by the British required large amounts of equipment (including significant volumes of alcohol)<sup>202</sup>.

After four years of internal strife and foreign military interventions that severely weakened

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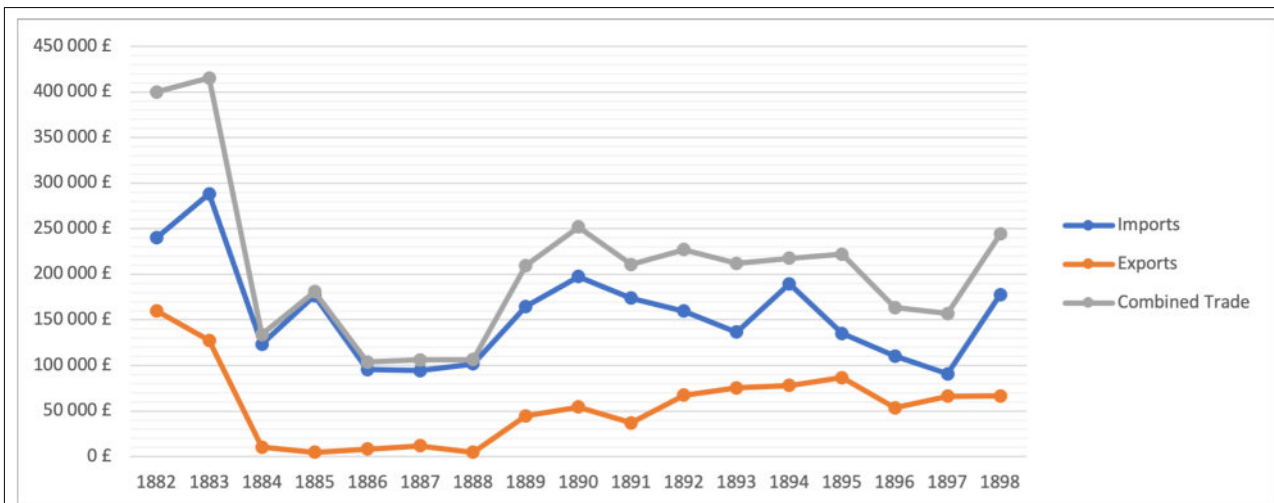
199 Alice MOORE-HARELL, "Slave trade in the Sudan in the nineteenth century and its suppression in the years 1877–80," *op. cit.*; Alice MOORE-HARELL, *Gordon and the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 126–141; Alice MOORE-HARELL, "Decline in European trade in the Sudan from the mid-Nineteenth century," *op. cit.*

200 Yitzhak NAKASH, "Reflections on a Subsistence Economy: Production and Trade of the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898," *op. cit.*, p. 50–51.

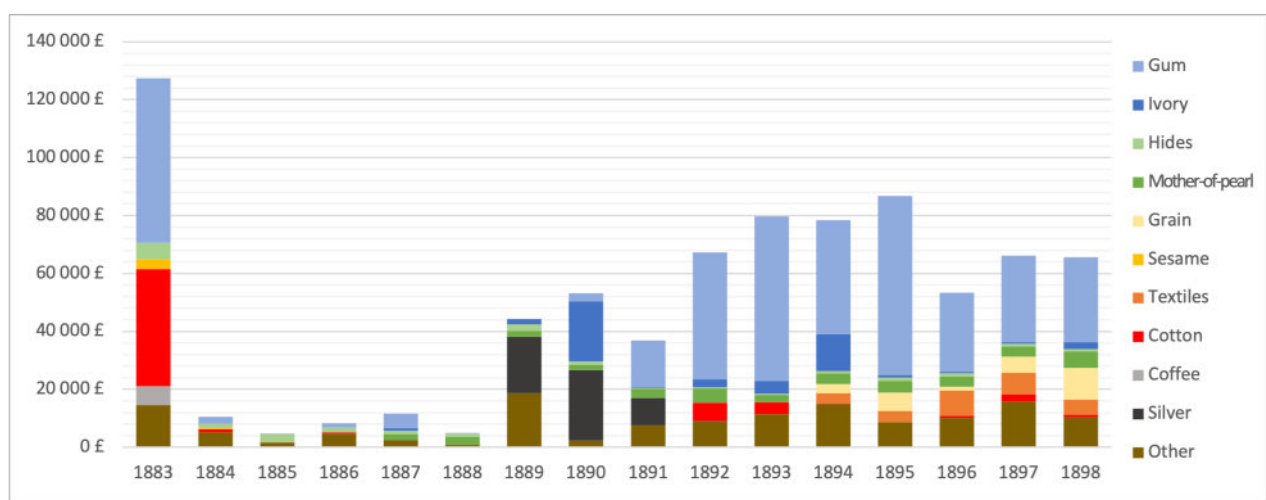
201 See chapter 2.

202 Hassan Abdel Aziz AHMED, "Aspects of Sudan's Foreign Trade during the Nineteenth Century," *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1974, vol. 55, p. 19.

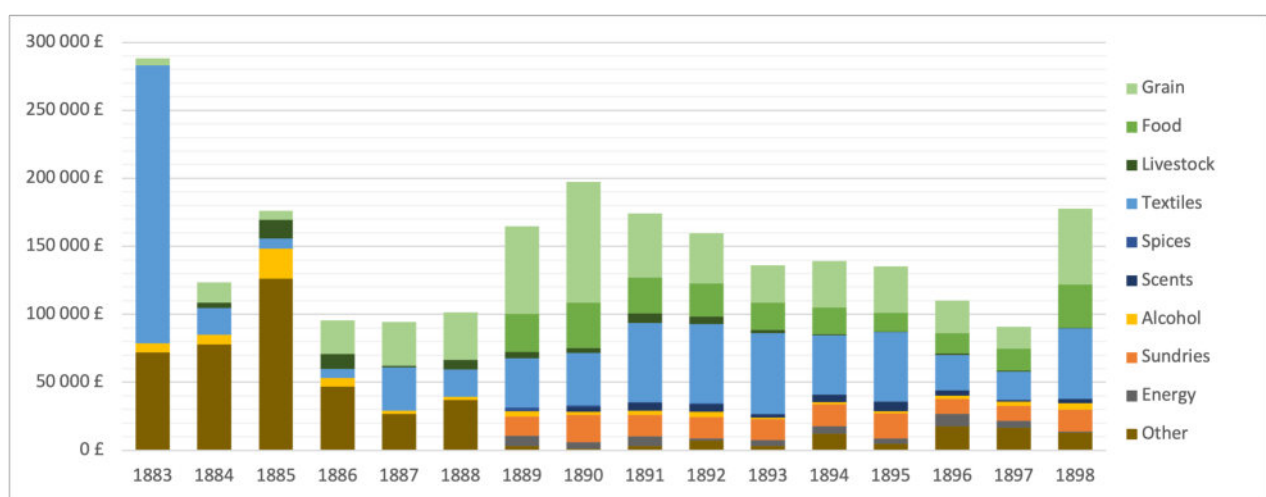




**Fig. 4.8a:** Trade in Sawākin in value (1882-1898)



**Fig. 4.8b:** Sawākin's exports (1883-1898)



**Fig. 4.8c:** Sawākin's imports (1883-1898)

**Fig. 4.8:** The evolution of trade through Sawākin (1882-1898)

**Sources:** HCCP “Reports from Her Majesty's consuls on the manufactures, commerce, &c., of their consular districts” (no. 6, 1886) and “Reports from H.M. Diplomatic and Consular Officers Abroad on Trade and Finance” (Egypt. Suakin no. 82, 272, 562, 707, 869, 988, 1206, 1363, 1504, 1689, 1859, 2052, 2247; 1887-1898).



the economy of Nilotic Sudan, the stabilisation of the new Mahdist regime in 1885 (1302/3) allowed for a revival of domestic trade.

*i) Markets and Circulations of the Sudanese Red Sea Littoral*

The spatial organisation of these trade circulations, once they were resumed, presented important alterations from the situation that had prevailed under Egyptian rule. For example, the concentration of activities in the new capital was much more intense than before. Indeed, Umm Durmān grew massively larger than Khartoum had ever been and so represented, by far, the main market in Nilotic Sudan<sup>203</sup>. Other factors contributed to strengthen the city's gravitational pull. Most foreign connections, if they had not been fully severed, were weakened by the uprising. Access to Egypt, the Red Sea or Ethiopia had become much more problematic than before. Historically, the *hajj* to Mecca had been an opportunity to travel and trade but the Mahdī had prohibited this practice. Instead, devout Sudanese were enjoined to make the pilgrimage to his tomb in the "Holy Spot". Lastly, policies implemented by the Khalīfa, especially monopolies on specific goods, furthered economic centralisation and meant that most merchants could hardly avoid Umm Durmān<sup>204</sup>.

The vast majority of foreign trade still circulated along the historical conduits of Sudanese commerce: to the north toward Egypt and the east toward the Red Sea. Both acted as interfaces with the outside world. Sawākin was directly connected to Jidda and Maşawwa' and participated in global circulations by importing goods such as Indian rice and British textiles. At the regional scale, it was constituted of three layers: the ports and small harbours, the local trading centres and the provincial trading centres.

In that framework, whatever the woes suffered by Sawākin by the hands of the Mahdists, it remained central to trade circulations in the region. The opening and closing of its gates instantaneously affected the organisation of trade. There were several reasons for Sawākin occupying such a predominant position on the Sudanese Red Sea littoral. To begin with, the town's merchants, the Sawākiniyya, were still the dominant trading community in Eastern Sudan. Regardless of their varying attitudes toward the Mahdiyya, their network was essential to the running of commerce in the region. Besides, all other sites were more arduous to reach. The absence of port infrastructures and the barrier formed almost continuously by corral reefs parallel to

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203 While estimates vary considerably, according to Robert S. Kramer, Umm Durmān's populations could safely be assumed to be around 250 000 inhabitants. In comparison, Khartoum probably did not exceed 30 000 inhabitants in 1885 (1302/3). See Robert S. KRAMER, *Holy City on the Nile: Omdurman during the Mahdiyya, 1885-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 49–54.

204 Yitzhak NAKASH, "Reflections on a Subsistence Economy: Production and Trade of the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898," *op. cit.*, p. 50.

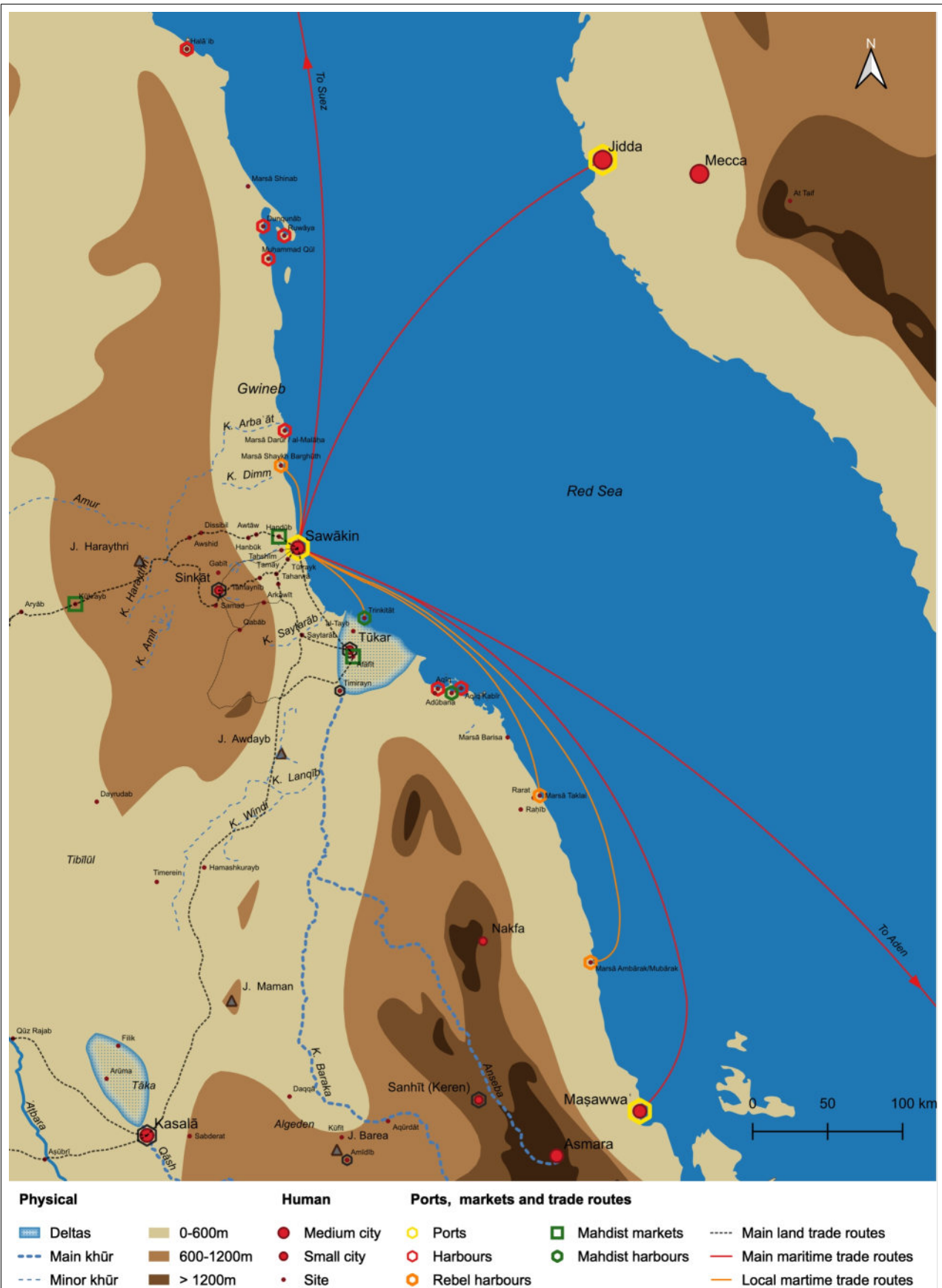


Fig. 4.9: Map of Eastern Sudan and trade circulations during the Mahdiyya (1885-1891)

the shore meant that only light dhows could actually reach the land and this limited the volumes of goods that could be exchanged. In addition, disembarking commodities was the easiest part of the trip. There was no immediate hinterland *per se*, no urban concentration of any sort before Kasalā and Barbar, and so no significant market to buy and sell goods that did not require at least a fortnight to get to with camels. The unforgiving environment that characterised most of Eastern Sudan meant that these trips could not be improvised. They required, at the very least, a network of wells and small resting stations, as well as contractors ready to rent their camels and guides (*khabīr* pl. *khubarā*) willing to head the caravan<sup>205</sup>. All these factors conspired to limit the flexibility of trade circulations. As a result, Mahdist authorities relied on the same routes as before without actually controlling their main outlet, thus placing the two foes in a position of unwanted mutual dependence. Whereas the Sudanese Red Sea littoral is easily several hundred of kilometres long, Mahdist positions are all situated in close proximity to that of their enemies (see fig. 4.9).

Nonetheless, political and military events in Eastern Sudan had significant consequences on the structure of trade circulations. The latter were probably disrupted since the early days of the Mahdiyya in Eastern Sudan, around August 1883 (Shawwāl 1300), but June 1884 (Sha‘bān 1301) was the actual turning point. When Mahdist forces occupied the well of Handūb, they effectively cut Sawākin from accessing the hinterland as a result of the *anṣār*’s effort to besiege the city. The reaction was immediate: “the people of Suakin began to send boats to anchorages (*marāsī* sing. *marṣā*) which were far from the Companions, to obtain supplies from those ‘Ummār’ar [*sic*].” The practice of diverting trade connections to less frequented natural harbours quickly expanded, prompting the Mahdists, who had anticipated this, to move their attention and closely surveil those inlets. They attacked the position of Shaykh Barghūth where they killed five and captured 70 men and women, as well as seized an important quantity of livestock which was being readied to board the boats mooring in the harbour<sup>206</sup>.

Whereas ‘Uthmān Dīqna and his followers were unable to cut Sawākin’s access to the sea, they attempted to fully disconnect the port from all mainland networks, including from those small harbours that could serve as branches to obtain supplies for its own population, and, conversely, would allow Anglo-Egyptian authorities to provide communities opposed to Mahdist rule with military equipment and grain. To the north of Sawākin, Shaykh Barghūth and al-Malaḥa (also called

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205 Information on caravans are rare in the documents produced by the treasury in Tūkar. This is all the more surprising that a tax based on the number of camels in a caravan was levied in other Mahdist positions. Indeed, one of the very few mentions of pack animals refers to the tax collected in Adūbana and “at Tūkar’s gate”. It reported the coming of a little more than 900 camels in the course of two weeks in July 1889 (D. al-Qa‘da 1306) and the collect of 874,75 *riyāl*. However, two weeks later, these references were omitted. See NRO Mahdiyya 5/13/48, document no. 23.

206 Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitab sa‘adat al-mustahdi bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdi (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdi)* by Isma‘il b. ‘Abd al-Qadir, *op. cit.*, p. 143 ; Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

*marsā* Darūr) were the main gateways to the northern and historical part of Ammār'ar territory. Further north, the Dunqunāb bay hosted three small harbours: Dunqunāb itself, Ruwāya and Muḥammad Qūl. Located at the border between Ammār'ar and Bishārīn territories, the area was important for salt production and so attracted a number of small traders<sup>207</sup>. Finally, at the border with Egypt, Halā'ib was one of the main outlets of the 'Abābda but it was too distant to be of real concerns to the Mahdists. On the opposite side, to the south, suitable harbours were rarer and so more disputed. 'Aqīq was one of the ancient ports of the region. It still played a significant role for the economy of local communities, mainly the Banī 'Āmir and the Rashāyda. 'Aqīq Kabīr, the island<sup>208</sup>, remained under the control of the former throughout the 1880s and its population was deemed hostile by the Mahdist power. They were regularly accused of being secretly in communication with the enemy, as was the case, for example, in early 1888 (mid-1305)<sup>209</sup>.

For the first five years, Mahdist authorities under 'Uthmān Dīqna focused most of their attention on preventing their opponents' access to the hinterland. This primarily reactive policy gave way from mid-1888 (early 1306) onwards to a more modulated approach. They attempted to assert their control over the network of smaller harbours which had experienced some development prompted by the closing of Sawākin to Sudanese merchants for half a decade. This trend was greatly reinforced by their settlement in Tūkar in early 1889 (mid-1306), leading them to seek access to the sea in the neighbouring inlets of Adūbana and Trinkitāt.

Adūbana was first mentioned in 'Uthmān Dīqna's correspondence with the Khalīfa in May 1889 (Ramaḍān 1306). By that time, circulations between that position and Tūkar were already frequent<sup>210</sup>. Mahdist authorities had to reconcile opposing rationales. On the one hand, distance to their headquarters was an important factor since finding transportation to carry the goods was often problematic. On the other hand, greater proximity made interferences by enemy forces, may they be British or Bijāwī, all the more likely. In that regard, Adūbana was sufficiently far from Sawākin to reduce that risk. It benefitted from the nearby presence of 'Aqīq, a site well-known to merchants of the Red Sea. Ensclosed in a series of small islands, its approach was difficult enough to prevent

207 The volumes were far from negligible: in 1889 (1306/7), 37 000 t. were exported. See DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 97 (11-23 December 1889), Appendix A.

208 'Aqīq ṣaḡhīr (Minor 'Aqīq) was situated on the mainland, north of Adūbana. In 1892, around 300 inhabitants, mostly Banī 'Āmir, lived there in thatched huts. The site was a good harbour and small stone jetty, but traders had retreated to the island of 'Aqīq Kabīr (Major 'Aqīq), therefore the Mahdists settled opposite the island, in the same bay. (NRO Mahdiyya CairInt 5/03/49, "Report on the Beni Amer Country & Report on the route traversed by the Col. Lewa Holled Smith Pasha on his tour of inspection in the Beni Amer Country", Holled Smith, 1892).

209 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Dīqna, op. cit.*, letter 52.

210 Mahdist presence in Adūbana is attested since January 1889 (Jumādā I 1306) when a small force was sent there by the *amīn* of the secretary. The first records of the *'ushr* being collected there under the newly appointed administrator, Samra 'Alī, date from the same time (NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56B, document no. 17 and NRO Mahdiyya 5/2067A, documents no. 3-12). In April 1889 (Sha'bān 1306), the place had its own *'āmil*, Aḥmad Muḥammad Maḥmūd (NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56C, document no. 13).

interventions by warships and this explains why smuggling had long been rife in this area. However, it also presented the defects of its qualities, namely that securing this position remained challenging and the path that connected it to Tūkar was vulnerable. Indeed, ‘Uthmān Diqna had initially written to the Khalīfa to report an attack on a caravan on its way to the Mahdist headquarters<sup>211</sup>. The following month, in June 1889 (D. al-Qa‘da), the ‘*āmil*’s reaction was to dispatch one of his *umarā*’, Daf‘ Allāh Khandaqāwī, to secure the road to Adūbana<sup>212</sup>. He and his men settled in a place called Umm Kubbān to guard the axis that connected the Mahdist headquarter to its main harbour and allowed them some measure of control over ‘Aqīq. Their efforts, however, were not fully successful. In September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307), Sawākin’s police was said to have attempted again to cut the road<sup>213</sup>. This did not prevent Adūbana from acquiring increasing importance for the Mahdist authorities. In December 1889 (Rabī‘ II 1307), another of the Mahdist *umarā*’, Khāṭir Ḥamīdān was sent there to collect goods and money as Tūkar’s treasury was then empty<sup>214</sup>.

In the same period, the British were becoming less commercially hostile towards the Mahdist authorities. The latter may have not been seeking actively another easier access to the sea, closer to Tūkar, but they were nonetheless keen on achieving such outcome. Indeed, in the same month as Ḥamīdān’s dispatch to Adūbana, a man named Antaryus, had written to Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf and Abū Qarja to inform them that when he returned to Sawākin, “he did his utmost to secure the opening of the Mashra (port) of Trinkitāt, for the goods of the Ansar, and begging to be remembered by them<sup>215</sup>.” This opportunity was not lost and in late January-early February 1890 (Jumādā II 1307), most of the imports had turned away from Adūbana to come through the “mashra‘ of Krinkitāt [Trinkitāt]”. A similar comment was made by Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf a month later who thus reported that “all importations in Adūbana have ceased<sup>216</sup>”. Trinkitāt was indeed much closer to Tūkar and more immediately connected to the main trade routes toward the interior. However, Mahdist concerns over the security of this position were slow to assuage. During the 1884-1885 British campaigns, two of the main expeditions had landed in Trinkitāt to reach the Mahdist forces settled in the Baraka Delta. These fears were well grounded as the raid against Tūkar organised by Colonel Holled Smith in February 1891 (Rajab 1308) also followed that road<sup>217</sup>. As for Adūbana, ‘Uthmān Diqna tried to eliminate that risk by establishing a defensive position between

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211 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 171.

212 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 29.

213 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 32 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 18.

214 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 21 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C) letter 37.

215 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 93, p. 63.

216 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 10.

217 Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 430. See the map in appendix [?].

the Mahdist camp and the port to secure the road. It is likely that this was set up near Andītayb<sup>218</sup>.

Other inlets may have been considered. To the north, in Ammār'ar territory, some Jiddāwī traders disembarked in May 1889 (Ramaḍān 1306) near Shaykh Barghūth to reach the Mahdist market of Handūb<sup>219</sup>, but its proximity with Sawākin meant that this road was even more vulnerable than Adūbana's, and the subject was not mentioned again. Landing, however, was only part of the matter. Whereas some exchanges were organised in the harbours themselves, a greater choice of commodities—and one can assume better terms of exchange—could only be found in locally controlled markets, such as Handūb.

Mahdist authorities had a strong interest in ensuring a certain concentration of commercial flows through their centres, the only places where they could exert some surveillance over them and, crucially, tax them. On one occasion, a Mahdist *amīr*, Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh Fanā, mentioned a so-called market at Karār<sup>220</sup> in August 1889 (D. al-Ḥijja 1306). Aware of the 'āmil's efforts to avoid the formation of markets outside of the Mahdist sphere of influence, he begged 'Uthmān Diqna not to break it up, fearing the effects this would have on local and foreign merchants<sup>221</sup>. In any case, Tūkar remained by far the most important trade place in Eastern Sudan and benefitted from several advantages including the presence of a very significant number of individuals, mainly combatants and their families, who had settled there following 'Uthmān Diqna's instruction. As a result, the market boasted different sections, including one devoted entirely to livestock and another to vegetables<sup>222</sup>, two commodities that indicate that Bijāwī communities were also engaged in trade activities. Furthermore, the treasury itself offered important volumes of goods for sale. As shown in figure 4.10, on average, three quarters of all goods collected from traders were sold in Tūkar, the remainder being distributed among the combatants (often as compensation for the lack of money in the treasury). This, of course, depended on the nature of the commodities in question. Whereas 98% of all objects related to adornment were sold back, this was the case for only 22% of the stationery, in all likelihood because of the administration's requirements. By the same token, more than 80% of all textiles were sold, when this proportion dropped to 60% for food items. Again, grain and other staples were considered too essential to the combatants to be disposed of in the market. Not only was the treasury directly engaged in commercial transactions, but this was also the case for the combatants themselves, some leaving the goods they had brought with them or acquired through raids to the treasury to organise their sale in the market. This practice is attested for the *amīr* Abū

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218 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, documents no. 3 and 14. The name of the new position is also written [Wadātay].

219 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 171.

220 This location could not be ascertained.

221 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 49, p. 59.

222 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 65; and Mahdiyya 5/17/58B, document no. 18.

Qarja<sup>223</sup>, but it is difficult to gauge whether this was widespread<sup>224</sup>.

As British authorities in Sawākin decided to ease restrictions on trade, Handūb began to witness some sort of a revival in early 1890 (mid-1307), a year after that position had been almost completely abandoned in the wake of the Mahdist defeat before the walls of Sawākin and the withdrawal to Tūkar. The advantages of this location were quite obvious and were expounded by Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf in a letter to ‘Uthmān Diqna. Indeed, “[he] learned that a great number of merchants come to Aḥmad Maḥmūd ‘Alī<sup>225</sup> and frequent him regularly from the district of Barbar, as well as goods from the fort [of Sawākin] (*qaqara*). Handūb has close relations to [depends on] Barbar (*muwāliyya li-Barbar*) and camels are easily available [there].” Handūb had long been one of the main stations on the trade route that connected the Red Sea port to the Upper Nile Valley and the old structure of commercial connections was rapidly reactivated, to the point that Majdhūb feared it may quickly eclipse Tūkar’s role as the main trading centre. He thought that “the merchants would not come here [to Tūkar] [anymore] and if the merchants who buy goods do not come here, so, necessarily, the importations are weak.” Obviously, the crux of the matter was the money and goods collected through the *‘ushr* in Handūb that should be used “to support the garrisoned *anṣār* (*al-anṣār al-murābiṭīn*), stored and [distributed] to meet their needs.” He had failed to gather more information, so he instructed orally the Mahdist appointee in Handūb to “keep a record of the imports in his area, but, until now, he is yet to receive an answer<sup>226</sup>.” Less than a month later, his concerns had materialised. The deputy *amīn* of the treasury<sup>227</sup> in Tūkar furthered his thoughts in another letter to ‘Uthmān Diqna. The reopening of Handūb had contributed to the decrease of trade in Adūbana and its corollary, the rerouting of some of these flows to Trinkitāt, located more to the north. But he noted that importations had also been decreasing in this last position, in all likelihood as merchants favoured Sawākin that was located even closer to Handūb.

This evolution had very real consequences on the ability of the Mahdist administration to provide for the *anṣār* in Tūkar—quite particularly as Handūb seemed to attract most of imported grain at a time when the effects of the famine could be felt. Echoing his previous letter, Majdhūb

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223 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 50, p. 59.

224 In a slightly different context, Bābikir Badrī and his brother Mūsā were actively engaged in trade as they were posted in Ṣaraṣ, near the northern border. Mūsā had taken with him bundles of fabric to Dunqulā al-Urdī “where he sold them, and from the proceeds bought a she-camel for [them], loaded her with grain, and returned with the balance of the money, which he used as capital to set up in the market, sometimes as a butcher, and sometimes as a trader in cloth or grain or other things.” See Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 52–53.

225 Aḥmad Maḥmūd ‘Alī, the son of Maḥmūd ‘Alī, had been appointed in Handūb in January 1890 (Jumādā II 1307). He was asked to collect the *‘ushr* on all the goods, regardless of their origin, record all levies and send them back to Tūkar every two weeks. See NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 27.

226 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 3.

227 The *amīn*, ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf, had accompanied ‘Uthmān Diqna to Umm Durmān in early October 1889 (mid-Ṣafar 1307). Both only returned to Tūkar on 22 August 1890 (6 Muḥarram 1308) (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 178 and 203).

wrote to Aḥmad Maḥmūd ‘Alī asking him to send to Tūkar some of the proceeds of the taxation of trade, most likely in kind, to alleviate the shortages in the Mahdist camp, and sent a few men to make sure his instructions would be followed. But the new entrepreneur boldly replied that his stocks were empty, and therefore he could not honour the *amīn*’s request. As the situation in Tūkar deteriorated, Majdhūb became desperate and appointed another group of representatives with higher standing, Daf‘ Allāh Khandaqāwī, Muḥammad al-Amīn ‘Ammār, Muḥammad Bābikir and Muḥammad Alī ‘Abd al-Raḥmān. This time, due to the dire circumstances in Eastern Sudan, Majdhūb ordered them to take half of what was found in Handūb and send it directly to Tūkar. After a short investigation, they found out that Aḥmad Maḥmūd ‘Alī had been hiding the true volumes of trade passing through Handūb. Daf‘ Allāh Khandaqāwī managed to obtain 450 r. and was promised that 60 bags of grain (around 2,7 t) would be sent to Tūkar by the sea<sup>228</sup>.

Tensions over the control of these trade centres were particularly intense because they were so crucial to Mahdist finances in Eastern Sudan. Once the caravans had left Tūkar and Handūb, they entered the Red Sea Hills before crossing the ‘Aytbāy where Mahdist presence was scattered at best. The next stops were located in Kasalā and Barbar, that is outside ‘Uthmān Diqna’s jurisdiction.

#### *ii) Traders and the Mahdist State*

The Mahdist administration’s role was not limited to levying taxes on trade circulations. It was also an economic actor in its own right. As noted in the previous section, the centrality of Tūkar’s market (and to a lesser extent Handūb’s) derived in part from the reintroduction of these same taxed goods back into the pool of traded commodities. This was carried out by the *amīn* of the ‘*ushr*, Muḥammad Yūsuf, who auctioned (*dilāla*) the goods in question under the watchful eyes of a few witnesses like Abū Qarja and one of the delegates. These must have been rather notable events as their proceeds could easily reach more than a thousand *riyāl*<sup>229</sup>. Besides, it should be remembered that the treasury could also purchase goods, even if this remained marginal with less than 2,4% of all acquired commodities. Some were also bought on credit, but the total cannot have exceeded 5%. However, these numbers ignore the much more consequent procurements of grain as they were recorded in the granary’s ledger<sup>230</sup>. Indeed, foodstuffs were very much the only items that were actively sought after by Mahdist administrators. It represented 99% of all purchases and more than ten times the value of those acquired on credit, probably for more circumstantial reasons (see fig. 4.10).

228 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 14.

229 Examples of the final statements of these auctions can be seen in NRO Mahdiyya 5/20/68, document no. 6 and 5/20/69C, document no. 6.

230 This question will be dealt with in the last part of this chapter.



	'Ushr	Surplus	Purchase	Loans		Total	Expenses	Sales		Total	
	ad.	ad.	ad.	r.	ad.	r.	ad.	ad.	ad.	r.	ad.
Food	5 491	68	930	7 728	332	236	6 820	2 594	3 880	3 620	6 473
	80,5 %	1,0 %	13,6 %	99,1 %	4,9 %	38,2 %	100,0 %	40,1 %	59,9 %	13,1 %	100,0 %
Textile	20 366	1 728	6	12	414	301	22 514	4 166	17 776	20 917	21 942
	90,5 %	7,7 %	0,0 %	0,1 %	1,8 %	48,7 %	100,0 %	19,0 %	81,0 %	75,7 %	100,0 %
Clothing	3 865	97	1	1	0	0	3 963	1 750	3 295	1 723	5 045
	97,5 %	2,4 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	100,0 %	34,7 %	65,3 %	6,2 %	100,0 %
Adornment	2 675	0	0	0	0	0	2 675	53	2 782	145	2 835
	100,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	100,0 %	1,9 %	98,1 %	0,5 %	100,0 %
Spices	3 048	889	105	35	329	81	4 371	1 389	2 555	827	3 944
	69,7 %	20,3 %	2,4 %	0,4 %	7,5 %	13,1 %	100,0 %	35,2 %	64,8 %	3,0 %	100,0 %
Scents	539	1	0	0	0	0	540	239	300	52	539
	99,8 %	0,2 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	100,0 %	44,3 %	55,7 %	0,2 %	100,0 %
Tools	562	3	3	11	0	0	568	146	418	68	564
	98,9 %	0,5 %	0,5 %	0,1 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	100,0 %	25,9 %	74,1 %	0,2 %	100,0 %
Utensils	453	5	0	0	0	0	458	76	359	28	435
	98,9 %	1,1 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	100,0 %	17,5 %	82,5 %	0,1 %	100,0 %
Stationery	216	0	20	12	0	0	236	219	62	54	281
	91,5 %	0,0 %	8,5 %	0,2 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	100,0 %	77,9 %	22,1 %	0,2 %	100,0 %
Other	1 046	665	0	0	0	0	1 711	730	997	145	1 727
	61,1 %	38,9 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	100,0 %	42,3 %	57,7 %	0,5 %	100,0 %
n.a.	242	1	0	0	0	0	243	73	137	59	210
	99,6 %	0,4 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	100,0 %	34,7 %	65,3 %	0,2 %	100,0 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>38 510</b>	<b>3 458</b>	<b>1 066</b>	<b>7 798</b>	<b>1 075</b>	<b>618</b>	<b>44 108</b>	<b>11 437</b>	<b>32 568</b>	<b>27 638</b>	<b>44 004</b>
<b>Avg.</b>	<b>87,3 %</b>	<b>7,8 %</b>	<b>2,4 %</b>	<b>100,0 %</b>	<b>2,4 %</b>	<b>100,0 %</b>	<b>100,0 %</b>	<b>26,0 %</b>	<b>74,0 %</b>	<b>100,0 %</b>	<b>100,0 %</b>

**Fig. 4.10:** Commodities entering and exiting the Tūkar treasury in volume (ad.) and value (r.) (1888-1891)

**Sources:** NRO Mahdiyya 5/04/16; Mahdiyya 5/05/21; Mahdiyya 5/06/27A; and Mahdiyya 5/08/36.

**Methodology:** Between late 1888 and early 1891 (1306-1308), 5 491 food items were collected for the 'ushr and deposited in the treasury. This represents 80,5% of all food items that entered the treasury. Conversely, 3 880 items were sold for a total of 3 620 riyāl. This sum represents 13,1% of all the sales performed by the treasury, which totalled 27 638 riyāl.

The administration in Tūkar also attempted to regulate trade activities at all levels, with varying success. Beyond general regulations on commerce, which were decided in Umm Durmān, local treasuries had a vested interest in the smooth running of trade operations. As in the capital, a *muhtasib* was present in Tūkar's market, a function assumed by al-Bashīr Aḥmad Ḥusayn<sup>231</sup>, the *amīn* of the money department. This administrator was responsible for monitoring transactions, controlling measures and, crucially, serving as an arbitrator for disputes. His work has left few traces in the records, probably because most of his decisions were given orally, as with local judges<sup>232</sup>. In that regard, he acted as the first guardian of the Quranic exhortation to “enjoin [what is right] and forbid [what is] wrong (*al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-nahī 'an al-munkar*)<sup>233</sup>”. In other words,

231 NRO Mahdiyya 5/13/48, document no. 19 and Mahdiyya 5/18/60, document no. 28.

232 One of the few traces of such conflict was a letter in which a trader from Kasalā named Aḥmad Ḥasan Šāliḥ complained that the man to whom he had given a *ḥawāla* (pl. *ḥawālāt*)—a promissory note—had lost the said document and asked upon his return to be reimbursed of the 250 r. he had paid. Tellingly, the letter was addressed directly to the *amīn* of the secretary, thus indicating that the *muhtasib*'s responsibilities were quite limited. See NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 26.

233 'Awaḍ Jabar al-Darām ĀDAM, *Niẓām al-ḥukm wa al-idāra fī dawla al-Mahdiyya bi-l-Sūdān (1885-1898)*, PhD Diss., University al-Nilayn, Khartoum, 2004., op. cit., p. 170–171.

[his] charge was nothing else than the formation, through Mahdist teachings, of an ideal society in the city's public space<sup>234</sup>." Members of the treasury were also required to be witnesses to certain transactions. This was especially true for slaves who were frequently the targets of competing property claims. Proofs of sale with one of the administrators' seals were less susceptible to being challenged<sup>235</sup>. One of the clerks, Muḥammad al-Amīn 'Ammār, seemed to have been entrusted with this particular task<sup>236</sup>. Finally, the Mahdist administration also supervised transportation. The same clerk informed all traders heading toward Kasalā and Barbar in a proclamation dated February 1890 (Jumādā II 1307) that they were forbidden from contracting camels without the administration's knowledge and that the presence of one of its agents was mandatory, so that the latter could record the travellers' names and that of the camels' owner<sup>237</sup>. Finally, the tentative control exerted by administrators of the treasury on trade circulations was not restricted to its economic dimensions. Indeed, Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf was told that "some traders pack[ed] *tunbāk*<sup>238</sup> inside boxes of sugar", something that was strongly frowned upon by the new regime<sup>239</sup>. Smuggling was a very common practice<sup>240</sup>, as was corruption, but traders from diverse backgrounds coming to Eastern Sudan must have found benefits in the treasury's action to organise and secure the market.

Sawākin remained central for trade circulations in Eastern Sudan, both because of the infrastructures of the Red Sea port and its trading community. The opening and closing of its gates was the dominant factor in the state of affairs in the region (see below). As for the merchants of the Sawākiniyya, their interests lay on both sides of the town's walls. Because their economic fate relied heavily on the good will of Mahdist and Anglo-Egyptian authorities, they were often suspected of collusion with the enemy, sometimes of espionage, and their circulations monitored. Indeed, the suspicions entertained by the Mahdist authorities were more than founded. Intelligence reports produced by the DMI abound with information communicated by traders, some directly, some other through intermediaries or letters. Ṣāliḥ al-Khamīsī, quite particularly, was in frequent contact with traders in Sawākin. One of his aids, 'Umar Sharīf, would take letters from Tūkar to the Red Sea port to Sawākin and deliver them to the governor-general, as it happened in October 1889

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234 Robert S. KRAMER, *Holy City on the Nile: Omdurman during the Mahdiyya, 1885-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

235 NRO Mahdiyya 5/17/59C, document no. 4. For another example in the same folder, see the doc. 11.

236 Attestations of transactions can be seen in NRO Mahdiyya 5/13/47, document no. 50; and Mahdiyya 5/09/04B, document no. 11.

237 NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/62B, document no. 41.

238 It is also written *tumbāk*. Tobacco was prohibited, but Levi Guido noted that Hadanduwas "are very fond of a preparation called tombek, which contains Indian tobacco powdered with other drugs. They constantly suck a pinch of this mixture and place it between their lower lip and gums, like the chewing tobacco used by sailors" (Guido LEVI, *Osman Dekna, chez lui*, *op. cit.*, p. 30).

239 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 14.

240 Bābikir Badrī gives numerous examples of smuggling techniques. See, among other instances, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

(Ṣafar 1307)<sup>241</sup>.

The traders of the Sawākiniyya entertained dense relations with the other main ports of the Red Sea, Maṣawwa‘ and Jidda, where they themselves had extended their networks since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century<sup>242</sup>. Indeed, trade activities required individuals who could be trusted—often family members—and would act as their representatives in different locations so as to ensure the management and security of the goods<sup>243</sup>. Inversely, traders from these ports, like Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Dunbar al-Maṣawwa‘ī, ‘Uthmān Bashīr al-Maṣawwa‘ī, or Muḥammad Ṣadaqa al-Jiddāwī were also present in Tūkar and frequented the small harbours of the littoral, alongside traders from Sawākin and Kasalā. Mahdist authorities designated them as “people of the east (*ahālī al-sharq*)” and entertained ambiguous relations with them. Their coming was crucial because they brought essential (and non-essential) commodities into Eastern Sudan, notably grain, and, by paying the *a‘shār* (sing. *‘ushr*) when they arrived in Adūbana, and a second time when they sold their goods in Tūkar, they contributed to the treasury’s budget. Besides, most of the arms trade that reached Eastern Sudan was organised by Jiddāwī merchants. In late 1890 (early 1308), Aḥmad al-Ṣabbāgh was appointed by ‘Uthmān Dīqna to supervise the purchase and transfer of bullets and gun powder from Jidda<sup>244</sup> (see below).

Yet, despite long-standing relations that predated the upheaval in Eastern Sudan, Mahdist misgivings toward all foreign elements also applied to them. As a result, in Tūkar, they were told about the “vanities of the world (*ḥuṭām al-dunyā*)” and were required to submit to some light indoctrination<sup>245</sup>. Because of their participation in arms trafficking as well as the slave trade, they were considered with much reservation by British officers who, for once, were well aware of the contacts between ‘Uthmān Dīqna and Jiddāwī traders<sup>246</sup>. But the most vocal opponents to their

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241 Ṣāliḥ al-Khamīsī did more than just transmit information. He was also engaged in outright treasonous activities. In his communication with Sawākin’s authorities, “he did not make any definite proposals of a course to be pursued [to suppress Mahdism in Eastern Sudan], but sa[id] “Meat to be eaten must be cooked. Once the influence of Osman is removed, the dervishes are the meat; we shall be the fire, and when things are ready, the Government can step in and do what it likes.” See DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 92 (1-15 October 1889), Appendices A and B.

242 Philippe PÉTRIAT, *Les grandes familles marchandes hadramies de Djedda, 1850-1950*, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

243 This was the case for several traders who arrived to Handūb from Sawākin (but whose origin is not known). For example, the trader Mūsā Idrīs Marjān had a brother who was settled in Tūkar. In the same manner, al-sayyid ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ‘Aqīl also mentioned, upon his arrival in Handūb, that his deputy was waiting for the goods in Tūkar. See NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/55, documents no. 5 and 15.

244 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 211.

245 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, letter 288, p. 225-226. In their communication with the Mahdists, traders were cautious to frame their activity in religious rather than economic terms. In a petition destined to the delegates (see below), they argued, somewhat unconvincingly, that they came to “the domains of the Mahdī (*diyār al-Mahdī*) [...] to sell some subsistence to assist the *anṣār* of the religion (*fī ma‘ūnat anṣār al-dīn*) with sincerity (*khālīṣīn*) and expected no reward (*qāṣidīn wajhi Allāh*)”. They also claimed feeling no resentment toward the treasury for the goods taken as loans, but nonetheless protested the practice (NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 22a).

246 The DMI was informed that ‘Uthmān Dīqna had organised, with the trader Sarūr Jarbū‘, the importation of a “considerable quantity of lead and powder” in early 1890 (mid-1307). He appears to have served as intermediary with Greek keepers of coffee-houses and grocers in Jidda who secretly participated in the arms trade. See DUL

presence were the local traders themselves who had much to lose from their competition. Ṣāliḥ al-Khamīsī, for example, was incensed at their coming to Trinkitāt to engage in contraband, thus jeopardizing the fragile agreement that had been reached between Tūkar and Sawākin. He told them that “he had managed to open the Mersa [port] under Aman [*amān*, assurance of protection], and would not have this undone by them.” In a bid to weaponise the Anglo-Egyptian authorities, he even called for a more active policy of contraband suppression, claiming that “as the Jemma merchants cheat the Government, so they cheat the Arabs, or the dervishes, or whomever they have dealing with<sup>247</sup>.”

Riverine traders, like Bābikir Badrī, were also coming to Tūkar and Sawākin. Some specialised in fabric and were designated as “*jalālīb* (sing. *jallāba*) *aqmisha*” while others focused on gum Arabic<sup>248</sup>. For example, a group of Ja‘aliyīn came in November 1889 (Rabī‘ I 1307) bringing “nine bales of gum, a cantar [*qinṭār*] of ivory, 520 dollars worth of silver, and some musk, for sale in Suakin<sup>249</sup>.” Next to the traders whose livelihood depended predominantly on this activity, the rest of the population often partook, in one form or another, in more modest commercial endeavours at the local scale. Small quantities of goods would be brought through the same channels as the ones that connected Adūbana and the Tūkar hinterland, whence they would be sold or exchanged for a small profit<sup>250</sup>. As for the Mahdists, the delegates affirmed that “[all traders] are welcome (*jumla kāfiyya*), may they be people with money (*ahl nuqūd*) or people with goods (*ahl badā‘i*)”, and insisted that the guarantees of the treasury branch in Adūbana were aimed at “all the traders, the retailers (*mutasabbibīn*) and the people of this country<sup>251</sup>”.

These traders had a vested interest in maintaining relations with both the British and the Mahdist authorities on whom they depended to pursue their activities. In that respect, they had their own agenda, often at odds with the governments with which they were in direct relation. Ṣāliḥ al-Khamīsī is a case in point of these dynamics. ‘Umar Sharīf, his associate, had brought other letters alongside the one destined to the governor-general. Those were meant for various merchants in Sawākin, including A. B. Wylde, the brothers Sīryal and Anṭūnyūs Sa‘d, probably Lebanese Christians, and a Greek merchant named Yohannis. The British entrepreneur who had joined the

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SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 99 (7-20 January 1890), Appendix D.

247 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 92 (1<sup>st</sup>-15 October 1889), Appendix B. The animosity was very much mutual. In early October 1889 (early Ṣafar 1307), fourteen traders from Jidda, Maṣawwa‘ and Eastern Sudan wrote a petition to the delegates, complaining that Ṣāliḥ al-Khamīsī had been sent by Abū Qarja to borrow cash and goods from them, and that he had been “extremely oppressive” (NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 22a).

248 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 302.

249 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 95 (13-26 November 1889), Appendix A.

250 For example, in July 1889 (early Dhū al-Ḥijja), a man named Madanī ‘Uthmān received a barrel of vinegar brought to him by al-Sharīf Aḥmad who, himself, seemingly, was in a business relation with a Jiddāwī trader named Ḥāmid Wīqān, for whom he transported goods between Adūbana and Tūkar. See NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40C, document no. 29.

251 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/03, document no. 23a and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 35.

project of the Sudan Trade Company initiated by Francis W. Fox and Verney Cameron in 1885 (1302/3), saw an opportunity in the gradual opening of trade relations in 1889 (1306/7), particularly with regard to the Baraka Delta where he promoted cotton cultivation, in the hope of exporting its harvests. He had entered in contact with local actors among whom Ṣāliḥ al-Khamīsī seemed to be his primary interlocutor. Together they organised the sale of cotton seeds to Bijāwī cultivators for the 1889 season (early 1307) and were monitoring the results closely (with the assistance of the DMI)<sup>252</sup>. Al-Khamīsī went even further and asserted that he had been put in charge of trade in the region by the Khalīfa himself and that he could protect those who engaged in cotton cultivation against ‘Uthmān Dīqna’s interferences, two claims that had little substance<sup>253</sup>. His position, however, was quite clear. He was forced by circumstances to work with both governments, but had no interest in taking part in the confrontation, a view he expressed succinctly: “Those who fight, fight; those who trade, trade<sup>254</sup>”.

Ṣāliḥ al-Khamīsī downplayed the intensity of his relations with the Mahdist authorities in his dealing with the British. Several factors conspired to strengthen these ties: traders and Mahdist leaders often had similar backgrounds—both ‘Uthmān Dīqna and Abū Qarja were engaged in trade activities, as was the case for at least one of the delegates, Muḥammad Khālīd Zuqāl—and so shared a common language as well as similar interests. Furthermore, because of the traders’ participation in the Mahdist budget, their demands could not be entirely ignored. They had no hesitation challenging the decisions of the treasury because of their perceived arbitrariness<sup>255</sup>. The DMI was convinced, probably with good reasons, that “the merchants at Tokar who have now considerable influence<sup>256</sup>” could influence Mahdist policies. The Sawākiniyya even tried to obtain their own separate market in Tamāy in March 1890 (Rajab 1307), but Aḥmad Maḥmūd ‘Alī was opposed to the idea<sup>257</sup>. There was nonetheless some truth in the DMI’s assessment, especially in 1889 and 1890 (1306-1308) when the Khalīfa actively began to promote trade. Indeed, boasts aside, Ṣāliḥ al-Khamīsī’s claim that he attended the council of the *umarā’* in Tūkar in December 1890

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252 Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State: Famine, Slavery, and Power in Sudan, 1883–1956*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 65–88 and 74.

253 In that regard, it is telling that his name is absent from the correspondence between ‘Uthmān Dīqna and the Khalīfa. His pretensions probably lay on the much more modest recognition of his role by the provincial Mahdist leadership. In a letter to the delegates in which he defended himself against accusations of spoliations made by traders (see above), Abū Qarja called al-Khamīsī “*amīn* of the merchants”, pointing to his local influence (NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 22b).

254 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 90 (1-16 September 1889), Appendices A and E; and Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 92 (1-15 October 1889), Appendix A.

255 In one instance, in May 1889 (Ramaḍān 1306), a merchant from Jidda petitioned ‘Uthmān Dīqna and the delegates to contest the decision of ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr to seize all of his goods. See *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 38, p. 58.

256 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 109 (27 May-9 June 1890), Summary.

257 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 9.

(Rabī‘ II 1308) was probably true<sup>258</sup>. This resulted in part from the new direction of the Mahdist government as regards trade relations, but reflected older dynamics grounded in the intertwined economic interests of both groups. For example, when ‘Uthmān Diqna left for Umm Durmān in October 1889 (Ṣafar 1307), the caravan he headed was joined by several traders who took advantage of this opportunity to gain a safe passage to the capital<sup>259</sup>. More generally, merchants served as the reluctant financiers of the Mahdist movement.

Some of them, a narrow group of traders, entertained even closer relations with the Mahdist state for which it could be said they directly worked. In Eastern Sudan, it was headed by ‘Umar Kisha, himself responsible for a network of individuals that included his brother, Muḥammad Kisha, as well as others like Muḥammad Ayra, Yūsuf Sulaymān and Muḥammad w. Aḥmad, in Tūkar but also in Handūb and Barbar<sup>260</sup>. He may have been in relation with the treasury before, but he first appeared in Mahdist sources in March 1889 (Jumādā II 1306), when he negotiated the purchase of 165 rtl. (around 74,25 kg) of civet musk for the very significant sum of 3052,5 r., a sale so important that it was directly supervised by the *amīn* of the central treasury, Ibrāhīm ‘Adlān<sup>261</sup>. Even if prior contacts cannot be excluded, ‘Umar Kisha’s reliability and his capacity to gather substantial capital (his full payment for the civet musk was only one day late) may have been the reason why he was entrusted by the central treasury with the mission to manage ivory exportations for the Mahdist state in 1890 (1307/8) (see below). Indeed, ‘Umar Kisha, a true Sawākinī, belonged to the old prestigious group of the Ḥaḍāriba<sup>262</sup>, as indicated by his *nisba*, and benefitted from solid relations on both ends of the Sawākin-Barbar road<sup>263</sup>. In association with his aforementioned qualities, ‘Umar Kisha’s resourcefulness and precious foreign contacts made him a valuable asset for a regime quite desperate to obtain hard currencies and balance the deficit of its budget. In that perspective, the Mahdist state monopolised and farmed the trade of certain particularly valuable commodities.

### ***B) Trade Goods in Eastern Sudan***

A variety of goods transited through Eastern Sudan and Tūkar’s market before reaching the Nile Valley and received a differentiated treatment according to their importance for the Mahdist

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258 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 96 (27 November-10 December 1889), Appendix E.

259 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 45.

260 NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/62B, document no. 42.

261 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 7.

262 In that respect, as other Sawākinī traders, he owned land in the Baraka Delta and some of the grain produced on his fields reached the Mahdist treasury in December 1890 (Jumādā I 1308) (NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 110).

263 Ibrāhīm ‘Akāsha ‘ALĪ, *Wilāyat Barbar fī ‘ahd al-Khalīfa ‘Abd Allāh (Ramaḍān 1302 – Rajab 1317 / June 1885 – November 1899)*, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

war economy. While military equipment was almost entirely excluded from market transactions, specific export-bound commodities like ivory were integrated to trade circulations but were still tightly monitored by the Mahdist government. This still left ample room for merchants to deal in textiles, perfumes and sundries and generate profits.

*i) Strategic Resources: Guns and Horses*

As observed by the historian Yitzhak Nakash, “the Mahdist state, being surrounded by hostile neighbours, faced severe difficulties in obtaining arms and ammunitions<sup>264</sup>”, a problem compounded by British efforts to limit their importations into Mahdist Sudan. Materials necessary for the local production of bullets, like lead, were also targeted by these measures. Crucially, these were deployed at the very same time Western powers initiated a collective and multilateral response to the proliferation of firearms in the Red Sea and the Western Indian Ocean. Concerns with regard to the arms trade were then at their most intense. In the wake of the Berlin conference of 1885 (1302/3), since territorial claims hence had to be backed by an effective colonial presence, the availability of large numbers of cheap rifles<sup>265</sup> was considered an obstacle to the imposition of an imperial order<sup>266</sup>. The matter was viewed along the same lines by British officers stationed in Sawākin, with the exception that until 1891 (1308), their control did not extend beyond the walls of Sawākin. DMI officers were keen to note that the failure of Ammār’ar or Hadanduwa groups in challenging Mahdist power was caused, in part, by their lack of firearms<sup>267</sup>. Consequently, authorities in the Red Sea port tried to implement a tight control over arms circulations, as well as grain, another critical commodity (see below).

Conversely, because of their obvious strategic character for the *jihād*, these goods and materials were closely monitored by the Mahdist central authorities for which the administration in Tūkar acted as an intermediary. Thus, all potential resources were supposed to be collected and sent directly to Umm Durmān. ‘Uthmān Diqna’s men could be found scouring battlefields looking for materials. Already in late 1886 (early 1304), the Khalīfa had dispatched two individuals to go to

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264 Yitzhak NAKASH, “Reflections on a Subsistence Economy: Production and Trade of the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898,” *op. cit.*, p. 49.

265 Humphrey J. FISHER and Virginia ROWLAND, “Firearms in the Central Sudan,” *The Journal of African History*, 1971, vol. 12, no. 2, p. 223.

266 The 1888 uprising in Zanzibar was a tipping point. It prompted the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy to institute a blockade along the littoral of Eastern Africa to prevent importations of ammunitions. This measure had little effect but nonetheless led soon after to the adoption of regulations designed to limit the arms trade within their respective colonial spheres. Ultimately, these regulations were integrated and expanded in the Brussels Conference Act of 1890. See Emrys CHEW, *Arming the Periphery: The Arms Trade in the Indian Ocean During the Age of Global Empire*, Basingstoke, 2012, p. 110–111.

267 On Christmas Eve 1889 (2 Jumādā I 1307), the Major-General James C. Dormer could thus write, to summarise the findings of the DMI in Tūkar, that “the Arabs are suffering severely from the tyranny of the dervishes, but having no proper arms and no leader, they find themselves unable to throw off the yoke unassisted.” See DUL SAD Intelligence Report (Suakin) n°96 (27 November–10 December 1889), Covering Minutes, p. 2.

Kasalā and bring back to the capital “the bullets (*raṣāṣ*), the shells (*qabsūl*) and the cartridges (*zurūf* sing. *ẓarf*)” found in the town, probably with the stocks of the garrison in mind<sup>268</sup>. But anything that could be used was presented to the ‘*āmil* and the information communicated to the Khalīfa. For example, in November 1888 (Rabī‘ I 1306), shells for the Krupp guns captured during the operations of Sawākin’s siege were gathered and, noting that these were coated with lead, a few samples (‘*ayyina*) were sent to Umm Durmān for further investigation<sup>269</sup>. In the same manner, so dire were the needs of the Mahdist state that the rails of the aborted railway track built from Sawākin to Awtaw during the 1885 Anglo-Egyptian campaign in Eastern Sudan were dismantled and brought back to the Mahdist headquarter for their iron. In January 1888 (Jumādā I 1306), ‘Uthmān Diqna was instructed to organise their transport to the arsenal in Umm Durmān as soon as possible<sup>270</sup>. Even damp powder could be requested, as in August 1888 (D. al-Ḥijja 1305), to check whether the workshop of the arsenal could make use of it<sup>271</sup>. Such was the paucity of resources that news that the metal found in September 1887 (Ramaḍān 1305) in Umm Durmān could be used for the domestic production of bullets was received with enthusiasm and praised as a miracle by ‘Uthmān Diqna. He immediately took this opportunity to ask that a large quantity of ammunition be sent to him<sup>272</sup>.

But the results of these efforts to produce ammunitions locally was somewhat mixed and reports diverged as to the quantity and the quality of gunpowder that came out from Umm Durmān’s arsenal<sup>273</sup>. In principle, weapons and ammunitions were supposed to be provided to the combatants by the treasury. Numerous requests were sent to obtain more ammunition, but these were only seldom fulfilled. In December 1888 (Rabī‘ II 1306), “50 boxes of Remington ammunitions, two barrels of powder and 1 000 shells for the mountain cannon, 5 000 cartridges for the *abū lafta*, and the equivalent for the *abū ruḥayn*<sup>274</sup>” had been sent to ‘Uthmān Diqna in preparation of the final assault against Sawākin, but at this date, it was still in Barbar through which it transited<sup>275</sup>. However, the local production’s quality was not reliable. ‘Uthmān Diqna complained once to the Khalīfa that the bullets he had sent to Eastern Sudan often malfunctioned and severely

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268 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 76, p. 83. The Khalīfa sent a similar order to ‘Uthmān Diqna in March 1889 (Rajab 1306) with regard to lead and blank ammunitions (*Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 263, p. 207-208).

269 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 110.

270 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A) letter 23, p. 56 and *Ibid.*, letter 147.

271 *Ibid.*, letter 81.

272 *Ibid.*, letter 19.

273 Yitzhak NAKASH, “Reflections on a Subsistence Economy: Production and Trade of the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898,” *op. cit.*, p. 49.

274 The terms “*abū lafta*” and “*abū ruḥayn*” designate types of rifles (Lidwien KAPTEIJNS, *Mahdist Faith and Sudanic Tradition: the History of the Masalit Sultanate 1870-1930*, *op. cit.*, p. 292, note 39 ; Fergus NICOLL, *An Index to the Complete Works of Imam Al-Mahdi*, translated by Osman NUSAIRI, Nusairi Publications, 2009, p. 121).

275 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 122.



injured several *anṣār*, some having their faces burned by the powder<sup>276</sup>. In any case, gleaning bullets off the ground could hardly meet the needs of the Mahdist military and so attempts were made at organizing imports.

This may have been first suggested by ‘Uthmān Diqna, out of frustration from the delays and the inadequacy of the resupplies from Umm Durmān. The very same day he learned that the ammunition he had requested had only reached Barbar, he wrote to the Khalīfa that “it came to [my] mind that we [could] deal with one we trust from among the many people who come and go regularly to us from the Ḥijāz with goods to bring bullets to buy and bring bullets back from there. Then, it appeared to us that we [should] inform the Khalīfa first before [we do] this, and then we will act according to the noble indication<sup>277</sup>.” He eventually found such a person, as ‘Uthmān Diqna was in direct communication with a man named Jābir, the “bullets’ concessionaire (*multazim*)” in November 1889 (Muḥarram 1307)<sup>278</sup>. But the matter was more complicated than he had anticipated. Indeed, as noted above, at least two other men were entrusted with the same task, Sarūr Jarbū‘ and Aḥmad al-Ṣabbāgh (see above). The outcome of ‘Uthmān Diqna’s endeavours was probably modest since no mention was made of any significant import of ammunition on the Red Sea littoral in the later correspondence exchange between the ‘*āmil* and the Khalīfa. The matter was a bit different for raw materials. The delegates in Tūkar had already contracted the importation of lead and caps to Ṣāliḥ al-Khamīsī in August 1889 (D. al-Ḥijja 1306), but these were meant solely for the arsenal in Umm Durmān<sup>279</sup>.

Consequently, controlling the available resources was quite crucial. Gunpowder was also rare and a coveted commodity, so much so that the Khalīfa instructed his ‘*āmil* to place guards to watch over the reserves in Kasalā in November 1885 (Ṣafar 1302), lest they should be stolen. A similar order was given three years later regarding ammunitions around late November 1888 (Rabī‘ I 1306)<sup>280</sup>, a sign that tensions had not abated. In addition, a few regulations were enacted to assert Mahdist control over all military equipment. Ibrāhīm ‘Adlān, the head of the central treasury (1886-1890), sent specific instructions to Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf on that question in May 1889 (Ramaḍān 1306). He stipulated that guns could only be sold within the provincial treasury and at a fixed price<sup>281</sup>.

Control over guns and ammunition was evidently essential, but other resources were also crucial, first and foremost mounts. Contrary to firearms that were not disseminated widely in

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276 *Ibid.*, letters 29 and 128.

277 *Ibid.*, letter 121.

278 *Ibid.*, letter 181.

279 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 51, p. 59.

280 *Daftār ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 40, p. 52-53 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix III, letter p. 183, p. 44.

281 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 35, p. 57.

Eastern Sudan (as in Nilotic Sudan in general), there was a local market for horses and camels, but only the former were actively sought after by the Mahdist administration. Indeed, horses were much more adaptable than camels and their speed made them necessary to launch raids. To a certain extent, they were considered as weapons by Mahdist authorities. Indeed, when ‘Uthmān Dīqna was asked about the state of the troops under his command by the Khalīfa, each banner was defined by three variables: the number of combatants, the number of firearms, and the number of weapons<sup>282</sup>.

Horses also conferred a certain status upon their owner. In May 1888 (Ramaḍān 1305), the Khalīfa had sent one to ‘Uthmān Dīqna after having learned that his current horse was not stable<sup>283</sup>. Because they were particularly valuable, horses were highly coveted and thus prone to theft<sup>284</sup>. Indeed, some reached astronomical prices. ‘Awaḍ al-Karīm Fāḍl Allāh Kāfūt claimed that in 1304 (1886/7), he had bought his horse for no less than 450 r.<sup>285</sup>. This explained in part why Abū Qarja was so intent on finding the “big brown Dongolese [horse that] had been stolen from Tokar by a thief”. Convinced that it had been taken to Sawākin, he wrote in December 1889 (Rabī‘ II 1307) to the trader Anṭūnyūs Sa‘d, mentioned above, to ask him if he had seen his horse and whether he could write to the governor-general to look for it<sup>286</sup>. His insistence on the subject indicates that the matter was probably not solely financial, but that his horse’s disappearance undermined his leadership. He was, in any case, willing to betray the Mahdist cause to locate it.

However, obtaining horses was just one part of the issue: caring for them raised yet more complications. The crux of the problem was that they required abundant fodder, an immense challenge during the drought of 1888 (1305/6). In the early summer of that year (late 1305), the lack of pastures near Handūb caused horses to perish of hunger. Yet, their military value was so great that when some grain reached the camp, it was decided that the horses would be fed before the families of the *anṣār*<sup>287</sup>. Winter rains relieved some of the tension, but the issue would appear time and time again during the following years. In that respect, the different censuses conducted during that period indicated the number of horses, alongside that of combatants and family members, for the simple reason that it defined each banner’s grain allotment<sup>288</sup>.

Weapons, and to a lesser extent horses, were almost entirely excluded from market dynamics, and placed under the sole control of the Mahdist state that ensured access to these strategic resources. But the same state badly needed cash to pay for imports like lead and cartridges.

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282 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 128 and 177.

283 *Ibid.*, letter 51.

284 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 5.

285 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 264.

286 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 97 (11-23 December 1889), Summary and Appendix D.

287 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 63.

288 See, for example, NRO Mahdiyya 5/05/23.

It had few options beyond trying to export ivory and slaves.

ii) “*Black Ivory and White*”: State Monopolies in Eastern Sudan<sup>289</sup>

To some extent, regulations similar to those described above were taken with regard to male slaves, in the sense that they too were objectified and considered as potential weapons by the Mahdist administration. After the surrender of Kasalā’s garrison in late July 1885 (mid-Shawwāl 1302), the Khalīfa wrote a series of instructions on how the booty should be dealt with. It also broached the question of the Egyptian army’s slave-soldiers. He advised his ‘*āmil*’ to make sure they did not flee to reach another garrison and entrusted them all to him, as with all the weapons found in the town<sup>290</sup>.

More generally, the slave trade experienced major evolutions during the Mahdiyya. Nakash has argued that whereas exports had decreased, price stability in the domestic market indicated a capacity to absorb the additional supply<sup>291</sup>. This narrative was quite convenient for British authorities who could flaunt their ability to hamper the slave trade toward Egypt and the Red Sea while depicting the Mahdist state as promoting slavery<sup>292</sup>. The reality revealed through the documents produced by Mahdist authorities in Tūkar differ significantly from this.

Despite its importance for Nilotic Sudan’s rural economy, slavery did not figure prominently in the Mahdī’s proclamations. Military campaigns led to the acquisition of large numbers of slaves, particularly after the capture of Khartoum in late January 1885 (mid-Rabī‘ II 1302), but the Mahdist state had little use for them and distributed them among the *anṣār*. Contrary to British assumptions, the political upheaval witnessed by the region hindered the organisation of slave raids launched against the southern populations—those most often targeted by these activities—causing a contraction of the domestic slave trade. In addition, fearful that slaves could serve in the Egyptian forces, the Khalīfa prohibited the exportation of male slaves who were to be integrated in the *jihādiyya*, a unit constituted of slave-soldiers that fought alongside the *anṣār*<sup>293</sup>. They were not considered the same way as other slaves, among other reasons because they were carrying firearms. Both Egyptian and Mahdist authorities complained about how precarious control over these individuals was. Indeed, they were quite opportunistic and could shift allegiance quickly. In mid-1888 (late 1305), intense food shortages prompted some of them to desert to Sawākin, accompanied

289 Henry C. JACKSON, *Black Ivory and White or The Story of El Zubeir Pasha Slaver and Sultan as Told by Himself*, Oxford, B. H. Blackwell, 1913.

290 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letters 30 and 31, p. 43-46.

291 Yitzhak NAKASH, “Reflections on a Subsistence Economy: Production and Trade of the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898,” *op. cit.*, p. 50–51; 54.

292 Abbas I.M. ALI, “Contemporary British Views on the Khalifa’s Rule,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1970, vol. 51, p. 36.

293 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 196 ; Kim SEARCY, “The Sudanese Mahdi’s Attitudes on Slavery and Emancipation,” *Islamic Africa*, 2010, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 76–78.

by some “slaves of the *anṣār* and their servants”, for a total of 300 persons<sup>294</sup>. But two years later, Kitchener noted that “the Arabs at Handoub are so well off [...] that they are able to offer high prices to induce Black soldiers of battalions at Suakin to desert [...]. These men are well paid and treated at Handoub, and are used as riflemen to protect the Arab camp<sup>295</sup>.”

A limited number of slaves were nonetheless sold in Kasalā between 1885 and 1887 (1303-1306)<sup>296</sup>. The ban on foreign exports was reiterated in January 1889 (Jumādā I 1306) when the traders from the Ḥijāz were permitted to bring in their goods on the express condition that they did not take out slaves from Mahdist territory<sup>297</sup>. But a year before, ‘Uthmān Diqna had already noted the resumption of slave trade circulations. Some people from Barbar came to sell “four or five heads” in Handūb and Tūkar. He denied having knowledge of pastoralists, also from Barbar’s area, who had reached the harbours of the littoral to find buyers for their slaves. He was quite certain that this was forbidden in Sawākin but admitted that before his return to the region in December 1887 (Rabi‘ I 1305), some slaves were brought to Jidda. Since, he attempted to enforce the centralisation of the slave trade and proclaimed for all to know that all slaves must be sold in the Mahdist camps<sup>298</sup>.

However, the ban on exports of slaves did not cover female slaves. In this respect, Eastern Sudan was central in slave circulations toward the Red Sea. The *amīn* of the treasury of Barbar, al-Nūr Ibrāhīm al-Jirayfāwī<sup>299</sup> informed ‘Uthmān Diqna on 14 January 1889 (11 Jumādā I 1306) that all female slaves detained by the central treasury were to be sent to Tūkar to be sold there<sup>300</sup>. Consequently, in May 1889 (Ramaḍān 1306), a covered enclosure (*rākūba*) was built to hold the slaves in Tūkar, under the supervision of its *amīn*, Aḥmad ‘Abd Allāh Ḥasab<sup>301</sup>. At the same time, ‘Uthmān Diqna complained to the Khalīfa that the number of slaves in the provincial headquarters kept increasing because of the ban on sales to foreigners. The Khalīfa tried to dissipate the confusion and specified, again, that only women could be sold to the pastoralists among the “people of the east who have desire for the Mahdiyya”<sup>302</sup>. As trade resumed with greater strength than

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294 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 63.

295 BNA WO 32/6353, “Blockade of Sudan: question of restriction on importation of grain. Suggested reopening of trade”, Col. Kitchener to Mr Portal, 22 July 1890. On the question, see Douglas H. JOHNSON, “Sudanese Military Slavery from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century,” in Léonie J. Archer (ed.), *Slavery and Other Forms of Unfree Labour*, London, Routledge, 1988, p. 142–156.

296 For receipts of these sales, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/21/71, documents no. 1-9; 16.

297 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 22, p. 56 and Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 143.

298 *Ibid.*, letter 85.

299 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 195 ; Ibrāhīm ‘Akāsha ‘ALĪ, *Wilāyat Barbar fī ‘ahd al-Khalīfa ‘Abd Allāh (Ramaḍān 1302 – Rajab 1317 / June 1885 – November 1899)*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

300 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 176.

301 NRO Mahdiyya 5/14/50, document no. 63.

302 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 289, p. 226-227.

before, in early 1891 (mid-1308), Handūb had become a thriving slave market<sup>303</sup>. Central authorities nonetheless attempted to reassert their monopoly on this activity. In reaction to the *‘āmil*’s complaint about slave overpopulation in Tūkar—concerns prompted by issues of food supplies—, Ibrāhīm ‘Adlān, then at the head of the treasury in Umm Durmān, tried to manage the situation from a distance and requested that no other slaves should be placed on the market while the first group had not been entirely sold. Furthermore, he insisted that the proceed of these sales be transferred back to the capital<sup>304</sup>.

However, the involvement of the Mahdist administration in the slave trade was limited, despite the existence of a department dedicated to it within Tūkar’s treasury. There were several reasons for this. First, not many slaves were available. A raid was conducted in the summer of 1887 (late 1304) against the populations of Barea and Bazeh near Kasalā during which 500 persons were enslaved, but this was not repeated<sup>305</sup>. Otherwise, all of the slaves mentioned as such came from regions that historically fell victim to these raids like the Nūba Mountains, some areas within Dār Fūr, as well as Baḥr al-Ghazāl and Equatoria<sup>306</sup>. But insecurity and a constant state of war meant that those were mostly suspended, as many of the men who participated in them joined the Mahdist army. Besides, the enslavement of the populations native to Eastern Sudan did not answer to the same modalities. As far as can be ascertained, Bijāwī captives did not enter the market for slaves<sup>307</sup>. Once captured, women from rebellious groups were integrated to the booty and could be forced to marry one of the *ansār*, but non-Bijāwī were given as concubines (*imā’*)<sup>308</sup>. By the same token, not all slaves passed via the market, but they were also frequently handed out as reward or charity (*iḥsān*) to the combatants, and it was not uncommon for high-ranking *ansār* to request one from the treasury<sup>309</sup>. For example, in April 1889 (Sha‘bān 1306), the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir himself requested a slave since “[he] ha[d] only one whose tasks have multiplied (*tukāthir al-ishtighāl*)<sup>310</sup>.

Consequently, most of this commerce appears to have been conducted by individuals who attempted to make a profit, but did not partake in wider circulations. Khāṭir Ḥamīdān, desperate to find resources to feed his men, claimed to have resorted to selling his own personal slaves

303 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 217.

304 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 25, p. 56.

305 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 7.

306 Among the origins mentioned in available sources: “Nūbāwiyya” (NRO Mahdiyya 5/05/20A, p. 159), “Fūrāwiyya” (NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, doc. 4), “taqlāwiyya” and “janqāwiyya” (NRO Mahdiyya 5/10/43A, documents no. 3 and 20), “fartīāwiyya” (NRO Mahdiyya 5/10/43B, documents no. 10)

307 On one occasion, in late June 1887 (Shawwāl 1305), the son of the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir, Muḥammad al-Majdhūb, requested from the *muqaddam* of the Jihādiyya “a nice and clean girl from those born among the Ḥalānqa (*muwalladāt al-Ḥalānqa*)” (NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40C, document no. 6). However, it is unclear whether Muḥammad al-Majdhūb had thus indicated his desire to obtain a woman who belonged to the Ḥalānqa or a slave who had been raised among them.

308 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 28. See chapter 5.

309 For example, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/15/51C, documents no. 5, 10 and 15.

310 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 22.

(responsible for the hearth of his house) in late 1889 (early 1307)<sup>311</sup>. Otherwise, sources seem to indicate that a number of slaves, a vast majority of women, had been found “wandering (*ḥāmila*)” and so recaptured<sup>312</sup>. One can only speculate as to the circumstances of their presence in Eastern Sudan, but, in all likelihood, they were attempting to find refuge on the littoral.

Although British attempts at preventing trade across the Red Sea were as efficient as Mahdist endeavours to monopolise exports their sales, both policies represented obstacles for slavers that were better circumvented<sup>313</sup>. A British report in May 1891 stated that some of the slave trade had been rerouted toward harbours situated to the north—like Mersa Elba—or the south—like Mersa Kantibai—outside of the Mahdist zone of influence. Authorities in Sawākin feared that these could finance massive importations of weapons. They estimated that over 1 000 slaves were exported from Sudan through Tūkar every year, although fiscal documents from the Tūkar Treasury suggested much lower numbers<sup>314</sup>. Therefore, British officers were either badly misinformed, or knowingly exaggerated the importance of the slave trade from the Sudanese Red Sea littoral so as to strengthen their case for the reoccupation of Eastern Sudan. Most of the trade ultimately escaped the Mahdist administration and relied on the reactivation of the former networks that had been so active during the Turkiyya, connecting Ja‘alī merchants to Greek traders<sup>315</sup>.

Slaves were not the sole commodity to be placed under the control of the state. Monopolies were also enacted on goods like ivory, gum Arabic and ostrich feathers<sup>316</sup>, but for reasons that are not clear, only the first was directly mentioned in sources<sup>317</sup>. Originally, all ivory belonged to the treasury, as ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf was reminded by al-Nūr Ibrāhīm al-Jirayfāwī, the new *amīn* of the central treasury, in April 1890 (Sha‘bān 1307), and all contraband brought to Tūkar

311 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 21 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 37.

312 See, among other examples, the case of Baraka, a woman whose face presented tribal marks (*mushallakha balādī*), of average height (*marbū‘ al-qāma*), with hair that fell down the ears (*sha‘r-ha* [illegible] *limma*), and whose teeth were broken (*al-sunūn kāsir*), and who had been found “wandering (*ḥāmila*)” in June 1890 (D. al-Qa‘da 1307), before being sold for 18 r. to a man named Muḥammad Ḥusayn ‘Uthmān. As in other instances, the sale was challenged by one who claimed to be her legal owner and the treasury reimbursed the first buyer (NRO Mahdiyya 5/06/29B, p. 29).

313 Mahdist control was effective only in the area directly under their influence. In 1889, some traders attempted to avoid Tūkar to send directly their slaves through Adūbana, but they were arrested and their slaves seized by the treasury (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 176.), but no other instance of such operation could be located in the archives. However, some arrangement could sometimes be found. In mid-1890 (late 1307), the trader Muḥammad Šālīḥ ‘Alī Dunbar asked the authorisation to send fourteen slaves to Jidda. He pleaded his case by reminding the treasury that it still owed him some money (NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/62B, document no. 39).

314 British officers should have been aware of this. From May 1889 to August 1890 (), 134 slaves were stated to have passed through Tūkar (see fig. 4.4).

315 William C. YOUNG, “From Many, One: The Social Construction of the Rashāyida Tribe in Eastern Sudan,” *op. cit.*, p. 93–94.

316 Yitzhak NAKASH, “Reflections on a Subsistence Economy: Production and Trade of the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898,” *op. cit.*, p. 54.

317 This omission is all the more puzzling concerning gum Arabic (*ṣamgh*), among Nilotic Sudan’s most important exports. Just a few years later, in 1894/5 (1312), Bābikir Badrī recounted that gum caravans to Sawākin were very numerous and that gum could be sold at 14 r. a *qinṭār* (*The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 163).

from any part of Sudan must be confiscated<sup>318</sup>. The previous month, the central treasury had proceeded to an extensive sweep, gathering all the ivory stored in the provincial treasuries (especially in al-Matamma) and confiscating the traders' holdings. One of them, Muṣṭafā al-Nā'im had been spotted in Barbar but had managed to reach Handūb where he was eventually arrested by Aḥmad Maḥmūd 'Alī before being sent to Umm Durmān. His ivory and jewels were seized. Around the same time, fifty camels loaded with ivory had arrived in Eastern Sudan<sup>319</sup>. Its sale was expressly meant to obtain resources to buy military equipment (*ālāt ḥarbiyya*) and was commissioned in early 1890 (mid-1307) to the trader 'Umar Kisha and his assistants. The operation was deemed particularly sensitive. The Khalīfa heavily impressed upon the 'āmil and his deputy, Majdhūb Abū Bakr, the need to closely supervise the operation and keep the matter secret<sup>320</sup>. Indeed, the amounts in question were considerable compared to the treasury's daily operations and may have attracted the unwelcome attention of the *anṣār* or the British. To be safer, the whole supply was divided between four individuals. 'Umar Kisha still received a fourth of the ivory, but the three other quarters were handed to Yūsuf Sulaymān, Muḥammad w. Aḥmad and al-Bilāl al-[Asīda]<sup>321</sup> and each was supposed to retrieve his own part of the payment. Eventually, in August 1890 (D. al-Ḥijja 1307/Muḥarram 1308), the sale of 488 qtr. (just a bit under 22 t) had delivered the staggering sum of 97 591 r., around 200 r. a *qinṭār*. Of this, 20 000 r. were paid in goods and the rest in cash. At that point, Majdhūb Abū Bakr had only received 49 625 r. and was waiting for the balance, including the promised goods. As for the purchase of military good, the delegates to whom this mission had been entrusted failed to carry it out because they could not find anything. 'Umar Kisha volunteered again his services. He took 1 500 r. from the sale's proceed with him to Handūb—where he was already required to receive the in-kind payment for the ivory—in the hope that he would be able to strike a deal for lead and gunpowder<sup>322</sup>. He cannot have been much more successful since 'Uthmān Diqna eventually commissioned Aḥmad al-Ṣabbāgh, a Jiddawī (see above), who was to return to the Ḥijāz and be their intermediary<sup>323</sup>. What happened to the money is unclear: it never entered the treasury's accounts and it is not known whether the rest was collected. As for al-Ṣabbāgh, his name is not

318 Report on the Dervish Rule, Appendix VI (A), letter 108, p. 65.

319 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 12.

320 For the Khalīfa's instructions, see *Daftar 'Uthmān Diqna*, letter 321 p. 241-2; letter, 333, p. 247; letter 338, p. 248; letter 344, p. 250-251; letter 346, p. 251-252; and NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56C, document no. 20.

321 Yūsuf Sulaymān was very probably the same agent with whom Bābikīr Badrī had crossed paths on several occasions. He was described as the most senior official responsible for tax-collection in Umm Durmān and had the reputation of being incorruptible. He may also have been the brother of Aḥmad Sulaymān, the first *amīn* of the central treasury, but this could not be ascertained. The involvement of such an important figure was warranted by the magnitude of the transaction (Bābikīr BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 150–151, 190 and 196). The identity of the two other individuals could not be determined with certainty.

322 More details about 'Umar Kisha and his brother Muḥammad's stay in Handūb can be found in NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/62, document no. 42.

323 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 196, 202, 206 and 211.

mentioned again in the correspondence between 'Uthmān Dīqna and the Khalīfa. Appointed in early October (late Ṣafar 1308), he probably did not have the time to negotiate the importation of military equipment from Jidda before the Mahdist withdrawal from Eastern Sudan in February 1891 (Rajab 1308).

### *iii) Trade Goods in the Tūkar Treasury*

Mahdist regulations were focused on exports since the central government was keen to appropriate the revenues derived from the sale of commodities that had long played a central role in Nilotic Sudan's participation to world trade circulations. On the other hand, imports were much more loosely monitored and so reflected what could be brought and sold for a profit in Tūkar, Barbar or Umm Durmān. The treasury in Eastern Sudan's Mahdist headquarter kept detailed statements on the goods that were deposited in its storeroom. Over 87% of those had been collected as payment for the *'ushr* (see fig. 4.6), and so can be considered as a pertinent proxy to determine the larger trends of importations from the Red Sea. However, contrary to their counterparts in Sawākin, Mahdist accountants did not record values but only volumes, a decision that made sense since most of the levies were paid in kind. Consequently, the numbers displayed in the charts below should be viewed with circumspection: they are based on the average price of sales and, more rarely, purchases carried out by the treasury. Henceforth, they reveal global balances rather than an exact reflection of reality. Furthermore, since the records for the other Mahdist trading centres of Adūbana, Trinkitāt and Handūb are not extant, they could not be included. Most of the goods that were seized there were transferred to Tūkar and registered in the treasury's reserves, but some were distributed on the spot to the *anṣār*, and so vanished from the records of the main branch.

Until early 1889 (mid-1306), foodstuffs represented a significant part of the commodities entering Eastern Sudan. That month, *dhura* itself amounted to a quarter of all imports, and more than a third with Indian rice. Wheat imports were much more modest, and their coming was more irregular. Following the development in the nineteenth century of a Sudanese taste for sweets, sugar loafs (*ra's* pl. *ru'ūs*) were brought in important quantities, almost 4 000 of them during the whole 25 months. Sweets like *'ajwa* (pressed dates) and *qamar al-dīn* (a delicacy made of fruit leather, most often apricots) were also imported. Other items like jam, raisins, figs (in tin) or Turkish delights figured alongside the former in the records but in much more limited volumes.

This changed in February 1889 (Jumādā II 1306) when food imports began to decrease and textiles became dominant. The completion of the harvests around the same time certainly diminished the need for grain imports to feed the *anṣār* (see below). In addition, this movement was concomitant to a revival of trade circulations caused by the Khalīfa's decision to adopt a much more



conciliatory attitude toward foreign commerce, the reopening of Sawākin's gates after several months of siege, as well as the implementation by British authorities of a trade policy that allowed the resumption of trade in the small harbours of the Sudanese Red Sea littoral. More than the Northern frontier, it was the main gateway for these products. Indeed, they were part of circulations that connected the entire eastern African littoral to India and England in which fabrics occupied a central position<sup>324</sup>. The historian Andrew S. Peacock noted that “the importance of the textile trade cannot be emphasised enough. This is based on the dual nature of this product which was considered in Nilotic Sudan as both a commodity and a currency<sup>325</sup>”. He referred to the use of *dammūr*, a coarse cotton fabric, that was central to the economy of the region and a major component of international trade circulations. Its use gradually dwindled under the increased monetisation of the Sudanese economy imposed by Egyptian authorities, however, it was readily revived in the early phase of the Mahdiyya, around 1886 (1303/4), to compensate for the absence of small coins alongside the new Mahdist *riyāl*<sup>326</sup>. Two dynamics combined to change the nature of the textile market in Nilotic Sudan. Firstly, whereas the region was still dependent for imports of cotton goods until the eighteenth century, local cotton culture had grown sufficiently since the 1800s to reach some form of self-sufficiency. The severe disruption of trade relations in the wake of the Mahdist uprising was compensated by the further involvement of women in spinning and weaving<sup>327</sup>. There was, according to Nakash, “an intensive production of cotton goods” and “cloth in considerable quantities was manufactured in the Gezira and sold in the local market<sup>328</sup>”.

These, however, were meant for everyday use and did not meet the needs of the population for the more varied and elaborate fabrics to which they had had access since at least a century and a half. Indeed, Sudanese societies had witnessed during that period the formation of a more affluent social class that had successfully challenged Funj monopoly over luxury items, especially clothing, while the dissemination of Islamic values and their mobilisation by the new *jallāba* group as a sign

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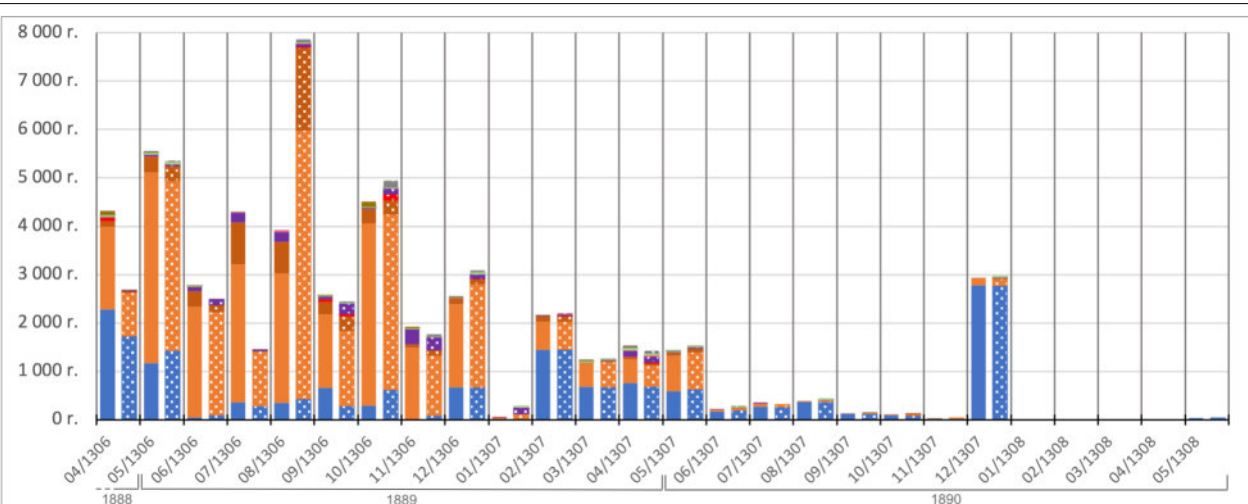
324 Sarah FEE, “‘Cloths with Names’: Luxury Textile Imports in Eastern Africa, c. 1800-1885,” *Textile History*, 2017, vol. 48, no. 1, p. 49–84.

325 Andrew C. S. Peacock, « The Ottomans and the Funj Sultanate in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries », *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 2012, vol. 75, n° 1, p. 95.

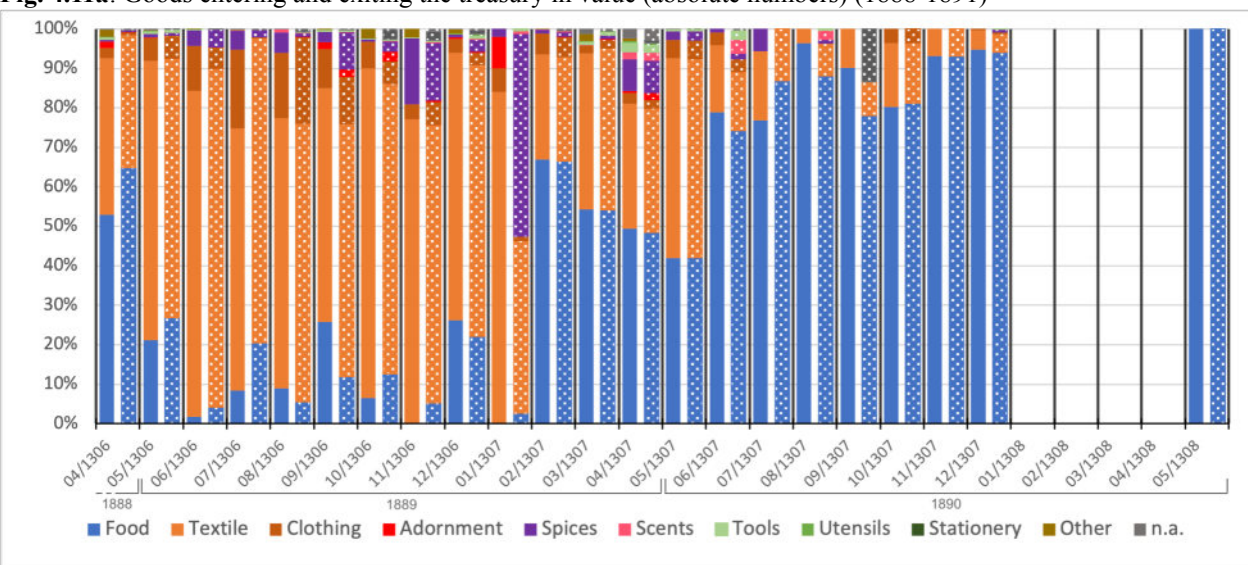
326 Yitzhak NAKASH, “Fiscal and Monetary Systems in the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898,” *op. cit.*, p. 377.

327 Peacock wrote on that matter that “the use of fabric as a tool of exchange in international trade is attested since at least the early Funj period, and within which *dammūr* played a central role. As such, the Ottoman garrison in Sawākin had negotiated to be supplied with vital provisions from the neighbouring tribes in exchange for 200 bolts of cloth every year.” (Andrew C. S. PEACOCK, “The Ottomans and the Funj Sultanate in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” *op. cit.*, p. 95.) The early nineteenth century witnessed an increase in textile production, furthered by the Egyptian power after the occupation of the Nile Upper Valley (Steven SERELS, “Spinners, Weavers, Merchants and Wearers : The Twentieth Century Decline of the Sudanese Textile Industry,” in Souad T. Ali et al. (ed.), *The Road to the Two Sudans*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, p. 162–165).

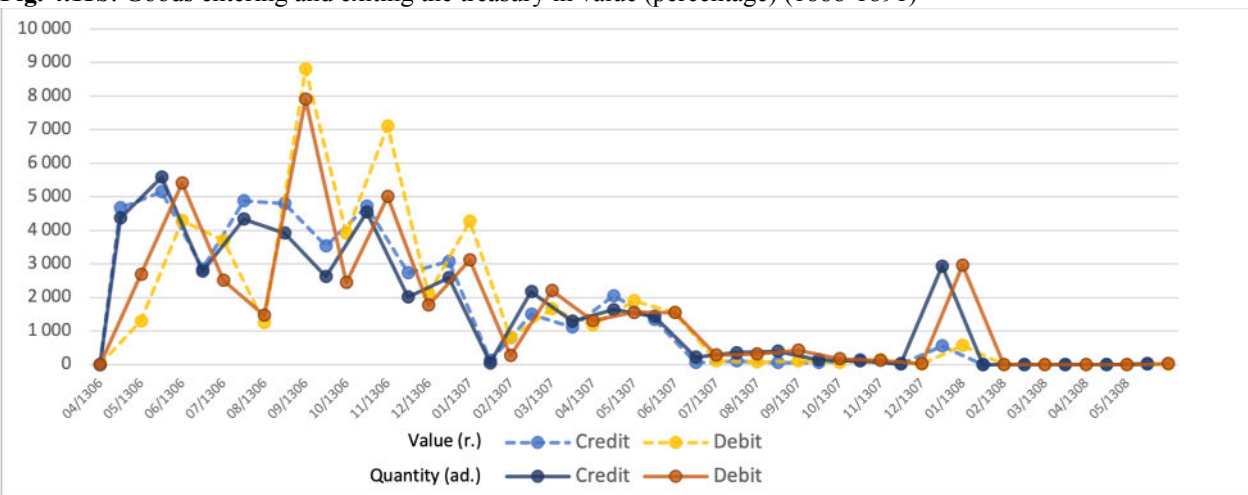
328 Yitzhak NAKASH, “Reflections on a Subsistence Economy: Production and Trade of the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898,” *op. cit.*, p. 49.



**Fig. 4.11a:** Goods entering and exiting the treasury in value (absolute numbers) (1888-1891)



**Fig. 4.11b:** Goods entering and exiting the treasury in value (percentage) (1888-1891)



**Fig. 4.11c:** Overall evolution of goods entering the Tūkar treasury in value and quantity (1888-1891)

**Fig. 4.11:** Trade in Tūkar (1888-1891)

**Sources:** NRO Mahdiyya 5/01/04, Mahdiyya 5/02/08, Mahdiyya 5/04/16, Mahdiyya 5/05/21 and 5/06/27A.

**Methodology:** In Rabī II 1304 (December 1888), the total value of goods entering the treasury in Tūkar amounted to more than 4 000 *riyāl* (fig. 4.11a), with foodstuff representing around half of it, and textiles a bit less than the other half, the difference, less than 10%, coming from a variety of goods.

of distinction had warped the market. Despite the Mahdī's calls for modesty and the abandonment of the world's riches, the Sudanese society did not abandon away its penchant for foreign fabrics. Those came in all types and colours, most of them Manchester and Indian cloths. One of the largest imports was the *zarāq*, a blue fabric, and the *marmar*, its white equivalent. In Tūkar, Indian calico (*khām hindī*) could be found, alongside another cotton fabric, the *dablān*, and broadcloth (*jūkh*). Pieces of clothing were also imported, as well as linen (*qimāsh tīl*), printed calico (*shīt*), Red Java wax (*Jawa ḥamra*), and for wealthy customers, silk (*ḥarīr*)<sup>329</sup>. Their use was not confined to the practical but very real issue of clothing the *anṣār* and their families. Short of cash, the treasury often resorted to distributing these as a form of payment or reward<sup>330</sup>, thus reactivating the monetary function once held by *dammūr*. It was indeed relatively easy to exchange. Traders who came to Tūkar could purchase textile which they would bring back to Barbar or Umm Durmān, where such pieces of cloth could be sold for a comfortable margin<sup>331</sup>. The advantage of textile was obvious: it did not weigh much and did not deteriorate rapidly, two conditions that made it an interesting commodity to transport by caravans through the Eastern Desert.

Other luxury items such as perfumes and spices could also be very profitable. *Dufur*, a type of crushed red seashell, regularly figured among these importations. This was also the case for cloves (*qaranful*) and clove perfume (*majma*), sandalwood, mahleb (*maḥlab*), incense (*bakhūr*) and several kinds of *fitna*, a type of perfume, including some from the Indian region of Surat. But traders also brought with them a wide range of sundry items like buttons, knives, locks, scissors, razors, needles, spoons, soap, pearls, combs, files, or glasses. In total, 170 different goods were recorded by the Mahdist administration in Tūkar.

The resumption of trade in 1889 (1306/7) in Eastern Sudan, five years after it had almost completely stopped (see fig. 4.8a and 4.8b), resulted from major shifts in both British and Mahdist policies. Traders returned to former patterns of importations that favoured light and expensive commodities, with a strong emphasis on textiles. However, after a short burst of activity, the rapid degradation of the economic situation in the region and in Nilotic Sudan in general caused a decrease in the volumes that passed through Tūkar (see fig. 4.11). The pacification of Eastern Sudan that some British officers hoped to obtain by favouring the commercial interests of the local population had limited results. Instead, from September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307) onwards, the collapse of food availability led to food imports to once again replace items of consumption in the few caravans that still circulated, but at much lower levels than before.

329 Na'ūm SHUQAYR, *Tārīkh al-Sūdān al-qadīm wa al-ḥadīth wa juḡhrāfiyyat-hu*, *op. cit.*, p. 149; Na'ūm SHUQAYR, *Géographie du Soudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

330 Bābikīr BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

331 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

### ***C) Trading with the Devil: Hesitations and Crises in Trade Relations (1883-1890)***

Foreign trade was one of the few topics considered in almost similar ways by Mahdist and Anglo-Egyptian authorities alike. Both raised the question in close terms: would the continuation of trade be detrimental or beneficial to the millenarian regime? More surprising yet, their answers mirrored one another, prompting each of them to wonder whether they had indeed picked the right policy.

The core of the matter was obvious enough. Would supplies and revenues obtained through commerce allow for the strengthening of the Mahdist state, or would it bring its demise, either by feeding the worldly aspirations of Sudanese communities and so detract them from the rightful path, or by causing its normalisation through the forced abandonment of its *jihādī* doctrine? The common narrative first formulated by agents of the DMI and expounded by Nakash asserted that the failure of Mahdist expansion and the impact of the 1306 famine had triggered a shift in the Khalīfa's outlook on foreign trade in late 1889 (early 1307), leading him to adopt a more conciliatory and proactive attitude. This would have resulted in the dispatch of emissaries in early 1890 (mid-1307)—Muḥammad Khālīd Zuqāl to Dunqulā and 'Alī Sa'd Farah to Barbar—tasked with implementing the Khalīfa's new directive: encourage the resumption of trade by offering guarantees to foreign traders and securing trade routes<sup>332</sup>.

The issue with this narrative is twofold. Firstly, it emphasises the role of central government and particularly of the Khalīfa in defining the regime's approach toward trade. As for the formation and later evolution of the Mahdist administrative apparatus, it fails to acknowledge the role of provincial authorities in informing and shaping these policies. Secondly, it overestimates the role of circumstantial factors, military defeats and the collapse of grain supplies, in inducing economic and political change. As shall be observed in the following section, a close analysis of events in Eastern Sudan brings significant nuances to this deterministic interpretation, in line with al-Qaddāl's pioneering reassessment of the classical chronology.

The sections below will endeavour to reconstitute the trade policies' evolutions and implementations, not by opposing Anglo-Egyptian and Mahdist perspectives, but, on the contrary, by weaving them together.

#### *i) Mahdist Isolationism: A Wavering Policy (1883-1886)*

Muḥammad Aḥmad had little time to formulate policies with regard to foreign trade before

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332 Yitzhak NAKASH, "Reflections on a Subsistence Economy: Production and Trade of the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898," *op. cit.*, p. 52–53. Nakash founded this analysis on the publications of the DMI: the *General Military Report on the Egyptian Sudan* (1891), the *General Report on the Egyptian Sudan* (1895), and Na'ūm Shuqayr's *Tārīkh al-Sūdān al-qadīm wa al-ḥadīth wa juḡhrāfiyyat-hu* (1903).

his untimely death. From 1883 to 1885 (1300-1302), it may not have mattered so much since trade routes were disrupted and most of Nilotic Sudan in a state of turmoil, to the extent that commerce had almost completely stopped. Nonetheless, it is telling as to the importance of the Barbar-Sawākin road for Sudanese trade that one of the very few observations by the Mahdī on the subject was meant for Sawākin's traders. His core policy was grounded on the need to set "a distinct barrier between *dar al-Islam* [...] and *dar al-harb*", in an attempt to insulate Mahdist territory from external contamination, and so he demanded that the Sawākiniyya leave the Red Sea port to distance themselves from the Turks. Yet, in July 1884 (Ramaḍān 1301), he guaranteed them that should they do so, they would receive his *amān* and be allowed to pursue their activities<sup>333</sup>. While Abū Salīm and Nakash<sup>334</sup> construed that proclamation as an indication of the Mahdī's isolationist stance, the text of the letter is much more ambiguous than they made it out to be and rather than an explicit prohibition of foreign trade, it alluded to the risks of moral corruption brought by contacts with unbelievers, a category that included the "Turks" as well as all deniers of the Mahdī's revelation. Therefore, this text allowed for the redeployment of trade within the Mahdiyya's sphere. It also echoed, on the Mahdī's part, a certain form of pragmatism which he had displayed on other occasions.

The Khalīfa's approach presented the same ambiguities. His stance was marked by a degree of hostility toward the trading milieu, and he upheld the Mahdī's principle of a strict isolation of the Mahdiyya's territory from the corrupting influence of the outer world. In that respect, the Khalīfa was particularly concerned by the information that merchants who crossed its borders could communicate to the regime's enemies. In line with British depictions of the Mahdist ruler as uncouth and ignorant of anything beyond the confines of Nilotic Sudan, Holt ascribed this attitude to indifference, while Nakash suggested that it may have resulted from 'Abdullāhi's greater distance with the *jallāba* who mostly arose from riverine communities like the Ja'aliyīn or the Danāqla<sup>335</sup>.

Relative indifference also dominated early British perspectives on the matter. From 1883 to 1885 (1300-1302), at the height of the conflict that pitted Mahdist supporters to Anglo-Egyptian forces, trade in Eastern Sudan was not considered an influential factor in the control of the region, and military sources do not mention any specific measures to limit it. In any case, the disruption of trade routes mentioned above had brought commerce to a halt. However, the decision to abandon

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333 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 371 ; Yitzhak NAKASH, "Reflections on a Subsistence Economy: Production and Trade of the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898," *op. cit.*, p. 52.

334 Nakash himself did not have access to the text of the proclamation and so relied upon on Abū Salīm's outline of the text presented in the *Murshīd* (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Al-murshid ilā wathā'iq al-Mahdī*, Khartoum, Dār al-wathā'iq al-markazīya, 1969, p. 175).

335 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 255 ; Yitzhak NAKASH, "Reflections on a Subsistence Economy: Production and Trade of the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898," *op. cit.*, p. 52.

Nilotic Sudan on 21 April 1885 (6 Rajab 1302) radically changed this. The question of whether Sawākin and the coastal markets should be opened for trade became the central dimension in the debate on the long-term strategy to be adopted towards Eastern Sudan. Those who advocated a free-trade policy benefited from an ideological tradition deeply rooted in the United Kingdom, and which became eminently popular after the rejection of the Corn Laws in 1846. The works of Adam Smith (1723-1790) and David Ricardo (1772-1823) underlined the economic inefficiency of protectionist policies and the error of considering, as mercantilism's supporters did, that trade was a zero-sum game. This perspective was later expounded by Richard Cobden (1804-1865) who defended the idea that free-trade—"God's diplomacy" as he dubbed it—would favour peaceful relations among the nations. Although regularly challenged during the first half of the nineteenth century, these economic theories were gradually adopted by the British political class as a whole, and by the 1880s the benefits of a free trade policy had been widely accepted<sup>336</sup>.

Advocates of the resumption of trade in Eastern Sudan put forward a simple argument. They considered that Mahdist power's main vulnerability was the fraught relationship it entertained with Bijāwī communities. Whatever the griefs the latter may have entertained against the former Egyptian colonial regime, it was in British interest to resume trade relations so as to gradually undermine the links between these groups and 'Uthmān Dīqna and bring the collapse of Mahdist influence in the region. According to them, the first objective of Sawākin's Governor-General should be the complete opening up of trade and the resumption of trade on the Sawākin-Berber road since it crossed the territories of the three main Bijāwī tribal groups—the Hadanduwa, the Ammār'ar and the Bishārīn—and would contribute to driving a wedge between them and Mahdist authorities by interesting them in the perpetuation of trade with Sawākin<sup>337</sup>.

And yet, once Lt.-General Graham's operations had ended and his expeditionary corps pulled from Sawākin, the first reports from British authorities in the Red Sea port highlighted the need to establish a blockade on Eastern Sudan. In August 1885 (D. al-Qa' da 1305), Consul Douglas A. Cameron (b. 1856) asserted that "the maintenance of a strict blockade of the coast [is] now the only means of reducing the tribes to submission<sup>338</sup>". Two months later, instructions to this effect were sent to the commander of the naval forces at Sawākin and all the coastal markets were closed.

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336 Peter CAIN, "Capitalism, War and Internationalism in the Thought of Richard Cobden," *British Journal of International Studies*, 1979, vol. 5, no. 3, p. 240 ; Patrick J. MCDONALD, "Peace Through Trade or Free Trade?," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2004, vol. 48, no. 4, p. 551.

337 This interpretation was formulated early on, before the end of British military operations in Eastern Sudan. Indeed, on 22 April 1885, Lt.-General Gerald Graham wrote to General Garnet Wolseley that "[the Ammār'ar] know that any kind of settlement will open out to them the sources of profit which they may have been able to draw upon when the caravans passed along the route carrying the Commerce of the Soudan." (BNA FO 32/6127).

338 BNA FO 881/5700, "Memorandum on Events and Negotiations in connection with the Retention of Suakin since 1883", 1888, p. 12.

Military considerations had prevailed. Indeed, while a free-trade policy garnered the support of most civilian figures like British administrators and traders, military authorities in Sawākin were much more doubtful as to its efficiency. Some officers firmly believed that opening up trade would primarily benefit and strengthen Mahdist power. According to them, the control by Mahdist troops of the two main trade routes in Eastern Sudan—from Sawākin to Barbar and Kasalā—would enable them to levy taxes and use these revenues to pay for imports, including that of necessary staples like *dhura*. Convinced of the Bijāwī tribes' dependency on outside food supplies, they feared that policy would only further their dependency on the Mahdist provincial power. Conversely, concentrating all the trade in Sawākin was supposed to have the opposite effect<sup>339</sup>. As long as they were unable to ensure that trade would benefit directly and solely to tribes deemed friendly to the “government”, caution prevailed. Even Evelyn Baring, the Consul-General of Egypt (1883-1907) and future Lord Cromer, failed to obtain a loosening of trade restrictions. In April 1886 (Rajab 1303), he had written to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs that “there is a general agreement of opinion among those who are able to speak with authority that some steps should be taken to open out trade in the Eastern Soudan” and added that instructions in that sense should be given to the newly appointed Governor-General of the Red Sea, Major Watson Pasha, but no measures were adopted<sup>340</sup>.

*ii) Trade and Power in Eastern Sudan (1886-1888)*

Less than two months later, the first signs of rebellion against Mahdist authority by some Ammār'ar and Hadanduwa communities radically altered the perception of the military balance in the region<sup>341</sup>. In June 1886 (Ramaḍān 1303), the coastal market of Shaykh Barghūth near al-Malaḥa was opened as a reward for the Ammār'ar victory over Muḥammad Ādam Sa'adūn<sup>342</sup>, introducing a new dynamic into the relations between the Sawākin authorities and the Bijāwī tribes. With the significant weakening of the influence of Mahdist power in the region caused by the successes of the rebellion, a complete opening up of trade was once again considered by the military authorities, who felt that, this time, it would mainly benefit the rebel tribes. In October 1886 (Muḥarram 1304), two other markets were opened in the southern part of the Red Sea littoral, in “Rarat [near *marsā* Taklai] and Mersa Mubark [*marsā* Ambārak/Mubārak]”, in a sign of support to the Banī 'Āmir and Ḥabāb communities, while the market in Aqīq remained closed for fear that it would supply the Mahdist troops who had taken refuge in Tūkar and were then gradually being surrounded (see fig. 4.9)<sup>343</sup>.

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339 BNA FO 633/56, telegram no. 31, Mr. Egerton to the Marquis of Salisbury, August 25 1885.

340 BNA FO 633/56, telegram no. 79, Sir E. Baring to the Earl of Rosebery, April 22 1886.

341 See chapter 2.

342 BNA FO 633/57, telegram no. 30, Sir H. Drummond Wolf to the Earl of Rosebery, 9 June 1886.

343 BNA FO 633/57, telegram no. 148, Sir H. Drummond Wolf to the Earl of Iddesleigh, 20 October 1886.

Whereas the initial resumption of local trade circulations had been ordered by Major Watson, the opening of the southern harbours was decided by his successor, Colonel Kitchener, who had been appointed governor-general in Sawākin in September 1886 (D. al-Hijja 1303). As most of his peers, he deemed restrictions on trade flows necessary but was more skeptical than others about assurances that only tribes deemed favourable to the Egyptian government would benefit from reestablishing connections with these small harbours. He was also the most vocal opponent to the opening of Sawākin's gates. And yet, he pursued that policy by opening trade north of the Sawākin-Berber road in April 1887 (Rajab 1304)<sup>344</sup>, and in October 1887 (Muḥarram-Şafar 1305) the whole of Eastern Sudan was declared open<sup>345</sup>. By his own admission, he had caved before higher authorities, particularly Baring who had lobbied for the adoption of this policy, as well as from the pressure of public opinion<sup>346</sup>.

Indeed, some private interests had been actively campaigning against trade restrictions<sup>347</sup>. In January 1886 (Rabī' II 1306), Francis W. Fox organised a meeting in Manchester to discuss the foundation of a "Chartered Company for the Soudan<sup>348</sup>", a project he had already presented to the Foreign Office. But the latter turned it down in March and again in December. Fox refused to give up and subsequently travelled to Cairo in April 1887 (Rajab 1304) in the hope that he could circumvent the Foreign Office's hesitations and find a more propitious welcome with the British Consul-General. He was wrong. Baring may have defended a more conciliatory policy toward trade, but he was very weary of engaging his administration's financial responsibility in support of a risky and, in his mind, ill-devised venture<sup>349</sup>. At the same time, another investor named Augustus B. Wylde was also actively pressuring the Foreign Office to allow for the opening of "tribal ports<sup>350</sup>".

344 BNA FO 633/58, telegram no. 68, Sir E. Baring to the Marquis of Salisbury, 26 April 1887.

345 BNA FO 633/58, telegram no. 11, Sir E. Baring to the Marquis of Salisbury, 12 October 1887.

346 This was noted by an article from the *Times*: "People in England got scent of these negotiations, clamoured for an immediate re-opening of trade, and forced his hand" (*The Times*, "The Trade at Suakin", 25 May 1888).

347 Most of what follows is based on Steven Serels' insightful account of the formation of Sudan Trade Company (STC) (Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State, op. cit.*, p. 62–66).

348 *The Manchester Guardian*, « Editorial », 22 January 1886. Baring described the project in those terms: "An English Company is to be established which shall become entirely responsible for the government of the Eastern Soudan. It is to bear all the expenses of the government, and at the same time to collect all the revenues. Control over the interior is to be exercised, not by European agents, but by employing the agency of tribal Chiefs. The construction of a railway from Suakin to Berber constitutes an important element in the project." See BNA FO 881/5700 "Memorandum on Events and Negotiations in connection with the Retention of Suakin since 1883", 1888, p. 55.

349 Fox requested, among other things, that the British government guarantees a minimum return rate on the investments incurred in Eastern Sudan.

350 BNA FO 633/58, correspondence no. 4, Mr. Wylde to the Marquis of Salisbury, 16 February 1887. Wylde's interest for the region and the management of trade was precocious. Already in October 1885, he had written a long letter to Colonel Chermiside on that subject. He suggested that "by giving a new outlet you then commenced on a new footing with the coast tribes and tell them the more they trade the more dollars they make and the more they make for transport the richer they will become. This will draw them again to commerce which means to them partial civilisation, the richer they become the more chance they will be of having anything more to do with the dervishes and you will enlist on your side all those who in former years have benefited by being carriers & by trading not only those [illegible] in the neighborhood but along the old caravan routes" (NRO CairInt 1/09/40, Augustus B. Wylde to Col. Chermiside, 1<sup>st</sup> October 1885). His peremptory and condescending tone may have been the first cause



In May 1888 (Sha‘bān/Ramaḍān 1305), as their efforts had proved unfruitful, they united their forces to present to the Foreign Office three resolutions in which they demanded the lifting of all restrictions on trade in Eastern Sudan and the support of Sawākin’s authorities, to what British diplomats answered that they were not aware of any limitations on trade in the region<sup>351</sup>. Unconvinced, the two traders attempted to mobilise some public support by conducting a press campaign<sup>352</sup> in which they showed themselves increasingly critical with Kitchener’s action, up to the point where the latter banned Wylde from staying in Sawākin<sup>353</sup>. Indeed, in one of the letters published by *The Manchester Guardian*, Wylde had written that “since 1884 I have been telling the military authorities and those responsible for the muddle at Suakim that they have been doing wrong. [...] The military have had their try and failed, give the merchant a chance, and he will settle the question”. But Wylde and Fox failed to garner support for their trading company. The profits they expected to realise through the development of cotton cultivation in the Tūkar Delta were conditioned to the betterment of security in the region, namely the withdrawal of Mahdist influence, and the two traders were accused of naivety. The economic rationale they were putting forward was undermined by military considerations and their project did not materialise, however they had made a total blockade of Eastern Sudan’s littoral much more complex to defend.

This period was characterised by two elements. Firstly, it is important to underline the British government's many hesitations about the future of the Sawākin garrison. After the second Anglo-Egyptian expedition, Sir J. Drummond Wolff began negotiations with the Sublime Porte to establish the conditions for a return of Sawākin under Ottoman rule. After much prevarication, due in particular to the Porte's fear of seeing the United Kingdom conquer Nilotic Sudan from Sawākin, the project was finally abandoned, as the Ottoman government was unable to guarantee that it would maintain this position in the long term<sup>354</sup>. The question of funding the troops stationed in East Sudan was also problematic. Faced with the Egyptian government's refusal (and inability) to meet these expenses, the British government agreed to assume responsibility for them on a temporary basis. Secondly, the Ammār’ar rebellion seems to have played a major role in the reconsideration of the opening of trade in Eastern Sudan. The gradual evolution of the Sawākin authorities' trade

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for the strong dislike he caused among certain British officers, including Kitchener.

351 BNA FO 881/5700, “Memorandum on Events and Negotiations in connection with the Retention of Suakin since 1883”, 1888, p. 32.

352 A. B. Wylde had already published an account of his time in Sawākin in 1888 (*'83 to '87 in the Soudan, with an Account of Sir William Hewett's Mission to King John of Abyssinia, op. cit.*). In November of the same year, he sent two letters to *The Manchester Guardian* entitled “The true policy in the East Africa” that were published on 19 November 1888.

353 This proscription was brought to the attention of the House of Commons. *The Manchester Guardian*, “Imperial Parliament”, 18 December 1888.

354 BNA FO 881/5700, “Memorandum on Events and Negotiations in connection with the Retention of Suakin since 1883”, 1888.

policy was directly influenced by these two factors, a situation marked by a lack of long-term strategy, and the weakening of ‘Uthmān Dīqna's power in the region.

This last point is crucial to understand the shift initiated by the Khalīfa. Confronted with the nefarious effects of the reopening of trade on Mahdist control over Eastern Sudan, he decided in May 1887 (Sh‘abān 1304)—a month after the opening of the territories north of the Sawākin-Barbar route—to ban foreign traders from Nilotic Sudan “until your country has entered under the government of the Mahdia and been snatched out of the hands of the infidels<sup>355</sup>”. He gave other explanations for this including the role of merchants in the taking out of Mahdist-minted coins and the smuggling of male slaves, and elaborated on the Mahdī’s condemnation of close contacts with miscreants by denouncing contacts between “the people from the rule of infidels (*ḥukm al-kafara*) and those from the rule of the Mahdiyya (*ḥukm al-Mahdiyya*)”. This was not, however, a blanket condemnation of all trade activities. Barely a month later, he wrote to al-Nūr Ibrāhīm al-Jirayfāwī, the *amīn* of Barbar’s treasury, to scold him for his zeal. He reminded him that only the property of the “people of the forts, Christian traders and Turks (*ahālī al-qaqarāt wa tujjār al-naṣāra wa al-Turk [sic]*)” were meant to be seized. As for the others, his orders stipulated that they should be driven back to Egypt, not see half their goods confiscated, “because as long as you take anything from them, [...] they will accuse the Mahdiyya of injustice (*sayansabū li-l-Mahdiyya al-zulm*)”. The Khalīfa may have been suspicious of traders, particularly foreigners, but he was not unaware of their importance. If Mahdist territory must be free from Western Christians and “Turks”, Muslim traders were handled with attention so as to not compromise all future potential relations<sup>356</sup>. These ambivalent and belated measures to put an end to foreign presence in Nilotic Sudan were expanded soon after. A month after the opening of the whole of Eastern Sudan to trade, in early November 1887 (late Ṣafar 1305), the Khalīfa ordered the closing down of all trade relations with Sawākin, Maṣawwa‘ and the whole of the Red Sea littoral. ‘Uthmān Dīqna was instructed to seize as loot all the goods of the traders who would contravene this order<sup>357</sup>.

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355 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 255–256. cited in Yitzhak NAKASH, “Reflections on a Subsistence Economy: Production and Trade of the Mahdist Sudan, 1881–1898,” *op. cit.*, p. 52. The exact date of this proclamation is unknown but for the year, 1304 (1886/7), but in all likelihood it was published at the same time authorities in Barbar were given instructions for its implementation, as shown below.

356 Muḥammad Sa‘īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 116–118.

357 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 20. This measure was implemented with some flexibility. In a letter to the Khalīfa from early 1888 (mi-1305), ‘Uthmān Dīqna confirmed being aware of the proclamation stipulating that all communications with “Eastern populations (*ahālī sharqīyya*)” were prohibited, including for economic relations. However, the Mahdist leader favoured clemency and he ordered the merchant who had violated the Khalīfa’s instruction, a man named Aḥmad al-Ṣabbāgh, to be released from prison. This merchant claimed that the goods found under his name in Kasalā had been purchased in Maṣawwa‘ before the Khalīfa’s edict had been made public. The *‘āmil* reckoned that some pedagogy was still necessary. His goods were returned to him but he was reminded that this could not happen again. If he did, all would be seized and considered as loot. See NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56B, document no. 22B.

iii) *Trading for Peace (1888-1890)*

This second phase came to an abrupt end at the turn of 1887 (Rabī' I-Jumādā I 1305) when the Mahdist *'āmil* returned from Kasalā, preceded, a few months prior, by his brother Mūsā Diqna. A series of punitive raids were launched against the rebellious communities and by January 1888 (Rabī' II) the situation was radically transformed: Mahdist power, which British military authorities considered to be on the verge of collapse, once again affirmed its control over the whole of Eastern Sudan<sup>358</sup>. The occupation of Handūb and more generally the area around Sawākin by Mahdist troops led to the complete closure of trade<sup>359</sup>. Surprisingly, however, this reversal of the military situation had no impact on the policy of opening up trade in the Sawākin region, and according to Lord Salisbury, by March 1888 (Jumādā II-Rajab 1305), all restrictions had been lifted<sup>360</sup>, in line with the recommendations made by Consul Cameron and the Consul-General Baring<sup>361</sup>. Civilian authorities had finally prevailed over the War Office's reluctance and impuled a major shift with regard to Anglo-Egyptian trade policies. The resumption of trade had been initially justified by the need to support groups opposed to Mahdist rule, considering that the greater the benefits the former accrued from commerce, the larger the rift between them and provincial authorities. But after the defeat of Maḥmūd 'Alī and most of the rebellious groups in January 1888, it could not be doubted that the Mahdists would be the primary beneficiaries of the resumption of trade, but the dominant opinion was that this strategy would lead to the pacification of the region and the relations with the *anṣār*. In the meantime, Kitchener, wounded in the jaw by a bullet during his reckless raid against Handūb on 17 January 1888 (3 Jumādā I 1305), went on leave to Cairo, only to return to Sawākin in November 1888 (Rabī' I 1306). His absence was instrumental to this evolution. Support and opposition to the liberalisation of exchanges in Eastern Sudan pitted against each other two distinct rationales. On the one hand, Baring and most civilian administrators sought the internal pacification of Nilotic Sudan and an end to Mahdist incursions through Egypt's southern border. They believed that Eastern Sudan's experience would lead to larger changes and, in the long term, would favour the appeasement of Mahdist Sudan's relations with its neighbours, maybe even its normalisation. Their main concerns were budgetary. Insecurity on its southern border had a cost for the Egyptian government, and the free-trade policy appeared as the cheapest way to reduce its military expenditures. On the other hand, officers stationed in Sawākin believed the Mahdist power incapable of such evolution and endeavoured to obtain its demise in Eastern Sudan which could

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358 See chapter 2.

359 *The Times*, "Trade at Suakin", 24 May 1888.

360 *The Manchester Guardian*, "Imperial Parliament", 17 March 1888.

361 BNA FO 633/58, telegram no. 53, Sir E. Baring to the Marquis of Salisbury, 14 March 1888, and *The Manchester Guardian*, "Commercial and Financial Notes", 23 March 1888.

then serve as a bridgehead to reach the Nile. They were careful enough not to publicise it, but an embargo on the Sudanese Red Sea littoral only made sense in the perspective of a future occupation of the land. In that respect, Kitchener had tied his career to the Mahdist question and his prospects depended heavily on future military operations in the region. Normalisation did not serve his interests.

As for the Khalīfa, the end of the Bijāwī civil war did not prompt him to alter his trade policies. But in the summer 1888 (late 1305), some traders from Sawākin, some from riverine communities and some others from Bijāwī groups, had come to Barbar with goods to sale. They had gone to sell slaves to the inlets of the Sudanese Red Sea littoral, but also, according to al-Jirayfāwī, the secretary of the central treasury, to Sawākin and some, seemingly, to Jidda. They had just returned with goods bought with the profits accrued from this trade. As the Khalīfa faced this new development, he asked ‘Uthmān Diqna to give him details as to the commodities that were brought to the Nile Valley, the people who were involved in this trade, and whether he thought that this was in the interest of the movement. Despite his declared commitment to ban commercial relations with the outer world, the Khalīfa’s position was more equivocal than expected, especially since the Eastern Sudan’s *‘āmil* stressed that the situation was more complex than was initially assumed by his counterpart in Barbar. Indeed, he distinguished three groups responsible for this revival of trade in the region. The individuals who had arrived in Barbar claiming to belong to the Sawākiniyya had in fact exited the Red Sea port with a few commodities (*amti ‘ā*) which they were authorised to keep. Those who had just a few items with them and on which the *‘ushr* would not exceed 20 r. were allowed to sell directly in the Mahdist camp of Handūb. Others were sent to the market in Sinkāt, while those who had larger quantities of goods were permitted to go on to Barbar. All of them, according to the *‘āmil*, had paid the *‘ushr* and the *zakawāt*. The second group was more heterogeneous and probably not as significant. They were men, some summoned, some others responsible for protecting the post, who had come to Handūb to take advantage of their journey to realise a small profit by selling four or five slaves whom they had brought along (and whom had probably been entrusted to them rather than being their personal property). ‘Uthmān Diqna saw no harm in this and allowed it. As for the Bijāwī groups, ‘Uthmān Diqna claimed not to be aware of their activities since the slave trade was forbidden in Sawākin and outside Mahdist camps. But he was not overly surprised by that, as some contraband was already taking place before his return to Eastern Sudan in late 1887 (early 1305)<sup>362</sup>. In the same letter, ‘Uthmān Diqna mentioned the

362 Consul Cameron had made the same observation. He wrote in the consular report for 1887 that “[e]ven while trade was officially supposed to be vigorously closed, a great deal of cloth, sugar, grain, &c., was taken out of the town [Sawākin] by friendly Arabs. Traders also smuggled their goods out, and made successful ventures to Berber.” See HCPP “Reports from H.M. Diplomatic and Consular Officers Abroad on Trade and Finance”, Egypt. Suakin no. 82, 8 February 1888.

existence of some residual local trade, from “those who walk”, probably meaning who do not possess camels for transport, he considered confiscating their goods since they had revealed their lingering attachment to worldly possessions, in direct contradiction with the Mahdī’s teachings, but there too, he had decided to show some flexibility and not sanction this practice, mainly out of fear that this would create unnecessary resentment from the local communities<sup>363</sup>.

Despite the official ban on trade circulations on the Red Sea littoral, the *‘āmil* had decided on his own to authorise small trade to go on, while traders from Sawākin were granted permits to sell their goods to Barbar, on the ground that their departure from Sawākin was definitive, a justification he must have known to be flimsy. But the Khalīfa did not condemn his actions and seemed satisfied of the details he had obtained. Moreover, around October 1888 (early 1306), he ordered ‘Uthmān Diqna to let goods from other areas of the Mahdiyya pass free, while those coming from the outside should be confiscated. He added that he *‘āmil* could decide whether he wished to seize the goods from Ḥabāb country<sup>364</sup>. This did not amount to a complete opening of trade, but indicates a shift toward a more flexible approach to trade relations that echoed his statements issued the previous year with regard to trade in Barbar.

In Sawākin, despite the failure of the local movement of opposition to Mahdist rule, the gates of the town had been kept open. But in September 1888 (Muḥarram 1306), when most of the coastal markets and Sawākin were open, Mahdist authorities decided to ramp up their siege of the Anglo-Egyptian garrison. These military operations, which lasted from 17 September to 20 December (10 Muḥarram-16 Rabī‘ II), put an end to already moribund trade circulations<sup>365</sup>. This could have sealed the fate of free trade in Eastern Sudan and vindicated British officers’ anxieties toward the efficiency of this policy. Yet, in February 1889 (Jumādā II 1306), Colonel Holled Smith, the acting governor-general of the Red Sea littoral who had replaced Kitchener in March 1888 (Jumādā I-II 1305), received instructions from General Grenfell to, once again, open the gates of Sawākin to merchants<sup>366</sup>. This initiated a new phase during which the British trade policy became much more reactive to the evolution of circumstances. Holled Smith complied to Grenfell’s orders and the gates of Sawākin were opened the same month. However, they were closed again in

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363 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 85.

364 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix III, letter 219, p. 176-177.

365 This was summed with great clarity by Acting-Consul Henry J. May (1853-1904), Cameron’s successor, who described the situation in these terms: “Suakin was not regularly besieged, but up to the middle of April there was scarcely any trade, the marauding parties of the Dervishes hovering round the town cutting off stragglers and lifting cattle. As the summer advanced the country quieted down, and an increasing trade was carried on. However, early in September, in accordance with orders from the Khalifa at Khartoum, all trade was stopped, the goods in course of transit were seized, and from that time to the defeat of the Dervishes on December 20 the town was closely blockaded, and all external trade entirely ceased.” (HCPP “Reports from H.M. Diplomatic and Consular Officers Abroad on Trade and Finance”, Egypt. Suakin no. 562, 24 May 1889).

366 BNA FO 633/59, telegram no. 37, Sir E. Baring to the Marquis of Salisbury, 4 February 1889.

September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307) when it became clear that the last desultory attempt by Hadanduwa and Ammār'ar groups to unite against Mahdist rule would fail<sup>367</sup>. This, however, was not continued and traders were allowed back in Sawākin in November 1889. Trade was temporarily suspended two more times. On 1<sup>st</sup> December 1889 (7 Rabī' II 1307) in response to a raid on the tribes living outside Sawākin, Holled Smith wrote to 'Uthmān Diqna and Abū Qarja that since "I perceive that your intentions are not peaceful, I have closed the harbour of Trinkitat, and unless you give me some guarantee that these things will not happen again, I shall close all the harbours including Akik". A dozen days later, Abū Qarja had conformed to Sawākin's request and ordered "the cessation of raiding in the direction of Suakin<sup>368</sup>." On another instance, trade was again suspended on 17 May 1890 (27 Ramaḍān 1307), in response to an attack on a *dhow* at Jazīrat 'Abd Allāh. The governor-general demanded that reparations be paid to the families of the victims and stipulated that trade relations would be interrupted until his request had been accepted. Faced with a deadlock in the situation, with the Mahdist authorities declaring that they themselves had punished those responsible, the merchants of Sawākin joined forces to raise the money for reparations<sup>369</sup>. This new dynamic affected the military situation in Eastern Sudan. The commitment of these different players to the same economic logic somewhat reduced the level of conflict and established a relatively neutral area of communication. The correspondence exchanged between the Sawākin military authorities and the Mahdist authorities would have been unthinkable even one year before.

Paradoxically, despite the heavy defeat of Mahdist forces on the field of Abū Jummayza, the Khalīfa saw no point in changing his trade policy. Barely two weeks after, in January 1889 (Jumādā I 1306), 'Uthmān Diqna had informed the *amīn* of the treasury in Kasalā that the Ḥijāzī would henceforth be allowed to trade but remained forbidden from exporting slaves "from the Mahdiyya". The initial communication had taken place in mid-December 1888 (early Rabī' II 1306), and still the Khalīfa had not rescinded his command<sup>370</sup>. British intelligence officers believed wrongly that the complete opening of trade had been decided almost a year later, in January 1890 (Jumādā I-II 1307), shortly after the gate had reopened at Sawākin<sup>371</sup>. There are no traces of a direct

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367 BNA FO 633/60, telegram no. 34, Mr. Clarke to The Marquis of Salisbury, 11 September 1889. The effects of this decision of Tūkar's trade appear clearly in the figure 4.11.

368 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 96 (27 November-10 December 1889), Appendices A and C; Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 107 (13-26 May 1890), Summary.

369 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 107 (13-26 May 1890), Summary.

370 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 22, p. 56, and Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, letter 143.

371 DUL SAD Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 98 (24 December-6 January 1890), Summary. In this report, the Bimbashi J. F. M. Prinsep wrote "The principal features of the intelligence of the past fortnight have been the arrival of Ahmed Mahmud at Handub, and the return of Osman Digna from Omdurman. They both have orders to allow trade, and open the routes freely. No reason has been given for this concession ; but, bearing in view the universal reports of famine and want of food, it would seem that the Khalifa and the dervish leaders begin to realise that they cannot continue to disregard the necessity of supplies."

communication from the Khalīfa on that subject in 1889 (1306/7), however his decision to further his support for trade certainly came before that date. In September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307), al-Khamīsī, one of the most active merchants in Tūkar (see above), had informed a colleague in Sawākin that the Khalīfa had given strict instructions that traders should not be interfered with<sup>372</sup>. The delegates in Tūkar were tasked with ensuring that this order be followed. Therefore, they were particularly upset upon hearing in November 1889 (Rabī‘ I 1307) that traders “from the East” who had landed in Adūbana had been prevented from going to Tūkar by the local Mahdist administrators. In their letter to the latter, the delegates emphasised the need to ease trade circulations:

“As long as you know that the objective (*maqṣūd*) is to bring benefit (*maṣlaḥa*) to the treasury and the welfare of the *anṣār*, whether from your [own] hands or without your intercession, you should not hinder [traders] [in Adūbana] with the result that they are annoyed (*tashawwashū*), turn back and leave. So, if you were preventing them before, henceforth, from the arrival of this letter to you, do not prevent anyone who wishes to come here. They are all welcome (*jumla kāfiyya*), may they be people with money (*ahl nuqūd*) or people with goods (*ahl baḍā‘i*)<sup>373</sup>, and assure them of this. Give them our letter for their complete peace of mind (*ṭuma’nīna tamma*) and read this text aloud to all the traders, the retailers (*mutasabbibīn*) and the people of this country, so the security and guarantee is well-known to them<sup>374</sup>”.

The reason why traders had been prevented from proceeding to Tūkar is unclear but may have been caused by a misunderstanding of the treasury’s policies with regard to the slave trade since the merchants who were specifically barred from going to Tūkar had expressly announced that they were looking for slaves. The fact that that group of administrators had little experience may explain their error<sup>375</sup>. As for the delegates, they were not only following the Khalīfa’s directives. They had also been made responsible for the treasury in Tūkar and knew that taxes on goods represented a vital source of revenue. They had to offer some form of guarantee to merchants and prevent abuses. This was part of a larger effort to better monitor these expanding activities. For example, in December 1889 (Rabī‘ II 1307), Ibrāhīm ‘Adlān, the *amīn* of the central treasury, informed ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf that no merchants were to proceed to the north, except those with an authorisation from Umm Durmān<sup>376</sup>. Furthermore, the initial ban on entering Sawākin was reiterated, particularly because Aḥmad b. Maḥmūd ‘Alī was said to tolerate them. On 3 March 1890 (11 Rajab 1307), he was reminded by Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf and one of the *umanā*’ that both the

372 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 90 (1<sup>st</sup>-16 September 1889), Appendix E, p. 9.

373 The meaning of both expressions is unclear, but it probably echoes a distinction between importers and exporters.

374 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 23; and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 35.

375 These administrators are the same as the ones who were firmly reprimanded for not having followed the usual protocol on the despatch of bi-weekly accounts. See chapter 3.

376 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 91, p. 63.

populations and the traders from Barbar and Umm Durmān were forbidden from going directly to the Red Sea port. He was expressly asked to tell the merchants that they must sell their goods in Handūb where they should wait for Sawākin's traders to come to them. If this proved to be impractical and traders had to purchase goods in the town, the Mahdist representative could appoint delegates (*mu`minīn/umanā` mahšūsīn*) who would buy them and take them out. This contributed to strengthening Handūb's position as an independent trade hub<sup>377</sup>. The Mahdists, like the British, instrumentalised commerce and quite particularly the revenues one could accrue by providing the various services required by merchants or through taxation. The position granted to Aḥmad Maḥmūd `Alī aimed at attaching the rebellious Ammār'ar to the regime, at the risk of destabilizing the already fragile economic balance of the region, as when trade circulations moved back north in early 1890 (mid-1307).

The process had been laborious, but in the summer 1890 (D. al-Qa`da-D. al-Ḥijja 1307), some *modus vivendi* seemed to have emerged. Both sides had different reasons to attempt to profit from and instrumentalise trade. Whereas peace was still unreachable, war seemed somewhat more distant. However, unbeknownst to the Mahdist administration, tensions had been brewing within the British military apparatus. An intense internal debate had opposed several officers, including Grenfell, Dormer<sup>378</sup> and Holled Smith from August 1889 to July 1890<sup>379</sup>. In contrast with former discussions, it was almost entirely focused on the matter of grain imports in the new context of the *Sanat Sitta* famine. Different solutions were considered such as a specific ban on grain imports, the implementation of quotas or a strict control over the beneficiaries of this trade, limited to the communities settled in the immediate vicinity of Sawākin. Yet, all these measures entailed their own set of difficulties and no consensus emerged. Unsurprisingly, the resulting situation was nothing short of confused as both sides constantly fluctuated as to the policies they chose to implement.

But in July 1890 (D. al-Qa`da/D. al-Ḥijja 1307), British trade policy in Eastern Sudan underwent a final change. The normalisation of relations between the Sawākin authorities and the Mahdist power, in which trade played a fundamental role, was halted. For the first time, all exports from Sawākin were blocked for a week due to the city's low *dhura* reserves<sup>380</sup>. The Trinkitāt market was closed on 12 August 1890 as well as Sawākin, "as military precautions against cholera<sup>381</sup>". This time, all trade relations were banned for six months and the Red Sea port's gates only reopened in

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377 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, documents no. 14 and 28.

378 General James C. Dormer (1834-1893) was the general commanding officer of the British troops in Egypt from 1888 to 1890.

379 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 187-190.

380 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 113 (22 July-4 August 1890), Covering minutes.

381 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 114 (5-19 August 1890), Covering minutes.



January 1891, albeit only partially<sup>382</sup>. A month later Colonel Hotted Smith captured Tūkar, thus putting an end to Mahdist rule in the region and all restrictions on trade in Eastern Sudan. Was the closure of trade in August 1890 (D. al-Hijja 1307/Muḥarram 1308) decided solely on the basis of health imperatives? If not, what reasons prompted Sawākin authorities to impose this total blockade?

### III. Surviving in a Time of Crisis: The Famine of the Sanat Sitta

As early as May 1884 (Rajab 1301), Colonel Chermiside, the governor-general of the Red Sea since March (Jumādā I), admitted that all his efforts to reach some understanding with the Mahdist forces in Eastern Sudan had been fruitless. He had tried all manners of approaches, sending a great number of letters and messengers, even trying to bribe their leader. He summarised ‘Uthmān Diqna’s response with these words: “Your offers are no good; money will not tempt us. This matter is a religious one. We cannot be your friends. If we cannot turn you out of Suakin, we will hold aloof from you. Short of your killing us, we are irreconcilable. You ask how we can live without your trade. We want but little. We ourselves will cast “dhura” into the ground of Tokar and the gash [Qāsh] [...]; that and our flocks will feed us.” Chermiside concluded that before such antagonistic position, “time or force can [...] alone operate any change<sup>383</sup>.”

The *anṣār* had indeed few needs, in line with Muḥammad Aḥmad’s message enjoining the relinquishment of worldly possessions. During his brief sojourn in ‘Uthmān Diqna’s camp in late January 1884 (Rabī‘ I 1301), Guido Levi had had a taste of this Mahdist austerity. Three times a day he was given "a bowl of polenta made from crushed dourah [*dhura*], dirty water and a little sour milk – the usual fare for the men of Dekna [Diqna]. Sometimes there was no flour, so the grain was boiled and eaten without salt.” Some milk was also brought to the camp from the neighbouring hills every morning, and in the two weeks of his stay, he received meat on three occasions: once camel and twice mutton. Every so often, small caravans would carry bags of *dhura* from the Baraka Delta to feed the 2 000 men settled in Tamāy<sup>384</sup>.

The British military drew several lessons from their initial interaction with Mahdism during the 1884-1885 campaigns in Eastern Sudan. They understood that commercial interests could be instrumentalised to insert a wedge between the Bijāwī populations and ‘Uthmān Diqna and reward loyal communities. This policy was debated and challenged but it remained the core tactic of the Anglo-Egyptian authorities in Sawākin between 1885 and 1890 (1302-1307). However, several

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382 *The Manchester Guardian*, “Affairs at Suakim”, 2 January 1891.

383 BNA FO 653/53, correspondence no. 177, Lt.-Colonel Chermiside to General Wood, Suakin, 18 May 1884.

384 Guido LEVI, *Osman Dekna, chez lui, op. cit.*, p. 30.

officers were quite convinced that if it could weaken Mahdist influence, it was illusory to believe that any trade policy could actually bring the millenarian movement to submit, or make its normalisation possible. Time had passed and little progress could be observed. Could force be the only alternative? In that respect, the extremely contrasted distribution of resources in this territory had been noted by the same officers who wondered, very early on, whether the only way to rid the region around Sawākin of Mahdist presence was to take control of the few spots where they could cultivate *dhura*.

The first section below will tackle the question of the characteristics of this dependency and how the Mahdists used Tūkar's territory to meet their needs. The second section will attempt to uncover the mechanisms behind the famine of 1889-1890. British authorities in Sawākin seized the opportunity of the dramatic weakening of Mahdist power to crush it definitely by imposing a strict blockade on grain, as will be shown in the third section. Finally, the last section will be dedicated to the consequences of these two years of intense food crisis.

### ***A) Sources of Grain***

There were essentially two ways for Mahdist authorities to procure grain it could then distribute to the *anṣār* and their families: through agriculture or through trade and transfers from other regions. Transportation, an oft overlooked dimension of the question of food supplies, was also very much a crucial matter.

#### *i) Reaping Dhura*

The British had been quick to recognise the strategic character of the grain-producing regions. In May 1885 (Rajab/Shā'abān 1302), Colonel Chermside had already noted that "the alluvial delta near Tokar, and the upper parts of the Khor Barka [*khūr* Baraka] and river Gash [Qāsh] valleys, near Kassala, may be considered, as regards supplies, the keys of the Hadendowa country<sup>385</sup>." The same was true of the Mahdists and this had driven their choice to settle in Tūkar after the failure of Sawākin's siege in December 1888 (Rabī' II 1306). The Mahdists were well aware of its importance: contrary to all their other positions like Tamāy, Handūb, Arkawīt, or Sinkāt, they maintained a direct control over Tūkar throughout the period, with the exception of a single day, on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1884 (3 Jumādā I 1301), when the position was briefly occupied by general Graham's troops during the first campaign in Eastern Sudan. Lacking a long-term plan to stabilise their presence, they had retreated the following day. The next time British troops had entered the place six years later brought the end of the Mahdist regime in Eastern Sudan.

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385 BNA FO 32/6127, Lt.-Colonel Chermside, "Memorandum for Lieut.-General. Graham", Suakin, 20 April 1885.

Food supply was obviously crucial to support large numbers of combatants. Since 1885 (1302/3) onwards, they were effectively in control of the two main zones of cultivation in Eastern Sudan mentioned by Colonel Chermiside. The extent to which cultivation in the Tūkar Delta was organised by the Mahdist authorities is difficult to assess, not because of a lack of documentation, as is the case for the Qāsh, but because sources, otherwise abundant, are quite allusive. There are no records that directly state the Mahdist policy with regard to cultivation in both deltas. As a result, it can only be inferred from fiscal records and a few mentions in the correspondence, almost entirely from 1888 to 1890 (1306-1308).

In accordance with Mahdist tropism toward close supervision of all administrative functions, each grain deposit was recorded alongside the reference to the initial authorisation that led to this levy, the identity of the individuals who gathered the grain and that of those to whom they answered, as well as the origin of the grain. This was the underlying principle, but it was realised inconsistently. This was not so much a failure from the administration itself, but rather a reflection of the complexity of the network on which it rested. Indeed, the records reveal several intertwined layers.

Details on the Mahdist supervision over cultivation in the Baraka Delta are hazy at best. Before 1888 (1305/6), British authorities in Sawākin allusively noted that “the Hadendowas exact heavy tithes from the crops of the labouring tribes (Ashraf, Artega, and others)<sup>386</sup>.” There is some indication that the original division of plots of land in the Baraka Delta occurred in late 1888 (early-1306), at the same time that the overhaul of the Tūkar treasury under the authoritative hand of its new secretary, ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr<sup>387</sup>. On this occasion, fields were delineated and distributed between the main *umarā*’ whose names appear time and time again in the records. The owners petitioned the *amīn* in early January 1889 (Jumādā I 1306), but refused the compromise that was presented to them. Unfortunately, no detail is given in the letter as to its nature. ‘Abd Allāh insisted that they had been given a share of the said fields, but he was told by ‘Uthmān Diqna to send them to him (he was then still in Handūb) and warned his first administrator, somewhat hypocritically, against abuses of power (*tafrīt*)<sup>388</sup>. Since it would have been strange to wait to challenge this policy, in all probability, this was indeed the first year when the Mahdist administration assumed direct control over the delta. This appropriation was not as disruptive of landownership rights as might be assumed since the yearly flood erased all limits<sup>389</sup>.

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386 BNA FO 633/58, correspondence no. 106, Mr. Portal to the Marquis of Salisbury, 13 August 1887.

387 See chapter 3.

388 NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56B, document no. 21.

389 NRO CairInt 3/02/43, W. E. Garstin, “Note on the Tokar District & Irrigation effected from the Khor Baraka”, 31 December 1891. Wylde instrumentalised the food crisis of 1889-1890 (1306-1308) to further the interests of the Sudan Trade Company. He offered assistance against the signing of 21-year leases on land in the Tūkar Delta. By

This policy was resumed for the next season. In September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307)—after the transfer of the Mahdist provincial headquarters from Handūb to Afāfīt had been completed—Mahdist control over the lands surrounding Tūkar expanded, in relation with the growing needs caused by the arrival of *anṣār* from the west. According to the DMI, ‘Uthmān Dīqna had asked the Artayqa to relinquish two-thirds of the Tūkar land to the Baqqāra<sup>390</sup>. Tensions prompted by this confiscation quickly arose. A man named Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, a native of Tūkar, confided to Intelligence officers that if “some of the inhabitants are cultivating, [...] many will not do so on account of the Baggaras<sup>391</sup>.” Some of the grain came directly from the fields that had been assigned to them, and they may have toiled the land themselves, as was the case after 1891 (1308/9) for those settled near Adāramā, but it is not certain<sup>392</sup>. Others, like the *amīr* Muḥammad Aḥmad Shaykh Idrīs asked ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr that he designate a piece of land for his slaves to cultivate<sup>393</sup>, but this was not common, mainly because cultivation in this area, as in the Qāsh, did not rely on a servile workforce, contrary to most of the Upper Nile Valley. As a result, slaves were just not numerous enough to replace local workers, quite particularly because the vast majority of the slaves present were women, due to the real restrictions imposed by the Mahdist regime on the commerce of male slaves (see above). In December 1888 (Rabī‘ II 1306), ‘Uthmān Dīqna who was then still in Handūb, sent ten horses and a few men to plough the fields<sup>394</sup>. There was little more the Mahdist administration could do.

In spite of the Mahdist takeover, former logics of ownership were not completely erased. On the contrary, the names of the main communities present in the vicinity are often mentioned. They were structured by a network of *madaqqāt*<sup>395</sup> (sing. *maddaqa*)—probably a form of “mill” where *dhura* was ground—that could depend on an individual or a community. Old claims were not abandoned: records indicate the predominance of the Artayqa in the area<sup>396</sup>. Only a handful of

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1891 (1308/9), he boasted more than 10 000 signed contacts. British authorities who soon after declared all the area was government land had misgivings about the validity of the contracts, wondering whether “the natives with whom the Company says it entered into contracts are really capable of contracting, or whether its agents [of the STC] know where the properties mentioned in them are” (Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State, op. cit.*, p. 78–79; 87–88). It was, at the very least, highly unlikely that several thousands of individuals could claim property rights on land in the delta.

390 On Artayqa claims of ownership over the Baraka Delta, see chapter 1.

391 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 88 (7-15 August 1889), Appendix A and Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 91 (17-30 September 1889), Appendix A.

392 Settled on the ‘Aṭbara, the *anṣār* who had relocated from Tūkar were swiftly put to work. Seeds were distributed to them and by October 1891 (Rabī‘ I 1309), they were cutting the grass to clear fields (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna, op. cit.*, letter 231).

393 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 62, p. 60.

394 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letters 15 and 16, p. 55.

395 No other reference to this term could be found in the secondary literature, including Ḥamid A. Dirar’s seminal work (*The Indigenous Fermented Foods of the Sudan: A Study in African Food and Nutrition, op. cit.*). While *midaqqa* (pl. *midaqqāt*) refers to the pounder, *madaqqa* was chosen to emphasise the spatial dimension of the term, in accordance with common Arabic nominal patterns.

396 In February 1889 (Jumādā I 1306), ‘Uthmān Dīqna wrote to ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bark Yūsuf that once the Artayqa have

documents were preserved that testify of the complex organisation of ownership rights in the delta. In one of them, a man named Muḥammad Ḥāmid ‘Umar [Sha‘fayn], from Artayqa, challenged two rulings of the *qāḍī* Aḥmad Jābir in favour of Awḥājī w. Abū Zaynab and one of the widows of Abābākr Shanqarāy. In the first case, Awḥājī had successfully wrested a field from one Muḥammad Ḥāmid’s neighbour in the wake of his coming of age and marriage and was, according to the petitioner, trying to consolidate his possessions by obtaining two “desirable (*maghrūna*)” fields from Muḥammad Ḥāmid. The second case involved another field, in the north, at a spot called Buruq Dibyāb<sup>397</sup>. According to Muḥammad Ḥāmid’s statement, he had granted the usufruct over four *kawālī* (sing. *kūla*)<sup>398</sup> to help a man named Abābākr Shanqarāy. This lasted several years until the latter passed away. Then, one of his widows claimed ownership over the land. He had protested the claim, but, in the meantime, pending the ruling from the *qāḍī*, he was forbidden from setting foot on said land. This was the decision that he wanted revoked by petitioning Majdhūb Abū Bakr<sup>399</sup>. As often with the Mahdist administration, military structures were not simply imposed on the civilian population, but fused with pre-existing social structures. In that regard, some individuals were appointed as *muqaddamīn* (sing. *muqaddam*), the population thus becoming their *maqḍūm*, a process indicative of a form of militarisation of the community that inhabited the Tūkar Delta.

Like cultivation, the manner through which grain was collected is not well known. In May 1889 (Ramaḍān 1306), ‘Uthmān Diqna instructed ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr not to let anybody gather his crops before the *‘ushr* was collected<sup>400</sup>. This indicates that levies were taken immediately after the harvest, but this order came after it was completed (see fig. 4.13), and, in the absence of the original letter, its exact meaning is quite obscure. In any case, in March and April 1889 (Rajab-Sha‘bān 1306), the Mahdist administration seized half of all the crops, ten percent for the *‘ushr*, in accordance with Mahdist fiscal regulations, and forty percent as loan (see above). If indeed some of the fields had been cultivated by the *anṣār* themselves, no receipt seems to indicate that the entirety of the yield was destined for the treasury. In all likelihood, they kept the residual half. In 1890 (1307/8), the situation was as tense as the previous year and instructions were given directly by the Khalīfa. Abū Qarja and Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf who had remained in Tūkar while ‘Uthmān Diqna and ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr had gone to Umm Durmān were asked to take half of the harvest

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gathered their crops, they should participate in the *jihād* (*Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 29, p. 57.

397 As Afāfīt, this location can be seen on the 1930 British map (DUL SAD PF 3/2, “Anglo-Egyptian Sudan: Tokar (Kassala Province)”, 1931).

398 The *kūla* was a stick used to define the limits of a field after the flood. By metonymy, it came to designate the primary unit for fields in the Baraka Delta, around five *faddān* (c. 2,1 ha). See NRO CairInt 3/02/43, W. E. Garstin, “Note on the Tokar District & Irrigation effected from the Khor Baraka”, 31 December 1891.

399 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 67 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 55.

400 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 41, p. 58.

“as you did the year before<sup>401</sup>”. This time, though, the volumes collected, a few hundreds of *ardabb* at most, bore no comparison to those of the previous year, already much below expected harvests.

*ii) Trade and Transfers of grain*

To compensate for bad harvests, trade constituted the main alternative, particularly for the populations on the littoral that thus had easier access to international circulations of food commodities. According to Steven Serels, in the early 1880s, Bijāwī communities were structurally dependent on grain imports. This would have resulted from a major shift in the food economy of Eastern Sudan in the middle of the century, bringing “pastoralist communities on Africa’s Red Sea littoral [to] abando[n] the commercial production of grain in response to changes in Red Sea trade.” Following his argument, the most important of these factors was the decrease in prices that itself resulted from Mehmet Ali’s decision to invest in infrastructures to export Egyptian grain toward the Ḥijāz as part of pious endowments. Prices continued their downward trend with the introduction of Iraqi and Indian grain in the Red Sea. Consequently, Eastern Sudan’s production could not compete against these cheaper sources. The pastoralists’ reaction was to turn away from cultivation to focus on animal rearing. It allowed them to maintain their margins and use the camels to transport the cheap Red Sea grain toward the neighbouring urban centres of Kasalā and Sawākin. Henceforth, less land was cultivated, a trend aggravated by the Egyptian colonial government’s request to abandon subsistence farming to focus on cotton and indigo cultivation, especially in the Qāsh Delta. All in all, Eastern Sudan imported grain<sup>402</sup>.

There are several reasons to believe this to be untrue. Firstly, the scale of Egyptian imports and investments were somewhat less ambitious than stated by Serels<sup>403</sup>. Secondly, the reduction of land dedicated to other types of culture is based on shaky evidence<sup>404</sup>. Thirdly, it ignores one crucial factor: transport costs. While foreign grain may have been competitive on the littoral itself, the hiring of camels and guides incurred significant additional charges that would have reduced that advantage. Finally, there are signs that Eastern Sudan exported grain almost up to the beginning of the Mahdiyya. In 1873 (1289/90), 861 ard. of *dhura* were exported to Jidda. Six years later, a similar volume (706 ard.) appeared in Sawākin’s exports. However, in 1880 (1297/8), more than 11 000 ard. were imported, and almost 14 000 ard. the next year<sup>405</sup>. This was also Consul Barnham’s opinion. Commenting on the 1883 (1300/1) customs’ returns in Sawākin, he affirmed that “the

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401 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 2.

402 Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State*, *op. cit.*, p. 49–51.

403 Joshua TEITELBAUM, “Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Long Durée Struggle for Islam’s Holiest Places,” *The Historical Journal*, 2018, vol. 61, no. 4, p. 5.

404 See chapter 1.

405 Ministère de l’Intérieur, *Statistique de l’Égypte, Année 1873 – 1290 de l’Hégire*, Cairo, Mourès & Cie., 1873, p. 118-123.

produce of dhourra at Tocar [...] was sufficient to maintain a large population, to supply the food of the town of Suakin when it contained a population of 12,000 inhabitants, and leave a large margin for export<sup>406</sup>.”

Therefore, it is likely that Eastern Sudan's needs in grain did not show a structural deficit. Fields in Tūkar could produce a small surplus, but a bad harvest could unsettle this precarious balance, especially since it had been deteriorated through the introduction of cotton in the early 1880s<sup>407</sup>. In any case, the Bijāwī population was well adapted to these constraints and relatively small imported volumes could compensate for a temporary deficit. The grain that passed through Sawākin in 1880 and 1881 (1297-1298) was probably not meant for Eastern Sudan's markets, but sent to the interior, toward the Nile Valley. Flour and Indian rice, two staples that were not commonly consumed by Bijāwī populations, also observed a sharp increase in imports.

However, as seen before, the region was not isolated, quite the contrary, and could resort, following former practices, to requesting transfers of grain from other grain-producing regions of Nilotic Sudan. In 1888 (1305/6), local deficits were partly compensated this way. Such requests for *dhura* from either the Nile Valley or the Qāsh Delta were made in the summer of 1888 (D. al-Qa'da-D. al-Ḥijja 1305). In early October 1888 (late Muḥarram 1306), just as the siege of Sawākin had begun, Mahdist troops received 200 ard. (29 t) from Barbar and 300 ard. from Kasalā (43 t). Another shipment of 410 ard. (59 t) was received from Kasalā the next month<sup>408</sup>.

These transfers came to a halt as reserves were dwindling in the context of the early phase of the *Sanat Sitta* famine. In January 1889 (Jumādā I 1306), asked by the Khalīfa to do away with 100 ard., the *amīn* of Barbar's treasury, al-Nūr Ibrāhīm al-Jirayfāwī wrote to the *'āmil* of the East that his stores had no more than 409 *ardabb*<sup>409</sup>. No further measures were taken and the project was apparently abandoned. At that point, the Mahdist administration in Tūkar focused its attention on obtaining supplies through its privileged access to foreign grain. Sawākin was, by far, the main market of that section of the coast. Kitchener was convinced (and scandalised), that 'Uthmān Dīqna had managed to purchase and take out of the Red Sea port 16 000 bags of grain just as the gates were about to close for the whole duration of the siege<sup>410</sup>. This error was not repeated and for most

406 HCCP, Trade report 1890, 1891.

407 Food security was undermined by the development of cotton cultivation in the Qāsh and the Baraka Deltas, but this crop could also be quite profitable. Guido Levi noted that the 1883 cotton harvest in the Tūkar Delta had been exceptional and that just a few months before 'Uthmān Dīqna's arrival in the region, “Arabs became the owners of sums of money hitherto unknown and —almost fortunes.” (*Osman Dekna, chez lui, op. cit.*, p. 7).

408 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI. A, letters 211 and 223, p. 172-173 and 178-179. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Dīqna, op. cit.*, letters 103 and 115.

409 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 26, p. 56.

410 There is, however, no trace of such transaction in Mahdist documents, but detailed records were only put in place a year later. It would have amounted to buying 7 200 t of grain and would have required thousands of camels to be transported. It is hard to believe that such an operation would have elicited no mention in the correspondence between the *'āmil* and the Khalīfa.

of 1889 (1306/7), grain sales were prohibited. There were essentially two other harbours where food supplies could be bought: Ruwāya, to the north, and ‘Aqīq, to the south. This was a new activity for neither of these positions. Already in 1885 (1302/3), there were reports of grain being brought by the Bishārīn from Shanab<sup>411</sup> to the *anṣār*. This route was initially considered so important that the Mahdists in Tamāy were thought to be under risk of starving if it was ever cut off<sup>412</sup>. So efficient was contraband in that location that grain was said to be even cheaper than in Sawākin at four dollars the *ardabb* instead of six<sup>413</sup>. To the south, ‘Aqīq Kabīr was also an important market<sup>414</sup>. In addition, there were numerous rumours of grain being brought to Eastern Sudan from even farther south, from the Eritrean harbours near Taklai, but this appeared only in Anglo-Egyptian sources<sup>415</sup>. The situation changed in 1890 (1307/8) with the reopening of Trinkitāt through which some *dhura* transited.

There was, seemingly, no organisation set up by the Mahdist administration for the specific purpose of buying grain. Lack of cash seriously hindered its ability to intervene in these markets and significant amounts of grain was obtained, not through direct purchase, but through ‘*ushr* levies (see 4.12). The largest amount of grain bought in a single month is 156 ard. (22,5 t), an important volume although dwarfed by the production of the Baraka Delta that could yield fifty times this amount (see fig. 4.13). In most cases, a commission (‘*uhda* pl. ‘*uhad*), in that case a sum of money, was granted to one of the *anṣār* with the mission to go to ‘Aqīq, later to Trinkitāt, to acquire grain. For example, in May 1890 (Shawwāl 1307), Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf wrote to the *umanā*’ of Trinkitāt to inform them that Bashīr Muḥammad Nūr was on his way to them to buy *dhura*<sup>416</sup>. On other occasions, purchases could be carried out by the *muḥtasib* directly within the Tūkar market, or by the administrators of the harbours who would use the proceeds of the taxes on goods to buy bags of grain which were later sent to the granary<sup>417</sup>.

However, for most of the period, Mahdists had little means of being certain to obtain grain. Until the opening of Trinkitāt, it could not be bought directly. Someone would be sent to Adūbana with money which he would in turn give to an intermediary. The latter would take it to the island of

411 The Shanab harbour is situated at the mouth of the eponymous *khūr*, the first one north of the Dunqunāb Bay, around 25 km from Ruwāya.

412 BNA FO 633/55, correspondence no. 184, Col. Chermiside to Maj. Watson, Suakin, 30 July 1885, and correspondence no. 190, Mr. Egerton to the Marquis of Salisbury, 12 August, 1885.

413 BNA FO 633/56, correspondence no. 27, Col. Chermiside to Maj. Watson, Suakin, 9 August 1885.

414 In June 1889 (Shawwāl 1306), ‘Aqīq was said to be the only place with Sawākin where *dhura* could be obtained. See DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 84 (11-26 June 1889), Appendix A.

415 According to Intelligence officers, “Osman relies on supplies from Adobana and Taklai when [the grain held by the treasury] is finished. See DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 83 (28 May-11 June 1889), Summary. A year and a half later, in early 1891, British authorities were informed that the Italians had offered to open *marsā* Taklai to the Mahdists and that, subsequently, 800 bags of grain had been sent from that position to Tūkar (NRO CairInt 3/02/42, “Report on the circumstances connected with the Dervish Post at Adobana”, Col. Holled Smith, 1891).

416 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 110, p. 65. See also in the same document the letter 112.

417 NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40C, document no. 47.



‘Aqīq Kabīr and then find a seller. The process was anything but secure. These details are known because in November 1890 (Rabī‘ I/II 1308), after waiting for some time, Aḥmad Jabar Allāh finally wrote to the treasury in Tūkar to complain that not only his agent had failed to secure grain, no trader having seemingly come to ‘Aqīq during that period, but he was yet to get his money back. Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf instructed the local administrators to assist the plaintiff. He recommended that someone from the “people of the country” be sent to ‘Aqīq, an indication that the Mahdists themselves were dependent on these local connections<sup>418</sup>.

Furthermore, the line between private and public acquisitions was quite blurry. Individuals like Aḥmad Jabar Allāh who had been appointed to buy and bring back *dhura* to the camp could buy some for their personal use or to sell the surplus for profit. Since the treasury was chronically unable to provide for all the combatants and their families in Tūkar, some took the matter in their own hand and entered in direct contact with sellers, as was the case for the *anṣār* Muḥammad Bābikir and Aḥmad Sharīf who had purchased grain on credit for Ḥasan Ibrāhīm Barnūs in late January 1890 (early Jumādā II 1307) and now asked the treasury to pay the 64 r. *qūshlī* they owed the trader<sup>419</sup>. In turn, the administration would grant tax abatements. When Bashīr Muḥammad Nūr, mentioned above, went to Trinkitāt, the letter sent by Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf stipulated that the *‘ushr* should not be levied on the grain he purchased<sup>420</sup>. Other operations were much more personal but could still be financed by the treasury. Ḥasab Allāh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān wanted to go to Umm Durmān to bring his family to the camp (*daym*), but upon his arrival in Kasalā he found it there. In early June 1890 (mid-Shawwāl 1307), a few days after his return to Tūkar, he now wanted to “go to the sea (*yanzilu ilā al-baḥr*)” to buy eight bags of grain. Since he had no money, the *amīr* Daf‘ Allāh Khandaqāwī under whom he served wrote to the *amīn* of the treasury so that the administrators of Adūbana may give him the necessary cash<sup>421</sup>.

In all these instances, in a context of severe food shortage, going directly to the harbours was still the most efficient way to obtain grain, even if the outcome of these undertakings remained unreliable. Indeed, obtaining grain was only the first part of the issue, there remained to transport it, which in itself represented a considerable challenge. To some extent, transport was so critical that it constituted the core argument for the settling of the Mahdist forces in Tūkar, alongside, of course, the availability of arable land and pastures.

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418 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 53, and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter no. 45. This was not an exceptional experience. A man named Ibrāhīm was dispatched by one of the *umarā’*, Muḥammad w. ‘Ālim to buy ten bags of grain but failed to do so and was given a single back from the reserves of the harbour (NRO Mahdiyya 5/21/71, document no. 33).

419 NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40C, document no. 45.

420 See other examples in NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40C, documents no. 47, 48, 50, 51 and 53; and Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 44.

421 NRO Mahdiyya 5/21/71, document no. 42.

### iii) Transport and Distributions: Feeding the Men

The question of transport never ceased to be highly problematic. In early January 1889 (early Jumādā I 1306), Ibrāhīm ‘Adlān, the *amīn* of the central treasury, wrote to Yūnus al-Dikaym, the ‘*āmil* of Barbar, to sell a 100 ard. of the *dhura* held in the town’s granary and send the proceeds to ‘Uthmān Diqna<sup>422</sup>. As mentioned before, this plan failed. Al-Nūr Ibrāhīm al-Jirayfāwī, at the head of Barbar’s treasury, refused to comply on the ground that their own reserves were insufficient. Meanwhile, it proved easier for Mahdist authorities in Eastern Sudan to ask for the grain to be sold locally and for the money of the sale to be transferred to them so that they would then endeavour to buy the grain from traders. This was a testimony of the logistic difficulties that plagued the Mahdist administration. Resorting to the external market, at a time when Sawākin was not opened to traders, meant that it was willing to pay a massive surcharge to avoid having to rent camels. They must have had no other choices.

Indeed, sources of that period abound with references to difficulties in finding mounts, almost exclusively camels, to move persons and goods around. The Mahdists were very much dependent on Bijāwī groups for transportation. In May 1888 (Sha‘bān/Ramaḍān 1305), as troops were concentrated in Handūb prior to the siege of Sawākin, Akkad w. Mūsā, head of the Hāsarnadawāb, “resided in Tūkar, helping the *anṣār*, in particular for grain, its harvest and its transport to them from Tūkar to here on camels of the Banī ‘Āmir<sup>423</sup>.” Since the Bijāwī civil war of 1886-1888 (1303-1306), distrust dominated the relations between local communities and Mahdist authorities. Mechanically, the groups that had been the most impacted by the cessation of trade on the Sawākin-Barbar road were the ones that offered their services to traders in Sawākin, first among which Maḥmūd ‘Alī’s Ammār’ar. They had few reasons to assist the Mahdists, especially since the latter often resorted to confiscations<sup>424</sup>. Even when authorities in Tūkar did manage to find camels and guides, transport could still fail. In the summer of 1889 (Sha‘bān/D. al-Qa‘da 1306), ‘Uthmān Diqna was said to have managed the mustering of a caravan of 150 camels to send sugar and other supplies to Umm Durmān, only to be abandoned in Arkawīt by its Bijāwī camel-drivers<sup>425</sup>. The little pressure they could exert on these individuals vanished as soon as they reached the Red Sea Hills.

These tensions were slow to abate. Asked to transport ammunitions in January 1891

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422 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 249, p. 191; *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 26, p. 56; and Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 135..

423 *Ibid.*, letter 52.

424 It is telling that camels and, to a lesser extent, donkeys, were far more likely to have been obtained through loot than other animals. See fig. 4.2c.

425 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 88 (7-14 August 1889), Appendix A. A very similar incident happened to Bābikir Badrī a few years later, in 1894/5 (1312). On his way from Barbar—where he had hired his camels—to Sawākin, the caravan took the Sinkāt road instead of going through Handūb, the shortest way. As a dispute erupted, the camel-drivers simply left. Bābikir Badrī had to wait 21 days for their return (Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 163).

(Jumādā II 1308), Mūsā ‘Abd al-Karīm requested, as a pre-condition, not to be asked to enter the Mahdist camp out of fear that his camels could be seized<sup>426</sup>. Once again, the treasury had few levers to remedy this problem. Short in currency, they accepted dues to be paid off by providing camels to carry the grain from Tībīlūl to the Mahdist camp<sup>427</sup>. Besides, since camels were such a strategic resource, all transport contracts were requested to be communicated to the administration<sup>428</sup>.

Mahdist authorities, though, were not the only actors in the region to be affected by this issue, even if they were rightfully suspected of having few qualms in commandeering animals according to their need. In a rare example of a purely private letter, ‘Alī al-Jilānī explained in July 1889 (D. al-Qa‘da 1306) to his brother Muṣṭafā—in all likelihood from a family of the Tūkar region—, that the camels he had hired were disobedient and so had compromised his intention to come to him with his family. He had suggested sending some money so that his brother buy camels and then come to fetch them, but this had also proved impossible<sup>429</sup>. This points to the larger and more structural problem of finding means of transportation in Eastern Sudan, quite certainly compounded by Mahdist requests, but not confined to them. Their withdrawal from Tūkar to Adārāma was concomitant of an improvement in the procurement of camels in the region, especially with the revival of the Sawākin-Barbar route. Ironically, the problem followed them on the banks of the ‘Aṭbara where finding camels proved to be, again, a major issue for the newly founded Mahdist camp.

The vast majority of the *dhura* obtained between 1888 and 1891 (1306-1308) came from the fields of the Baraka Delta. The transfer of bags of grain to the treasury did not require nearly as many camels. However, it still needed to be distributed to the combatants. In the context of Eastern Sudan and the particular division of power within the Mahdist authority, whereas ‘Uthmān Diqna was ultimately responsible for military matters and Abū Qarja for the treasury, grain distributions were deemed too sensitive to be entrusted to one of them, and so the delegates were made responsible for organising them<sup>430</sup>. The principle of fixed stipends for the *anṣār* that had been introduced under the Mahdī was maintained after 1885 (1302/3) as the accepted practice. Whereas the administrators of the treasury and the higher echelons of the Mahdist hierarchy received both cash and grain, common soldiers only received the former. The amount of their monthly allowance varied over time, depending on availability. For the *umarā’* and the *maqādīm*, additional grain could be given instead of money based on somewhat obscure calculations in which the status of the claimant certainly played a role. In general, the rule was that men would receive every month four

426 NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40C, document no. 64.

427 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 309.

428 NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/62B, document no. 41.

429 NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40C, document no. 63.

430 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 39, p. 58. See chapter 3.

*qīraṭ* of grain (24 kg), and two additional *qīrāt* (12 kg) for each family member registered with him<sup>431</sup>. There were, however, important variations and Mahdist leaders could be given much larger quantities which they would then redistribute as they saw fit. At the height of the famine, distributions were observed with great attention and rumours of hoarding were rife. A slave from Tūkar reported in August 1889 (D. al-Ḥijja 1306) that “Osman issues very little food to the Arabs. They get from the Beit El Mal only ½ kaila once a month; the “Aghrab” [Westerners] are given 1 ½ kaila (two to those who have families), and 1 ½ dollars. This is issued three times a month”<sup>432</sup>. In that respect, as will be seen in the next chapter, records were absolutely central to the organisation of these distributions. Being formerly registered alongside one’s family members in the notebooks that contained all the names of the recipients of food distributions was absolutely vital. Some individuals were suspected of being registered in several banners, sometimes leading to investigations<sup>433</sup>. The matter was further complicated by the fact that some of the grain in the granary had been deposited by the combatants, including before leaving to travel to Umm Durmān. As they returned, they asked that their grain be returned to them, a request that was granted by the *‘āmil*. Surprisingly, in early July 1889 (early D. al-Qa’da 1306), this was still possible<sup>434</sup>, but the shortage in staple food that the Mahdist authorities had hitherto managed to mitigate, soon after became out of control, and the famine of the *Sanat Sitta* engulfed Eastern Sudan.

### ***B) Autopsy of a Disaster: The Collapse of Food Supplies in Eastern Sudan***

Events in Eastern Sudan from 1883 (1300/1) onwards deeply disrupted the fragile balance between production and consumption of grain. This was also the case for other regions of Nilotic Sudan. The northern territories experienced food insecurity as early as 1885 (1302/3), immediately after the withdrawal of Anglo-Egyptian forces from the region of Dunqulā. This was not caused by environmental factors but by a combination of lower production and greater demand. On the one hand, the region had witnessed a sharp decrease in available labour force due to a massive population movement across the Egyptian border. In addition, several thousands of male agricultural slaves took advantage of the turmoil to escape their condition while others were forced to accompany their Dunqulāwī masters. More than a third of all arable lands may have been uncultivated as a result. On the other hand, the expansionist policy pursued by the Khalīfa had

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431 For example, NRO, Mahdiyya 5/04/17.

432 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 89 (16-31 August 1889), Appendix A. A similar comment was made by a group of Artayqa and Hadanduwa Wayl’alyāb shortly after. They claimed, with resentment, that “the Aghrab [Westerners] are fed from the Beit El Mal [treasury in Tūkar] while the Arabs get nothing.” (DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 90 (1<sup>st</sup>-16 September 1889), Appendix A)

433 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 53, p. 59.

434 NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/62B, document no. 28.

brought large contingents of *anṣār* in the region from 1886 to 1889 (1303-1307). They put pressure on resources that were already stretched thin. This scissors effect resulted in a state of famine in 1887-1888 (1304-1306), which predated the *Sanat Sitta*<sup>435</sup>.

Circumstances in Eastern Sudan were noticeably different, among other reasons because agriculture in this region did not rely on an enslaved workforce. The following section seeks to render the particular dynamics that caused the collapse of food supply between 1888 and 1890 (1306-1307), firstly by analysing in detail its chronology, before, in a second part, examining the different causes that have been put forward by other scholars and confront them to both British and Mahdist sources.

In his investigation on the origins of the famine, Steven Serels established a timeline that started in September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307), when officers in Sawākin noticed that Bijāwī pastoralists came less frequently to the Red Sea port to sell their livestock, before the full scope of the crisis became evident to them in November 1889 (Rabīʿ I 1307) as a number of Hadanduwa tribesmen began to settle on the outskirts of the town<sup>436</sup>. This perspective is the product of the limitations of British sources. Access to DMI reports before April 1889 (Shaʿbān 1306) is difficult since the only place where they are apparently still held is the NRO. In any case, their reliability before Wingate's overhaul has been noted<sup>437</sup>. This timeline suggests that the famine began around the same time as its effects reached the walls of Sawākin. It raises at least one major paradox: according to this calendar, the 1306 (1888/9) famine started in 1307 (1889/90). The development below will attempt to retrieve this lost year by expanding the timeframe.

Comments about agricultural conditions in Eastern Sudan between 1885 and 1889 (1302-1307) are rare. Wingate noted that in 1886 (1303/4) “the crops [...] in the Tokar delta were exceptionally good, and attracted many Arabs in the neighbourhood, with the result that the Tokar leader, Mussa Fiki, had by the end of the year considerably increased his following<sup>438</sup>.” The Mahdist correspondence for the same year contains no reference to difficulties in finding supplies or the state of cultivation in the Baraka and Qāsh deltas. Concerning the former, it should be remembered that ʿUthmān Diqna had left the region in August 1886 only to return in December 1887 (D. al-Qaʿda 1303-Rabīʿ I 1305), and all of his intention was absorbed by the unfolding of the Bijāwī civil war. The paucity of references about matters of grain suggests that this was not a pressing issue. This had ceased to be true in early 1887 (mid-1304). In February (Rabīʿ II), ʿUthmān Diqna and

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435 Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State*, *op. cit.*, p. 30–32.

436 *Ibid.*, p. 76–77.

437 Peter M. HOLT, “The Source-Materials of the Sudanese Mahdia,” *op. cit.*, p. 113–114.

438 Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

Abū Qarja—who had just joined the *‘āmil* in Kasalā—informed the Khalīfā that “the brethren lack food and are exhausted”, prompting some to desert the town. They could only give a quarter of a *riyāl* to each individual and an eighth to each family member, but there was no grain in this region, in which “the population is destitute and owns nothing<sup>439</sup>”. The situation was somewhat better near Tūkar. Grain may have had to be rationed, but ‘Uthmān Diqna claimed in mid-1887 (late 1305) that 1 500 ard. remained in the granary and he disputed the rumours that had reached the Khalīfā that members of the *jihādiyya* and some *anṣār* had deserted because of a lack of food in that place too<sup>440</sup>.

The summer of 1888 (late 1306) witnessed a new development when troops concentrated in Handūb before the siege of Sawākin began in earnest in September. On this occasion, probably because of the sheer number of men present in a single location and logistical problems that hindered circulations between the Mahdist camp and Tūkar, “the grain for the *anṣār* [was] being brought from other areas”. Indeed, the *‘āmil* had asked the Khalīfā for *dhura* to be sent to him from either Kasalā or Barbar. He had himself written in May 1888 (Ramaḍān 1305) to Kasalā’s *‘āmil*, Ḥāmid ‘Alī, to send him grain 2 000 ard. in separated and regular dispatches, since the treasury was running empty and prices had already begun to increase, and the Khalīfā had asked Yūnus al-Dikaym to transfer a similar amount of grain from al-Qallābāt to Kasalā. Eastern Sudan’s *‘āmil* gauged that the men in Handūb required 800 ard. of grain every month to feed more than 2 500 combatants. By chance, while he was waiting for this, the first dispatch organised by the Khalīfā had arrived through Barbar<sup>441</sup>. All in all, several hundreds of *ardabb* reached Handūb, an amount short of the quantities initially requested.

Several signs, though, testify of the intense difficulties experienced to supply the men in Handūb in late 1888. In December of that year (Rabī‘ II 1306), ‘Uthmān Diqna offered his first summary on the agricultural situation near Tūkar, a sign that this had become an issue. He informed the Khalīfā that the fall (July to September) had been disappointing and only a fraction of the land had received water, meaning that the annual flood of the Baraka had been much more limited than usual. Indeed, the seasonal rains on the Ethiopian plateau, which fed the floods of both the Baraka and the Qāsh—as well as Nile’s through the Blue Nile—, did not reach their normal level<sup>442</sup>. Conditions bettered in October (Ṣafar 1306) thanks to some early winter rains. However, these only became sufficient to initiate cultivation on the whole of the Tūkar Delta a few days prior to the

439 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letters 91, p. 93-94.

440 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 63.

441 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 102, p. 102 and *Ibid.*, letters 116, 130 and 139. The number of combatants did not include family members. Indeed, 800 ard. could feed almost 10 000 persons based on rations of a quarter kilo of *dhura* per day.

442 Richard PANKHURST and Douglas H. JOHNSON, “The Great Drought and Famine of 1888-92 in Northeast Africa,” in Douglas H. Johnson and David M. Anderson (ed.), *The Ecology of Survival: Case Studies from Northeast African History*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1988, p. 47.

‘*āmil*’s letter, in early December. He predicted, rightly, that the harvests would be ready in February 1889 (Jumādā I 1306). While the entire season was not lost, cultivation had begun more than two months late. Crucially, since the delta had not been flooded, the rich silt that usually settled once the water had ebbed and that allowed for two, sometimes three consecutive harvests, was absent.

In the meantime, additional dispatches were requested, but this time, as noted above, ‘Uthmān Diqna deemed it more efficient to purchase grain from traders. Whereas by January 1889 (Jumādā I 1306) the first harvests should have been collected, in the deltas as on the fertile fields of the Nile banks, the *amīn* of Barbar complained that the town’s granary had already reached a critical point and refused to sell part of his reserves to send the proceeds to the East<sup>443</sup>. Tensions began to appear elsewhere and news arrived in Handūb about the dire situation in Umm Durmān for those with few means to buy *dhura*. One of the *umarā’*, Muḥammad Shaykh Idrīs had left around 45 people, all his family, in the capital and the boat on which their revenues depended had been seized by the administration, leaving them bereft of income and bringing them to “a state of extreme duress from the lack of food (*al-ta‘b al-shadīd min ‘adam al-ta‘āyish*)<sup>444</sup>”.

A month later, in early February 1889 (Jumādā I 1306), ‘Uthmān Diqna complained again about lack of supplies and delays in the grain shipments he had requested. At the same time, the ill-boding clouds that had gathered over the *ansār* began to dissipate with news that the *dhura* cultivated in the Baraka Delta was finally ripe and ready for harvest. Contrary to the rest of Nilotic Sudan, the winter rains of the Gwineb—a regional specificity<sup>445</sup>—had saved the crops and mitigated a potential disaster. After having postponed the transfer of the camp for some time, events unfolded quickly. Still, in Handūb, the ‘*āmil* instructed ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr to collect half of the grain, including 80% as a loan that he vowed to reimburse<sup>446</sup>. While the camp was gradually emptied and thousands transferred to Tūkar, in the course of the next two months (Rajab-Sha‘bān 1306), almost 6 000 ard. were levied (see fig. 4.12), for a total harvest that must have amounted to 12 000 ard. since the Mahdist authorities had decided to take the ‘*ushr* and the *niṣf* (half).

As this process was completed, in May 1889 (Ramaḍān 1306), officers of the DMI noted that “the Arabs have been coming [to Sawākin] in very large numbers lately, almost entirely to buy *dhurra*, the supply of which at Tokar has come to an end. For this reason, a general exodus is taking place<sup>447</sup>.” This affirmation is symptomatic of the very frequent misunderstandings that impaired the

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443 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 26, p. 56.

444 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 140.

445 See chapter 1.

446 NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/62B, document no. 33.

447 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 82, Summary and Appendix A (30 April-15 May 1889). The same officer wrote, “Many Arabs in during the day, but little news as to the state of the country. There is great scarcity”, thus revealing the very limited scope of the information they were able to gather.

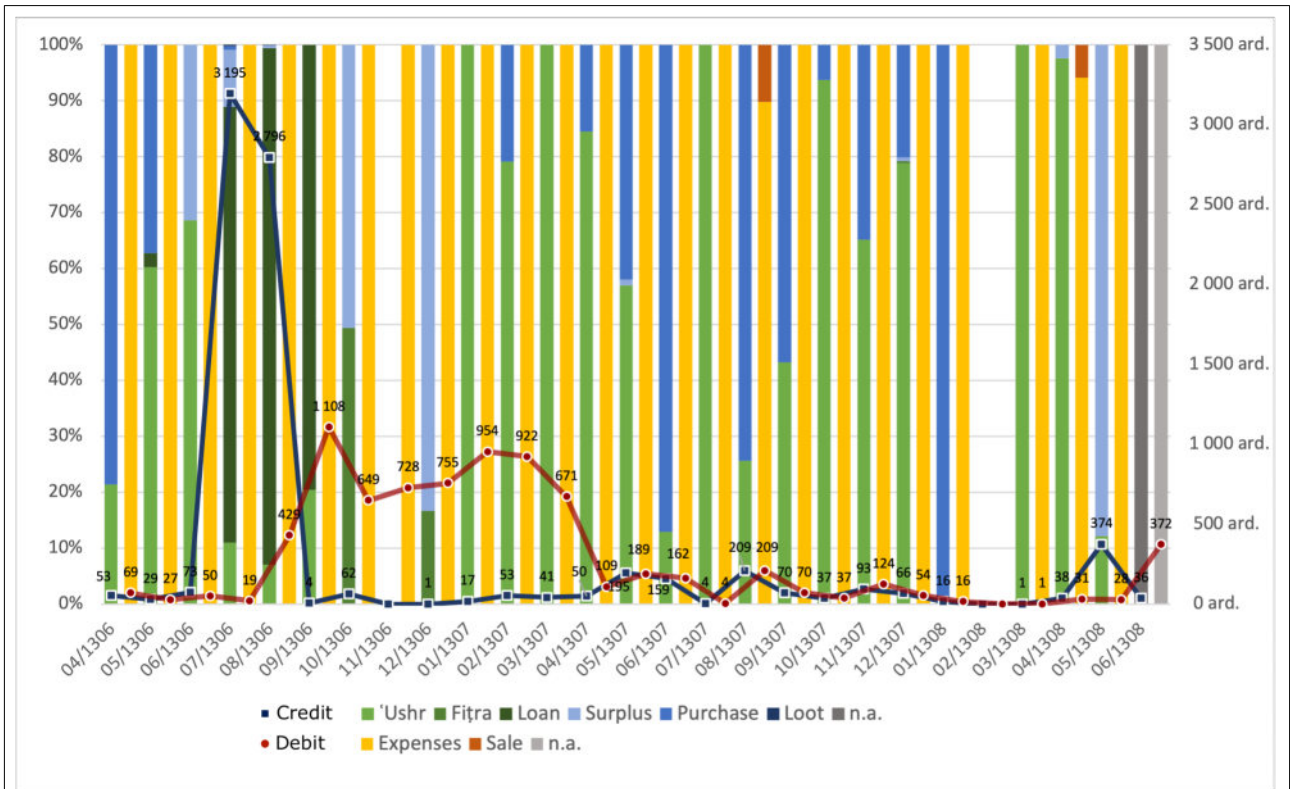


Fig. 4.12: Credits and debits of grain in Tūkar’s granary (1888-1891)

judgement of the authorities in Sawākin. Reserves in Afāfīt where the Mahdist granary was located were then at their highest and the moment this report was written coincided with the largest distribution of grain ever recorded by the Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan (see fig. 4.12). After months of deprivation, the festivities associated with the holy month of Ramaḍān were duly celebrated. The Hadanduwa who had left Tūkar did not do so because there was no more *dhura*, but because there was no *dhura* for them. Tensions between the Mahdist administration and the Hadanduwa were so intense that the latter attacked the treasury in early February (early Jumādā I 1306)<sup>448</sup>. The harvests had been late thus causing important disruptions in their seasonal migrations. Besides, once they had arrived in the delta to partake in its cultivation, as many of them customarily did, they found themselves competing with the Mahdists for limited resources. Consequently, some of them decided to resume their normal migratory pattern and return to the Red Sea Hills, toward Sinkāt and Arkawīt, where their herds were waiting for them, although they had failed to obtain the grain that was necessary to them to survive for the next six months, until the first harvests that would not come before late November (late Rabī‘ I).

The Mahdist community in Tūkar benefitted from a brief respite. A month after the report mentioned above, Intelligence officers of the DMI revised their judgement and recognised that “there is still *dhurra* in the Beit El Mal [treasury] at Tokar” but that it was all in the hands of

<sup>448</sup> Report on the Dervish Rule, Appendix VI (A), letter 30, p. 57.



‘Uthmān Diqna. As for the Bijāwī communities that had been evicted from the delta, they went to “Suakin [which] is now the only place where *dhurra* is obtainable, and numbers of Arabs come in daily to buy this and other necessities” thanks to the money obtained by “sell[ing] cattle, milk, charcoal hides, &c.” Intelligence officers believed that ‘Uthmān Diqna had been instructed by the Khalīfa to give Bijāwī pastoralists permission to enter the Red Sea port to buy *dhura* for the next four months—from July to November, that is until the very first harvests could be expected—“on the understanding that they do not take in supplies of cattle, sheep, milk, &c.” More cautious than usual in their assessment, they deemed it “not unlikely, considering the great distress and want of food which undoubtedly prevails throughout most of the Sudan<sup>449</sup>”. They were, as often, only partly right. There is no trace whatsoever of instructions to that effect emanating from Umm Durmān. Strangely, in mid-April (mid-Sha‘bān 1306), the *‘āmil* had informed the Khalīfa that if the Bijāwī had stopped fighting the “party of God (*ḥizb Allāh*)” and most of them had cut communications with Sawākin, they had retreated to their homeland (*awṭān* sing. *waṭan*) and none of them had come to Tūkar, but for a few of their heads<sup>450</sup>. This must have been a lie since British authorities, which had no interest in fabricating such a story, reported two weeks later a Hadanduwa exodus from Tūkar to Sawākin. On the contrary, the Mahdist *‘āmil* may have wanted to conceal from the Khalīfa the level of tension that his appropriation of delta’s harvests had caused<sup>451</sup>. Suspending the prohibition of commercial relations with the Red Sea port could alleviate these tensions and offer some solution to pastoralists seeking grain for the next months with anguish. ‘Uthmān Diqna could hardly have taken such a decision by himself, among other reasons because Abū Qarja would have been prompt to denunciate him. The delegates, however, could have taken on this responsibility, in particular Muḥammad Khālid Zuqal who was appointed soon after to encourage trade across the northern border (see above).

The same delegates were cautious in their management of *dhura* reserves. In the eight months after the harvests, from April to November 1889 (Sha‘bān 1306-Rabī‘ I 1307) they distributed 777 ard. per month on average (see fig. 4.12), a number strikingly close to ‘Uthmān Diqna’s estimate of the *anṣār*’s needs (see above), even as other crises were looming large over the Mahdist administration beyond adverse climatic conditions. Indeed, cash reserves were running dangerously low. In June 1889 (Shawwāl 1306), the *amīn* responsible for monetary matters wrote to ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf to warn him that because “this period was the hottest of the year, the

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449 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 83 (28 May-11 June 1889) and Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 84 (11-26 June 1889).

450 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 161.

451 Another interpretation is that some of these pastoralists may indeed have attempted to find pasture for their livestock while others attempted to purchase *dhura* in Sawākin. These could also represent two different phases of the same movement.

collection of revenues from grazing livestock (*na‘am*) would be very low (*wāhī jiddān*).<sup>452</sup> As a result, he thought that salaries could not be paid and would have to be cut until the end of the year<sup>452</sup>, a risk that soon materialised<sup>453</sup>, and portended further difficulties. In the meantime, the local situation had taken a turn for the worse. In Kasalā, one of the *anṣār* named al-Ṭayyib al-Ḥājj Musā‘id reported to the *amīn* of Tūkar’s treasury that because of “raids [launched] day and night by the hypocrites”, the people had stopped cultivating the land. For that reason and others, al-Ṭayyib offered an apocalyptic vision of the situation. He explained that “the country here is in extreme distress (*ghāyat al-karb*) due to the lack of food (*qūt*) present, so that the ardabb has reached fifty *riyāl qūshlī*”, an extraordinary sum (see below), and “the country in general is filled up with biers, since there is no one to do it [bury them] (*al-balad ‘alā al-‘umūm mashhūn bi-l-janā’iz fī al-arḍ li-‘adam man yaqūm bi-amr-hā*)”. He concluded his letter by asking that God may free them from their grief<sup>454</sup>.

Finally, in September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307), the flood of the Baraka, which had failed the previous year, inundated the fields of the Tūkar Delta<sup>455</sup>. Two months later, the first harvests would be ready and the distress experienced by the Bijāwī communities put to an end. However, the last months would be the most difficult. While there was still grain in the treasury, the total volume must have been insufficient for everyone as requests for food addressed to ‘Abd Allāh and his brother Majdhūb multiplied during that period. Between 17 and 30 September (20 Muḥarram to 3 Ṣafar 1307), they received no less than eight requests for rations. Even leaders were affected. Al-Hardalū Aḥmad Abū Sinn, a major figure of the Shukriyya, also wrote to Majdhūb Abū Bak to beg him to give him his pay with some of it in *dukhn*<sup>456</sup>. Madanī ‘Uthmān Qamr al-Dīn from the Majādhīb wrote a few lines to al-Makkī Muḥammad, al-Majdhūb and al-Amīn Abū Bakr<sup>457</sup> to console them for the sufferings caused by hunger they were witnessing near Arkawīt<sup>458</sup>. Similar comments were made by two relatives of the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir al-Majdhūb, ‘Alī and al-Ḥusayn ‘Abd Allāh Madanī al-Majdhūb, who reported that people were eating human flesh<sup>459</sup>.

In October (Ṣafar), “The numbers of Arabs coming from the hills, except those from Tokar, who have been more numerous than usual, have considerably decreased owing to the rain, which

452 NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40, document no. 14.

453 See chapter 3.

454 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 40.

455 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 62, p. 60.

456 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letters 67-77, p. 61.

457 Al-Makkī Muḥammad and al-Amīn Abū Bakr arrived in Arkawīt in August 1889 (D. al-Hijja 1306), probably to monitor the Bijāwī pastoralists who had moved to this region. See *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 54. Al-Amīn Abū Bakr was the brother of ‘Abd Allāh and Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf (see letter 79 in the same document).

458 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 64, p. 60.

459 NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56B, document no. 20. A similar comment was made in DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 95 (13-26 November 1889), Summary.

has fallen in considerable quantities. With increased pasturage, the great distress which has been prevalent, both in this vicinity and the interior, for several months will probably be relieved<sup>460</sup>.” Bijāwī pastoralists had resumed their migratory pattern by moving from the Red Sea Hill where they had spent the previous months to escape the summer heat and now came down with their livestock to take advantage of the first winter rains on the Gwineb. The dramatic expansion of available pasture alleviated the tensions that had marked certain territories like Arkawīt and Sinkāt. However, grain was still very much absent and in late October 1889 (early Rabī‘ I 1307), the impoverishment of the Mahdist community was undeniable. Slaves were mortgaged to be sold in Adūbana<sup>461</sup>. In November 1889 (Rabī‘ I), the granary’s reserves in Tūkar were eventually depleted (see fig. 4.12). Distributions were very barely sufficient and the *anṣār* had been kept in state of undernourishment. Expectations were high but the *dhura* was still not ready. Some *anṣār* who complained that they had received nothing for the past two months, probably an exaggeration, requested grain. Abū Qarja suggested that they pledge not to ask for anything once the harvests were completed, but this idea was refused by the delegates. They feared that, firstly, the *anṣār* would not respect their initial promise, and secondly, that early distributions would fracture the Mahdist body, since there was not enough grain for everyone in the granary<sup>462</sup>.

Both the Mahdists and the larger Bijāwī community had been brutally impacted by food shortages for the past six months at least, but the situation had not yet veered into complete disaster. A few days before the harvests were finally ready, a swarm of locusts coming from Tāka where it caused havoc landed in the Baraka Delta and damaged the crops<sup>463</sup>. What had been left was completely destroyed by a second swarm a few weeks later. A second burst of grain credit should have occurred around late November 1889 (early Rabī‘ II). Instead, only small amounts of grain were deposited in the granary, and most of it had been bought, not harvested (see fig. 4.12). At that point, in December 1889 (Rabī‘ II), newcomers formed a second wave of arrivals near Sawākin. Contrary to the individuals who had gathered near the Red Sea port since April or May to obtain access to grain, these were direct victims of the famine and appeared emaciated and weak. Some, if not most of them, were probably Bijāwī tribesmen registered on the rolls of the treasury who, until the previous month, had benefitted from the meagre distributions of the Mahdist granary in Tūkar. But the latter was now almost completely empty and there was no alternative, so they began moving to the north in the hope of finding pasture for their animals and some *dhura* in the regions not touched by locusts<sup>464</sup>.

460 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 91 (17-30 September 1889), Summary.

461 NRO Mahdiyya 5/17/59B, document no. 37.

462 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 43.

463 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 95 (13-26 November 1889), Summary.

464 BNA FO 633/60, correspondence no. 48, Sir Baring to the marquis of Salisbury, 17 December 1889, and DUL

In January 1890 (Rabī‘ II/Jumādā I 1307), the situation was particularly tense. With regard to the limited yield of the harvest, the Mahdist leaders in Tūkar were instructed by the Khalīfa to register it (*bayān*), preserve it (*taḥaffuẓ*), and not squander it (‘*adam al-tafrīṭ*’). As a result of dire scarcity, grain was dearly coveted. The officials were thus asked “to be extra [cautious] to guard it and not to be negligent (*naghfula*) with it.” They were to appoint only men they trusted from among the *anṣār* to keep the grain and “brief them about preserving (*ṣiyān*) it and watching it”. The multiplication of similar recommendations emphasised the intent of the Mahdist state in controlling this precious resource. On the same token, it needed to ensure that the little grain collected would serve its interests. In that perspective, important restrictions were set up so as “not to allow those from outside the camp to buy the grain like the Banī ‘Āmir and those with whom they are associated from among the pastoralists (‘*urbān*) of the mountains.” Furthermore, the authorities in Tūkar were asked to “stress to the merchants to not buy any of the grain and monopolise it for trade but it should only be bought to feed (*li-l-taqawwut*) [people]<sup>465</sup>.” In late January-early February (Jumādā II), Majdhūb Abū Bakr acknowledged that the granary was empty since all the grain had been distributed. In the same letter, the head in Tūkar presented a bleak picture of cultivation in the region. With regard to “the yield from the labourers (*thamrat min al-ujarā*) [...], the locust has eaten the cultures and what is left is of no use. Whenever some of it grew again after of which [we hoped] some could be of a little use, another [swarm of] locust would come and eat it, and that is their [habit] to this day<sup>466</sup>.” Aḥmad Maḥmūd ‘Alī, then settled in Handūb, made similar comments in a letter he wrote to the deputy of the treasury and the last remaining delegate<sup>467</sup> stating that “this year is sterile (*al-sana jadiba*)<sup>468</sup>.” He added that this state of deprivation explained the success of the handouts organised by the authorities in Sawākin. Indeed, in February 1890 (Jumādā II), the British had begun setting up some form of food relief for the individuals who had settled near the Red Sea port (see below). Moreover, Kitchener affirmed that the coastal trade was going well, and that monthly exports from Sawākin to Trinkitāt averaged 6 000 to 8 000 bags in the first half of 1890. He himself was quite puzzled by this information. This amounted to exports ranging from 2 700 to 3 600 t. every month, a volume that, by his own admission, could feed 42 000 persons, a volume that vastly exceeded the needs of the 2 000 residents in Tūkar. With Handūb’s imports, an additional 2 100 bags or 945 t, more than 52 000 people could be fed every month with the grain leaving Sawākin. Whereas this fed into Kitchener’s claim that trade in grain was allowing the

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SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no.

465 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 2.

466 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 3.

467 After the passing away of the *shaykh* al-Tāhir al-Majdhūb in February 1890 (Jumādā II 1307), only al-Shafī‘ Aḥmad al-Majdhūb was still present in Tūkar. See chapter 3.

468 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 27.

Mahdist regime to subsist in Eastern Sudan, he could not help but ask the question “where then does all the grain go to?”<sup>469</sup> He may have knowingly exaggerated the volumes of grain that transited through the Mahdist harbour, but he would probably have better concealed his own doubts. Quite probably, he was badly misinformed as to the actual quantities of grain exported. Indeed, Mahdist records from Trinkitāt show that the number of bags collected through the *‘ushr* had indeed increased between February and June 1890 (Jumādā II-D.al-Qa‘da 1307), but only from 32 k. to 179 k., meaning that the overall imports ranged from 320 k. to 1790 k.<sup>470</sup> So to answer Kitchener’s question, short of being able to determine where the grain went, it did not reach Trinkitāt. This explains why, in May (Ramaḍān/Shawwāl), Wylde could write in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* that the populations inhabiting the Baraka Delta had been devastated by the famine<sup>471</sup>. Others, in Tūkar, Sinkāt or Kasalā, were left to their own devices, waiting for the next harvests that could not be expected before late November 1890, nine months later.

The Mahdist leadership tried to intervene but had few solutions at its disposal. Aḥmad Maḥmūd ‘Alī was suspected of appropriating resources that belonged to the treasury, including precious grain, leading Majdhūb Abū Bakr to ask him to keep detailed records of the goods passing through Handūb. This proved insufficient and the deputy *amīn* resorted to appointing four delegates—following the practice instituted by the Khalīfa—tasked with inspecting the position, monitoring the operations, and hiring accountants to establish the proper records<sup>472</sup>. Abū Qarja organised a major raid against the Banī ‘Āmir and Ḥabāb from whom he obtained large numbers of livestock, around 2 000 heads, half of which was distributed to his men and the other half sent to Tūkar. Of the animals that arrived in the Mahdist headquarters, around half was immediately sold to reimburse the traders who had financed the detachment and to whom the treasury was already heavily indebted, up to 5 000 *riyāl*. The operation was quite successful since 300 bags (*akyās* sing. *kīs*) of grain arrived at the same moment than the loot, in March (Rajab), and only half of the total amount of 1 800 r. had been paid before<sup>473</sup>. The outcome of these efforts was somewhat mixed. While Mahdist authorities in Tūkar managed to obtain some grain through trade, the volumes in question were vastly insufficient to meet the *anṣār*’s needs.

### ***C) Locusts, Rinderpest and the British: Explaining the Famines***

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469 BNA WO 32/63/53, inclosure in telegram no. 1, Col. Kitchener to Mr. Portal, 22 July 1890.

470 NRO Mahdiyya 2/75/1B

471 Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State, op. cit.*, p. 78.

472 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 3 and 14.

473 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, documents no.3, 10 and 13.

*i) A Natural Disaster?*

Several reasons were suggested to explain the breaking down of cultivation in Eastern Sudan. Weak rains on the Ethiopian Plateau in 1887 and 1888 (1305-1306) led to insufficient floods which in turn considerably limited the yields of the Qāsh and Baraka deltas. Poor harvests caused by climatic instability sapped the capacity of the local populations to pivot and make better use of the winter rains in the Gwineb to grow crops, which, in any case, could not have fully compensated the deficit accumulated in the two previous years.

However, external negative factors were not new in the region and its inhabitants normally managed to mitigate their effect by resorting to trade to fulfil their needs in grain. Deficits should indeed have been compensated by imports (whether these were structurally required or not). The three pillars of Bijāwī economy, trade, agriculture and husbandry, were meant to balance each other. If one failed, the other two could offset the loss, allowing these communities to subsist until better times. As a result, bad harvests cannot, by themselves, explain the collapse of the regional economy and the famine. The two other repositories of wealth—cash derived from the organisation of caravans and the local petty trade on the one hand, and capital in the form of livestock in the other hand—must have been affected by other negative factors.

Steven Serels contended that grain was indeed available for purchase in the Red Sea markets, including in Sawākin, and that prices had remained relatively stable throughout the period. Consequently, the crux of the issue was not grain availability, but the Bijāwī pastoralists' inability to buy said grain, or, in other words, that "ARSL [African Red Sea littoral] pastoralists starved because they had no means to purchase the grain in the market". He focused his attention on livestock and put forward the hypothesis that they had experienced during that period a dramatic loss in capital with the death of large numbers of livestock—primarily cattle—caused by a rinderpest outbreak, a disease first introduced in Eritrea by the Italians when they brought infected cattle in Maṣawwa' in 1887 (1304/5), and that quickly spread to the Abyssinian highlands and then Eastern Sudan<sup>474</sup>.

He himself recognised that there was little documentary evidence in colonial archives that confirmed the spread of this epizootic in Eastern Sudan under the Mahdists. The main proof presented in support of this hypothesis is a British veterinarian report from 1899 (1306/7) that noted the fact that that year's epizootic—a much better documented episode than the one that had occurred a decade earlier—had seen mortality rates remain below 60%, a strong indication that the local stock had already been in contact with the disease and that its surviving members were

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474 Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945*, *op. cit.*, p. 90–94.

immune to it. Indeed, non-immunised herds often suffered from mortality rates as high as 90%<sup>475</sup>. The mobilisation of Mahdist sources provides new insights into the question and allows us, to some extent, to discard that theory.

The rinderpest hypothesis raises three main issues. The first one is to explain how authorities in Sawākin could have failed to notice in 1889 that up to 90% of the herds had died. Incompetence within the DMI has been noted before but this concerned mostly Eastern Sudan's political intricacies. Officers were very dependent on external informants but often failed to notice that these had their own agenda and showed little qualms in spreading, sometimes, aberrant rumours. Livestock health, however, did not leave the same room for interpretation and manipulation. It seems almost impossible that multiple herds across Eastern Sudan may have experienced dire losses, supposedly in a matter of a few days—the normal incubation time for the rinderpest ranges from three to nine days<sup>476</sup>—, and that none of the DMI's interlocutors, who mostly came in the hope of obtaining British support in the form of weapons, food supplies and cash, never thought of mentioning that 90% of their cattle had died. Serels argued that the attention brought on the famine itself may have concealed its underlying causes, but officers of the DMI also failed to take note of the extent of the food shortage witnessed in the region and were almost two years late when they started commenting on it. Mahdist authorities were not always much better informed, especially when 'Uthmān Diqna was not physically present. Still, not one of the hundreds of letters exchanged in 1888-1890 between a variety of actors ever mentioned anything resembling to such a collapse of local herds. That both the Mahdist and British powers may have missed such a crucial development borders on the impossible. In other regions, mass deaths of cattle was noted, even if surreptitiously. Šāliḥ Kūkū lived in Arqū, north of Dunqulā, and he claimed to own a piece of land on which he wanted to build a *sāqiya*. The local treasury opposed it on the ground that his field was registered as uncultivated land (*atyān al-būr*) and as such, was considered the property of the state, a characterisation that Šāliḥ vehemently challenged. He met all the criteria for ownership: he had received the land from his father and his grandfather, he had planted palm trees, and, crucially, he had been 'laying[his] hands on [the land] since the Turkiyya.' Only once, he said, did "he lift his hands from it, for a few days in 1304 (1886/7) when the cows died over all the country (*ḥašala mītat al-abqār 'alā jamī' al-balad*)<sup>477</sup>".

Secondly, the need to summon an external factor to explain the impoverishment of the

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475 Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State*, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

476 John ROWE, "Rinderpest in the Sudan, 1888-1898: The Mystery of the Missing Panzootic, With Comments by Kjell Hødnebo," *Sudanic Africa*, 1994, vol. 5, p. 151.

477 NRO Mahdiyya 5/10/41 document no. 44. Paradoxically, this observation raises more questions than it answers. If Šāliḥ Kūkū refers to the same epizootic, its dating implies that the disease spread at lightning speed to have reached such a distant territory so early.

Bijāwī populations lies on the idea that grain was available and, crucially, that prices had remained somewhat stable. According to Serels, with the exception of a brief period in late December 1889 when raids hindered trade circulations, “the price of dhura in Eastern Sudanese markets quickly returned to normal levels of 4 Maria Theresa silver thalers per 4.5 kg sack and this price remained relatively constant from January through July 1890<sup>478</sup>”. This point is central because without a price increase, the reason for the Bijāwī pastoralists’ inability to purchase *dhura* must be found elsewhere. Unfortunately, prices may have been relatively stable, which in itself is quite surprising, but 4 MTt for a 4.5 kg sack cannot be described as a return to “normal levels”. This affirmation is based on the testimony of four soldiers who managed to flee Umm Durmān and reach Sawākin in late 1889 (early 1307), but the numbers that were recorded and presented in the Intelligence report were obviously wrong. Firstly, if indeed the price of the 4,5 kg bag had increased from 4 to 20 MTt, this would have meant that the *ardabb* (144 kg) of *dhura* in Trinkitāt had reached the extraordinary price of 640 MTt, an improbable amount. In the same letter, the most extreme value mentioned was 240 r. the *ardabb* in Kasalā, while prices in Khartoum varied between 36 and 40 *riyāl*<sup>479</sup>. In any case, this type of unit was so uncommon in Eastern Sudan that no other reference to it could be found. The unit found throughout Mahdist accounts was the bag (*kīs* pl. *akyās*) that equaled a third of an *ardabb*, around 48 kg. Alternatively, smaller distributions and transactions were often stipulated in *kīla*, a twelfth of an *ardabb*, that is around 12 kg. Logically, a bag contained 4 *kīla*. None of these measures amounts to 4,5 kg. In all likelihood, a comma was inadvertently added by an officer with little knowledge of local economic realities.

Nonetheless, prices were indeed relatively stable on the littoral. According to Lt.-Commander Paget, the average price for a bag of *dhura* in Sawākin was 3,75 MTt. It increased to 4,25 MTt in November 1888 (Rabī‘ I 1306), an evolution that Paget described as a “considerable rise” but that was still considerably lower than in the Sudanese hinterland<sup>480</sup>. And yet, British officers of the DMI failed to note that these prices were constant because they had already tripled and may have reached a ceiling beyond which it could not be purchased anymore. Indeed, when grain arrived in Sawākin or was harvested in Barbar and Kasalā, the *ardabb* could be valued as low as 4 or 5 MTt. This is at least what was declared at Sawākin’s customs. In 1890, 59 752 ard. entered the port for a total value of 62 765 E£, that is 0,872 E£ the *ardabb* or 5 MTt<sup>481</sup>. Grain produced in

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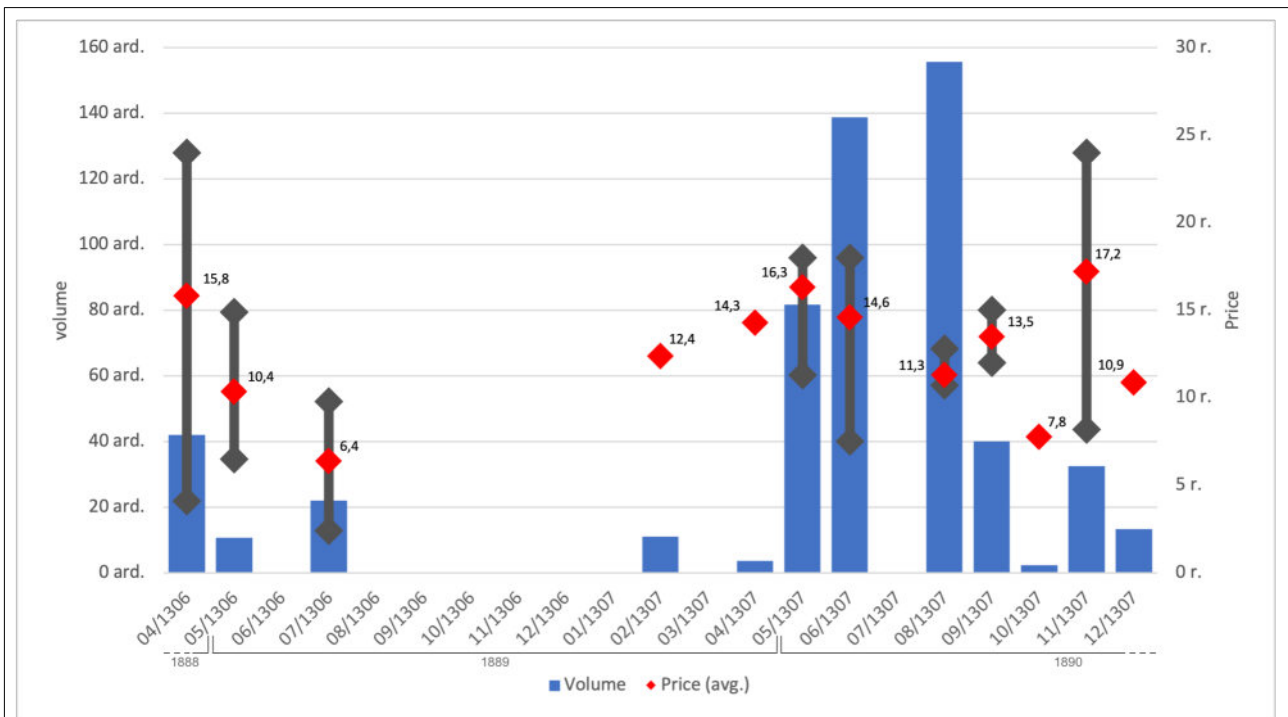
478 Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State*, op. cit., p. 75.

479 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 91 (17-30 September 1889), Appendix A; and Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 99 (7-20 January 1890), Appendix D, p. 9-10.

480 BNA FO 633/58, Inclosure in telegram no. 133, Lt.-Commander Paget to Sir E. Baring, 27 November 1888.

481 The Egyptian pound was worth 100 piastres. The British pound equalled 97,5 piastres, the Egyptian *riyāl* 20 piastres and the MTt 21 piastres. Conversion rates with Mahdist *riyāl* is more complex to ascertain due to the numerous debasements in their coinage. But since these occurred after 1891 (1308/9), the matter can be temporarily set aside and the *riyāl maqbūl*, the main Mahdist coin, can be valued at 25 piastres, that around 1,25 MTt. See, in this





**Fig. 4.13:** Grain purchase in Eastern Sudan (1889-1891)

**Sources:** NRO Mahdiyya 5/01/04, Mahdiyya 5/02/08, Mahdiyya 5/04/16, Mahdiyya 5/05/21 and 5/06/27A.

**Methodology:** In Rabī' II 1306 (December 1888), around 40 ard. of grain were purchased by the treasury. Prices varied between 5 r. and 25 r., for an average of 15,8 r. per *ardabb*.

the Nile Valley was even cheaper<sup>482</sup>. Selling bags at 4 MTt represented thus a 135% price increase. Prices in the harbours were even higher. In December 1889, the DMI stated that “four dhows from Trinkitat report[ed that] the dhurra they landed there was sold at five dollars a sack<sup>483</sup>”, around 15 *riyāl* the *ardabb*. This was indeed the price paid by the Tūkar treasury when it managed to purchase grain (see fig. 4.13). The same informants claimed that they heard that the bag of *dhura* was sold in the Mahdist headquarters for 16 dollars, or around 50 *riyāl* the *ardabb*. This may be true, but no evidence could be found in Mahdist sources to support it. The treasury seemingly never partook in the grain trade as a seller. Only two sales were recorded, both directly at a harbour (Trinkitāt and Adūbana), not in Tūkar, and no motives were given. In March/April 1890 (Sha‘bān 1307), 64 k. were thus sold for 248 r., that is around 11,6 r. the *ardabb*, a very reasonable price considering the context (see fig. 4.13)<sup>484</sup>. Surprisingly, no comments were made in the administrative correspondence regarding the private grain market, beyond ‘Uthmān Diqna’s general admonition to traders against monopolising grain (see above). Accordingly, nothing is known of the prices

chapter, note 179 [check]. For a detailed analysis of the evolution the Egyptian pound’s rate, see Markus A. DENZEL, *Handbook of World Exchange Rates, 1590–1914*, London, Routledge, 2010, p. 599–606.

482 In 1895/6 (1313), well after the end of the famine, *dhura* could be found in Arqū at 2 r. the *ardabb* (NRO Mahdiyya 5/10/42 document no. 23).

483 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 97 (11-23 December 1889), Appendix A.

484 NRO Mahdiyya 5/06/27A, p. 53.

practised by traders. The initial remark may nonetheless point to an interesting observation: while prices on the littoral remained relatively stable once they had nearly tripled, extremely high transport costs from the harbours of the Red Sea to the hinterland may have been the main factor in the raise of grain prices. In January 1891 (Jumādā II 1308), *dhura* was sold at the high price 8 r. the *ardabb* in Eastern Sudan, despite the fact that the harvests had been spared by locusts<sup>485</sup>.

Ultimately, Bijāwī communities were unable to buy grain not because of the brutal destruction of their herds by an epizootic, the presence of which in Eastern Sudan still has to be demonstrated, but because the disruption of economic circulations since 1885 and a sharp increase in market prices since at least 1887 had gradually eroded the little capital at their disposal. Grain prices probably stabilised because traders could not find buyers anymore. Otherwise, there would be no reason for merchants who had invested this trade not to speculate on the needs of the Sudanese populations. As noted by Serels, the Bijāwī communities found themselves without the necessary cash to purchase *dhura* directly. To obtain it, they resorted first to selling part of their livestock<sup>486</sup>, but the proceeds must have been limited since they do not appear in the trade reports between 1883 and 1898 (1300-1316). In any case, contrary to what Serels seems to have assumed, cattle rearing was not widespread among the Bijāwī groups, but was mainly undertaken by communities pertaining to the Southern Bijāwī triangle, particularly the Banī ‘Āmir. Further to the north, climatic conditions rendered such activity too complex and camel-rearing was the dominant activity. So, the individuals who came to Sawākin brought whatever objects of worth they could find. In 1889-1891 (1306-1308), the increase in exports from Sawākin was mainly driven by silver ornaments sold to Banyans and then exported to Bombay. By 1892 (1309/10), once the crisis had passed, it had entirely stopped (see fig. 4.8b). The same was true in ‘Aqīq Kabīr where its *ma`mūr* observed in September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307) that “some silver and gold was brought from the mainland during this time<sup>487</sup>.” This impoverishment affected everyone, even Muḥammad al-Majdhūb, the son of the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir. Since they did not cultivate, his family used to buy their grain on the market, but in December 1890 (Rabī‘ II 1308), he had nothing with which to pay and resorted to ask the treasury several bags of *dhura*<sup>488</sup>.

Beside this gradual erosion of the Bijāwī communities’ capacity to finance grain purchases, logistics played a certain role in the brutal deterioration of food availability. As mentioned, no reference to the death of large numbers of cattle could be located in the Mahdist correspondence. Camels infected by the epizootic do not present particular symptoms. But the lack of rain in 1887

485 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 122, p. 66 and NRO CairInt 3/03/44, “Report on Tokar Land”, Mr. Palmer to the president of the Council, 26 December 1891.

486 BNA FO 633/59, correspondence no. 36, Sir Baring to the Marquis of Salisbury, 22 January 1889.

487 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 90 (1-16 September 1889), Appendix G.

488 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 47.

and again in 1888 severely reduced available pastures, with dire effects on camel herds. In September 1888 (Muḥarram 1306), ‘Uthmān Diqna complained that the camels of all the regions were weak and emaciated due to the lack of fodder<sup>489</sup>. When camels were required in December to transfer grain from Barbar, Ḥāmid ‘Alī, the *amīn* of the town’s treasury, explained that he had the utmost difficulty to gather the sufficient number of camels and that “many of them had died”, without further detail<sup>490</sup>. One year later, the situation had visibly worsened and was not restricted to the Mahdists. Bijāwī groups who opposed Mahdist rule and attempted to organise a raid in September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307) against Muḥammad Mūsā Diqna, then settled in Arkawīt—probably in search of the same rare pastures—, reported intense difficulties in finding camels<sup>491</sup>. At the same moment, two Hadanduwa who had just left the Red Sea Hills arrived at Sawākin with “sick camels<sup>492</sup>”. Even the often clueless officers of the DMI noted that the coming of the early winter rains would increase pastures and so “the great distress which has been prevalent, both in [Sawākin’s] vicinity and the interior for several months will probably be relieved<sup>493</sup>.” During the whole period, from 1887 to 1894, camel prices went up 50% to reach 30 MTt while goats and sheep’s prices remained low and stable<sup>494</sup>. In that regard, the famine was compounded by the collapse of camel herds and its corollary, a steep increase in transportation costs that further limited the purchasing power of both the Bijāwī communities and the Mahdist authorities.

*ii) A British-Made Disaster: The Blockade of the Sudanese Red Sea Littoral*

The British did not observe the evolution of the situation as mere spectators but instrumentalised food insecurity to weaken the Mahdist presence in Eastern Sudan. The famine that ran from 1888 to mid-1890 (1306-1307) was the result of a combination of factors, namely degraded climatic conditions, unprecedented requisitions by the Mahdist power—placing enormous strain on a structurally precarious balance of food supplies—, and the breaking down of communication due to a lack of camels. The second phase of the famine may have been much shorter, a few months at most, but its effects were devastating, and this time, the consequence of decisions taken consciously by British officers<sup>495</sup>.

The origins of this policy hark back to the very first year of British presence in Sawākin. Initially, a few officers claimed that the idea had been suggested by their local interlocutors.

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489 NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/62B, document no. 32.

490 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 130.

491 *Ibid.*, letter 180.

492 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 90 (1<sup>st</sup>-16 September 1889), Appendix A.

493 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 91 (17-30 September 1889), Summary.

494 Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640–1945*, *op. cit.*, p. 103–104.

495 Steven SERELS, “Famines of War: The Red Sea Grain Market and Famine in Eastern Sudan, 1889-1891,” *op. cit.*, p. 86–88.

Commodore Molyneux was among the first to report that ‘Alī [Birkīt] had suggested in October 1884 (D. al-Ḥijja 1301) the imposition of a blockade on the Red Sea littoral<sup>496</sup>. Others, like the leadership of the Mīrghaniyya, also condoned the blockade<sup>497</sup>. General Wolseley’s communication of May 1885 (Rajab/Shā‘bān 1302) underlines that the military authorities were initially in favour of adopting such a policy. In a dynamic of open conflict with the forces of ‘Uthmān Dīqna, and due to the low strength of the Sawākin garrison that prevented any offensive action, the blockade was intended to cause a slow erosion of Mahdist authority. Commodore Molyneux, then in charge of the naval forces at Sawākin, was able to write dramatically in July 1885 (Ramaḍān/Shawwāl 1302), “Famine will be our best ally<sup>498</sup>”. Even civilian authorities like Consul Cameron shared that opinion<sup>499</sup>. The first operations decided in that framework were relatively successful. An expedition conducted against *marsā* Shināb, north of Dunqunāb and Ruwāya, had brought the cessation of trade between Bijāwī tribes and the Arabian coast. Colonel Chermiside justified it by writing: “this action of stopping all trade between the tribes and the Arabian coast excepting Suakin, is, I am confident, the true manner of checking the revolt, and of forcing the tribes to peace, by rendering the use of the port of Suakin a necessity to them [...]. It is also the best manner of checking the Slave Trade<sup>500</sup>.”

But the blockade did not produce the expected results, a fact that Consul Cameron eventually noted in January 1886 (Rabī‘ II 1303). He stated in a report that “this maritime blockade, however prolonged and effectual and stringent, can have but little effect on the real situation in the Eastern Soudan, which for its vital strength and fanaticism is most obviously dependent inland on Khartoum, Kassala, and Berber<sup>501</sup>”. He wrote again to Baring, the consul-general of Egypt, in April 1887 (Rajab 1304) that, since British naval forces were unable to control smuggling, and since no land force could be assembled, a policy of pacification through trade was the only possible option<sup>502</sup>. Indeed, the numerous reports sent by the commander of the naval forces to Sawākin indicate a crucial lack of resources to control 500 km of coastline and often difficult to access due to the presence of sandbanks and coral reefs. Stationed at Quarantine Island, where docks were built in 1884 (1301/2), the Royal Navy was already tasked with protecting the city from Mahdist assaults, in addition to its primary objective: bringing an end to the slave-trade in the Red Sea. They proved

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496 Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

497 “Morghani of Cairo sanguine about being able to reconcile tribes, but asks for time to effect it. Other Morghani, who has more local experience, looks on Hadendowas as only to be reduced by fear of Abyssinians or by blockade of coast” (BNA FO 633/56, correspondence no. 25, Mr. Egerton to the Marquis of Salisbury, 30 August 1885).

498 BNA FO 633/55, correspondence no. 140, Commodore Molyneux to Admiral Hay, 8 June 1885.

499 BNA FO 633/56, telegram no. 31, Mr. Egerton to the Marquis of Salisbury, 25 August 1885.

500 BNA FO 633/56, correspondence no. 31, Mr. Egerton to the Marquis of Salisbury, 25 August 1885.

501 BNA FO 633/56, telegram no. 10, Mr. Egerton to the Marquis of Salisbury, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1886.

502 BNA FO 633/58, telegram no. 9, Sir E. Baring to the Marquis of Salisbury, Suakin, 30 April 1887.

very reluctant to enforce a blockade, which they had come to believe was a bad strategy<sup>503</sup>. Consequently, initiated in August 1885 (Shawwāl/D. al-Qa‘da 1302), this policy was quickly abandoned, especially as the emergence of opposition movements among the Hadanduwa and Ammār’ar communities in 1886 (1303) offered a credible alternative to challenge Mahdist power in the region. Neither ‘Uthmān Diqna’s return in December 1887 (Rabī‘ I 1305) and the subsequent pacification campaign waged against the rebellious Bijāwī groups, nor the siege of Sawākin from September to December 1888 (Muḥarram-Rabī‘ I 1306) led to its resumption<sup>504</sup>.

Yet, some British officers, headed by Colonel Kitchener, the governor-general of Sawākin from 1886 to 1889 (1304-1307)<sup>505</sup>, were vocal in arguing for the reinstatement of the blockade. As a result, he came under virulent and personal attacks for his opposition to the free trade policy that was defended within business circles. A *Times* correspondent in Sawākin reported in May 1888 (Sha‘bān/Ramaḍān 1305) that “one and all unite in the cry that [Kitchener’s] desire to annex Tokar led him in the first place to sacrifice trade, and that he has continued to hamper it in every possible shape and way, and to disturb the country by weak and purposeless raids. Perhaps, as has been grimly observed, now that he has obtained his promotion, he will drop the Tokar project<sup>506</sup>.” Tensions ran high in the Red Sea port as Colonel Kitchener was accused of undermining the policy he professed to be enforcing. In the same article, the journalist remarked “I have been overwhelmed with the most contradictory testimony of witnesses professing to be acquainted with every detail of the matter under investigation.” So antagonistic were the positions that it even divided officers. When Major Watson was said, in early 1889 (mid-1306) to have endeavoured to restrict trade<sup>507</sup>, he wrote a long letter to Salisbury, the Prime Minister and the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, to deny it and distance himself from Kitchener’s policy<sup>508</sup>. He himself had taken keen interest in the success of the Sudan Trade Company. A few months before his letter to Salisbury, he had taken part in a meeting of the Manchester Geographical Society on the Red Sea and the Sudan, in the company of Francis W. Fox, the founder of the STC, during which he spoke to emphasise the economic and

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503 Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State*, *op. cit.*, p. 45–46.

504 *The Pall Mall Gazette*, « The Truth about our Policy at Suakin », 22 January 1889.

505 With a long interlude, in 1888, mostly spent away after the injury he received in the attack against Handūb in January (see fig. 2.8).

506 *The Times*, “Trade at Suakin”, 24 and 25 May 1888.

507 *The Pall Mall Gazette*, “The truth about our policy at Suakin”, 22 January 1889.

508 BNA FO 633/60, telegram no. 15, Maj. Watson to the Marquis of Salisbury, 27 May 1889. “This letter [...] is written to point out to your Lordship that the allegation that Colonel Kitchener’s policy at Suakin and mine were identical is incorrect. To put the matter shortly, my policy was, not to interfere actively with the interior of the country, but to persuade and encourage the tribes to pacify their own districts, holding out to them as an inducement to do so the promise that trade would be reopened in those districts so soon as they were restored by the tribes themselves to a peaceful condition. Colonel Kitchener, on the contrary, interfered directly with the interior of the country, as for example, when he ordered Tokar to be given up to him within three days (an order which he had no power to enforce), and when he appointed Government Agents for Sinkat and other places in the interior.”

commercial potential of the region<sup>509</sup>.

Even “Colonel Kitchener's opponents make out that whether favourably disposed to commerce or not, he is, at any rate, ignorant of his first principles<sup>510</sup>.” But his thought ran counter to theirs and both rationales could not be reconciled. His attention was almost singularly, if not somewhat obsessively, focused on the matter of grain. The governor-general of the Red Sea firmly believed that the reoccupation of Tūkar and the Baraka Delta was the key to eradicating Mahdism in Eastern Sudan. He kept putting forward and peddling doubtful numbers, like the 12 000 bags that were supposed to have exited Sawākin just before the siege<sup>511</sup>, or the hundreds that were supplied to Trinkitāt and Handūb during the famine (see above). This was not necessarily malicious, but reveals a particular bias from Kitchener in information selection. He kept on claiming that without the reopening of trade at the beginning of 1889 (mid-1306), the Mahdists would have been unable to meet the needs of their troops and so forced to withdraw<sup>512</sup>.

However, initiating a shift in Sawākin's trade policy required a propitious set of circumstances. Increased tensions in food supplies since 1888 (1305/6) reinforced Sawākin's position, but Kitchener was convinced that all other harbours should be closed so as to better leverage the Red Sea port's position as the sole provider of grain for Eastern Sudan. As in 1885 (1302/3), this opinion was suspiciously supported by local leaders. Shaykh 'Alī 'Umar of the Jamīlāb declared in June 1889 (Shawwāl 1306) to the Bimbashi Prinsep, the officer in charge of the Intelligence Division at Sawākin, that “if the Government wanted to get rid of the dervishes, they could do so by effectually shutting all the harbours. Akik and Suakin are now the only places where dhurra is obtainable, and they would starve, while the Arabs could always get food from Suakin<sup>513</sup>”. Ḥamad Darb Kātī, one of Maḥmūd 'Alī's son, was also in favour of a complete blockade. He mentioned the same argument pushed again and again by Kitchener that “when the gates were open natives loyal to the Government obtained practically nothing; natives friendly to the Dervishes obtained a small quantity of grains, but the great bulk fell into the hands of the Dervishes and was used exclusively by them<sup>514</sup>.”

The turning point occurred in late 1889 (early 1307) and was prompted by two realisations. Firstly, the temporary suspension of trade relations implemented since September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307) had proved efficient tools to coerce Mahdist authorities in adopting a more conciliatory

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509 *The Manchester Guardian*, “The Manchester Geographical Society: Red Sea and the Soudan”, 17 December 1888 and Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State*, *op. cit.*, p. 62–68.

510 *The Times*, “Trade at Suakin”, 25 May 1888.

511 BNA FO 881/5700, “Memorandum on Events and Negotiations in connection with the Retention of Suakin since 1883”, 1888 p. 35.

512 BNA FO 633/59, telegram no. 35, Sir E. Baring to the Marquis of Salisbury, 15 January 1889.

513 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 84 (11-26 June 1889), Appendix A.

514 BNA FO 633/59, telegram no. 2, Maj.-General Dormer to the Horse Guards, 3 November 1890.

position. The lesson was not lost. Besides, the testimony of two Egyptian soldiers, two trusted sources, who had escaped Umm Durmān and reached Sawākin and Cairo through different paths, gave British authorities a much better understanding of the intensity of the food crisis in the interior. They even had time, during their arduous journey, to note that “had trade in the Eastern Sudan been stopped for a year, and efficient means been taken to prevent supplies and ammunition reaching the dervishes by unauthorised routes, the dervishes would probably have been driven by famine either to disperse or to submit to the Government<sup>515</sup>.” This opinion was echoed soon after in higher circles. General Grenfell, the *sirdar* of the Egyptian army since April 1885 (Jumādā II/Rajab 1302) and Kitchener’s predecessor at that position, concluded from his reading of the Intelligence Report of January 1890 (Jumādā I 1307) that “the re-opening of trade has furnished sufficient supplies to the dervish forces in Eastern Sudan to allow them to remain, and that if the harbours had been kept closed and grain prohibited, they must have left the country<sup>516</sup>.” Kitchener made a similar comment six months later, in July 1890 (D. al-Qa’da/D. al-Ḥijja 1307), writing “the fact that there is no restriction whatever on grain entering the Sudan without Government control from the Red Sea coast appears to be the main cause for the unsatisfactory aspect of affairs at Suakin. The influence of Suakin over the neighbouring Arab tribes has evidently greatly diminished<sup>517</sup>”.

From this point of view, it seemed necessary to put an end to grain imports into Eastern Sudan as quickly as possible in order to limit the Mahdist government's capacity for military concentration, said to be preparing an attack against the Egyptian border, even if the veracity of this rumour was questionable at best<sup>518</sup>. Hotted Smith himself, the governor-general who had succeeded Kitchener in September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307), was doubtful about it<sup>519</sup>. Kitchener— now back in Cairo where he had been appointed inspector general of the Egyptian police<sup>520</sup>—was of course of a different opinion. He stressed to his superior in August 1890 (late 1307), that “the project of attacking Egypt by the roads northwards from the neighbourhood of Suakin is being steadily carried out by Osman Digna”, and added that the latter “is now very cleverly having his force fed by the Suakin Government until he is ready to move”, just as he had done in September 1888 (late 1305)

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515 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 99 (7-20 January 1890), Appendix D.

516 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 98 (24 December 1889-6 January 1890), Covering Minutes.

517 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 111 (24 June-7 July 1890), Covering Minutes.

518 The correspondence exchanged between ‘Uthmān Diqna and the Khalīfa does not contain references to such operation.

519 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 109 (27 May-9 June 1890), Covering Minutes. He wrote in June 1890 (Shawwāl/D. al-Qa’da 1307) that “the reports of an advance via Kosseir on Egypt have been in circulation for some months past. It is possible this movement may be talked of among the dervishes themselves, but natives do not put much faith in these rumours and consider they are circulated to revive the flagging interest in Mahdism. [...] The Arabs, if even Osman Digna could collect them, would desert in the first opportunity, and it is improbable that the wells on the route could supply a large number of men and animals.”

520 C. Brad FAUGHT, *Kitchener: Hero and Anti-Hero*, New York, I.B. Tauris, 2016, p. 54.

just before the beginning of the siege<sup>521</sup>. A few days after this report was published, on 17 August, the first day of the new Islamic year (1 Muḥarram 1308), all imports of grain into a region hard hit by famine were blocked for five months.

Kitchener knew this decision would be fiercely challenged within business circles in Sawākin, Cairo and London. Several factors allowed him to dissimulate his intentions. Firstly, Kitchener had found a good reason to close Sawākin's gates. He instrumentalised the threat of a cholera epidemic as a pretext to circumvent the official policy of free trade and imposed a quarantine on the Red Sea port<sup>522</sup>. Secondly, in the summer 1890 (late 1307), Baring, the Consul-General in Egypt, had left Cairo, probably to treat his sciatica at Carlsbad<sup>523</sup>. Grenfell was also on leave and Kitchener had been chosen as acting-*sirdar*. As for Holled Smith, Sawākin's governor, he may have supported the blockade, but he was unreliable, as his past remarks on the reality of a Mahdist invasion had shown. He too was on leave and had been replaced by a more junior officer, the Kaimakam Hackett Pain<sup>524</sup>. This policy was supported at the higher echelons. General Wolseley defended it in London<sup>525</sup> and Major-General Dormer, at the head of British forces in Cairo, was candid about the reasons behind the quarantine, writing that "the Cholera scare has at least had this beneficial effect, that it has afforded an excuse for putting a stop to the suicidal policy of free trade in grain, and supplying the rebel dervishes (not the distressed and peaceful inhabitants) with food to enable them to carry on their hostilities against the Government<sup>526</sup>". But others did not hesitate to express their doubts, and some recoiled at the possible consequences of this measure. The Brigadier-General W. F. Butler, who served in Egypt, professed to agree with Kitchener on the inadequacy of the current dispositions regarding trade, but added that he "regard[s] the stoppage of the existing system, in the present state of famine prevailing throughout the Eastern Sudan, as practically condemning to death, by starvation, great numbers of women, children, and non-

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521 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 113 (22 July-4 August 1890), Covering Minutes.

522 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan, op. cit.*, p. 190–191. This must have been partly planned. On 21 September 1890 (6 Šafar 1308), Kitchener wrote that "the cessation of supplies of grain from Suakin to the dervishes, owing to quarantine regulations, is having the effect anticipated, in breaking up the camp at Handub, as well as causing the Handub tribe to see the necessity of keeping on good terms with the Government." See DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 116 (2-10 September 1890), Covering Minutes.

523 Roger OWEN, *Lord Cromer: Victorian imperialist, Edwardian proconsul*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 216.

524 A letter from a correspondent in Sawākin, forwarded by Fox, described the situation thus: "Trade was gradually but surely developing; the tribes were becoming more confident and eager for peace and trade. But all this was changed by the irresponsible frivolity of the young and inexperienced replacement Governor-General [G. Hackett Pain] and the military authorities in Cairo" (*The Manchester Guardian*, "Letter to the Editor", 3 January 1891).

525 Wolseley wrote on the question that "the immediate measures I would recommend are the closing of the port of Trinkitat, the maintenance of a close naval watch over the coast line from Massowah to Mount Elba, and the stoppage of all trade with the interior" (BNA WO 32/6353, "Blockade of Sudan: question of restriction on importation of grain. Suggested reopening of trade", Gal. Wolseley to the Secretary of State for War, 22 August, 1890).

526 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 116 (2-10 September 1890), Covering Minutes.



combatants<sup>527</sup>.” This all too real possibility bolstered the need to dissimulate this from the general public. In that regard, the timing of the quarantine was propitious. Besides the fact that the summer was the period during which dhura reserves would be at their lowest, especially after two years of mediocre harvests, and so Bijāwī and Mahdist communities were particularly vulnerable, British authorities in Sawākin knew they would not have to answer to their actions in the immediate future. Indeed, the last parliamentary assembly of 1889-1890 (1307-1308) was held on 18 August 1890, the day after the quarantine was introduced, and did not gather again before 25 November 1890. This did not stop Major-General Dormer from complaining, three weeks prior, that “the wretched condition of the non-combatant inhabitants of the Eastern Soudan will probably soon be brought to the notice of Parliament and of the public, while it will be easy for a certain class of philanthropists and humanitarians to show that, while Suakin is stored with grain, the people outside its walls are dying of hunger<sup>528</sup>.” He was right, a week after Parliament had reconvened, the role of British authorities in Eastern Sudan’s famine was mentioned, without follow-up<sup>529</sup>. The *Manchester Guardian*’s correspondent in Sawākin had also noted the strange coincidence that “the English Parliament had again adjourned, when a verbal order was issued to close the gates against trade and drive away the inhabitants living outside the walls”. He remarked that Colonel Kitchener had also waited for the suspension of Parliament in August 1887 (D. al-Qa’da/D. al-Ḥijja 1304) before launching raids against the Bijāwī tribes. He was quite convinced that if the gates were closed, “it was not for quarantine reasons, as it was over fifty days after the outbreak of cholera in the Hedjaz that this order was promulgated<sup>530</sup>”.

While it is not possible to establish with certainty the responsibility of the military authorities in Cairo in consciously setting up a blockade of Eastern Sudan’s shore at a time when the region was suffering from intense famine, the combination of elements examined above allows us to consider that the fear of the spread of a cholera epidemic was seen by certain officers, first among which Kitchener, as an opportunity to implement a policy that would probably not have been accepted either by the British government or by public opinion. However, it achieved its original goal: definitively crippling Mahdist influence in Eastern Sudan.

## **Conclusion: The Price of Peace**

“How many battles have been fought in the neighbourhood of Suakin since 1883? How

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527 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 113 (22 July-4 August 1890), Covering Minutes.

528 BNA FO 633/61, telegram no. 2, Maj.-Gal. Dormer to Horse Guards, 3 November 1890.

529 *The Manchester Guardian*, “Parliamentary speeches”, 23 December 1890.

530 *The Manchester Guardian*, “The Famine in the Eastern Soudan. Terrible details. Suakim, 10 November 1890”, 9 December 1890.

many of the natives have been killed? What has been the expense in men and money to England and Egypt? How many of the people of the district have died of starvation? What is the policy behind this alternation of bayonets and famine? What is it supposed to lead to, and who is responsible for it?<sup>531</sup>” The author of these lines thought these questions should be answered in the Parliament, but Kitchener’s tactic had worked and when news of his decision finally reached the metropolis in November 1890 (Rabī‘ I/II 1308), it did not cause a public outcry.

Gauging the effects of the famine of 1306 on Eastern Sudan’s population is an arduous task. Estimates for populations are fragile and later censuses conducted in Nilotic Sudan notoriously problematic, among other reasons because the newly established colonial power had strong incentives to amplify the collapse of Nilotic Sudan’s population during the Mahdiyya<sup>532</sup>. In the first census of 1903 (1320/1), the population of Eastern Sudan was estimated at 140 000, from 800 000 in 1882 (1299/300). Steven Serels’ estimate of 210 00 is certainly much closer to the truth<sup>533</sup>. This would still entail that a third of the region’s population had died in two decades.

One striking aspect of the *Sanat Sitta* in Eastern Sudan is how invisible it is in both British and Mahdist sources. Regarding authorities in Sawākin, their perspective was severely limited to the direct surroundings of the port where local groups gathered in the hope of obtaining some grain. Otherwise, they relied solely on testimonies from traders and the occasional escapee. Contemporary observers pointed out that the mortality rate must be much higher inland, an area with which the Sawākin authorities had almost no communications. In that respect, Bimbashi Prinsep, at the head of the DMI in Sawākin, stated in August 1889 (D. al-Ḥijja 1306) that “the continual reports of great distress and extreme want from all parts of the Sudan are, I believe, in no way exaggerated. Even those of the tribesmen who come from comparatively close to Suakin, mostly present a most emaciated appearance on arrival here. [...] If this want exists comparatively close to Suakin, it must be infinitely worse in the more distant districts where the tribes have less opportunity of obtaining dhurra<sup>534</sup>.” A year later, in March-April 1890 (Rajab-Sha‘bān 1307), he believed his initial statement had been vindicated and asserted that “the inhabitants of Kassala and Berber, and villages between the latter place and Khartum, are in a state of absolute famine. Though the whole country is perfectly quiet, the deaths from mere starvation are enormous.” He also noted that “reporters describe[d] the state of Kassala as being terrible. Cannibalism is common<sup>535</sup>.” But these comments

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531 *The Manchester Guardian*, “Editorial”, 29 January 1891.

532 Karol J. KRÓTKI, “La population du Soudan au XIXe siècle et au début du XXe siècle,” *Annales de démographie historique*, 1979, p. 171–176.

533 Steven SERELS, *Starvation and the State*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

534 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 88 (7 -15 August 1889), Summary.

535 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 102 (20 February- 3 March 1890), Summary and Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 104 (18 March-1<sup>st</sup> April 1890), Summary,

all relied on testimonies. Actual evidence for the effects of the famine on local populations were gathered much later and were mainly circumstantial. For example, the British administrator of the SPS, G.E.R. Sandars observed in the early 1930s that “even at this relatively recent date it is clear that the Atbara Bisharin were vastly more numerous than they are at present; the names of no less than eleven sections now extinct appear in the list [of Bishārīn sections in 1880]”. He added that only 25% of Bishārīn farmland on the banks of the ‘Aṭbara was under cultivation, which he believed to be a sign of the deep demographic crisis caused by the food crisis of 1888-1890 (1306-1308)<sup>536</sup>.

Paradoxically, the famine is also difficult to discern in Mahdist sources. In the vast correspondence exchanged between ‘Uthmān Dīqna and the Khalīfa, the classical term for “famine” (*majā‘a*) does not seem to have ever been used. Whereas British officials understood the crisis as one singular phenomenon but failed to grasp its details because they were not direct witnesses to it, Mahdist authorities were keen commentators on the local effects of the famine, noting that hunger plagued civilians and soldiers, but did not feel the need to set the issue within a larger framework. In their view, the crisis unfolded in a variety of configurations that required localised answers and assistance obtained from other centres of the Mahdist network, not a global response from the political centre. And yet, this unnamed famine pervaded everything and could be felt everywhere. It prompted combatants to relentlessly request grain for themselves and their families<sup>537</sup>. It was a driving factor behind increased tensions in the Mahdist camp in Tūkar, including those fuelled by Abū Qarja who accused the administrators of the treasury of misallocating the available resources<sup>538</sup> at the expense of the *anṣār* who had moved to the province. It was also in scattered mentions of its consequences on the men. For example, in late October 1889 (late Ṣafar 1307), Muḥammad Ṭāhir ‘Alī Dīqna reported to Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf that 62 men who had been brought “to replace the faithful *anṣār* who, as they were suffering from hunger, had fallen sick from eating blood and other things<sup>539</sup>.” Ultimately, the sole direct reference that could be unearthed was made by Abū Qarja himself. In February 1891 (Rajab 1308), when he arrived in Kasalā as the town’s new *‘āmil*, he wrote to the Khalīfa that “of all the Hadanduwa and Ḥalānqa tribes who are under the authority of the *mudiriyya* of Kasalā, only a few remain [...] because most of them joined the hypocrites in the mountains and some of them perished during the [famine of the] *Sanat Sitta*<sup>540</sup>.”

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536 George E. R. SANDARS, “The Bisharin,” *op. cit.*, p. 130. See also, Andrew Paul’s take on the effects of the famine on the Hadanduwa and Ammār’ar (*A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan, op. cit.*, p. 117).

537 See, for example, NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 13.

538 See chapter 3.

539 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 1; and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 1.

540 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Dīqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi, op. cit.*, p. 140–141.

The same month, on 19 February (10 Rajab) an expedition led by Colonel Hotted Smith defeated ‘Uthmān Dīqna’s forces and occupied Tūkar, putting an end to the Mahdist presence in this part of Eastern Sudan. The fragile economic balance that had allowed the movement to consolidate its power by taxing the local populations, raiding its enemies, and borrowing from its traders, had finally crumbled. Far from previous simplistic assessments, Mahdist fiscal records reveal a complex and evolutive apprehension of the best way to ensure the survival of the movement and provide for the *anṣār* to pursue the *jihād*.

Trade was the cornerstone of the Mahdist economy in Eastern Sudan, as well as the main theatre of opposition with Sawākin’s authorities. The ambiguous relations that developed from 1888 to 1890 (1305-1308) were based on an uneasy interdependence between the two sides, thus producing a situation that was neither only antagonistic, nor fully pacified. This process of trials and errors was unique to Eastern Sudan, in relation to the specificities of the region’s localisation, and attests of the need to further deconstruct the Mahdist state as a cohesive and centralised political entity.

Paradoxically, the strengthening of trade relations was concomitant to the breaking down of food supplies in the region. As manifestations of what was yet to become the famine of 1306 became more and more obvious to British officers in Sawākin, the urge to instrumentalise the crisis to eradicate Mahdist presence steadily grew, until the right set of circumstances allowed Kitchener to order the full cessation of grain imports, consciously condemning large sections of the Bijāwī communities to starve.

The capture of Tūkar sealed the fate of Mahdist rule in Eastern Sudan. By taking control of the main agricultural area, Anglo-Egyptian authorities made sure that ‘Uthmān Dīqna would be unable to feed his troops, while resorting to transfers from other regions was not an option that could be entertained anymore. In contrast with former setbacks incurred by Mahdist forces, in the wake of their defeat in Afāfīt, the *anṣār* did not retreat to the Red Sea Hills, which had been their refuge between 1883 and 1886 (1300-1304), but withdrew all the way to Kasalā and Adarāma on the ‘Aṭbara River. This marked the end of a shift initiated with the Bijāwī civil war that gradually isolated the millenarian movement from local populations. It did not, however, put an end to the attempt to form a new reformed society that abided to the principles enacted by the Mahdī.



*“I had a vision yesterday and I will tell it to you, the Sublime willing (in shā’ ta’ālī). I saw you and around you a great crowd, standing on their feet. You were distant from them, as they were making noise, afraid and scared. I ask you about them and their fear, and you say “This is the abyss (hāwiya)<sup>1</sup>, they still owe us (wa naḥna li-nā ‘alay-him ḥuqūqān) and this is the promise (wa hadhā al-wa’d).” You order me to bring the Qur’ān and you tell me: “Open to this verse.” You recite it loudly to the people while all of them are standing. This verse is “And We place the scales of justice for the Day of Resurrection, so no soul will be treated unjustly at all. And if there is [even] the weight of a mustard seed, We will bring it forth. And sufficient are We as accountant” [Q 21:47]. Your order me to tell a weight (ta’mar-nī bi-talā waznā<sup>n</sup> bi-hā) with my voice. I do as you order and you tell me “The weights of the scales are tiny particles (dharr)” and you tell me: “Those are the people (nās) who bring with them dissent. Among them are Arabic people (ahl al-‘arabiyya) and among them are ruṭāna people (ahl al-ruṭāna)”. And this is what I saw.*

Letter from Madanī ‘Uthmān Qamr al-Dīn to Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf (undated)<sup>2</sup>

Dream and apparitions played an important part in the Mahdist *da’wa*<sup>3</sup>. For instance, Bābikir Badrī’s autobiography contains three mentions of such prophetic visions, all three related to death, that of the famous *amīr* al-Nujūmī, of the Mahdī, and his own<sup>4</sup>. Like the one told by Madanī ‘Uthmān Qamr al-Dīn<sup>5</sup> to Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf, one of the *umanā’* of the treasury and the brother of its head, these dreams could be quite mundane in their form. Nothing extraordinary emanates from his account and the vision he describes could have taken place at an actual gathering of *anṣār* in Tūkar, all of them “standing on their feet”, if not for the subdued tension that transpires through the small cracks of the text. Why is the crowd afraid and scared? Why is Majdhūb Abū Bakr the protagonist of this dream and not ‘Uthmān Diqna? What is the origin of the dissent mentioned at the moment of the weighing of the scales?

One could be surprised of Madanī’s need to share his dream, but visions were taken very seriously. When al-Nujūmī heard of Bābikir Badrī’s prediction regarding his passing, he asked to meet him and requested details<sup>6</sup>. In Madanī’s case, it offers a rare insight into a personal

1 Devin J. STEWART, “Pit,” in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, Leiden, Brill, 2001, p.  
 2 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document 64 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 52.  
 3 The place of dreams in Nilotic Sudan’s culture is not exceptional. More generally, they were highly valued in Islam, especially in Sufism. For an overview of this theme, see Elizabeth SIRRIYEH, *Dreams and Visions in the World of Islam: A History of Muslim Dreaming and Foreknowing*, I.B. Tauris, 2015.  
 4 See, for example, Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 22–24, 36 and 39–40.  
 5 His identity is not certain, but the fact that he was literate, well-educated and had access to paper narrows the possibilities. He may have been a member of the Majādhīb but this could not be confirmed. The *Mudhakkirāt* mentions an “*amīr* Madanī al-Majdhūb” which is one of the few occurrences of this name but he died in combat in 1883 (1300) (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 37).  
 6 Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

understanding of the Mahdist community's inner workings in Eastern Sudan. As such, despite its fictitious dimension, his dream was imbued with political meaning<sup>7</sup>. The main objective of this chapter is to shed light on the modalities of Mahdist power. In this perspective, it mobilises the Foucauldian notion of governmentality to study not only the power apparatus established by 'Uthmān Dīqna's interpretation, but also the way it interacted with individuals, the *anṣār* and their families, and how they, in turn, challenged, instrumentalised or adapted to the specific forms of Mahdist rule<sup>8</sup>. In that regard, the development below will pay a particular attention to the microtechniques of power. The overarching aim of this chapter is to qualify the dominant approach that tends to either overlook or simply disregard the potency of the Mahdist project. Contrary to what was assumed by most contemporary observers<sup>9</sup>, the revolutionary goals of Muḥammad Aḥmad, namely the transformation of Nilotic Sudan's societies in accordance to the religious principles he proclaimed, did not die with him in 1885 (1302). On the contrary, they were still instrumental in structuring the Mahdist community in Eastern Sudan half a decade later. In that regard, the following sections will endeavour to counterbalance the preponderance of military matters—the result of the documentation itself, which was mainly dedicated to tactical questions, troops movements, etc.—by showing that military dynamics kept on spilling over the civilian domain, blurring the limit between the two spheres, among other reasons because the Mahdist state had no intention to draw a limit as it considered that every individual could be mobilised. This regimentation met many obstacles that severely hindered the extent of its influence, to the point that it could be easily overlooked by scholars of the Mahdiyya. However, the relative failure of the Mahdist project should not warrant the complete abandonment of the subject, especially since this line of investigation is revealing of the formation of Mahdist rule.

At the heart of the matter resides the notion of pastoral power developed in the lectures Michel Foucault held in 1977-1978 at the Collège de France<sup>10</sup>. Making an unexpected turn toward religious history, he defined pastoral power through three main aspects, which differentiate it from other forms of power. Each section of this chapter will be articulated around one of these modalities. First, pastoral power does not attempt to control a territory but rules over a “multiplicity in motion (*multiplicité en mouvement*)”. In contrast with sovereign power, space only matters in

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7 A century later, dreams could still be political instruments in Sudan. For an example, see Noah SALOMON, *For Love of the Prophet: An Ethnography of Sudan's Islamic State*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2016, p. 163–166.

8 For the canonical definition of apparatus (*dispositif*), see Michel FOUCAULT, *Dits et écrits, II (1976-1988)*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, p. 299. For a definition of governmentality as “the encounter between the techniques of domination exercised over others and the techniques of the self”, see p. 1604 in the same volume.

9 See introduction.

10 For an overview, see Ben GOLDER, “Foucault and the Genealogy of Pastoral Power,” *Radical Philosophy Review*, 2007, vol. 10, no. 2, p. 157–176.

relation with the population that lives on it. In Madanī's dream, space is a factor only because of a distance that separates Majdhūb from the crowd. They are present, but distant. The first section will explore Mahdist policies of territorialisation, that is its numerous attempts at affecting populations through displacements, based on the idea that the environment could alter behaviours and so bring individuals closer to Mahdism. Secondly, the pastoral power is "individualising". While the flock must be guided as a whole, the pastor's power is based on his knowledge of each individual. This requires to alter identities to integrate them into a whole in which each member of the flock is independent from the others and directly connected to the pastor, or, in Foucault's words, the principle he called *omnes et singulatim*<sup>11</sup>. The Mahdist provincial administration attempted to carry out such transformation by removing individuals from their network of sociability, primarily ethno-tribal allegiances, to form a Mahdist community articulated on military structures. The failure of this project, or at least its incompleteness, is alluded to in Madanī's dream. Despite their efforts, the Mahdist leadership could not remove all distinctive features. As a result, and this was part of the tension, in Tūkar two groups could still be distinguished, "Arabic people" and "ruṭāna people", those who spoke Arabic and those who spoke Bijāwiye. Lastly, the technologies used by the pastoral power are fundamentally beneficent<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, the Mahdist administration was responsible for the welfare of the men and acts according to the "interest of religion (*maṣlahat al-dīn*)" (see below). To that end, the regime must guarantee justice and equality among the men. This task falls partly to the *'āmil*, but *'Uthmān Dīqna* is conspicuously absent from this vision. The true guardian of the Mahdist order is Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf, the accountant.

## I. The Spatialisation of Mahdism in Eastern Sudan

In the course of the propagation of Muḥammad Aḥmad's *da'wa*, the meaning imbued in the word Mahdiyya gradually shifted. Among some 160 mentions of the term in his correspondence, all early occurrences referred either to his claim to the Mahdīship itself, which was meant to be recognised and accepted, or a moment in time, as in the expression the "expected Mahdiyya (*al-Mahdiyya al-muntazira*)". In that last acceptance, it also referred to the foundation of a regime, "a Mahdist order (*amr al-Mahdiyya*)", of which "God had made [Muḥammad Aḥmad] a sign [or harbinger] (*Allāh ja'ala li-ki 'alā al-Mahdiyya 'alāma*)"<sup>13</sup>, in direct relation with the eschatological aspiration of the movement. But then, in early 1884 (Rabī' I 1301) a spatial apprehension began to

11 Michel FOUCAULT, "Omnes et singulatim : vers une critique de la raison," *Le débat*, 1986, vol. 41, no. 4, p. 5–36.

12 Philippe BÜTTGEN, "Théologie politique et pouvoir pastoral," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 2007, vol. 62, no. 5, p. 1132.

13 See, among many other examples, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letters 15, 38 and 69.



infiltrate the expression as when Muḥammad Aḥmad distinguished the “territory of the Mahdiyya (*balad al-Mahdiyya*)” with that of the “Turks<sup>14</sup>”. This gradual territorialisation was buttressed by the development of the Mahdist administration, quite particularly in the provinces, where legal requests prompted a reflexion on the relation between Mahdist power and territorial control. The Mahdiyya morphed from a chrononym<sup>15</sup> to a toponym, or, more precisely, incorporated a spatial dimension to its initial acceptance<sup>16</sup>.

Subdued at first, this aspect of Mahdism only gained strength under the Khalīfa, to the extent that it could be used in a provincial context without hesitations. The fact that the Mahdiyya was thought as a political space is evident in several instances related to Eastern Sudan. For example, with regard to the exports of slaves, the Khalīfa wrote that traders from the Ḥijāz were not allowed to send them “outside the Mahdiyya (*li-khurūj-hum ‘an al-Mahdiyya*)<sup>17</sup>”. In a similar vein, when inhabitants of Sawākin left the Red Sea port, ‘Uthmān Diqna gave them authorisations for wherever they wished to go “within the areas of the Mahdiyya (*min jihāt al-Mahdiyya*)<sup>18</sup>”.

The following sections will endeavour to outline the process that led to the formation of this Mahdist spatiality and its internal structuring. They will attempt to demonstrate that far from solely constituting a blank canvas on which political divides were drawn, separating supporters and opponents, friends and enemies, spatial representations could also be performative and lead to the reconfiguration of spaces and, beyond, the attempted transformation of populations, so as to integrate them into the Mahdist political order.

### ***A) The Formation of a Mahdist Spatiality***

#### *i) Believing with the Feet: The Hijra and the Founding of a New Mahdist Spatiality*

Muḥammad Aḥmad’s spatial understanding is revealing of the larger dynamics that defined Nilotic Sudan’s territorial organisation. Because of the vicissitudes of his personal trajectory, the precocious Sufi *shaykh* had a direct experience of these dynamics. At first, his life unfolded on the north-south axis, the Nile River axis, following the footsteps of many of his fellow Danāqla who had formed an influential diaspora. From the Dunqulāwī Reach where he was born, each new phase of Muḥammad Aḥmad’s life brought him further south, first to Khartoum and its network of schools (*khalawā* sing. *khalwa*), and ultimately, to the southern frontier of the domain of the Turkiyya, to

14 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 213.

15 For a short introduction to chrononyms, see Dominique KALIFA, “Introduction. Dénommer le siècle: « chrononymes » du XIXe siècle,” *Revue d’histoire du XIXe siècle. Société d’histoire de la révolution de 1848 et des révolutions du XIXe siècle*, 1 June 2016, no. 52, p. 9–17.

16 I thank the historian Sébastien Moreau for pointing out this interpretation.

17 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 143.

18 *Ibid.*, letter 85.

Ābā Island on the White Nile. The great hesitation of his formative years, as to whether he should pursue his studies in Cairo at the world-famous university of al-Azhar, could have represented a major reversal of this trend, prompting him to go back north, but he decided otherwise. Henceforth, as he grew into a well-respected *shaykh* of the Sammāniyya, all of his subsequent journeys would take place between the Jazīra where he had settled, and al-Ubayyid, Kurdufān's capital, that is on the east-west axis that was to prove so central to the ulterior development of the Mahdiyya (see map 0.1)<sup>19</sup>. Often travelling, he always came back, whether to look after his disciples settled on Ābā, or to attend the funerals of his latest mentor, al-Qurāshī w. al-Zayn, in early 1880 (early 1297)<sup>20</sup>. In that respect, his decision to leave the banks of the White Nile to head back west, this time without an immediate perspective of return, represented a break but it nonetheless aligned with his previous trips.

Muḥammad Aḥmad—who had then publicly announced his claim to the Maḥdīship—left the island on 13 August 1881 (17 Ramaḍān 1298), escaping a likely retaliation by the Egyptian government after his first victory, the day before, against the troops of Abū al-Su'ūd, who had been dispatched by the governor-general Muḥammad Ra'ūf Pasha to arrest him<sup>21</sup>. With some degree of precipitation, he had his followers cross the White Nile by boats, and set up for a long march to the Nūba Mountains, where they would eventually settle in a place named *jabal Qadīr* on 31 October 1881 (7 D. al-Ḥijja 1298). As noticed by several later commentators, the Maḥdī performed and framed this initial movement in profoundly Islamic terms, setting a parallel with the *hijra* of the prophet Muḥammad from Mecca to Madīna, and made it the cornerstone of Maḥdist mobilisation. Indeed, almost all subsequent letters to his partisans between 1881 and 1883 (1299-1301) admonished them to perform the *hijra* and join him in Qadīr<sup>22</sup>.

According to Peter M. Holt, the sequence *hijra-jihād* was not only characteristic of West Africa's Islamic movements, but also echoed Sudanese history by reenacting the exodus of *makk* Nimir and his Ja'alīyīn, who had escaped to the Abyssinian borderland after having murdered Ismā'īl Pasha, the commander of the conquering Egyptian forces, in October 1822 (Ṣafar 1238)<sup>23</sup>. However, John Voll offered a richer interpretation of Muḥammad Aḥmad's reliance on the concept of *hijra*, within which he identified four distinct uses. The first one, in line with Holt's view, which was shared by most of the Mahdiyya's scholars (such as Bermann, Trimmingham, or Brown<sup>24</sup>), was

19 For a detailed description of Muḥammad Aḥmad's early life, see Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 27–62 ; Fergus NICOLL, *The Mahdi of Sudan and the Death of General Gordon*, Stroud, Sutton, 2005, p. 13–80.

20 See chapter 2.

21 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

22 Fergus NICOLL, *The Mahdi of Sudan and the Death of General Gordon*, *op. cit.*, p. 90–114.

23 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

24 Richard A. BERMAN, *Die Derwischtrommel: das Leben des erwarteten Mahdi*, Volksverband der

the duplication of the Prophet Muḥammad's life<sup>25</sup>. It represented a legitimisation technique through the insertion of the Mahdist movement into the Quranic narrative. The adoption of the term *anṣār*—a direct reference to the vocabulary of the early Islamic period—, to replace the term *darwish*<sup>26</sup>, belonged to the same attempt at reframing the Mahdī's movement in an Islamic conceptual framework while somewhat concealing its anchoring in Sudanese culture. The second use was also based on the canonical approach of the *hijra*. Not only did physical movement allow to escape oppression, as expounded in the surah of the Bee<sup>27</sup>, but it also represented an opportunity to abandon the material world (*dunyā*) by leaving behind one's possessions, considered as obstacles on the path to serving God<sup>28</sup>. According to Voll, both these interpretations were not specific to the Sudanese Mahdiyya but echoed classical views held in the Islamic world.

This was not the case for the two last dimensions of the concept of *hijra* present in Muḥammad Aḥmad's discourse. As he left Ābā Island, the Mahdī set himself as an example to emulate. Voll noted that he could not find an instance in the Mahdī's writing in which he stated that he was commanded to follow the Prophet's example, but seemed to have solely claimed that he had been ordered by the Prophet to undertake the *hijra*. As such, "the Mahdi [was] utilizing prophetic precedents as a guide for solving difficulties rather than a blind antiquarianism of simply copying the Prophet<sup>29</sup>." But the most important dimension was certainly the last one. By offering himself as an example to the believers, the Mahdī established the *hijra* as the main token of adherence to the Mahdist movement. Thus, leaving's one abode and land became the first step in the path of the *jihād* and participation in the cause of the Mahdiyya.

The Mahdist mobilisation through the *hijra* weaved these different aspects together to create a spatial framework in which the Mahdī's *da'wa* could be performed. In a context of slow and precarious communications, leaving the banks of the Upper Nile allowed to extract oneself from the Egyptian polity. This was not only an answer to a strategic issue, namely to avoid the repression of the nascent movement, but also a stark refusal of the colonial regime's legitimacy. According to the Mahdī, its corruption, which he forcefully denounced, had pervaded the whole of the Sudanese society. The separation was meant to be political, but also moral. In the first statement of his *da'wa*, written in July 1881 (Sha'bān 1298) before he had even left Ābā, the Mahdī had emphasised to his

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Bücherfreunde, Wegweiser-Verlag g.m.b.h., 1931 ; John S. TRIMINGHAM, *Islam in the Sudan*, *op. cit.* ; Carl BROWN, "The Sudanese Mahdiya," in Robert L. Rotberg (ed.), *Rebellion in Black Africa*, London, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 3–23.

25 John O. VOLL, "The Mahdī's Concept and Use of 'Hijrah,'" *Islamic Studies*, 1987, vol. 26, no. 1, p. 34.

26 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

27 "And there are those who emigrated in God's [path] after they had been oppressed. Surely, we will provide accommodations for them in this world that are good and the reward in the next world which is even greater" (cited in John O. VOLL, "The Mahdī's Concept and Use of 'Hijrah,'" *op. cit.*, p. 38).

28 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

beloved supporters that since “the state of this time is known [to you], and characters are stolen from one another (*al-ṭibā‘ tasarraqa ba‘ḍ-hā ba‘ḍ-hā*), there is no other escape from this than the *hijra* (*lā mukhallaṣ ‘an-hā illā bi-l-hijra*)<sup>30</sup>”. In his mind, no true preparation for the coming of the end of times and Judgement Day could be achieved if contacts with one’s community were not fully severed. In that respect, the Mahdī translated his injunctions by using Sufi concepts to which the vast majority of Nilotic Sudan’s population could relate. His calls to leave behind all material property, so as to prepare for the Hereafter (*al-ukhra*) and abandon the material world, immediately echoed the Sufi practice of *tajarrud*, that is of relinquishment of all personal assets. Conversely, the Sufi model that had been at the centre of the Mahdī’s life was deemed inadequate. The isolation he had sought in Ābā, the erstwhile purpose of a *khalwa*<sup>31</sup>, had proved insufficient to guard him and his disciples from the dissipation witnessed by a society marked by increased mobility and undergoing changes at an unprecedented rate. So he required from all those who, like him, wished to build a reformed community, to leave the turmoils of the world. However, he remained vague as to where they should meet. Indeed, the first time the term *hijra* was used, in a letter destined to his father-in-law, Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Baṣīr, on 29 June 1881 (1<sup>st</sup> Sha‘bān 1298)—the day Muḥammad Aḥmad publicly announced his Mahdīship—he simply stated that as his representative (*nā‘ib*), he “should encourage the people (*ahl*) to undertake the *hijra* towards us<sup>32</sup>”.

Maybe the answer was obvious to him. Almost a year before his departure from Ābā, in October-November 1880 (Shawwāl-D. al-Qa‘da 1298), he had written a series of three letters already enjoining various followers to “come to [him] rapidly with [their] people, [their] groups and [their] brothers, and everyone who has love for the religion (*dīn*)”. In another, he had informed al-Baṣīr that “[he had] commanded [his] brothers to empty their hands of all activity (*ishghāl*) [...] and to embark on a boat coming [to him]. Even if this activity concerns specifically the people who depend on them, they should empty their hands of it and embark as soon as possible”. Others yet were asked to join him so that he could share with them his secrets<sup>33</sup>. These justify Voll’s claim that the *hijra* was not directly linked with the physical movement from Ābā Island to *jabal Qadīr*, but was focused first and foremost on the figure of the Mahdī. This may have been, at first, a pragmatic

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30 A similar expression appears in the work of the fourteenth-century scholar Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406), as well as in *Riyādat al-ṣibyān (Training the Youth)* by the Egyptian Shafī‘ī scholar Shams al-Dīn al-Ramlī in the first half of the sixteenth century (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 20.)

31 The term *khalwa* came from the Arabic root *kha-lam-waw* that conveyed emptiness, loneliness, and freedom from all other obligations but the pursuit of a deeper relation with God. In the Sudanese context, it designated a Sufi retreat before being adopted to characterise Quranic schools (‘Alī Ṣāliḥ KARRĀR, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 137).

32 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 15.

33 *Ibid.*, letters 10, 11 and 12.

solution to the fact that the Mahdī did not know where he would eventually settle<sup>34</sup>.

Yet, Voll's analysis was confined to the discursive dimension of the *hijra* and stopped short from addressing its performative aspects<sup>35</sup>. The Mahdi's call to his adherents to leave their land led to a reshaping of the overall territorial structure of Nilotic Sudan that combined political and Sufi conceptions of space<sup>36</sup>. By placing himself at the centre of a new political and religious order—to the extent that these could be set apart from one another—the Mahdī had surreptitiously instrumentalised the notion of *baraka* (a form of blessing, grace, or divine power) that structured Sufi space. Indeed, a Sufi *shaykh* was said to possess it in abundance and be able to manipulate it. Furthermore, it transcended his death and thus formed a sacred topography of sites articulated around the tombs of holymen (*qibāb* sing. *qubāb*<sup>37</sup>) where *baraka* was thought to be concentrated, and where the potentiality for supernatural feats was deemed higher, allowing for miracles (*karāmāt* sing. *karāma*) that were interpreted as proofs of a *shaykh*'s anointment by God. These spaces, in turn, attracted other *shuyūkh*, further reinforcing the local concentration of *baraka*<sup>38</sup>. The Mahdī took that notion, eliminated its Sufi frame<sup>39</sup>, and reconfigured the entire religious space of Nilotic Sudan. This had direct and long-lasting consequences on the initial structuration of Mahdist rule that was articulated around the physical person of the Mahdī whose localisation was supposed to be both a locus of power and sacredness. This, again, proved to be the result of adaptations rather than of a fully formed program. In another pre-Mahdiyya letter dated 16 November 1880 (13 D. al-Ḥijja 1298), a Sufi *shaykh* named Sulaymān was invited to join Muḥammad Aḥmad in Ābā Island, then named *al-buq'a*<sup>40</sup>, literally “the spot”. This is the same term used throughout the itinerant phase of the Mahdiyya, between 1881 and 1885 (1298-1302)<sup>41</sup>, as well as the expression under which Umm Durmān was designated after 1885 (1302), as *al-buq'a al-sharīfa* or *al-ṭāhira*, the “noble spot” or the “pure spot”, after the Mahdī was buried there<sup>42</sup>.

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34 Fergus NICOLL, *The Mahdi of Sudan and the Death of General Gordon*, *op. cit.*, p. 90–114.

35 Voll argued that Sudanese Mahdism represented a form of fundamentalism, leading him to discard its Sufi aspects. His interpretation was based on a close reading of the Mahdī's numerous texts, particularly the *Rātib*. See John O. VOLL, “The Sudanese Mahdī: Frontier Fundamentalist,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1979, vol. 10, no. 2, p. 145–166.

36 For a reflection on Sufi spatiality in an altogether different context, see Nile GREEN, *Making Space: Sufis and Settlers in Early Modern India*, Oxford University Press, 2012.

37 A *qubāb* literally means a “dome” and so refers to the most common form of the tombs of Sufi *shuyūkh*. The greatest concentration of such tombs can be seen in the famous village of Abū Ḥarāz, north of Wad Madanī, on the lower Blue Nile.

38 Neil MCHUGH, *Holymen of the Blue Nile*, *op. cit.*, p. 22 ; 'Alī Šāliḥ KARRĀR, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

39 The Mahdi was cautious not to claim *baraka* for himself, in contrast with all his Sufi counterparts. In his proclamations, the term was used in a generic manner.

40 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 13.

41 See, for examples, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letters 393 and 450.

42 The most detailed account of the construction of the Mahdī's tomb and description of the *qubbat al-Mahdī* complex can be found in James (Khalid) D. DEEMER, *Umm Durmān during the Mahdiyya*, PhD diss., Harvard University,

## ii) *Legal Spaces and Spaces of Rebellion*

The Mahdī's epistolary network enabled a discursive reorganisation of space in Nilotic Sudan. His physical presence represented a new centre of gravity toward which all his supporters were enjoined to converge, forming migratory rivers flowing to the itinerant capital of the Mahdiyya, from Qadīr, to al-Ubayyid, and ultimately Umm Durmān. By doing so, he altered Nilotic Sudan's spiritual topography, levelling historical Sufi summits of high *baraka*, in parallel with his attempt to abolish the different *ṭuruq*, even as he sponsored a number of local relays, often Sufi *shuyūkh*, that were meant to direct the flows of *muhājirūn* and serve as anchor points for the further extension of Mahdist territory<sup>43</sup>.

This constellation of positions all gravitated toward the Mahdī, but the land itself still required to be incorporated within the domain of the Mahdiyya. The territorialisation of Mahdist rule went hand in hand with the gradual definition of its spatial and temporal boundaries. The Mahdī's writings tended to associate Sufi topography with the canonical and profoundly political division of space between the *dār al-ḥarb* (the abode of war) and the *dār al-Islām* (the abode of Islam), thereby assimilating the act of remaining on Egyptian-controlled territory as a refusal of his Mahdīship that could then be condemned as apostasy<sup>44</sup>. The early Mahdist movement thus founded what might be dubbed a *takfirī* spatiality, intrinsically linked with the important Islamic reflexion on Muslims' ability to remain on a territory under the authority of an un-Islamic power. The first and main expression of this process of territorialisation was the formation of legal spaces. The *sharī'a*, as interpreted by the Mahdī, could only be applied in territories effectively under Mahdist control. Outside, even Muslim populations did not benefit from the protection of the law.

Consequently, the expansion of the Mahdist legal dominion tied together geographical and temporal dynamics. This argument has already been expounded in the third chapter with regard to the provincial administration's development, and so, only its main aspects shall be recapped here. The first decree dealing with the matter dates from 6 March 1883 (26 Rabī' II 1300), less than two months after the capture of al-Ubayyid. In a letter destined to all the Mahdist representatives and combatants, the Mahdī stated that judicial cases that predated 30 May 1882 (to 12 Rajab 1299)<sup>45</sup> should not be adjudicated, except for matters of debt (*dayn*), deposition in trust (*amāna*), orphans' property (*māl al-aytām*), and the free status of men and women (*ḥurayya*)<sup>46</sup>. This temporal boundary

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Cambridge, 1988, p. 525–576.

43 See chapter 3.

44 With less dire consequences, the distinction between the *dār al-ḥarb* and the *dār al-Islām* also informed taxation on traders. See chapter 4.

45 This was the date of the battle that had pitted Mahdist forces against a detachment headed by al-Shallālālī near Qadīr (Māssa).

46 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 87 ; Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

was meant to avoid endless litigations that the Mahdist movement had little means of managing. Only legal issues that could impede the current mobilisation in favour of Mahdism were to be examined, the point being to offer some form of legal security to those who had left their community and often their family behind. Money that had been entrusted as *amāna* or outstanding debts could still be claimed and violations challenged, despite the regime's overhaul, while their relatives were supposed to be safe from undue enslavement in the course of the war, and, their children's property looked after by the state, were they to die during the *jihād*. In relation with this temporal division, the Mahdī's decision founded a differentiated geography of power. While the *sharī'a*'s application was supposed to be complete in the territories under Mahdist control, contested areas answered to a derogatory status, and complains that could hinder their integration to the Mahdiyya should be dismissed<sup>47</sup>. As towns in Nilotic Sudan surrendered one after the other, the Mahdist legal space gradually expanded, following specific modalities depending on the particular circumstances under which they were seized<sup>48</sup>. Conversely, towns that had remained under Egyptian control, as was the case for Sawākin, remained firmly outside the Mahdist legal order. When some creditors of the provincial administration in Eastern Sudan decided to seek refuge within its walls, they forfeited all claims to their debts according to Mahdist regulations<sup>49</sup>.

The Mahdī had defined a before and an after, as well as an inside and an outside, but these distinctions were much more complex to ascertain with regard to nomadic populations. Contrary to urban settlements, determining a date for the rallying of scattered and mobile communities within a region the boundaries of which were themselves blurry was not obvious. As fightings began to subside in Dār Fūr in early 1884 (early 1301), the Mahdī wished to extend to this region the same rules that had been introduced in Kurdufān the year before. A date was required to mark the end from the derogatory system that had been enforced hitherto and so affirm its full integration into the Mahdist legal space. But no clearcut watershed moments like the surrendering of a garrison could be used. The Mahdī resorted to an ambiguous phrasing, instructing the *amīr* of the tribunal of Dārā<sup>50</sup>, 'Abd al-Ṣamad Sharfī, that only the petitions presented by "the Muslim nomadic tribes" (*al-'urbān al-muslimīn*) could be adjudicated and that only if they were posterior to their submission [to the Mahdist authorities] and their [open declaration of] opposition (*taslīm-hum wa mujāharat-*

47 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 87.

48 Whereas al-Ubayyīḍ (January 1883) and Kasalā negotiated their surrender to the Mahdist forces, Barbar (May 1884) and Sinnār were stormed. Among other sources, short descriptions of these events can be found in Na'ūm SHUQAYR, *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*, *op. cit.*, p. 379–389; 462–463; 648–664.

49 See chapter 4.

50 Situated in South Darfur, Dārā was the site chosen by Rudolf von Slatin to establish his headquarter when confronted with the rebellion of the Rizayqāt Baqqāra which started in June 1882. Slatin and his men surrendered the position to the Mahdists in December 1883. See Richard HILL, *Slatin Pasha*, *op. cit.*, p. 15–19.

*hum*)<sup>51</sup>” to the “Turks”. Geography had failed the Mahdī. Whereas the divide between the Mahdist legal space and that of the enemy could be determined with relative ease in regions with significant settled populations, mostly riverine communities, the mobility and fragmentation of most nomadic populations hindered its implementation in more peripheral areas. The Mahdī substituted the community’s assent to territorial acquisition as the marker for integration into the Mahdist legal space. But he himself was aware of the limits of his own instruction. Consequently, he delegated to his representative the authority to set a date, and, in case this proved too complex, his *amīr* could cut matters short by simply using the same date as Kurdufān: 12 Rajab 1299.

This particular spatial construct informed how populations were perceived by the Mahdist regime. More subdued during the Mahdī’s rule, the Khalīfa’s rule displayed a clear hostility to nomads and pastoralists (‘*urbān*<sup>52</sup>). Because of their mobility, they could always withdraw from the Mahdist legal space and remove themselves from its influence. Their movements, to some extent, negated the very coherence of the Mahdiyya as a space. Neither fully external, nor fully integrated into the Mahdist realm, the status of nomadic populations verged on outright condemnation of their assumed lack of faith. When al-Kurdufānī used the *Daftar waqā’ī ‘Uthmān Diqna* for his own account of the early phase of the Mahdiyya, he adapted some of the terms that had been used by its initial author. Some of the changes were related to greater transformations within Mahdist governmentality, such as replacing *fuqarā’* (dervishes; sing. *faqīr*) by *aṣḥāb* (companions; sing. *ṣāhib*), but he also replaced terms like *musharikūn* (associationists; sing. *mushārik*) and *kuffār* (unbelievers; sing. *kāfir*) by *a’rāb* (nomads; sing. ‘*arab*), and sometimes described them as “enemies of the Mahdiyya (*a’ dā’ al-Mahdiyya*)<sup>53</sup>”.

While in most other territories the *khalā’*—the open country that spanned most of the desert land beyond the banks of the Nile and the ‘Aṭbara north of Khartoum—was the space that epitomised the incomplete integration of Nilotic Sudan’s territories in the Mahdiyya, the specificities of Eastern Sudan shaped another political geography. In this context, the local topography coincided somewhat with Mahdist spatial representations of domination. While the plains were considered as spaces of submission, the Red Sea Hills were seen as spaces of rebellion because they could serve as havens for those who wished to avoid contacts with state powers. These representations were shared by at least some of the foreign observers of the early phase of the Mahdist movement. In 1884 (1301/2), Augustus B. Wylde, who advocated for two expeditions toward the Nile Valley to rescue Gordon in Khartoum, was confident that the route from Maṣawwa’

51 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 239.

52 See below for a longer discussion of the term.

53 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 16–17.



to Kasalā, across the Abyssinian Plateau, would be “absolutely safe”, since “there was no fear of the mountaineers turning Mahdists, as the higher one goes up the mountains the less the fanaticism, and up till now there were no signs of Mahdism in the neighbourhood<sup>54</sup>.”

In that regard, the mountainous region of the Red Sea Hills and the neighbouring areas of the Abyssinian plateau constituted Sudanese *zomias*<sup>55</sup>. Seeking refuge in the mountains was not specific to Eastern Sudan, even if this practice was rare due to the very simple reason that mountain massifs are few despite Nilotic Sudan’s enormous surface. The practice, at the very least, was well-known. When *makk* Nimir and his fellow Ja‘aliyīn fled from Shandī in 1822 (1237/8), they naturally headed toward the Ethiopian heights. The historian Yushiko Kurita mentioned two other similar episodes. In 1844 (1259/60), slave-soldiers mutinied and sought refuge in the mountains near Fazūghlī. Four decades later, in 1885-1887 (1302-1305), during the Mahdiyya, another mutiny by slave-soldiers from the *jihādiyya* stationed in al-Ubayyīd also attempted to escape the harsh sanctions of the Mahdist state by heading toward the Nūba Mountains where they established a sort of “military republic<sup>56</sup>”. Of course, the same mountains had been the initial refuge of the Mahdī after his *hijra* in 1881 (1298), before becoming one of the regions where Mahdist rule was challenged with the greatest intensity<sup>57</sup>.

A similar reversal was observed in Eastern Sudan, signalling the rapidity with which those spatial representations could evolve according to the reality of Mahdist territorial control. Three phases can be distinguished. In the first phase, from mid-1883 to mid-1885 (mid-1300 to late 1302), the Mahdist movement was itself struggling against an existing government, even if the latter’s influence in the Bijāwī hinterland was rather limited. The Red Sea Hills then constituted a region in which the Mahdists led by ‘Uthmān Dīqna could withdraw and regroup, as was the case on several occasions, including shortly after the end of the second British campaign of 1885 (1302/3), when the *‘amil* retreated with his men from their camp in Tamāy after several costly clashes with Graham’s troops. The second phase began after the surrender of Kasalā in July 1885 (Ramaḍān 1302). With the acquisition of this major urban centre, spatial representations held by Mahdist leaders, including ‘Uthmān Dīqna, shifted entirely. Difficult to reach and even more to control, the Red Sea Hills, which were considered not long before as Mahdism’s regional stronghold, became a refuge for opponents, deserters and all those unwilling to dedicate their life to the cause. In the eyes of the Mahdist provincial administration, relocating to this region carried a strong stigma, akin to rebellion, a shift that was openly displayed in the vocabulary used in official texts. The mountain

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54 Augustus B. WYLDE, ‘83 to ‘87 in the Soudan, with an Account of Sir William Hewett’s Mission to King John of Abyssinia, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

55 James C. SCOTT, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, *op. cit.*, p. 1–39.

56 Yoshiko KURITA, “The Role of ‘Negroid But Detribalized’ People in Modern Sudanese History,” *op. cit.*, p. 2–3.

57 Enrico ILLE, “The Nuba Mountains between Coercion and Persuasion during Mahdist Rule (1881–98),” *op. cit.*

became where the “hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*)” fled to escape Mahdist authorities, and, crucially, the religious duties that they attempted to enforce, and which most Bijāwī communities were suspected of following only with great reluctance<sup>58</sup>. These representations were once again reversed in the aftermath of the Mahdist withdrawal from Tūkar toward the lower ‘Aṭbara in early 1891 (mid-1308). In December 1892 (Jumādā I 1310), when ‘Uthmān Diqna finally complied to the Khalīfa’s repeated requests about the situation, the ‘*āmil* offered him a description that brought to light this new twist. Indeed, he concluded his overview of the Bijāwī tribes’ attitude toward the Mahdiyya by mentioning that since rain had fallen in the past few days over the Gwineb, some tribes had moved there to find pasture for their livestock. Since this term was specific to Eastern Sudan, ‘Uthmān Diqna explained that “the Qinib [Gwineb] is the name of the lands between the mountains and the salted sea. In these days, this is where those from the nomads (‘*urbān*) who refused to submit or sided with the enemies of God, the Turks, go. When one wants them to submit and to side with us, he takes them from these lands (*yartaḥi* ‘*an-hā*) to the region of the mountains close to us<sup>59</sup>.”

Yet, at the height of Mahdist power in the region, between 1885 and 1891 (1302-1308), its limited resources reduced its ability to effectively monitor these mountainous regions, and its territorial presence remained patchy and sporadic. While outer positions such as Kūkrayb and Aryāb<sup>60</sup>, on the Sawākin-Barbar road, remained in their hands throughout the period, at least until 1896 (1313/4), the same cannot be said of Arkawīt or Sinkāt, in the heart of the Red Sea Hills. Despite being ‘Uthmān Diqna’s homeland, imposing Mahdist rule in the area had been problematic. In September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307), Muḥammad Mūsā Diqna had been dispatched to Arkawīt, probably with Muḥammad Aḥmad Shaykh Idrīs and al-Amīn Abū Bakr Yūsuf<sup>61</sup>, but he failed to maintain his position and was forced to withdraw soon after<sup>62</sup>. Less than a year later, the DMI believed the position to be “free of dervishes<sup>63</sup>”.

Mahdist spatial representations were not shaped only by the attitude of a given population, but postulated a form of intense correlation between the environment and its inhabitants. In other words, mountains were not so much a zone in which rebellious groups could escape Mahdist rule, mountains produced rebellion. More precisely, the Mahdist argument held that certain environments harboured specific forms of socioeconomic structures that were conducive of resistance. The conclusion they drew reflected larger dynamics at play at the scale of the whole of Nilotic Sudan: to

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58 See chapter 1 for a discussion on the long-standing doubts held by foreign observers about the Islamic character of Bijāwī religious practices.

59 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 309.

60 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

61 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letters 55 and 79.

62 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 180.

63 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 113 (22 July-4 August 1891), Summary.

affect change among these communities required to displace them and closely monitor their movements.

### ***B) Shaping Mahdist Spatiality to Reform Local Societies***

The Mahdist leadership was aware that its project of broad social transformation would be hindered by the heterogeneous nature of the societies of the Greater Nile Valley, thus the strong emphasis it placed on population relocations. These policies were implemented in different manners, according to local specificities. Mahdist spatiality was not confined to a set of normative representations. Spaces themselves could be transformative and instrumentalised to bring about changes within the populations so as to achieve greater conformity to the Mahdist ideal of a reformed and devout society. Space was also considered as performative and for Mahdist authorities, the most straightforward way to alter local social configurations was to displace communities, firstly to sever the ties they entertained with the land, and secondly to enable greater control over them once they were placed in a position of subordination and dependence toward the state.

#### *i) Politics of Tahjīr in Eastern Sudan*

As seen above, in the early phase of the uprising, individual or collective engagement, especially for the *jihād*, the prominent form of mobilisation, required a physical movement to enter the political and religious space of the Mahdiyya. The expansion of the state that led to the swift incorporation of most of Nilotic Sudan's territories could have put an end to this requirement, but the contrary happened. The Mahdī's successor introduced *tahjīr* or *tarḥīl*<sup>64</sup>—meaning relocation or forced displacement—as one of the Mahdist state's central policies. The polysemy of the term *tahjīr* is a significant hurdle on the path of its definition. The most effective way to outline its meaning is through a comparison with the *hijra*, from which it differs with respect to the conditions of its realisation, its significance, and the patterns of its direction. As often, the matter was considered solely through the lenses of the central power. Eastern Sudan's example reveals crucial nuances.

Firstly, *tahjīr* differed from the *hijra* in that the latter was voluntary. It may have been requested by the Mahdī, often forcefully, but it could not be imposed to an individual. It had to remain a conscious and voluntary decision, lest the act itself lost its primary value. On the contrary, *tahjīr* was, in most cases, the result of direct coercion and threat. Whereas the *hijra* could be sought

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64 Based on the same root as *hijra* (ha-jim-ra) the concept of *tahjīr* is the verbal noun of the second form (*wazn*) and so implies the role of an external actor, in this case the Mahdist state, and some amount of coercion. The term *tarḥīl* is also a verbal noun but it is derived from the verb *raḥḥala* (ra-ḥal-lam), which is devoid of the religious overtone conveyed, through historical association, by *tahjīr*. Paradoxically, the Mahdī himself only used the term *tarḥīl* to refer to movements towards the “spot”.

and seen as a positive development, most displacements were actively resisted. Furthermore, while the *hijra* was essentially a personal endeavour, the *tahjīr* tended to affect whole communities. In Eastern Sudan, ‘Uthmān Diqna expressed harsh criticisms toward Bijāwī communities in his correspondence with the Khalīfa. He blamed them for their lack of commitment *vis-à-vis* the Mahdiyya. His recriminations were focused on their constant desire to return to their homelands and so avoid the hardships entailed by religious obligations, including the most burdensome of them all, participation in the *jihād*<sup>65</sup>. This led to numerous attempts to stabilise their presence in the Tūkar region. In that regard, the Mahdist leader noticed that “mass desertions to Kasalā’s area and the instability [of Bijāwī fighters’s] in the camp [of Handūb] has no other reason than their desire to be reunited with their families<sup>66</sup>”, and so, on several occasions, he organised the displacement of their relatives so as to mitigate the issue.

While most of those relocations were forced, they could also be prompted by the combatants themselves. In a letter written by the “*maqāḍīm* of the Samrīdawāb<sup>67</sup>” in May 1889 (Ramaḍān 1306), they explained that “when we were informed and assured that the *jihād* could only be performed by leaving our homelands (*awṭān* sing. *waṭan*) and abandoning our own customs (*ma`lūfāt al-nafs*), some of us left our people in the Qāsh to come to this place with the intention to [undertake] the *hijra* and participate in the victory of the religion (*nuṣrat al-dīn*)”. But now that they were settled in Tūkar, they asked ‘Uthmān Diqna to organise the moving of the rest of their people who were currently near Kasalā, as well as authorise their “brother” Bilāl al-Amīn who had been residing in Umm Durmān for some time to join them in Eastern Sudan<sup>68</sup>. Therefore, large movements of populations, often referred to in Mahdist correspondence as the result of *tahjīr* answered to dynamics more complex than simple coercion. A leading group of Mahdist volunteers could pave the way before being joined by the rest of their family, clan or tribal group, probably causing important frictions with the more reluctant members. This process of concentration contributed to the greater stability of the Mahdist community by restoring organic social relationships, but could also constitute a threat to the establishment of a new social order by reintroducing tribal allegiances and putting in direct contact groups that had rarely, if ever, been in such proximity (see below).

A second major difference lies in the fact that while the *hijra* meant almost exclusively heading toward the political centre—incarnated by the Mahdī for the four first years of the Mahdiyya—, *tahjīr* could designate both the process of relocation to Umm Durmān, as well as

65 Anaël POUSSIER, “Les représentations identitaires de l’État mahdiste. L’autorité provinciale au Soudan-Est et les tribus bija (1883-1898),” *op. cit.*, p. 861.

66 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 92.

67 Most likely the Hadanduwa Samrandawāb established on the Qāsh delta near Kasalā.

68 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 165.

transfers within a province, as was the case in Eastern Sudan. The *hijra* to the “holy spot (*al-buq‘a al-sharīfa*)”, to visit the tomb of the Mahdī and, for important figures, to confer with the Khalīfa himself, were important endeavours, often requested by the combatants themselves<sup>69</sup>. In late 1890 (early 1308), ‘Uthmān Dīqna wrote to the head of the Mahdist state that “numerous people from the area who had been delayed [...] the first year of the *hijra*, wish to perform it and [ask for] the authorisation to meet the Khalīfa of the Mahdī, peace be upon Him, place their allegiance in his noble hands (*akhdh al-bay‘a ‘alā yad-hu al-sharīfa*) and to be illuminated by the lights of his counsel (*al-tanawwur bi-anwār mudhākīrat-hu*)<sup>70</sup>.” But relocations should not be confined to this Umm Durmān-centric vision. The historian ‘Uthmān Muḥammad ‘Uthmān underlined that it had affected various groups and almost all the Mahdist provinces at one point or another<sup>71</sup>. As shall be seen below, internal displacements were a major feature of Mahdist policies in the province of Eastern Sudan. These answered both strategical and religious considerations.

The *hijra* may have been based on a personal decision, it was nonetheless considered a religious obligation. The significance of the *tahjīr* was more ambiguous. Most historical accounts insisted on their military aspect, confining *tahjīr* to the dispatch of troops prompted by strategic concerns and their concentration in specific location, particularly Umm Durmān, in relation with the shift of power away from the *ashrāf*, the Mahdī’s first followers, to the *awlād al-‘arab*, the Westerners, among whom the Khalīfa’s own tribe, the Ta‘ā’īsha Baqqāra played a prominent role. Most movements of combatants were headed toward the outer limits of the Mahdiyya, as preparatory measures for further military actions against the regime’s foes, as the one aimed against the Egyptian southern border, or as responses to external threats, as was the case in Eastern Sudan between 1885 and 1891 (1302-1308) from Anglo-Egyptians forces, and after 1890 (1307/8) from the Italians closing down on Kasalā, a city they eventually seized in 1894 (1311/12). However, ‘Uthmān Dīqna’s correspondence clearly shows the conflation of both military and religious dynamics. A refusal to partake in the *jihād* was deemed an act of apostasy by the Mahdī and so the reluctance of some sections of the Bijāwī tribes to join ‘Uthmān Dīqna was not only a sign of disobedience and contestation of Mahdist authority, but also the manifestation of their opposition to “religion (*dīn*)”. Conversely, on par with the *hijra*, true adherence to the Mahdiyya almost systematically entailed physical movement. Henceforth, when the Ashrāf communicated in early 1888 (mid-1305) their desire to “come from the regions of Tākā to be among [the Mahdists] for the *jihād* for the cause of God (*fī sabīl Allāh*)”, ‘Uthmān Dīqna ordered Kasalā’s *‘āmil* to organise their

69 For example, Maḥmūd ‘Alī’s children informed ‘Uthmān Dīqna in mid-1888 (late 1305) that they wished to perform the *hijra* to Umm Durmān to meet the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi (*Ibid.*, letters 96 and 126).

70 *Ibid.*, letter 215.

71 ‘Uthmān Muḥammad ‘UTHMĀN, “Siyāsāt al-tahjīr fī ‘ahd al-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi,” *Majallat al-dirāsāt al-sūdāniyya*, 1975, vol. 5, no. 1, p. 153.

transfer<sup>72</sup>. This took place within the larger trend that spanned most of the period between 1886 and 1890 (1303-1307), namely the attempt at transferring large swathes of the Bijāwī population from Tāka to the region near Sawākin, especially Tūkar. However, other movements were planned, including from al-Qaḍārif and the ‘Aṭbara toward Kasalā as in April/May 1888 (Sha‘bān 1305). On this occasion, ‘Uthmān Diqna instructed ‘Abd Allāb Abū Bakr Yūsuf, the *amīn* of the treasury, then still based in Kasalā<sup>73</sup>, that he should impress upon those displaced from the *ṣa‘īd*—in this context the Upper ‘Aṭbara—that “this is among the most important missions (*min ahamm al-muhimmāt*) that result from the matter of the *jihād* and the reform of the worshippers (*iṣlāḥ al-‘ubbād*) by entering them in the group (*zumra*) of the *anṣār* of God who are working to establish His religion and striving to please Him. These are the most important matters and the most successful objectives<sup>74</sup>.”

The organisation of population transfers in Eastern Sudan unfolded in wide variety of circumstances. Some of these movements were voluntary, especially in the early phase. Others were the consequence of the conflict rather than of decisions taken by the Mahdist leadership. Last but not least, proper *tahjīr* were major vectors of population transfers, even if quantifying such movements would be vain.

On a pattern similar to the one observed for the first phase of the Mahdiyya<sup>75</sup>, between 1881 and 1885 (1298-1302), adherence to the Mahdist movement was first and foremost signalled by physical movement, following logics that could be contradictory with larger strategic considerations. For example, shortly after his arrival in Eastern Sudan in August 1883 (Sha‘bān 1300), ‘Uthmān Diqna had written to al-Ḥājj b. Ḥasan Abū Zaynab, the *shaykh* of the Kimaylāb, a community located near Kasalā. Al-Ḥājj promptly headed the Mahdist call and almost immediately killed the local *ṣanjak* and his men. They were asked to cut the telegraph line between Sawākin and Kasalā, but tellingly, in November 1883 (Muḥarram 1301), the Kimaylāb were already marching to join the main group of *anṣār* to the north<sup>76</sup>.

Important movements of population were also caused by Mahdist pressure. Some of the tribes were said to have been driven from their position in the Qāsh toward Kasalā, thus furthering the historical movement of southern migration before the Hadanduwa advance<sup>77</sup>. Between May and

72 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 41.

73 See chapter 3.

74 NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56B, document no. 12.

75 See chapter 2.

76 Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitāb sa‘adat al-mustahdi bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdi (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdi)* by Isma‘il b. ‘Abd al-Qadir, *op. cit.*, p. 133; 136 ; Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

77 Thomas R. H. OWEN, “The Hadendowa,” *op. cit.*, p. 198.

August 1888 (Ramaḍān-D. al-Qa‘da 1305), Khāṭir Ḥamīdān, one of the Mahdist *umarā’*, launched a series of raids against the *jabal* of the Jamīlāb<sup>78</sup>, a hotbed of resistance in the context of the Bijāwī civil war that was then reaching its nadir. The Hadanduwa Ḥamdāb, whose territory lay east of Tibīlūl, were forced to leave their territory before the advance of the Mahdist troops to head north, toward Awshid, where other segments of the tribe were settled. The Jamīlāb, another Hadanduwa tribe, suffered a similar fate. They too were driven out of the mountains toward the north-east, in the direction opposite to the vast encircling movement carried out by the *anṣār*, and ordered to settle near *khūr* Saytarāb, at the limit between the Red Sea Hills and the Gwineb. Other minor Hadanduwa communities were asked to resettle near Sinkāt (see fig. 2.9). In a letter to the Khalīfa, ‘Uthmān Diqna outlined his strategy. He aimed at forcing the relocation of the main Bijāwī tribal body and claimed that with regard to “the nomads (*‘urbān*), most of the Hadanduwa have left their homelands and joined either our side [between Handūb and Tūkar] or Tāka. Most of them have entered into obedience, but the rest of them are still, up to now, averse to religion (*nāfirat ‘an al-dīn*)”. The plan was to send raids until he obtained their full submission, and accepted “to settle in places near him, at a distance of one day or around”. The positions that were allocated to them shared the same feature: they were all situated on the main trade routes that connected Eastern Sudan to the hinterland. Awshid and Sinkāt (Awkāk) were two important halts on the Sawākin-Barbar road, while the *khūr* Saytarāb was located at the mouth of the *khūr* Baraka, on the road to Kasalā.

Uprooted from their land, these communities would have found themselves without means of subsistence. ‘Uthmān Diqna may have attempted to compensate for this loss by allowing to partake, or at least benefit from trade circulations that would have then crossed their territory. However, the most likely explanation for his choices of resettlement is that these positions were also regularly visited by Mahdist detachments and so relatively easy to monitor. But these forced relocations were resisted, as they often were, and ‘Uthmān Diqna was forced to recognise to the Khalīfa that in late August 1888 (mid-D. al-Qa‘da 1305) none of the aforementioned groups had yet reached their destination. Now that the pacification campaign had ended and the siege of Sawākin about to begin, the *‘āmil* resorted to another tactic. He announced that “[his] intention is to send the *anṣār* on raids against all of those who would be found outside of those places, since [they] would have no safe conduct (*amān*) from us<sup>79</sup>.” In other words, the Mahdist combatants were tasked with killing and looting all the communities that were not settled in their designated area<sup>80</sup>. Mahdist

78 This is the region north of the *khūr* Lanqayb, on the northern slopes of the valley formed by the *khayrān* Lanqayb, Windī and Baraka.

79 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 79.

80 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

authorities were forcefully moving tribes to sites where they could exert greater control over them. The outcome of this policy is difficult to gauge. Bijāwī opposition to the Mahdiyya rescinded and the Mahdist leadership focused its attention on its last attempt to capture the Red Sea port. The whereabouts of the Hadanduwa communities were not a pressing matter anymore. Nonetheless, the Mahdist power had introduced a new form of spatial control, aimed at reducing the mobility of the Bijāwī nomads, forcing them out of the hills, and imposing upon them some form of a sedentary way of life. A year and a half later, in February 1890 (Jumādā II 1307), Mahdist authorities were still pursuing this kind of policy. At a moment when they attempted to reinforce their presence in the Red Sea Hills and circumscribe the influence of Maḥmūd ‘Alī’s children, newly settled in Handūb, local tribes were required to have their livestock in a specific location near Arkawīt. Aḥmad Maḥmūd ‘Alī rejoiced of Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf’s decision to grant “delimited areas (*taḥdīd al-amkān*)” to Bijāwī pastoral communities like the Sha‘yāb, the Nūrāb, the Kimaylāb, and the Samrār<sup>81</sup>.

These displacements can easily be assimilated to *tahjīr*, however, they amounted to a reaction to the Bijāwī uprising that had begun in 1886 (1306) among some Ammār’ar sections, rather than a deliberate policy of population displacement. Yet, the first instance of such policy occurred at the same time. Indeed, one of the earliest mentions of a massive transfer of population can be found in a letter from ‘Uthmān Diqna to ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf in April 1886 (Rajab 1306). In this document, the *‘āmil* announced to his *amīn* that the “general displacement of Tāka’s population to the littoral” had been approved. He instructed his agent to “let no one go his separate way (*bi-dūn farz aḥad min-hum*), demolish the centre of Kasalā (*kharāb markaz Kasalā*), and leave it empty of its inhabitants (*wa tark-hu khāliyān ‘an al-sukkān*) to bring them to us”. There too, military reasons, namely participating in the *jihād*, was an important dimension of this order, but ‘Uthmān Diqna stressed that the objective was not the “building of a material world” (*‘amārat al-dunya*)” but the “establishment of the religion and God’s victory (*iqāmat al-dīn wa nuṣrat Allāh*)” that requires “souls and money to be expended (*badhl al-nufūs wa al-amwāl*)” and “leaving [behind] customs and desires (*al-khurūj ‘an al-ma’lūfāt wa al-mushtahiyāt*)<sup>82</sup>”. ‘Uthmān Diqna was probably attempting to replicate the complete dismantling of Khartoum in 1885 (1302) and maybe found a new Mahdiyya in the East. Otherwise, the *‘āmil*’s exact intention are all the more ambiguous that the order did not emanate from the Khalīfā. While the latter had asked his *‘āmil* on several occasions to return to Sawākin’s region since at least December 1885 (Rabī‘ I 1303), he does not seem to have ever called for the destruction of Kasalā and the transfer of all the

81 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 25.

82 NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40, document no. 4.



populations of the area. On the contrary, the Khalīfa had enjoined him to be accommodating with the nomadic tribes and mobilise non-Bijāwī groups such as the Shukriyya and the Ḍabbāniyya<sup>83</sup>. Therefore, this decision did not pertain to a wider strategy at the scale of Nilotic Sudan but had been adopted as a provincial policy. ‘Uthmān Diqna must have felt that his leaving Tāka would lead to the breakdown of the Mahdist order in the region, prompting him to initiate the relocation of a large population and the abandonment of the former provincial capital. It pointed to a general framework within which the revolutionary objectives of the Mahdist movement could only be reached by eradicating connections between communities and their land, and disrupting their socioeconomic organisation<sup>84</sup>. ‘Uthmān Diqna’s orders had little effects. They were impractical and potentially impossible to implement.

Though the first drive for forced relocation did not result in the changes expected by the Mahdist leadership, the project was not cast aside. Almost two years after ‘Uthmān Diqna’s first order, the Khalīfa appointed Ḥāmid ‘Alī to Kasalā in March 1888 (Rajab 1305) with the express mission to monitor the situation of the nomadic tribes. He left his *‘āmil* free rein as to the best manner to obtain their submission and participation in the war effort. ‘Uthmān Diqna did not revert to his initial project, but instructed the new *‘āmil* of Kasalā to “dedicate all of his attention on gathering those people and their families, to inscribe them on the registers (*darraja-hum bi-l-kushūfāt huma wa ‘awā’il-hum*) as soon as [his] letter arrived and then displace from each tribe half of their families with the general head (*ra’īs al-qabīla al-‘umūmī*) of the tribe, from all the Hadanduwa, Ḥalānqa, Banī ‘Āmir, Shukriyya, Ḥamrān, Sabdarāt<sup>85</sup>.” There again, practical considerations prevented the full implementation of this policy. In June 1888 (Shawwāl 1305), the *‘āmil* was still requesting from ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf that the transfer of population be expedited<sup>86</sup>. Ḥāmid ‘Alī received the same order to hasten the displacement of the “halves of the Tāka tribes (*anṣāf qaba’il al-Tāka*)” to Sawākin’s region<sup>87</sup>. But in December 1888 (Rabī‘ II 1306), it was yet to be carried out<sup>88</sup>. Military considerations, namely bringing a force large enough to repel any potential advance from Sawākin and saturate the land around the Red Sea port, were central to the Mahdist project. Yet, the *modus operandi* that was chosen reveals a keen understanding by the

83 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 49, p. 60-61.

84 In that respect, similar tactics were employed elsewhere. Bābikir Badrī recounted how, in late 1886 (early 1304), Qarārīsh Arabs who had been accused of entertaining relations with the enemy were raided and forcefully moved near the camp of Ṣaraṣ, north of Dunqulā, and told that “they must attend all the five prayers of each day in the mosque area, or else be considered spies and executed” (Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 44-45).

85 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 44 ; Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

86 NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40, document 5.

87 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 67.

88 *Ibid.*, letter 160.

‘*āmil* of the socioeconomic factors that prevented the full integration of the provincial communities within the Mahdist order. His new plan to divide tribes had several advantages.

First, it removed these groups from their customary environment and so placed them in a state of dependence toward the Mahdist administration. ‘Uthmān Dīqna was straightforward about the advantages accrued from this estrangement. For example, Maḥmūd ‘Alī’s children abandoned their rebellious father, reached Tūkar and espoused the Mahdist cause in early August 1888 (mid-D. al-Ḥijja 1306), but nine months later, they were still an object of concern for the Khalīfa. In an attempt to alleviate his fears, ‘Uthmān Dīqna asserted that “concerning [Maḥmūd ‘Alī’s children] staying with us, they are like the *muhājirīn*, for they are in this region, the Tūkar region, which is not theirs. They do not know it and are not associated with its people (*mukhālaṭa bi-ahāli-hum*), since the lands (*diyār*) they know [lie] from Sawākin to the ‘Aytbāy. They have no people in Tūkar, except for a handful of individuals who had been living in Tūkar for a long time, but they are not their people or anything (*laysa lu-hum ahl wallā ghayr-hā*). So to sum up, the situation of [this] family is like that of a family of *anṣār* as regard their position in this country<sup>89</sup>.”

Secondly, around 500 kilometres separated Sawākin from Kasalā. Once the transfer was carried out, ‘Uthmān Dīqna believed that such a distance would prevent them from attempting to return to their homeland (*waṭān*). This was also the rationale behind his decision to order the transfer of the families alongside that of the combatants, since he viewed their separation as the main vector of desertions (see above). Overall, ‘Uthmān Dīqna was trying to fragment communities so as to transform them and integrate them into the Mahdist order by subjecting them to the ordeal of the *jihād*. A greater concentration of population and a reduction in mobility by nomadic groups were also meant to allow for a much tighter control over them by the Mahdist provincial bureaucracy, including for taxation purposes. However, displacing populations entailed the ability to monitor them, and so the establishment of a paper trail was meant to control and circumscribe their movements.

## ii) *Creating a Paper Trail: The Formation of a Surveillance Society*

Censuses occupied the heart of this bureaucratic apparatus of surveillance. Why were such precise records not only kept, but also regularly updated<sup>90</sup>, surely at great cost for a thinly spread-out administration<sup>91</sup>? Most evidently, the new state was invested in keeping track of the

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89 *Ibid.*, letter 173.

90 See chapter 4.

91 The Mahdist state did not clearly distinguish between administrative and military functions. If the former are restricted to acts of recording (for example to the exclusion of tax collection which was often undertaken by military parties), not more than a few dozen clerks covered the entire *‘imāla* of Eastern Sudan spreading on around 200 000 km<sup>2</sup>, roughly the same surface as that of Great Britain.

whereabouts of its population, and primarily the men who had been mobilised for the *jihād*.

The ability to mobilise forces was of primary interest to central authorities. The process of bureaucratisation had begun early on, in relation with the settlement of Mahdist power in an urban environment in 1883 (1300/1) after the conquest of al-Ubayyīd. As mentioned before, the monopoly on loot implemented by the Mahdī was concomitant with the restructuring of the various groups that had voluntarily taken part in the millenarian movement into a standing army whose members were directly remunerated by the state<sup>92</sup>. This prompted an urgent need for registers<sup>93</sup>. In late January 1883 (Rabī' I 1300), a man named al-Ḥājj Mazrūq b. Muḥammad wrote to the Mahdī asking for his authorisation to raise a banner. Muḥammad Aḥmad answered with a classical admonition to be righteous in his actions and stated that “since the establishment of religion is one of the duties (*wājibāt*), there [was] no objection to [him] being authorised [to raise a banner] with all those who would so desire”, but in an addendum (*taḥshiya*), he also instructed al-Ḥājj Mazrūq to “make a list with their names and the names of their *maqādīm*, and bring it to [him] for review and [only] then would [he] consider giving [him] a banner<sup>94</sup>.” By the end of the year, the system was sufficiently well established that the Mahdī could ask his *amīn*, Aḥmad Sulaymān, to assist one of the *umarā'* to clearly state each [*nāṣir*] by his name, [and distinguish between] those who are missing, dead or recruited (*mustajidd*)<sup>95</sup>.” A year later, on 20 November 1884 (2 Ṣafar 1302), a proclamation of the Mahdī instructed all his followers to establish records of those present in each banner<sup>96</sup> as well as the loot in their possession, so as to redistribute it internally<sup>97</sup>.

The Khalīfa did not attach the same importance to these reports as the Mahdī, at least not at first. But with respect to Eastern Sudan, this began to change in early 1888 (mid-1305) when the massive displacement of men and their families from Kasalā was being planned in view of reinforcing the Mahdist presence near Sawākin. The need for greater administrative control over the combatants must have been acutely felt in this context of unprecedented mobilisation and concentration of troops in the immediate vicinity of Anglo-Egyptian garrison. During the first years of the conflict, from 1883 to 1885 (1300-1302), the enthusiasm felt for the Mahdist cause and the victories against an enemy considered as an alien occupying force (see below) drove the engagement of Bijāwī communities bent on reducing state encroachment in the region. This did not last and, as the Egyptian and British threat rescinded, the impetus to fight for more global strategic goals weakened. The siege of Sawākin in preparation since early 1888 (mid-1305) required the

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92 See chapter 3.

93 Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

94 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 82.

95 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 189.

96 This is one of the few occasions where the Mahdī favoured the term *bayraq* (pl. *bawāriq*) over *rāya* (pl. *rāyāt*).

97 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 476.

presence of large numbers of men in a static position. It is not a coincidence that the first proper military census appeared at that time. They allowed for a much tighter control over the *anṣār*, especially since their concentration was about to bring about further tensions on the supply line. Contrary to the combatants from other provinces who had relatively few opportunities to desert, the men mobilised within Eastern Sudan could easily return to their home area. Thus, from February 1888 (Jumādā I/II 1305) onwards, the Khalīfa multiplied the requests for detailed censuses on available forces.

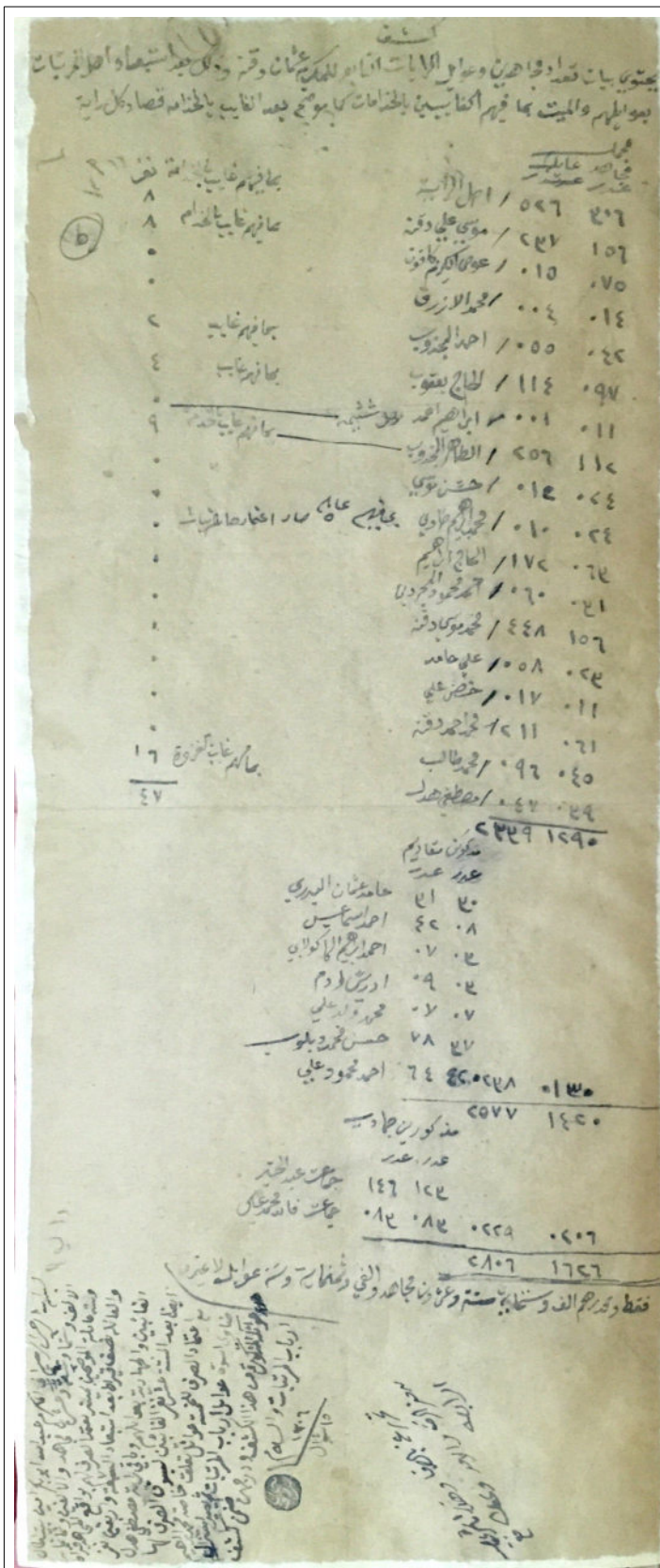
On these occasions, he instructed ‘Uthmān Diqna to communicate to him the names, “individual by individual”, of all those who were supposed to head north. The *‘āmil* obeyed this demand and sent, less than three weeks later, six separate reports—one for each banner—with the names of the 5 326 combatants who had been ordered to follow him back to participate in the siege of the Red Sea port<sup>98</sup>. This was not solely meant as a tool to evaluate the Mahdist military capacities in the region, but also to ensure that deserters could be accounted for. This represented a major shift since it brought about the registering of the Bijāwī population as a whole, albeit in a military framework. On 27 April 1888 (15 Sha‘bān 1305), ‘Uthmān Diqna wrote to the Khalīfa that the heads of the tribes who had recently submitted would leave soon for Umm Durmān, each carrying a letter with information on the number of individuals in their tribe, their names, and comments as to their current situation. At the same time, Ḥāmid ‘Alī who had just been appointed to take control of Kasalā after Abū Qarja’s departure, was instructed to organise the displacement of half of each tribe from the region of Tāka, with their respective heads. The *‘āmil* insisted that he should gather them and “enter them with their families in the reports (*darraja-hum bi-l-kushūfāt huma wa ‘awā’il-hum*)<sup>99</sup>”.

All of these early censuses were conducted after being requested by the central power. Their interest lay almost exclusively on their military dimension and these enquiries were accompanied with other demands related to deserters and inventories of equipment such as horses and weapons<sup>100</sup>. Subsequent censuses were marked by a subtle but noticeable shift away from pure military concerns, as a Mahdist society began to stabilise in this part of Eastern Sudan. Contrary to the previous ones, they were ordered by the provincial leadership and were not thought as the first step to prepare later military expeditions. To some extent, early local assessments had paved the way to these more elaborate censuses. Indeed, around late 1887 or early 1888 (1305), as the Mahdist authority was attempting to secure its holding in Eastern Sudan, ‘Uthmān Diqna had

98 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 126. The Khalīfa’s request can be found in *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 135, p. 121.

99 *Ibid.*, letters 40 and 44.

100 *Ibid.*, letters 127 and 128.



Report

[that] contains information on the number of combatants and family members from the banners dependent on the honourable 'Uthmān Dīqna and this after excluding from the people of the salaries with their family members the missing, including those gone on a mission as indicated below under "absent for service" opposite each banner.

total			
comb. f.m.	individual		
nbr.	nbr.		
306	526	main banner	8 absent for service
156	237	Mūsā 'Alī Dīqna	8 absent for service
75	15	'Awaḍ al-Karīm Kāfūt	
14	4	Muḥammad al-Azraq	
42	55	Aḥmad al-Majdhūb	2 missing
97	114	al-Ḥājj Ya' qūb	4 missing
11	1	Abī Ibrāhīm Aḥmad	Shatīma arrived
112	356	al-Tāhir al-Majdhūb	9 absent for service
24	12	Ḥusayn Mūsā	
24	10	Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Dāwī	
63	172	al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm	
31	60	Aḥmad Maḥmūd al-Majrūbī	5 fm. authorised to a salary
156	448	Muḥammad Mūsā Dīqna	
23	57	'Alī Ḥāmid	
11	17	Khīḍir 'Alī	
61	11	Muḥammad Aḥmad Dīqna	
45	96	Muḥammad Ṭālib	
39	47	Muṣṭafā Hadal	a band of 16 absent
<b>1290</b>	<b>2339</b>		
<b>maqādīm</b>			
30	31	Ḥāmid 'Uthmān al-Badawī	
8	42	Aḥmad 'Ismā'īl	
3	7	Aḥmad Ibrāhīm al-Ḥākūlābī	
3	9	Idrīs Adām	
7	7	Muḥammad w. 'Alī	
37	78	Ḥasan Muḥammad [Dablūb]	
42	64	Aḥmad Maḥmūd 'Alī	
<b>130</b>	<b>238</b>		
<b>1420</b>	<b>2577</b>		
<b>jihādiyya</b>			
123	146	group of 'Abd al-Khayr	
83	83	group of Khālid Muḥammad 'Abbās	
<b>206</b>	<b>229</b>		
<b>1626</b>	<b>2806</b>		

In total, one thousand six hundred twenty-six combatants and two thousand eight hundred and six family members, nothing else

[in perpendicular]

In the name of God the most Gracious, the most Merciful, to 'Abd Allāh Abū Bakr, amīn of the treasury  
 One thousand six hundred twenty-six combatants and two thousand eight hundred and six family members were recorded distribute to them the amount of a *qidāh* for each combatant and half a *qirāṭ* for the family after the removal of the forty-seven absent individuals. Distribute the same to the *jihādiyya* and the rest of the Muṣṭafā Hadal's banner after [the removal of the] sixteen absent individuals. You are authorised to distribute to the five family members who are personally attached to Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Dāwī the same amount as to the families of those who receive a salary. Then remove those mentioned from this report and record them in the account of those who receive salaries. Peace

15 Shawwāl 1306

Fig. 5.1 : Summary of a census of 'Uthmān Dīqna's banners in June 1889 (Shawwāl 1306)

Source: NRO Mahdiyya 5/20/70D, document no. 11.

Abbreviations: comb. = combatant (*mujāhid*) / f.m. = family member ('ā'ila) / ind. = individual (*naḥar*) / nbr. = number ('adad)

Comment: A *qidāh* (also *qidāh*) is a common measure of dry good equal to 1/96<sup>th</sup> of *ardabb* or around 2 litres.

instructed one of his leading *umarā'*, 'Awaḍ al-Karīm Kāfūt, to gather the Ammār'ar and the Bishārīn at al-Malāḥa to count them<sup>101</sup>. Yet, these early censuses were rudimentary. At that stage, the easiest manner for the Mahdist provincial administration to obtain such information was to look at the treasury's expenses. Following another request by the Khalīfa in December 1888 (Rabī' II 1306), the *'āmil* replied that "reports on the number of *anṣār* of the expedition present in the camp [were] based on the records of what was distributed to them<sup>102</sup>". Much more exhaustive censuses were executed later, the first of which in January 1889 (Jumādā I 1306), after the defeat inflicted by Anglo-Egyptian troops in front of Sawākin in December 1888 (Jumādā I 1306), to assess the number of remaining troops present in Handūb<sup>103</sup>. A month later, in February 1889 (Jumādā II), another one was carried out for all the *anṣār* in the Tūkar region and its results presented in five reports later sent to the Khalīfa<sup>104</sup>. As the Mahdist authorities settled in Afāfīt, the shift in nature of these censuses was furthered and their administrative dimension became prominent. They were undertaken on a regular basis, at least once a year, as was the case in 1890 (1307) and again in 1891 (1308)<sup>105</sup>. In parallel, requests for detailed information on the number of men mobilised decreased in 1889-1890 (1306-1307), thus indicating a higher degree of autonomy of the provincial administration when military matters were not immediately affected, something confirmed by the fact that in all likelihood, the detailed censuses of 1890 and 1891 were not communicated to the central authorities in Omdurman. The next report on the troops in Eastern Sudan was sent by 'Uthmān Diqna to the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi after the loss of Tūkar in February 1891 (Rajab 1308) and the withdrawal of the Mahdist administration<sup>106</sup>.

While the first censuses were meant to assess forces, later ones were crucial tools of Mahdist governmentality. They were mostly used to control wages and food distributions (see fig. 5.1). The combatants were subjected to the disciplinarian gaze of the Mahdist administration. They were encased in a dense network of paper trails that conditioned their access to the state's resources of the state and through which their circulations were closely monitored. The simultaneous bureaucratisation of Mahdist administrative practices also led to the multiplication of requests for reports on local activities regarding taxation<sup>107</sup>. The method through which these censuses were

101 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – 'Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

102 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 125 and 142.

103 *Ibid.*, letter 125.

104 *Ibid.*, letter 153.

105 Those two last censuses were the only ones that could be found in the NRO in Khartoum, respectively Mahdiyya 5/07/34 and Mahdiyya 5/08/38.

106 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 216 and 217.

107 For example, in early 1890 (mid-1307), Aḥmad Maḥmūd 'Alī, then appointed to supervise and tax trade circulations in Handūb was asked to submit reports on the goods collected through the *'ushr* every two weeks. See NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 27.

carried out is not known, but may have been based on monthly records of the transfers of the combatants and their families. They distinguished those who were still enlisted (*qar'a*), those who had been integrated in each banner (*amadd*) and those who had been dismissed (*raft*), so as to calculate the number of remaining combatants (*bāqīn*), as well as the number of family members<sup>108</sup>. Quite probably, these records were compiled and then checked by counting the actual number of men and women in each banner<sup>109</sup>.

If censuses were used to control who was present, movements from one region to another were also closely monitored. The correspondence exchanged between the Khalīfa and 'Uthmān Diqna shows that no movement between provinces or to the capital was possible unless previously sanctioned, often after a direct enquiry to the Khalīfa himself. For example, Mūsā Aḥmad al-Bashīr, the *'āmil* of Dār Muhārib on the White Nile, had come to Kasalā with many men, but a great number had died during the famine of 1306 (1889/90), some had fled to Omdurman (as reported by various witnesses there), and only forty of them remained. He wrote to 'Uthmān Diqna asking the authorisation to travel to the capital to reunite his group, but the *'āmil* reminded them that they could not leave without the Khalīfa's assent, and exhorted them to be patient while they waited for an answer<sup>110</sup>.

This close supervision of movements was not limited to combatants. Requests were made for family reunifications, as was the case for Muḥammad 'Alī al-Baṣīr, who asked in April 1888 (Rajab/Shā'bān 1306) that his wife and his niece, Fāṭima bt. al-Salīm, be sent to him from Omdurman<sup>111</sup>. This also applied to the few foreigners who arrived in Sudan, especially from the East. In September 1890 (Muḥarram/Ṣafar 1308), 'Uthmān Diqna requested from the Khalīfa the authorisation to come to Umm Durmān for a traveller named Muḥammad b. al-Walī Ḥammada. Originally from Chinguetti (Mauritania), and after having visited Jerusalem, Bagdad, Damascus, Medina and Mecca, he wished to go to Barbar and then to the capital to meet the Mahdī's successor. Conversely, non-sanctioned movements were highly suspect and individuals who omitted to request the necessary documentation were considered as deserters and so faced immediate penalty. As 'Uthmān Diqna was returning from Umm Durmān to Kasalā in August 1887 (D. al-Qa'da/D. al-Ḥijja 1304), he noticed that a man named Khālid b. Umm Bārik had left the capital without the permission of the Khalīfa. He advised him to go back and ask for his forgiveness<sup>112</sup>. The reaction of Mahdist authorities was not always so lenient. A year after Khālid's incident, forty-four individuals,

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108 A unique example of such a record survived in NRO Mahdiyya 5/05/23.

109 Records were also kept at the level of the *muqadamīyya*, even if the extent of this practice is not known. For an example, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/21/72.

110 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 189.

111 *Ibid.*, letter 45.

112 *Ibid.*, letter 8.

including two women and a slave, who had left the camp of Handūb on 25 September 1888 (18 Muḥarram 1306) without notifying the administration, were pursued by a party of *anṣār*. When they were finally caught on, four of them were slain<sup>113</sup>. However, such degree of violence may not have been the norm. A month after the event mentioned above, when the Khalīfa was informed that deserters had managed to reach Kasalā, he simply ordered ‘Uthmān Diqna to transfer details on those individuals to Ḥāmid ‘Alī, the governor of the town, and instructed him to send them back to Handūb<sup>114</sup>. In any case, the mobilisation effort always proved to be immensely challenging for the Mahdist administration, despite the numerous records kept to circumscribe the men’s movements. In one banner alone originating from the region of Rufā‘a on the Blue Nile, only 50 of the 300 combatants whose names were recorded on the banner’s register were still present in Kasalā in late 1888 (early 1306), little more than 15% of the total, the others having either returned to their home or most likely, never really left in the first place<sup>115</sup>.

The Mahdist state’s attempts at administrative control was first and foremost informed by spatial dynamics. This was the result of practical reasons such as the lack of men to control moving populations dispersed on vast areas, but also the unreliable nature of communications between the central authorities and their representatives in the provinces. The most efficient way for Mahdist leaders to ensure that they could exert their authority was almost uniquely to have those individuals in close proximity. The prevalence of this view, relentlessly echoed in the correspondence between ‘Uthmān Diqna and the Khalīfa, is at the centre of the main tension of Mahdist authority: the impossibility of ruling from afar and the inadvisability of leaving the centre of political power, lest disgruntled factions seize the opportunity to depose their ruler. Spatial dynamics were imbued with political and religious meaning, in perpetuation of the initial calls for *hijra* which prevailed in Muḥammad Aḥmad’s early correspondence. Mobilisation necessarily expressed itself by displacement, from a politically anomic space to one entirely framed by Mahdist authorities, and one could say that being Mahdist was essentially situational. In that regard, a significant amount of the production of the Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan aimed at locating the men and their families, keeping track of their whereabouts, and circumscribing their movement through an elaborate paper trail that found its clearest expression in the establishment of meticulous censuses.

Through displacement and relocation, the Mahdist leadership disconnected men and women from their immediate socioeconomic environment. In turn, leaving one particular territory was akin to shedding one’s identity and starting anew, within the Mahdist community. The crux of the matter

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113 *Ibid.*, letter 88.

114 *Ibid.*, letter 105.

115 *Ibid.*, letter 109.



was to erase tribal affiliations, a never-ending process.

## II. Identity Matters: The Creation of a Mahdist Subject

The Mahdiyya was “extremely hostile to tribal organisation along political or administrative lines<sup>116</sup>” as it was to any forms of affiliations that could interfere with adherence to the movement. The Mahdī strived to suppress plurality and the division of allegiances, particularly tribal allegiances. If religious unicity was meant to be achieved through the dissolution of all other Sufi *turuq* to form a cohesive polity organised through principles directly influenced by Muḥammad Aḥmad’s own ascent within the Sammāniyya, the social aspect of the Mahdist revolution required to root out other aspects of communal networks<sup>117</sup>. In that respect, Mahdist ideology was very much grounded in a non-essentialist perspective regarding ethnic identities, in contrast with ulterior colonial conceptions<sup>118</sup>. Thus, the *hijra* and *tahjīr* represented a central pillar of this ambitious program that sought to rewire the identities of individuals inhabiting Nilotic Sudan.

The Mahdist regime and the ideology it promoted vigorously unsettled the societies of the Upper Nile Valley, yet it did so in a context of larger transformations of tribal identities that dated back to at least the mid-eighteenth century<sup>119</sup>. While an in-depth discussion of the matter cannot be entertained here<sup>120</sup>, it should be remembered that tribal affiliations had already been weakened by migrations, rural exodus and urbanisation, three processes that were concomitant to the decline of the Funj central authority and accelerated during the Turkiyya (1821-1885). In that regard, Muḥammad Aḥmad himself was a representative member of the powerful Dunqulāwī diaspora<sup>121</sup>, which had settled in almost all corners of Nilotic Sudan and had been a central actor in the territorial unification of the region. This, in turn, led to the gradual depoliticisation of these tribal affiliations—albeit in very contrasted ways depending on the community in question—as relations of vassalage ceased to structure relations of authority. Diasporic groups had little to gain by submitting to a distant leader whose role could hardly matter beyond the confines of his own territory.

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116 Mahmood MAMDANI, *Saviors and survivors*, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

117 Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd KĀB AL-RAFĪQ, “Al-Mahdiyya wa al-mujtama‘ al-Mahdawī fī al-Sūdān: al-ahdāf wa al-wasā’il wa madā tawāfuq-hā ma‘a al-āthār wa al-natā’ij,” *op. cit.*

118 Among a vast number of references, see the seminal work of the anthropologist Jay O’Brien (“Toward a Reconstitution of Ethnicity: Capitalist Expansion and Cultural Dynamics in Sudan,” *op. cit.*). For the necessity to consider ethnic identities as politically grounded, see Mahmood MAMDANI, *Saviors and survivors*, *op. cit.* For the relation between identities and their socioeconomic environment, see Talal ASAD, “Equality in Nomadic Social Systems?,” *op. cit.*

119 See introduction.

120 A more thorough overview of the question can be found in Anaël POUSSIER, “Les représentations identitaires de l’État mahdiste. L’autorité provinciale au Soudan-Est et les tribus bija (1883-1898),” *op. cit.*

121 See chapter 2.

This process was far from straightforward and did not so much generate a detribalised society, as it brought about the reformulation of what tribal identities meant in the first place. Indeed, as a number of groups from the riverine communities began to form diasporas, this led to the subjectivation of tribal affiliations as part of one's identity but disconnected from the assertion of a specific authority. In other words, the depoliticisation of tribal identities allowed for their ethnicisation. Most of the men who first showed interest in the Mahdī's provocative and defiant discourse belonged to such diasporic groups. For example, the famous merchant Ilyās Umm Birayr, appointed governor of Kurdufān in 1878 (1295) was still considered a Ja'alī, despite being a longtime resident of al-Ubayyid<sup>122</sup>. Paradoxically, the Egyptian colonial regime both favoured this remodelling of tribal identities and limited its scope. By unifying most of Nilotic Sudan under one single authority, it eased the expansion of these diasporic communities, especially toward the south. At the same time, through its reliance on tribal heads and the formation of *nāzirates*, it strengthened the former's authority and defined territories that they were made responsible to manage, even if only for fiscal purposes, thus attenuating the atomisation of Sudanese societies. Nonetheless, the meaning of their power had experienced a radical shift obscured by the apparent continuity in tribal designations.

The Mahdist regime very much inherited this complexity. It showed clear hostility to tribal groupings under the Mahdī and that for several reasons. Firstly because it could represent a challenge to the Mahdī's absolute authority; and secondly because tribal affiliations were considered as an obstacle to the relinquishing of worldly matters. This had important political consequences with regard to how former tribal authorities were dealt with. In Eastern Sudan, Muḥammad Mūsā, the *nāzīr* of the Hadanduwa and a formidable figure during the Turkiyya<sup>123</sup>, was summoned to Umm Durmān around 1887 (1304/5) to answer for the rising level of defiance from the Hadanduwa in Tāka—in the context of the Bijāwī civil war—and was briefly jailed. When he returned, the *nāzīrate* was no longer a functional political structure<sup>124</sup>. Besides, in spite of their role in the early days of the Mahdist mobilisation and 'Uthmān Dīqna's family ties, the Hadanduwa saw their war drums (*naḥās*) confiscated<sup>125</sup>. In this way, Mahdist power signalled its desire to limit their autonomy and subject them to the authority of their *'āmil*. While relations between the Mahdist

122 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 4ç.

123 See chapter 1.

124 The irrelevance of the *nāzīrate* is conspicuous in 'Uthmān Dīqna's correspondence. Not only is it never mentioned, but Muḥammad Mūsā's name appears only once in the hundreds of letters he exchanged with the Khalīfa. In the spring of 1888 (mid-1305), Colonel Kitchener had written to the *nāzīr* to exhort him not to submit to the Mahdist regime. The missive was intercepted and 'Uthmān Dīqna sent it to Umm Durmān. Tellingly, the *'āmil* had to remind the Khalīfa who Muḥammad Mūsā was, even as the latter was imprisoned in the capital, and described him not as the *nāzīr* of the Hadanduwa but simply as one of their heads (*ru'asā'* sing. *ra'īs*). See Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 39.

125 Thomas R. H. OWEN, "The Hadendowa," *op. cit.*, p. 199.

state and Bijāwī communities never ceased to be a source of tension, at no point was his return and appointment entertained. However, the fact that other options were considered and the modalities of tribal governance a major topic of the correspondence exchanged between the Khalīfa and ‘Uthmān Diqna—second only to military matters—shows the pragmatism of the regime. Short of better options and confronted to the failure of its past policies, the Khalīfa had no qualms revisiting past positions and reinstating some form of local tribal authorities.

The ambiguity was never fully resolved. In Eastern Sudan as in other provinces, the Mahdist administration was characterised by light schizophrenia: exhorting the abandonment of tribal affiliations and, nonetheless, almost systematically finding itself resorting to tribal networks to organise the mobilisation of the *anṣār*.

### ***A) The Inchoate Erasure of Ethno-tribal Identities through Military Integration***

In principle, the Mahdist administration was identity-blind. In general, the correspondence between Tūkar and Umm Durmān did not make use of tribal markers. The core of the process of detribalisation was the integration into the Mahdist military structure through the formation of banners (*rāya* pl. *rāyāt*), which were not meant to reflect tribal affiliations, even though they often did, following modalities that could vary greatly between groups. In that regard, relocation was supposed to disconnect the combatants from their socioeconomic network. Once they had reached the Mahdist centre, they were to be integrated into a banner as their new primary social group.

In practice, the modalities of the *anṣār*'s incorporation into a banner could take many different forms, depending on the circumstances of their mobilisation. In that respect, the situation in Eastern Sudan reflected patterns similar to those characterising the early phase of the Mahdiyya. Indeed, in the western provinces of Kurdufān and Dār Fūr, between 1881 and 1883 (1298-1300), the Mahdist movement had initially spread through the mobilisation of tribal communities, first among which the Baqqāra pastoralists, particularly the Ta‘ā’īsha to whom the Khalīfa ‘Abd Allāh belonged<sup>126</sup>. In Eastern Sudan, the Hadanduwa played a role similar to that of the Baqqāra between 1883 and 1886 (1300-1303) as the core of the movement. In the same manner, despite its strong Sufi overtone and the engagement of the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir and more generally of the Majādhīb settled in the region, mobilisation in favour of Mahdism took place at the scale of the clan, if not the section. The Bushāryāb, ‘Uthmān Diqna’s maternal clan, the Ḥāmdāb and the Nūrāb, three Hadanduwa clans located near Sinkāt and Arkawīt, were all instrumental in the success of the expansion phase of the Mahdist movement in the region<sup>127</sup>. The preponderance of tribal structures

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126 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 59–65.

127 See chapter 2.

was noted in early 1884 (early 1301) by Guido Levi who mentioned the presence of chiefs, mostly from the Hadanduwa Nūrāb, and alluded to the fact that each tribe had its own house within the camp<sup>128</sup>.

But, as for other matters, almost nothing certain is known about the organisation of ‘Uthmān Diqna’s troops for the first years of the movement. The few documents on this period do not make use of the term banner (*rāya*). For example, it does not appear in the Khalīfa’s response to ‘Uthmān Diqna’s account of the battle of Kūfīt<sup>129</sup>. Instead, combatants were referred to as “brothers”, “*mujāhidīn*” or “*anṣār*”. Therefore, the introduction and imposition of the model of the banner as the primary social structure is difficult to date with precision. This may have been anecdotal, but nonetheless telling that a physical banner was sent by the Khalīfa to ‘Uthmān Diqna only in late 1885 (early 1303)<sup>130</sup>.

The shift occurred with the return of the ‘*āmil* in December 1886 (Rabī‘ I 1304) and that of his second-in-command, Abū Qarja, in February 1887 (Jumādā I 1304). The troops they brought back from Umm Durmān—essentially Ja‘aliyīn and Danāqla from the riverine regions and Baqqāra from the western provinces—and those they recruited among the communities of the Buṭānā—mainly from the Shukriyya—were all organised in banners<sup>131</sup>. This last term became much more prevalent from 1887 (1304) onwards within the Mahdist documentation. In September 1887 (late D. al-Ḥijja 1304), the Khalīfa authorised all the Bijāwī nomads to be integrated into the ‘*āmil*’s banner if they so wished<sup>132</sup>, thus confirming that this was probably not the case before. This took place in a period marked by growing discontent among the local Bijāwī communities, first among some Ammār’ar clans in the north, and later in Tāka, where some Hadanduwa groups actively opposed Mahdist rule.

The need to further their integration into structures the existence of which depended entirely on the Mahdist project must have been felt acutely, especially since similar dynamics had emerged in other provinces, thus prompting the historian Abū Salīm to designate the period as that of “tribal revolutions (*thawrāt qabīliyya*)<sup>133</sup>”. Invisibilising tribal affiliations also led the Khalīfa, three weeks before authorising the integration of Bijāwī men into the banners, to exhort his ‘*āmil* to use only the terms of “*anṣār*” or “*aṣḥāb* (companions, sing. *ṣāhib*)” to designate the men who had joined the Mahdist army<sup>134</sup>, supposedly in an effort to impose a common idiom to all the combatants.

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128 Guido LEVI, *Osman Dekna, chez lui, op. cit.*, p. 16–18.

129 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 38, p. 50-52.

130 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 47, p. 59.

131 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi, op. cit.*, p. 22; 99 and 134.

132 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 108, p. 106-107.

133 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Al-ḥaraka al-fikriyya fī-l-Mahdiyya, op. cit.*, p. 35–36.

134 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*, letter 109, p. 107.

However, these instructions remained somewhat theoretical until orders were given to displace most of the available troops to the north in preparation of Sawākin’s siege in early 1888 (mid-1305). On this occasion, the Khalīfa explicitly asked for a list of banners, including the number of combatants in each of them, to be sent to him<sup>135</sup>. Two months later, in late April 1888 (mid-Shā‘bān 1305), facing mounting resistance from Tāka’s Bijāwī communities, ‘Uthmān Dīqna took the radical step of ordering—seemingly without prior approval from Umm Durmān—the transfer of half of each group with its head. At this point, military rationale spilled over civilian life. The ‘āmil justified his action by pointing out that “they relied upon the effect of their homeland (*rakanū li-ta’thīr awṭān-hum*)” to avoid accomplishing their duty to fight the *jihād*. To break this pattern, ‘Uthmān Dīqna instructed Ḥāmid ‘Alī, Kasalā’s ‘āmil, to “dedicate all his attention on gathering those peoples, inscribing them and their families on the registers (*darraja-hum bi-l-kushūfāt huma wa ‘awā’il-hum*) as soon as [his] letter arrives and then displacing half of each tribe with their families and its main head (*ra’īs al-qabīla al-‘umūmī*), from all the Hadanduwa, Ḥalānqa, Banī ‘Āmir, Shukriyya, Ḥamrān, and Sabdarāt<sup>136</sup>”.

The logic behind ‘Uthmān Dīqna’s decision was quite straightforward. By breaking up these communities and taking them away from their socioeconomic environment, he hoped to achieve their full integration into the Mahdist political order, an objective that he had hitherto been unable to achieve and that the eruption of the Bijāwī civil war had made all the more pressing. To some extent, what is known about the inner workings of the banners, shows that tribal identities were indeed subsumed into these new structures.

First, the *umarā’* who headed the banners were not tribal representatives *per se*. Figures like Abū Qarja, at the helm of the second most important banner after ‘Uthmān Dīqna’s, had no tribal standing beforehand and, in all likelihood, the men under him were not all Danāqla. In a letter destined to the delegates, some of his men explained their allegiance to him with the following words: “since the early phase of the affairs of the Muslims, he introduced us and others from among the companions to the Mahdī [...] and his *khalīfa* [...] so we nominated him and we chose him as our leader (*qā’id*) and our guide (*murshid*) for us to our lord since he was the best of the companions (*ni‘m al-aṣḥāb*), the beloved, the comrade<sup>137</sup>”. They added that they had followed him “upon his appointment in the eastern regions”, without making any reference to a relation based on an ethno-tribal relation.

Indeed, for these men as for the early supporters of ‘Uthmān Dīqna<sup>138</sup>, mobilisation for the

135 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, letter 135, p. 121-122 and Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 26.

136 *Ibid.*, letter 44.

137 NRO Mahdiyya 5/20/67B, document no. 23.

138 See chapter 2.

millenarian movement was first and foremost decided at the family if not the individual level. Since there are few mentions of personal trajectories, Mahdist sources may give the wrong impression that movements were carried out in homogeneous units, whereas the process was much more fragmented<sup>139</sup>. For example, on his way back from Umm Durmān to Tūkar in early 1890 (mid-1307), ‘Uthmān Dīqna halted for several weeks in al-Qaḍārīf. There, several men expressed their wish to accompany the Mahdist ‘*āmil* to Eastern Sudan. Subsequently, several letters were exchanged with the Khalīfa to sanction their transfer<sup>140</sup>. Yet, as mentioned above in relation to the motivation behind desertions, family relations remained central in the lives of the *anṣār*, may they be from Bijāwī communities, or from other provinces. Whereas, in the first case, these relations failed to appear in Mahdist documents (as most aspects of Bijāwī social lives), they occupied an important place in the requests for family reunification put forward by the *anṣār*. For example, in June 1888 (Shawwāl 1305), two combatants named ‘Umar Muḥammad Ḥusayn and Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ asked and obtained from the ‘*āmil* the authorisation to head to Kasalā to bring their relatives, some from Kasalā itself, but also from al-Ṣafīyya<sup>141</sup> and Rufā‘a, on the Nile<sup>142</sup>. Despite ‘Uthmān Dīqna’s attention to family matters, not all requests were answered positively. ‘Alī al-Jīlānī, a Hadanduwa Shabūdīnāb<sup>143</sup>, tried to arrange the transfer of the children of his brother, Muṣṭafā, himself a clerk of the Mahdist administration, but reminded him that the authorities had grown suspicious of such request due to the precedent of ‘Abd al-Qādir Hudayb to whom this was granted and then fled to Maṣawwa<sup>144</sup>. These exchanges reveal an active network of relations, often across the whole of Nilotic Sudan<sup>145</sup>. When Sātī Aḥmad, one of the clerks of the delegates, went to Umm Durmān in late 1889 (early 1307), he met with the ‘*āmil* who had preceded them there, and visited the tomb of the Mahdī. He also took pains to obtain information on the family of the *amīr* Maḥmūd Muḥammad Nūrī, who himself had stayed in Tūkar. He located his first wife, Ḥaram bt. ‘Alī, in the capital, and gave her the gifts that had been entrusted to him. He apologised, however, for not being able to find his second wife who was said to have left to cultivate some land upstream, maybe a

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139 One of the few detailed examples of these trajectories’ complexity was developed in the introduction. While Yūsuf Khāṭīb’s involvement in the Mahdiyya was probably not voluntary, his experience remains significant as it reveals the scope of the circulations undertaken during that period, from Khartoum to Dār Fūr and Eastern Sudan, as well as far-reaching connections.

140 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letters 102, 103 and 105.

141 Its location could not be ascertained, however, it probably refers to the small town of al-Ṣafīyya (now called al-Ṣafīyya al-qadīma or Old Ṣafīyya), half-way between Kasalā and Rufā‘a, and, in all likelihood, on the path taken by ‘Uthmān Dīqna and Abū Qarja when they headed back from Umm Durmān the previous year.

142 NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/62B, document no. 1.

143 The same letter was mentioned in chapter 4 in reference to transport problems, particularly to gather camels. ‘Alī al-Jīlānī is said to have been present in al-Ubayyīd before ‘Uthmān Dīqna’s arrival in early 1883 (early 1300). See Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Amīr al-Sharq, ‘Uthmān Dīqna, op. cit.*, p. 44.

144 NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40, document no. 63.

145 In another context, family ties represent one of the major themes of Bābīkir Badrī’s autobiography (*The Memoirs of Babīkr Bedri, op. cit.*).

consequence of the food shortages caused by the *Sanat Sitta*. They discussed with Ḥaram about the possibility of bringing her to Tūkar. She was enthused about the idea, but when ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf who had also undertaken the journey to the capital and was bound to return to Eastern Sudan to resume his work at the head of the treasury, was consulted, he firmly advised against it, thus putting an end to the project<sup>146</sup>.

In all these discussions, no reference to a tribal affiliation was ever made. These individuals did not frame their involvement in the Mahdist movement in ethno-tribal terms. The way banners were constituted also reflected this reality. It is evidently significant that the origin of the men who formed these units was not specified in Mahdist administrative documents, even though they were all registered in detailed censuses (see above). The dominant vector of affiliation was their *amīr* to whom they had been placed under. Consequently, when ‘Uthmān Diqna reported on the state of troops in early 1888 (mid-1305), he simply referred to them by naming their commanding officer. Abū Qarja’s banner was the second largest banner with 818 combatants (family members were not counted), while the smallest, under Ḥamad al-Nīl Ḥāmid, counted only 45<sup>147</sup>. These formations abided to the Mahdist principle of erasing ethno-tribal affiliations, albeit very imperfectly, as shall be seen below.

However, at a lower level, that of the *muqaddamiyya*, primary networks of sociability can be retrieved. Again, these were not the focus of the Mahdist administration. They appear only in a few documents, when the whereabouts of deserters were discussed, because it informed the direction through which they had fled and so allowed officers in other towns to be alerted. In September 1888 (D. al-Ḥijja 1305), just before the siege of Sawākin began in earnest, 44 individuals, men and women, were reported missing. As for banners, each *muqaddamiyya* was designated by its *muqaddam*, but, exceptionally, the origin of his group was also stated. Thus, among other examples, within the banner of *al-sharīf* al-Hindī<sup>148</sup>, eight combatants had fled from the *muqaddamiyya* of Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Raḥmān from al-Shabārqa, a village (*hilla*) on the eastern bank of the Blue Nile, 20 kilometres south of Wad Madanī, opposite Baraka. A few months later, Faḍl Allāh Karār, al-Hindī’s deputy (*wakīl*) tried to explain to ‘Uthmān Diqna why half of the 300 combatants that had come to Handūb had deserted. After having indicated the names of the 22 villages that were under

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146 NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56C, document no. 19.

147 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 26.

148 *Al-sharīf* Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Yūsuf al-Hindī (1817/8-1883) was an eminent Sufi *shaykh* and founder of the Hindiyya, a *ṭarīqa* established between the Blue Nile and the Ethiopian border. He died shortly after having performed the *hijra* to the Mahdī and at least two of his sons, Yūsuf and ‘Alī, carried on the family engagement for the Mahdiyya. See Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 386–387 ; John O. HUNWICK and Rex S. O’FAHEY (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa, Volume 1 Writings of Eastern Sudanic Africa to c. 1900*, *op. cit.*, p. 277–280 ; Rex S. O’FAHEY, “A History of the Awlād Hindī,” *Sudanic Africa*, 2002, vol. 13, p. 75–82.

al-Hindī's authority, he recounted to the *'āmil* that “in this camp (*ribāṭ*), they fight day and night and have protested for some time. Those present now are sick with worry, and if no one comes who can listen to their word and to make them their centre of attention, like the *maqādīm* of the villages and *'umud* (village chief; sing. *'umda*), order within that rabble cannot be restored (*fa-lā yastaqīmu amr-hā bi-l-awbāsh*)”. Their displacement had caused the breakdown of the social order that structured life in the aforementioned villages situated on the Lower Blue Nile, on the Jazīra. Faḍl Allāh Karār himself recognised having little authority over them. Despite the fact that the banner was not a tribal formation and that each *muqaddamiyya* was essentially associated to a specific village, he nonetheless felt compelled to remind the *'āmil* that he himself was a Maḥas whose origins lay north of the Dunqulā Reach, at the border with Egypt, and that his “mixing (*ikhtilāt*) with them” was only the result of a marriage relationship. He himself had first joined the family banner during the *hijra* to the Maḥdī and kept on fighting alongside 'Alī, one of Muḥammad al-Amīn's son. The other one, the famous Yūsuf, was still near Wad Madanī, busy attempting to ensure the welfare (*rāhā*) of the same *maqādīm* whose absence in Handūb was denounced by the deputy Faḍl Allāh Karār<sup>149</sup>.

Banners were not monolithic institutions and among the different vectors that underlay their formation, tribal affiliation occupied a marginal role compared to other social connections. At some point in early 1889 (mid-1306), the Khalīfa had authorised Ḥāmid al-Naṣrī to form his own banner, but when around 40 men asked to leave the banner of the *amīr* Aḥmad al-Badawī, he refused and petitioned the delegates to challenge the decision. In these circumstances, al-Naṣrī felt compelled to write to the Khalīfa to justify the gathering of these men, thus offering a glimpse into the details of these social connections. Some of them belonged to “the people (*ahl*) of al-'Aylafūn<sup>150</sup> [and were part] of the party of [his] parent 'Abd Allāh al-Khalīfa Abū Ṣafiyya”. Others had been dispatched to the people of Abū Dūm<sup>151</sup> by al-Ṣiddīq Aḥmad al-Kinānī<sup>152</sup> where they had a chance encounter with the famous *amīr* Yūsuf al-Dikaym. They followed him to Umm Durmān before joining the *muqaddamiyya* of al-Naṣrī. Al-Qaddāl Ibrāhīm and his men were also integrated in the banner on the basis that he was of the same “people” as al-Naṣrī, even if the latter specified that he was born in Taqālī, in the Nūba Mountains, where he had joined another renowned *amīr*, Ḥamdān Abū 'Anja, before heading toward Umm Durmān and asking to be affected to al-Naṣrī's group<sup>153</sup>. While ethno-

149 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 87 and 123.

150 This locality is situated a dozen kilometres south of Khartoum and Sūbā on the Blue Nile.

151 Probably a reference to the *wādī* Abū Dūm near Marawī in Northern Sudan, between al-Dabba and Abū Ḥamad.

152 Probably from the Kināna community settled on the White Nile that had been instrumental in allowing Muḥammad Aḥmad's *hijra* through their territory (Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 46 and 56).

153 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 5 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 10. Another letter was sent at the same time to the Khalīfa by some of the men mentioned in al-Naṣrī's letter to denounce al-Badawī's coercive practices (NRO Mahdiyya 5/20/67B, document no. 24).



tribal connections are manifest in these trajectories, they are not dominant. Only al-Naṣrī's *nisba*, al-Ḥasanī<sup>154</sup>, gives some indication as to the common "people" to which he referred.

But the crux of the problem in this case was Aḥmad al-Badawī's opposition to the departure of some of his men. Family connections could not be easily dismissed. Transfers from one banner to another could be challenged by referring to family ties. In May 1889 (Shawwāl 1306), around the same time as al-Naṣrī's petition and in the larger context of the reorganisation of Mahdist troops in Eastern Sudan after their transfer to Tūkar and the coming of the Khalīfa's delegates<sup>155</sup>, three *anṣār* opposed their transfer arguing that not only had they not been informed of that decision, but "all the children of their maternal uncle's father were [still] incorporated in [their] former banner<sup>156</sup>." Transfers between banners were closely regulated, mainly because they were far from pacified and probably constituted the main sources of tension within the Mahdist camp. One of the *maqādim*, Muḥammad al-Kindī claimed in yet another petition to the Khalīfa that when Abū Qarja had learnt of his imminent transfer to another banner, he had attacked his group repeatedly and even robbed them of 425 r. *qūshlī*<sup>157</sup>. Whatever the truth in this allegation, such intense reaction to what should have been primarily an administrative decision was considered plausible. The reasons behind such bursts of violence must be located in an array of factors, rarely if ever made explicit in the epistolary exchanges of the period, probably because they did not conform to the moral economy that the Mahdist provincial administration was trying to establish. More than half a century later, Bābikir Badrī could afford to be more candid. Stationed in Farka, midway between Dunqulā al-Urdī and Ṣaraṣ, the Mahdist bridgehead on the Egyptian border, just south of Wādī Ḥalfa, Badrī was convinced by his uncle, 'Alī Shakkāk, to transfer from the banners of Makīn al-Nūr and 'Alī Ḥamad al-Nīl to that of 'Abd al-Ḥalīm, "for economic reasons". Indeed, soon after, he was appointed deputy-clerk of his new banner and made responsible of its stores. He was able to take advantage from his new position to embezzle some of the supplies, mainly grain, that were brought from the south to feed al-Nūjūmī's army. Denounced by the *amīn* of the granary, he fell out of favour and suspected his own uncle of having engineered his disgrace. When he threatened to resign and return to his own banner, he reminded his *amīr* that "[they had] left the [banner] of Makīn al-Nūr, and abandoned [their] people the Rubāṭāb who are still with it, only so that [they] might live more easily under your power; for [they], like [him], know that religion is the same under all the [banners]". So

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154 The Ḥasaniyya claimed to be a tribe of Arab descent. They were mainly established in a string of locations that spread from Marawī in the north to Kūstī, on the White Nile, in the south ('Awn al-Sharīf QĀSIM, *Mawsū'at al-qabā'il wa al-ansāb fī al-Sūdān wa ashḥār asmā' al-a'lām wa al-amākin*, *op. cit.*, p. 576–579). The fragmented aspect of the Ḥasaniyya's localisation fits the information given by al-Naṣrī as to the origin of the men of his new banner.

155 See chapter 3.

156 NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/67B, document no. 23.

157 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 12.

as to make sure that his intent was understood, he added that would his request not be granted, he would leave the banner and take with him “everyone else in ‘Alī Shakkā’s unit<sup>158</sup>”. Badrī skilfully navigated the different registers of legitimation, insisting, on the one hand, on the Mahdist project of erasing ethno-tribal affiliations, while, on the other hand, reminding his interlocutor of the importance and potency of these ties, so as to blackmail him into reinstating him back to his previous position and the substantial advantages he accrued from it.

To make sense of this threat requires to underline the ambiguity of the position held by banners’ heads. Unable or unwilling to invoke ethno-tribal authority, their power resided mostly on their invocation of an aristocratic principle: they had been among the first to heed the Mahdī’s revolutionary project, had performed the *hijra*, and proven themselves on the battlefield. The men who followed them did so because of their exemplary commitment. But the argument cut both ways. Failings from their part, particularly with regard to their respect for the tenets of the Mahdist moral economy, could prompt combatants to ask for their transfer and so diminish their social standing. In that respect, these *umarā’* found themselves acting as small entrepreneurs, trying to elevate their status by attracting recruits, even if this took place in a constrained social environment where other connections, including ethno-tribal relations, remained powerful vectors of identification. These internal tensions could suddenly emerge in open with great intensity, as when twelve *maqādīm* decided, in April 1889 (Sha‘bān 1306), to complain to Abū Qarja against their own *amīr*, Shā‘ib Aḥmad, whom they accused of misappropriation. To justify their action, they claimed to have suffered from an “intense hardship and an absence of rectitude (*istiqāma*) for the compensation of the misery (*tardīyat al-ta‘ūs*)”. Abū Qarja had already tried to mediate between the two parties and obtain reparations for the *maqādīm*, but after he left for Umm Durmān “[their] hardship only intensified, as well as the rivalry (*munāfasa*), the detestation (*mubāghada*), the anger (*taqaṣṣud*), and the refusal of all sincere advice from us and many others. Its duration (*tūl*) and its permanence (*mudāwamat*), [made them] fear that this may strike [them] in [their] religion and spirits (*anfās*), so [they] presented to [Abū Qarja] the harm (*darar*) that happened to [them] [and] wished that his lordship would give [them] justice<sup>159</sup>.” Relations within a banner were far from being pacified.

The military order developed during the Mahdiyya—the template for a wider and more encompassing Mahdist social order—may have been contested and sapped by other underlying dynamics, but the premises of inclusion and non-differentiation could not be flouted without consequences. The extension of such organisation to integrate large Bijāwī sections within the

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158 Bābikīr BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 51–52.

159 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 1.

Mahdist order proved difficult. In 1892 (1309/10), the Khalīfa was still urging his *‘āmil* in Eastern Sudan “not to divide the army among the nomads (‘urbān)<sup>160</sup>” The Khalīfa’s decision to separate military matters, wholly entrusted to ‘Uthmān Dīqna, from the management of the relationships with the Bijāwī communities, a responsibility that fell on Abū Qarja, gave form to a dual system of governmentality. Military mobilisation engendered a shift from the tribe (qabīla) to the banner (rāya) as the primary social structure, which went hand in hand with an attempt by the administration to divide the larger tribes in order to limit their capacity for opposition.

As for the relations with the Bijāwī tribes, the Khalīfa’s reaction to growing opposition to Mahdist rule in Eastern Sudan was to appoint Abū Qarja as the spokesman of the local communities’ interests in January 1887 (Rabī’ II 1304)<sup>161</sup>. The paradox of employing a Dunqulāwī in this position is obvious. It signals two antagonistic trends. On one side, this decision contributed to furthering the decoupling of ethno-tribal dynamics from the Mahdist mobilisation for the *jihād*. On the other side, it also exposed the failure of the provincial administration to rule over the entire region as a single entity. Forced to contain the spread of Bijāwī contestation that had erupted in 1886 (late 1303), and eager to widen the base of Mahdist power in Eastern Sudan, the provincial administrations attempted to adapt to local circumstances and establish a differentiated treatment for these communities, thus indicating its willingness to renege on its revolutionary project of total integration.

### ***B) Alterity in the Mahdist Melting-Pot***

Through displacements and mobilisation, the Mahdist regime induced an extraordinary concentration of population of various origins in Eastern Sudan, a phenomenon probably without precedent in the region’s history. Thousands of individuals from all backgrounds were brought together<sup>162</sup>, fighting alongside, and, on occasions against each other. The unifying impulse of the millenarian movement led to the formation of a melting-pot that required to be regulated, thus prompting the transformation of these actors’ identities, either through the action of the state, or by sheer reaction to being placed in direct contact with groups originating from vastly different ethno-tribal structures. Managing this alterity was one of the essential tasks of the provincial leadership.

‘Uthmān Dīqna’s initial effort to unite the men and women who partook in the early phase of the movement translated into framing the Mahdists as fighting a singular and alien entity. The *‘āmil* instrumentalised the historical distrust of Eastern Sudan’s communities toward external actors.

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160 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 309.

161 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, letter 81, p. 86-88.

162 The numbers were themselves hotly contested as they were instrumental in the rivalry between ‘Uthmān Dīqna and Abū Qarja. See chapter 3.

In that respect, the state was the enemy. The term *dawla* seems to have been uniquely used to designate the Egyptian and “English” states. The author of the *Mudhakkirāt* thus noted that the expedition defeated at the second battle of the coast on 4 February 1884 (6 Rabī‘ II 1301) was the last they saw of the “soldiers of the Egyptian state (‘*asākīr al-dawla al-maṣriyya*)”. While this had caused the collapse of the “order of the Turks (*amr al-Turk*)”, leading to the suspension of all operations in the interior, the first chronicler of the Mahdist uprising in Eastern Sudan was prompt to emphasise that the “governorate of Sawākin (*muḥāfaẓat Sawākin*) had been entrusted to the English [and that] Sawākin was henceforth under English rule (*ḥukm al-Inklīz*)<sup>163</sup>”. One state had just replaced the other. A similar expression could be found later in the *Waqā’i*. In one of the rare mentions of how the British intervention was perceived, Muḥammad Sirr al-Khatm al-Mīrghanī, the famous *shaykh* of the Mīrghaniyya<sup>164</sup>, was accused of having colluded with the “states of the Franks (*duwal al-Afranj*)<sup>165</sup>”.

These terms reflected closely the vocabulary used in the Mahdī’s own correspondence. But as time passed by, a cursory analysis of Mahdist epistolary sources reveals that specific terms tended to be discarded in favour of the more general designation of “Turks<sup>166</sup>”. Several hypotheses can be offered as to this semantic preference. Firstly, it allowed to subsume a wide spectrum of identities under a single name. Mahdist authorities in Eastern Sudan were well aware of these differences and regularly distinguished British soldiers from Egyptian ones, whom they designated as “Reds (*ḥumrān*)<sup>167</sup>”, as well as Egyptians either settled or born in Nilotic Sudan, like the *muwallad*<sup>168</sup> present in Kasalā. When those joined the Mahdist movement, the term that appears to have been privileged was *awlād al-rīf*<sup>169</sup>, but this is based on a handful of examples<sup>170</sup>. In that regard, this denomination was not an expression based on muddled representations of whom the enemy might be, but on the contrary, reflected the need to resort to an all-encompassing expression that included a diverse set of actors. In that sense, all enemies were Turks and the Turks were the

163 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, p. 60.

164 See chapter 2.

165 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, p. 76.

166 A specific count of the use of each designation, English, Egyptian and Turk is unfortunately severely hindered by the polysemy, in Arabic, of the two last terms, as well as the number of derivatives that can be formed from them.

167 The origin of this unconventional plural (instead of *aḥmar* pl. *ḥumr*) could not be ascertained. Its contemporary use has been restricted to individuals with a light tone of skin, mainly of European descent. The matter is all the more confusing that one of the non-Bijāwī groups settled near Kasalā are the Ḥamrān (also pronounced Ḥumrān). They were said to have left the region around 1886 (1303) to seek refuge in Abyssinia and not have returned before the fall of the Mahdist regime (Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Tārīkh sharq al-Sūdān: mamālik al-Bija, qabā’il-hā wa tārīkh-ha, op. cit.*, p. 672–673). For an example of Egyptian soldiers called “Reds”, see Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, letter 432.

168 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, letter 130.

169 Literally the “sons of the countryside”, an expression that mirrored other common Sudanese designations such as the *awlād al-balad* for the riverine communities and *awlād al-‘arab* for those from the western provinces.

170 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, letters 130, 199 and 214.

enemy.

Another interpretation is to notice that the expression “Turks” allowed the Mahdists to emphasise the alien character of their enemies. While British officers in Sawākin like Kitchener could be called “enemies of God (*a ‘dā’ Allāh* sing. *‘adūw*)”, the fact that most of the Egyptians stationed in the Red Sea port and engaged in Eastern Sudan were Muslims could not be dismissed easily. The *takfīrī* principle that informed the Mahdī’s ideology could not be transferred in ‘Uthmān Diqna’s province where Bijāwī communities were already suspected of having a loose relation with Islamic orthodoxy. Furthermore, it reflected the inner tensions of the group that had gathered around the *‘āmil* and that comprised affluent merchants, some of whom may have travelled extensively in the Red Sea area, as well as Bijāwī nomads whose horizons were more restricted. Crucially, not all of the Mahdist supporters shared a common language. In this regard, the “Turk” was characterised by his alterity, the embodiment of otherness, and so contributed to conceal the stark contrasts that existed within the Mahdist body.

Lastly, there is little doubt that this designation helped unite all the different groups under ‘Uthmān Diqna’s command by framing their action as a struggle against the former regime. In this perspective, the “Turks” were seen as the representatives of the colonial order, may they be of Egyptian, Turkish or Sudanese origin, that was overthrown by the Mahdist revolution. It certainly had potent echoes in Eastern Sudan where resistance to the encroachment of the Egypto-Ottoman regime had been particularly intense. Besides Dār Fūr, the region was indeed one of the last to have been effectively submitted (something that cannot be said of the southern provinces like Equatoria or the Baḥr al-Ghazāl). The violence of the conflict of the early 1840s cannot have been forgotten, as were the exactions perpetrated by officers based in Kasalā while collecting taxes<sup>171</sup>. As a matter of fact, some of these men were indeed Turkish-speaking. One can assume that the Mahdist *da ‘wa* strongly contributed to anchoring this distinction in Sudanese collective memories, although the use of such a vague term as “Turk” should not be construed as signalling a lack of understanding of the heterogeneity of their foes on the part of the Mahdist leadership, but rather as an instrument in their attempt to blur the very internal differences that threatened its cohesiveness.

The relative unity that had prevailed between 1883 and 1886 (1300-1303) began to crumble with the beginning of the Bijāwī civil war. The solution to the surge of local opposition, bringing troops from other provinces, enabled the Mahdists to overcome Bijāwī resistance, but it was also responsible for the diffusion of the contestation to the southern Bijāwī triangle that had hitherto remained calm. The Mahdist project of subsuming communitarian forms of identification within a

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171 See chapter 1 for an overview of the integration of Eastern Sudan within the Egyptian colonial dominion.

single and coherent identity, pegged on the recognition of and abidance to the Mahdī's *da'wa*, remained incomplete. This ambiguity is manifest in the Mahdist documentation itself.

While ethno-tribal affiliations were almost never openly discussed and commented on, they were nonetheless used in multiple instances within Mahdist administrative records. Despite their claim of being identity-blind, provincial representatives of the Mahdist state did distinguish groups based on such affiliations. Without these discursive slips, which belied the tenets of Mahdist ideology, the extent of Mahdist mobilisation's heterogeneous character could not be gauged. Indeed, in early 1888 (mid-1305), at what can be presumed to have been the peak of out-of-province mobilisation in Eastern Sudan, 'Uthmān Dīqna declared to the Khalīfa that, alongside the 4 000 men that were supposed to be brought by 'Alī w. Hadāb, there were also 1 000 from the Shukriyya, 300 of the Ḥamrān, 200 of the Sabdarāt, and 500 from the Ḥalānqa, all originating from Tāka and the Buṭāna, for a total of 6 000 men. In addition, the 'āmil stated that the troops at Awdayb under Ḥāmid 'Alī numbered 4 000 combatants. With the 1 000 men who had left previously from Kasalā, led by Ibrāhīm Muḥammad, and the similar number present alongside the 'āmil, this was supposed to bring the total number of troops in Eastern Sudan to 12 000, but 'Uthmān Dīqna recognised that this figure was vastly overestimated, a more realistic count should be between 3 000 and 4 000, mainly because of the lack of enthusiasm for the *jihād* from the part of the Bijāwī communities and their distinct tendency to desert<sup>172</sup>. Unfortunately, the proportion of foreign fighters is difficult to assess. As a result of the dual system of military integration formulated above, only Eastern Sudan's groups, Bijāwī and non-Bijāwī, were designated through their ethno-tribal affiliation.

Other groups, if they ever were constituted in homogeneous units, would only seldom appear in relation to precise numbers. One of the very few instances for which these categories were used in Mahdist correspondence, was in relation with the operations led against the Ammār'ar in the midst of the Bijāwī civil war. On 28 December 1887 (11 Rabī' II 1305), around 2 000 men, including 1 000 Hadanduwa, led by the *umarā'* Zakaryā Faḍl Allāh and al-Ṭāhir bin Muḥammad 'Alī Dīqna met with an enemy force near al-Malaḥa. The ensuing fight was confused and only stopped at dusk. Four days, when the *anṣār* returned, they had lost six men of the Ta'ā'isha Baqqāra<sup>173</sup>, fifteen from the Jimi', nine from Bornū<sup>174</sup>, two from the Habāniyya, and three from other groups. Besides, 56 members of the *jihādiyya* had also been killed and 27 were assumed

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172 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 23.

173 One of the few other documents in which the existence of the Ta'ā'ishī group is clearly mentioned can be seen in NRO Mahdiyya 5/05/23A, p. 29 and Mahdiyya 5/05/23B, p. 31.

174 A banner of Bornū is also mentioned in Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 212.

captured, while the *awlād al-‘arab*<sup>175</sup> counted 20 losses and the Hadanduwa themselves, 84<sup>176</sup>. In addition, a group of Ja‘aliyīn had also been dispatched to Eastern Sudan under the *amīr* ‘Awaḍ al-Karīm Kāfūt<sup>177</sup>. One other important community represented among ‘Uthmān Diqna’s *anṣār* were the Takārīn, more commonly known as the Takārīr (sing. Takrūr)<sup>178</sup>, that is the community of Western Africans settled in Nilotic Sudan either waiting to gather funds to finalise the *hajj* to Mecca, or on their way back from the holy city. Significant numbers could be found in al-Qaḍārif. Finally, some *awlād al-rīf*, under Aḥmad al-Majdhūb, were also mobilised<sup>179</sup>. Surprisingly, Danāqla whose presence is attested in the region in other sources, do not appear by name in Mahdist documents.

Bringing together large numbers of combatants, often accompanied by their families, could only stoke tensions in a context of food shortage (if not extreme famine). Such tensions generally echoed the very ethno-tribal divisions that the Mahdist leadership attempted to erase. They were prompted by the arrival of several thousand men from other provinces in early 1887 (mid-1304)<sup>180</sup>. Indeed, among the main reasons for the declining support of the Hadanduwa to the Mahdist movement was the coming of Baqqāra tribesmen to Eastern Sudan. This led to numerous frictions between the two communities<sup>181</sup>.

At first, the fault line between the *anṣār* and the local Bijāwī communities was caused by the exactions perpetrated by the former as they moved across Eastern Sudan. In June 1887 (late 1304), a small party of *anṣār*, on its ways from Barbar to Handūb, clashed with a group of Bishārīn as they crossed their territory. The Bishārīn petitioned Muḥammad Khayr ‘Abd Allāh Khūjalī, Barbar’s *‘āmil*, who in turn communicated their complaint to the Khalīfa. Upon their arrival in the Mahdist headquarter, ‘Uthmān Diqna interrogated the accused *anṣār*, who, unsurprisingly, stated that they were attacked without reason. Abuses were common, but the Mahdist leadership was keen to mitigate their effects and investigate them when they were declared. In this case, according to the

175 The fact that the *awlād al-‘arab* were distinguished from the Ta’ā’isha and associated with the *jihādiyya* shows that ethno-tribal categories partially overlapped with military categories. The *jihādiyya* was the sole unit the members of which all had firearms. Similarly, it is likely that *awlād al-‘arab* were cavalrymen. For another example of such association, see *Ibid.*, letters 63 and 287.

176 *Ibid.*, letter 22.

177 *Ibid.*, letters 44 and 130.

178 See also NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56B, doc. 8 and *Ibid.*, letters 44, 80 and 105.

179 *Ibid.*, letter 130.

180 According to Ḥammūdī, Abū Qarja arrived in Kasalā in February accompanied by 3 000 Baqqāra and Shukriyya. The source for this figure is not indicated and thus it could not be corroborated. See *Report on the Dervish Rule*, p. 4 and Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 100 ; Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

181 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 16–17.

*anṣār*'s own testimony, Muḥammad Zayn Ḥasan, a minor Ja'alī *amīr* based in Barbar<sup>182</sup>, had previously written to the Ja'alīn and Bishārīn tribes to inform them that "Muḥammad al-Khayr 'Abd Allāh had dispatched [the *anṣār*] (*shahala-hum*), had provisioned them (*ṣarafa-hum*) and did not leave them with one thing lacking". He thus insisted on the idea that the Mahdist combatants had no right to claim anything from them. More astonishing, he even instructed both communities that "should the brothers pass by them and ask them for something, they were to fight them." This they did but they were nonetheless severely beaten by the *anṣār* who killed five of them<sup>183</sup>. Resistance was always a gambit.

Whereas other groups, like the Shukriyya, quickly deserted, the Baqqāra remained and so had to be supplied. Due to the region's limited resources, they could not be stationed in Kasalā and had to find their own grazing lands. It seems that in 1887 (1304/5), the majority of them had settled near *jabal* Awdayb where they lived off the land. This quickly strained the relations with two Hadanduwa groups, the Jamīlāb and Shabūdīnāb, one can assume because of competitive uses of available pastures<sup>184</sup>. The situation was not much better in Handūb even if clashes were more subdued. In late July 1888 (mid-D. al-Qa'da 1305), 'Uthmān Diqna informed the Khalīfa of the death of "one of the *anṣār* by the name of Muḥammad w. Bakhīt of the Maḥas, from the sons of 'Awj al-Darb, from the banner of al-Shahīd Muḥammad Yasin Rād Allāh, [whose body] was found in the vicinity of two detachments of nomads (*firqān al-'urbān*), which had come on a mission and settled next to the camp<sup>185</sup>". Nothing more was known as to the motive of this murder, even if the manner in which the case was presented left little doubt as to its ethno-tribal dimension. Such tensions were much more explicit one year later, in early 1889 (mid-1306). The Mahdi camp had just been moved from Handūb to Afāfīt. In a context of reconfiguration of Mahdist presence in Eastern Sudan, the relation between the *anṣār* and the Bijāwī groups that had been mobilised for the *jihād* quickly degraded. On 25 March (24 Rajab 1306), the delegates of the Khalīfa decided to gather the army, the *umarā'* and the judges, to obtain their opinion with regard to the feud between 'Uthmān Diqna and Abū Qarja. As they were conversing with the judges in a corner of the tribunal, they heard the beating of the war drums (*naḥās*) summoning the *anṣār*. Unaware of the reason, a large number of men<sup>186</sup>—several thousands according to the different testimonies—from the neighbouring tribes came and surrounded the *anṣār* who were gathered in the courtyard of the

182 Ibrāhīm 'Akāsha 'ALĪ, *Wilāyat Barbar fī 'ahd al-Khalīfa 'Abd Allāh (Ramaḍān 1302 – Rajab 1317 / June 1885 – November 1899)*, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

183 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 5.

184 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – 'Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

185 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 65.

186 Abū Qarja estimated the Bijāwī men who came to around 2 000, while the *umarā'* who, on this occasion, also testified, claimed that they were almost 7 000.



mosque. Emotions ran high and the tension was such that Abū Qarja claimed only “an arrow head” separated the two groups when they came face to face. Some form of brawl must have erupted since one of the *anṣār* was reported to have been beaten and his fingers broken<sup>187</sup>.

How Bijāwī communities may have perceived these newcomers cannot be accessed. On this issue as on others, Mahdist sources almost never echo their thoughts, restricting the analysis to the outer manifestations of said relations. Yet, in another context, Yūsuf Mikhā’il, a *muwallad* incorporated in the Mahdist administration, commented on the arrival in Umm Durmān of men from the western provinces who had been displaced in 1896 (1313/4) in reaction to the advance of the Anglo-Egyptian expedition. He remembered, almost four decades later, that “some of these tribes spoke an unknown language – it resembled that of animals”. The description given by the Coptic administrator mirrors closely those given by contemporary observers like Ohrwalder, Slatin and Shuqayr of the arrival of the Ta‘ā’isha in Umm Durmān in 1888 (1304/5), leading Ṣāliḥ Muḥammad Nūr, Yūsuf Mikhā’il’s first translator, to suggest that he may have conflated the arrival of the western troops led by Maḥmūd w. Aḥmad with this episode<sup>188</sup>. Indeed, while Mahdist discourse is indicative of significant tensions between local communities and the *anṣār*, it is uncertain whether these were prompted by the rejection of the Mahdist state and its agents or a sense of violation of the Bijāwī territory by foreigners. In that sense, Mikhā’il’s retrospective comment on the alien character of the Baqqāra echoed the position of the DMI. Anglo-Egyptian authorities in Sawākin were well aware of the heterogeneity that characterised Mahdist troops thanks to Ḥusayn Walī, a Diqnāb from his mother’s side, herself one of Muḥammad Aḥmad Diqna’s sister, who had been captured when the Mahdist camp of Salahat near Tamāy had been raided by the Ammār’ar in 1886, an operation that had marked the beginning of the Bijāwī civil war. Released some time later because of his very young age, he maintained communication with his former jailers. According to him, in late 1889 (early 1307), “there [were in Tūkar] 1000 men consisting of Baggara, Dongolese, Jaalin, Mahass, Shaikiyeh, Bederieh, Gimieh, and Takruris”, as well as 150 Jihādiyya<sup>189</sup>. But the DMI had its own grid of interpretation. A few months before, in September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307), they were tipped by 19 Artayqa, Wayl’alyāb, and others, all Bijāwī, who came from Tūkar *via* ‘Aqīq, about the internal tensions that plagued the Mahdist camp, because “the Aghrab are fed from the Beit El Mal while the Arabs get nothing<sup>190</sup>.” Yet, the term *Aghrāb*,

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187 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fi Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 133–137.

188 Salih Mohammed NUR, *A Critical Edition of the Memoirs of Yūsuf Mikhā’il*, *op. cit.*, p. 232 ; Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK (ed.), *Mudhakkirāt Yūsuf Mikhā’il: al-Turkiyya wa-l-Mahdiyya wa-l-ḥukm al-thunā’ī fi al-Sūdān*, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

189 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 97 (11-23 December 1889), Appendix A.

190 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 90 (1-16 September 1889), Appendix A.

with the literal meaning of “Westerners” or, in this context, “foreigners”, does not seem to ever appear in the Mahdist correspondence, except to designate actual foreigners in Sawākin<sup>191</sup>. This could well be a rare indication of a Bijāwī sense of otherness with respect to some of the *anṣār*.

The fact is that it also became a fixture in the discourse developed by Wingate, then at the head of the DMI. In his influential work, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*, it appears on several occasions, thus writing that “up to early in 1887 the Arab forces had been drawn solely from the local tribes, none of the *Aghrab* (i.e. Baggara, Jaalin, Danagla, etc.) had as yet to invade the eastern Sudan<sup>192</sup>”. Wingate seemed quite convinced that the local populations had a clear perception of the *anṣār* as being foreigners. According to him, after the Mahdist withdrawal from the immediate vicinity of Sawākin, the consequence of the battle of al-Jummayza on 20 December 1888, “proclamations were issued urging [the local tribes] to take advantage of the rout of the Arabs and drive them out of their country<sup>193</sup>”. In the same vein, with regard to the events that took place in Eastern Sudan in 1889, he narrated that a “tribal confederation” of Hadanduwa and Ammār’ar had come to Sawākin to ask for assistance in their struggle against the Mahdists, expressing “violent protestations [...] to exterminate the *Aghrab* or foreigners<sup>194</sup>”. Similar comments were made throughout his analysis on the position of the communities in this region, which he assumed were innately hostile to those he called the “Arabs”, adding further confusion to the debate since that term was evidently ambiguous and could point to *anṣār* from Baqqāra and Ja‘alī origins, as well as nomads native to Eastern Sudan (see below). In any case, Wingate and the DMI were anxious to describe Mahdist presence in this province as a foreign intrusion. It buttressed his argument toward the British public about the illegitimacy of the Mahdist regime, allowing him to frame future military operations as desired by the local populations. Conversely, by insisting on the alien dimension of Mahdist rule, the DMI may have hoped to garner support from the Bijāwī communities themselves in order to evict ‘Uthmān Diqna and his men from the area.

On the other side, the way Mahdist leaders perceived the very same Bijāwī communities they strived to incorporate was not devoid of ambiguities. Between the figure of the enemy, the Turk, and that of a cohesive and uniting “us”, the various groups inhabiting Eastern Sudan occupied a shifty position in Mahdist representations, a fact compounded by the wide movement of opposition that erupted in 1886 and rendered the delimitation between friends and foes even blurrier. Among the *anṣār* themselves, some divisions could surface, as when ‘Uthmān Diqna

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191 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 85.

192 Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

193 *Ibid.*, p. 368–369.

194 *Ibid.*, p. 453.

referred to the “families of the Takārīr and the families of the *anṣār*”, seemingly considering that the former constituted a separate group of combatants, and hinting at the existence of an internal hierarchy<sup>195</sup>. By the same token, in the murder mentioned above, the precise identification of the victim, based on his integration into the Mahdist military structure, contrasts with the relegation of the detachments of Bijāwī nomads, relegated both physically, outside the camp, and discursively, beyond the Mahdist regime of knowledge, leaving their identity undefined. More generally, few of the specificities of Bijāwī societies can be located in Mahdist documents. The proper Bijāwī terms to designate the different tribal levels, like the *badana* or the *diwab*<sup>196</sup>, are almost never used<sup>197</sup>. This is certainly due to the very nature of the sources at our disposal. The Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan acted as a translator for the central power and thus expressed itself according to a common repertoire that eliminated regional specificities. This is particularly evident in a letter sent to the Khalīfa by ‘Uthmān Diqna in September 1888 (Muḥarram 1306), in which, speaking of the Hadanduwa, the *‘āmil*, had to clarify for his attention that they were a “nomadic people (*ahl bādiyya*)<sup>198</sup>”.

Because of his double heritage, ‘Uthmān Diqna could have acted as an intermediary between the Bijāwī world and that of the Khalīfa’s. But the *‘āmil*’s discourse manifests a distance with the local communities. His remark on Hadanduwa nomadism was part of a more general description of their “condition (*amr*)”. He condemned the weakness of their adherence to the Mahdist movement, noting that “they have no stability towards us, no [willingness to] stay by our side, are uncertain in their *jihād* against the enemies of God and to achieve the victory of religion”. According to him, the first cause for the half-hearted character of their mobilisation was economic and had to do with the constant search for pastures “where they will be able to devote themselves to looking after their livestock (*bahā`im*) and cattle (*mawāshī*)”, while the second had to do with the superficiality of their Mahdist convictions, as their withdrawal to the Red Sea Hills would always allow them to “rest from the hardships [imposed by] the prescriptions of religion and the suffering [imposed by] the affairs of the Mahdiyya”, in contradiction with the Mahdī’s doctrine that enjoined everyone to focus their attention on preparing themselves for the Hereafter. Besides, his comments were not confined to a criticism of their lack of commitment to Mahdism, a leitmotiv of the

195 NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56B, document no. 19. Many comments alluding to social hierarchies were underpinned by racial distinctions. These dynamics were at play in the case of forced matrimonies. After the suppression of ‘Abd Allāh Sa’d’s rebellion in 1897 (1315), a number of Ja’alī women were captured and brought back to Umm Durmān. Rumours that they may be distributed between the Western followers of the Khalīfa were vehemently protested by other Ja’alī who felt insulted by this. See Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri, op. cit.*, p. 213–215.

196 See chapter 1.

197 Only occurrence of the term *badana* could be located in the entirety of the sources consulted. It is used in reference to the mills (*madaqqāt*) of several Bijāwī *badanāt*, (the Jamīlāb, the Kimaylāb, the Walīliyāb, the Bashyārāyāb and the Amrāb) located in the Tūkar Delta. See NRO Mahdiyya 5/02/08, p. 12.

198 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, letter 93.

Khalīfa's correspondence with his representatives, but also offered a unique characterisation of Hadanduwa tribes. He added that this geographical, and therefore political, instability concerned “men as well as women, adults as well as children” and is “shared by the good as well as the vile”. Finally, ‘Uthmān Dīqna wrote that “both men and women have the capacity to leave. A man who wants to leave will consider neither women nor children, and the woman will in turn run away and find her husband in any place<sup>199</sup>”. This description curiously echoes the main features of the etic representations associated with the Bijāwī tribes as analysed by Susan Grabler for the nineteenth century and mirrored by Andrew Paul in the main English-language monograph on the history of the Bijāwī communities<sup>200</sup>. It is unlikely that the ‘*amil*’s distance with the Bijāwī communities was a posture, though he may have been wary not to seem biased in their favour. During his conflict with Abū Qarja, the latter had expressed before the delegates a thinly veiled accusation that this was the case, and that grain distributions advantaged local groups. On this occasion, he too made a distinction between those he called, on one side, the “people of the homeland (*ahl al-waṭan*)” or “people of the country (*ahl al-balad*), that is the local Bijāwī communities, and on the other side, the *anṣār* and the *mhājirīn* who had come to the region from other provinces<sup>201</sup>, a sign that the integration effort of the Mahdist movement was incomplete.

Crucially, however, ‘Uthmān Dīqna’s characterisation was limited to the Hadanduwa and did not result in an ethnicisation of the Bijāwī tribes, a term by which the communities of Eastern Sudan are otherwise never referred to. The main denomination under which they were gathered was that of “‘*urbān* (sing. ‘*arabī*<sup>202</sup>)”, not in its ethnic acceptance, as “Arabs”, but as groups engaged in nomadic pastoralism. In that sense, ‘Uthmān Dīqna and his interlocutors were fully invested in a state language that categorised groups according to how effective Mahdist governmentality was on them. While more stable groups were designated as tribes (*qabīla* pl. *qabā’il*), a term common to most of Nilotic Sudan, or people (*ahl*) for settled communities, the identity of Bijāwī nomads was defined through their strained relation with the Mahdist apparatus of power, regardless of their actual position with regard to the regime.

This designation was sufficiently important that it structured the census of 1890 (1308). The banners of the people (*ahl*) of Kasalā were all recorded under one single category, but in Tūkar,

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199 Ṣalāh al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Dīqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

200 See chapter 1 and Susan L. GRABLER, *Pastoral Nomadism and Colonial Mythology: The Beja of the Sudan, c. 1750-1881*, MA diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, 1980, p. 7; Andrew PAUL, *A History of the Beja Tribes of the Sudan*, *op. cit.*

201 NRO Mahdiyya 1/01/05, document no. 90 (quoted in Ṣalāh al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Dīqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 138–139).

202 Only the plural form seems to have ever been used.

each banner was designated by its *amīr*, except for the Bijāwī banners, recorded as the banners of the nomads (*'urbān*)<sup>203</sup>. However, just the year before, the previous census was organised differently. With the addition of another category, the banners of the Ja'aliyīn “from the *ṣa'īd*”, that is from the Upper 'Aṭbara, the division between the *anṣār* present in Tūkar's camp (*ribāṭ*) and Kasalā's was already present, but each group was again divided into two distinct sets: the banners of the *ruṭāna* people and those of the *'arabiyya* people<sup>204</sup>. The criterion used by the Mahdist administration was linguistic. They distinguished between those who spoke Arabic, and those whose primary language was a *ruṭāna*, a local language like Bijāwiye. The epigraph at the beginning of this chapter shows that this vocabulary had pervaded the Mahdist ranks, even if the extent of this phenomenon is difficult to assess.

There is also little direct evidence that the Mahdist presence in Eastern Sudan resulted in structuring an ethnicised Bijāwī identity. The fact that local communities were subsumed in a single linguistic entity points to the emergence of a perceived Bijāwī alterity by the Mahdist leadership, even though it is also coherent with the first argument that considered etic representations of the Bijāwī population as shaped by political considerations. Indeed, difficulties to communicate efficiently had direct consequences on the potency of Mahdist governmentality, like the need to recruit translators for the judges appointed in Tūkar<sup>205</sup>. There are nonetheless several reasons to suggest that the Mahdiyya was a formative period for the Bijāwī identity, leading to its gradual transformation from a “cultural identity” to an “ethnicity<sup>206</sup>”.

Firstly, Mahdist policies had major consequences on the distribution of the Bijāwī populations. Forced displacements brought Bijāwī clans and tribes in close contact, whereas they may have entertained only sparse interactions hitherto. This dynamic may well have been reinforced by the decrease in population resulting from years of protracted conflict and the famine of the *Sanat Sitta*. This contraction of Bijāwī societies, both in geographic and demographic terms, may have been responsible for the weakening of previous tribal structures and the reconfiguration of the identities that they supported. In that perspective, the Bijāwī civil war did not further fracture local communities, but, on the contrary, contributed to dissociating tribal-based identities from political structures at the tribal and clan levels. In that regard, this argument follows the historian William C. Young's assessment of the formation of a Rashāyda identity deriving primarily from their

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203 NRO Mahdiyya 5/08/38.

204 NRO Mahdiyya 5/07/34. Unfortunately, both these censuses could not be fully exploited. Both files were either misplaced or lost after having been consulted once and four years of investigation, from 2017 to 2021, did not yield any result as to their whereabouts.

205 See chapter 3.

206 Hassan Abdel ATI, “Conflict Management and Resolution Among Beja Pastoralists: Elements and Procedures of the Salif Customary Law,” *op. cit.*, p. 28.

concentration in a confined refuge zone of various groups originating from the Ḥijāz that, according to him, did not previously share a common “genealogical canopy<sup>207</sup>”.

Secondly, the Mahdiyya may have served as the crucible for a Bijāwī identity based on the shared experience of what amounted to a deeply traumatic set of events that brought Bijāwī communities near the brink of collapse<sup>208</sup>. Despite deep internal divisions between the different Bijāwī sections toward Mahdist rule, they were all affected in some way or another by this unprecedented penetration of state power in the region. Tribal political identities probably coalesced in its rejection, at the same time that former political structures like the Hadanduwa *naẓirate* were almost entirely wiped out by the revolutionary and transformative social project that the millenarian regime attempted to implement. Furthermore, this process may have been strengthened by the etic perspective adopted by Mahdist leaders and administrators toward the local population that insisted on its otherness. In that regard, Mahdist state encroachment represented one preliminary phase before the implementation of the Condominium and the imposition of British colonial rule in the early twentieth century. To some extent, the emergence of Bijāwiness mirrors similar developments elsewhere on the African continent. The historiography of South Africa, for example, has long revised previous narratives on the formation of a Zulu identity, bringing the historian John Wright, among others, to challenge the former assumption that the process was concomitant with the creation of a Zulu state in the 1810s, and assert that it had only begun in earnest almost a century later, when the people that inhabited the former Zulu kingdom developed a new discourse aimed at resisting and negotiating colonial power<sup>209</sup>.

The effort toward the spatial stabilisation of Eastern Sudan’s communities, a Sisyphean effort, and their partial integration into the Mahdist order, entailed the introduction of a new apparatus of power that could reinforce the coherence of this nascent Mahdist community by preventing internal dissensions. This was meant to allow for the implementation of the reformist policies designed to strengthen adherence to the Mahdist ideals. Two of the most central tenets of the new ideology, the *hijra* and the *tajarrud*, could only lead to the concentration of an increasing number of *mujāhidīn* economically dependent on the Mahdist authority. The Mahdist provincial administration was tasked with maintaining a proper system of compensation (*izālat al-ḍarar*<sup>210</sup>) against the economic loss incurred by participation in the *jihād* in order to keep the movement from

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207 William C. YOUNG, “From Many, One: The Social Construction of the Rashāyida Tribe in Eastern Sudan,” *op. cit.*, p. 72 and 98.

208 See chapter 4, especially on the effects of the famine of 1888-1890 (1306-1307).

209 John WRIGHT, “Reflections on the Politics of Being ‘Zulu,’” in Benedict Carton et al. (ed.), *Zulu Identities: Being Zulu Past and Present*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 35–44.

210 This literally means “alleviation of the damage”.

collapsing under its own weight. However, the payment of regular stipends and the organisation of food distributions should not be reduced to their logistic and military dimension. It pertained to a larger framework, a Mahdist governmentality, that aimed at forging a reformed society.

### III. Governing the Men and their Souls

The transformative project of the Mahdist movement aimed at founding a society devoted to realising the Mahdī's message. Displacements and the attempted sedentarisation of Bijāwī nomadic communities were meant to place them in a relation of dependency toward Mahdist authorities by breaking the ties that connected them to their socioeconomic environment. Once they were structured in banners, these groups could be fully incorporated in the Mahdiyya and so subjected to its power. The nature of the Mahdist order and the modalities of its establishment, however, remains to be defined. Former interpretations explained the success of the Mahdist mobilisation by the “fanaticism” of the populations inhabiting Nilotic Sudan, with the result that the subject did not necessitate careful examination since, by essence, adherence to Mahdism was deemed irrational (or manipulative)<sup>211</sup>. On the contrary, this last section will explore the appeal of the Mahdist project to sections of Sudanese communities.

As a matter of fact, as early as 1898 (1316), direct contemporaries such as Paolo Rosignoli, an Italian catholic priest captured by the Mahdists after the fall of al-Ubayyīd in 1883 (1299/300), had offered a more nuanced description of the dynamics behind Mahdist mobilisation writing that “the promise of equality and equal distribution of wealth had intoxicated the masses and they gave themselves heart and soul to the Mahdī”. He added that “the Bayt al-Mal (treasury), repository of wealth and distributor of the same, reflected the socialist aspect of the Mahdī state. It centralised wealth and redistributed it”<sup>212</sup>, hence linking the principles put forward by the Mahdī with their administrative implementation. This last section follows Rosignoli's intuition arguing that the egalitarian doctrine proclaimed by the Mahdī had not only driven the mobilisation of the *anṣār*<sup>213</sup> but was also instrumental in structuring Mahdist governmentality. Furthermore, the latter, far from being solely an *ad-hoc* set of institutions developed to answer the needs of the nascent movement, was central in realising the Mahdist vision of a reformed society. Finally, I intend to prove that the Mahdist tenets were resilient, both in time and space, that is after the death of the Mahdī in June 1885 and outside of Umm Durmān.

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211 See introduction.

212 Paolo ROSIGNOLI and Farnham REHFISCH, “Omdurman During the Mahdiyya,” *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1967, vol. 48, p. 59–60.

213 Literally the “helpers”, this term was adopted over that of “*darwīsh*” (a member of the Sufi *ṭarīqa*), which was used in the early days of the Mahdiyya. It is a direct reference to the supporters of the Prophet Muḥammad in Madīna.

This section critically engages the potency of the Mahdī's ideology in the shaping of a Mahdist community through the works of Eastern Sudan's provincial administration between 1888 and 1891 (1306-1308). With regard to the decisive influence of the model of Sufi *ṭuruq* (sing. *ṭarīqa*) on the development of the Mahdist institutions, it heeds Knut S. Vikør's call for "a unified approach [that] must assume the primacy of the pious ideals, seeing the social and political consequences as results, side-effects, of the realisation of these pious ideals<sup>214</sup>". Instead of dismissing the Mahdist ideology as pure religious rhetoric or postulating its irrelevance for the ordinary operations of the state, this section aims at questioning the enduring effects of the call it championed for social justice through an approach "from below" and reveal its impact on daily interactions. The core principles of the ideology promoted by Muḥammad Aḥmad, the vectors of their resonance with the Sudanese population, and the modalities of their expression in the building of the early Mahdist administration will be examined first. The ways these ideals were still performative at the turn of the 1890s and critical in defining the generative interactions between the administration and an emerging Mahdist society in Eastern Sudan is the subject of the three last subsections. Each is devoted to an essential function performed by Mahdist authorities: caring for the combatants and their families, disciplining the community, and finally, regulating the Mahdist social body.

#### ***A) Genealogy of the Mahdist Social Pact: Equality, Justice, and Piety***

The Mahdist *da'wa* as it was communicated to the believers relied upon two central imperatives. The first one was to abandon the material world (*dunyā*) to dedicate oneself to the afterworld (*ukhra*). It entailed a renunciation of possessions and riches to allow for a total commitment to God. The second duty of the new Mahdist adherents was to perform the *hijra*, a first step toward the *jihād*, thought as the struggle to annihilate the rule of the "Turks". Once the first supporters of the Mahdist uprising had gathered, there remained to organise and sustain this community, as the coming of large numbers of men and women raised practical and logistical issues. Their mobilisation and the disruption it caused on the socioeconomic fabric of Nilotic Sudan's societies were unprecedented in the modern history of the region, bringing immense pressure on the resources of the state and its administration. Rosignoli argued that this development was the reason for the eventual downfall of the Mahdist state as it became unable to satisfy the needs of an "inert population" once the resources acquired through looting were depleted<sup>215</sup>.

However, the Italian father failed to see that the dependency of the Mahdist supporters to the

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214 Knut S. VIKØR, "Sufism and Social Welfare in the Sahara," in Holger Weiss (ed.), *Social Welfare in Muslim Societies in Africa*, Stockholm, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2002, p. 79–80.

215 Paolo ROSIGNOLI and Farnham REHFISCH, "Omdurman During the Mahdiya," *op. cit.*, p. 60.



treasury's distributions was not accidental but constituted the core of the Mahdist project, that is the establishment of a reformed community removed from material concerns and entirely dedicated to its religious duties. In this regard, the first Mahdist society in Qadīr bore a striking resemblance to the Sufi *ṭuruq* of the Greater Nile Valley. Indeed, as mentioned before, the regime's vocabulary was infused with terms related to Sufi organisations such as *muḥibbīn*, *khalīfa*, *muqaddam*, or *bayt al-māl*. Still, several aspects of the early structuration of the Mahdist movement signalled important differences to the classical model of the *ṭarīqa* as a semi-autonomous local community centred around the figure of a *shaykh*, but reflected the later development of new forms of Sufi organisation.

Indeed, at the same time the Mahdī was exhorting his supporters to join him, he was also setting up a network of representatives, thus mirroring the practices of the centralised Sufi *ṭuruq* that had emerged in Sudan in the early nineteenth century like the Khatmiyya, and to a lesser extent, Muḥammad Aḥmad's own Sammāniyya. Their centralised and hierarchical organisation was in stark contrast with the fragmentation that characterised previous Sufi institutions<sup>216</sup>. This organised network of religious institutions served as the template for the development of the Mahdist state, particularly in its effort to establish a coherent territorial control. Representatives were appointed throughout Nilotic Sudan's territory—a system not unlike the formal authorisation that would be granted to a local religious figure to spread the teachings of a *shaykh*<sup>217</sup>—and thus formed a web of epistolary circulations that became the main administrative instrument of the Mahdist state. There were however limits to this attempt to turn a Sufi power structure into a state apparatus, most notably because the Mahdist movement had considerably larger needs than any Sufi *ṭarīqa* and could not rely on its own bureaucratic apparatus. Consequently, it had to resort to forcefully recruiting elements from the Egyptian colonial administration to fill a number of positions, resulting in a hybrid organisation<sup>218</sup>. At the local level, these Sufi organisations also introduced new modalities regarding the manner through which they interacted with disciples and adherents. Returning to Vikør's injunction to consider the social practices of Sufi institutions as consubstantial with the realisation of their pious ideals, the social organisation established by the Mahdist administration should be considered as a performative way to induce the transformation of individual behaviours, a direct echo of the emphasis on personal religious realisation common to the revivalist Sufi movements that were successful in spreading their message across Nilotic Sudan in the nineteenth century<sup>219</sup>. Part of the reason behind their popularity was the subjectivation of

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216 See introduction.

217 For an explanation related to the Muḥammad 'Uthmān al-Mīrghanī, see 'Alī Ṣāliḥ KARRĀR, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

218 See chapter 3.

219 Zachary V. WRIGHT, *Realizing Islam: The Tijaniyya in North Africa and the Eighteenth-century Muslim world*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2020, p. 100–141.

religious commitment that these Sufi *ṭuruq* favoured and which constituted an adaptation to the evolution of Sudanese communities that had become more fragmented, more mobile, and more distant from tribal structures. In that sense, the Mahdist regime inherited and produced a specific form of governmentality that inextricably associated a totalising reform of Sudanese societies based on religious imperatives with the individualisation of the technologies of political control<sup>220</sup>. The “benevolent” dimension of the Mahdī’s pastoral power sought to establish an egalitarian, a just, and a pious society.

The declared objective of the Mahdist project was to remedy the perceived corruption brought by the “Turks” along two lines, that of equality and justice. With regard to the former, Muḥammad Aḥmad repeatedly condemned in his correspondence the overt manifestations of wealth and power. To the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi, he communicated in 1883 (1299/300) his alarm at the interest showed by his following in worldly possessions and advised him to set an example by banning all luxury in his clothing, food and drink<sup>221</sup>. This also affected rank and status. For example, Muḥammad Aḥmad instructed his father-in-law, Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib al-Baṣīr, “not to elevate [himself] secretly above the lowest of the poor, but to consider [himself] as their equal<sup>222</sup>”. The depth of this drive for social reform based on an egalitarian ideal was probably best expressed through the regulations broaching matrimonial matters. There is no clearer testimony to the perceived imbalance of Sudanese society than the early and repeated edicts promulgated by Muḥammad Aḥmad to reduce the value of dowries, in an attempt to both limit conspicuous spending and enable greater mobility within the newly-founded Mahdist society of equals<sup>223</sup>. The egalitarian principle promoted by the Mahdī was not confined to regulations, it informed the way the movement’s followers were integrated into military structures, the banner and the *muqaddamiyya*, that were instrumental in realising a society freed from the networks of subordination toward the state, the tribe, the *ṭarīqa* or the family, that previously shaped the social life of Nilotic Sudan’s populations.

On the other hand, the Mahdī was keenly aware that whatever the dedication of his followers to the Mahdist revolution, the lures of personal enrichment were powerful. Calls to prevent the seizing of unlawful loot abound in early Mahdist correspondence, showing how those regulations were complex to enforce but nonetheless considered crucial for the establishment of a reformed social order. The legitimacy of the Mahdist apparatus depended on its ability to restore justice after the violations of the former Egyptian regime. Consequently, the Mahdist state was

220 Paolo SAVOIA, “Foucault’s Critique of Political Reason: Individualization and Totalization,” *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, 2012, no. 43, p. 14–22.

221 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 132.

222 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 225.

223 Aharon LAYISH, *Shari‘a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

eager to demonstrate its legalism. The immense scriptural production of the Mahdist provincial administration in Eastern Sudan was a direct result of this particular attention. Besides, a just society could only be founded if individual failings could be reported and condemned, meaning that Mahdist representatives should be held accountable for any misgivings. Those who felt they had been wronged were exhorted to contact a member of the Mahdist hierarchy and expose their case, with real effect, since the Mahdī's correspondence is rife in reparatory measures of various sorts, mostly related to illegal appropriations by commandants or military parties<sup>224</sup>. This gave representatives of the law a crucial role in upholding the *sharī'a*, quite particularly the interpretation developed by the Mahdī. While the judiciary aspect of Mahdist rule in Eastern Sudan has left few traces, judges were not the sole agents responsible to enforce the law. The delegates dispatched by the Khalīfa assumed a similar role with regard to internal disputes. As such, they participated in the fundamental Islamic call repeated by the Mahdī to “enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong (*al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa al-nahī 'an al-munkar*)”<sup>225</sup>. The concept mobilised in Mahdist discourse—by the Mahdī and his successor—was *maṣlaḥat al-dīn*, meaning the “interest of religion”. In the late nineteenth century, this term was at the centre of a major debate among Muslim intellectual figures who considered it as “the embodiment of the purpose of the law” and so, in their attempt to reform Islamic law to adapt to the new circumstances of modernity, had to redefine what the “public interest” entailed<sup>226</sup>. The Mahdist perspective on the question was much wider and exceeded its legal dimension. The interest defended by the millenarian power was much more encompassing: it must enable the conditions for the formation of society that abided by Muḥammad Aḥmad's principles. To some extent, it echoed Foucault's “raison d'État” in the sense that it was not aimed at the population itself, but at the state apparatus<sup>227</sup>. In other words, the “interests of the religion” require first that the state established the conditions for their realisation, namely ensured the welfare of the Mahdist community.

Only then could the true purpose of the Mahdist project be implemented, that is the formation of a pious society entirely dedicated to preparing itself to the Day of Judgement. All the agents of the Mahdī were in some capacity or another responsible for bringing about this change. Yet, this task of “establishing the religion (*iqāmat al-dīn*)” was primarily devolved to delegates

224 See, for example, for the first months of 1300 (late 1882 / early 1883), as Mahdist rule in Kurdufān was beginning to structure itself, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letters 73, 76, 79, 83 and 103..

225 This expression appears for the first time in a letter announcing the appointment in 1881/1882 (1299) of Aḥmad b. al-ḥājj Muḥammad Zayn al-ʿĀbdīn instead of his brother Mūsā to rule over the tribes of the region of al-Fāshir. See *Ibid.*, letter 66.

226 Felicitas OPWIS, “Maṣlaḥa in Contemporary Islamic Legal Theory,” *Islamic Law and Society*, 2005, vol. 12, no. 2, p. 182–223.

227 Michel FOUCAULT, *Sécurité, territoire, population : cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978*, Paris, Gallimard, EHESS, Seuil, 2004, p. 298.

directly dispatched from the political centre. For example, two arbiters (*muḥakkam*)<sup>228</sup> were sent to the Zaghāwa in Dār Fūr in March 1883 (Jumādā I 1300), alongside the Mahdī's appointee, the *malik al-shaykh* al-Tūm, to ascertain the Islamic character of the community and rectify potential violations. Delegates were also tasked with ensuring the completion of religious rituals (*sha'ā'ir* sing. *sha'īra*), recording the names of girls in age to be married, and protecting the interests of orphans. They even had a hand in the collect of the *zakat* and the tithe (*'ushr*)<sup>229</sup>.

In that respect, the development of a more structured provincial administration after the surrender of al-Ubayyīd in early 1883 (early 1300) constituted a significant change of the relation between the regime and the populations. While the full extent of the process cannot be ascertained, Mahdist power began to be more localised. It aimed at transforming entire communities instead, although this was not meant to supplant personal commitment. Indeed, whereas the first texts insisted on the individual duties of those who decided to follow the Mahdī, namely trust in God (*tawakkul*), obedience (*tā'a*) to the Mahdī and his agents, abstinence or asceticism (*zuhd*), and, as seen above, the *hijra* and the *jihād*<sup>230</sup>, later proclamations issued after January 1883 strived to alter village social organisation. For example, the Darāwish who were appointed in the Nūba Mountains, received instructions that emphasised this aspect. Letters sent to these communities reflected this evolution. For example, as the Kawahla populations<sup>231</sup> of the mountains of Kalūqī, situated a mere 15 kilometres to the west of Qadīr, were informed of Ādam b. 'Alī Abū Jaka's appointment to rule over them, the Mahdī wrote that he had appointed him so that “[they] listen to his command and abide by his word, in what pleases God and His Prophet”, and added that Abū Jaka shall “forbid [them] from carrying out what is prohibited (*muḥarammāt*), drinking liquor (*khamra*), having adulterous relationships (*zinā*) and consuming tobacco (*tunbak*), [as well as compelling them] to do the prayer and give the *zakat*, building mosques and [having] the prayer in it<sup>232</sup>.” In addition, they were told to build mosques in which the five prayers must be performed. The buying and selling of wine in the market was prohibited, as well as more generally thieving and cheating. Houses were required to be purified and the women, girls and children enjoined to perform the five daily prayers and the former ordered to cover themselves. Followed other instructions with regard to matters such as the payment of the dowry and rents over land<sup>233</sup>. This letter was to serve as the blueprint of the

228 While the most common term throughout the period was *nā'ib*, meaning representative, the title of *muḥakkam* was also used in the early phase of the Mahdiyya. See Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 95.

229 al-Jāk Ibrāhīm IBRĀHĪM, “Al-nizām al-qaḍā'ī fī al-dawla al-mahdiyya bi-l-Sūdān,” *op. cit.*, p. 77–78.

230 For an early example of this set of injunctions dated from June/July 1881 (Sha'bān 1298), that is before the departure of the Mahdī for the Nūba Mountains, and destined to “all the brothers in God (*aḥbāb fī Allāh*)”, see Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 20.

231 An Arab nomadic tribe.

232 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 27.

233 *Ibid.*, letter 95.

founding set of rules to be applied in all the provinces. A copy was immediately made and sent to “all the beloved”, once the few elements specific to the situation in Dār Fūr had been taken out<sup>234</sup>. Therefore, the Mahdist provincial administration was thought as an essential cog in the diffusion of the movement’s interpretation of orthodox Islam and its coerced adoption by the populations under its control. This constituted the core of the Mahdist social project and as such formed the foundation of its revolutionary aspirations, that is its ambition to radically alter the fabric of Sudanese society, beyond the forces it had mobilised for the *jihād*. This affected all communities albeit in various degrees, depending on the relationship they cultivated with Islam prior to the Mahdiyya.

For instance, communities from the Nūba Mountains with which the Mahdist leadership had been in direct contact as early as October 1881 (D. al-Qa‘da) received specific injunctions. Indeed, the instructions sent to the Ruwāwqa nomads are particularly meaningful. The latter constituted one of the three divisions of the Ḥawāzma but according to the British colonial officer Harold MacMichael, “they probably contain more Nūba blood than most of the other sections<sup>235</sup>”. This may explain why after having participated to the siege of al-Ubayyid and refused to participate to the move against Khartoum, they retreated to the heart of the Nūba Mountains, to *jabal* Goghub near Kadūqlī<sup>236</sup>. The Mahdī wrote to them on 16 Rabī‘ I 1301 (14 February 1884), through the proxy of his *amīr* in the region, Ibrāhīm Hārūn, admonishing them to respect his authority. However, this letter illustrates the transformative nature of Mahdist provincial rule. Indeed, the bulk of the text is dedicated to the necessary steps that should be adopted to conform the Ruwāwqa society to Islamic principles<sup>237</sup>. Beside the common admonitions to respect prohibitions concerning the consumption of alcohol and tobacco or adulterous relationships, the Mahdī added that they must abandon Nūba practices such as the *sibūr* (sing. *sibir*), festivals related to agricultural practices held once or several times a year. This condemnation was linked with the non-Islamic overtones of those rituals, underlined by the Mahdī’s mention of the *kujūr*<sup>238</sup>, “a spiritual medium and healer<sup>239</sup>”, and the animal sacrifices performed at these occasions for purification purposes<sup>240</sup>. They were also required to use clothing. In addition, the Mahdī enjoined them to come down from the mountains and establish mosques. Crucially, once those measures were implemented, Ibrāhīm Hārūn was asked to

234 *Ibid.*, letter 96.

235 Harold A. MACMICHAEL, *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 282–283.

236 Harold A. MACMICHAEL, *The Tribes of Northern and Central Kordofan*, Cambridge, University Press, 1912 ; Edward GLEICHEN (ed.), *The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan: A Compendium Prepared by Officers of the Sudan Government*, London, Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1905, vol. 2, p. 153.

237 Quite probably with very little result since the first order of the Mahdī contained in this letter was to call upon them to cease attacking their own *amīr*.

238 This is the spelling used in the Mahdist documents. A more common spelling is *kujur* (pl. *kajara*).

239 Enrico ILLE, “The Nuba Mountains between Coercion and Persuasion during Mahdist Rule (1881–98),” *op. cit.*, p. 13.

240 Kwame ESSIEN and Toyin FALOLA, *Culture and Customs of Sudan*, Westport and London, Greenwood Press, 2009, p. 155–156.

gather the chiefs (*'umad* sing. *'umda*) of all the mountains' communities and bring them to the Mahdī for the purpose of “education (*tarbiyya*), consultation (*mudhākira*) and knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of what [the Mahdī] required as to the matter of the religion (*amr al-dīn*)<sup>241</sup>”. The link with subsequent events is unclear but it would seem that failure to comply to those prescriptions led to the organisation of an expedition led by Abū 'Anja against the Nūba Mountains a month later in March 1884 (Jumādā I 1301).

One of the striking aspects of the measures implemented by the Mahdī to ensure the diffusion of the Mahdist ideology to the provinces is their variety. In the case of the Nūba Mountains, maybe due to the lack of personnel or the particular structure of this space, the Mahdist power attempted to instrumentalise local chiefs. This resonates with comments on the spatial fragmentation of this territory and the numerous issues encountered by external bureaucracies to impose themselves in the mountains of South Kurdufān<sup>242</sup>. The situation was quite different in Eastern Sudan's context where communities were much more scattered, mobile, and fragmented.

Contrary to the Nūba Mountains, Mahdist authorities did not so much rely on tribal leaders whose authority was limited at best, but used displacement and enlistment in an attempt to erase the influence of competing social structures. The settlement of 'Uthmān Diqna' men in a camp<sup>243</sup> near Tūkar in early 1889 (late 1306) changed, once again, the parameters of Mahdist governmentality. Since 1883 (1300/1) and the Mahdī's decision of asking all looted assets to be handed over to the treasury, under the direction of its secretary, Aḥmad Sulaymān<sup>244</sup>—in disregard of Quranic regulations as regards the sharing of loot<sup>245</sup>— was an important inflexion as it placed the Mahdist administration in the situation of being the sole provider for the whole Mahdist community. Fulfilling this mission was not an easy task. In 1891 (1308), when Tūkar was captured by an Anglo-Egyptian force, Afāfit itself counted more than 6 000 *tukuls*<sup>246</sup>, as well as larger compounds enclosed in a *zarība*<sup>247</sup> and around thirty more permanent buildings made with clay occupied by the treasury or serving as merchants' houses<sup>248</sup>. At its apex, the population probably numbered more than 10 000 inhabitants, making Afāfit one of the largest urban settlements in Nilotic Sudan (but dwarfed by Omdurman), notwithstanding the local populations like the Ḥasanāb, the Artayqa and numerous Hadanduwa, Ammār'ar, Banī 'Āmir. What was until 1888 (1305/6) a secondary position

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241 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 236.

242 Janet J. EWALD, *Soldiers, traders, and slaves*, *op. cit.*

243 Mahdist sources use *daym* and *ribāt* to designate a military encampment, regardless of their size. They could be established within the city boundaries, as it was the case in Kasalā, or in the open country, as in Afāfit.

244 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 97.

245 See chapter 4 for a discussion on loot and its division.

246 Small huts made of straw.

247 A fence made of thorny bushes.

248 Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 505.

compared with Handūb, the Mahdist base during the siege of Sawākin, had become an important centre.

Unlike classical accounts of the progressive corruption of Mahdist principles under the autocratic influence of the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi, an examination of the daily life of combatants in a provincial headquarter shows their vitality and resilience. The following subsections will explore the interaction between the implementation of the tenets of Mahdist ideology, the activities of the Tūkar treasury, and the demands of the Mahdist community.

### ***B) Caring for the Men and their Families***

The granting of fixed stipends, both in grain and cash, which had been introduced under the Mahdī, continued after 1885 (1302/3) and was the common practice. Once most of the *anṣār* had relocated to Tūkar after their withdrawal from Handūb, the first objective of the Mahdist authorities was to feed the men, a chronic problem that reached tragic dimensions with the advent of the famine of the *Sanat Sitta* (1888-1890). The main staple of food distribution was *dhura*, a type of sorghum, kept at the granary (*shūna*) under the authority of the provincial treasury. Most of it was produced locally, in the Baraka Delta at the centre of which Tūkar was located<sup>249</sup>. Easy access to arable land and water probably constituted one of the most important factors in the Mahdist decision to move their camp to Afāfit in early 1889 (mid-1306). The monthly allowance varied over time. In general, men received four *qīraṭ* of grain (24 kg), and two additional *qīrāṭ* (12 kg) for each family member registered with him<sup>250</sup>. There were, however, important fluctuations and the *umarā*’ could be granted much larger quantities that they could redistribute as they saw fit.

So as to benefit from said grain distributions, the combatants had to be added to the registers, within the relevant formation, most often the banner or the *muqaddamiyya*. Records were absolutely central to the Mahdist organisation and to the *anṣār*, since they conditioned access to food. Despite a number of exceptions, the granting of an allowance was directly linked with a scriptural record of the banner to which a combatant was attached. Unsurprisingly, resettlements appear to have been the primary factor in creating or updating the state records. In April 1888 (Rajab/Shahābān 1305), the Ashrāf<sup>251</sup> in Tāka wished to join ‘Uthmān Diqna near Sawākin after the death of their *‘āmil* and the appointment of the new one who was already there. The *‘āmil* thus wrote to his subordinate in Kasalā “to organise the transfer (*tarhīl*) of all of the Ashrāf and those who have joined them to [him], with their families, after the combatants and their families have

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249 See chapters 1 and 4.

250 For example, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/04/17.

251 Whereas in the Islamic world the *ashrāf* designate the descendants of the family of the Prophet, in Eastern Sudan they constituted a small tribal group.

been entered in the necessary records”. As mentioned before, the first census at our disposal for Eastern Sudan was also linked to the coming of troops from Kasalā to Sawākin. This intricate relationship between space and administrative regulations makes all the more sense since most of the men mobilised for the *jihād* derived their livelihood directly from the lands they occupied. The Mahdist state had to compensate for this loss (*izālat al-ḍarar*) and so provide for the men, but also for their families. This question was central to the topics broached by the correspondence between the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi and ‘Uthmān Diqna. As the siege of Sawākin was gaining in intensity in June 1888 (Shawwāl 1305), the head of the Mahdist state instructed his *‘āmil* that, “since the number [of men] in the camp (*ribāt*) has increased with the arrival of the army, [he] should work for a way to achieve the welfare (*rāḥa*) of the army and bring to them subsistence (*ma‘āyish*), so that they suffer no harm (*ḍarar*)<sup>252</sup>”.

Transfers from one banner to another could also jeopardise access to food distributions. Due to the loose nature of the Mahdist military organisation, these operations could have fallen entirely under the scope of the administration’s supervision. However, without an official sanction, *anṣār* could not ask for their ration. Consequently, the banners themselves were held together by these records. The matter was not overlooked by those concerned. As a certain Muḥammad Bāsūma asked ‘Uthmān Diqna in November 1891 (Rabī‘ II 1309) to be reintegrated into the banner of his cousin Ibrāhīm Sa‘īd, along with a few other family members, he made sure to ask that their wages (*irzāq*) be transferred with them<sup>253</sup>. The issue was particularly crucial when combatants were required to leave their family behind when they left for a raid or on another mission. Like Muḥammad Bāsūma, when the *amīr* Muḥammad al-Azraq was summoned to Umm Durmān in September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307), he wrote to the treasury’s administrators to make sure, before his departure, that his family would not lose its rights to grain distributions<sup>254</sup>. Most *anṣār* were accompanied by several dependents, relatives and occasionally slaves<sup>255</sup>. In late 1890 (early 1308), on average, each combatant was responsible for around three other individuals<sup>256</sup>. This number could vary greatly. The previous year, in June 1889 (Shawwāl 1306), the average number of dependents was lower, less than two, for the banners in Tūkar. Some of them, like Abī Aḥmad ‘Alī group of Takrūrī counted only one dependent for eleven combatants, probably because those had moved from al-Qaḍārif without bringing their families with them, or because they had settled in Nilotic Sudan without them in the first place. In contrast, al-Ṭāhir al-Majdhūb’s banner, composed mostly of individuals who

252 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 60.

253 *Ibid.*, letter 235.

254 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 69.

255 Mentions of slaves as dependents are rare, however, since they are not distinguished from family members in the censuses, the extent of their presence in the Mahdist camp is difficult to assess.

256 NRO Mahdiyya 5/08/38.



were residing in the Tūkar region before, numbered more than three dependents for each combatant (see fig. 5.1)<sup>257</sup>. Some families were much larger. Awnūr ‘Umar who travelled to Umm Durmān with the *amīr* Muḥammad al-Azraq, left ten family members in Tūkar whose care he entrusted to the only remaining male combatant whom he then appointed as his deputy (*wakīl*)<sup>258</sup>. Births were also the occasion to ask for additional assistance from the treasury. To ascertain their rights, combatants would declare their infant and write to the treasury to add their newborn to the pertinent registers<sup>259</sup>. The matter was not trivial. Even major figures such as the *amīr* Ḥamad al-Dīn Ḥāmid could find themselves in the position of asking that family members be added to their own salary rather than be left dependent on the broader ledger of the banner, so as to secure their rights more firmly<sup>260</sup>.

Besides grain, the treasury was also supposed to pay stipends to the officers and the administrators. In late 1888 (early 1306), monetary salaries for those who worked in the Mahdist administration in Tūkar ranged from 2 r. for the gatekeepers of the treasury or 3 r. for those who measured the grain (*kayyāl*), to 10 r. for the head of one of the administrative departments<sup>261</sup>. In certain circumstances, additional grain could be given instead of money based on somewhat obscure calculations in which the status of the claimant certainly played a role. But money and grain were not the sole items distributed in an organised fashion. Pieces of clothing, namely *jibba* and trousers, were handed out from those manufactured in the tailoring workshop of the camp. Furthermore, Mahdist authorities were also responsible for accommodating the combatants. They could request wood, straw (*qashsh*) and mats woven from palm leaves (*abrāsh khuṣṣ* sing. *burush*) to build their *tukul*, either after moving, as was the case for most combatants coming from Handūb in the spring of 1889 (late 1306), or for the unfortunates forced to rebuild their house after it burned down<sup>262</sup>.

At least in theory, grain was to be distributed regularly. Because the granary could have insufficient stocks, the arrival of a party to a new location, often after a harsh travel, could bring new tensions as those present more permanently would have already depleted the meagre reserves. The Mahdist administration was constantly under tension due to the lack of sufficient resources in the context of the *Sanat Sitta*. The disruptive effect of the famine on this provincial Mahdist society can be observed, if only surreptitiously, in some requests. This is the case for al-Bakrī Muṣṭafā who wrote in September 1889 (Muḥarram 1307) to ask for an extension (*imdād*) of grain for the

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257NRO Mahdiyya 5/20/70D, document no. 11.

258 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 36 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 32.

259 For example, *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (A), letter 68 and NRO Mahdiyya 5/10/41, document no. 20.

260 NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40C, document no. 40.

261 NRO Mahdiyya 5/03/11.

262 NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/60, documents no. 103 and 119.

children, as “their hands [were] bereft of food”. At this occasion, he reminded the head of the treasury that his own children had died in Handūb, that is before most of the Mahdist society had moved to Afāfit in February 1889 (Jumādā II 1306), but that he had adopted orphans, indicating the toll taken by the famine on the Mahdist community<sup>263</sup>.

In a context of chronic lack of food supplies, the treasury resorted to distributing goods collected from merchants through the tithe (‘*ushr*’), confiscations or loans, in view to supplement the irregular distribution of grain. On certain occasions, cash appears to have been more available than grain and could also be given as replacement in the absence of food distributions. Individuals would then attempt to find and buy their own sustenance. Because the treasury was the sole provider for these men, it meant that it could be considered as the guarantor in last resort of their expenses, including their credits. This is what prompted Awshayk ‘Alī Muḥammadayn to request to the *umanā*’ the reimbursement to his creditors of the debts he had incurred “while the treasury was empty”, since he is leaving soon to return to Kasalā<sup>264</sup>.

The failure of the treasury to meet the needs of the combatants was at the origin of many complaints. A few weeks after the Khalīfa had written to ‘Uthmān Diqna asking him to be diligent in his dealing with the welfare of the troops, he wrote again, this time prompted by petitions from a few *maqādīm*. They claimed that due to the lack of food, they had to sell their pack animals (*zawāmil*), their servant slaves (*khaddām*), their weapons and their captives. Indeed, they had to buy their grain themselves, as they had only received a quarter<sup>265</sup> (*rub* ‘) of grain (‘*aysh*’), approximately 6 kg, for the past 75 days. The *āmil* admitted that grain had been scarce, but contested that some of the combatants may have had to sell their weapons and more importantly asserted that upon their arrival, this detachment had received grain brought over from the treasury of Tūkar which had been distributed to all of them, their families, and their horses<sup>266</sup>.

All these expenses were precisely and painfully recorded day after day in the treasury’s books, each item accounted for. As noted before, these accounts were not economic tools *per se*. Even for the inventory, their use was limited. Their main function was to attest the legality of each handout<sup>267</sup>. Mahdist governmentality was not so much interested in the overall balance of revenues and expenses, as it was in the realisation of its egalitarian ideals based on the fair distribution of its

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263 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 41. Another combatant, ‘Alī Ḥāmid al-Jamīlābī told a similar story to Abū Qarja just a few months before. He complained about the lack of assistance from the treasury, reminding the *amīr* that “the people of my house (*ahl baytī*) is pregnant and nearing the childbed (*qarubāt nifās-hā*). With us, there are children of martyrs, small children and women, all of them from either the children of my brothers, my sisters, or my paternal uncle.” See NRO Mahdiyya 5/18/62A, document no. 24.

264 Awshayk ‘Alī Muḥammadayn arrived in Tūkar with the force led by Ḥāmid ‘Alī in August 1889 (D. al-Ḥijja 1307).

265 A quarter corresponded to four *qadaḥs* (lit. a bowl) or one *qīrāt*, that is one twenty-fourth of an *ardabb* or 12 kg.

266 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 63.

267 See chapter 3.

resources, with the objective of ensuring the welfare of the community at large. In that perspective, they were at the basis of a moral economy that stipulated equal and fair treatment between the *anṣār* of similar ranks, regardless of other social attributes. These principles were very much actionable: petitions could be presented to challenge infractions that violated them. In December 1889 (Rabīʿ II 1307), the *amīr* Khāṭir Ḥamīdān complained bitterly of his situation in a letter to the delegates. He insisted that he knew of the Khalīfa's order and that they had been instructed "to come to [their] district [Tūkar], so as to bring welfare (*rāha*), equality (*musāwāh*) to [them], and consideration (*iftikār*) about [these matters]". He had already made a request for assistance only to receive the answer that the treasury was empty. Now, he claimed that "as regards our welfare, the *anṣār* with us are in extreme distress since we did not receive the necessary subsistence." and added "we have received neither consideration nor equality<sup>268</sup>". Because the administration had failed to meet their legitimate demands and so broken the pact that bound the movement together, he threatened to bring his petition directly to the Khalīfa. These principles may have been potent but the details of their actual implementation was a source of heated debates. Indeed, equality and fairness could be understood in different ways. Abū Qarja, for example, challenged the practices of the treasury on this point. He remarked that "'the people of the homeland (the Bijāwī) took from the treasury [what was needed] for their combatants, their families and their horses, and this equally with the newcomers (*muhājirīn*) and the *anṣār*, while they have far more camels, sheep. Yet [the lack of grain] was the most important factor that caused damage to the army in Handūb whereas the people of the land (the Bijāwī) were not affected by this at all, therefore, when they heard that they would be treated equally with the *anṣār*, they set aside their possessions<sup>269</sup>". Abū Qarja accused local groups of having taken advantage of the treasury's distributions, despite having kept their personal property, while the *anṣār* had either relinquished it or simply lost what little possessions they may have had with them, and so revealed a major tension between corrective and distributive justice.

### ***C) Regulating the Mahdist Social Body***

Beyond the essential task of providing for the men mobilised for the *jihād*, the Mahdist provincial authorities in Eastern Sudan also regulated core social practices by assuming functions normally fulfilled by the extended family. If the process of military integration remained unfinished, relocation had indeed at least temporarily severed the ties between the *anṣār* and their community. Henceforth, most social relations unfolded within the banner, which was meant to supersede former networks of sociability. The administration in Tūkar did assist the *anṣār* and their families on a

268 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 21 and *Report on the Dervish Rule*, Appendix VI (C), letter 37.

269 NRO Mahdiyya 1/01/05, document no. 90 (Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – 'Uthmān Dīqna wa-l-Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 138–139).

number of issues, but it also instrumentalised the combatants' dependency on its resources to assert its authority by inserting itself in the most private aspects of their lives.

*i) Beneficence and Assistance by the Treasury*

Against the vagaries of life, Eastern Sudan's provincial authorities implemented some form of safety net through beneficence (*iḥsān*). For instance, money could be requested when one was stricken by disease. In November 1889 (Rabī' I 1307), a man named Ismā'īl al-Shā'ib could thus write to Khāṭir Ḥamīdān, the head of his banner, that "for a period of more than fifty days, I have been bedridden due to a pain to the eyes and other [ailments]. [I am] still without health, and my hands are empty of everything and of compensations [...]. My family is in an extreme state of duress. As this is our condition, [...] it was necessary to write to you [...] particularly to approve an expense to me from the treasury<sup>270</sup>." This complaint was then transmitted to the treasury with the support of the *āmil*. Other traces of this policy appear in various accounting documents. In the daily reports for monetary debits and credits, on 9 July 1890 (21 D. al-Qa'da 1307), one *riyāl* was spent for the "women sick from an illness of the throat" at the "anchorage (*marsā*)", most likely at Adūbana near Tūkar<sup>271</sup>. Those expenses and others, for water, for the service of the *jihādiyya* and some *awlād 'arab* (from Western Sudan) on the port or for the guests hosted by the administration were all included under the title of "*iḥsānāt*", namely acts of beneficence or charity.

Sickness, undernourishment and war took their toll on the population in Eastern Sudan and the Mahdist administration was also responsible for the regulation of death. British observers had noticed that military encounters rarely led to battlefields strewn with corpses, but that to the contrary, the Mahdists seemed to go to great lengths to ensure the proper burial of the men. Death rituals were important enough that within the accounting notebooks, an entire section was dedicated to the shrouds (*kafan*) provided for burials. Other life events like the birth of a child<sup>272</sup> could also justify a request for additional support from the treasury. In the same manner, one of the *anṣār* named Idrīs Muḥammad Bilāl wrote to the *amīn* of the treasury 'Abd Allāh Abū Bakr to request help. He reminded him that he was growing older and had nothing to sell on the market nor clothes. As a result, he received two pieces of fabric<sup>273</sup>.

The widows of the martyrs (*shuhadā'* sing. *shahīd*) were not forgotten by the administration. In an attempt to implement the gender segregation prescribed by the Mahdī, 'Uthmān Diqna had forbidden women to go out, but the Khalīfa did not agree to this on the basis

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270 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 28.

271 NRO Mahdiyya 5/06/29B.

272 NRO Mahdiyya 5/15/54, documents no. 15, 24 and 28.

273 NRO Mahdiyya 5/17/58B, document no. 8.

that “in this region [Eastern Sudan] there are wives of martyrs, as well as women from the *jihādiyya*, working for the service of the religion [and] whose livelihood depends on the markets”. In consequence, the *‘āmil* rescinded his order and compromised by establishing two markets, one for the men and one for the women<sup>274</sup>, following the model adopted in Omdurman<sup>275</sup>. This allowed the women to supplement the assistance they obtained from the Mahdist administration with the income they garnered from petty trade activities, hence alleviating the charge on a treasury chronically in deficit<sup>276</sup>.

The matter of orphans was also taken into consideration. As for widows, the treasury did not have a straightforward procedure to assist them but relied on exceptional handouts when petitioned. Their custody was ultimately the responsibility of their relatives and family connections, not of the Mahdist administration. It does not appear that their rights to food distributions were terminated after the death of their husband, but they still had to make sure that their names would be maintained in the records. However, caring for orphans was a legitimate reason to ask for greater resources from the treasury. An example of such request was mentioned above for grain, but money could also be asked. When ‘Alī Faḍl Allāh Kāfūt died near Kasalā in 1885/6 (1304), he left his underage (*quṣṣar*) children a horse. On the advice of Abū Qarja, his brother ‘Awaḍ al-Karīm bought the horse for 450 r. He would pay himself 250 r. and it was arranged that the treasury would complete his expense, the entire sum being meant to sustain ‘Alī’s orphans. Unfortunately, five years later, the treasury had yet to give this money<sup>277</sup>.

#### ii) *Love in the Time of the Mahdiyya: Women and Matrimonies*

The link between matrimony and Mahdist affiliation was mobilised very early on. Barely six months after ‘Uthmān Diqna’s return to Eastern Sudan and the beginning of the uprising, the author of the *Waqa’i* claimed that Muḥammad Sirr al-Khatm al-Mīrghanī, Muḥammad ‘Uthmān’s brother, had declared upon his arrival in Sawākin to “all those who have joined us from the *arabs* (*a’rāb*) who are feeble-minded (*di’āf al-‘uqūl*): do not enter your wife before having waited for forty days, since you have pledged allegiance to ‘Uthmān Diqna<sup>278</sup>.”

The Mahdists too instrumentalised, and to some extent, weaponised matrimonies. The regulation of unions is an unequivocal example of the Mahdist leadership’s attempt at controlling every aspect of the *anṣār*’s social life in Afāfīt. It is unclear whether the men were obligated to ask for the authorisation of their *amīr* to wed, but the practice was common. In any case, despite the

274 Muḥammad Sa’īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898, op. cit.*, p. 79.

275 Robert S. KRAMER, *Holy City on the Nile: Omdurman during the Mahdiyya, 1885-1898, op. cit.*, p. 103.

276 Nawar el-Sheikh MAHGŪB, *Sudanese Women during the Mahdiyya, 1881-1898, op. cit.*, p. 48–49.

277 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, letter 264.

278 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, p. 75–76.

numerous restrictions imposed by the Maḥdī on dowries<sup>279</sup>, marriages still entailed expenses that could not be met by men isolated from their family network. They were compelled to request the treasury's assistance (*musā'ada*), which was apparently almost always granted, if the reserves of the treasury made it possible. There were no formalised ways to file a request. Usually, a *nāṣir* would write to the *'āmil* of his banner who in turn would transfer the demand to the secretary of the treasury, but requests could also be made directly.

The same al-Bakrī Muṣṭafā mentioned above who requested additional grain for the orphans under his guardianship strengthened his case by reminding the head of the treasury that he had made another demand of assistance for his marriage a few days before (one would imagine with the mother of the orphans) and that he had received neither pieces of fabric nor money for his expenses "since the treasury is empty right now<sup>280</sup>". A few months before, in July 1889 (D. al-Qa'da 1306), Muḥammad al-Amīn 'Ammār was luckier, maybe because he framed his request in religious terms. He claimed having looked for a long time, but could not find "a wife to command and preserve my religion". His issue, as he framed it, was that he "he feared for [him]self to act [in a way] that would displease my Lord (*kashayt 'alā nafsī al-wuqū' fī-mā lā yardī Malikī*)". In other words, he worried that should he not find a wife quickly, he may well find himself adultery, a sin for which the treasury should be held responsible. His threat worked and not only did Abū Qarja authorise him to marry, but the *amīr* also wrote to the treasury to the effect that the necessary be given for his dowry. He received two bundles (*tāqa*) of *marmar*, two quarters of *zirāq* and two units of *mushtarak*<sup>281</sup>, two units of diverse pieces of clothing, and seven and a half units of *marbū'* and *majmū'* perfumes<sup>282</sup>. Textiles and scents thus constituted the main elements of the state's donations and, significantly, the main imports with foodstuffs on which taxes could be collected in kind<sup>283</sup>. The importance of fabrics in Sudanese social life cannot be underestimated and explains why a variety of cloths would still be imported despite the severe restrictions on trade circulations caused both by the Mahdist state's hostility to maintaining commercial relationships with "unbelievers" and by the numerous retaliatory bans imposed by the Anglo-Egyptian administration in Sawākin<sup>284</sup>. Indeed, fabrics were a crucial component of dowries after land and cash transfers. Furthermore, their importance grew dramatically in the nineteenth century with the increased pressure exerted on free women to cover

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279 Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī'a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*; Nawar el-Sheikh MAHGOUB, *Sudanese Women during the Maḥdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*; David F. DECKER, "Women in Mahdist Kordofan: Captives Chattels and Companions."

280 NRO Maḥdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 41.

281 Respectively white, blue and silk fabrics.

282 NRO Maḥdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 10.

283 See the title records in NRO Maḥdiyya 5/01/04, 5/02/07-08, 5/05/20 and 5/08/36.

284 See chapter 4.

their upper body<sup>285</sup>, a phenomenon directly related to the diffusion of the *thūb*, a long covering and constraining garment limiting physical activities and so contributing to their gradual exclusion from the economic sphere<sup>286</sup>. The repeated appeals from the Mahdī to implement modesty reveal the limits of this cultural change. While the Khalīfa pursued this particular matter with less zeal, he showed great interest for the instrumentalisation of matrimony. Not all the *anṣār*, however, were as clever as Muḥammad al-Amīn ‘Ammār in framing their request in religious terms. Some petitioned the delegates claiming that since they had no wives, there was no one to prepare food for them, and so argued that they needed greater assistance from the treasury<sup>287</sup>.

There are very few indications as to the identity of the women who married in Tūkar. Some must have followed a relative, others their husband who had since passed away<sup>288</sup>. On at least one occasion, individuals from two different banners were married<sup>289</sup>. Short of being able to find a wife from among the free women, some *anṣār* requested a slave to the treasury. Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Ḍawī, for example, was impatient. He had tried to present his current situation to the administrators of the treasury on several occasions, but they always claimed to be busy. Now, he requested a female slave using similar arguments to Muḥammad al-Amīn ‘Ammār’s. He claimed that a slave was “necessary for the preservation of [his] religion and [his] welfare (*ḍarūrī li-ḥafẓ dīnī wa rāḥatī*)”, and he too added that she would “assist [him] in preparing food” (*musā‘ada lī ‘alā al-ma‘āyish*). But he went much further in stating his case in a religious idiom. He professed not being driven by “yearning or greediness (*min dūn tashawwuf wallā ṭama*)”, that no one was “more righteous than himself”, and lastly, that granting him a slave was itself in the “interests of the religion (*al-maṣāliḥ al-dīniyya*)<sup>290</sup>”. It is not known whether this subtle argumentation convinced the administration.

There was, however, a third solution. The *anṣār* could attempt to marry a captive. The practice of seizing women from Bijāwī groups opposed to Mahdist rule is attested since the first clashes that occurred near Sawākin from May to July 1884 (Rajab to Ramaḍān 1301)<sup>291</sup>. On at least two occasions, several dozen women were captured in the wake of those small-scale encounters<sup>292</sup>.

285 This represented a major shift with regard to the dominant practices during the Funj sultanate (1504-1821), when only women of elite status were allowed to cover their torso.

286 Jay L. SPAULDING, “Individual and Communal Forms of Land Tenure on Echo Island, 1820-1901,” *Northeast African Studies*, 1995, vol. 2, no. 2, p. 130.

287 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document no. 9.

288 The Mahdī had written a proclamation stating that there was no fault in being accompanied by women during the *hijra*. See Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Mahdī*, *op. cit.*, letter 937.

289 NRO Mahdiyya 5/09/40, document no. 9.

290 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 69 and Report on the Dervish Rule, Appendix VI (C), letter 57.

291 See chapter 2.

292 Haim SHAKED, *The Life of the Sudanese Mahdi: A Historical Study of Kitab sa‘adat al-mustahdi bi-sirat al-Imam al-Mahdi (The Book of the Bliss of him who Seeks Guidance by the Life of the Imam the Mahdi) by Isma‘il b. ‘Abd*

While the *ansār*'s war parties were solely constituted of male combatants, this was not the case of their opponents. They took advantage of this asymmetry to suppress dissent by organising punitive raids that targeted enemy communities. British observers noticed that 'Uthmān Diqna knew how to instrumentalise captives. In the midst of the conflict, he decided to release nearly all of the women prisoners, in the hope "to conciliate the league [of Ammār'ar]<sup>293</sup>". Details as to later operations are fuzzy, but the *āmil* did not renounce this tactic. A few months later, the Acting Consul in Sawākin was told that as a group of Ammā'ar was on its way to Barbar, they had met with a band of Mahdist Hadanduwas, and "as their clans had lost their women in the recent raid, they were inclined to make terms with [them]<sup>294</sup>." In that respect, women represented a precious commodity among others, since they could be traded or gifted. In 1307 (1889/90), the *muqaddam* of the Ashrāf from the Baraka Valley, Abū Fāṭima, had withdrawn to the Abyssinian highlands, in the region of Satīt, to escape Mahdist pressure. He gathered around him a large group of "hypocrites" opposed to 'Uthmān Diqna's rule in Eastern Sudan. The danger he represented was emphasised by the leaders of the millenarian movement who noted that "his resources [...] and women had multiplied<sup>295</sup>".

Women themselves were one of the main ideological battlefields of the Mahdiyya. Around thirty proclamations of the Mahdī dealt with their status, especially with respect to matrimonial bonds. His central argument lay on the principle that no relations should interfere with the direct connection that he hoped to establish with his supporters. Families were not exempt from the revolutionary ambitions of the new regime, with the unexpected results that the Mahdī easily recognised women as independent subjects by condemning forced marriages and granting them the right to marry their own daughter without the father's express approval. He went even further by allowing women to undertake the *hijra* without their husband's permission<sup>296</sup>. Conversely, opponents to the Mahdiyya forfeited all their rights, including over their wife. The Mahdī's intent was to create a clear divide between the Mahdist society and those outside. During the siege of Khartoum, a fellow Rubāṭābī read a proclamation to Bābikir Badrī and other combatants that forbade them from intermarrying with those who had failed to come to the siege of Khartoum<sup>297</sup>, probably in an attempt to further the break, not only with the enemies, but even with individuals who adopted a wait-and-see position.

Women in Eastern Sudan were at the centre of a matrimonial economy that had

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*al-Qadir*, *op. cit.*, p. 142–145 ; Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

293 BNA FO 633/53, correspondence n°128, Mr. Egerton to Earl Granville, 26 May 1884.

294 BNA FO 633/54, Correspondence n°13, Sir E. Baring to Earl Granville, 8 October 1884.

295 NRO Mahdiyya 5/16/56B, document no. 23.

296 Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī'a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 103–106 and 118.

297 Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 21. The text in question does not feature among the known proclamations of the Mahdī.



ramifications beyond the confines of the Mahdist camp and constituted an important part of the authorities' regional policy. Therefore, the condition of captive women was addressed on several occasions in the official correspondence in 1887 and 1888 (1304-1306) in the context of the Bijāwī civil war. As the Hadanduwa tribes settled near Kasalā rebelled against the collect of the *zakāt* on livestock in August 1887 (D. al-Qa'da 1304). 'Uthmān Diqna decided to send a party to bring them back to obedience. On 11 September 1887 (22 D. al-Ḥijja), the Khalīfa decreed that the goods and the women of those who had opposed Mahdist rule should be considered as loot (*ghanīma*), except if they repent<sup>298</sup>. This decision had serious consequences. Indeed, a ruling of the Mahdī stated that women taken as loot were to be considered as slaves, resulting in the dissolution of their matrimonial bond (*iṣma*)<sup>299</sup>. Probably aware of his ruling's potential repercussions, the Khalīfa seemed to have somewhat backtracked soon after to the effect that in early November 1887 (late Ṣafar 1305) he forbade his *'āmil* to marry women taken captives to the *anṣār* without his express approval<sup>300</sup>. Consequently, in February 1888 (Jumādā II 1305), 'Uthmān Diqna received a letter from the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi that underwrote the marriage between some of the women captured as loot and some of the *anṣār*. He refrained however to consider them as slaves, since he added that the slave girls had been given as concubines (*imā'*) and not as legal wives<sup>301</sup>.

The *'āmil*'s reluctance to fully implement the Mahdist jurisprudence sprung from two different reasons. Firstly, the Mahdists were not the only ones to capture women. The Ammār'ar raid led by Aḥmad b. Maḥmūd 'Alī against the camp of Salahāt, near Tamāy, in October 1886 (Muḥarram 1304) had resulted in around a hundred death among the *anṣār*, as well as the capture of a number of women who had thereafter been brought back to Sawākin. Released in early 1888 (early 1308), some of them decided to leave and headed to Handūb, where their status was quite contentious. Did the Mahdī's dissolution of matrimonial bonds apply to women captured by the enemy, and if so, should these bonds be renewed? The question was directly raised by 'Uthmān Diqna in March 1888 (Jumādā II 1308). He was under significant pressure from the families of these women who wanted to marry them. The problem was compounded by the variety of cases presented before the *'āmil*. Some other women had married rebels who had subsequently repented and pledged allegiance. Some others had found their way and had managed to flee from towns like Khartoum, Sinnār, or Kasalā before they surrendered, but some others had been captured after their fall. Among them were “Egyptian (*banāt riḥ*)”, “Egyptians born in Nilotic Sudan (*muwalladāt*)”, or

298 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – 'Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi*, op. cit., p. 66.

299 Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī'a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, op. cit., p. 234.

300 *Daftar 'Uthmān Diqna*, letter 123, p. 114 and letter 129, p. 117; *Report on Dervish Rule*, p. 33.

301 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, op. cit., letter 28.

“nomads (‘*arabiyāt*)”<sup>302</sup>. Faced with the complexity of these individual situations, ‘Uthmān Diqna was lost. Eventually, the Khalīfa qualified his initial ruling by authorising the women released from Sawākin to be reunited with their husband without renewing their matrimonial bond, but only after three menstrual cycles<sup>303</sup>. For the others, mostly women from communities hostile to Mahdist rule in Eastern Sudan, his agreement was still required but he delegated the authority to judge whether those unions were in the “interest of the religion” (*maṣlahat al-dīn*) to his ‘*āmīl*’<sup>304</sup>. While he alone could sanction a union, the Khalīfa was also well aware that only ‘Uthmān Diqna could appreciate the potential fallouts of giving a Bijāwī woman to one of the *anṣār* in a particularly volatile regional context. As the Bijāwī civil war was nearing its end, other raids were launched against the Jamīlāb near Tibīlūl. Around 200 women and children were captured in June 1888 (Shawwāl 1305). Immediately after, their surviving relatives chased the detachment that held them. In the clash, seven *anṣār* and all the 17 Jamīlāb who had tried to retrieve their family died. The unusual violence of the encounter, even for Mahdist standards, signals the determination of the rescuing party<sup>305</sup>. Captive women were instrumental in shaping the relationships with Bijāwī nomads, with the objective to bend their resistance by threatening to keep their wives in bondage or marry them to Mahdist combatants, or by rewarding their submission by returning them. But ‘Uthmān Diqna’s aforementioned hesitations with regard to this policy was probably caused by his fear to completely antagonise the very communities he was trying to subdue.

The attention paid by the central Mahdist authorities to the regulation of matrimonies is a testament to the extent of the social disruption caused by years of conflict in Eastern Sudan. Bijāwī societies were profoundly affected by the emergence of Mahdist rule. Families were separated, couples divided, children lost, while clans were fragmented, some almost entirely eradicated. In contrast, Mahdist authorities were actively engaged in a process of social engineering, aiming at the radical transformation of communities so as to integrate them in a unified and reformed society which would uphold the ideals of the Mahdī, a society wholly committed to carrying out their religious duties.

#### ***D) Disciplining a Provincial Mahdist Society***

Central to the efforts of the authorities to discipline individual behaviours was the pacifying of internal relations within the Tūkar community, apparently with some measure of success. Indeed,

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302 *Ibid.*, letter 32.

303 This is an evolution of the Mahdī’s jurisprudence which considered that a woman separated from her husband for a period exceeding her menstrual period could not be reunited to him without a renewal of the matrimonial bond. See Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī‘a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

304 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 48.

305 *Ibid.*, letters 62, 67, 79, 80.

surprisingly for such a society composed of men often separated from their original community, without personal resources, and, it seems, idle for most of their time, incidents are seldom evoked in the sources. As mentioned, a murder was signalled in July 1888 (D. al-Qa‘da 1305)<sup>306</sup> and a general fight broke out in March 1889 (Rajab 1306)<sup>307</sup>, but not much more was declared to the Khalīfa by his *‘āmil*. The latter may have been careful not to give out details on issues related to life in the camp that could subject his leadership to criticism, but it is more likely that discipline was maintained and most of the intense violence that characterised this period (see above) executed outside the confines of Mahdist society. This implied the establishment of an apparatus of power that could regulate disputes, often related to ethno-tribal rivalries, between and inside groups of mobilised combatants by ensuring that contestations could be expressed, heard and solved. In that regard, the Mahdist administration played a role not dissimilar to the one exercised by Sufī *turuq* in certain regions of Muslim Africa as promoters of peace<sup>308</sup>, albeit in a frame confined to the society formed by the proponents of the Mahdist movement. With this in mind, provincial authorities followed the tenets that structured the organisation of the early Mahdist regime, namely the imposition of a strict hierarchy, the mobilisation of external arbitration and an insistence on the accountability of its leaders.

The prevalence of hierarchical relations is manifest in all of the correspondence of ‘Uthmān Diqna with the Khalīfa. The fact that the former had to consult the opinion of the latter on what could be considered minute details of the life of the Mahdist camp of Afāfīt, such as transfers from one banner to the other, indicates the high degree of centralisation of the Mahdist state, but also, the importance granted to upholding a clear hierarchical structure. In the course of a dispute which erupted between the leaders of two different banners in April 1889 (Sha‘bān 1306), one accusing the other of having interfered with his orders while he had left for Omdurman, the plaintive had addressed directly the matter to the Khalīfa. But once the issue was solved, the delegates (*umanā*) who had dealt with the case scolded him writing that “you should not raise a problem to the Khalīfa unless you have consulted those with you among the *‘ummāl* of the army, the *umarā*’ of the detachment, or others from your brothers the *anṣār*. If a dispute between you cannot be solved, then the *‘ummāl* of the army will authorise to raise the matter to the Khalīfa<sup>309</sup>.”

Despite these measures destined to uphold the egalitarian principles of the Mahdiyya, the fact that the Khalīfa’s proclamations repeatedly enjoined the combatants to strive for unity

306 *Ibid.*, letter 65.

307 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 135–137.

308 Knut S. VIKØR, “Sufism and Social Welfare in the Sahara,” *op. cit.*, p. 85.

309 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/04, document no. 62.

(*taḥazzub*<sup>310</sup>) shows that pacified relations within the Mahdist camp of Afāfīt were constantly under threat. The degree of penetration of Mahdist ideology is difficult to assess, but some of the missives and petitions sent by the *anṣār* to the provincial administration give us hints as to the dissemination of the Mahdist discourse. When Faḍl Allāh Karrār, the deputy of a banner, asked ‘Uthmān Dīqna to be removed from his position due to a conflict with the *maqādīm*, he was careful to add that his only intention was to “concentrate [his] effort (*tafarrugh*) on the matter of the religion and reform [him]self (*iṣlāḥ nafsī*), far from what brings envy and anger among the companions, but for the love of God and brotherhood in the hereafter (*ajila*)<sup>311</sup>”. Karrār’s comments do not say much about his actual commitment to Mahdist ideals—they may well have been purely rhetorical— but nonetheless reveal the authorities’ attention to the expression of adherence to the religious reformist principles of the Mahdiyya, beyond simple commitment to the *jihād*.

The first requirement was quite modest. As repeated in numerous letters, the Maḥdī exhorted his followers to observe essential religious rituals (*sha‘ā’ir al-dīn*), namely attending the Friday prayer, performing the ablutions, and preserving one’s purity (*tahāra*)<sup>312</sup>. At first, these relatively limited expectations were probably a pragmatic response to the various levels of religious engagement encountered among the men mobilised for the *jihād*. The Khalīfa did not betray his master’s teachings, and as early as August 1885 (Shawwāl/D. al-Qa‘da 1302), less than two months after the Maḥdī’s passing, he was writing to ‘Uthmān Dīqna to exhort him to hold public Friday prayers whenever possible<sup>313</sup>.

Still, the Mahdist authorities had greater ambitions and understood the welfare of the combatants to encompass both their material well-being and their spiritual development. Consequently, they attempted to implement more transformative policies beyond following the core Islamic ritual practices. In late 1888 (early 1306), the Khalīfa enjoined his *‘āmil* to treat the *anṣār* with kindness, “to treat their elder as a father, their young people as sons, their equals [in age] as brothers” but also “to bring them to God with wisdom, good preaching (*al-maw‘iza al-ḥasana*), and charity to their family (*ishra*)”<sup>314</sup>. The effects of such policy were limited. Asked by the Khalīfa about the condition of the army in Tūkar in October 1890 (Ṣafar/Rabī‘ I 1308), ‘Uthmān Dīqna stated that he talks to them in the morning and in the evening, probably after the prayer. In accordance with Mahdist ideals, he exhorted them to abandon their material desires, to read the

310 *Taḥazzub* is most often translated as “factionalism” from *ḥizb*, the party or the faction. In the context of the Mahdiyya, it meant uniting as a faction without taking tribal affiliations in consideration.

311 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 151.

312 See, for example, the letter 238 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Al-āthār al-kāmila li-l-imām al-Maḥdī*, *op. cit.*.

313 *Daftar ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, letter 23, p. 33.

314 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 120.

*rātīb* and perform their prayers but he complained that this command was not heeded. Many did not pray, especially the *‘ummāl*<sup>315</sup>.

The main tool for the imposition of a Mahdist religious discipline was lectures, the privileged medium for a predominantly illiterate society. This effort was referenced early, in the first letter sent by ‘Uthmān Dīqna to the Mahdī<sup>316</sup>. In it, he extolled the virtues of Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir b. al-Ṭayyib b. Qamar al-Dīn, the leader of the Majādhīb in Eastern Sudan. The author of the *Waqā’i* noted that almost all of his followers had joined the Mahdiyya and that he supported the Mahdist cause, adding that “he never stopped working for this matter [the Mahdiyya] by reminding people, preaching to them, warning them, reading to them the proclamations [of the Mahdī] all night long until dawn, and giving them advice on God<sup>317</sup>.” Receipts show that some individuals could receive a salary as “readers of the *rātīb*”. This was not a trivial matter as in May 1889 (Ramaḍān 1306), there were 23 of them in Afāfīt, including eight in ‘Uthmān Dīqna’s banner alone<sup>318</sup>. The proclamations of the Khalīfa appear to have been systematically read aloud to the *anṣār*<sup>319</sup>, and their content, at least occasionally, explained by using “their tongue” (*lisān-hum*), that is in Bijāwiye.

More informal letters could also be shared with the troops, copies of correspondence sent by *umarā’* from other provinces announcing military successes<sup>320</sup>, but also internal events, such as the purge that targeted the *ashrāf*<sup>321</sup>. On this last occasion, the Khalīfa based his decision on a vision (*ḥaḍra*) in which the Mahdī and the Prophet Muḥammad had designated to him seven individuals to send to prison. To what ‘Uthmān Dīqna replied on 15 March 1887 (20 Jumādā II 1304) that “we acquainted ourselves with this vision and we told it to the companions. All of us understood its content, and we knew for certain that what had come to the Khalīfa of the Mahdī, peace be upon Him, was the truth (*ḥaqq*) in which there is no doubt”. He added that the *anṣār* rejoiced of the punishment imposed to those who propagate corruption<sup>322</sup>. At least once, in December 1888 (Rabī’ II 1306), the copy of an article of the *Egyptian Gazette* describing the dire situation of the population in Sawākin, then besieged by the Mahdists, was “read to the *anṣār*, and it rejoiced their hearts, when they learned of the fear that reigned [there]”<sup>323</sup>.

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315 *Ibid.*, letter 215.

316 See Chapter 3.

317 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

318 NRO Mahdiyya 5/14/49, document no. 151. In the early years of his involvement in the Mahdiyya, Bābikīr Badrī, who was well educated, held a similar position. See Bābikīr BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

319 This is revealed in the structure of some of the letters. Indeed, some proclamations began with a short incipit addressed to ‘Uthmān Dīqna followed by a longer text destined to all the *anṣār*. For an example, see NRO Mahdiyya 5/20/67B, document no. 26.

320 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 132 and 243..

321 This purge took place in March 1884 (Jumādā II 1304) and led to the dismissal, among others, of Aḥmad Sulaymān, the head of the general treasury.

322 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 3.

323 *Ibid.*, letter 117.

## Conclusion

This chapter strived to bring to light the coherence and potency of the Mahdist social project. Mahdism, as an ideology, was meant to radically transform Sudanese communities. This constituted the properly revolutionary nature of this movement which sought to discipline individual behaviours, weaken tribal bonds, and form a reformed society perpetually mobilised for the victory of Islam. Albeit marked by frequent shortcomings and pragmatic concessions resulting from the limits of the political authority exercised from Umm Durmān, the social project developed during the Mahdiyya was never abandoned and remained throughout this period the driving influence on the structure and operations of its administrative apparatus. The Mahdist call for equality and justice was heeded by many, men and women, and the society formed under its auspices was organised to ensure the upholding of those principles. Arguably, this political and social construct could be interpreted as a new form of governmentality extending the disciplinary practices of Sufi institutions to the scale of a state.

The norms issued by the Mahdī were performative in the peripheral territories of the Mahdist provinces. Contrary to the colonial depiction of an arbitrary power grounded on violence, the documents from the provincial administration in Eastern Sudan show how those principles were constantly reactivated. Measures which could appear as instrumental or answering primarily to strategic considerations, in the context of almost constant warfare on the borders of the Mahdist state, were ensconced within an ideological framework which did not suddenly disappear in 1885, after the death of Muḥammad Aḥmad. In that regard, the communities of combatants could be considered as examples of a model Mahdist society. Entirely devoted to the *jihād*, their needs were guaranteed by an administration which sought to regulate almost all aspects of their lives and allowed them to abandon all other activities. Still the responsibility for keeping with the Mahdi's edicts did not lie solely with local leadership. The correspondence exchanged with the *umarā'* and the administrators of the treasury in Afāfīt reveals how members of this Mahdist community engaged with these egalitarian ideals by challenging the administration to conform to them. The rich details they give out when exposing their case briefly lifts the veil over the inner workings of a provincial Mahdist society in the making.



## CONCLUSION

“There was in our company a man named Majdhūb Abū Bakr, originally from ‘Uthmān Diqna’s people, whose mother was the daughter of Shaykh al-Ṭāhir al-Majdhūb. He had a long spear with which he began to strike the earth, then he stuck the shaft upright in the rain-wet sand of the watercourse, and shouted at us, ‘Hey! you recusants! See the sign of victory!’ We said nothing, and after a little the sound of the steamers firing on the forts ceased, and the veins in the man’s throat swelled enormously as he assured us doubters that all the steamers were captured.”

Bābikir Badrī, *The Memoirs Babikr Bedri*, 1969<sup>1</sup>.

The period between 1891 and 1898 (1308-1314) has attracted little attention from scholars. Of the nine chapters of ‘Uthmān Diqna’s biography by the SPS administrator Henry C. Jackson, four were dedicated to the period spanning from 1883 to 1885 (1300-1303)—the height of Anglo-Egyptian military operations in the region—, one to the next two years, from 1886 to 1887 (1304-1306), but only one for the following decade, from 1888 to 1898 (1306-1316)<sup>2</sup>. This contrasts sharply with the distribution of the correspondence emanating from Tūkar (see fig. 2.1) and so signals the preponderance of British perspectives in the writing of this history. Surprisingly, despite its heavy reliance on oral testimonies, the same can be said of Ḍirār’s *Amīr al-sharq*<sup>3</sup>, thus revealing the dependency of vernacular historiographies to the larger colonial context.

The first part below aims at offering an overview of the evolution of Mahdist influence in Eastern Sudan during these last seven years. While Mahdism failed to firmly take root in the region, the mobilisation it had managed to trigger had repercussions long after the Mahdist power was pushed out of the area. Against common interpretations by British officers who insisted on the shallowness of Mahdist sentiment among Bijāwī populations, some remained loyal to the cause until the very end. In the last days of August 1898 (mid-Rabi‘ II 1316), Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf, one of the most important administrators of the Tūkar treasury, was still ready to give his life in defence of the regime, as shown by the epigraph above. During the battle of Kararī itself, one of the very few groups of *anṣār* to inflict casualties to the invading force was headed by ‘Uthmān Diqna and mostly made up of Bijāwī men<sup>4</sup>.

The second part will attempt to summarise the key findings of this research, offering a short

1 Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, translated by Yousef BEDRI and translated by George SCOTT, London, Oxford University Press, 1969, vol. 1, p. 233–234.

2 Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna*, *op. cit.*

3 Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ ḌIRĀR, *Amīr al-Sharq*, ‘*Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*

4 For a detailed account of the battle of Kararī, see Ismat Hasan ZULFO, *Karari: The Sudanese Account of the Battle of Omdurman*, *op. cit.*



overview of each chapter, while the last section will attempt to open perspectives on Nilotic Sudan's within the larger regional context.

## **I. The End of the Mahdist Experiment in Eastern Sudan: Ruling the Unruly from Afar (1891-1898)**

### ***A) "A Township Sprang in the Desert<sup>5</sup>": Setting up a New Camp in Adārāma***

The British advance on Tūkar was the conclusion of a process that had been at least five years in the making and had begun with the appointment of Kitchener to the Red Sea governorship in September 1886 (D. al-Hijja 1303). While British metropolitan authorities had long been very reluctant to authorise any expedition in the hinterland, especially after Kitchener's own reckless advance in January 1888 (Rabī' II 1305) during which he was almost killed. After the severe blow inflicted on the Mahdists at the battle of al-Jummayza in December 1888 (Jumādā I 1306), Anglo-Egyptian forces chose not to press their advantage, allowing 'Uthmān Diqna and his men to regroup first in Handūb, and later in Tūkar. But several years of an internal campaign orchestrated conjointly by Kitchener himself—who had returned to Cairo after his injury and had been appointed adjutant-general of the Egyptian army in late 1890 (early 1308)—and Major Wingate—who had been placed at the head of Egyptian military intelligence<sup>6</sup>. The Prime Minister Salisbury finally gave in and sanctioned an advance in Eastern Sudan's hinterland. Colonel Holled Smith, the governor of the Red Sea, had anticipated this. On 27 January 1891 (16 Jumādā 1308), he had already launched a preliminary operation to occupy Handūb. The *amīr* to whom this position had been entrusted, Muḥammad Sa'adūn, made no attempt to resist but withdrew to the south. Barely ten days later, when the official authorisation to advance on Tūkar finally arrived, forces based in Sawākin were ready. The next day, on 8 February (28 Jumādā II), they boarded ships that brought them to Trinkitāt for what was the third and last Anglo-Egyptian landing in that spot<sup>7</sup>.

Just a week before the capture of Handūb by British forces, 'Uthmān Diqna had left Tūkar in direction of the south-east with more than 3 000 men to raid the Ḥabāb, the Ad Shaykh and the Banī 'Āmir, leaving Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf as his deputy<sup>8</sup>. Despite the distance, he was kept informed of the local situation. When he heard of the assault against Handūb, he quickly turned

5 Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna, op. cit.*, p. 146.

6 Military Intelligence was constituted as a single and autonomous department only in 1892 (1309/10). However, he headed a section dedicated to intelligence within the Egyptian army since 1886 (1303/4). Due to its growing importance, it was first transformed into a sub-department in 1888 (1305/6).

7 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan (1881-1898): A Study of its Origins, Development and Overthrow*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 192.

8 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, Khartoum, Markaz Abū Salīm li-l-dirāsāt, 2004, letter 219.

around to assist Muḥammad Sa‘adūn. The next stages are somewhat unclear. The *‘āmil* must have moved with some haste to reach the Mahdist site on the Sawākin-Barbar route, but before he could recapture a position then occupied by a handful of enemy soldiers, he received further news from his deputy in Tūkar about rumours of another Anglo-Egyptian advance, this time directly against Tūkar. Once again, ‘Uthmān Diqna turned around and headed toward his headquarter, hoping to arrive before the British. Hotted Smith occupied the harbour of Trinkitāt on 11 February (2 Rajab). For unknown reasons, he waited there a week, giving enough time for ‘Uthmān Diqna to hurry to Tūkar and prepare his men for the fight. The advantage of surprise was lost. In the meantime, British authorities in Cairo grew very anxious of the pace at which Sawākin’s governor had acted on their orders. More than anything else, they feared that Hotted Smith would exceed his instructions, as Kitchener had done before him, throw himself wholeheartedly in the battle and so run the risk of finding himself embroiled in a much wider confrontation with the Mahdists, maybe even large segments of the Bijāwī communities. So intense were these concerns that Wingate himself travelled to Sawākin in an attempt to monitor the operation. Anxiety seemingly turned into anguish when he realised, upon his arrival, that the troops had already left. He jumped into a ship, and, as the captain refused to navigate the perilous waters between the reef and the mainland by night, he took a rowboat to finally reach the shore and the forces at Trinkitāt. At least, some of his fears were vindicated. Hotted Smith had ordered the advance on Tūkar for the next day, unaware that ‘Uthmān Diqna’s men had returned. Wingate’s initiative to dispatch scouts prevented what could have been a catastrophic ambush. The *ansār* did launch an assault against the Anglo-Egyptian square on 19 February (10 Rajab), but despite their best efforts, they failed to break it and suffered enormous losses, around 700 men and 17 *umarā*<sup>9</sup>.

‘Uthmān Diqna fled first to Timirayn with a few hundred men. He had first considered withdrawing to the *khūr* Baraka, but he feared not to be able to find grain there, and so eventually headed toward *jabal* Awdayb<sup>10</sup>, while others marched to Kasalā with one of the few surviving *umarā*, al-Amīn Shā’ib<sup>11</sup> (see fig. 0.2). The Khalīfa had initially asked his *‘āmil* to regroup in Tāka, in part because of rumours of a coordinated Italian advance, but when he learned that he had decided to move toward the ‘Aṭbara, he gave him the choice to settle wherever he saw fit. ‘Uthmān considered several locations before opting for a small site named Adārāma<sup>12</sup> on the northern bank of

9 *Report on the Dervish Rule*, p. 13-15 and Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna, op. cit.*, p. 142–144. So violent was the encounter that it was credited for having squashed all thoughts in Cromer’s mind in favour of a larger intervention in Nilotic Sudan for the foreseeable future (Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, MA diss., University of Khartoum, Khartoum, 1967, p. 115).

10 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna, op. cit.*, letter 220.

11 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Eastern Sudan), no. 1, 8-22 March 1891, Summary.

12 Also called Adārāmāb.

the seasonal river.

Practices that had shaped the life of the Mahdist community in Tūkar were quickly resumed. As had been the case when the camp had been moved from Handūb to Tūkar, the Khalīfa dispatched two delegates (*umanā*’ sing. *amīn*), Makkī Abū Ḥarāz and al-Ṭāhir Tatāy, who arrived in the new camp in early April 1891 (late Sha‘bān 1308) and immediately began to inspect the situation and inquire about the state of the army, to the Mahdist leader’s satisfaction<sup>13</sup>. In this position, the *‘āmil* established a new camp. He recruited Shāyqī labourers to set up mud buildings including a large mosque and houses for the main *umarā*<sup>14</sup>. In May (Shawwāl), he reported 810 *anṣār* and 1 363 family members with him in Adārāma, and he ordered two communities of the Hadanduwa Shabūdīnāb and Hadanduwa Ḥākūlāb who were settled nearby to join him<sup>15</sup>.

Soon after, he tackled the issue of feeding the men. While information on agricultural matters were rare when the Mahdist headquarters were located in Tūkar, the subject was suddenly discussed in much greater details in Adārāma, probably because the *anṣār* were doing most of the work, in contrast with the situation in the Baraka Delta<sup>16</sup>. Having settled definitely in the region in April (Ramaḍān), at the beginning of the dry season, ‘Uthmān Dīqna was waiting anxiously for the summer rains. In late August, these had yet to materialise. In any case, he knew that cultivation could only begin in earnest with the flood of the ‘Aṭbara in September (Shawwāl) and the first harvest could not be expected before December if not January of the next year<sup>17</sup>. Thankfully, the effects of the *Sanat Sitta* had abated by then and the *‘āmil* could rely on external supply. He received an initial shipment of 500 ard. of grain (around 72 t) from Barbar but complained that one of the boats had capsized and sent its load into the river. He was still, however, waiting for a second shipment of 500 ard. from Umm Durmān<sup>18</sup>. The fact that the ‘Aṭbara was not navigable all year round may have convinced ‘Uthmān Dīqna to forcefully encourage the *anṣār* to cultivate, so as not to be dependent on the assistance of other *‘ummāl*. Finally, as expected, around September, the *widyān* began to fill with water. There too, the *‘āmil* showed himself much more precise than he had ever been before, informing the Khalīfa of the areas he had inspected, which ones he thought suitable, even suggesting that he may have consulted with local farmers to educate himself. This effort was real and the administration’s involvement in organising cultivation bore no comparison with the situation that had prevailed in the Baraka Delta. Indeed, a year after their arrival on the

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13 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 222.

14 Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna*, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

15 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 227.

16 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Dīqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

17 ‘Uthmān Dīqna reported the end of the harvest in mid-February 1892 (mid-Rajab 1309) (Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Dīqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 254).

18 *Ibid.*, letters 229, 231 and 233.

‘Aṭbara, ‘Uthmān Diqna had bought 40 oxen that were made to work on the waterwheels he had had erected (*sawāqī* sing. *sāqiya*) and he now asked for a thousand *riyāl* to buy horses for work<sup>19</sup>.

Contrary to Tūkar, Adārāma was of no particular strategic interest. It represented one of the closest points from Tūkar where some men could be concentrated. But ‘Uthmān Diqna’s decision to set up camp there did not seem to answer to specific considerations, or he did not bother communicating them to the Khalīfa. To some extent, the community formed by the *anṣār* did not require anymore to justify its own existence based on the waging of the *jihād*. It had become sufficient for them live so as to follow as closely as possible the precepts of the Mahdī. In that respect, the Mahdist community had completed their transformation into a Sufi *ṭarīqa*.

### ***B) Out of Sight, Out of Mind: The Evolution of the Relationships with the Bijāwī Communities***

However, the settlement on the ‘Aṭbara did not put an end to all military activities. On the contrary, raids were quickly resumed. As early as October 1891 (Rabī‘ I 1309), ‘Uthmān Diqna asked the Khalīfa for his authorisation to launch a raid against Tūkar, which he claimed was weakly defended, and the Banī ‘Āmir, one of the targets of the expedition that had been cut short by the Anglo-Egyptian capture of Handūb. But the Khalīfa had doubts about the operation. He asked to be given an overview of the Bijāwī communities’ stance toward Mahdism. On this occasion, he may have been surprised to learn that several Ammār’ar leaders, as well as some Hadanduwa clans had visited the ‘*āmil* in Adārāma and asked to join him. Others, like the Jamīlāb or the Shar‘āb, who had been the spearhead of the rebellion against ‘Uthmān Diqna’ rule during the Bijāwī civil war, remained hostile and refused to initiate discussions with the weakened Mahdist power<sup>20</sup>. Despite the setback the Mahdists suffered in Afāfit, they had kept part of their influence. Paradoxically, the Bijāwī communities may have been much more favourably inclined toward the *anṣār* now that they did not represent an existential threat to their way of life and had lost most of their capacity to project their power.

The Khalīfa recognised the shift, especially since Eastern Sudan was not isolated in the matter. Therefore, he insisted on maintaining better, if not good relations with the Bijāwī communities. For example, in early 1892 (mid-1309), the Khalīfa exhorted his representative to show himself more understanding toward the people under his command and the communities around Adārāma. He wrote that “we should exert ourselves in mobilising (*taḥazzub*) the tribes of the ruṭāna [the Bijāwī tribes] so as to increase their familiarity (*ilf*) to us and their acceptance of our

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19 *Ibid.*, letters 268 and 277.

20 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 149–150.

instructions, but solely the tribes who wish to join us, and we shall read the proclamation (*manshūr*) recorded in writing of our Lordship to the *anṣār* who are by our side and explain to them [its content] in their language (*lisān*). We should deal with them according to this and strive to widen the circle of Islam (*dā'irat al-Islām*) through gentleness (*rifq*) and softness (*līn*).” As a response, ‘Uthmān Diqna pledged to “adopt a good conduct (*ḥasan al-sīr*) with the people and behave with evenness (*isti'māl al-sidād fī al-aḥwāl*), so that they will not see from [him] but what they would hope for the matter of the religion<sup>21</sup>.”

As a matter of fact, the new raids targeted exclusively enemy positions. The first of those was carried out against Awshid with around a thousand men in early October 1892 (Rabī' I 1310), after the *āmil* was informed of the building of a small fort there to protect the end of the *khūr* Baraka. The position was besieged but ‘Uthmān Diqna had to withdraw to Arkawīt with some of the men due to the lack of pasture near Awshid itself. The *shaykh* ‘Abd al-Qādir Ḥamad Ḍaw of the Ḥāmdāb was asked to retake the fort from the *anṣār*, but he eluded the request. Despite the blow inflicted upon the *anṣār* the previous year, tribal leaders were still very much on the fence, hesitating as to whether they should throw in their lot with the Anglo-Egyptian authorities or wait for further developments, in case ‘Uthmān Diqna managed to salvage the situation, as he had done before. At the same moment, another raid was also organised against Tūkar by Muḥammad Ṭāhir ‘Alī Diqna, but its outcome was confined to a few stolen cattle.

The new Khalīfian injunction to avoid any form of clash with the Bijāwī communities was taken up by the *āmil*. In October 1892 (Rabī' I 1310), as he was asking for grain, horses and men to be sent to him to Arkawīt where he was still settled in order to prevent the “Turks” from getting a foothold at Awshid, he instructed his men that “none of the brothers [should] extend their hands to them [the *‘arab*] for anything that is theirs (*ḥuqūq*), even for a reed from their fields (*qaṣab mazra‘-hum*) do not oppose them for this, and they should not take from them even a thread (*ḥabl*), an [earthen] pot (*burma*), a gourd (*qirba*), [or] a camel pack (*ḥawīyya*), nothing, so that they are safe from us harming them and we are safe from them harming us.” Above all, he added, “if they are not safe from our harm and we are also not safe from their harm, then we will have no respite and we will disengage from fighting the *jihād* against the enemies of God to fight them<sup>22</sup>.”

The extent to which ‘Uthmān Diqna respected his own pledge seems limited. The Khalīfa often had to temper his *āmil*'s inclination toward violent retribution. When he had moved against Tūkar, some of the local tribes had swiftly fled to the ‘Ayṭbāy. In December 1892 (Jumādā I 1309), he asked for the authorisation to pursue them, which the Khalīfa refused to give, asking him instead

21 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 241 and 243.

22 *Ibid.*, letter 291.

to focus his attention on winning the tribes to the Mahdist cause<sup>23</sup>. This did not stop the Mahdist leader from organising other raids in March 1893 (Sha‘bān 1309) against Arkawīt and immediately after, against Tūkar, with 1 500 men. It seems that the main reason for these was to feed the *anṣār*. Indeed, on both occasions, they requested half of the content of the underground granaries (*maṭāmīr* sing. *maṭmūra*)<sup>24</sup>, following a pattern similar to that of their grain levies in 1889 and 1890 (1306-1307)<sup>25</sup>.

Yet, up to a certain degree, the *‘āmil* of Eastern Sudan knew that the relationship with the local Bijāwī communities had to change. He was the one who first suggested some form of regular payment to tribal leaders, even if the matter had already been raised by Aḥmad Maḥmūd ‘Alī in early 1890 (mid-1307). The latter had written then to Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf to defend his policy of distributing the proceeds of the *‘ushr* to the Bijāwī nomadic communities “to unite (*ta’līf*) them in the religion of God Almighty, so that the love of the Mahdiyya be planted in their hearts (*tangharisu muḥibbat al-Mahdiyya*), and that unbelief (*kufṛ*) be extracted from them”. He claimed to be following the Khalīfa’s direct instructions, but ‘Uthmān Dīqna had to rein in his spending and asked that Aḥmad do not distribute “what is in [his] hands with immoderation (*lā yaj‘alu yaddī farṭa fī al-ṣarf*)”. The new leader in Handūb did not heed the *‘āmil*’s request and disbursed lavish amounts with the unsurprising result that “when the nomadic tribes (*‘urbān*) saw from me our gentle aim (*ḥabāb-nā al-līn*) and the generosity of my distributions, they came to me and pledged to me [to fight for] the victory of the religion and stand with me. [...] They entered in the religion in droves (*qūm kathīra*)”. However, he feared, as did other Mahdist leaders, of the opportunistic character of their rallying. In that respect, he was anxious that “those who entered with us in the allegiance to our master the Mahdī, peace be upon Him, [...] turn their heels (*yankaṣū ‘alā a‘qābi-him*) because the year is sterile (*al-sana jadiba*) and because the unbelievers, the enemies of God and his Messenger, give their money to anyone who seeks shelter with them in [Sawākin] (*al-qaqara*)<sup>26</sup>.” They knew they could not outbid the Anglo-Egyptian authorities.

But in 1892 (1309/10), the situation had changed. With the withdrawal from Tūkar, the Mahdists had lost their main foothold in the region, with direct control over the trade routes toward Maṣawwa‘, Kasalā and Barbar, as well as one of the most productive agricultural areas of the region. Ruling from afar required other tools and ‘Uthmān Dīqna was now willing to consider rewarding tribal leaders. He knew that the government in Sawākin paid salaries to tribal chiefs to win them over and give them missions. The fort set up in Awshid, at the origin of the first Mahdist

23 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Dīqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, op. cit., p. 155.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 155–158.

25 See chapter 4.

26 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 27.

raid since their abandonment of Afāfīt, was placed under the authority of Ḥamad Darb Kātī al-Fāḍlābī, who was also in charge of the market, and received a salary of 40 pounds for his service (as well as the restitution of his properties in Sawākin). ‘Uthmān Diqna wanted to try a similar approach and so he appointed the Ammār’ar Muḥammad ‘Alī Rikāb and the Hadanduwa ‘Umar Ibrāhīm Ḥamad Ḍaw in Kūkrayb, an important position on the Sawākin-Barbar road. He authorised them to levy taxes on the goods brought from Sawākin by caravan and ordered them to redistribute the sums levied to the Ammār’ar and Hadanduwa chiefs settled nearby. To this end he wrote to the Khalīfa on 27 July 1892 (2 ramadān 1310) that he had decided to give them between a sixteenth and half a riyāl each, according to their status, in order to bring them back to the Mahdist movement, have them protect the road, and "cut them off from their lust for what is in the hands of the disbelievers<sup>27</sup>".

At the same time, practices that had already been implemented the years before with varying success were used again. Indeed, the *‘āmil* still believed in the efficacy of forced displacements, an opinion he seemingly shared with the Khalīfa who in May 1892 (Shawwāl 1309) had already instructed him to strive to “unite the nomadic tribes (*qabā’il ‘urbān*) and make them desire religion”. The rationale was the same as before but the manner had changed. ‘Uthmān Diqna should still remove them from their homeland, but he should “reassure them, honour them, and entice them to perform the *hijra* to him” instead of using threats. The main objective was to sever all connections with the Anglo-Egyptian authorities. In that respect, ‘Uthmān Diqna enjoined them to “leave behind all their contacts with the enemy and their amity with them, cut all relations with them”. His plan was to isolate Sawākin from the hinterland by cutting the roads that ran to the Red Sea port<sup>28</sup>. The enemy in question took note of the *‘āmil*’s attempt at relocating the Bijāwī tribes and was quite skeptical as to its practicality. On this matter, they wrote that “some go as far as to say that Osman’s scheme of depopulating the country east of Kokreb, and taking them to the Atbara was unfeasible from the start, and is now a complete dead letter<sup>29</sup>.” ‘Uthmān Diqna’s real intentions were somewhat more modest and limited to the groups located near Sinkāt. He endeavoured to gather a sufficient number of combatants in Kūkrayb to secure this strategic position and control one of the most important trade routes in Nilotic Sudan. As a result, in March 1893 (Ramadān 1310), Qīlāy Awr w. Wad ‘Alī Rikāb was instructed to gather in Kūkrayb all the groups that had submitted so that the *‘ushr* could be taken from their livestock<sup>30</sup>.

After the defeat at Tūkar, the Mahdist authorities lost most of their influence on the local

27 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 150–151.

28 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 275.

29 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Egypt) no. 9, December 1892, p. 3.

30 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 328.

tribes. This led to an alteration of the way the tribes were dealt with. ‘Uthmān Dīqna was cautious not to upset the fragile balance that had emerged after 1891 (1308). While Mahdist influence could have been wiped out in the aftermath of their withdrawal, it had proved surprisingly resilient. The Mahdists still commanded some respect among the Bijāwī communities. These probably realised that as long as the *anṣār* would control the Nile Valley itself, they could not alienate them and had to establish some form of *modus vivendi* that allowed them to share the benefits accrued from organising caravans across the Eastern Desert. This, however, did not stop Mahdist authorities from trying to gain the upper hand in the region. In late 1892 (early 1310), the *‘āmil* thought that “since there is no hope to cut [the nomadic tribes] from coveting (*tama*) the enemy and the enemy from coveting them, all of them should be moved to the area of Atbara and this area emptied<sup>31</sup>.” Through displacements, ‘Uthmān Dīqna was trying to stifle the influence not only of the Anglo-Egyptian authorities in Sawākin, but also that of the Italians who had taken advantage of Mahdist decline to play a greater role in the region.

### ***C) Competing Influences in Eastern Sudan: The Mahdists, the British and the Italians***

After the withdrawal of the Mahdist forces from Tūkar, the populations of Eastern Sudan found themselves courted, threatened and repressed by three competing powers: the British from Sawākin, Mahdist loyalists headed by ‘Uthmān Dīqna and settled in Adārāma, and the Italians who were established in Maṣawwa‘ since 1885 (1302/3). In that respect, the capture of Kasalā by the Italians on 17 July 1894 (13 Muḥarram 1312) sent shockwaves throughout Nilotic Sudan. Bābikir Badrī remembered a naked madman called Ibn ‘Awf who had predicted the fall of the town and “kept on repeating these words while he danced; then he shouted ‘O-o-oh! God!! O-o-oh! God!! Tobacco in Kasala! Tobacco in Kasala’<sup>32</sup>”. Yet, Italian influence in the region was not new. Since their arrival in the Eritrean port of Maṣawwa‘, they had developed contacts with the local communities, including the Banī ‘Āmir and the Ḥabāb. Some groups sided with them, as was the case for the Rashāyda and one of the factions of the Ḥabāb. They did so to protect themselves against Mahdist encroachments and secure their control over trade circulations, which may be imperilled by the new power. Moreover, Ḥāmid ‘Alī, the *kantibāy* of the Ḥabāb understood that the Italians would be better patrons than the Ethiopians. By October 1885 (Muḥarram 1303), he had officially become their client, cutting his ties with the Ethiopians who had, in the meantime, grown wary of his ambitions for autonomy. In less than nine months, the Italian colonial administration had managed to insert itself in local affairs and exert some influence over tribal power dynamics<sup>33</sup>.

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31 *Ibid.*, letter 292.

32 Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri, op. cit.*, p. 227.

33 William C. YOUNG, “From Many, One: The Social Construction of the Rashāyida Tribe in Eastern Sudan,”



Yet, in the following few years, they were seldom mentioned in the Mahdist correspondence. They faded from the forefront of Eastern Sudan's politics as they were busy strengthening their presence in Maṣawwa'. Their impact on the development of the Mahdist power is difficult to gauge but was probably more significant than usually assumed. Indeed, there are reasons to believe that the Italians prevented the potential extension of the Mahdist movement on the southern parts of the Red Sea littoral. Whereas favourable feelings toward the Mahdiyya had rapidly cooled down in Maṣawwa', the enthusiasm of other groups proved much more enduring. For example, inhabitants of the Danākil were quite receptive to the Mahdist *da'wa*. One of them wrote directly to Tūkar, informing the Mahdists that "they fight the hardest *jihād*", and that they had taken boats in late 1889 (early 1307) to join them. If they eventually managed to reach the Mahdist headquarter, they had been blocked for some time trying to avoid being spotted by the Italians<sup>34</sup>.

Again, the circumstances shifted in early 1890 (mid-1307) when Italian incursions were reported to the Mahdī. The already volatile situation on the Abyssinian highlands unravelled quickly after the death of Yohannes IV at the battle that pitted his forces against the Mahdists at al-Qallābāt on 9-10 March 1889 (7-8 Rajab 1306). In the chaos that ensued, the Italians seized the opportunity to expand their control over the hinterland, and by December (Rabī' II 1307), they had asserted their authority over Sanhīt (Keren)<sup>35</sup>. Their advance seemed unstoppable and they were rumoured to be heading toward Umm Durmān. Local groups had their own doubts about the ability of the Mahdist authorities to prevent further encroachments. Some heads even contacted British authorities in an attempt to gain their support. In February, Ibrāhīm Mūsā Bey, one of the principal *shuyūkh* of the Wayl'alyāb, a branch of the Hadanduwa located in the *khayrān* of the Qāsh and the Baraka, wrote to the governor-general of the Red Sea that they wanted help against the Italians who, they thought, threatened their land. In that respect, they wrote that "[they] wished to keep [their] country for the old Government" and claimed that they were willing to chase the Mahdists from Tūkar and Handūb, before entering in Kasalā where "[they] will hoist the Khedivial flag upon the Government House in such a way that no usurper can ever remove it<sup>36</sup>." At the same period, the Mahdist leadership was quite worried not to understand the hearsay surrounding Italian activities. They heard of clashes between the Abyssinians and the Italians near Asmara and tried to monitor as closely as they could the evolution of the relationships between the Italians and the Ḥabāb<sup>37</sup>. This "fog of war" was instrumental in Abū Qarja's downfall. Appointed as *'āmil* of Kasalā in late 1890

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*Northeast African Studies*, 1997, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 91–92.

34 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document no. 23.

35 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 174 ; Richard A. CAULK, "Yohannes IV, the Mahdists, and the Partition of North-East Africa," *Transafrican Journal of History*, 1971, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 34–37.

36 DUL SAD, Intelligence Report (Suakin) no. 101, Appendix B.

37 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, documents no. 4 and no. 11.

(early 1308), he arrived on 19 January 1891 (8 Jumādā II) to take up his new post. Paradoxically, the Khalīfa grew suspicious of his *‘āmil* because he rarely mentioned the Italians in his letters despite his express instruction to dispatch men to the borders to collect intelligence. The Khalīfa became convinced that Abū Qarja was in contact with them. Indeed, in late 1891 (early 1310), when Musā’id Qaydūm was sent to the capital of Tāka to assess the situation, he provided evidence that Abū Qarja, never short of treasonous impulses, had been selling firearms to the Italians. Soon after, he was summoned to Umm Durmān to be appointed *‘āmil* of the province of Equatoria. He was, in all but name, sentenced to exile, and this proved to be the end of his career<sup>38</sup>.

More generally, Italian presence in Eritrea prompted some of the Bijāwī communities to abandon Mahdism. In reaction, a series of operations were launched by the *anṣār* toward the highlands, especially toward al-Daqqā where they hoped to obtain the support of the local population<sup>39</sup>. However, these missions were mostly unsuccessful. An attack against the Italians at Aqūrdāt on 21 December 1893 (12 Jumādā II 1311) was a failure, leading the Khalīfa to withdraw most of the *anṣār* from Kasalā, thus putting an end to all operations in the area. Six months later, the Italians took advantage of this, especially since the region had suffered heavy losses from the *Sanat sitta*, and local support for the Mahdiyya had dwindled due to the policy of forced displacements to Sawākin conducted a few years prior<sup>40</sup>. On 17 July (13 Muḥarram 1312), they entered the town.

Italian ambitions were high. Barely a month after the capital of Tāka had fallen in the hands of General Baratieri, three articles were dedicated to Kasalā in the *Bollettino della societa d’esplorazione commerciale in Africa*<sup>41</sup>. This could have raised tensions with the other colonial power, but negotiations between British and Italians had begun soon after the Italian capture of Sanhīt (Keren), which precipitated, in the eyes of British administrators like Cromer, the consul-general of Egypt, the need to come to an agreement as regards the border between the two colonial spheres<sup>42</sup>. Negotiations lasted more than a year and were only concluded in April 1891 (Ramaḍān 1308). The final agreement stipulated, among other clauses, that the Italian advance would not go further than Kasalā. It is in this context that the first detailed map of Bijāwī tribal boundaries was drawn (see fig. 6.1). It is not surprising since the question of who had authority over the

38 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 141 ; Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, “Al-amīr Muḥammad ‘Uthmān Abū Qarja,” *Majallat al-Dirāsāt al-Sūdāniyya*, 1979, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 160–161.

39 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 201.

40 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

41 *Bollettino della societa d’esplorazione commerciale in Africa*, vol. 8 (9), August 1894.

42 BNA FO 403/128, “Summary of the recent Correspondence respecting a proposed Delimitation of Italian Territory and Influence on the Littoral of the Red Sea and in the Interior of the Eastern Soudan”, Foreign Office, 1890.



**Fig. 6.1:** Map of Bijāwī tribal boundaries in 1890

**Source :** BNA WO 925/374, « Sketch map showing approximate boundaries of tribes between Nile and Red Sea », 1890.

communities of the borderland was central to the discussions. In the wake of Kasalā’s capture, Bijāwī communities were asked to choose between the British and the Italian sides, so as to finally allow for the drawing of the border<sup>43</sup>.

One of the main areas in which this tripartite rivalry expressed itself was with regard to trade circulations. After the closing of Sawākin’s gates in the second half of 1890 (early 1308) and its dramatic consequences for the Bijāwī communities, trade resumed its course. The Khalīfa remained cautious but nonetheless encouraged trade activities and allowed traders to circulate<sup>44</sup>.

43 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

44 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letters 234 and 246.

Bābikir Badrī was one of the riverine merchants who participated in these revived exchanges<sup>45</sup>. From 1892 to 1895 (1309-1312), he earned significant profits thanks to the selling of gum Arabic in Sawākin, despite the many obstacles he encountered, quite particularly concerning what he deemed to be confiscatory rates of taxation. According to him, the Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi had forbidden all trade relations with the Red Sea littoral and Egypt in 1896 (1313) when he learned that merchants did not conduct their business in Kūkrayb, a position still under Mahdist control, but directly in Sawākin<sup>46</sup>. Indeed, ‘Uthmān Diqna was informed that all movements on the Sawākin-Barbar road were prohibited in February 1896 (Sha‘bān/Ramaḍān 1313), but the Khalīfa made no mention in his letter of the consideration Badrī referred to<sup>47</sup>. It is more probable that the Khalīfa was reacting to rumours regarding a large concentration of Anglo-Egyptian troops in Wādī Ḥalfā, the prelude to the campaign that led to the capture of Dunqulā in September 1896 (Rabī‘ II 1314). Overall, 1896 was a watershed year for Eastern Sudan because of the Italian defeat at Adawa on 1<sup>st</sup> March (16 Ramaḍān 1313) and the British campaign against Dunqulā, which was at least in part justified as a way to alleviate the growing pressure against the Italian garrison in Kasalā, a position that had become isolated in the aftermath of the Italian defeat. Soon after the beginning of the Anglo-Egyptian invasion, movements of rebellion sprung along the axis Sawākin-Barbar. In April 1896 (Shawwāl/D. al-Qa‘da 1313), ‘Uthmān Diqna informed the Khalīfa that the tribes in Arkawīt were preparing for war<sup>48</sup>. After two years of suspension, raids were resumed and the *anṣār* advanced toward Arkawīt. Attacked by Anglo-Egyptian forces near *khūr* Wintrī, they were severely beaten. The *‘āmil* had no other choice than to retreat once again to Adārāma. The shift in the balance of power pushed the Bijāwī communities to openly side with the Egyptian government. A few desultory operations were organised in November and December (Jumādā II-Rajab 1314), not so much in an attempt to preserve the last shreds of Mahdist authority in the region, but simply to obtain supplies. A last major raid was launched in early 1897 (mid-1314), marking the end of Mahdist presence in Eastern Sudan. After the fall of Barbar on 7 September 1897 (9 Rabī‘ II 1315), the Mahdists could not hold Eastern Sudan anymore. The *‘āmil* withdrew from Adārāma to Abū Dalīq, in the Buṭāna<sup>49</sup>. A loyal group of supporters nonetheless remained around ‘Uthmān Diqna until the bitter end of the Mahdist movement, crushed at the battle of Karārī on 2 September 1898 (15 Rabī‘ II 1316). As indicated by the epigraph, several members of the Mahdist administration in

45 For another much shorter account, see Hugh E. M. STUTFIELD, “The Experiences of an African Trader,” *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 1892, vol. 67, p. 110–120.

46 Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, *op. cit.*, p. 184; 202–203.

47 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (ed.), *Muḥarrarāt ‘Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*, letter 412.

48 Ṣalāḥ al-Tijānī ḤAMMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān – ‘Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi*, *op. cit.*, p. 64–65.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 167–172.

Tūkar were present on the battlefield. More than fifteen years after ‘Uthmān Diqna’s return to Eastern Sudan, Majdhūb still professed absolute faith in the Mahdist *da‘wa* (see above). This dissertation was, in essence, an attempt at retrieving, at the individual level, these trajectories.

## II. Ruling the Unruly: A Provincial History of the Mahdiyya in Eastern Sudan (1883-1891)

### *A) Bijāwī Societies and States in the Long Term (16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries)*

The first chapter is a dense introduction to the long-term history of Eastern Sudan. In particular, it sets out to rethink the categories of analysis in order to avoid essentialising the various communities living in this region by showing the evolution of their areas of settlement, their economic role in the commercial flows of the Upper Nile Valley and, above all, the relations they maintained with neighbouring regimes from the beginning of the modern period until the 1870s.

These communities are among the oldest human groupings on the African continent. They appear under the name of "Blemmiyes" in a number of ancient texts, including Roman sources. This is all the more remarkable given that these were independent groups who do not seem to have been subject to any centralised power at the time. This gives them a historical depth that is very rare for the populations of the region. In particular, it enabled them to avoid the fate reserved for most pastoral and nomadic groups, i.e. a relegation to immanence and the denial of their historicity. Conversely, the power of the representations associated with them has tended to freeze their relative position among polities of Nilotic Sudan. From this point of view, Bijāwī communities have long been associated with the figure of the other in its antagonistic relationship with the state, but also in its distance from written culture, the weapon of power. The Bijāwī is precisely the one who does not submit, the one who is on the margins of the intense commercial, political and intellectual exchanges that shape the Red Sea, or the one who lives on the other side, in the *qayf*, on the mainland. Paradoxically, this knowledge is first and foremost a reflection of the state's view of them, which over the centuries has produced a tenacious veil over the reality of their historical trajectory. The aim of the following sections is to tear away this veil and re-historicise these communities.

Far from the image of a tribal group outside of time that British administrators helped to forge, from the sixteenth to the end of the nineteenth century, Bijāwī communities presented a wide variety of sociopolitical organisations such as the commercial networks of the Ḥaḍārība, the confederation of the Bishārīn or the caste system of the Banī ‘Āmir. The emphasis on tribal structures in historiography thus says more about the predominance of state perspectives in

historical writings than about the reality of Bijāwī political and social structures. What emerges from the analysis of Bijāwī identities is their mutability. Indeed, rather than being based on ethnicity, Bijāwī identity could be defined according to functional criteria, i.e. according to their role in socio-economic dynamics. Thus, perhaps it would be more appropriate to speak of *bijāwī*, without a capital letter, as it is possible to evoke *ḥaḍārib*, for those who were invested in trade circulations. As a counterpoint, this approach entails the dissolution of Bijāwī uniqueness. If we refute the idea that this was merely an etic designation, it should be noted that the overriding factor of identification is linguistic. Those who spoke Bijāwiye were Bijāwī, a criterion that played a central role in the identification logics of the Mahdist regime, as seen in the last chapter.

Beyond Bijāwī identity itself, tribal identities were based on genealogical traditions developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These were motivated by the attempts of the colonial state (Egyptian or British) to make Bijāwī society more legible, and at the same time they expressed a vernacular understanding, both descriptive and performative, of the evolution of Bijāwī social bodies in the wake of the great southern migration. For the occasion, these traditions mobilised a grammar of self-identification developed shortly before, in the eighteenth century, by the populations of the Upper Nile valley. In other words, the partial and ambivalent tribalisation of the Bijāwī communities was not just a process imposed from outside.

An analysis of the historical trajectory of Eastern Sudan's populations must be diachronic and spatialised. The settlement of Hadanduwa clans in the southern Bijāwī triangle cannot be reduced to a simple territorial expansion. It also changed the dynamics of the internal structure of these communities and their links with other groups. Unfortunately, the few sources we have do not allow us to go beyond these hypotheses, but it is possible that the primordial organisation of land rights, as well as its corollary, the territorialisation of Bijāwī identities, were shaped in the heart of the Qāsh valley at the turn of the nineteenth century. The central argument is to consider that the violent intrusion of Hadanduwa communities from the Red Sea Hills into the southern territories accelerated a process begun during the Bishārī and Ammār'ar migrations, of developing a customary law, the *salif*, in order to regulate access to land and reduce local antagonisms.

The main conclusion to be drawn from this analysis is that a significant part of the internal transformations observed within the Bijāwī populations had endogenous origins. The influence of the state may have been significant, for example with regard to the monopolisation of international trade relations by the Funj sultans in the seventeenth century, a decision that could not fail to affect the Ḥaḍāriba, but this should not prevent us from considering Eastern Sudan as an autonomous space with its own constraints, including environmental ones, that certainly played a decisive role in the southward migration that began in the eighteenth century. In this respect, part or even all of the

region could be seen as a form of *zomia*, to use James Scott's term, contracting or expanding according to the relative strength of neighbouring states.

Yet to define the region as a 'non-state space' and the Bijāwī peoples as 'non-state peoples' is misleading and tends to reify a distinction based on what they are not, rather than highlighting the originality of their historical trajectory. The supposed incompatibility between tribal and state structures is based on an ideal-typical consideration of the former that has little or no historical basis. The dependence of the state on the participation of the Bijāwī populations was evident throughout the nineteenth century, may it be for transport, with the supply of camels, or for cultivating the land. While tribal leaders often tried to counter state action, they have also used state legitimacy to consolidate their own power. The relationship between local populations and the central powers has never been unequivocal.

### ***B) Revolt and Civil War in Eastern Sudan (1870-1888)***

In the second chapter, the transformation of the socioeconomic context in the 1870s is analysed to explain the dynamics of Mahdist mobilisation from 1883 (1300) onwards. The arrival of the Mahdist *da'wa* in Eastern Sudan, through the actions of the *'āmil* 'Uthmān Diqna, is dealt with in the second part. Contrary to the dominant narrative, adherence to Mahdism is not conflated with tribal categories and is not limited to the Bijāwī nomads, but reveals much more complex tensions within the populations of Eastern Sudan. The nature of the conflict that pitted Mahdist forces against Anglo-Egyptian troops from 1883 to 1885 (1301-1302) is dealt with, from the point of view of the Bijāwī combatants, in the third part, while the outbreak of the Bijāwī civil war in 1886-1888 (1303-1305) is the subject of the final part.

This development is an attempt to anchor the history of the Mahdiyya in a specific territory and narrate this history from a local perspective. The central aim of this second chapter is to qualify the historical narratives that emphasise the exogenous nature of the Mahdist message and therefore analyse its diffusion univocally, as a project that would emanate exclusively from the figure of the Mahdī, with the result that its trajectory is seen exclusively through the prism of its gradual territorial expansion.

On the contrary, the first section paints the portrait of a region profoundly affected by global and regional dynamics and reveals the adaptations of the local population to these changes. In this respect, this analysis departs from previous accounts by highlighting the complexity of the motives that may have led some Bijāwī to participate in the *jihād*. Above all, it challenges the characterisation of the Mahdist movement in Eastern Sudan as essentially rural and tribal. Since the 1860s, and with increasing intensity in the 1870s, the economy of Eastern Sudan had been partially

integrated to global circulations, particularly as a result of the rise in internal trade with the opening up of the southern Sudanese territories and the intensification of trade in the Red Sea with the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869. This had major consequences for the region's urban and pastoral communities. Contrary to what has long been thought, the initial success of Mahdism was not based on pure opportunism on the part of Bijāwī nomads, attracted by the prospect of loot and driven by an irresistible desire to fight. While opposition to the central states is a long-term historical dynamic, and while its importance in explaining the mobilisation of certain Bijāwī clans cannot not be denied, it should be emphasised that the core of Mahdist mobilisation was diverse and that the Bijāwī merchants of the Sawākiniyya occupied a central place in it. The first individuals to join the movement initiated by ʿUthmān Dīqna and supported by the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir al-Majdhūb of the Majādhīb—whose influence was then considerable on the populations of the region—can only be explained by referring to a complex network of interactions between different segments of a population with different aspirations. In other words, the first *anṣār* were not Bijāwī who demonstrated through their participation in the *jihād* an ancestral antagonism to any state structure and who would have instrumentalised Mahdism to serve their own desires for independence from Egyptian colonial rule, but rather a motley collection of individuals brought together precisely by their will to change the state itself, and by the same token, their relationship with it. Those who took part in the movement were those affected by the reconfiguration of socioeconomic relations observed during the 1870s. Therefore, to understand adherence to Mahdism, we need to move away from a model that sees Eastern Sudan as a periphery and the local populations as passive agents of a millenarian message adopted for opportunistic reasons.

However, the power of family, clan and tribal relations, which also played a major role in the mobilisation, cannot be overlooked. The Dīqnāb and Majādhīb groups were central actors and remained so throughout the period. Group solidarity was crucial to the rapid spread of the movement in Eastern Sudan. However, ethno-tribal affiliations should not be seen as the only determining factor. Clans and tribes constituted potential political communities that could serve as vectors of mobilisation, but they could also—and this was often the case—be deeply divided and their members adopt antagonistic positions. The latter was all the more likely as adherence to Mahdism was first and foremost a personal and individual commitment.

This chapter avoids, as far as possible, going into the strictly military aspects because these are already well known, thanks to the many accounts available on the British side of the campaigns of 1884 and 1885. However, religious considerations, often neglected or underestimated by contemporary observers, are fundamental in explaining the forms of warfare adopted by the *anṣār*. Against the essentialist and exoticising representations conveyed by accounts written mostly by



British officers who praised the courage of the Bijāwī fighters but confined their action to a form of irrational savagery fuelled by religious fanaticism, it is worth emphasising the power of millenarian expectations as well as the intensity of these men's adherence to the Mahdist project. Both shaped the very way the struggle was conducted, which means that it has to be seen not so much through a strategic or tactical prism, but as a total social action and a manifestation of the influence of the ideals set out by the Mahdī.

Despite the fact that the Mahdist mobilisation was initially an individual and religious decision, tribal and clan dynamics also helped to structure the movement. The end of Anglo-Egyptian operations outside Sawākin after 1885 (1302/3) and the assertion of territorial control over the whole of eastern Sudan with the capture of Kasalā in July 1885 (Shawwāl 1302) allowed for the stabilisation Mahdist authority. The new power's attempts to assert itself, notably by introducing a new tax system, very quickly aroused considerable resistance, first in the north, in 1886, before the movement reached Tāka from the summer of 1887 (late 1304). Against this background of high tensions, tribal and clan affiliations regained their vigour. The capture of Sawākin and the expulsion of the "Turks", the two main objectives of the *jihād* in Eastern Sudan, represented a goal to which most Bijāwī individuals could adhere. The temporary end of the fighting, the result of the withdrawal of Anglo-Egyptian troops behind the walls of the Red Sea port, left a vacuum. The relative Bijāwī unity that had prevailed until then cracked and opposition to the Mahdist regime spread to many sections of the local population. But the divergent interests of the various communities, not least in terms of the benefits they hoped to gain from the Mahdist authorities, did not allow a common front to be formed. On the contrary, the opposition movement soon turned into a region-wide civil war. In this context, both ‘Uthmān Diqna and the Red Sea governors attempted, often with little success, to instrumentalise these rivalries. It is advisable, however, not to reify the latter, but to historicise them and thus, reinscribe them in the long history initiated in the first chapter and continued at the beginning of the second. Indeed, these dynamics are crucial in explaining, even superficially, the fluctuating positions of the different groups settled in Eastern Sudan.

### ***C) The Formation of Mahdist Provincial Authorities in Eastern Sudan (1883-1891)***

The violent campaign of repression against the Bijāwī communities resistant to Mahdist rule came to an end in the summer of 1888, due in particular to the exhaustion of the belligerent groups, as the provincial authorities led by the *‘āmil* ‘Uthmān Diqna began to assert their power with greater intensity. This process was accompanied by a move towards bureaucratisation that culminated in the foundation of a treasury in Tūkar at the end of 1888. In that perspective, this

chapter is dedicated first to the question of the territorialisation of Mahdist power through the establishment of a provincial power structure. The second part focuses on the province of Eastern Sudan in order to study the gradual construction of a local administration, first in Kasalā, then in Handūb, and finally in Tūkar from the beginning of 1889. Finally, the last section deals with the relation between bureaucratic power and Mahdist governmentality.

The question of supervising the population and their leaders once they had proclaimed their support for the Mahdist regime occupied a major place in the Mahdī's political thinking since the very beginning of the movement. The stakes were indeed high. In its early days, the main manifestation of adherence to Muḥammad Aḥmad's *da'wa* involved performing the *hijra*, the pilgrimage to the Mahdī, first to Qadīr in the Nūba Mountains and, after January 1883, to al-Ubayyid. From this point of view, the first provincial agents of the Mahdiyya were mere intermediaries responsible for organising the departure of new followers of Mahdism. It was only later, once the insurrection had stabilised and Mahdist power had been installed in an urban setting, that the transformation of the revolutionary movement into a state structure began. This involved establishing a clear hierarchy, a process that was never quite completed. Above all, it led to an almost total reversal in the way mobilisation was organised. During the first phase of the movement, *jihād* combatants had to join the Mahdī where he was. The movement was therefore carried out from the periphery to the centre (according to Mahdist geography). The Mahdist agents in the provinces were for the most part Sufi *shuyūkh*, i.e. local religious figures who were accredited by the Mahdī through a licence (*ijāza* pl. *ijāzāt*) and who used their legitimacy and authority to support and organise the movement. From 1883 onwards, most of them were replaced by administrators who had been appointed directly by the Mahdī and whose aspirations for autonomy the Mahdī did not have to fear. This represented a radical reversal of the process of territorial control. Henceforth, representatives of the Mahdiyya would first report to the Mahdī and then be sent to the provinces. This process was pursued in parallel with the gradual imposition of Islamic law in accordance with the Mahdī's interpretations, resulting in a form of legal territorialisation of Mahdist power.

It was within this framework that 'Uthmān Diqna was appointed *'āmil* of Eastern Sudan in May 1883. However, his role was initially only military. It was not until the end of 1885, after the death of the Mahdī, that his successor, the Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi, completed the process of constituting provinces with relatively fixed boundaries. This is the moment when a genuine provincial administration under the control of a treasury emerged. Its evolution, especially after 1888 when an institution distinct from the one in Kasalā was created in Handūb, shows the complexity of the dynamics that shaped the Mahdist provincial administration. Contrary to previous analyses that

emphasised the predominant role of the Khalīfa in the institutionalisation of this administration, the example of the treasury of Tūkar demonstrates that there were continuities with the process initiated by the Mahdī, but also that significant aspects of the structure established in Eastern Sudan was shaped by local decisions linked to endogenous circumstances. Despite its limitations, the administrative apparatus centred on the treasury of Tūkar was a complex institution that attempted to meet specific needs with limited resources, not a messy imitation of a central treasury that could only function thanks to the participation of the former administrators of the Turkiyya. Consequently, provincial autonomy is a reality that should not be dismissed out of hand, and the model developed by the historian Peter M. Holt, which distinguishes between "military provinces" and "metropolitan provinces", should be abandoned in favour of a more nuanced approach that highlights the reciprocal influences between the centre of power and the provinces, as well as between the provinces themselves, through the circulation of people and administrative practices.

The role of these provincial institutions was not confined to accounting. The main function of the Mahdist administration was to maintain a balance between the different sources of authority. The complex administrative procedures implemented by the treasury were intended to put into practice the Mahdī's stated principles of a fair and egalitarian government. From this point of view, the internal organisation of the treasury in Tūkar reflected the importance attached not so much to the accounting dimension of this administrative work, but rather to the legitimacy of each and every operation. In other words, the main function of the treasury was not to keep an inventory of foodstuffs, products and equipment, but to keep track of every entry and exit in order to verify their legality, and potentially, to be able to respond to any challenge from the *anṣār* or *umarā'* as to the origin of any decision. The dense network of authorisations, statements and registers produced by Tūkar's treasury agents formed the basis of a Mahdist moral economy that prescribed the just distribution of resources among the combatants. Because of its strategic position at the heart of provincial power, the treasury became the main battleground for the competing ambitions of Mahdist leaders, such as those that caused the rift between ʿUthmān Diqna and his second-in-command, Muḥammad ʿUthmān Abū Qarja. These developments were closely followed by the Khalīfa, who relied almost exclusively on the dense epistolary network founded by the Mahdī to monitor his agents throughout Nilotic Sudan. However, letters sometimes proved insufficient to resolve these rivalries or the other tensions emanating from the communities under Mahdist rule. Convening local chiefs in Umm Durmān gave the Mahdist leader access to better and more nuanced accounts of the local situation than those that reached him irregularly from the provincial centres.

However, even annual meetings were difficult to organise, all the more so as they caused problematic power vacancies in the provincial headquarters, often leading to an increase in internal

disputes and conflicts. Sending delegates, a practice initiated by the Mahdī but formalised by the Khalīfa, enabled the latter to reassert his authority and impose direct supervision over the activities of provincial agents. Often seen as a manifestation of the provinces' lack of autonomy *vis-à-vis* the central power, this system, on the contrary, shows genuine attention on the part of the Khalīfa to local dynamics and the need to adapt power to regional contexts. In this respect, the variability of provincial configurations should not be interpreted as a sign of disorganisation, but as an adaptation to specific and evolving circumstances. In order to make sense of these specificities, we need to renew our understanding of the links that united the different political spaces of the Mahdist regime. This does not call into question the centralised nature of the Mahdist state, although a close examination of the practices of the provincial administration reveals a much more mixed picture. Relations between the political centre and the external territories were more reciprocal than previously thought. Experiments and adaptations could be carried out in a provincial context only to be endorsed a posteriori by the Khalīfa, which was sometimes deliberately kept in a state of nebulous ignorance of the details of the situation. Moreover, certain aspects of local politics or the local organisation of power could be transferred from one province to another and even end up in Umm Durmān.

#### ***D) The Mahdist War Economy and British Economic War***

Mobilising fighters for the *jihād*, the main objective of Mahdist leaders, required the acquisition and management of resources that were, and still are, quite scarce in Eastern Sudan. The extensive documentation produced between 1888 and 1891 by the Mahdist bureaucracy provides a rare window into a provincial economy during the Mahdiyya. The unparalleled level of detail in these documents allows for an in-depth analysis of the Mahdist budget outside the capital and can also be used to trace the trade policies adopted by both the British authorities in Sawākin and the Mahdist leadership. The chapter is structured around the three essential resources of Mahdist power in Eastern Sudan. Money, of course, was central to its economy. The tax system imposed on the populations was not just a means of extracting some of the local wealth to finance the mobilisation of the *anṣār*. Because the Mahdist insurrection was, in part, a reaction to the predatory practices of the Egyptian colonial regime, it was imperative for Mahdist fiscality to distance itself from this counter-model, with limited success. Because of its position at the crossroads of major trade routes, the provincial administration in Eastern Sudan could also count on capturing part of the trade flows between the interior of the country and the Red Sea. The management of the products collected in this way was one of the treasury's most important tasks and helped, in part, to compensate for the intrinsic fragility of the tax levies. Finally, cereals, mainly sorghum (*dhura*) and millet (*dukhn*) were

absolutely necessary for feeding the *anṣār*. In the extremely tense context of the Year Six famine (*Sanat sitta*) of 1889-1891, grain supplies were a crucial issue for the Mahdist administration, but also for the Anglo-Egyptian authorities in Sawākin, who instrumentalised the shortage to bring about the collapse of ʿUthmān Dīqna's power.

Originally, the taxation introduced by the Mahdī had to conform to Islamic prescriptions and was therefore based on the two canonical taxes: the *zakāt* and the *ʿushr*. In principle, the former was a 2,5% individual tax on capital while the latter was a 10% levy on income, most notably sales and purchase transactions. Implementing this tax system in Eastern Sudan was a complex process that provoked a great deal of resistance. It is difficult to draw a coherent picture of the tax systems. They evolved, the names changed frequently and, above all, the theoretical framework was never clearly established. Indeed, the rules enacted by the Mahdī were not really intended to be implemented as such. They were thought as an ideal system (even if the Mahdī could pay attention to certain specificities of the culture of Nilotic Sudan) designed to contrast with the practices of the Turkiyya. When the provincial administrators wanted to tax the local populations, the framework laid down by Muḥammad Aḥmad was difficult to enforce. Consequently, this fiscality underwent numerous modifications and adaptations. The relative confusion that surrounded the definition of the different taxes was considered to be a sign of their extra-legal nature. As a result, Mahdist taxation was long portrayed as essentially predatory and based on plunder. It is true that the Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan, and the same can be said of the other provincial and central administrations, was structurally in deficit. Mahdist tax rates were too low and tax bases too narrow to meet the expenses of the state, especially in the context of the massive mobilisation of the population for the *jihād* that brought many men and women to be entirely dependent on the regime to provide for them. Violent appropriation through raids was therefore frequent, but it was not the norm. Indeed, to compensate its deficit, the Tūkar administration had no choice but to borrow large sums from merchants operating in the region, the only individuals with enough capital to actually contribute to the Mahdist budget. Contrary to the caricatural representation of a state with little concern for the legality of its actions, the documents produced by the treasury bear witness to the attention paid to recording its loans. What is even more surprising is that these loans were repaid, albeit incompletely, on a regular basis throughout the period. This can be explained partly by the need to maintain good relations with creditors, with a view to taking out further loans, but also by the intensity of the relations between merchant circles and the Mahdist authority in Eastern Sudan.

Indeed, despite the collapse of trade after 1883 and the closure of the port of Sawākin, significant quantities of goods continued to transit through the Sudanese Red Sea coast. In order to continue their activities, both Sudanese and foreign merchants had to deal with the Mahdist

administration. To a certain extent, they became the financiers of the movement. In return, they gained access to a number of resources, including those under state monopoly, such as slaves, ivory and gum Arabic. The Anglo-Egyptian authorities in Sawākin very quickly realised the advantage they could gain from controlling these flows. Since the Mahdist core was essentially made up of individuals from communities directly involved in trade, the closure of the main Sudanese port on the Red Sea and the imposition of a coastal blockade were, in their view, particularly effective tools for undermining Mahdist power and supporting rebel groups by granting them privileged access. This policy underwent a number of reversals, according to the positions of Sawākin's governors and the changing attitude of the Mahdists. Like the construction of the provincial administration, the correspondence between 'Uthmān Diqna and the Khalīfa allows us to qualify the centralised nature of the decision-making process. Here too, the provincial administration had a degree of autonomy and helped to define Umm Durmān's trade policy.

Kitchener, the governor of the Sudanese Red Sea littoral from 1886 to 1888, was one of the officers most concerned about what he saw as an internal contradiction in Anglo-Egyptian policy towards trade flows. Convinced that these directly supported the *anṣār*, he considered the continuation of trade to be a serious mistake and the main reason for the perpetuation of Mahdist power in the region. The latter was in fact highly dependent on local production, located mainly in the Baraka and Qāsh deltas. When a series of external shocks—a period of aridity combined with a plague of locusts—eliminated this source, the Mahdists and all the Bijāwī communities found themselves entirely dependent on imports from the Nile Valley and the Red Sea. The action taken by the British authorities demonstrated a clear desire and a concerted effort to ban all grain imports on the pretext of a cholera epidemic so as to starve the population and so weakened Mahdist rule. Even though Sawākin's granaries were full, the population outside its walls was left almost entirely destitute.

It is difficult to assess the effects of the famine of 1306 on the population of Eastern Sudan. Population estimates are fragile and subsequent censuses in Nilotic Sudan notoriously problematic, not least because the newly established colonial power had a strong incentive to amplify the collapse of the population during the Mahdiyya. In the first census of 1903, the population of Eastern Sudan was estimated at 140 000, compared with 800 000 in 1882. The assessment offered by the historian Steven Serels of 210 000 is certainly much closer to reality. The fact remains that a third of the region's population would have disappeared in two decades. The British policy was a success. Mahdist power was permanently weakened by the famine. This enabled Colonel Hotted Smith to carry out operations against Handūb and then Tūkar in January and February 1891, just a few months after the reopening of trade in Sawākin, resulting in the complete defeat of the *anṣār*.

The capture of the administrative centre of Afāfīt and the Baraka Delta sealed the fate of the Mahdist regime in Eastern Sudan. By taking control of the main agricultural area, the Anglo-Egyptian authorities ensured that ‘Uthmān Dīqna would be unable to feed his troops, while falling back on transfers from other regions was no longer an option. Unlike previous setbacks suffered by Mahdist forces, in the aftermath of their defeat, the *anṣār* did not retreat to the Red Sea Hills, which had served as their refuge between 1883 and 1886, but withdrew much farther to Kasalā and Adarāma on the ‘Aṭbara River. This marked the end of a development initiated with the Bijāwī civil war and which gradually isolated the millenarian movement from the local populations. It did not, however, put an end to the attempt to form a new reformed society respecting the principles laid down by the Mahdī.

### ***E) Mahdism, territory and population***

The Mahdist provincial authorities were responsible for providing for the needs of the men and their families who had joined the movement, whether willingly or by force. Basic needs had to be met (and they rarely were), but the Mahdist project was much more radical and required the transformation of these scattered groups into an ideal Mahdist society. With this in mind, the Mahdist regime developed its own governmentality, which is explored in this final chapter. Its first dimension was spatial. The millenarian regime imposed its own understanding of space and in doing, reshaped the territory of Nilotic Sudan. However, space itself was not its actual target. It was only interested in people. The aim was not to control a territory, but to convert and transform the individuals who lived there. It was about changing their identity and erasing competing forms of allegiance, particularly tribal and clan allegiances, to enable the foundation of a truly Mahdist society. The management of this community was at the heart of the Mahdist project. It was based on principles that are both original and at the same time deeply influenced by those governing Sufī brotherhoods.

Strongly inspired by the canonical spatial frameworks of Islam, in particular the opposition between the domain of Islam (*dār al-islām*) and the domain of war (*dār al-ḥarb*), the Mahdist regime divided space between that of the Mahdiyya, conceived then as an expanding but delimited territory, and an outer space, where Mahdist principles did not apply and its population was assimilated to unbelievers. From this perspective, the first manifestation of adherence to Mahdism was geographical and involved a move, on the model of the *hijra*, towards the Mahdī. The territorialisation of the regime through the formation of provincial administrations somewhat limited the power of attraction exerted by the Mahdī himself, the repository of a form of *baraka* that directly echoed the Sufī practices then dominant in the Upper Nile Valley. On his death, the tomb

erected by his successor at Umm Durmān became the centre of gravity of this spiritual topography. However, the spatial principles formulated by Muḥammad Aḥmad were not abandoned. Integrating populations into the Mahdist order involved relocating them in order to cut them off from their original community and socioeconomic environment. The policy of forced displacements (*tahjīr*) was widely enforced, especially in Eastern Sudan. The regime's aim was to create a surveillance society, influenced by the disciplinary model developed by the Sufi *ṭuruq*. Movements were closely controlled and every journey required the approval of the authorities, resulting in a dense network of scriptural records.

The second stage of the Mahdist project to rebuild Sudanese society was to reconfigure individual identities by integrating them into a military structure, the banners and the *muqaddamiyya*. The intention was indeed to dissolve regional, tribal and family identities in order to obtain the full allegiance of the *anṣār*. The results of this policy were mixed, and that for two main reasons. On the one hand, tribal, but above all clan and family affiliations, played a central role in the mobilisation for the *jihād*. Even if the administration tried to make these logics invisible, each banner had a tribal overtone that was not determinant, but nonetheless influential. On the other hand, the concentration of large numbers of fighters—usually accompanied by their extended families and, in some cases, their slaves—in a camp, whether in Kasalā, Handūb or Tūkar, brought individuals from very different backgrounds into direct contact. While it is difficult to measure the concrete effects of this unprecedented situation, it is safe to assume that it led to a strengthening of identity-based logics.

This is not to say that the whole Mahdist project failed. On the contrary, its resilience should be noted. It is even possible to consider that it remained most vigorous in the provinces, where men and women, some of whom had given up everything to take part in the Mahdī's vision, defended it and tried to put its principles in practice. In fact, the form of government developed by the Mahdist regime was based on three strong injunctions for a just, egalitarian and pious society. It was up to the administrative apparatus to ensure that the community lived up to these principles. The first challenge was to take care of the members of the Mahdist community. Their needs had to be provided for and, above all, this had to be done fairly, with all combatants being treated in the same way. The treasury was therefore the first port of call for individuals facing particular difficulties or extraordinary expenses. One of the main areas of application of this Mahdist regulation of the social body was matrimonial relations. Because the Mahdist regime aimed to separate individuals from their original socioeconomic environment, they could not call on their own community of origin to organise marriages. The Mahdist regime therefore took advantage of this and did not hesitate to use it to reinforce its control over the population. Finally, the regime also had to ensure the religious



education of the Mahdist troops. The pillars of Mahdist practice, prayers and the reading of the Mahdī's devotional book, the *rātib*, occupied a central place in the daily lives of the *anṣār*.

This final chapter has sought to highlight the coherence and power of the Mahdist social project. Mahdism, as an ideology, was supposed to radically transform Sudanese communities. This is the revolutionary nature of this movement, which strived to discipline individual behaviour, weaken tribal ties and create a reformed society that was constantly mobilised for the victory of Islam. Although marked by frequent shortcomings and pragmatic concessions resulting from the limitations of the political authority exercised from Umm Durmān, the social project developed during the Mahdiyya was never abandoned and remained throughout this period the driving force behind the structuring and functioning of its administrative apparatus. The Mahdist call for equality and justice was heard by many, men and women alike, and the society formed under its auspices was organised to ensure respect for these principles. This political and social construction could be interpreted as a new form of governmentality extending the disciplinary practices of Sufi institutions to the scale of a state.

### **III. Nilotic Sudan: A Historical Hapax?**

#### *i) The Singularity of Nilotic Sudan's Historical Trajectory*

One of the most striking aspects of the Mahdiyya's historiography is its relative isolation. The period, despite the immense consequences it had on the populations of Nilotic Sudan, is seldom mentioned in scholarly works focused on the neighbouring territories. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, it reflects the paradox of a territory located at the crossroads of major axes of circulations but nonetheless considered as marginal. While nineteenth-century Egypt has been the subject of a number of studies, the same cannot be said of its southerly neighbour. A similar comment could be made with regard to Ethiopia. Nilotic Sudan was also distant from the Swahili sphere to the south, as well as from the major polities of Borno or Sokoto to west. The rich historiographies that structure the history of the African continent during the modern period have thus left a significant blind spot. This was compounded by colonial dynamics. Indeed, by the late nineteenth century, the Upper Nile Valley was surrounded by no less than four imperial powers, namely Britain, France, Italy and Belgium. In that new context, the region became the intersection of antagonistic trends of imperial expansion, especially with regard to the French ambitions to establish some form of control over an axis that ran from the Senegal Valley up to Djibouti, while some members of the British colonial lobby aimed at connecting the Cape to Cairo. Fashūda

underlined the paradoxical centrality of the Greater Nile Valley. The two main colonial powers of the nineteenth century nearly went to war to control a region to which Mahdist officers who had fallen out of favour with the Khalīfa were exiled. By the time the whole of Nilotic Sudan could be said to be firmly under British rule, colonial borders elsewhere were already being consolidated and so reaffirmed the region's isolation. As a result, separate sets of colonial knowledge were formed and produced deep epistemic divides, the traces of which can still be observed in current African historical studies.

The fall of the Mahdist regime in 1898 and the subsequent foundation of the Condominium could have resulted in the integration of the region to the British sphere. To some extent, it did. For example, colonial administrators were well aware of the intensity of the relations between Sudan and northern Nigeria. But it is telling that the Sudan Political Service, as analysed by the historian Nicole Grandin<sup>50</sup>, shared very few links with other British colonial administrations, in Africa or Asia. Most of its members were recruited as they graduated from Cambridge and Oxford and spent the entirety of their career in Sudan, before retiring. Few of them would experience other fields as it was common within the British empire. Therefore, the large body of literature they produced was intensely Sudano-centric and rarely concerned with comparisons.

Furthermore, Nilotic Sudan's historical trajectory in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not fit into the larger narratives that shaped Africa's modern historiographies. At the very same time participants to the Berlin conference were convening to define the rules of the "scramble", the Mahdists led by Muḥammad Aḥmad had captured Khartoum and killed its world-famous governor-general. This was not, evidently, the only setback suffered by colonial forces on the continent. Six years prior, British troops had been severely beaten at Isandlwana, and eleven years later, Italian ambitions towards the Ethiopian highlands were crushed at the battle of Adwa. Yet, these did not amount to much more than delays in the process of colonial penetration and did not endanger significantly these powers' hold over the territories they already occupied. Italians remained in Eritrea and, eventually, Britain defeated the Zulu kingdom to annex it in 1887. Not only the situation in Nilotic Sudan was quite singular, but its evolution ran counter to the dynamic of expansion of imperial rule. Indeed, since 1821, large sections of Nilotic Sudan had been conquered by Ottoman-Egyptians. The nature of the regime they established is still the subject of scholarly debate. An underlying hypothesis to this dissertation is that it gradually mutated into a form of colonial rule, a process that accelerated sharply in the 1860s. Unfortunately, this remains to be proven as access to Egyptian archives where elements of answer could be found is notoriously

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50 Nicole GRANDIN, *Le Soudan nilotique et l'administration britannique (1898-1956) ; éléments d'interprétation socio-historique d'une expérience coloniale*, Leiden, Brill, 1982.

difficult to obtain. There are, nonetheless, indications that this is indeed the case, whether because of the emergence of a colonial discourse in Egypt<sup>51</sup>, or because of the development of ever more elaborate methods of wealth extraction, as was the case in Eastern Sudan with the drafting of ambitious agricultural schemes during that period<sup>52</sup>. In that perspective, Mahdism can be construed as one of the first movements of decolonisation on the African continent, even if the meaning of the millenarian uprising vastly exceeds this framework.

The singularity that characterised the circumstances within which the Mahdī mobilised the men and women of the Greater Nile Valley for the *jihād* extended to the regime he established. For more than a decade, Nilotic Sudan was under a system of power that has few obvious equivalents. While comparisons with the Sokoto Sultanate could be found<sup>53</sup>, they remained rare, and much more doubtful connections were drawn with other millenarian movements like the one headed by Muḥammad Ibn Tūmart that resulted in formation of the Almohad Caliphate in the twelfth century<sup>54</sup>. To some extent, the first intent of the research presented above was an attempt at normalising the Mahdist regime. To do so required to break free from the shackles of chronological scansions. Instead of focusing my attention on the state, considered as a monolithic entity and the main if not only expression of the Mahdiyya, as was the case in Peter M. Holt's seminal work, my objective was to write a social history, from below, of a provincial society undergoing major changes under three consecutive regimes. However, several issues prompted significant adjustments regarding this initial plan. First, since, despite my best efforts, the Egyptian national archives remained closed to me, sources to explore the fate of Eastern Sudan during the 1860s and 1870s were limited. Secondly, while the focus on Eastern Sudan was warranted by the exceptional availability of Mahdist documents, the latter were highly concentrated on a short period, a particularity that hindered a diachronic development. Thirdly, circumstances precluded me from engaging in extensive fieldwork to gather the material for an oral history of Eastern Sudan. Lastly, and this was by far the most consequential factor, the vast number of letters and records produced by the Mahdist administration in Eastern Sudan said very little on its local population. The Mahdist state was mostly concerned by its own action and its administrators did not benefit from the same motivations as British colonial officers, namely exoticism and boredom, to engage in

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51 Eve M. TROUTT POWELL, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003.

52 See chapters 1 and 2.

53 As mentioned in the introduction, Paul E. Lovejoy is one of the few historians to extend his analysis, focused on the western polities, up to Nilotic Sudan (*Jihād in West Africa during the Age of Revolutions*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2016.).

54 See, for example, Muḥammad ZNIBER, "Al-Khalfiyya al-ijtimā'iyya wa al-thaqāfiyya li-ḥarakat al-Mahdī bin Tūmart," in 'Umar 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Naḡar (ed.), *Dirāsāt fī tāriḫ al-Mahdiyya*, Khartoum, Dār jāmi'at al-Kharṭūm li-l-nashr, 1987, vol. 1, p. 133–155.

anthropological descriptions. In accordance with their stereotype, the Bijāwī communities remained aloof and elusive.

*ii) Foucault on the Nile*

In contrast, not only did the gravitational pull of the Mahdist state seem inescapable. In the end, the vast amount of documents that its administration had produced in Eastern Sudan said little on the local population. The plan to study a community under Mahdist rule and use the records of the state to uncover the transformations it underwent could not be fully carried out, but new avenues of questioning soon started to arise. Why was the Mahdist state so keen on producing such extensive records that served no obvious purpose? Despite lacking resources, in the midst of one of the worst famines experienced by the populations of the Upper Nile Valley and in a context of almost constant warfare, Mahdist administrators kept on writing infinite and minute lists of goods, carefully maintaining censuses, and delivering thousands of receipts, often for trivial amounts of fabric or grain.

To understand the motivations of these actors required an investigation into the practical modalities of power, that is the different technologies of power that were mobilised by Mahdist administrators through writing and counting. In that respect, the documents that emanated from the Tūkar treasury were not solely records for the simple reason that they were ill-adapted to fulfil basic bureaucratic tasks. Even straightforward inventories required a significant amount of work to retrieve what should have been their main usage, namely to know what quantity of a given good was present in the stores at any given moment. Not that it was impossible, but they were not designed to do this. Indeed, after close examination, it appeared they were essentially scriptural traces of goods' movements, meant to establish the identity of recipients of state distributions, but above all, to keep track of those who had authorised these transfers according to the hierarchical line. Thus, the matter that these documents were meant to solve was less economic than political. They constituted tools to ensure that each of the *anṣār* received a fair share of the administration's distributions by making every decision traceable and so potentially challengeable while signalling the administration's own commitment to uphold principles of equality. This bureaucratic organisation was conceived to constrain the actions of the administration and of military leaders, two functions that were not always separate, whose responsibility could be engaged in case certain operations raised objections.

Studying how power was actually exercised at the greatest scale, in small interactions between agents of the state and members of a nascent Mahdist community mobilised for the *jihād*, revealed an underlying framework that informed the manner the treasury operated as well as the

administrative structure itself. The segmentation of the bureaucratic apparatus in codependent departments implied that every decision would be examined by at least two different head clerks, often more, and so would limit opportunities for embezzlement and corruption. This framework was primarily based on the Mahdist tenets formulated by the Mahdī and reaffirmed by his successor. It aimed at the formation of a reformed society of equals dedicated to the Mahdist cause. In contradiction with contemporary accounts by British observers who assumed the gradual but quick degradation of these principles' upholding within the Mahdist polity after the death of its initiator, an examination of Eastern Sudan's provincial administration shows their lasting potency. These precepts gave form to the overall direction followed by the Mahdist apparatus, but the manner through which they were implemented depended on an apprehension of authority relations that had experienced deep evolutions since at least the early nineteenth century, with the emergence of centralised Sufi brotherhoods in the Upper Nile Valley, which favoured a more individual approach to religious commitment, and which can be considered the origin of a new governmentality that the Mahdist regime briefly attempted to impose on the entire Sudanese territory.

The analysis above is obviously infused with Foucauldian theory and terminology, whether in its consideration of micro-techniques of power or because of its mobilisation of the concept of governmentality. While this approach is fruitful, because of its attention to the practice of power—particularly with regard to administrative operations that would have been otherwise deemed too insignificant to require interpretation—and its ability to articulate the normative and performative aspects of bureaucracy, it is hardly original. This is intentional. Indeed, it is part of a larger effort to normalise the Mahdist state, which should thus be studied with conceptual tools often mobilised in analyses of state structures, regardless of its millenarian origins and its *jihādī* program. By the same token, the Mahdist state's discourse should not be dismissed as inconsequential. It gave shape to an administrative apparatus that was designed to implement the core tenets of Mahdism. The disdain with which it was considered by British commentators resulted from two considerations. First, because of the large number of administrators of the Turkiyya who had kept their position or were reintegrated in one capacity or another, they saw this administration as external to the regime, a simple tool for the management of everyday matters, directly inherited from the previous regime. Secondly, and the two ideas are not mutually exclusive, the framework within which Mahdist administrative activities unfolded was discredited as a thin veneer of legality lay over oppressive and confiscatory operations that answered almost solely to military considerations. And yet, if the Mahdiyya's administration often failed to follow its own prescriptions, a core argument of this dissertation was that this very discourse was not without substance and potency. Members of the Mahdist community in Eastern Sudan were keen to remind leaders and administrators of their

obligations.

However, this dissertation also points to some potential limits of the introduction of Foucauldian theory in the Sudanese context. Indeed, the history of governmentality Foucault attempted to develop did not claim to be universal or to be directly transferable to non-European contexts. It depended on a genealogy of modes of power that distinguished several overlapping phases from sovereign power to biopolitics through disciplinarian power. There is no reason to believe that other regions adopted a similar trajectory. On the contrary, using Foucault's genealogical method reveals the singularity of Mahdist governmentality. A comparative approach, at the scale of the Sudanic belt, could lead to uncovering alternative trajectories, founded on the dense and continuous intellectual circulations that extended far beyond the confines of Nilotic Sudan. This raises tantalising questions, such as the influence of Sufism on dynamics of individuation, especially with regard to the formation of a political subject, or the formation of polities in the nineteenth century devoid of reference to a national community. In this respect, this dissertation aimed at unearthing a vernacular governmentality independent from European genealogy outlined by Foucault.

### *iii) The Centre Cannot Hold: Logics of Colonial Subjugation*

As mentioned above, one of the main criticisms that could be levelled against the idea that Mahdist governmentality was singular had its origin in comments by British officers like Wingate who considered that the millenarian regime's administration had simply mimicked the organisation founded during the Turkiyya. In that perspective, the disciplinary power it seemed to embody did not derive from the newly-gained influence of reformist Sufi brotherhoods and the mutations these institutions experienced in the nineteenth century, but from the imposition of colonial rule by Egypt. In other words, Mahdist governmentality would be the result of a millenarian graft on an exogenous mode of power.

The point here is not so much to challenge the undeniably syncretic nature of the Mahdist regime, but to underline the singularity of the mode of power it implemented. As such, this dissertation challenges Peter M. Holt's postulate that the formation of the Mahdist state was dependent on the development of a centralised administrative apparatus. The example of Eastern Sudan reveals much more nuanced perspectives. First, provinces were more autonomous than previously thought. As such, they played a role in shaping the way power was understood and exercised, even in the capital. To some extent, this echoes the argument offered by the historian Isa Blumi on the role of the peripheral regions of the Ottoman empire in impulsing transformation at the regional scale before seeing these modalities gradually adopted by the political centre and then

disseminated to other provinces in a constant movement of circulation<sup>55</sup>. Secondly, Mahdist power in Eastern Sudan bears a striking resemblance, in the way it dealt with the local populations, with both the Egyptian regime it ousted and the Condominium regime that succeeded it. Bijāwī populations were considered with suspicion, their allegiance called into question, and their movements closely monitored, to the extent that it could be assimilated to a colonial form of power. This raises the question of the generative dimension of the colonial context—as the management of alterity—with respect to statecraft and state modernisation.

All in all, this dissertation contributes to nuance narratives that saw in the imposition of a colonial order by European powers the main vector for the formation of modern states. It hints at other paths, alternative trajectories that were overwritten by imperial expansion.

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55 Isa BLUMI, *Foundations of Modernity: Human Agency and the Imperial State*, New York and Abingdon, Routledge, 2012.

## Introduction : un charpentier nommé Yūsuf Khaṭīb

« Bien avant l'apparition des cavaliers de la Mahdiyya, j'avais une femme émancipée nommée Mabrūka », écrit Yūsuf Khaṭīb dans une lettre qu'il envoie au célèbre *'āmil* du Soudan-Est, 'Uthmān b. Abū Bakr Diqna (c. 1840-1926), le vendredi 14 décembre 1888 (9 Rabī' II 1306), quelques jours avant que la dernière tentative de s'emparer du port de Sawākin, sur la mer Rouge, ne soit écrasée par les forces britanniques. Yūsuf avait probablement travaillé dans les tranchées creusées tout autour de la ville et connu, comme les *anṣār* (sing. *nāṣir*)<sup>1</sup>, les difficultés causées par plusieurs mois d'opérations militaires. Cela n'empêcha pas Yūsuf d'exprimer la plus pressante de ses préoccupations : « Après son émancipation, je l'ai épousée conformément à la *Sunna* de Dieu et de son Prophète. Elle est restée avec moi et m'a donné une fille nommée 'Azīza. Je les ai laissées, elle et sa fille, à Khartoum lorsque je me suis rendu à l'ouest<sup>2</sup> ». Il ne donne pas de détails sur les circonstances de son départ, mais indique seulement qu'il a rejoint Muḥammad Khālīd le « gourdin » (*Zuqal*) (d. 1903) qui avait été nommé par le Mahdī *amīr* général (*amīr 'umūm*) de la province du Dār Fūr en novembre 1883 (Muḥarram 1301) et avait immédiatement entrepris d'asseoir son autorité sur les principales villes de la région – Umm Shanqa, Dāra, Kābkābiyya et al-Fāshir –, mission qu'il acheva à la mi-janvier 1884 (mi-Rabī' I 1301)<sup>3</sup>. Selon toute vraisemblance, Yūsuf avait quitté Khartoum à un moment donné en 1885 (1302/3), après que la ville est tombée aux mains des mahdistes le 26 janvier 1885 (9 Rabī' II 1302), entraînant la mort de Charles G. « Chinese » Gordon (1833-1885) sur les marches du palais du gouverneur. Yūsuf ne l'a pas mentionné, mais il est très probable qu'il ait été mobilisé de force, comme ce fut le cas pour de nombreux Égyptiens (*awlād al-rīf*) (dont des Coptes) établis au Soudan nilotique<sup>4</sup>, en raison de leurs compétences particulières. En effet, dans sa lettre, Yūsuf se décrit comme un « charpentier d'artillerie (*najjār al-madāfi*)<sup>5</sup> ».

1 Avec le sens d'« assistant » ou d'« aide », ce terme était utilisé par les autorités mahdistes pour désigner ses propres combattants, en référence directe à l'islam primitif, lorsque cette désignation était habituelle pour les « assistants » médinois du Prophète. D'autres noms tels que *muhājirūn* signifiant « migrants » ou *darāwish* (sing. *darwish*) pour « derviches », utilisés pendant la première phase de la Mahdiyya, ont été abandonnés ou interdits. Cependant, *fuqarā'* (sing. *faqīr*) signifiant « pauvre » et, dans le contexte soudanais, membre d'une *ṭarīqa* soufie, est resté présent beaucoup plus longtemps. Voir Hassan Ahmad IBRAHIM, « Al-Anṣār (Soudan) », dans *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three*, Leiden et Boston, Brill, 2009 [en ligne].

2 NRO Mahdiyya 1/30/06, document n°1.

3 Rudolf C. SLATIN, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan: A Personal Narrative of Fighting and Serving the Dervishes. 1879-1895*, Londres, E. Arnold, 1896, p. 244-278 ; Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan (1881-1898): A Study of its Origins, Development and Overthrow*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 76 ; Mūsā al-Mubārak AL-ḤASAN, *Tārīkh Dār Fūr al-siyāsī, 1882-1895*, Khartoum, Khartoum University Press, 1970, p. 64-68.

4 Voir, par exemple, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (éd.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, Khartoum, Markaz Abū Salīm li-l-dirāsāt, 2004, lettre 199.

5 Lorsque 'Uthmān Diqna transfère la requête de Yūsuf Khaṭīb au Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi, lui demandant des instructions, il désigne son auteur comme un « charpentier en bois (*najjār khashab*) » alors que la réponse du Khalīfa le désigne comme un « spécialiste de l'artillerie (*awsṭa al-madāfi*) » (*Daftar 'Uthmān Diqna*, p. 230). Un an et demi plus tard, en juin 1890 (D. al-Qa'da 1307), la plupart des opérations militaires étant suspendues et le siège de Sawākin abandonné depuis longtemps, ses activités avaient pris une tournure plus civile et ses talents de charpentier étaient



Lorsqu'il retourne dans la vallée du Nil, vers 1886/7 (1304), la capitale de l'ancien gouvernement colonial égyptien a été entièrement abandonnée et le siège du nouveau pouvoir établi sur la rive opposée, à Umm Durmān, surnommé le « lieu saint (*al-buq' a al-sharīfa*) ». Malgré tous ses efforts, il ne put retrouver sa femme et sa fille « parmi ceux qui avaient quitté Khartoum », vraisemblablement en août 1886 (D. al-Ḥijja 1303) lorsque le Khalīfa 'Abdullāhī (1846-1899), successeur du Mahdī, ordonna à tous les habitants restants de quitter la ville et de se réinstaller à Umm Durmān<sup>6</sup>. Il les recherchait depuis lors.

La nouvelle capitale mahdiste se développant rapidement, il ne fait guère de doute que Yūsuf aurait pu y trouver du travail sur l'un des nombreux chantiers. Mais là encore, il décida ou fut contraint de partir et rejoignit un détachement (*sariyya*) en direction de Kasalā, peut-être avec le 'āmil du Soudan-Est lui-même qui se rendait à Umm Durmān en juillet/août 1887 (D. al-Qa'da 1304) pour assister au conseil des *umarā'* (sing. *amīr*)<sup>7</sup>. Avant de partir, il prend la précaution d'adresser une requête au Khalīfa au sujet de la disparition de sa femme et de sa fille, dans l'espoir d'obtenir de l'aide. Le chef mahdiste demanda oralement à Yūsuf (*amr shafāhī*) de l'avertir s'il les retrouvait. S'il est effectivement parti avec 'Uthmān Diqna, Yūsuf Khaṭīb ne peut être arrivé à Kasalā bien après septembre 1887 (D. al-Ḥijja 1304). Cela signifie qu'il a passé au moins six mois dans la plus grande ville du Soudan-Est. En effet, en mars 1888 (Rajab 1305), alors qu'il s'apprête à partir pour Tūkar – le siège des autorités provinciales mahdistes près du littoral de la mer Rouge – avec Muḥammad 'Uthmān Abū Qarja (d. 1916), il vit sa femme avec une personne de la bannière (*rāya*) de l'*umarā'* de 'Uthmān Diqna, Yūsuf w. Muḥammad al-Amīn w. al-Hindī. Cette personne lui dit qu'elle avait été confiée à ses soins par 'Awaḍ al-Karīm<sup>8</sup> qui s'était rendu à al-Qaḍārif. Ce dernier prétendait les avoir achetés au trésor, on peut le supposer, d'Umm Durmān.

La situation était sombre mais avant que Yūsuf ne parte pour Tūkar, il réussit à placer sa femme sous la tutelle du *qāḍī* de Kasalā. Il dut à nouveau attendre plusieurs mois avant de recevoir une lettre dudit 'Awaḍ al-Karīm qui déclarait qu'il était prêt à renoncer à sa propriété sur Mabrūka et 'Azīza. Cependant, la question n'était pas facile à régler. Yūsuf était occupé à des réparations d'artillerie et ne pouvait donc pas se rendre à Kasalā, mais il écrivit dans sa réponse : « Je ne peux pas laisser ma fille et sa mère comme la propriété [de quelqu'un] (*ghayr mumkin tark ibnatī wa ummahā mamlūkatīn*) ». Le nœud du problème est qu'il n'a pas été en mesure de fournir la preuve qu'ils étaient effectivement libres. Tout ce qu'il pouvait faire, c'était se référer à ses connaissances

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utilisés pour des travaux de construction (*'imāra*), comme cela a été mentionné lorsque le paiement de son salaire a été enregistré par le trésor (NRO Mahdiyya 5/06/29B, p. 43).

6 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, op. cit. p. 104.

7 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (éd.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, op. cit. lettres 4, 7 et 8.

8 Selon toute vraisemblance, 'Awaḍ al-Karīm Faḍl Allāh Kāfūt, l'un des principaux chefs militaires de l'armée mahdiste stationnée dans l'est du Soudan.

du temps où ils étaient à Khartoum, parmi lesquelles figuraient d'éminentes personnalités telles que 'Abd al-Qādir Salāfīn, l'ancien gouverneur de Dār Fūr, plus connu, avant sa conversion à l'islam, sous le nom de Rudolf Carl von Slatin (1857-1932). Il donne d'autres noms comme Muḥammad Sa'īd Islāmbūliya et Muḥammad Yūsuf Sa'īd al-Bannā<sup>9</sup> et insiste sur le fait que tous « connaissent la vérité sur son état [...] lorsque j'étais responsable d'elle à Khartoum (*muwakkal-hu 'alay-hā*) ». Il a ajouté que « d'autres la connaissent, et maintenant, ils sont présents sur le lieu saint ». Entre-temps, Yūsuf Khaṭīb souhaitait que sa famille lui soit envoyée de Kasalā avec l'aide de Ḥāmid 'Alī, l'*amīr* de la ville. Finalement, le 16 juin 1889 (16 Shawwāl 1306), le Khalīfa écrit à 'Uthmān Diqna pour « compenser les dommages » causés à Yūsuf Khaṭīb<sup>10</sup>. Deux mois plus tard, ils n'étaient toujours pas réunis, mais la décision du Khalīfa avait levé l'ambivalence juridique permettant au charpentier du camp mahdiste de Tūkar d'écrire à Abū Qarja qu'il souhaitait envoyer quelque chose à sa famille à Kasalā. Comme « [ses] mains sont vides », il a demandé s'il pouvait recevoir une avance sur son salaire mensuel<sup>11</sup>. »

Le nom du charpentier égyptien apparaît à plusieurs reprises dans les registres du trésor de Tūkar, d'avril 1889 (Sha'bān 1306) à fin 1890 (début 1308)<sup>12</sup>. Sa famille lui manquait peut-être, mais il n'était pas seul. En avril 1889 (Sha'bān 1306), lorsque les administrateurs du trésor enregistrent pour la première fois son allocation en grains, ils notent qu'il est accompagné de huit personnes à charge (*'awā'il*)<sup>13</sup>. Le 30 juin 1889 (1<sup>st</sup> D. al-Qa'da 1306), le secrétaire du trésor modifie son allocation de 20 qa. à 1 ardabb<sup>14</sup>. La raison n'est pas mentionnée mais le grain supplémentaire correspond à ce qui serait accordé pour deux individus. Cette décision pourrait-elle être le résultat de la décision du Khalīfa de rendre Mabrukā et 'Azīza à Yūsuf prise deux semaines

9 Muḥammad Yūsuf Sa'īd al-Bannā n'a pu être identifié avec certitude, mais Muḥammad Sa'īd Islāmbūliya était un marchand chrétien syrien bien connu d'al-Ubayyid. Lorsque les mahdistes commencèrent le siège de la ville, il les rejoignit, ainsi que la plupart des habitants de la ville. Il joue un rôle important dans sa reddition finale le 19 janvier 1883 (10 Rabī' I 1300). Plus tard, Yūsuf Mīkhā'il mentionne que des prisonniers chrétiens lui ont été confiés (Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK (ed.), *Mudhakkirāt Yūsuf Mīkhā'il: al-Turkiyya wa-l-Mahdiyya wa-l-hukm al-thunā'ī fī al-Sūdān*, Khartoum, Markaz 'Abd al-Karīm Mīrghānī al-thaqāfī, 2017, p. 83.) et il est nommé par le Mahdī *muqaddam* des chrétiens (Richard L. HILL, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, Londres, Frank Cass & Co, 1967, p. 187.). Son vrai nom était George (Jūrjī) Iṣṭambūliya. Ces contacts tendent à indiquer que Yūsuf Khaṭīb était lui-même copte.

10 *Daftar 'Uthmān Diqna*, p. 230.

11 NRO Mahdiyya 5/11/45, document n°36.

12 Les registres et reçus pour le paiement de son salaire mensuel de 10 r. *qūshlī* et de l'allocation d'un demi *ardabb* pour Sha'bān à D. al-Ḥijja 1306 (avril à août 1889) (NRO Mahdiyya 5/03/11, p. 36, et Mahdiyya 5/14/49, doc. 61) ainsi que Muḥarram (septembre 1889) (NRO Mahdiyya 2/07/01, doc. 66) et D. al-Qa'da 1307 (NRO Mahdiyya 5/06/29B, p. 43) ont été conservés. Il est également mentionné parmi les serviteurs du trésor qui ont reçu collectivement 3 ard. de grain à la fin de Ṣafār 1307 (octobre 1889) (NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/65). La dernière occurrence de son nom dans les archives disponibles apparaît dans une lettre écrite par Muḥammad 'Uthmān Abū Qarja dans laquelle ce dernier demande que la dette de 18 r. de Yūsuf Khaṭīb envers un marchand nommé 'Abd al-Khālīq 'Abd al-Qādir soit remboursée par le trésor (NRO Mahdiyya 5/19/63, doc. 93).

13 Le terme utilisé dans les archives mahdistes est *'ā'ila*. Souvent traduit par « famille », il désigne dans ce contexte l'ensemble du foyer, y compris les femmes, les enfants et les esclaves.

14 NRO Mahdiyya 5/02/06, p. 28.

avant<sup>15</sup> ?

Cette pétition montre un monde en ébullition, un monde où les individus, les espaces et les catégories sont rapidement transformés par le mouvement millénariste et *jihādī* initié par Muḥammad Aḥmad (1840-1885) en 1881 (1298) et le régime qu'il a fondé, la Mahdiyya, jusqu'à son renversement en 1898 (1316). À son retour de Dār Fūr, non seulement Yūsuf Khaṭīb ne retrouve pas sa femme et son enfant, mais la ville même où ils avaient vécu a été entièrement évacuée, pour qu'une nouvelle capitale gigantesque voie le jour sur la rive opposée du Nil. En quelques années, ce charpentier s'est probablement converti à l'islam et a parcouru plus de 2 000 km, depuis la région la plus occidentale où s'est établi le pouvoir mahdiste, jusqu'à ses limites orientales, la frontière avec l'Abyssinie et le littoral de la mer Rouge. En l'espace de dix-huit ans, la Mahdiyya a bouleversé la vie de nombreuses personnes, déplaçant des groupes à travers de vastes régions, mobilisant des personnes issues de communautés radicalement différentes et tentant de les faire combattre côte à côte pour le *jihād*. En décembre 1888 (Rabī' II 1306), cinq ans à peine après la fondation du régime mahdiste, un copte égyptien pouvait demander à un marchand d'origine bijāwī, après avoir suivi un Dunqulāwī au Soudan-Est, de plaider sa cause auprès d'un membre de la Baqqāra Ta'ā'īsha, afin de prouver à un Shukriyya l'émancipation de sa femme - elle-même très probablement originaire des régions méridionales de la vallée du haut Nil - et de sa fille, en s'appuyant, entre autres, sur le témoignage d'un ancien officier austro-hongrois d'origine juive. Quel sens Yūsuf donne-t-il à ces interactions ? Quelles représentations les ont nourries ? Comment comprenait-il les événements qui les avaient façonnées ?

Répondre à ces questions nécessite tout d'abord de développer une réflexion sur les limites de l'espace dans lequel s'est déroulé le voyage de Yūsuf Khaṭīb. Ce sera l'objet de la section suivante. Si les mobilités observées pendant la Mahdiyya sont inédites par leur intensité et leur ampleur, elles sont profondément liées aux dynamiques qui ont émergé à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, lorsque le Soudan nilotique a connu d'importants mouvements de population, l'émergence de puissants centres urbains et de profonds changements socio-économiques structurels. La deuxième partie retrace ces transformations pour montrer que la Mahdiyya n'a pas représenté une rupture avec ces tendances plus larges mais, au contraire, leur accélération soudaine et brutale. L'objectif sous-jacent de la première partie est d'ancrer l'histoire du mouvement mahdiste dans un contexte proprement soudanais. En effet, la seconde partie présentera un bref aperçu de son historiographie afin de démontrer que la Mahdiyya a longtemps été étudiée comme une forme d'*hapax* historique, une parenthèse singulière tant sur le plan interne, au regard de l'histoire soudanaise, que sur le plan externe, au regard de l'histoire des entités voisines. Jusqu'à récemment, ce parti pris a contribué à l'élaboration du récit dominant présenté dans la deuxième section. L'accent mis sur les opérations

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15 C'est probable, mais la question est d'autant plus obscure que Yūsuf Khaṭīb n'a reçu que 12 qa. pour chacun de ces mois. Là encore, aucune raison n'est donnée pour expliquer cette divergence.

militaires et les développements politiques laisse de côté plusieurs questions fondamentales concernant les dynamiques de mobilisation, la nature de l'engagement mahdiste et les ambiguïtés du processus de construction de l'État. La troisième et dernière section soutiendra que l'étude de la Mahdiyya dans le contexte de sa mise en œuvre au Soudan-Est, c'est-à-dire à partir de l'une de ses marges, apporte un nouvel éclairage à cette histoire.

## Situer le Soudan nilotique dans l'espace et le temps

### *A) Ambivalence spatiale : le Soudan nilotique est-il en Afrique ?*

Le 23 septembre 1964, l'historien britannique Paul Hair (1926-2001) a donné une brève conférence devant la Société historique de l'Université de Khartoum, dans laquelle il a proposé de répondre à une question stimulante : « Dans quelle mesure l'histoire du Soudan est-elle africaine ? Hair a souligné la tendance croissante à « l'africanisation de l'histoire du Soudan » qu'il a opposée à la « vision du Nord » qui traite le Soudan comme « une région périphérique de diverses civilisations méditerranéennes et du Moyen-Orient » et explique la majeure partie de l'histoire du Soudan par des interventions extérieures telles que « l'invasion arabe ». Selon lui, cette « approche unidirectionnelle » s'explique par le fait qu'« à l'époque coloniale, le Soudan a été considéré comme un département du Moyen-Orient<sup>16</sup> ». Les considérations politiques égyptiennes tendaient à minimiser la distance entre la haute et la basse vallée du Nil pour favoriser une perspective basée sur le trope génératif de « l'unité de la vallée du Nil (*waḥdat wādī al-Nīl*) ». L'exagération de l'importance de l'axe du Nil était principalement une construction politique et le produit d'un discours qui a commencé à émerger au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et qui a été repris plus tard par les nationalistes égyptiens. À l'inverse, l'établissement d'une frontière coloniale entre le Soudan et le Tchad séparant les empires britannique et français a eu pour conséquence la déconnexion partielle des historiographies de ces deux territoires.

Au-delà du poids de ces représentations coloniales sur l'historiographie soudanaise, l'unification territoriale ultérieure du Soudan sous le régime du condominium après l'occupation britannique de Dār Fūr en 1916 (1334/5) constitue un second obstacle. Envisager le Soudan nilotique comme une entité spatiale unique est trompeur et projeter les frontières du Soudan sur cet espace ne peut que renforcer la vision téléologique de la formation d'une politique nationale soudanaise comme un destin nécessaire. Il faut au contraire prendre en compte l'extrême diversité des configurations locales et régionales sur une vaste échelle. Rappelons que le Soudan dans ses frontières d'avant 2011 couvrait à peu près la même superficie que l'Europe occidentale ou un tiers

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16 Paul E. H. HAIR, « How African is the History of the Sudan », *Sudan Society*, 1969, p. 39-58.

des Etats-Unis. Cet immense territoire était (et est toujours) caractérisé par une grande diversité linguistique. Alors que certaines régions ont adopté l'arabe, d'autres ont conservé l'usage d'une langue plus localisée comme langue vernaculaire, pour des raisons qui font encore l'objet de débats<sup>17</sup>.

Si l'on fait abstraction des nombreux contacts et interconnexions avec les territoires adjacents, la cohésion du territoire du Soudan nilotique à l'époque moderne repose sur des discontinuités spatiales évidentes. La première de ces lignes de séparation se situait au nord du territoire soudanais, près de l'actuelle frontière avec l'Égypte. En effet, lorsque les troupes du gouverneur ottoman Mehmet Ali (r. 1805-1848) pénétrèrent en Haute Nubie en 1820 (1235/6), la dernière fois qu'une autorité basée en Égypte avait réussi à s'imposer pendant une période significative au-delà des trois cataractes septentrionales remontait à plus de deux mille ans avant<sup>18</sup>. Ces barrières consécutives sur le Nil ont gravement entravé les circulations sur le fleuve (voir fig. 0.1). En outre, en raison de la nature rocheuse du terrain près de la deuxième cataracte - la plus difficile des trois à traverser<sup>19</sup>, une caractéristique qui lui a valu son nom de « ventre de pierre (*Baṭn al-ḥajar*)<sup>20</sup> », l'accès à l'eau elle-même, une denrée cruciale dans cet environnement, pouvait être difficile. Le rétrécissement des terres arables signifiait également que les ressources étaient rares et les établissements humains peu nombreux, des facteurs qui, réunis, rendaient la circulation sur le Nil ou sur ses rives difficile. En conséquence, la portion du Nil comprise entre Arqū et Wādī Ḥalfā formait un goulot d'étranglement nubien, tout à fait invisible sur les cartes, qui a eu des conséquences importantes sur l'histoire du Soudan à *long terme*. D'une part, c'est dans cette région que l'expansion de l'islam au VII<sup>e</sup> siècle a été brusquement stoppée. Avec la signature du fameux *Baqt* en 652 (31/2), les conquérants arabes sont repoussés et le message du Prophète Muḥammad attendra un demi-millénaire avant de gagner un nombre significatif d'adeptes dans le Soudan nilotique. Les Ottomans qui ont conquis l'Égypte au début du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle n'ont guère mieux réussi lorsqu'ils ont tenté de poursuivre leur avancée dans le territoire funj<sup>21</sup>. Il existe des traces incertaines d'une première poussée en 1555 (962/3) qui a été interrompue par une mutinerie parmi les troupes. L'opposition la plus méridionale des Ottomans s'établit à Ibrīm, en aval de la deuxième cataracte, où

17 Rex S. O'FAHEY, « Islamic Hegemonies in the Sudan: Sufism, Mahdism and Islamism », dans Louis Brenner (ed.), *Muslim identity and social change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, London, Hurst & Company, 1993, p. 22.

18 En effet, de 1450 à 850 avant notre ère, les pharaons égyptiens ont imposé leur domination sur la Nubie. La vallée du Nil a de nouveau été brièvement unifiée entre 750 et 650 avant notre ère, cette fois sous le règne des pharaons nubiens de la XXV<sup>e</sup> dynastie. Voir Olivier CABON *et al.*, *Histoire et civilisations du Soudan : de la préhistoire à nos jours*, Paris, Soleb, 2017, p. 85-114 ; 133-155.

19 Na'ūm SHUQAYR, *Géographie du Soudan*, traduit par Vivianne YAGI, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2012, p. 24.

20 Peter M. HOLT et Martin W. DALY, *A History of the Sudan: From the Coming of Islam to the Present Day*, Londres, Routledge, 2011, p. 15.

21 Le sultanat de Funj a été fondé au début du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle et renversé par les Ottomans égyptiens en 1821. L'ouvrage le plus important sur ce sujet reste *The Heroic Age in Sinnār* de Jay Spaulding, Trenton et Asmara, Red Sea Press, 2007.

une forteresse est construite entre 1555 et 1570 (977/8). Une autre avancée a peut-être été réalisée sans résultats clairs en 1577 (984/5), mais la véritable avancée a eu lieu en 1585 (992/3) lorsqu'ils ont finalement atteint la troisième cataracte. Ils n'ont pas réussi à progresser au-delà de ce point et, peu après, ont été contraints de se retirer, un résultat souvent attribué à l'opposition réussie des 'Abdallāb - la principale entité au nord du confluent des deux Nil au début de la période moderne – qui ont conservé la tradition d'une victoire majeure à Ḥannik, au nord de Dunqulā<sup>22</sup>.

Peu de choses ont changé au cours des trois siècles suivants. Lorsque Mehmet Ali (1769-1849) décida d'envahir le Soudan nilotique en 1820 (1235/6), à la recherche d'or et d'esclaves, l'expédition égyptienne se heurta à d'immenses difficultés<sup>23</sup>, même si un élan politique et économique suffisant pouvait permettre de surmonter ces obstacles. Parties en septembre de Wādī Ḥalfā, les troupes égyptiennes parvinrent à dépasser le goulet d'étranglement nubien et à vaincre la Shāyqiyya<sup>24</sup>, la communauté qui contrôlait le territoire situé entre les deux coudes du Nil, pour atteindre Sinnār, la capitale du sultanat de Funj, avec une relative facilité à la fin du mois d'août 1821. En moins d'un an, ils ont imposé leur autorité sur une portion de la vallée du haut Nil longue de plus de mille kilomètres. Au même moment, le 20 août 1821, une autre colonne se dirigeant vers l'ouest avait atteint al-Ubayyīd et arraché le contrôle de Kurdufān au sultan de Fūr<sup>25</sup>. Mais la poursuite de l'expansion a été considérablement ralentie.

Les efforts militaires ultérieurs ont été marqués par les mêmes problèmes. L'expédition de 1884-1885 (1301-1302) menée par l'adjudant général Wolseley (1833-1913) pour délivrer Khartoum du siège imposé par les troupes mahdistes est paralysée par des problèmes logistiques. Deux navires à vapeur, une équipe de reconnaissance, ont finalement atteint la ville le 28 janvier 1885 (11 Rabī' II 1302), deux jours après qu'elle a été prise d'assaut par les *anṣār* et que Charles G. Gordon ait été tué, une mort « héroïque » qui a fondé l'un des mythes impériaux les plus puissants<sup>26</sup>. L'opinion publique britannique s'est ensuite émue des retards de cette opération sans tenir compte du fait qu'en réalité, le gros des troupes se trouvait toujours à des centaines de kilomètres de Khartoum. Ils étaient en retard de plusieurs semaines, voire de plusieurs mois, et non de quelques jours.

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22 Andrew C. S. PEACOCK, « The Ottomans and the Funj Sultanate in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries », *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 2012, vol. 75, no. 1, p. 93 ; 96.

23 *Ibid*, p. 97.

24 Aux batailles de Kūrtī le 4 novembre 1820 et de Jabal Daiqa le 2 décembre 1820.

25 Richard L. HILL, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 8-13.

26 Douglas H. JOHNSON, « The Death of Gordon: A Victorian Myth », *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 1982, vol. 10, n°3, p. 285-310 ; John M. MACKENZIE, « Heroic Myths of Empire », in John M. MacKenzie (ed.), *Popular Imperialism and the Military, 1850-1950*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1992, p. 125-132 ; Stephanie LAFFER, *Gordon's Ghosts: British Major-General Charles George Gordon and His Legacies, 1885-1960*, thèse de doctorat, Florida State University, 2010 ; Berny SÈBE, *Heroic Imperialists in Africa: The Promotion of British and French Colonial Heroes, 1870-1939*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015.

Inversement, les mouvements du sud vers le nord ont été entravés par les mêmes problèmes. La plus grande opération militaire organisée par l'État mahdiste dans le cadre de son expansion *jihādī*, sous le commandement du célèbre *amīr* ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Nujūmī (m. 1889), rencontra d'immenses difficultés pour ravitailler les 13 000 hommes et femmes qui composaient les troupes parvenues à la frontière égyptienne. Elle s'effondre lentement sous son propre poids avant d'être écrasée par une force anglo-égyptienne lors de la bataille de Tūshkī le 3 août 1889 (5 D. al-Ḥijja 1306)<sup>27</sup>. Malgré ce dernier succès militaire, les vainqueurs n'ont guère les moyens de pousser leur avantage.

Soixante-dix ans après l'expédition de Mehmet Ali, traverser la région et atteindre l'extrémité du premier coude du Nil (du nord au sud) restait un défi de taille. Les investissements réalisés par le Sirdar<sup>28</sup> Herbert H. Kitchener (1850-1916) lors de la première campagne de « reconquête<sup>29</sup> » du Soudan en 1896-1897 (1313-1314) en ont donné la mesure. En effet, il a supervisé la pose de centaines de kilomètres de voies ferrées – le Sudan Military Railway (SMR) – pour transporter les 24 000 hommes mobilisés pour la poussée finale contre Umm Durmān<sup>30</sup>. Les contemporains se sont émerveillés de l'exploit technologique que cela représentait, mais aucun n'a commenté le fait que la restauration d'une unité du Nil largement mythique avait nécessité l'engagement d'énormes ressources et d'une ingénierie prométhéenne.

Ces contraintes géographiques ont limité le rôle de la vallée du Nil en tant qu'axe de circulation entre les entités politiques soudanaises et leur voisin du nord. Par conséquent, au début de l'époque moderne, les principales routes commerciales contournaient la zone située entre la troisième et la première cataracte à l'ouest et à l'est. Dans le premier cas, les liaisons étaient assurées par la célèbre route des quarante jours (*darb al-‘arba‘īn*) qui reliait le centre commercial de Kubbayh à Dār Fūr, près de la capitale du sultanat, al-Fāshir, à Aṣyūt dans le *ṣa‘īd* égyptien.

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27 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.* p. 178-183.

28 Le chef de l'armée égyptienne.

29 Bien que ce terme soit encore couramment utilisé, comme dans l'ouvrage édité par Edward M. Spiers, *Sudan: The Reconquest Reappraised* (Londres, Frank Cass & Co., 1998), il devrait être évité en raison de sa forte relation avec le discours impérial britannique, puisqu'il postule la légitimité de la domination coloniale égyptienne dans la région.

30 D'après les calculs dérivés de l'expérience de la campagne ratée de 1884-1885 (1301-1302), le déplacement d'un corps de soldats aussi important, ainsi que de l'artillerie et de l'équipement, aurait nécessité le nombre stupéfiant de 80 000 chameaux (John W. FORTESCUE, *The Royal Army Service Corps, A History of Transport and Supply in the British Army*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1930, vol. 1, p. 205). Le fait qu'une force aussi importante ait été jugée nécessaire pour renverser un régime régulièrement présenté par les officiers britanniques comme étant sur le point de s'effondrer témoigne des angoisses coloniales. Loin du récit triomphant présenté dans la plupart des comptes rendus, on ne saurait trop insister sur le niveau de tension, de crainte et de doute éprouvé par Kitchener au fur et à mesure que la campagne se déroulait. Une puissance de feu écrasante rendait l'issue beaucoup plus prévisible qu'en 1884-1885, mais elle augmentait également les enjeux en cas d'échec, si jamais les troupes britanniques devaient subir un contrecoup sur le champ de bataille. Pour limiter ce risque, Kitchener était prêt à engager des ressources considérables pour construire une ligne traversant le désert de Nubie de Wādī Ḥalfā à Abū Ḥamad (Edward M. SPIERS, « The Sudan Military Railway », in *Engines for Empire: The Victorian Army and its Use of Railways*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015, p. 96-114).

D'autres réseaux commerciaux régionaux, notamment à partir de Kurdufān, convergeaient également vers cette voie. Elle constituait un axe d'échange vital pour les marchandises en provenance des régions sahéliennes. Du côté oriental, une autre voie commerciale majeure reliait Barbar à Abū Ḥamad, d'où les marchands quittaient le Nil pour traverser le désert de Nubie et atteindre Kūruskū, au sud d'Aṣwān (voir fig. 0.1)<sup>31</sup>. En outre, les trois cataractes méridionales ont également contribué, quoique dans une moindre mesure, à la fragmentation de la vallée du haut Nil en entravant la circulation fluviale. Ce phénomène a été aggravé par la position particulière des coudes du Nil à Abū Ḥamad et al-Dabba. Plus en amont, au-delà du confluent, le Nil Bleu et le Nil Blanc suivaient des voies plus régulières et formaient donc des schémas de mobilité plus simples que dans le nord. Cependant, dans le cas du Nil Bleu, ceux qui souhaitaient voyager en amont se heurtaient à un obstacle important lorsqu'ils atteignaient les contreforts du grand plateau abyssin, à l'est de Fāzūghlī. Sur le Nil Blanc, il n'y avait pas de montagnes pour barrer le chemin, mais un obstacle encore plus indomptable : le Sudd. Sur une superficie qui peut s'étendre sur plus de 100 000 km<sup>2</sup> pendant la saison des pluies, c'est l'une des plus grandes zones humides du monde. Son nom n'a pas besoin d'être longuement interprété puisqu'il signifie simplement « barrière » en arabe. Malgré de puissantes incitations économiques, il a fallu attendre deux décennies pour que le Sudd soit ouvert aux intérêts commerciaux dans les années 1840<sup>32</sup>, et deux autres décennies pour que l'on puisse dire que la région a été incorporée au Soudan égyptien. Cependant, le contrôle des héritiers sur les régions méridionales était pour le moins fragile, comme ce fut le cas pour les régimes ultérieurs, y compris le régime mahdiste.

Contrairement à la fragmentation de l'axe nord-sud, les circulations d'ouest en est (et inversement) rencontrent peu d'obstacles de l'ampleur décrite ci-dessus, comme le montrent les voyages de Yūsuf Khaṭīb. Si les progrès sont lents et les voyages toujours périlleux, les pèlerins des sultanats occidentaux de Borno, Waddāy et Sokoto, mais aussi des territoires situés au-delà, jusqu'à la vallée du fleuve Sénégal, peuvent espérer, avec du temps et de la chance, accomplir le *ḥajj* à La Mecque. Ils bénéficiaient au Soudan nilotique d'un chapelet d'agglomérations urbaines comme al-Fāshir et al-Ubayyīd situées au sud de la latitude de Khartoum, ligne sous laquelle les précipitations moyennes augmentaient régulièrement, ce qui rendait l'accès à l'eau moins aléatoire et les déplacements en caravane un peu plus sûrs. À l'est, son déplacement n'est entravé que par le plateau abyssin qui réoriente les circulations vers le littoral soudanais de la mer Rouge. Les tentatives de pénétration de ce territoire par les Égyptiens, les Mahdistes<sup>33</sup> et plus tard les Italiens au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle

31 Intisar Soghayrun ELZEIN, *Trade and Wadis System(s) in Muslim Sudan*, Kampala, Fountain Publishers, 2010, p. 68-77.

32 Gondokoro, près de Juba, l'actuelle capitale du Sud-Soudan, est atteint en 1841 par une flotte égyptienne dirigée par Salīm Qapūdān. Voir Richard L. HILL, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, *op. cit.* p. 68-70.

33 Iris SERI-HERSCH, « 'Transborder' Exchanges of People, Things, and Representations: Revisiting the Conflict



n'ont eu qu'un succès limité. Les contacts entre les communautés des zones frontalières étaient denses, mais le changement rapide de topographie se traduisait néanmoins par des sphères d'influence distinctes. Les pèlerins et les commerçants pouvaient soit tenter de rejoindre Maṣawwa', soit se diriger vers le nord-est et suivre les contreforts du plateau à travers le *khūr* Baraka pour rejoindre le littoral et le port de Sawākin où ils pouvaient s'embarquer pour Jidda. L'importance de cette connexion occidentale pour l'histoire du Soudan nilotique n'a pas échappé aux chercheurs, notamment en ce qui concerne l'installation des populations peules<sup>34</sup> au Soudan au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle<sup>35</sup>.

À l'échelle régionale, les territoires soudanais sont traversés par des axes de circulation empruntés par les nomades, les marchands et les pèlerins. Les cartes du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle ne rendent qu'imparfaitement les interconnexions entre le terrain et la manière dont il structure les déplacements. Les seuls affluents du Nil au nord de Khartoum (la rivière 'Aṭbara et ses principaux affluents, le Rahad et le Dindir), les *widyān* (sing. *wādī*), rivières saisonnières d'une grande variété d'intensité, et les *khayrān* (sing. *khūr*), dépressions locales, sous-tendaient la structure de ces réseaux, car ils marquaient clairement l'espace et réduisaient les risques de navigation, et parce qu'en saison sèche, l'eau résiduelle stagnait dans les souterrains. Une certaine confiance pouvait être accordée aux puits pérennes creusés à ces endroits. Les villes et leurs marchés étaient les principaux nœuds de ces réseaux. Sur le littoral de la mer Rouge, les ports étaient également des positions importantes. Les topographies informaient les circulations.

Au niveau local, les espaces sont également fortement différenciés et organisés selon des schémas complexes liés aux droits afférents à leur propriété, aux modalités de leur exploitation économique et aux représentations qui y sont projetées. L'organisation du contrôle foncier diffère entre les régions fluviales où l'accès au Nil représente le principal facteur de gestion des terres, et d'autres espaces tels que les terres ouvertes du Dār Fūr, le Khayrān<sup>36</sup> de Kurdufān ou les parcelles de la Jazīra qui sont structurés par des impératifs différents. Le *khalā*, l'« espace vide », et le *jabal*, la montagne, véhiculaient de puissantes représentations de retrait des normes étatiques. Cet imaginaire était puissant. Cela ne signifie pas, bien sûr, qu'ils étaient anomiques.

Par conséquent, une histoire de la Mahdiyya doit nécessairement être multi-scalaire, c'est-à-dire attachée à adopter différentes hypothèses quant aux conditions d'observation, du micro au macro, selon l'approche énoncée par Jacques Revel<sup>37</sup>. Elle doit être analysée en tenant compte des

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Between Mahdist Sudan and Christian Ethiopia, 1885-1889 », *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 2010, vol. 43, n°1, p. 1-26 ; Haggai ERLICH, « Ethiopia and the Mahdiyya - You Call Me a Chicken ? », *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 2007, vol. 40, n°1/2, p. 219-249.

34 Ces populations sont connues au Soudan sous le nom de Fallāta (du mot Kanuri pour Fulani) mais aussi sous le nom de Takrūr (pl. Takārir).

35 Voir, par exemple, Christian Bawa YAMBA, *Permanent Pilgrims: The Role of Pilgrimage in the Lives of West African Muslims in Sudan*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1995.

36 Écrit ici avec une majuscule pour désigner une région particulière du Kurdufān.

37 Jacques REVEL (ed.), *Jeux d'échelles : la micro-analyse à l'expérience*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996.

considérations issues du contexte régional et de la configuration particulière de l'affirmation de l'autorité mahdiste dans ce cadre. Elle doit être analysée en tenant compte des considérations issues du contexte régional et de la configuration particulière de l'affirmation de l'autorité mahdiste dans ce cadre. L'un des enjeux de l'écriture de l'histoire du Soudan nilotique au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle est de tenir compte de la cohésion de ce territoire tout en évitant l'écueil téléologique qui consisterait à considérer la formation des entités politiques qui ont émergé au cours de cette période comme les blocs fondateurs des États soudanais contemporains. Les territoires au sein desquels Yūsuf Khaṭīb a circulé étaient des constructions instables, leurs frontières s'étendant et se contractant rapidement et de nouveaux axes étant constamment tracés en relation directe avec les formidables changements et bouleversements socio-économiques dont cette région a été le témoin au cours d'un long XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. C'est l'objet du développement qui suit.

## ***B) Transformations du Soudan nilotique dans la longue durée : les origines du mouvement mahdiste***

### *i) Crises politiques et socio-économiques au Soudan nilotique au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*

Au Soudan nilotique, le XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle commence en 1762 lorsque le sultan Badi IV fut déposé par l'un de ses généraux, Muḥammad Abū Likaylik, qui s'était hissé au premier rang grâce à ses victoires en Kurdufān contre le sultanat de Fūr<sup>38</sup>. Le nouveau régime, la régence de Hamaj (1762-1821), fut dès le début entaché d'instabilité et les dernières décennies du sultanat funj furent marquées par des troubles politiques. Néanmoins, les Hamaj avaient remarqué les tensions qui affectaient les communautés du Soudan nilotique et tentèrent de trouver les moyens de concilier l'ordre social qui émergeait au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle avec des institutions de pouvoir adaptées<sup>39</sup>.

Au cours du siècle dernier, l'intensification des contacts avec le monde extérieur et le développement des relations commerciales à longue distance ont surtout profité aux sultans funj. Cependant, leur monopole est de plus en plus contesté par une classe marchande naissante. Nobles et roturiers se regroupent dans des villes dont le nombre décuple, passant de deux à une vingtaine, entre 1700 et 1820<sup>40</sup>. Ils cherchent à commercer sans être gênés par les règles du sultanat, tout en fondant un nouveau mode de vie urbain distinctif, en rupture avec l'organisation féodale des Funj.

Dans le même temps, les conceptions juridiques islamiques ont commencé à pénétrer les couches inférieures des sociétés nilotiques du Soudan grâce à la diffusion de manuels de *fiqh*. Les

38 Au début du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, Kurdufān était le champ de bataille central entre les deux principaux sultanats du Soudan nilotique.

39 Jay L. SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, *op. cit.* p. 123 ; 167-176 ; Peter M. HOLT et Martin W. DALY, *A History of the Sudan*, *op. cit.* p. 29-31.

40 El-Sayed EL-BUSHRA, « Towns in the Sudan in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries », *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1971, vol. 52, p. 63-70.

« principes des Arabes », selon l'expression de Jay Spaulding, allaient changer radicalement la configuration socio-économique de ces populations tout en étant l'un des principaux vecteurs de la disparition du sultanat Funj. Les principaux acteurs de ces mouvements sont les saints hommes (sing. *faqih* pl. *fuqahā* /*fuqarā*) qui s'installent dans la région et fondent des centres d'érudition soufis (*khalwā* pl. *khalāwī*/*khalwāt*) le long de la rivière<sup>41</sup>. D'abord cooptés par le sultan qui voyait en eux des alliés contre l'influence des familles nobles locales, ces saints hommes obtiennent des concessions sur des domaines et des exemptions d'impôts. Leur autorité sur leurs disciples s'est progressivement étendue à l'ensemble des communautés voisines au fur et à mesure que leur pouvoir économique s'accroissait, d'autant plus qu'ils devenaient responsables de la collecte de la *zakāt* et de la *fiṭra*, deux des principaux impôts canoniques islamiques<sup>42</sup>, et qu'ils se lançaient dans le commerce, reproduisant ainsi les dynamiques à l'œuvre dans les villes. Grâce aux bénéfices qu'ils tirent de ces ressources, ils commencent à consolider leur emprise sur des domaines de plus en plus vastes. Les affaires judiciaires sont également devenues l'une de leurs prérogatives, contribuant ainsi à la diffusion des normes islamiques dans certains aspects de la vie quotidienne des communautés riveraines, tels que les mariages<sup>43</sup>. Ces saints hommes ont été les architectes d'une profonde restructuration de ces sociétés.

Dans les deux cas, le développement de ces enclaves urbaines et rurales a contribué à l'affaiblissement de la structure féodale du sultanat Funj par la formation de communautés ayant acquis une certaine autonomie par rapport aux seigneurs et, en fin de compte, par rapport au sultan lui-même. Les régents hamaj étaient conscients de ces transformations et des tensions qui en découlaient. Ils ont donc tenté de favoriser l'intégration de cette nouvelle classe au sein du régime, peut-être pour trouver des alliés afin de renforcer leur propre légitimité fragile. Un saint homme a été nommé *wazīr* et le tribunal a été ouvert à d'autres personnes, tandis que leur rôle local de juges et de collecteurs d'impôts s'est vu conférer un statut officiel. Quant aux commerçants, ils furent autorisés à diriger leurs efforts vers les provinces méridionales du Nil Bleu qui avaient été relativement épargnées par les transformations sociales observées dans le nord<sup>44</sup>. Mais les Hamaj n'ont pas pris en compte le fait que les normes islamiques diffusées au sein des sociétés du Soudan nilotique savaient la nature des relations féodales qui constituaient le tissu même du sultanat. L'adoption de successions patrilinéaires dans les familles nobles a entraîné d'intenses conflits entre les prétendants tout en privant le sultanat de son outil le plus puissant pour le contrôle des seigneurs

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41 Neil MCHUGH, *Holy men of the Blue Nile: The Making of an Arab-Islamic Community in the Nilotic Sudan, 1500-1850*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1994.

42 Voir chapitre 4.

43 Jay L. SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār op. cit.* p. 87-110.

44 *Ibid*, p. 123-126.

de la guerre régionaux<sup>45</sup>.

L'occupation de la haute vallée du Nil par les troupes de Muḥammad 'Alī en 1821 a été facilitée par le morcellement territorial observé dans le sultanat Funj depuis plusieurs décennies. À cet égard, la fin du régime Funj n'a pas constitué un tournant pour les dynamiques socio-économiques de la région. Au contraire, les politiques adoptées par les nouveaux maîtres ont accéléré des changements déjà bien engagés. Les plus significatifs de ces changements pour les communautés riveraines sont liés à l'évolution brutale du statut de la terre qui se situe à la charnière entre les effets de la diffusion des normes islamiques et la formation d'une économie bourgeoise. À l'origine, toutes les terres situées sur les rives du Nil étaient la propriété des sultans funj qui pouvaient décider de leur affectation en accordant des domaines à des familles nobles. L'exploitation des terres était essentiellement organisée par les communautés et si des droits de propriété étaient reconnus, ils étaient limités à l'usufruit. La terre elle-même ne pouvait être revendiquée. Cette situation change rapidement au cours du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Le capital accumulé par la classe marchande émergente n'avait que peu, voire pas du tout, de possibilités de réinvestissement en dehors de la possession de terres, une denrée précieuse dans cet environnement. Par coïncidence, les normes islamiques défendues par les saints hommes ont contribué à définir un cadre pour la marchandisation de la terre et à donner un fondement juridique à leurs revendications.

Mais pour que des terres soient achetées, il faut qu'elles soient vendues. Plusieurs facteurs ont contribué à faciliter les transferts de terres. Tout d'abord, le respect accru des règles islamiques en matière d'héritage, notamment en ce qui concerne le partage égal entre les héritiers mâles, a probablement été la principale cause de la spectaculaire fragmentation de la propriété foncière. Au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, lorsque les officiers coloniaux britanniques ont tenté d'établir des registres fonciers<sup>46</sup>, des revendications de propriété sur des parcelles minuscules leur ont été présentées et ils ont donc essayé d'imposer un minimum de 1/576<sup>e</sup> d'une *sāqiya*<sup>47</sup> pour que l'enregistrement soit accepté. Alors que sous le sultanat funj, le droit coutumier atténuait le problème en prévoyant un mécanisme de compensation pour les héritiers de titres de propriété inférieurs à un douzième, l'application stricte de la *sharī'a* sous la Turkiyya a conduit à la fragmentation des droits de propriété<sup>48</sup>.

La consolidation des titres fonciers aurait pu être tentée par les membres de ces communautés si leur situation économique ne s'était pas progressivement dégradée depuis la fin du

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45 Sous le sultanat de Funj, le statut de noblesse n'était accordé qu'aux descendants de femmes nobles dont les mariages devaient être approuvés par le sultan.

46 Steven SERELS, « Political Landscaping: Land Registration, the Definition of Ownership and the Evolution of Colonial Objectives in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1899-1924 », *African Economic History*, 2007, n°35, p. 59-75.

47 La *sāqiyya* désigne la roue à eau utilisée pour l'irrigation, mais aussi la terre qui l'entoure. Voir Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Al-sāqiyya*, Khartoum, Ma'had al-dirāsāt al-ifriqiyya wa-l-āsiyawiyya, 1980.

48 Hassan Abdel Aziz AHMED, « The Turkish Taxation System and its Impact on Agriculture in the Sudan », *Middle Eastern Studies*, 1980, vol. 16, n°1, p. 106 ; Jay L. SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, *op. cit.* p. 145-146.

XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle et tout au long de la Turkiyya. Leur appauvrissement est le résultat de l'effondrement de l'organisation féodale des obligations interdépendantes entre les communautés rurales et leurs seigneurs. Selon les normes qui prévalaient sous le régime funj, les excédents de grains collectés par les seigneurs étaient en principe destinés à alimenter leurs greniers afin d'être redistribués en cas de mauvaises récoltes. Mais les besoins de la population urbaine émergente ont conduit à la formation d'un marché aux grains et à la marchandisation rapide de cette ressource. Les régents hamaj ayant eu recours à la vente de titres de propriété à une noblesse ébranlée par la multiplication des querelles familiales, la vente des excédents de céréales était le moyen le plus efficace pour les seigneurs de renflouer leurs caisses. Pour les roturiers, cela signifie qu'ils ne peuvent plus compter sur les dons de nourriture pour traverser les périodes de pénurie, et sont alors contraints d'acheter leur subsistance auprès des marchands, le plus souvent à crédit (*shayl*) sur la base des récoltes à venir<sup>49</sup>. L'équilibre très précaire entre la production et la consommation de céréales dans la vallée du haut Nil mettait les cultivateurs riverains sous une pression constante. La désagrégation du régime féodal s'est accompagnée de la lente disparition des garde-fous qui avaient préservé ces communautés. Elles se sont retrouvées dans un état d'endettement structurel.

La précarité des économies rurales a été aggravée sous la Turkiyya par la refonte du système fiscal<sup>50</sup>. Les commentateurs européens contemporains de la situation économique du Soudan nilotique ont systématiquement décrié le niveau confiscatoire de la fiscalité établi par le régime colonial égyptien (voir ci-dessous). Cependant, le large consensus sur le caractère insoutenable du niveau absolu de la collecte des impôts a peut-être occulté des aspects plus importants liés aux mécanismes d'imposition. Comme les autorités coloniales avaient l'intention de satisfaire les politiques d'extraction promulguées au Caire, en vue d'équilibrer le coût de l'occupation et de générer un excédent budgétaire, la collecte d'impôts monétisés était privilégiée par rapport aux prélèvements en nature. En outre, faute de ressources pour mesurer la production, la *sāqiya* est devenue la base du système fiscal selon des taux fixes. Cela a renforcé la tendance à la marchandisation et à la monétisation des économies rurales riveraines. Dans l'obligation de trouver des espèces pour payer les impôts requis, les cultivateurs étaient contraints par des cycles d'endettement qui pouvaient conduire à l'hypothèque de leurs terres, ce qui permettait alors à la classe marchande d'intervenir et de consolider ses propres acquisitions aux dépens des communautés locales<sup>51</sup>.

Enfin, la *sāqiya* étant la principale unité fiscale égyptienne dans le Soudan nilotique et le

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49 Jay L. SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, op. cit. p. 112-113.

50 Jay L. SPAULDING, « Slavery, Land Tenure and Social Class in the Northern Turkish Sudan », *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 1982, vol. 15, n°1, p. 1-20.

51 Anders J. BJØRKELO, *Prelude to the Mahdiyya: Peasants and Traders in the Shendi Region, 1821-1885*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 85-87.

niveau d'imposition ne tenant pas compte du rendement réel, les cultivateurs étaient tenus par des impératifs contradictoires. Plus le nombre de parts était faible, plus le rendement de chaque participant à une *sāqiya* spécifique était élevé, mais cela signifiait également qu'ils devaient diviser le même montant d'impôts entre eux. Étant donné que l'irrigation dans la vallée du haut Nil nécessitait beaucoup de main-d'œuvre, moins de mains signifiait nécessairement qu'une plus petite surface pouvait être cultivée. La solution à ce problème consistait à remplacer les hommes libres qui pouvaient prétendre à une part des récoltes par des esclaves. Depuis le début de la Turkiyya, la multiplication des razzias d'esclaves dans les régions méridionales avait considérablement accru leur nombre, mais leur achat nécessitait des capitaux que l'immense majorité des paysans riverains, déjà accablés par un fort endettement, n'avait pas les moyens de se procurer, contrairement aux membres de la classe marchande. Leurs profits ainsi réinvestis ont favorisé la marchandisation de la terre et l'expansion de l'agriculture servile<sup>52</sup>.

Au total, des dernières décennies du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle aux années 1870, plusieurs dynamiques se sont conjuguées pour altérer le tissu des sociétés riveraines et subvertir les relations que les différentes composantes de ces populations entretenaient les unes avec les autres. Les contrastes marqués entre les statuts et les mécanismes ancrés de distinction sociale sont quelque peu contrebalancés par des réseaux d'interdépendances. Si le pouvoir des nobles funj avait peu de limites, ils n'avaient pas non plus intérêt à ce que le potentiel économique de leur territoire s'effondre. L'accumulation capitaliste, la monétisation de l'économie et la marchandisation de la terre et des céréales ont eu des conséquences dramatiques pour les cultivateurs des terres irriguées du haut Nil. Alors que certains nobles et roturiers avaient exploité les possibilités offertes par le nouveau contexte économique et avaient réussi à accumuler des richesses, notamment sous la forme de domaines, la plupart des personnes vivant sur les rives du fleuve et à proximité étaient intensément frustrées par l'aggravation de leur situation. Ce mécontentement est à l'origine de la grande migration soudanaise.

#### *ii) Mouvements de population et migrations*

Si la dégradation des conditions économiques a certainement été le principal facteur à l'origine des mouvements migratoires engagés par les populations des provinces septentrionales du Soudan nilotique au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, il existe quelques indices quant à l'antériorité de ce « *Drang nach Süden* » par rapport aux bouleversements socio-économiques amorcés à la fin du sultanat funj. En effet, les registres des tribunaux du Caire du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle mentionnent la venue de marchands dunqulāwī du Dār Fūr, laissant entrevoir des schémas de migrations pour investir les routes

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 76-81.

commerciales que l'on pourrait dater de la fin du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle<sup>53</sup>. Parmi les différentes hypothèses qui peuvent être proposées pour expliquer le dynamisme de l'une des communautés les plus septentrionales de la vallée du haut Nil, leur position sur une marche lointaine du sultanat funj figure en bonne place. Mais les caractéristiques topographiques du bief de Dunqulā pourraient aussi les avoir rendues plus susceptibles d'être affectées par les évolutions climatiques. Malgré des preuves limitées, un nombre croissant d'ouvrages, en particulier ceux de Steven Serels, suggèrent une augmentation de la variabilité climatique liée au « petit âge glaciaire » entre le milieu du XVII<sup>e</sup> et le milieu du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle dans le Soudan nilotique, entraînant des périodes de sécheresse plus fréquentes et plus longues<sup>54</sup>. L'évolution des facteurs environnementaux pourrait expliquer pourquoi différentes communautés du nord, à l'ouest et à l'est du Nil, ont pu suivre des schémas de migration similaires vers le sud<sup>55</sup>. La question de savoir si cela pourrait également expliquer l'intrigant déplacement vers le sud des activités de formation de l'État dans le Soudan nilotique au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle est une discussion qui n'a pas encore été entamée<sup>56</sup>.

Si les changements climatiques ont effectivement joué un rôle dans les migrations méridionales, il ne s'agissait pas de ruptures brutales, mais de secousses lentes et progressives pour des communautés dont l'adaptation était limitée par les contraintes physiques de leur environnement. Les incitations suscitées par l'évolution de la dynamique économique du Soudan nilotique aux XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles ont été plus puissantes.

Les Danāqla formaient la plus grande communauté diasporique, suivie par les Ja'aliyīn. Ils ont été incités à quitter les rives du Nil pour se diriger vers le sud par des « facteurs d'incitation », pour reprendre la terminologie d'Anders J. Bjørkelo, principalement liés à la détérioration de la situation socio-économique des communautés riveraines du nord causée par la diffusion progressive de modes de production axés sur le marché, renforcés ou déclenchés par les politiques adoptées sous la régence hamaj et la Turkiyya. Contrairement à l'évaluation de la plupart des contemporains, les méthodes violentes de collecte des impôts employées par les irréguliers au service de l'administration fiscale égyptienne, de la Shāyqiyya et des Bāsh-Būzüks ont aliéné les populations soudanaises du gouvernement colonial, mais les migrations ont été causées par des facteurs plus structurels. Un nombre croissant de paysans mécontents et sans terre ont commencé à chercher des

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53 Terence WALZ, *Trade between Egypt and Bilād as-Sūdān, 1700-1820*, Le Caire, Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1978, p. 72-74 ; Intisar Soghayrun ELZEIN, *Trade and Wadis System(s) in Muslim Sudan*, *op. cit.* p. 60.

54 Douglas H. JOHNSON et David M. ANDERSON (ed.), *The Ecology of Survival: Case Studies from Northeast African History*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1988, p. 43-44 ; David N. EDWARDS, « Post-Medieval Sudan and Islam (c. AD 1500-1900) », in *The Nubian Past: An Archeology of the Sudan*, Londres, Routledge, 2004, p. 260 ; Steven SERELS, *The Impoverishment of the African Red Sea Littoral, 1640-1945*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 31-35.

55 Voir le chapitre 1 pour une analyse de l'effet des changements climatiques dans l'est du Soudan.

56 Rex S. O'FAHEY, « Islamic Hegemonies in the Sudan: Sufism, Mahdism and Islamism », *op. cit.* p. 22.

moyens d'échapper aux cycles d'endettement, de perte de propriété foncière et d'expulsion qui étaient devenus leur réalité. Dans le même temps, les « facteurs d'attraction » gagnaient en force. L'instauration du régime colonial égyptien a permis de relier plus étroitement les différentes régions du Soudan nilotique et de rendre les routes un peu plus sûres. L'ouverture du Sud et l'expansion des échanges commerciaux, notamment d'esclaves, sont perçus par les Nordistes comme des opportunités. Certains d'entre eux ont réussi à amasser de grandes fortunes et leur réussite a été un puissant attrait pour ceux qui étaient attirés par la vie dans la diaspora. Cependant, parmi les *jallāba*, la classe croissante de marchands qui a pris de l'importance au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, la plupart étaient de petits commerçants d'itinéraires dont la richesse restait modeste. D'autres se sont déplacés non pas tant en raison d'opportunités commerciales que pour trouver des terres disponibles. Ils partaient pour le Khayrān, une région de petits bassins de terre argileuse dans le nord du Kurdufān<sup>57</sup>, sur les traces des précédentes migrations des Dunqulāwī vers cette région depuis le milieu du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle<sup>58</sup>, ou s'aventuraient plus au sud, sur le Nil Blanc, comme le fit la famille de Muḥammad Aḥmad, le futur Mahdī, à la fin des années 1860<sup>59</sup>.

Reflétant le mouvement volontaire du nord vers le sud, la forte augmentation de l'intensité de la traite des esclaves observée au Soudan nilotique au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle a amené un grand nombre de Nuba, de Shilluk, de Nuer et de Dinka, pour ne mentionner que les plus importantes des communautés du sud, vers le nord<sup>60</sup>. Un autre mouvement migratoire important a vu l'afflux régulier dans la vallée du haut Nil d'individus provenant des régions occidentales de la ceinture soudanaise. Ils suivaient les routes empruntées auparavant par les commerçants et les pèlerins accomplissant le *ḥajj* (deux activités qui ne s'excluent pas mutuellement) et traversant le Soudan nilotique pour atteindre les ports de la mer Rouge et, de là, La Mecque, mais leur nombre augmentait et, surtout, ils commençaient à se sédentariser. Ce mouvement s'est engagé au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, lorsque l'extension de l'influence du sultanat de Fūr sur le Kurdufān a suscité l'établissement de colonies agricoles par des migrants de l'ouest<sup>61</sup>. Cette tendance s'est accélérée au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à ce que de petites

57 Leif O. MANGER, *The Sand Swallows our Land: Over-Exploitation of Productive Resources and the Problem of Household Viability in the Kheiran - A Sudanese Oasis*, Bergen, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen, 1981.

58 Anders J. BJØRKELO, *Prélude à la Mahdiyya*, op. cit. p. 138-141.

59 Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-imām al-Mahdī: Muḥammad Aḥmad bin 'Abd Allāh (1844-1885), Lawḥa li-thā'ir sūdānī*, Khartoum, Maṭba'at jāmi'at al-Khartūm, 1985, p. 43 ; Fergus NICOLL, *The Sword of the Prophet*, Stroud, Sutton Publishing, 2004, p. 39.

60 Mohamed Ibrahim NUGUD, 'Alāqāt al-riqq fī-l-mujtama' al-sūdānī, Le Caire, Al-Shirka al-'ālamīyya li-l-ṭibā'at wa al-nashr, 1995 ; Alice MOORE-HARELL, « Economic and Political Aspects of the Slave Trade in Ethiopia and the Sudan in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century », *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 1999, vol. 32, n°2/3, p. 407-421.

61 Jay L. SPAULDING, « Pastoralism, Slavery, Commerce, Culture and the Fate of the Nubians of Northern and Central Kordofan Under Dar Fur Rule, ca. 1750-ca. 1850 », *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 2006, vol. 30, n°3, p. 408.



communautés *fallātā* jalonnent un axe ouest-est<sup>62</sup>.

Ces différents mouvements ont en commun d'entretenir des relations ambiguës avec le cœur de la vallée du haut Nil. Si Khartoum, la nouvelle capitale coloniale fondée au confluent des deux Nil en 1830 (1245/6), est devenue le principal centre commercial et attire des migrants entreprenants, elle n'est pas le point focal des circulations décrites ci-dessus. La raison principale de ce phénomène réside dans les différentes stratégies utilisées pour éviter le contrôle direct et les contacts fréquents avec les autorités coloniales égyptiennes. Peu après la conquête de la vallée du Nil, les forces d'occupation égyptiennes ont dû faire face à un vaste mouvement de rébellion, provoqué par l'assassinat d'Ismā'īl Pacha Kāmil – l'un des fils de Mehmet Ali – par le *makk* Nimir du Ja'alīyīn à Shandī en octobre 1822 (Muḥarram/Šafar 1238). La ville commerçante ne s'est jamais complètement remise de la violente répression qui a suivi, et le dirigeant ja'alī a été contraint de fuir vers les terres frontalières éthiopiennes, à une distance sûre de la portée limitée du régime central<sup>63</sup>. D'autres mouvements d'opposition, dont deux révoltes d'esclaves-soldats en 1844 (1259/60) et 1885-1887 (1302-1304), se terminèrent par la recherche par les mutins d'un refuge dans le Fāzūghlī et les monts Nūba<sup>64</sup>.

Il y avait, bien sûr, des raisons moins dramatiques de s'éloigner des environs immédiats de la vallée du Nil. La plus importante d'entre elles était d'éviter les effets les plus sévères du contrôle gouvernemental, en premier lieu une fiscalité oppressive. En effet, au-delà des rives du Nil et des agglomérations urbaines, la capacité du régime colonial égyptien à imposer sa volonté s'est rapidement affaiblie. Les preuves de ces pratiques d'évasion sont rares et il est difficile de suivre des groupes spécifiques sur des périodes données. Cependant, il semble difficile d'expliquer le dépeuplement des régions septentrionales concomitant à l'effondrement du système de la *sāqiya* uniquement par les migrations vers le sud et l'engagement dans les activités commerciales des *jallāba*. Certains ont choisi d'abandonner l'agriculture pour l'élevage, peut-être après une période de transition ou en passant régulièrement d'une activité à l'autre en fonction des circonstances. Dans cette perspective, les mouvements de population dans la vallée du Nil ne doivent pas être interprétés uniquement comme des conséquences mécaniques d'un large ralentissement économique, mais aussi comme une déclaration politique de rejet de l'État. Inversement, à la suite des observations pionnières de Talal Asad sur le clivage entre groupes sédentaires et nomades, on peut noter que les

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62 Muhammad Ahmad BADĪN, *Al-Fallāta al-fulāniyyūn fī al-Sūdān: al-aṣl wa al-tārīkh*, Khartoum, Markaz al-dirāsāt al-sūdāniyya, 1996.

63 Les habitants d'al-Dāmar, une ville située juste au nord de Shandī, ont également été touchés, notamment les chefs et les membres du Majādhīb. Voir Albrecht HOFHEINZ, « A Flame of Learning in the Winds of Change: Notes on the History of the Majādhīb of al-Qadārif, » in Natana J. DeLong-Bas (ed.), *Islam, Revival, and Reform: Redefining Tradition for the Twenty-First Century*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2022, p. 88-90.

64 Yoshiko KURITA, « The Role of 'Negroid But Detribalized' People in Modern Sudanese History », *Nilo-Ethiopian Studies*, 2003, vol. 8-9, p. 2-3.

deux catégories sont perméables et que l'insistance à caractériser les nomades par leur mobilité spatiale (plutôt que selon un mode de production où nomades et sédentaires sont interdépendants) est avant tout l'expression de l'intérêt particulier de l'État à établir sa domination sur les « terres libres » et en dit autant sur les populations en question que sur le pouvoir de l'État et ses limites<sup>65</sup>.

*iii) La reconfiguration des identités et des structures d'autorité*

Les identités sociales et les systèmes d'affiliation ont considérablement évolué au cours du long XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle dans le Soudan nilotique. La remarque faite plus haut sur la perméabilité relative entre les sphères nomades et sédentaires est un premier pas vers une qualification plus complète des cadres de référence des différentes identités des communautés du Soudan nilotique.

Les concepts de tribus et d'ethnies, et en particulier, pour le Soudan nilotique, la division entre Arabes et non-Arabes, ont été au cœur des écrits historiques sur cette région, ainsi que sur la majeure partie du continent africain. Il existe aujourd'hui une vaste littérature critique sur ces deux termes, dont l'examen dépasse le cadre de cette introduction. Il suffit de noter qu'en ce qui concerne la notion de tribu, les études soudanaises ont contribué à la formulation de la théorie de la lignée segmentaire, selon laquelle les structures tribales ont pour fonction de réguler l'ordre social et politique en l'absence d'un État<sup>66</sup>. Si cette théorie représentait un changement important par rapport au paradigme évolutionniste durkheimien, elle enfermait les tribus dans une relation nécessairement antagoniste avec l'État, ce dernier étant considéré comme entièrement investi dans ses efforts pour renforcer son emprise sur les structures sociales anachroniques, principalement par le biais de la sédentarisation. Depuis, cette dichotomie a été nuancée, notamment par Philip Khoury et Joseph Kostiner. Selon eux, cette opposition n'existe que lorsque les deux entités sont réduites à leurs idéaux-types. Selon eux, la notion de tribu englobe une diversité d'organisations sociales, accentuée par leur évolution radicale au fil du temps, qui va bien au-delà des groupes de nomades pastoraux partageant un idiome commun de parenté. En effet, dans le Soudan nilotique du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, les tribus ne pouvaient être ni pastorales ni nomades, et les aspects de la parenté presque totalement absents. Plutôt que de s'opposer, ces auteurs ont insisté sur la variété des formes que pouvaient prendre les interactions entre les tribus et l'État<sup>67</sup>, une approche prédominante dans plusieurs ouvrages historiques récents<sup>68</sup>.

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65 Talal ASAD, « Equality in Nomadic Social Systems?: (notes towards the dissolution of an anthropological category)\* », *Critique de l'anthropologie*, 1978, vol. 3, n°11, p. 57-65.

66 Edward EVANS-PRITCHARD, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1940.

67 Philip S. KHOURY et Joseph KOSTINER, « Introduction: Tribes and the Complexities of State Formation in the Middle East », dans Philip S. Khoury et Joseph Kostiner (ed.), *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991, p. 1-22.

68 Reuven AHARONI, *The Pasha's Bedouin: Tribes and State in the Egypt of Mehemet Ali, 1805-1848*, Londres, 2007, p. 2-3 ; Reşat KASABA, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants, and Refugees*, Seattle and

Cependant, la qualification de la nature des relations entre les tribus et l'État a laissé de côté la question de la caractérisation de cette structure sociale. Dernièrement, la tendance a été de se concentrer sur les tribus en tant que catégories étatiques pour les communautés ciblées par les politiques de transformation. Comme l'admet volontiers Nora E. Barakat, cela ne signifie pas qu'il n'y avait pas de réalité sociale préexistante, mais que l'objectif premier de cette désignation ottomane était de définir des individus et des collectifs légaux<sup>69</sup>. En s'appuyant sur son intuition, il est possible de tenir ensemble les deux aspects en définissant les tribus comme des communautés politiquement actionnables, caractérisées par des réseaux internes de mobilisation médiatisés et hiérarchisés, fondés sur une mythologie partagée d'appartenance à un lignage commun. Cette définition se distingue de la théorie du lignage segmentaire en ce qu'elle fait prévaloir non pas l'insaisissable ordre égalitaire conféré par les équilibres horizontaux, mais l'imbrication des structures d'autorité à la manière d'une poupée russe. En d'autres termes, contrairement à d'autres institutions sociales comme l'armée ou, d'ailleurs, les confréries soufies, pour lesquelles l'action individuelle s'obtient directement (quoique par l'intermédiaire d'une hiérarchie), dans les tribus, elle résulte de la mobilisation de la famille, puis du lignage élargi, et enfin du clan, chaque étape offrant le risque d'un dérapage du processus. Ainsi, la force de la *'aṣabiyya* khaldounienne dépend de chaque configuration spécifique de la distribution du pouvoir au sein d'une communauté tribale. Inversement, le système tribal est aussi plus robuste parce que les mécanismes de l'autorité se répercutent à chaque niveau où les interrelations des différentes composantes favorisent la synchronisation. Ceci contraste fortement avec l'autorité non médiatisée de l'Etat qui doit obtenir l'assentiment de chaque individu en fonction de sa capacité à mobiliser un langage d'action commun.

Paradoxalement, le rôle des formations tribales<sup>70</sup> sous le sultanat funj et leur évolution ultérieure sous la Turkiyya ont été peu étudiés. En gardant à l'esprit la nécessité d'historiciser systématiquement les affirmations identitaires et les logiques d'affiliation<sup>71</sup>, les groupes tribaux ne doivent pas être essentialisés et considérés comme se reproduisant évidemment d'eux-mêmes. Plusieurs facteurs ont contribué à une plus grande affirmation des liens tribaux. Alors que l'on peut supposer que les communautés du Soudan nilotique ont d'abord été organisées comme des entités politiques, localisées et socio-économiques, l'affaiblissement des structures féodales au XVIII<sup>e</sup>

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London, University of Washington Press, 2009, p. 6-8.

69 Nora E. BARAKAT, « Making 'Tribes' in the Late Ottoman Empire », *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2021, vol. 53, p. 482-487.

70 Tribu est la traduction la plus courante de *qabīla* (pl. *qabā'il*), mais, comme nous le voyons au chapitre 5, divers termes étaient utilisés pour désigner les communautés, tels que *nās* et *ahl*, avec le sens général de « peuple ».

71 Mahmood MAMDANI, *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2009, p. 108.

siècle a probablement eu pour effet de mettre davantage l'accent sur les formes tribales d'autorité, aidé par la diffusion du modèle de la descendance patrilinéaire et de son corollaire, la recherche de pedigrees patrilinéaires pour étayer les revendications d'autorité<sup>72</sup>. L'administration égyptienne dans la vallée du haut Nil a peut-être renforcé cette dynamique en s'appuyant sur les chefs de tribus en tant qu'intermédiaires, mais cette question mérite d'être étudiée plus en détail.

Dans le même temps, la région a connu d'importants mouvements de population (voir ci-dessus) qui ont conduit à l'ethnisation des identités tribales. Depuis l'approche interactionniste fondée par Frederik Barth, les ethnies ne sont pas tant définies par un ensemble stable de références socioculturelles partagées par un groupe que par les relations que ce dernier entretient avec les autres, plaçant ainsi le lieu de l'appartenance ethnique sur la négociation des frontières qui séparent « nous » d'« eux »<sup>73</sup>. En d'autres termes, alors que les affiliations tribales sont tournées vers l'intérieur, les identités ethniques sont essentiellement tournées vers l'extérieur<sup>74</sup>. Dans cette perspective, Jay O'Brien a mis en garde contre l'utilisation de « notions primordialistes floues » pour insister sur la mutabilité des ethnies et la fluidité de leurs affiliations<sup>75</sup>. Dans le contexte du Soudan du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, les dynamiques en jeu varient d'une communauté à l'autre et répondent à des temporalités différentes, défiant ainsi toute généralisation. La tendance générale des populations riveraines de la vallée du haut Nil depuis le milieu du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle a été de mettre en avant leur « arabité » face à leurs suzerains nettement « non-arabes », les Funj et les Hamaj. Ce processus correspondait à l'émergence d'une nouvelle classe sociale engagée dans le commerce. Cette revendication ethnique a été soutenue par l'adoption de généalogies arabes qui, à leur tour, ont pu contribuer à donner plus de poids aux affiliations tribales. Le principal critère était linguistique, alors que les causes de la diffusion inégale de l'arabe dans le Soudan nilotique restent une question ouverte. La conquête égyptienne de 1820-1821 (1235-1236) a accéléré l'ethnisation des communautés soudanaises. Les mouvements migratoires mettent en contact direct des populations d'origines diverses comme les *jallāba* du nord, les individus asservis du sud et d'Abyssinie, les Fallātā de l'ouest, les *muwalladūn*<sup>76</sup> ou les *awlād al-rīf*<sup>77</sup>. Les administrateurs égyptiens, les

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72 Jay L. SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, *op. cit.* p. 118-119 ; Jay L. SPAULDING, « The Chronology of Sudanese Arabic Genealogical Tradition », *History in Africa*, 2000, vol. 27, p. 325-337.

73 Frederik BARTH, « Introduction », dans *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*, Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1969, p. 9-38.

74 Cela n'empêche pas les frontières ethniques d'encadrer des systèmes de valeurs significatifs, performatifs et cohérents.

75 Jay O'BRIEN, « Toward a Reconstitution of Ethnicity: Capitalist Expansion and Cultural Dynamics in Sudan », *American Anthropologist*, 1986, vol. 88, n°4.

76 Ce terme est polysémique. Au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, il désigne surtout la progéniture des hommes égyptiens et des femmes « soudanaises » (souvent des esclaves), mais il peut englober tous les individus d'origine mixte.

77 Littéralement, les « fils du pays ». Le terme *rīf* était utilisé dans son sens égyptien pour la région de Basse-Égypte (par opposition à la Haute-Égypte, le *ša'īd*). Il désigne une population « blanche ».

78 Na'ūm SHUQAYR, *Géographie du Soudan*, *op. cit.* p. 83-84.

« Turcs », incarnent cette altérité. Les effets exacts de ces profonds changements sont difficiles à évaluer, mais l'augmentation des interactions et la formation de communautés diasporiques ont certainement accru l'ethnicisation des appartenances tribales, comme cela a pu être le cas pour les Danāqla.

L'islam a été la pierre angulaire de la réarticulation des identités des populations du Soudan nilotique. Alors que l'allégeance religieuse était essentiellement communautaire et que les pratiques pouvaient varier considérablement, la nouvelle classe sociale qui a émergé au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle a lié sa revendication identitaire à une interprétation plus stricte des textes islamiques et à ce qu'elle considérait comme des rituels plus orthodoxes. Cela fait écho aux effets de l'une des innovations les plus puissantes apportées par la propagation de l'islam à partir du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle dans le Soudan nilotique, à savoir la diffusion parallèle de l'alphabétisation. Pour ce faire, ils pouvaient s'appuyer sur les nombreux centres soufis établis sur les rives de la vallée du haut Nil. Ces *khalāwī* étaient avant tout des lieux d'éducation et constituaient à ce titre le principal vecteur de diffusion de l'alphabétisation. Ce nouveau système d'enseignement a eu deux conséquences principales. D'une part, il a inculqué aux disciples des saints hommes le sentiment qu'ils étaient différents de leurs ancêtres, les amenant à s'interroger et à réaffirmer un élément central de leur identité. D'autre part, il élargit leur horizon, les inscrit dans un vaste réseau de circulations intellectuelles et transforme leur *Weltanschauung* fondée sur les représentations du monde islamique<sup>79</sup>.

L'influence des *shuyūkh* (sing. *shaykh*) soufis s'étendait au-delà du cercle de leurs disciples. Par le biais de subventions et d'exemptions fiscales obtenues auprès des autorités funj puis égyptiennes, ils détenaient un pouvoir considérable sur les populations attachées à leurs domaines. Comme ils agissaient souvent en tant que *qādī*, ils ont contribué à imposer les pratiques scripturaires et le respect des obligations islamiques au détriment du droit coutumier, une évolution que certains roturiers n'appréciaient guère car elle favorisait la nouvelle classe marchande. Ils ont également promu un nouveau type de poésie populaire soufie, le *dhikr*, et organisé diverses fêtes et réunions religieuses, contribuant ainsi à élever « la conscience islamique du Soudanais ordinaire<sup>80</sup> ». À cet égard, les ordres soufis historiques comme les Ya'qūbab, les 'Arakiyyūn ou les Majādhīb, ont tous contribué à l'émergence d'un sens original de l'identité islamique dans les régions fluviales de la vallée du haut Nil.

Mais ce processus a été profondément affecté par l'émergence de nouvelles formes d'organisations soufies, souvent qualifiées de « néo-soufies », au point que Rex S. O'Fahey a soutenu que si l'histoire moderne du Soudan peut commencer en 1818 avec la décision de

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79 Jay L. SPAULDING, *The Heroic Age in Sinnār*, *op. cit.* p. 109-110.

80 Rex S. O'FAHEY, « Islamic Hegemonies in the Sudan: Sufism, Mahdism and Islamism », *op. cit.* p. 26.

Muḥammad ‘Alī d’envahir le Soudan, une autre date cruciale serait 1815, lorsque Aḥmad b. Idrīs al-Fāsī (1760-1837) autorise Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mīrghanī (1793-1853) à se rendre au Soudan pour un « voyage missionnaire » et à y établir sa propre confrérie soufie<sup>81</sup>. Défini pour la première fois en 1966 par l’érudit indo-pakistanaise Fazlur Rahman, le « néo-soufisme » a été défini comme une rupture avec l’héritage d’Ibn ‘Arabī par les érudits musulmans des XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles. Dans cette perspective, ils se sont éloignés de son panthéisme<sup>82</sup> et de sa compréhension métaphysique du soufisme et ont condamné le culte des saints. Au cœur de cette nouvelle tendance se trouve le passage de la quête mystique de l’union avec Dieu à une spiritualité orientée vers l’émulation de la vie du Prophète Muḥammad, la célèbre *ṭarīqa Muḥammadiyya*<sup>83</sup>. Le renouveau de l’étude du *ḥadīth* peut être considéré comme un corollaire de ce dernier point. Enfin, l’adhésion à une *ṭarīqa* (pl. *ṭuruq*) devait être exclusive. Avec quelques nuances, cette notion a été adoptée par John Voll et Nehemia Levtzion pour décrire le réseau de savants soufis qui ont émergé de La Mecque et de Médine aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles et qui ont joué un rôle déterminant dans le développement de nouveaux *ṭuruq* ou dans la transformation de *ṭuruq* historiques vers un rôle politique plus actif dans les régions où ils étaient établis sur la base d’un mysticisme moralisateur et puritain. Le centre de leur attention était Ibn Idrīs dont Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mīrghanī et al-Sanūsī, les fondateurs de la Khatmiyya et de la Sanūsiyya, avaient été les disciples.

Dans les années 1990, le néo-soufisme a fait l’objet de vives critiques. Le cadre initial de Rahman avait déjà été attaqué parce qu’il trahissait l’influence de chercheurs dépassés tels Hamilton A. R. Gibb, Harold Bowen et, dans une certaine mesure, John S. Trimmingham, et faisait écho à leur point de vue sur la corruption de l’Islam, en particulier du soufisme, qui aurait commencé à la fin de l’« âge d’or » au XII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Selon Rachida Chih, les vues de Rahman étaient « dogmatiques et anhistoriques ». L’appréhension historiographique du néo-soufisme a été fortement influencée par les craintes coloniales. Ibn Idrīs a été décrit comme une force intellectuelle motrice dans la formation du panislamisme au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Les *ṭuruq* établis par ses élèves ont été considérés comme la preuve des ambitions à grande échelle du revivalisme islamique mené par la tradition idrīsī<sup>84</sup>.

La remise en question de cette notion par Bernd Radtke et Sean O’Fahey visait sa nouveauté. Ils soutiennent que la *ṭarīqa Muḥammadiyya* n’est pas tant une altération de la quête soufie originelle qu’une autre voie vers l’union avec Dieu. À cet égard, ils n’ont pas pu trouver dans les textes d’Ibn Idrīs ou de ses disciples de preuves claires d’une rupture avec la tradition d’Ibn

81 *Ibid*, p. 25.

82 Cette critique portait sur la notion de « *waḥdat al-wujūd* » d’Ibn ‘Arabī, qui signifie « l’unité de l’Être ».

83 Littéralement, « la voie de Muḥammad ».

84 Rachida CHIH, *Sufism in Ottoman Egypt: Circulation, Renewal and Authority in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2019, p. 82-84.

‘Arabī. Enfin, en ce qui concerne l’activisme politique des *turuq* néo-soufis, ils notent que la réaction à l’expansion coloniale ne peut guère être leur raison d’être puisque la Sanūsiyya et la Khatmiyya ont été fondées avant la pénétration européenne. Le fait que la résistance ait été organisée par et autour de ces institutions soufies n’implique pas qu’elle ait été le résultat d’un programme idrīssien<sup>85</sup>. L’influence évidente d’Ibn Idrīs est d’autant plus déroutante que ses enseignements étaient relativement banals, d’où la dimension « énigmatique » de sa vie<sup>86</sup>. Par ailleurs, la nature de ses relations avec Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Mīrghanī, le fondateur de la puissante *ṭarīqa* des Khatmiyya au Soudan, a également été réévaluée. Malgré un examen approfondi des sources disponibles, il n’a pas été possible de savoir si al-Mīrghanī avait achevé son initiation auprès d’Ibn Idrīs avant son départ pour la Nubie et le Kurdufān en 1813, ni s’ils s’étaient revus par la suite. De plus, la correspondance échangée entre eux témoigne du fossé grandissant causé par les grandes ambitions du premier disciple d’Ibn Idrīs<sup>87</sup>.

Et pourtant, dans le Soudan nilotique du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, entre autres, « quelque chose de nouveau<sup>88</sup> » était en train de se produire. L’accent mis sur le réseau savant organisé autour des villes saintes du Ḥijāz et la quête de généalogies intellectuelles ont peut-être mis trop l’accent sur les dimensions littéraires de cette tendance soufie. Malgré leurs critiques, Radtke et O’Fahey reconnaissent eux-mêmes un changement qu’ils relient non pas à la tradition idrīssienne, mais aux nouveaux territoires ciblés par ses activités missionnaires, y compris la vallée du haut Nil. L’importance des facteurs spatiaux a été reconnue par Awad al-Sid al-Karsani. Selon lui, l’une des raisons expliquant la présence différenciée des soufis est que dans le centre du Soudan, les confréries soufies étaient installées dans des contextes socio-économiques et environnementaux où un surplus pouvait être extrait, soit par l’agriculture, soit par le commerce, alors que dans l’Ouest du Soudan, les *shuyūkh* soufis locaux étaient beaucoup plus dépendants des populations nomades et semi-nomades dont les revenus provenaient principalement du pastoralisme, empêchant ainsi l’établissement de ces nouveaux ordres soufis<sup>89</sup>.

Indépendamment de ces contraintes locales, l’introduction de la Khatmiyya au début du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle dans le Soudan nilotique a donné lieu à des transformations majeures du paysage soufi

85 Rex S. O’FAHEY et Bernd RADTKE, « Neo-Sufism Reconsidered », *Der Islam*, 1993, vol. 70, n°1, p. 52-87.

86 Rex S. O’FAHEY et ‘Alī Ṣāliḥ KARRĀR, « The Enigmatic Imam: The Influence of Ahmed Ibn Idris », *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1987, vol. 19, n°2, p. 205-219 ; Rex S. O’FAHEY, *Enigmatic Saint: Ahmad ibn Idris and the Idrisi tradition*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1990 ; Rachida CHIH, *Sufism in Ottoman Egypt: Circulation, Renewal and Authority in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, op. cit. p. 82-84.

87 Jay L. SPAULDING, « Fall of a Wayward Saint », *Northeast African Studies*, 1983, vol. 5, n°3, p. 43-50.

88 Anne K. BANG, *Islamic Sufi Networks in the Western Indian Ocean (c. 1880-1940): Ripples of Reform*, Leiden et Boston, Brill, 2014, p. 8.

89 Awad Al-Sid AL-KARSANI, « Beyond Sufism: The Case of Millennial Islam in Sudan », dans Louis Brenner (ed.), *Muslim identity and social change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Londres, Hurst & Company, 1993, p. 136-138.

qui avaient plus à voir avec « des changements de fonction que de contenu spirituel<sup>90</sup> ». O'Fahey considère que les déviations par rapport aux pratiques antérieures sont apparues dans les *ṭuruq* établis par les disciples d'Ibn Idrīs sur la « frontière islamique » et qu'elles concernaient principalement de nouvelles caractéristiques organisationnelles<sup>91</sup>. Auparavant, les centres soufis de la vallée du haut Nil n'étaient liés qu'à une *ṭarīqa* particulière. Il s'agissait avant tout d'institutions locales dont l'influence se limitait aux frontières de la communauté qu'elles dirigeaient (voir ci-dessus). Les nouveaux *ṭuruq* ont fondé de vastes réseaux organisés par un système de licences<sup>92</sup> (*ijāzāt* sing. *ijāza*) qui formaient des structures hiérarchiques d'autorités et représentaient des « organisations de masse supra-tribales<sup>93</sup> » reliant les enclaves soufies qui avaient émergé au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Dans son sens ancien et classique, les *khulafā'* (sing. *khalīfa*) étaient les successeurs désignés d'un *shaykh* soufi. Al-Mīrghanī utilisa le même terme mais modifia profondément la position pour les transformer en agents locaux qu'il pouvait révoquer à sa guise<sup>94</sup>. Ces changements structurels ont donné aux nouveaux *ṭuruq* une influence beaucoup plus grande sur les populations. Cela en fait des acteurs politiques potentiels, d'autant plus qu'ils contribuent à une « explosion de l'activité littéraire<sup>95</sup> » à une époque où l'on investit davantage dans l'éducation ainsi qu'à un recadrage des relations entre le *shaykh* (aussi *murshid* pl. *murshidūn*) et son disciple (*murīd* pl. *murīdūn*). Dans cette perspective, l'évolution des institutions soufies n'est pas tant liée à un programme réformateur d'inspiration idrīssienne qu'à un ensemble d'influences contingentes, à la fois spatiales et temporelles, qui ont provoqué l'émergence de technologies de pouvoir spécifiques fondant une gouvernamentalité soufie à une échelle sans précédent.

Bien qu'il propose lui-même une compréhension linéaire de l'évolution des structures soufies en distinguant les « anciennes confréries » (principalement la Qādiriyya et la Shādhiliyya) et les « confréries centralisées » (d'abord la Khatmiyya, mais aussi la Sammāniyya, et plus tard la Tijāniyya et l'Idrīsiyya), 'Alī Ṣāliḥ Karrār a noté l'ambiguïté d'une division aussi tranchée. Bien que la Sammāniyya ait été présentée comme une « confrérie réformatrice » par Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib w. al-Bashīr (1742-1824), un disciple de Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Sammān (1718-1775) lui-même, elle n'a pas produit le type de structure hiérarchique et centralisée qui devait caractériser la

90 Anne K. BANG, *Réseaux islamiques soufis dans l'océan Indien occidental (c. 1880-1940)*, *op. cit.* p. 9-10.

91 Rex S. O'FAHEY et 'Alī Ṣāliḥ KARRĀR, « The Enigmatic Imam: The Influence of Ahmed Ibn Idris », *op. cit.*

92 Ce terme désigne l'autorisation accordée à son titulaire de transmettre un type de savoir islamique, en l'occurrence lié à l'enseignement d'une *ṭarīqa* particulière.

93 Rex S. O'FAHEY, « Islamic Hegemonies in the Sudan: Sufism, Mahdism and Islamism », *op. cit.* p. 27.

94 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, thèse de doctorat, Université de Bergen, 1996, p. 161. Hofheinz a avancé un argument éclairant en faisant remarquer qu'une église néo-gothique peut être similaire en tous points à une église gothique, et pourtant, les deux sont des bâtiments radicalement différents parce que les fonctions qui ont motivé leur architecture ne sont pas comparables. Malheureusement, cet article (« Illumination and Enlightenment Revisited, or: Pietism and the Roots of Islamic Modernity », 2009) n'a pas été publié.

95 Rex S. O'FAHEY, « Islamic Hegemonies in the Sudan: Sufism, Mahdism and Islamism », *op. cit.* p. 26.



Khatmiyya. Après la mort de son *shaykh*, elle s'est rapidement fragmentée en trois branches rivales<sup>96</sup>, raison pour laquelle Karrār la qualifie de « maison de transition ». Par coïncidence, c'est en tant que membre de la Sammāniyya que Muḥammad Aḥmad se proclama Mahdī en 1881 (1298). Quant à la Khatmiyya, elle maintient tout au long du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle une position favorable au *statu quo* et à l'accommodement avec les autorités égyptiennes.

L'abandon du néo-sufisme en tant que concept résulte principalement de l'impossibilité de définir un ensemble cohérent de doctrines et de le rattacher à une généalogie claire remontant à Ibn Idrīs. Le Soudan nilotique illustre les limites de ce paradigme. Les confréries centralisées ne sont pas arrivées dans la région en tant que mouvement réformiste à part entière dérivé d'un insaisissable programme idrīssien. Leur émergence en tant que structures hiérarchisées a été conditionnée par des facteurs circonstanciels tels que la plus grande autonomie acquise par les enclaves soufies tout au long du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle et la nécessité de combler le vide de pouvoir causé par l'effondrement de l'organisation féodale funj. De même, l'accroissement rapide de leur influence politique a été rendu possible par le pouvoir colonial égyptien qui a eu besoin de relais locaux pour compenser son manque de personnel. Dans cette perspective, la Khatmiyya était bien une institution endogène. Elle n'avait pas de programme pour perturber l'ordre politique puisqu'elle devait l'essentiel de son développement à la configuration spécifique du pouvoir dans le Soudan nilotique. Les autres courants religieux n'étaient pas aussi accommodants.

*iv) Attentes millénaristes : Ex Oriente Lux*

À la fin du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle *hijrī*, les attentes millénaristes étaient puissantes au Soudan nilotique, comme dans de larges pans du monde musulman. Dans son analyse, l'historien de la Mahdiyya Peter M. Holt a donné une « introduction quelque peu hésitante à l'idée mahdiste au Soudan, hésitante parce qu'il y avait peu d'antécédents dans l'histoire soudanaise<sup>97</sup> ». Le seul Mahdī soudanais connu était Ḥamad al-Naḥlān (d. 1704/5), également appelé Wad al-Turabī, qui s'était autoproclamé alors qu'il accomplissait le *ḥajj* à La Mecque. Bien qu'elle n'ait pas été au premier plan de leur programme, l'idée mahdiste était néanmoins présente au sein des *ṭuruq* soufis, y compris les Khatmiyya. En effet, Ismā'īl al-Walī (1792/3-1863), élève de Muḥammad 'Uthmān al-Mīrghanī avait écrit trois traités sur ce sujet. Un autre savant, cette fois de la Qādiriyya, Ibrāhīm w. al-Kabbashī (m. 1869/70) avait également rédigé un ouvrage sur cette question intitulé *Al-Mahdī al-muntazar*. Dans la tradition idrīssienne, le concept d'« extinction de l'islam (*indirās al-Islām*) », compris comme l'effondrement imminent du monde causé par sa corruption croissante, peut avoir

96 'Alī Ṣāliḥ KARRĀR, *The Sufi Brotherhoods in the Sudan*, Londres, Hurst, 1992, p. 43-48.

97 Rex S. O'FAHEY, « Islamic Hegemonies in the Sudan: Sufism, Mahdism and Islamism », *op. cit.* p. 28-29.

contribué à renforcer les attentes mahdistes et à donner un sens théologique aux expériences locales de bouleversements sociaux. Selon O'Fahey, al-Walī et al-Kabbashī entretenaient tous deux des relations difficiles avec les autorités coloniales, ce qui donne à penser que cette littérature particulière pourrait avoir été motivée par des considérations politiques et avoir été l'expression d'une forme de défiance à l'égard de la domination égyptienne dans la vallée du haut Nil<sup>98</sup>.

La diffusion de ces idées auprès de la population générale de la région est difficile à évaluer. La diffusion de l'alphabétisation et l'importance accordée à l'éducation par les *ṭuruq* soufis impliquent que certains parmi les communautés de disciples ont dû connaître les ouvrages mentionnés ci-dessus. Quant aux attentes mahdistes proprement dites, elles étaient certainement partagées par beaucoup, mais dans des termes qui nous échappent le plus souvent. Dans le premier chapitre de ses mémoires, Bābikir Badrī raconte que lorsqu'il étudiait à Madanī auprès du *shaykh* Muḥammad al-Izayriq, c. 1880 (c. 1297), il trouva dans une pastèque qu'il avait achetée des graines sur lesquelles il pouvait lire d'un côté « Il n'y a pas d'autre Dieu que Dieu ». L'autre face était plus difficile à déchiffrer, ce qui ne l'empêcha pas d'affirmer à l'époque « Naturellement, [...] ce sera le Mahdī<sup>99</sup> ».

La rapidité et l'ampleur avec lesquelles la *da'wa*<sup>100</sup> de Muḥammad Aḥmad a été reçue par les populations du Soudan nilotique après 1881 (1298) témoignent de la diffusion des attentes mahdistes. Cependant, aucun modèle millénaire évident n'était alors disponible. De manière assez surprenante, aucun des nombreux mouvements de résistance à la domination égyptienne ne semble avoir pris une dimension prophétique, contrairement à ceux qui ont émergé pendant la Mahdiyya. L'exemple le plus proche d'un mouvement de contestation structuré par des références religieuses se trouve en Haute-Égypte, dans les révoltes successives qui embrasent le Qinā et sa région entre 1820-1824 (1235-1239) puis en 1864. Ses chefs, un *shaykh* nommé al-Ṣalaḥ en 1820 et son fils Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib en 1864 (1280/1) étaient à la fois des mystiques soufis et des messies autoproclamés. Rien ne prouve que ces événements aient eu un écho au Soudan nilotique, malgré les nombreuses résonances entre ces mouvements, qui contestaient ce que Zeinab Abul-Magd décrivait comme le « colonialisme interne » de l'État égyptien sur cette province périphérique. Les questions de fiscalité et de propriété foncière étaient au cœur de l'opposition des populations de la région de Qinā, comme de celles habitant au-delà de la troisième cataracte<sup>101</sup>.

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98 *Ibid*, p. 29.

99 Bābikir BADRĪ, *The Memoirs of Babikr Bedri*, traduit par Yousef BEDRI et traduit par George SCOTT, Londres, Oxford University Press, 1969, vol. 1, p. 12.

100 La polysémie du terme *da'wa*, qui signifie « invitation », « convocation » et « prédication », rend sa traduction ardue, d'autant plus que ces termes ne parviennent pas à rendre compte du fait qu'il désigne également le paradigme idéologique qu'il énonce.

101 Zeinab ABUL-MAGD, *Imagined Empires: A History of Revolt in Egypt*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013, chapitres 3 et 4.

Les chercheurs ont été beaucoup plus attentifs aux origines occidentales du mahdisme. En effet, le flux régulier de pèlerins et de commerçants a longtemps été considéré comme l'un des points de départ de la diffusion des attentes millénaristes dans le Soudan nilotique au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Selon Awad al-Sid al-Karsani, « le messianisme et le mahdisme comptent parmi les plus anciennes importations religieuses d'Afrique de l'Ouest dans le Soudan occidental<sup>102</sup> ». Depuis le XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, les territoires situés entre la vallée du fleuve Sénégal à l'est et les rives du lac Tchad ont connu plusieurs grands mouvements *jihādī* à connotation millénariste<sup>103</sup>. Certains d'entre eux ont conduit à la fondation de structures étatiques pérennes, dont le califat de Sokoto (1804-1903), sans doute le plus important de la région. Tout le XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle *hijrī fut* marqué par une soif croissante de migration vers l'est, motivée par de puissantes traditions selon lesquelles le Mahdī apparaîtrait dans la vallée du Nil, au point que le troisième calife de Sokoto, Abū Bakr 'Atīku (1837-1842) a dû rappeler à ses sujets que le temps n'était pas venu pour la venue du Mahdī, afin de réfréner leur ardeur.<sup>104</sup>

Si l'on sait peu de choses sur le rôle des communautés fallāta dans le Soudan nilotique avant le Condominium, et encore moins sur leur rôle dans la propagation et la formation des attentes millénaristes, leur implication dans la révolution mahdiste a laissé de nombreuses traces. Ils furent parmi les premiers à qui le Mahdī écrivit pour les informer de ses prétentions au titre de Mahdī et obtenir leur soutien. Leur influence était suffisamment établie pour que la courte crise de succession qui suivit la mort de Muḥammad Aḥmad en 1885 (1302) soit résolue par un *faqīh* d'origine fallāta nommé al-Dādāri, en faveur d'un autre occidental, le Khalīfa 'Abdullāhī. Al-Dādāri avait été un disciple de 'Uthmān b. Fodio (mort en 1817), le premier calife de Sokoto, avant de partir vers l'est, probablement dans les années 1860, où il aurait rencontré 'Abdullāhi engagé comme lui dans une quête pour trouver le Mahdī. Ceci met en lumière la complexité des « connexions islamiques transsoudaniennes<sup>105</sup> ». L'influence inverse de la Mahdiyya sur le Soudan central, incarnée par Ḥayātū al-Dīn b. Sa'īd (1840-1901) et Rābiḥ b. Faḍl Allāh (c. 1842-1900), a été plus attentivement étudiée alors que l'étendue de l'influence des Fallāta sur la fondation et la consolidation du régime mahdiste lui-même reste floue.

Il est d'ailleurs révélateur que cinq auteurs aient été mobilisés pour écrire sur la trajectoire

102 Awad Al-Sid AL-KARSANI, « Beyond Sufism: Le cas de l'islam millénaire au Soudan », *op. cit.* p. 138.

103 Pour une vue d'ensemble, voir Paul E. LOVEJOY, *Jihād in West Africa during the Age of Revolutions*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2016. Sur cette tendance, Murray Last écrit que « le millénarisme est peut-être le thème le plus important de la pensée musulmane populaire en Afrique de l'Ouest, en particulier en ce qui concerne le treizième siècle musulman. Il a été à l'arrière-plan des principaux mouvements de réforme de Shaikh Uthman b. Fudi, Shaykh Ahmad Lobbo et Al-Hajj Umar ; il a été responsable de migrations à grande échelle vers l'est et du déplacement d'innombrables individus en Afrique de l'Ouest vers le Nil ». (cité dans P. B. CLARKE, « Islamic Millenarianism in West Africa: A 'Revolutionary' Ideology ? », *Religious Studies*, 1980, vol. 16, n°3, p. 323.

104 Christian DELMET, « Sur la route du pèlerinage : les Peuls au Soudan », *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 1994, vol. 34, n°133-135, p. 475.

105 John O. HUNWICK et al, « Between Niger and Nile: New Light on the Fulani Mahdist Muḥammad al-Dādāri », *Sudanic Africa*, 1997, vol. 8, p. 85-108.

d'al-Dādāri, du califat de Sokoto au Soudan nilotique<sup>106</sup>, afin de dépasser les clivages qui séparent les différents champs historiographiques de la ceinture soudanaise. Cet effort n'est pas si courant. La tendance générale a souvent été d'isoler la vallée du haut Nil des dynamiques sociopolitiques et religieuses prévalant à l'ouest, et de mettre l'accent sur les effets du colonialisme égyptien sur sa société comme facteur principal de l'éruption du mouvement mahdiste dans les années 1880<sup>107</sup>. Ceci est d'autant plus surprenant qu'il ne reflète pas vraiment l'historiographie pas si récente de la région aux XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles développée par Jay S. Spaulding, Neil McHugh et Anders J. Bjørkelo qui ont tous insisté, même si c'est à des degrés divers, sur la nécessité de combler le fossé colonial. Bien que le travail de Paul E. Lovejoy se concentre sur l'Afrique de l'Ouest, il tient à souligner la réverbération des mouvements *jihādī* occidentaux vers l'est et vice-versa. Les idées qu'il avance sur les points communs des transformations socio-économiques pour expliquer leur émergence, qu'elles soient fondées sur la volonté de l'État de stabiliser et de garantir les identités islamiques comme protection contre l'asservissement, ou sur la crise sociale résultant d'une fragmentation de la propriété foncière sous l'effet d'un plus grand respect des règles islamiques, ont des échos évidents pour le Soudan nilotique du dix-neuvième siècle.<sup>108</sup>

## **Penser la Mahdiyya**

### ***A) La Mahdiyya (1881-1899) : une enquête historiographique***

Lorsque Muḥammad Aḥmad b. ʿAbd Allāh, membre éminent de la Sammāniyya *ṭarīqa*, proclame ouvertement être le Mahdī attendu (*al-Mahdī al-muntaẓar*) le 29 juin 1881 (1<sup>er</sup> Shaʿbān 1298), il initie un mouvement collectif religieux et politique qui va profondément transformer la société soudanaise. Au cours des quatre années suivantes, il réussit à arracher le contrôle de la majeure partie du Soudan nilotique à la domination coloniale égyptienne (1820-1885) et à fonder une structure étatique centralisée, dirigée après sa mort le 22 juin 1885 (9 Ramaḍān 1302) par le Khalīfa ʿAbdullāhi. Jusqu'à sa disparition en septembre 1898 (Rabīʿ I/II 1316) dans le sillage de la conquête anglo-égyptienne (1896-1899), le régime mahdiste a exercé une influence considérable sur le tissu social des diverses communautés présentes dans la région, qu'il a tenté de modifier radicalement pour les rendre conformes aux idéaux islamiques qu'il prônait, notamment en mobilisant la population pour le *jihād*.

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106 Voir note précédente.

107 Pour un exemple de ce type d'études, voir Roman LOIMEIER, *Muslim Societies in Africa: A Historical Anthropology*, Bloomington et Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2013.

108 Paul E. LOVEJOY, *Jihād in West Africa during the Age of Revolutions*, *op. cit.*

i) Premières évaluations : le mouvement mahdiste et le monde arabe

Les premières évaluations du mouvement mahdiste ont été fortement influencées par le contexte du début des années 1880 (fin des années 1290). Les commentateurs extérieurs ont projeté leurs propres agendas et inquiétudes sur un mouvement qu'ils avaient les plus grandes difficultés à comprendre dans ses propres termes. Les autres mobilisations *jihādī* des XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles en Afrique de l'Ouest s'étaient déroulées à distance du regard européen et les fonctionnaires britanniques avaient du mal à donner un sens aux événements qui se déroulaient dans la vallée du haut Nil. Dans le premier rapport compilé par les renseignements militaires britanniques, l'origine de l'« insurrection du [faux] prophète » est vaguement attribuée à la « fascination particulière [des] races indigènes » pour l'Islam, considérées comme de « nouveaux convertis », prompts à se mobiliser pour « la régénération de l'Islam par la force des armes »<sup>109</sup>. Vus de Londres, les événements de la vallée du haut Nil ont été interprétés par certains parlementaires, radicaux et libéraux gladstoniens comme l'expression d'un mouvement de libération nationale que les Britanniques devaient soutenir, et non pas écraser par une nouvelle aventure impériale mal conçue dans la région<sup>110</sup>.

Les Britanniques ne sont pas les seuls à considérer la révolution mahdiste avec perplexité. Les autorités ottomanes s'en désolent également. Abdülhamid II semble avoir considéré le Mahdī comme une marionnette britannique envoyée pour servir leurs intérêts dans la région et saper l'influence ottomane en instrumentalisant le discours de libération nationale aux dépens de l'empire. La Sublime Porte craignait également que la *da'wa* mahdiste ne sape la légitimité islamique que le pouvoir hamidien tentait alors de consolider. Paradoxalement, sur ce point particulier, les vues ottomanes étaient partagées par les Britanniques qui craignaient qu'un mouvement de contestation panislamique de grande ampleur n'atteigne leur dominion indien, moins de trois décennies après la rébellion de 1857<sup>111</sup>.

En raison de la synchronicité du soulèvement mahdiste avec la révolte des 'Urābī (1879-1882), des figures intellectuelles comme Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghanī (1838/9-1897) et Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) ont interprété la rébellion du haut Nil comme un prolongement du mouvement anti-impérialiste en Égypte. Eux aussi ont tendance à minimiser la dimension religieuse de la

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109 War Office, « Report on the Egyptian provinces of the Sūdān, Red Sea, and equator. Comp. in the Intelligence branch, Quartermaster-General's department, Horse guards, War office », Londres, H. M. Stationery Office, 1883, p. 30.

110 Norman DANIEL, *Islam, Europe and Empire*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1966, p. 416 ; 422 ; Fergus NICOLL, *Gladstone, Gordon and the Sudan Wars: The Battle Over Imperial Intervention in the Victorian Age*, Pen & Sword Military, 2013, p. 12-16 ; Ömer KOÇYIĞIT, « The Ottoman State's Perception about the Sudanese Mahdi Uprising », *International Journal of Turcologia*, 2014, vol. 9, n°8, p. 101-130.

111 Fergus NICOLL, « Fatwa and Propaganda: Contemporary Muslim Responses to the Sudanese Mahdiyya », *Islamic Africa*, vol. 7 (2), 2016, p. 239-265, 2016, vol. 7, n°2, p. 252-255.

rébellion, qu'ils considèrent comme le résultat de son incapacité à exposer un discours nationaliste. L'analyse d'al-Afghanī, présentée dans plusieurs articles publiés dans *L'Intransigeant*, était une tentative de coopter le mouvement mahdiste dans son propre agenda anti-britannique<sup>112</sup>.

ii) *La Mahdiyya dans les écrits coloniaux britanniques*

La diversité qui caractérise les lectures du mouvement mahdiste à ses débuts n'est plus une réalité dans les années 1890. Francis R. Wingate, chef de l'espionnage britannique en Egypte entre 1889 et 1899, est à l'origine d'un corpus littéraire dont l'influence se révélera durable sur l'historiographie de la Mahdiyya. En effet, la première publication de Wingate, *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan*<sup>113</sup>, et les deux opus suivants de son travail éditorial par Joseph Ohrwalder<sup>114</sup> et Rudolf C. von Slatin<sup>115</sup>, ont joué un rôle crucial dans la formation de la compréhension contemporaine du mouvement mahdiste. Peter M. Holt a qualifié ses efforts de « propagande de guerre » ou de « littérature de relations publiques des services de renseignements militaires égyptiens<sup>116</sup> » visant, par la construction de la « légende de la Mahdiyya<sup>117</sup> », à convaincre l'opinion publique et les dirigeants politiques britanniques de la nécessité et de la légitimité d'une intervention militaire au Soudan<sup>118</sup>.

Le « Wingate-Slatinisme », comme Martin Daly a surnommé cette production, était basé sur deux arguments centraux. Le premier est que le soulèvement mahdiste était une réaction aux nombreux abus du régime égyptien oppressif, en particulier en matière de perception des impôts, qui ont mécontenté les populations locales. Cela correspondait à une opinion exprimée très tôt par Gordon lui-même, qui avait écrit dans la *Pall Mall Gazette* : « Je suis convaincu que c'est une erreur totale de considérer le Mahdi comme un chef religieux. [...] Il personnifie le mécontentement populaire<sup>119</sup> ».

Afin de persuader l'opinion publique britannique et les parlementaires réticents de la nécessité d'une intervention au Soudan pour mener à bien la « mission civilisatrice »<sup>120</sup>, Wingate doit discréditer la légitimité du nouveau régime. Ainsi, son deuxième argument dépeint les

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112 *Ibid*, p. 261-264.

113 Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan: Being an Account of the Rise And Progress of Mahdiism, And of Subsequent Events in the Sudan to the Present Time*, Londres, Macmillan and Co, 1891.

114 Josef OHRWALDER, *Ten Years' Captivity in the Mahdi's Camp, 1882-1892: From the Original Manuscripts of Father Joseph Ohrwalder...*, Londres, Sampson Low, Marston & Co, 1892.

115 Rudolf C. SLATIN, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, *op. cit.*

116 Peter M. HOLT, « The Source-Materials of the Sudanese Mahdia », *Middle Eastern Affairs*, 1967, vol. 4, n°1, p. 112.

117 Norman DANIEL, *Islam, Europe et Empire*, *op. cit.* p. 424-428.

118 Gabriel R. WARBURG, « The Wingate Literature Revisited: The Sudan As Seen by Members of the Sudan Political Service during the Condominium: 1899-1956 », *Middle Eastern Studies*, 2005, vol. 41, n°3, p. 373.

119 Norman DANIEL, *Islam, Europe et Empire*, *op. cit.* p. 416.

120 Gabriel R. WARBURG, « The Wingate Literature Revisited », *op. cit.* p. 374-375.

mahdistes comme des fanatiques, des hommes superstitieux facilement influencés par le charisme du Mahdī. Quant à ce dernier, quelle que soit la validité de sa vocation première, « il a été ruiné par une sensualité débridée » et est devenu un « prophète efféminé et débauché<sup>121</sup> », succombant aux plaisirs d'Omdurman. Les valeurs réformistes qu'il avait défendues furent encore corrompues sous le règne de son successeur, responsable des « horreurs et des cruautés » qui firent qu'« au moins soixante-quinze pour cent de la population totale [périt] à cause de la guerre, de la famine et de la maladie<sup>122</sup> ». À cet égard, la littérature coloniale britannique a fortement insisté sur l'aliénation par le régime mahdiste de sa propre population. Cette propagande a permis de présenter la conquête de la vallée nilotique soudanaise par les troupes anglo-égyptiennes en 1896-1898 (1313-136) comme la libération d'un peuple opprimé. Ce récit plutôt contradictoire niait à la fois la puissance de la *da'wa* du Mahdī et son appel aux populations soudanaises, ainsi que l'agentivité des hommes et des femmes qui avaient volontairement rejoint le mouvement en encadrant leur engagement comme le résultat mécanique de l'affiliation tribale ou l'effet de la rhétorique manipulatrice du Mahdī.

Pourtant, d'autres récits avaient été suggérés avant même la fin du régime mahdiste. Rudolf von Slatin, probablement le témoin européen le mieux informé de ces événements, a proposé une autre série d'explications. Dans son célèbre récit autobiographique, *Fire and Sword*, il souligne que si la perception de l'impôt a été un motif central du soulèvement mahdiste, ce n'est pas tant en raison du niveau général d'imposition que parce que son exploitation dans les *jallāba* a perturbé les hiérarchies sociales qui dépendaient de réseaux de dépendance fondés sur le tribut. On pourrait aller plus loin et voir dans la « soudanisation » partielle de l'administration coloniale l'un des principaux facteurs du soulèvement mahdiste. Elle a rompu les liens sociaux et produit des inégalités entre les dirigeants<sup>123</sup>.

L'analyse, centrée sur l'oppression égyptienne comme principal facteur explicatif du déclenchement de la révolte mahdiste et sur la relation antagoniste entretenue par les populations du Soudan nilotique avec le nouveau régime, est devenue le paradigme dominant de la littérature impériale britannique et, malgré de nombreuses nuances, son héritage continue de façonner les études actuelles. Une façon d'expliquer sa résilience au cours de la première moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle est que ses fondements, la délégitimation du régime colonial égyptien et de l'État mahdiste, sont restés des idées utiles pendant le condominium. La « bienveillante » administration britannique pouvait se considérer comme un rempart contre le fanatisme islamique et la tyrannie égyptienne. C'est ce qui explique la postérité du « Wingate-Slatinisme » et son maintien par les administrateurs ultérieurs du Sudan Political Service (SPS) qui voyaient dans cette littérature autant un

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121 Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*, *op. cit.* p. 12 ; 228.

122 Rudolf C. SLATIN, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, *op. cit.* p. 623.

123 *Ibid*, p. 133-134.

commentaire sur le passé qu'un avertissement pour l'administration coloniale en place. Dans sa préface pour *Osman Digna*, un récit de la vie de l'un des principaux *umarā'* mahdistes publié en 1926 par Henry C. Jackson, lui-même administrateur du SPS, Wingate pouvait écrire qu'« en dépeignant la situation lors de la grande révolte des Soudanais contre l'oppression tyrannique, la vénalité et la mauvaise administration sans espoir de l'ancien régime égyptien, [Jackson] permet à ses lecteurs de réaliser à quel point l'histoire peut facilement se répéter<sup>124</sup> ».

Une autre raison de la résilience du « Wingate-Slatinisme » est la faiblesse des discours alternatifs. La Mahdiyya n'était pas un héritage facile à mobiliser. Le mouvement néo-mahdiste fondé dans les années 1920 par Sayyid 'Abd al-Raḥmān, fils posthume du Mahdī, tentait de résoudre la quadrature du cercle en convoquant la légitimité religieuse de son père tout en se tenant à l'écart de ce qui pouvait être considéré par l'administration coloniale britannique comme des ambitions politiques radicales susceptibles de remettre en cause son pouvoir. D'autre part, si l'antagonisme provoqué par la Mahdiyya parmi les différentes populations du Soudan nilotique a été exagéré et présenté de manière non critique comme la réaction commune par la littérature coloniale pour les raisons mentionnées ci-dessus, son héritage a en effet provoqué des divisions. Bien que cela mérite des recherches plus approfondies, les travaux des figures du milieu nationaliste soudanais naissant semblent avoir évité d'invoquer cet épisode de leur histoire récente pour étayer leur programme.

Il existe quelques exceptions à cette tendance générale. L'une d'entre elles est le travail de du yéménite 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ḥusayn al-Jabrī. Il visita le Soudan en 1925 et il fut engagé par Sayyid 'Abd al-Raḥmān pour écrire une biographie du Mahdī et une histoire de la Mahdiyya. Le résultat, *Tārīkh al-Mahdī 'alayhi al-salām*, fut considéré par les autorités coloniales britanniques comme un « ouvrage séditieux de propagande antigouvernementale ». Les livres ont été saisis et al-Jabrī rapidement expulsé<sup>125</sup>. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥīm avait été un témoin direct des événements de la Mahdiyya. Il avait accompagné son père lorsque celui-ci avait rejoint les *anṣār*, l'armée mahdiste, et avait été engagé dans certains des combats importants, notamment la bataille de Karārī près d'Umm Durmān le 2 septembre 1898 (15 Rabī' II 1316) où il fut blessé. Parmi les ouvrages qu'il a produits dans les années 1930, deux au moins, *Baḍā'i' al-athar fī akhbār al-Mahdī al-muntaẓar* [*Les attributs de la tradition dans la pensée du Mahdī attendu*] et *Tadawhwur al-Mahdiyya* [*Le renversement de la Mahdiyya*], traitent directement de cette période<sup>126</sup>. Le fait qu'ils

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124 Henry C. JACKSON, *Osman Digna*, Londres, Methuen & Co, 1926, p. xii.

125 Mohamed Omer BESHIR, « Abdel Rahman Ibn Hussein El Jabri and His Book 'History of the Mahdi' », *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1963, vol. 44, p. 136-139 ; Hassan Ahmed IBRAHIM, *Sayyid 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi: A Study of Neo-Mahdism in the Sudan, 1899-1956*, Leiden et Boston, Brill, 2003, p. 84-85.

126 Yahya Muhammad IBRAHIM et al, « The Life and Writings of a Sudanese Historian: Muhammad 'Abd al-Rahim (1878-1966) », *Sudanic Africa*, 1995, vol. 6, p. 125-136.



n'aient pas été publiés peut être une indication de l'opposition de l'administration coloniale et, peut-être, du manque d'intérêt du public soudanais<sup>127</sup>. À peu près à la même époque, à partir de 1929, 'Alī al-Mahdī, un autre fils du Mahdī, recueillait des témoignages pour rédiger son *Al-aqwāl al-marwiyya fī tāriḫ al-Mahdiyya* [*Les récits oraux de l'histoire du Mahdiyya*]. Cependant, il n'a été publié qu'en 1965 sous un autre titre, *Jihād fī sabīl Allāh* [*Le Jihād pour la cause de Dieu*] et, bien que le texte ait été édité par 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad Aḥmad, sa paternité a été attribuée à l'auteur de l'introduction, Ṣādiq al-Mahdī<sup>128</sup>.

La pénurie d'ouvrages en langue vernaculaire sur la Mahdiyya au cours des premières décennies du condominium, qu'elle ait été imposée par l'administration britannique ou qu'elle soit la conséquence du désintérêt prudent des élites soudanaises pour cette période, est reflétée dans la production des officiers coloniaux. Eux aussi étaient réticents à écrire sur la Mahdiyya. Leur attention s'est surtout portée sur l'archéologie, l'histoire locale et les études anthropologiques<sup>129</sup>. L'accent mis sur l'histoire ancienne fait écho à l'effort similaire pour fonder les nationalismes européens. Contrairement aux pyramides de l'État méroïtique, le mahdisme n'était pas politiquement mort, ce dont les administrateurs britanniques se rendirent compte à intervalles réguliers avec les soulèvements d'inspiration mahdiste de Kasalā (1918), Sinnār (1919), Nyala (1921) et Zālinjay (1927), pour n'en citer que quelques-uns<sup>130</sup>.

Plusieurs éléments peuvent expliquer ce revirement dans le regard porté sur la Mahdiyya. Tout d'abord, après la révolution de 1924, l'influence du nationalisme égyptien est désormais considérée comme la principale menace à l'influence britannique sur le Soudan. Dans cette perspective, l'instrumentalisation de l'histoire ancienne a peut-être atteint ses limites, d'autant plus qu'il était difficile de situer la fondation du Soudan à l'époque préislamique. La Mahdiyya était le véhicule idéal pour s'opposer aux revendications nationalistes égyptiennes. Alors que les universitaires du Caire avaient entrepris de contester le traitement sévère réservé à la Turkiyya dans la littérature britannique, leur propre historiographie a permis de mettre en évidence les progrès accomplis sous le régime colonial. L'ouvrage le plus important dans cette perspective est probablement celui de Muḥammad Fu'ād Shukrī, *Al-ḥukm al-miṣrī fī al-Sudān* [*La domination*

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127 Ces deux ouvrages, comme la majeure partie de la production littéraire de Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥīm, n'ont pas encore été édités. Tous les manuscrits ont été déposés au National Records Office (Khartoum).

128 Fergus NICOLL, « 'Alī al-Mahdī's Oral History of the Mahdīa », *Sudan Studies for South Sudan and Sudan*, 2015, vol. 51, p. 34-43.

129 Entre 1918 et 1963, sur les 188 articles écrits sur l'histoire générale du Soudan, 92 étaient consacrés à l'archéologie et à l'histoire ancienne, et seulement 56 à l'histoire moderne (parmi lesquels on peut supposer que la majorité traitait de la Turkiyya). Voir George N. SANDERSON, « 'Sudan Notes and Records' as a Vehicle of Research on the Sudan », 1964, vol. 45, p. 170.

130 Hassan A. IBRAHIM, « Mahdist Risings Against the Condominium Government in Sudan, 1900-1927 », *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 1979, vol. 12, n°3, p. 440-471.

égyptienne au Soudan], publié en 1947<sup>131</sup>, mais il y a eu plusieurs épigones de cette tendance<sup>132</sup>. Assez paradoxalement, la première impulsion pour le renouveau des études sur la Mahdiyya est peut-être venue des administrateurs britanniques eux-mêmes. Comme le montre Iris Seri-Hersch, dès les années 1940, les manuels scolaires préparés à Bakht al-Ruḏā présentaient la révolution mahdiste sous un jour positif, comme un mouvement de libération contre l'oppression égyptienne<sup>133</sup>.

### iii) L'histoire de la Mahdiyya revisitée

Cependant, l'interprétation de la Mahdiyya restait liée aux perspectives impériales qui imprégnaient l'analyse de ses origines. Alors qu'un changement progressif avait été amorcé à l'initiative des éducateurs du Condominium, en nuançant la nature fanatique et la dimension irrationnelle de la mobilisation mahdiste, le régime du Khalīfa ‘Abdullāhi qui avait succédé au Mahdī en 1885 était toujours considéré à travers un prisme orientaliste, comme le règne d'un despote cruel qui avait perverti les principes fondateurs du mahdisme.

Cette perception a prévalu jusqu'aux années 1950, lorsque des historiens professionnels ont proposé des récits plus nuancés avec les travaux de Makkī Shibayka<sup>134</sup> et Peter M. Holt. Cette réévaluation historiographique s'est appuyée sur un retour aux sources primaires, dans les archives britanniques pour Shibayka, qui fut le premier diplômé du Gordon College à réaliser une thèse de doctorat en histoire en 1949<sup>135</sup>, et aux archives nationales soudanaises (*Dār al-wathā’iq al-qawmiyya al-sūdāniyya*), dont la fondation a été supervisée par Holt lui-même<sup>136</sup>. Cette ouverture a donné lieu à la publication du texte fondateur des études mahdistes : *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*<sup>137</sup>, publié en 1958 et qui reste la plus importante synthèse sur la période. Cette révision cruciale de l'historiographie avait été précédée par la publication de *The Mahdiyya: a History of the*

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131 Muḥammad Fu’ād SHUKRĪ, *Al-ḥukm al-Miṣrī fī al-Sūdān, 1820-1885*, Le Caire, Dār al-fikr al-‘arabī, 1947.

132 Pour une vue d'ensemble de cette question, voir Gabriel R. WARBURG, « The Turco-Egyptian Sudan: A Recent Historiographical Controversy », *Die Welt des Islams*, 1991, vol. 31, n°2, p. 193-215 ; Gabriel R. WARBURG, *Historical Discord in the Nile Valley*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1992, parties I et II.

133 Iris SERI-HERSCH, *Enseigner l'histoire à l'heure de l'ébranlement colonial : Soudan, Égypte, empire britannique (1943-1960)*, Paris, Karthala, 2018.

134 Pour un aperçu de l'œuvre de Makkī Shibayka, voir Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Makkī al-Ṭayyib Shibayka, 1905-1980*, Khartoum, Markaz Abū Salīm li-l-dirāsāt, 2006.

135 Mekki SHIBEIKA, *The Sudan and the Mahdist Revolution of 1881-1885*, thèse de doctorat, Université de Londres, Londres, 1949.

136 Environ 50 000 documents mahdistes ont été saisis par le département du renseignement militaire de l'armée égyptienne. Ils ont tous été conservés au Caire jusqu'en 1913-1915 (Holt donne les deux dates), date à laquelle ils ont été transportés à Khartoum. Ils sont restés inaccessibles jusqu'à l'ouverture des archives soudanaises en 1951 et l'établissement de leur inventaire. Pour des résumés des collections, voir Peter M. HOLT, « The Archives of the Mahdia », *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1955, vol. 36, n°1, p. 71-80 ; Peter M. HOLT, « The Source-Materials of the Sudanese Mahdia », *op. cit.* ; Peter M. HOLT, « Mahdist Archives and Related Documents », *Archives*, 1962, vol. 5, n°28, p. 193-200.

137 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan (1881-1898): A Study of its Origins, Development and Overthrow*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1958.

*Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1881-1899* d'Alan B. Theobald<sup>138</sup> en 1951 et de *British Policy in the Sudan 1882-1902* de Shibayka<sup>139</sup> l'année suivante. La mobilisation des sources primaires, un demi-siècle après la fin de la Mahdiyya et dans le contexte d'une pression accrue vers l'indépendance (1956), permet à ces historiens de réviser la caractérisation du régime mahdiste, et tout particulièrement du régime khalifien (1885-1899), héritée du « wingate-slatinisme ». Une approche plus sereine a été adoptée, qui a conduit à un développement historiographique important au cours des trois décennies suivantes, des années 1950 à 1981.

L'un des aspects les plus importants de ce renouveau a été le grand développement des études régionales, dont toutes les contributions sont éminemment redevables à cette thèse. Des ouvrages sur Dār Fūr<sup>140</sup> et Kurdufān<sup>141</sup> ont été publiés, tandis que plusieurs thèses importantes ont été rédigées sur le Soudan-Est, la Jazīra, le Barbar et le Soudan-Est<sup>142</sup>. Muḥammad Sa'īd al-Qaddāl a également écrit un texte important sur la présence mahdiste à la frontière éthiopienne<sup>143</sup>. Une dynamique similaire affectait les institutions de l'État mahdiste, qui a bénéficié de plusieurs études sur les systèmes judiciaire et financier<sup>144</sup>. À cette époque, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm, sans doute le plus important historien soudanais de la Mahdiyya, adoptait une approche nouvelle en étudiant la production littéraire officielle de l'État mahdiste. Il a offert de précieuses informations sur les documents imprimés, la chancellerie et la diplomatie, un effort qui a conduit à la publication du magistral *Al-ḥaraka al-fikriyya fī al-Mahdiyya* [*Le mouvement intellectuel dans la Mahdiyya*]<sup>145</sup> en 1989.

Ce formidable développement de l'historiographie de la Mahdiyya a peut-être atteint son apogée avec l'organisation de la conférence de Khartoum sur la Mahdiyya en novembre 1981, à l'occasion de la commémoration du centenaire du lancement du mouvement mahdiste. Les actes, édités par 'Umar 'Abd al-Rāziq al-Naqar, ont montré l'ampleur des sujets abordés par les

138 Alan B. THEOBALD, *The Mahdīya: A History of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1881-1899*, Londres, Longmans Green and Co, 1951.

139 Mekki SHIBEIKA, *British Policy in the Sudan 1882-1902*, Londres, Oxford University Press, 1952.

140 Mūsā al-Mubārak AL-ḤASAN, *Tārīkh Dār Fūr al-siyāsī, 1882-1895*, *op. cit.*

141 'Awaḍ 'Abd al-Hādī AL-'ATĀ, *Tārīkh Kurdufān al-siyāsī fī-l-Mahdiyya, 1881-1899*, Khartoum, Al-majlis al-qawmī li-ri'āyat al-ādāb wa al-funūn, 1973.

142 Salāh al-Tijānī HAMŪDĪ, *Al-Mahdiyya fī Sharq al-Sūdān - 'Uthmān Diqna wa-l-Khalīfa 'Abd Allāh*, mémoire de maîtrise, Université de Khartoum, Khartoum, 1967 ; Aḥmad 'Uthmān Muḥammad IBRĀHĪM, *Al-Jazīra fī khilāl al-Mahdiyya, 1881-1899*, thèse de doctorat, Jāmi'at al-Kharṭūm, Khartoum, 1970 ; Ibrāhīm 'Akāsha 'ALĪ, *Wilāyat Barbar fī 'ahd al-Khalīfa 'Abd Allāh (Ramaḍān 1302 - Rajab 1317 / juin 1885 - novembre 1899)*, mémoire de maîtrise, Université de Khartoum, Khartoum, 1971.

143 Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-Mahdiyya wa-l-Habasha: Dirāsa fī al-siyāsa al-dākhiliyya wa-l-khārijiyya li-dawlat al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, Khartoum, Dār al-ta'līf wa-l-tarjama wa-l-nashr, 1973.

144 'Alī Muḥammad 'Alī ṢĀLIH, *Nizām al-quḍā' fī al-dawla al-Mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, thèse de doctorat, Université de Khartoum, Khartoum, 1973 ; Fayṣal al-Ḥājj Muḥammad MŪSĀ, *Al-nizām al-mālī fī dawlat al-Mahdiyya bi-l-Sūdān*, mémoire de maîtrise, Jāmi'at al-Qāhira, Le Caire, 1975.

145 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Al-ḥaraka al-fikriyya fī-l-Mahdiyya*, Khartoum, Dār jāmi'at al-Kharṭūm li-l-nashr, 1989.

chercheurs<sup>146</sup>.

iv) *Le tournant social et le déclin subséquent des études mahdistes*

La conférence de 1981 a marqué une inflexion de l'État vers les questions économiques et sociales, avec des présentations sur les politiques économiques de l'État mahdiste<sup>147</sup> mais aussi, de manière cruciale, sur la tentative de formation d'une « société mahdiste »<sup>148</sup>. La première veine, relative aux aspects économiques, a été explorée avec plus d'acuité. Le travail d'Al-Qaddāl sur la politique économique de l'État mahdiste est précieux par sa rigueur, mais essentiellement descriptif. Cependant, dans son introduction, il soulève des points cruciaux dans le débat sur les causes profondes du mouvement mahdiste. Il n'est pas satisfait des explications précédentes. Na'ūm Shuqayr considère que le mécontentement à l'égard du pouvoir égyptien est le principal facteur du soulèvement. Le désarroi des institutions coloniales dans le contexte de la révolte des 'Urābī aurait permis son développement au point de la rendre irrépressible. Cet argument, qui s'inscrit dans la lignée du « Wingate-Slatinisme », a exercé une grande influence sur les analyses ultérieures. Shibayka insiste sur la dynamique religieuse, voyant dans la mobilisation mahdiste le résultat de l'opposition entre l'islam orthodoxe imposé par les Egyptiens et le soufisme soudanais. Quant à Holt, s'il partage l'idée de Shuqayr d'un mécontentement populaire général, il insiste sur l'abolition de la traite des esclaves comme cause immédiate du soulèvement. Al-Qaddāl pensait qu'il fallait remonter aux racines socio-économiques du mouvement. Ni l'abolition de la traite des esclaves, ni les tensions avec l'islam orthodoxe n'auraient pu provoquer le niveau de mobilisation de la première phase de la révolution. Sa principale intuition était que les segments les plus impliqués dans le soulèvement ne cherchaient pas tant à détruire l'État qu'à s'en emparer pour reconfigurer à leur avantage les relations commerciales, principale source de revenus dans la vallée du haut Nil<sup>149</sup>.

Bien que discutable, l'approche d'al-Qaddāl constitue un renversement de l'historiographie existante en ce sens qu'il abandonne l'aspect purement réactionnaire mis en avant par les anciens historiens pour expliquer la révolution mahdiste. Pour une fois, les adeptes du Mahdī se sont vus reconnaître des aspirations. Leurs actions ne sont pas uniquement dirigées contre la domination coloniale. Ils étaient porteurs d'un projet partiellement reflété par les institutions étatiques formées

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146 'Umar 'Abd al-Rāziq AL-NAQAR (éd.), *Dirāsāt fī tāriḫ al-Mahdiyya*, Khartoum, Dār jāmi'at al-Kharṭūm li-l-nashr, 1987, vol. 12, deux volumes.

147 Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, « Al-ittijāhāt al-'amma li-l-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya (1881-1898) », dans 'Umar 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Naqar (ed.), *Dirāsāt fī tāriḫ al-Mahdiyya*, Khartoum, Dār jāmi'at al-Kharṭūm li-l-nashr, 1987, vol. 2/1, p. 133-155.

148 Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Ḥamīd KĀB AL-RAFĪQ, « Al-Mahdiyya wa al-mujtama' al-Mahdawī fī al-Sūdān: al-ahdāf wa al-wasā'il wa madā tawāfuq-hā ma'a al-āthā wa al-natā'ij », in 'Umar 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Naqar (ed.), *Dirāsāt fī tāriḫ al-Mahdiyya*, Khartoum, Dār jāmi'at al-Kharṭūm li-l-nashr, 1987, vol. 2/1, p. 111-117.

149 Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, Khartoum, Khartoum University Press, 1986, p. 21-51.

par le Mahdī et ses collaborateurs au cours de la première phase du mouvement. Cette approche de l'économie mahdiste a été poursuivie par Yitzhak Nakash<sup>150</sup> et, peu après, par Aḥmad Ibrāhīm Abū Shūk<sup>151</sup>. Les travaux de doctorat de ce dernier ont conduit à la publication en 1996, en collaboration avec Anders J. Bjørkelo, de la première édition des sources financières du trésor central mahdiste<sup>152</sup>.

Ces travaux ont contribué à combler le fossé historiographique entre l'État et la population. Tout en restant principalement axés sur les politiques économiques de l'État mahdiste en matière de commerce et de fiscalité, ils s'écartaient des analyses antérieures centrées sur leurs aspects normatifs et leur déviance par rapport à une orthodoxie islamique mal définie, pour porter l'essentiel de leur attention sur leurs effets sur les populations du Soudan nilotique. Ces premiers pas vers un tournant social dans l'historiographie de la Mahdiyya ont été favorisés par des travaux qui se sont efforcés de démêler les effets sociaux de la législation et des politiques mahdistes sur les femmes. L'analyse de David Decker sur les femmes du Kurdufān pendant la Mahdiyya<sup>153</sup> et l'ouvrage plus complet de Nawar el-Sheikh Mahboub sur les femmes soudanaises offrent de précieuses indications sur la vie sociale sous le régime mahdiste<sup>154</sup>. L'histoire sociale la plus aboutie de la Mahdiyya reste l'étude de Robert Kramer sur « l'expérience d'Omdurman » et la formation d'une société urbaine<sup>155</sup>. Son originalité réside dans sa tentative minutieuse de faire coïncider les analyses des politiques mises en œuvre par l'État mahdiste à Umm Durmān, les principes directeurs dont elles découlent, en particulier en ce qui concerne leur objectif de transformation, et la configuration des relations sociales qui en résultent.

Dans les années 1990, les études mahdistes ont ensuite disparu des débats universitaires. En 1989, le coup d'État militaire mené par 'Umar al-Bashīr et soutenu par les Frères musulmans du Front national islamique a eu des conséquences durables sur le monde universitaire soudanais. L'accès aux archives a été limité alors qu'un contrôle politique accru était exercé sur celles-ci, un certain nombre d'archivistes expérimentés sont partis ou n'ont pas été remplacés, et la détérioration

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150 Yitzhak NAKASH, « Fiscal and Monetary Systems in the Mahdist Sudan, 1881-1898 », *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1988, vol. 20, n°3, p. 365-385 ; Yitzhak NAKASH, « Reflections on a Subsistence Economy: Production and Trade of the Mahdist Sudan, 1881-1898 », dans Elie Kedourie et Sylvia G. Haim (ed.), *Essays on the Economic History of the Middle East*, Londres, Frank Cass & Co, 1988, p. 43-57.

151 Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK, *The Fiscal Administration of the Mahdist State in the Sudan (1881-1898)*, mémoire de maîtrise, Université de Bergen, Bergen, 1991.

152 Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK et Anders J. BJØRKELO (ed.), *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897*, Leiden, Brill, 1996.

153 David F. DECKER, « Females and the State in Mahdist Kordofan », dans Endre Stiansen et Michael Kevane (ed.), *Kordofan Invaded: Peripheral Incorporation and Social Transformation in Islamic Africa*, Leiden, Brill, 1998, p. 86-100.

154 Nawar el-Sheikh MAHGOUN, *Sudanese Women during the Mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, mémoire de maîtrise, université de Bergen, Bergen, 1992.

155 Robert S. KRAMER, *Holy City on the Nile: Omdurman during the Mahdiyya, 1885-1898*, Princeton, Markus Wiener Publishers, 2010. Bien que publiée en 2010, *Holy City on the Nile* a été développée à partir d'une recherche menée à la fin des années 1980 (Robert S. KRAMER, *Holy City on the Nile: Omdurman, 1885-1898*, thèse de doctorat, Northwestern University, Evanston, 1991).

de la situation économique a réduit les ressources disponibles. Dans l'ensemble, cette évolution a eu un impact considérable sur les travaux des chercheurs soudanais et étrangers. Parallèlement, la marginalisation, sur la nouvelle scène politique façonnée par les islamistes, des deux principaux partis historiques, le parti Umma (*Hizb al-umma*) et le parti unioniste démocratique (*al-Hizb al-ittiḥādī al-dīmūqrāṭī*), deux organisations soufies (la première de la Mahdiyya et la seconde de la Khatmiyya), a contribué à diminuer l'importance perçue des études mahdistes. Une opinion répandue dans certains milieux universitaires de la capitale soudanaise était que la grande expansion de l'historiographie au cours de la seconde moitié du vingtième siècle avait laissé peu de pistes de recherche inexplorées.

L'élan donné à une histoire sociale structurée de la Mahdiyya a été de courte durée, même si le corpus de sources éditées s'est considérablement élargi grâce au travail de Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm<sup>156</sup>. Cela a partiellement compensé l'accès réduit aux archives et a permis le développement d'une érudition précieuse par Kim Searcy sur les dimensions symboliques de l'autorité mahdiste<sup>157</sup>, et sur l'approche de la loi islamique par le Mahdī, par Aharon Layish<sup>158</sup>. Cependant, pour les raisons mentionnées ci-dessus, peu de travaux ont été menés sur la base de sources primaires conservées à Khartoum. Parmi les exceptions, on peut citer les études d'Iris Seri-Hersch sur les relations entre l'État mahdiste et son voisin éthiopien<sup>159</sup>, ainsi que l'analyse d'al-Ṣiddīq Muḥammad Aḥmad Ḥātīm sur l'armée mahdiste en tant qu'institution<sup>160</sup>.

### **B) Chronologie politique de la Mahdiyya (1881-1899)**

Malgré tous les développements des cinquante dernières années, cette historiographie est restée quelque peu enfermée dans les questions posées par la littérature propagandiste britannique, que ce soit sur les causes du soulèvement mahdiste, toujours présentées comme dépendant principalement de facteurs externes à la société soudanaise (oppression fiscale égyptienne et abolition de la traite des esclaves), ou sur la nature de l'autorité mahdiste (considérée presque

156 Parmi les plus importants travaux éditoriaux entrepris par Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm, il faut mentionner son édition magistrale de la correspondance du Mahdī et du 'Uthmān Dīqna, ainsi que l'édition inachevée de l'immense correspondance du Khalīfā 'Abdullāhi. Pour un résumé utile des travaux de Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Abū Salīm jusqu'en 1992, voir Anders J. BJØRKELO et Rex S. O'FAHEY, « The Writings of the Sudanese Mahdi: M. I. Abu Salim's Edition: A Progress Report », *Sudanic Africa*, 1992, vol. 3, p. 163-164.

157 Kim SEARCY, *The Formation of the Sudanese Mahdist State: Ceremony and Symbols of Authority (1882-1898)*, Leiden et Boston, Brill, 2011.

158 Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī'a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan: The Mahdī's Legal Methodology and Doctrine*, Leiden et Boston, Brill, 2016.

159 Iris SERI-HERSCH, « Confronting a Christian Neighbor: Sudanese Representations of Ethiopia in the Early Mahdist Period, 1885-89, » *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2009, vol. 41, n°2, p. 247-267 ; Iris SERI-HERSCH, « 'Transborder' Exchanges of People, Things, and Representations: Revisiting the Conflict Between Mahdist Sudan and Christian Ethiopia, 1885-1889 », *op. cit.*

160 Ḥātīm al-Ṣiddīq Muḥammad AḤMAD, *Al-jaysh fī al-dawla al-mahdiyya (1881-1898)*, Al-dār al-'arabiyya li-l-mawsū'āt, 2012.

uniquement du point de vue du centre politique, Umm Durmān). Le cadrage initial de la trajectoire globale du régime mahdiste, établi par Holt et toujours en vigueur aujourd'hui, témoigne clairement de ces motivations. Dans un article important, l'historien britannique et éminent spécialiste de la Mahdiyya a proposé de diviser son évolution en six périodes différentes<sup>161</sup>, dont la présentation servira à établir un cadre préliminaire qui sera nuancé dans le corps de cette thèse.

La première période s'étend de la proclamation par Muḥammad Aḥmad de ses prétentions au titre de Mahdī en 1881 (1298) dans l'île d'Abā à sa mort en 1885 (1302) à Umm Durmān. Elle couvre ce que Holt appelle « la création de la théocratie mahdiste » au cours de laquelle le mouvement mahdiste prend le contrôle territorial du Kurdufān marqué par la prise d'al-Ubayyid le 19 janvier 1883 (10 Rabī' I 1300), avant d'étendre son influence au reste de la vallée du haut Nil grâce à un double mouvement de soulèvements locaux et à l'envoi de forces militaires depuis l'ouest, centre du pouvoir mahdiste. Parallèlement, les premières institutions de l'État mahdiste naissant sont fondées, parmi lesquelles le trésor (*bayt al-māl*) occupe une place centrale. L'apogée de cette première phase est atteinte avec la chute de Khartoum aux mains des mahdistes à la fin du mois de janvier 1885 (Rabī' II 1302). Peu après, Muḥammad Aḥmad installe sa capitale dans un petit village sur la rive opposée du Nil.

La mort du Mahdī en 1885, six mois après la prise de Khartoum, provoque le désarroi de ses partisans. Les deux années suivantes voient la consolidation du pouvoir du Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi. Dès le début de l'année 1886 (début 1303), il réprime une tentative de contestation de son autorité par les *ashrāf*, un groupe composite de partisans de la première heure du Mahdī qui avaient conspiré contre lui. Il envoie le célèbre *amīr* Ḥamdān Abū 'Anja (*vers* 1835-1888) pour prendre le contrôle des troupes de Muḥammad Khālīd Zuqal qui ont quitté Dār Fūr et avancent de façon menaçante vers Umm Durmān. Enfin, le Khalīfa procéda à une vaste purge dans les rangs de l'administration territoriale mahdiste pour y placer des clients et des compagnons de tribu de la Baqqāra. En septembre 1886 (D. al-Ḥijja 1304), ce processus est achevé.

Les trois années suivantes, de 1886 à 1889 (1303-1307), constituent ce que Holt appelle la « phase militante » de l'État mahdiste. Au cours de cette période, plusieurs expéditions militaires ont été lancées pour étendre le contrôle territorial mahdiste. À l'est, le 20 décembre 1888 (16 Rabī' 1306), l'armée mahdiste qui assiégeait depuis plusieurs mois le port de Sawākin sur la mer Rouge - toujours sous contrôle égyptien - est repoussée avec des pertes importantes, quelques jours après la lettre de Yūsuf Khaṭīb. Ce premier coup d'arrêt important dans l'expansion mahdiste est rapidement suivi par d'autres. Plus au sud, les armées mahdistes avaient pénétré le territoire éthiopien et

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161 Peter M. HOLT, « The Place in History of the Sudanese Mahdiya », *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1959, vol. 40, p. 107-112.

rencontré à plusieurs reprises les armées de Yohannes IV (1837-1889), entraînant la mort de ce dernier à la bataille d'al-Qallābāt le 9 mars 1889 (6 Rajab 1306). Épuisées, les deux forces se replient peu après. De l'autre côté, à l'ouest, le contrôle mahdiste sur Dār Fūr est resté fragile depuis que Muḥammad Khalīd Zuqal a été évincé du commandement. Alors que les révoltes tribales sont maîtrisées avec une relative facilité, le soulèvement mené par Aḥmad Abū Jummayza (m. 1889), une figure messianique qui revendique le poste de *khalīfa* offert par le Mahdī à Muḥammad al-Mahdī b. al-Sanūsī, mobilise un grand nombre de partisans et menace de chasser le pouvoir mahdiste de la région. Sa mort prématurée au début de l'année 1889 (mi-1306) marque la fin de ce qui était sans doute la plus grande menace interne pour le pouvoir khalifien. La dernière poussée de la Mahdiyya est dirigée vers l'Égypte. La vaste armée rassemblée par 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Nujūmī se dirigea vers la frontière, vers Wādī Ḥalfā, mais fut sévèrement défaite par une force anglo-égyptienne à la bataille de Tūshkī le 3 août 1889 (5 D. al-Ḥijja 1306). Cette série de revers signe l'arrêt d'importantes opérations extérieures.

La période de 1889 à 1891 a vu ce que Holt a appelé la « stabilisation » de l'État khalifien, mais le terme de reconfiguration est peut-être plus approprié pour décrire le processus subi par le pouvoir mahdiste. Sévèrement affaibli par son incapacité à exporter la *da'wa* du Mahdī et par la famine de 1306 *h.* (1889/90), le pouvoir du Khalīfa fut à nouveau contesté par les *ashrāf* en novembre 1891, qui virent là une occasion de réaffirmer leur influence perdue. Comme la première fois, leurs efforts échouèrent et les plus ardents opposants au Khalīfa furent exécutés ou exilés. La fin de la contestation politique au centre s'accompagne d'un mouvement de normalisation. Le *jihād* est abandonné en tant qu'objectif principal de l'État, les relations commerciales internationales reprennent timidement et une organisation administrative plus cohérente est mise en place, notamment par l'établissement d'un système fiscal plus rigoureux.

Ayant survécu à de multiples crises au cours des deux années précédentes, le régime khalifien a bénéficié d'une meilleure acceptation de son autorité par la population. Les révoltes se font plus rares. Holt voit dans cette période de cinq ans l'aboutissement de la transformation de l'État militant et théocratique en une monarchie personnelle, une « autocratie Ta'ā'ishī », dirigée par le Khalīfa et soutenue par la puissance militaire de la Baqqāra.

L'État mahdiste avait déjà été contraint de se retirer partiellement de certaines régions de son est sous la pression accrue des Britanniques, qui reprenaient un contrôle limité sur une partie de l'arrière-pays de Sawākin, et plus au sud, des Italiens qui s'emparaient de Kasalā, près de la frontière éthiopienne, en juillet 1894 (Muḥarram 1312). Cependant, l'invasion de la province septentrionale de Dunqulā par les troupes anglo-égyptiennes du sirdar Kitchener en 1896 (1313) initie une séquence qui se termine par la chute du régime mahdiste. Après une première poussée conclue en



1897 (1314/5) par l'occupation de Barbar en septembre 1897 (Rabī' II 1315), les troupes coloniales se regroupent et stabilisent leur position à quelques centaines de kilomètres au nord d'Umm Durmān. La dernière phase de l'invasion débute en mars 1898 (Shawwāl 1315) avec la reprise de l'avancée vers le sud. Le 2 septembre 1898 (15 Rabī' II 1316), à la bataille de Kararī, le gros de l'armée mahdiste est anéanti, mettant fin au pouvoir du Khalīfa. La capitale, Umm Durmān, est occupée, tandis que le chef mahdiste se retire sur le Nil Blanc. Un an plus tard, le 24 novembre 1899 (20 Rajab 1317), il est tué à la bataille d'Umm Diwaykarāt.

### *C) Nouvelles perspectives sur la Mahdiyya*

Ce cadre initial de la Mahdiyya s'est avéré étonnamment résistant. La plupart des études sur le mahdisme se concentrent sur l'État et ses institutions. Comme nous l'avons vu plus haut, l'évolution vers une histoire sociale de la Mahdiyya a été amorcée, mais elle est loin d'être achevée. Le pouvoir politique est toujours présenté comme hautement centralisé et les politiques décidées à Umm Durmān sont donc imposées aux autres provinces, ce qui les place dans une relation de subordination évidente. L'histoire politique occupe une place disproportionnée dans l'historiographie de la Mahdiyya. Il en va de même pour les opérations militaires - tout particulièrement lorsqu'elles impliquent des troupes anglo-égyptiennes -, héritage du « Wingate-slatinisme » (voir plus haut). Ainsi, la richesse des informations sur la campagne d'al-Nujūmī dans le nord reflète avant tout les préoccupations de l'establishment militaire du Caire.

D'autres aspects de la Mahdiyya n'ont pas bénéficié de la même attention. Les analyses sur les relations entre le nouveau régime et les populations du Soudan nilotique ont surtout été analysées à travers un prisme dual. La plupart des bilans historiques sont restés enfermés dans une dichotomie opposant adhésion et résistance, presque systématiquement envisagée à l'échelle des groupes tribaux. À cet égard, les affiliations tribales sont considérées comme le seul facteur déterminant pour expliquer les attitudes à l'égard des représentants mahdistes locaux, sans tenir compte des dynamiques infra-tribales. Il s'agit là encore du reflet de la grille à travers laquelle les officiers britanniques ont rendu lisible la situation politique du Soudan nilotique. En conséquence, la complexité des interactions individuelles avec l'État, ses représentants et le modèle social qu'ils promouvaient a été négligée et peu d'attention a été accordée à la compréhension de la manière dont la *da'wa* du Mahdī a résonné auprès des populations soudanaises et a conduit un grand nombre d'hommes et de femmes à s'engager en faveur de son mouvement.

Dans cette optique, cette thèse vise à explorer deux axes de réflexion sur la Mahdiyya dans le contexte spécifique de sa province du Soudan-Est, tous deux articulés autour de l'idée de transformation sociale : les mécanismes et la nature de l'engagement mahdiste, et les ambitions

réformatrices de l'État.

Malgré plusieurs récits et ouvrages historiques sur le mouvement de Muḥammad Aḥmad, la dynamique qui sous-tend la mobilisation de ses partisans reste insaisissable. Les récits présentent une révolution sans révolutionnaires, soutenue par des groupes vaguement définis tels que les *jallāba* ou les tribus Baqqāra. À l'exception de quelques leaders, la plupart des hommes et des femmes qui ont décidé de rejoindre le Mahdī disparaissent dans une masse anonyme. Dans l'ouvrage fondateur de Holt, les mécanismes qui ont présidé à leur adhésion sont à peine étudiés. Quelques facteurs circonstanciels - parmi lesquels l'abolition de la traite des esclaves en 1877 (1293/4) occupe une place prépondérante - sont invoqués pour expliquer un état général de mécontentement qui s'est facilement transformé en un véritable soulèvement, et la mobilisation mahdiste est présentée comme une réaction aux empiètements coloniaux. Elle ne tient pas compte de la tension notable qui aurait dû naître du fait que l'adhésion au mahdisme était la plus forte dans les provinces occidentales et orientales, c'est-à-dire celles qui étaient les moins affectées par les politiques coloniales égyptiennes, et l'écarte en convoquant subrepticement des tropes sur la violence inhérente aux communautés pastorales et nomades. De plus, les causes locales et conjoncturelles ne peuvent expliquer le synchronisme du soulèvement dans un espace aussi vaste, entre différents groupes linguistiques aux occupations variées. Holt recourt donc à une lecture essentialiste de la mobilisation, écrivant à propos de l'expansion du mouvement de l'ouest vers la vallée du Nil qu'« il n'y avait guère de doute que tôt ou tard les peuples riverains et sédentaires plus doux se soulèveraient *en masse*, poussés par les longs souvenirs d'une liberté perdue, par la lassitude d'être gouvernés, ou par un penchant pour l'anarchie et le désir de butin<sup>162</sup> ». D'autres explications basées sur une appréciation wébérienne du pouvoir charismatique du Mahdī sont intéressantes pour leur théorisation des différentes phases vers la routinisation du pouvoir et pour leur saine insistance sur la crise sociale comme condition préalable à l'émergence des mouvements révolutionnaires<sup>163</sup>. Cependant, les dynamiques d'adhésion elles-mêmes tendent à être rapidement évacuées comme le seul résultat du charisme particulier du leader et de l'adéquation de son message avec les aspirations de ses partisans.

Contrairement aux remarques ci-dessus, l'analyse présentée dans cette thèse est fortement

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162 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, op. cit. p. 43.

163 Pour une tentative riche mais parfois malavisée d'appliquer le modèle wébérien à la Mahdiyya soudanaise, voir Richard H. DEKMEJIAN et M.J. WYSZOMIRSKI, « Charismatic Leadership in Islam: The Mahdi of the Sudan », *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1972, vol. 14, n°2, p. 193-214. Cette théorie wébérienne est également au cœur des études de Kim Searcy, voir par exemple Kim SEARCY, « The Khalifa and the Routinization of Charismatic Authority », *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 2010, vol. 43, n°3, p. 429-442.

redevable à Juan R. I. Cole de l'adaptation historique de la théorie de Theda Skocpol sur les révolutions en tant que résultat non planifié des interactions entre des mouvements sociaux variés et distincts. Pour Cole, « les révolutions, en tant que forme de turbulence, impliquent une conjoncture désordonnée de plusieurs types d'actions collectives, menées de manière non coordonnée par différents groupes sociaux<sup>164</sup>», mais liées par une idéologie nativiste. Contrairement aux approches qui considèrent le soulèvement mahdiste comme un mouvement proto-national<sup>165</sup> ou comme faisant partie d'une révolution bourgeoise motivée par des intérêts mercantiles<sup>166</sup>, l'argument de Cole insiste sur la nécessité de prendre en compte les changements sociaux à petite échelle qui ont affecté les différentes couches de la population. Dans le cas du Soudan nilotique, en raison de l'extrême diversité des milieux et des corps sociaux, l'analyse de la mobilisation mahdiste doit être ancrée dans un territoire spécifique, même si cela n'empêche pas les comparaisons. Alors que les sources disponibles sont loin d'offrir les mêmes descriptions granulaires sur lesquelles Cole a fondé son analyse des changements sociaux vécus par les différents segments de la société égyptienne, cette thèse tentera de retracer l'évolution du pouvoir et des structures socio-économiques au Soudan-Est depuis le XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle afin d'éviter la réification des catégories coloniales basées sur les seules appartenances tribales.

L'enjeu principal est de faire converger et de combiner les approches interprétatives et explicatives, c'est-à-dire, pour Roxanne L. Euben, d'adopter un « modèle dialogique d'interprétation<sup>167</sup> ». Cela signifie essentiellement qu'il faut garder une certaine distance avec les acteurs historiques et maintenir une position de neutralité réflexive, tout en évitant de situer l'analyse académique comme totalement externe. L'objectif principal de l'application de ce modèle à la mobilisation mahdiste est de laisser une place à la croyance et de limiter l'influence dominante du discours colonial britannique. D'une part, le risque de rechercher les causes du soulèvement mahdiste est de considérer l'idéologie mahdiste comme purement instrumentale, le mode d'expression par défaut du mécontentement de ces « rebelles primitifs<sup>168</sup> », vidant ainsi le discours mahdiste de toute substance et le réduisant à un langage commun de résistance. Il était courant chez les officiers coloniaux d'expliquer les fréquents changements d'allégeance des chefs de tribus qu'ils tentaient de rallier à leur cause. Ils voyaient dans leurs hésitations et leurs revirements la preuve de

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164 Juan R. COLE, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt Urabi Movement*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 234.

165 Pour un exemple caricatural, voir P. DAVID, « Le Soudan et l'État mahdiste sous le khalifa 'Abdullahi (1885-1899) », *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, 1988, vol. 75, n°280, p. 273-307.

166 Pour résumer injustement l'argument d'al-Qaddāl tel qu'il est présenté dans Muḥammad Sa'īd AL-QADDĀL, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādiyya li-l-dawla al-mahdiyya, 1881-1898*, *op. cit.*

167 Roxanne L. EUBEN, *Enemy in the Mirror*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 36-42.

168 Eric J. HOBSBAWM, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th centuries*, Manchester, Manchester University press, 1959.

leur ambivalence et de leur incrédulité inavouée. Tout engagement mahdiste pouvait alors être dépeint comme opportuniste et motivé par l'appât du gain ou l'acquisition d'une influence politique.

Mais ces mêmes officiers n'ont pu s'empêcher de constater que les combattants mahdistes étaient tout à fait prêts à mourir pour des convictions qu'ils n'avaient apparemment pas. Cette contradiction n'avait pas besoin d'être résolue. L'irrationalité du discours mahdiste était supposée et n'avait donc pas besoin d'être expliquée. Cette ambiguïté apparente pouvait être facilement imputée aux tendances « fanatiques » des musulmans, en particulier de ceux qui ne se conformaient pas aux représentations coloniales des croyances orthodoxes. À l'inverse, les autorités provinciales mahdistes, notamment au Soudan-Est, font fréquemment le même constat quant à l'inconstance de leurs adeptes. Dans leur correspondance, les chefs mahdistes accompagnent souvent leur demande de soumission de menaces physiques, mais le vocabulaire qu'ils utilisent est totalement imprégné de l'idéologie mahdiste. Il est inconcevable qu'ils aient formulé leurs instructions dans une langue dépourvue de puissance. Il faut donc supposer que plusieurs « programmes de vérité », pour reprendre la notion de Paul Veyne<sup>169</sup>, ont cohabité. Les individus pouvaient à la fois croire et ne pas croire, et leur position fluctuer au gré des circonstances, sans que leur engagement potentiel dans les idéaux mahdistes soit irrémédiablement abandonné.

Prenant en compte le point de vue de Lidwien Kapteijn selon lequel la Mahdiyya nécessite toujours d'être considérée « d'en bas »<sup>170</sup>, l'une des lignes centrales poursuivies dans cette thèse sera de mettre l'accent sur les perspectives des membres de la communauté mahdiste naissante composée de combattants, d'administrateurs et de leurs familles.

La seconde approche poursuit la réflexion élaborée plus haut sur la nécessité de réinsérer les hommes et les femmes qui ont participé, témoigné et se sont opposés au régime mahdiste dans le récit historique, en particulier en ce qui concerne la relation qu'ils ont entretenue avec l'appareil administratif mis en place dans les provinces de l'État mahdiste. Une analyse des dimensions normatives et prescriptives de l'État sera menée parallèlement à une réflexion sur la manière dont les individus ont interagi, se sont adaptés et ont réagi à ces injonctions afin de suggérer des idées sur leur perception de ce vocabulaire du pouvoir. Cette focalisation sur les individus plutôt que sur les groupes est au cœur de l'argumentation présentée ici. Si le mouvement mahdiste peut être décrit comme une réaction au processus de « modernisation » dont le Soudan nilotique est témoin depuis le XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, c'est-à-dire à son intégration croissante dans le « système mondial » et à l'influence

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169 Paul VEYNE, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes ?*, Paris, Seuil, 1983.

170 Lidwien KAPTEIJNS, « The Historiography of the Northern Sudan From 1500 to the Establishment of British Colonial Rule: A Critical Overview », *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 1989, vol. 22, n°2, p. 264.

du capitalisme sur le tissu socio-économique de la région, certains des premiers adeptes n'étaient pas tant opposés à la modernité que frustrés de ne pas avoir récolté les dividendes économiques et politiques qu'ils auraient pu espérer tirer de ces changements. Cela n'excluait pas d'autres positions, mais il s'agit de remplacer une opposition binaire par un paradigme plus nuancé articulé autour de leur interaction avec la modernité.

La focalisation sur les individus est la conséquence de deux tendances. La première relie l'émergence de ce que Schumpeter a appelé « l'État fiscal » à l'établissement d'une relation impersonnelle entre la population et l'administration<sup>171</sup>. Selon lui, l'établissement de « l'Etat moderne » a été permis par le déclin des liens qui structuraient la société féodale. Il s'est alors retrouvé responsable de toutes les dépenses liées à la guerre et a donc dû recourir à l'impôt. Cela nécessite « un cadre où les liens de la communauté se sont désagrégés et où l'individu [...] s'est déplacé vers le centre de gravité<sup>172</sup> ». S'il faut être prudent avant de transposer au Soudan nilotique un modèle initialement développé dans un contexte européen, de 1821 (1236/7) à 1881 (1298), le régime colonial égyptien a accéléré la désagrégation des liens féodaux entamée sous le sultanat funj tardif. Dans une certaine mesure, cet effort a été perpétué par le régime mahdiste. Au moins jusqu'en 1889 (1306/7), même si cela se limite à certains territoires périphériques, il cherche à incorporer tous les hommes disponibles pour le *jihād*. En conséquence, le processus d'individuation, même s'il est incomplet, est particulièrement intense<sup>173</sup>. Mais ce n'est pas la seule dynamique en jeu. Les relations féodales et tribales ont également été affectées par l'influence progressivement gagnée par les *shuyūkh soufis*, tout particulièrement après l'établissement de *turuq* soufis hiérarchisés au début du dix-neuvième siècle. Les pratiques qu'ils encouragent favorisent la formation de liens individualisés entre un disciple et son maître et, selon Albrecht Hofheinz, une forme d'intériorisation de la piété soufie<sup>174</sup>. Ces deux tendances se sont combinées, bien que selon des modalités qui restent complexes à évaluer, pour donner forme à de nouvelles normes de gouvernementalité qui ont structuré les communautés mahdistes.

Les administrations provinciales étaient l'un des principaux lieux d'expression de cette forme particulière d'autorité. Holt note que si la Mahdiyya « se présentait comme un mouvement primitiviste et rigoriste, fondamentalement opposé au changement et à la modernisation induite [...] par l'impact de l'Occident [...], dans les domaines de la modernisation technique et de

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171 Aaron G. JAKES, *Egypt's Occupation: Colonial Economism and the Crises of Capitalism*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2020, p. 17.

172 Richard A. Musgrave MUSGRAVE, « Schumpeter's Crisis of the Tax State: An Essay in Fiscal Sociology », *Journal of Evolutionary Economics*, 1992, vol. 2, n°2, p. 91-92.

173 Cet argument reflète de manière frappante le commentaire de Rudolf von Slatin mentionné plus haut sur la perturbation des structures sociales par l'abandon des réseaux tributaires fondés sur l'autorité hiérarchique.

174 Albrecht HOFHEINZ, *Internalising Islam: Shaykh Muḥammad Majdhūb, Scriptural Islam, and Local Context in the early Nineteenth-Century Sudan*, op. cit.

l'administration, tant de choses ont été reprises du régime turco-égyptien par l'État mahdiste, qu'à bien des égards, il en était le successeur<sup>175</sup>». Un certain nombre de commis de la Turkiyya<sup>176</sup>, souvent des coptes égyptiens comme Yūsuf Mikhā'il, ont en effet été incorporés dans l'administration mahdiste, mais le fait d'utiliser les mêmes personnes ne signifie pas qu'ils faisaient la même chose. Je souhaite réfuter l'idée de Holt selon laquelle l'État mahdiste a eu recours au même appareil administratif que le régime précédent par manque d'autres options.

Wael Hallaq a posé l'impossibilité de l'État islamique sur la base de deux arguments principaux<sup>177</sup>. Premièrement, parce que le droit positif, fondé sur la force autoritaire de l'État, est radicalement incompatible avec la loi islamique ; deuxièmement, parce que les technologies disciplinaires et réglementaires de l'État moderne ne sont pas islamiques<sup>178</sup>. Si l'on fait abstraction de la première partie de l'argument<sup>179</sup>, la Mahdiyya elle-même était manifestement un « État possible » et un exemple significatif que cette opposition entre la nature islamique de l'État et son utilisation de techniques disciplinaires de pouvoir nécessite au moins un examen plus approfondi. Malgré l'hypothèse de Holt quant à leur nature héritée, les structures administratives n'étaient pas une apposition circonstancielle convoquée pour résoudre des questions purement logistiques, mais étaient considérées comme essentielles à la formation d'une communauté mahdiste. Sans organisation préconçue prête à être mise en œuvre, elles étaient le résultat d'un processus graduel d'expérimentation fortement influencé par le principal modèle dont disposait le leadership mahdiste, celui du pouvoir disciplinaire du *turuq* soufi hiérarchisé. À cet égard, je souhaite démontrer que ce processus a été particulièrement vigoureux dans les provinces de l'État mahdiste, dans les sites où étaient agrégés les plus ardents partisans de la *da'wa* du Mahdī. Contrairement à ce que l'on a longtemps supposé sur l'hypercentralisation de l'État mahdiste, réalité indéniable, la formation des politiques concernant la gouvernance de la communauté mahdiste et des populations locales n'était

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175 Peter M. HOLT, « Modernization and Reaction in the Nineteenth-Century Sudan », in *Studies in the History of the Near East*, Londres, Franck Cass, 1973, p. 145.

176 Ce fut également le cas de spécialistes comme Yūsuf Khaṭīb, mentionné au début de ce texte.

177 Wael B. HALLAQ, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013.

178 Andrew F. MARCH, « Review Essay: What Can the Islamic Past Teach Us about Secular Modernity ? », *Political Theory*, 2015, vol. 43, p. 3.

179 L'argument de l'incompatibilité entre le droit positif et la *sharī'a* ne tient pas compte des nombreuses interactions entre la gouvernance (*siyāsa*) et la loi religieuse (*fiqh*) et du fait que tous les aspects de la vie d'une communauté musulmane n'étaient pas couverts par la loi religieuse. Dans le contexte de la Mahdiyya, de tels arguments ne sont pas nécessaires pour invalider le point de vue de Hallaq. Comme l'a noté Aharon Layish, le Mahdī a donné la priorité, sur toutes les autres formes de décisions juridiques, à une forme particulière d'interprétation (*ijtihād*) basée sur l'inspiration (*ilhām*). En conséquence, sa liberté de légiférer était presque illimitée, d'autant plus qu'il revendiquait l'infaillibilité (Aharon LAYISH, *Sharī'a and the Islamic State in 19th-Century Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 36-43.). Cela faisait écho à la tendance plus large des mouvements réformistes des XVIII<sup>e</sup> et XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles d'envisager l'abandon de l'école des lois (*madhhab* pl. *madhā'ib*) (Catherine MAYEUR-JAOUEN, « À la poursuite de la réforme » : renouveau et débats historiographiques de l'histoire religieuse et intellectuelle de l'islam, XV<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle », *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 2018, vol. 73, n<sup>o</sup>2, p. 357).

pas l'apanage du centre politique. Les actions menées en province pouvaient éclairer les orientations prises par le Khalīfa, l'une informant l'autre en boucle afin de s'adapter à des situations en constante évolution. Cela rappelle la théorie d'Isa Blumi, dans le contexte ottoman, selon laquelle « le type d'échanges ayant lieu dans ces contextes « locaux » était éminemment important pour le développement même du système étatique, de la bureaucratie et des modèles socio-économiques que nous associons aujourd'hui à la modernité<sup>180</sup>».

Enfin, cette thèse vise à montrer que les techniques de pouvoir utilisées par l'administration provinciale mahdiste n'étaient pas seulement régulatrices mais aussi transformatrices. Ce dernier aspect de la Mahdiyya était au cœur de la *da'wa* promue par le Mahdī et de la révolution dont il était l'instigateur. Ce dernier terme ne figure pas dans les descriptions du mouvement mahdiste<sup>181</sup>. Il n'apparaît pas dans les proclamations du Mahdī ni, semble-t-il, dans sa volumineuse correspondance. Les fonctionnaires britanniques qualifient les événements du Soudan nilotique de « révolte » ou de « soulèvement ». Na'ūm Shuqayr, le célèbre auteur de la première histoire complète du Soudan dans ses frontières coloniales, a introduit le terme en arabe (*thawra*)<sup>182</sup>. Toutefois, cette désignation ne s'est répandue qu'à la fin des années 1940, sous l'impulsion de la génération émergente d'historiens professionnels. La thèse de doctorat de Makkī Shibayka était intitulée « Le Soudan et la révolution mahdiste de 1881-1885 ». Holt a écrit plus tard que la Mahdiyya était « un mouvement d'origine religieuse [...] qui a accompli une révolution politique - le renversement de la domination égyptienne et l'établissement d'un État islamique indigène<sup>183</sup> ». Dans les deux cas, ces auteurs considèrent que la révolution a été accomplie en 1885 (1302) avec la prise de Khartoum, mettant ainsi fin au principal mouvement de contrôle territorial. Or, je considère que l'objectif proprement révolutionnaire du mouvement mahdiste ne résidait pas dans la formation d'un État mais dans l'établissement d'une société islamique idéale. Cela impliquait un effort durable pour modifier les comportements individuels, une perspective renforcée par le processus de subjectivation de la foi engagé par le *ṭuruq* soufi, ainsi que les structures sociales. L'influence mahdiste a été la plus forte à Umm Durmān, où les prisonniers européens ont été les témoins directs de ces efforts, comme l'a étudié Robert S. Kramer<sup>184</sup>. Cette thèse s'efforcera de démontrer que, contrairement à ce que l'on pourrait croire, ce double impératif de régulation et de transformation du

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180 Isa BLUMI, *Foundations of Modernity: Human Agency and the Imperial State*, New York et Abingdon, Routledge, 2012, p. 5.

181 On pourrait noter que la « révolution du drapeau blanc » de 1924 présentait des ambiguïtés similaires. Voir Elena VEZZADINI, *Lost Nationalism: Revolution, Memory and Anti-colonial Resistance in Sudan*, Woodbridge et Rochester, Boydell & Brewer, 2015.

182 Na'ūm SHUQAYR, *Tārīkh al-Sūdān al-qadīm wa al-ḥadīth wa jughrāfiyyat-hu*, Le Caire, Maṭba'at al-ma'ārif, 1903, p. 109.

183 Peter M. HOLT, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan*, *op. cit.* p. 4.

184 Robert S. KRAMER, *Holy City on the Nile: Omdurman during the Mahdiyya, 1885-1898*, *op. cit.* p. 81-125.

corps mahdiste a également été observé dans les provinces après 1885. L'armée mahdiste a été le principal instrument de cette politique.

### **La Mahdiyya par ses marges : le cas de la province du Soudan-Est**

L'orientation de cette thèse est le résultat de deux considérations. Tout d'abord, comme mon mémoire de maîtrise portait principalement sur le conflit entre les autorités anglo-égyptiennes de Sawākin et le mouvement mahdiste du Soudan-Est, il s'appuyait largement sur des sources étrangères<sup>185</sup>. L'objectif initial de cette thèse est de contrebalancer les voix sonores des archives coloniales en mobilisant des sources mahdistes. Deuxièmement, il s'agit de décentrer un récit trop souvent articulé du point de vue de la capitale et de proposer une histoire « par le bas » des hommes et des femmes qui se sont engagés dans le mouvement mahdiste, ainsi que des populations locales avec lesquelles ils ont interagi. En d'autres termes, pour paraphraser la célèbre expression d'Edward P. Thompson, l'objectif était, de manière quelque peu ambitieuse, de sauver les mahdistes « de l'énorme condescendance de la postérité<sup>186</sup> » et de tisser les fils d'une histoire sociale d'une province sous domination mahdiste, poursuivant ainsi la réévaluation initiée par des historiens tels que David F. Decker, Nawar el-Sheikh Mahboub, Robert S. Kramer et Iris Seri-Hersch.

La province (*'imāla* pl. *'imālāt*) du Soudan-Est offrait des avantages indéniables pour entreprendre une telle étude. Tout d'abord, la définition de ce territoire au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle était relativement cohérente et stable. Situé entre le littoral de la mer Rouge et la vallée du Nil, sa frontière nord était souvent fixée près de la frontière actuelle entre l'Égypte et le Soudan<sup>187</sup>. Au sud-ouest, la rivière 'Aṭbara était couramment utilisée pour distinguer le Soudan-Est des plaines du Buṭāna, du Nil jusqu'à Kasalā. La situation est plus ambiguë au sud-est. Les contreforts des hauts plateaux éthiopiens constituent une forte rupture topographique, cependant, les nombreuses vallées des rivières saisonnières relient les deux espaces et les circulations entre eux étaient fréquentes. Une situation similaire prévaut sur le littoral lui-même. La frontière soudano-érythréenne héritée de la colonisation italienne ne reflète que partiellement les réalités des implantations humaines. Les observateurs européens associaient cet espace au territoire tribal des populations Bija, c'est-à-dire des locuteurs bijāwī. Comme nous le verrons en détail dans le chapitre 3, la province orientale

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185 Anaël POUSSIER, *Le conflit au Soudan-Est : se battre pour Sawākin (1883-1891)*, mémoire de maîtrise, Université Paris-1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, 2012.

186 Edward P. THOMPSON, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Londres, V. Gollancz, 1963, p. 12.

187 La définition de cette frontière reste un point de discorde important entre les deux pays. Le triangle de Ḥalā'ib, région située au nord du 22<sup>e</sup> parallèle, a été placé sous l'autorité soudanaise en 1902 pour tenir compte des droits de pâturage des bergers bijāwī. En 1958, l'Égypte a décidé d'imposer sa souveraineté sur ce territoire. La question n'a toujours pas été résolue.



définie par l'administration mahdiste correspondait étroitement à ces frontières tribales<sup>188</sup>, sans jamais évoquer cette logique.

Un autre facteur facilitant la recherche dans cette région particulière est la relative disponibilité des sources<sup>189</sup>. Alors que toutes les troupes britanniques et égyptiennes ont été retirées du Soudan nilotique en 1885, peu après l'échec de l'expédition Wolseley visant à soulager Gordon à Khartoum, une garnison a été maintenue à Sawākin. Malgré la fermeture fréquente des portes de la ville entre 1885 et 1891, les officiers de renseignement qui y étaient stationnés avaient accès à un flux dense de nouvelles et de rumeurs propagées par les commerçants, les voyageurs et les chefs de tribus qui passaient par le port. Leurs publications reflètent la fragilité de leurs sources et leur compréhension limitée des réalités sociopolitiques en dehors de la ville, surtout avant 1889, date à laquelle l'organisation des antennes du DMI est revue par Wingate et sa production plus fiable<sup>190</sup>. Il donne néanmoins des indications précieuses, même si elles sont manifestement biaisées, sur les sujets de préoccupation des acteurs économiques et politiques régionaux, ce qui n'existe pas pour les autres provinces.

Ce corpus d'archives est utile car il offre une perspective distincte de celle des sources mahdistes, ce qui permet de les lire l'une par rapport à l'autre. Elles sont plus faciles à manipuler pour des raisons historiques et pratiques. Le Mahdī lui-même a placé la province orientale de l'État mahdiste sous l'autorité d'un des personnages les plus célèbres de l'époque, 'Uthmān b. Abū Bakr Diqna (c. 1840-1926), en 1883 (1300). Contrairement à d'autres régions qui ont connu de nombreux changements de dirigeants, notamment à la suite des purges de 1885-1886 (1300-1301), le Soudan-Est n'a été dirigé que par un seul *'āmil* durant toute la Mahdiyya, même si son pouvoir effectif a connu des changements spectaculaires au cours de cette période. Cela signifie que la correspondance qui s'établissait entre lui et le pouvoir central, le Khalīfa lui-même dans la majorité des cas, est beaucoup plus facile à retracer et offre une vision plus cohérente de l'évolution des politiques régionales que pour d'autres territoires. Ceci est renforcé par le fait qu'il a bénéficié de l'immense effort éditorial mené par Abū Salīm qui a publié en 2004 les *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna* [*Les écrits de 'Uthmān Diqna*], une compilation rigoureuse des lettres de 'Uthmān Diqna au Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi<sup>191</sup>. Il s'agissait d'un complément essentiel à l'édition beaucoup plus ancienne d'un texte fondamental et unique, le *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna* [*Le mémorial de 'Uthmān Diqna*]<sup>192</sup>,

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188 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, Khartoum, Dār al-balad li-l-ṭibā'a wa-l-nashr wa-l-tawzī', 1998, p. 7-8.

189 La nature des sources mobilisées dans cette thèse est présentée plus en détail dans chaque chapitre. La liste détaillée des sources mahdistes se trouve en annexe.

190 Martin W. Daly, « The soldier as historian: F.R. Wingate and the Sudanese Mahdia », *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 1988, vol. 17 (1), p. 99-106.

191 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM (éd.), *Muḥarrarāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.*

192 Dans le manuscrit, ces ouvrages sont désignés respectivement comme les *Muḥarrarāt* et les *Mudhakkirāt*.

décrivant pour le Mahdī les premières opérations militaires mahdistes dans l'est du Soudan<sup>193</sup>. Les lettres envoyées par le Mahdī et le Khalīfa à 'Uthmān Diqna ont également été copiées dans un livre de lettres (*daftar*), comme c'était pratique courante pour ce type de correspondance<sup>194</sup>. L'original du *Daftar 'Uthmān Diqna* est conservé au National Record Office (NRO) à Khartoum, mais une copie est également disponible sur microfilm aux Archives du Soudan de l'Université de Durham<sup>195</sup>.

Mais ce qui rend la province du Soudan-Est exceptionnelle, c'est l'issue inattendue d'une opération militaire britannique. Au début du mois de février 1891 (Rajab 1308), le lieutenant-colonel Holled Smith, qui porte alors le titre trompeur de gouverneur général de la mer Rouge, mais dont l'autorité réelle se limite ) Sawākin et aux environs immédiats du port, lance une série d'expéditions afin d'obtenir une forme de contrôle sur la région qui est censée être sous son autorité. Le 19 février (10 Rajab), il se rend à Afāfīt, centre provincial mahdiste du Soudan-Est, à quelques kilomètres de la garnison égyptienne de Tūkar, désormais abandonnée, dans le delta de la Baraka. Après avoir vaincu les *anṣār* qui avançaient contre lui, le commandant britannique fut surpris de découvrir une ville de plus de 6 000 *tukuls*<sup>196</sup>. Les agents du DMI s'empressent de rassembler le maximum de documents, fouillant le trésor provincial et les domiciles des personnages importants. La rapidité de l'avance a entièrement surpris les forces mahdistes. Elles se retirèrent précipitamment de leur position, laissant derrière elles un important corpus de documents administratifs datant de 1883 à 1891. Pour les raisons présentées au chapitre 4, la grande majorité de ces documents couvre la période allant de décembre 1888 à janvier 1891 (Rabī' II 1306 à Jumādā II 1308). Ils constituent désormais une section entière (section 5) du fonds mahdiste conservé au NRO à Khartoum. Une évaluation approximative de leur nombre, environ 5 000 documents, signifierait que cette section représente à elle seule 10 % de l'ensemble de la collection de documents mahdistes. Ce chiffre est purement indicatif puisqu'il s'agit d'additionner sous une même unité des types de textes, de registres et de reçus très dissemblables. Il donne néanmoins une impression réelle de l'ampleur de ce fonds, sans équivalent pour les archives mahdistes. En effet, dans le cas de la plupart des autres provinces, et notamment à Umm Durmān immédiatement après la défaite mahdiste de Karārī le 2 septembre 1898 (15 Rabī' II 1316), les administrateurs mahdistes ont le plus souvent brûlé les documents officiels, entre autres raisons pour ne pas trahir leur participation active au régime. De ce fait, aucun des autres trésors provinciaux ni le trésor central ne présentent un ensemble aussi

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193 Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Mudhakkirāt 'Uthmān Diqna*, *op. cit.* Le texte original est désigné comme *Daftar waqā'i' 'Uthmān Diqna* [*Le dossier de l'histoire de 'Uthmān Diqna*] et est conservé à Khartoum (NRO Mahdiyya 8/07/62).

194 Il existe plusieurs autres livres de lettres. Le premier à arriver entre les mains des officiers britanniques est celui de 'Abd al-Raḥmān w. al-Nujūmī, trouvé sur le champ de bataille de Tūshkī le 3 août 1889 (voir ci-dessus).

195 NRO Mahdiyya 8/07/60 et SAD 14/12M.

196 Francis R. WINGATE, *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan*, *op. cit.* p. 505.

continu et cohérent de documents financiers<sup>197</sup>.

Les historiens ne sont pas unanimes quant à l'intérêt de ces archives. Alors que Holt évoquait, à propos des documents administratifs et fiscaux, « une très riche collection<sup>198</sup> », al-Qaddāl était plus dubitatif quant à l'usage qui pouvait en être fait pour écrire une histoire économique de la Mahdiyya<sup>199</sup>. Dans une certaine mesure, tous deux avaient raison. L'espoir que cette documentation détaillée puisse fournir des informations sur la vie quotidienne de la communauté mahdiste établie dans l'Est du Soudan a été partiellement atteint. Ils sont restés silencieux sur les dynamiques plus larges de l'inscription du pouvoir mahdiste dans la région, tout particulièrement en ce qui concerne ses interactions avec les groupes locaux. Ces derniers sont rarement mentionnés et leur voix presque entièrement absente. L'historien Nicolas Michel s'était déjà demandé « si les merveilleux *daftar-s* ottomans ne nous transportaient pas dans un monde de papier<sup>200</sup> ». En effet, cette immense ressource, produite à grands frais par une petite administration provinciale, était essentiellement autoréférentielle, l'État se contemplant dans son action et mettant en valeur sa puissance, mais n'accordant qu'une attention parcimonieuse aux individus et à leur vie quotidienne. La frustration initiale causée par le mutisme relatif de ces textes a conduit à une reconfiguration de l'approche adoptée par cette recherche pour examiner le rôle de l'État – dont la présence est si évidente dans sa propre production – et insister sur la formation de cette bureaucratie et ses pratiques scripturales, afin de souligner les liens entre le pouvoir et les traces écrites laissées par le trésor provincial du Soudan-Est à travers sa matérialité et les microtechniques qu'il a déployées<sup>201</sup>, dans son entreprise de domination et de transformation de la communauté mahdiste militante installée en Afāfīt et du pouvoir qu'il a tenté d'exercer sur les populations de la région<sup>202</sup>.

### ***A) Chapitre I – Les sociétés bijāwī et les États dans la longue durée (XVI<sup>e</sup>-XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle)***

Le premier chapitre est une introduction dense à l'histoire du Soudan-Est dans la longue durée. Il s'attache en particulier à repenser les catégories d'analyse afin d'éviter d'essentialiser les différentes communautés qui résident dans cette région en montrant l'évolution de leurs zones de

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197 Le principal exemple de ces sources reste le précieux travail d'édition des comptes du trésor central pour la période allant du 22 mars au 24 décembre 1897 (18 Shawwāl 1314 à la fin de Rajab 1315) (Aḥmad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SHŪK et Anders J. BJØRKELO (ed.), *The Public Treasury of the Muslims: Monthly Budgets of the Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1897*, op. cit.) Comme on peut le constater d'emblée, il ne couvre que neuf mois, et ce à une période particulière où le régime mahdiste s'effondrait déjà devant l'avancée anglo-égyptienne menée par Kitchener.

198 Peter M. Holt, « The Archives of the Mahdia », *Sudan Notes and Records*, vol. 36 (1), 1955, p. 74.

199 Muḥammad Sa'īd al-Qaddāl, *Al-siyāsa al-iqtisādīyya li-l-dawlat al-mahdiyya*, 1881-1898, op. cit. p. 17.

200 « Et si les merveilleux *daftar-s* ottomans ne nous transportaient que dans un monde de papier ? » (Nicolas Michel, *L'Égypte des villages autour du seizième siècle*, Peeters, Paris, Louvain et Bristol, 2018, p. 10). Mes remerciements à Didier Guignard pour m'avoir signalé cette référence.

201 Rémi DEWIÈRE et Silvia BRUZZI, « Paroles de papier. Matérialité et écritures en contextes africains », *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 2019, vol. 236, n°4, p. 949-966.

202 Nicolas MICHEL, *L'Égypte des villages autour du seizième siècle*, Peeters, Paris, Louvain et Bristol, 2018.

peuplement, de leur rôle économique dans les circulations commerciales de la haute vallée du Nil et, surtout, des relations qu'elles ont entretenues avec les régimes voisins depuis le début de la période moderne jusqu'aux années 1870.

Ces communautés sont parmi les groupements humains du continent africain dont la généalogie est la plus ancienne. Ils apparaissent sous le nom de « Blemmiyes » dans quelques textes de la haute antiquité, ainsi que dans nombre de sources romaines. Ceci est d'autant plus remarquable qu'il s'agissait de groupes indépendants qui ne semblent pas avoir été soumis, à cette période, à un pouvoir centralisé. Ceci leur confère une profondeur historique très rare pour les populations de la région et leur permet notamment d'éviter le sort réservé à la plupart des groupes pastoraux et nomades, c'est-à-dire la relégation dans une immanence et la négation de leur historicité. Inversement, la puissance des représentations qui leur sont associées a eu tendance à figer leur rôle. De ce point de vue, le Bijāwī ont longtemps été associé à la figure de l'autre dans sa relation antagoniste avec l'État, mais aussi dans sa distance avec la culture écrite, l'arme du pouvoir. Le Bijāwī est justement celui qui ne se soumet pas, celui qui se trouve à la marge des intenses échanges commerciaux, politiques et intellectuels qui façonnent la mer Rouge, ou encore celui qui réside de l'autre côté, dans le *qayf*, sur le continent. Paradoxalement, cette connaissance est d'abord le reflet des regards étatiques qui se sont posés sur eux et qui, à travers les siècles, ont fini par produire un voile tenace sur la réalité de leur trajectoire historique. Les sections suivantes ont ainsi pour vocation de déchirer ce voile et réhistoriciser ces communautés.

Loin de l'image d'un groupe tribal hors du temps que les administrateurs britanniques ont contribué à forger, du XVI<sup>e</sup> à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, les communautés bijāwī ont présenté une grande variété d'organisations sociopolitiques tels que les réseaux commerciaux des Ḥaḍāriba, la confédération des Bishārīn ou le système de castes des Banī 'Āmir. L'accent mis sur la structuration tribale dans l'historiographie en dit donc plus sur la prédominance des perspectives étatiques dans les écrits historiques que sur la réalité des structures politiques et sociales bijāwī. Ce qui ressort de l'analyse des identités bijāwī est leur mutabilité. En effet, bien plus que fondée sur une appartenance ethnique, l'identité bijāwī pouvait se décliner selon des critères fonctionnels, c'est-à-dire selon leur rôle dans les dynamiques socio-économiques. Ainsi, peut-être serait-il plus opportun de parler de *bijāwī*, sans majuscule, comme il est possible d'évoquer des bédouins, ou de *haḍārib*, pour ceux qui avaient investi les échanges marchands. En contrepoint, cette approche entraîne la dissolution de l'unicité bijāwī. Si l'on réfute l'idée qu'il ne s'agissait que d'une désignation étique, il convient de remarquer que le facteur primordial d'identification est linguistique. Sont bijāwī ceux qui parlent le bijāwīyet, un critère qui joua un rôle central dans les logiques d'identification du régime mahdiste, ainsi que cela est écrit dans le dernier chapitre.

En-deçà de l'identité proprement bijāwī, les identités tribales reposaient sur des traditions généalogiques élaborées au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Celles-ci étaient motivées par les tentatives de l'État colonial (égyptien ou britannique) de rendre la société bijāwī plus lisible, et en même temps, elles exprimaient une compréhension vernaculaire, à la fois descriptive et performative, de l'évolution des corps sociaux bijāwī dans le sillage de la grande migration méridionale. Pour l'occasion, ces traditions mobilisèrent une grammaire de l'auto-identification élaborée peu avant, au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, par les populations de la haute vallée du Nil. En d'autres termes, la tribalisation partielle et ambivalente des communautés bijāwī n'a pas été uniquement un processus imposé de l'extérieur.

L'analyse de la trajectoire historique des populations du Soudan-Est est menée de façon diachronique et spatialisée. L'installation des clans hadanduwa dans le triangle bijāwī sud ne peut être réduite à une simple expansion territoriale. Elle a également modifié les dynamiques de la structuration interne de ces communautés et de leurs articulations avec d'autres groupes. Les quelques sources dont nous disposons ne nous permettent malheureusement pas d'aller au-delà de ces hypothèses, mais il est possible que l'organisation primordiale des droits fonciers, ainsi que son corollaire, la territorialisation des identités bijāwī, furent façonnées au cœur de la vallée du Qāsh au tournant du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. L'argument central est de considérer que l'intrusion violente des communautés hadanduwa depuis les collines de la mer Rouge dans les territoires du Sud a accéléré un processus engagé lors des migrations bishārī et ammār'ar, d'élaboration d'un droit coutumier, le *salif*, afin de réguler l'accès à la terre et réduire les antagonismes locaux.

La principale conclusion à tirer de cette démonstration est qu'une part significative des transformations internes observées au sein des populations bijāwī avait des origines endogènes. L'influence de l'État a pu être significative, par exemple en ce qui concerne la monopolisation des relations commerciales internationales par les sultans du Funj au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, une décision qui ne pouvait manquer d'affecter la Ḥaḍāribā, mais cela ne doit pas empêcher d'envisager le Soudan-Est comme un espace autonome avec ses propres contraintes, y compris les contraintes environnementales qui ont certainement joué un rôle déterminant dans la migration vers le sud. À cet égard, une partie, voire la totalité de la région eut être considérée comme une forme de *zomia*, pour reprendre le terme popularisé par James Scott, se contractant ou s'étendant en fonction de la force relative des États voisins.

Pourtant, définir la région comme un « espace non étatique » et les populations bijāwī comme des « peuples sans État » est trompeur et tend à réifier une distinction fondée sur ce qu'ils ne sont pas, plutôt que de souligner la complexité et l'originalité de leur trajectoire historique. L'incompatibilité supposée entre les structures tribales et étatiques repose sur une considération

idéal-typique de la première qui n'a que peu, voire aucun fondement historique. La dépendance de l'État à l'égard de la participation des populations bijāwī a été évidente tout au long du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, pour le transport, la fourniture des chameaux nécessaires, la culture, etc. Si les dirigeants tribaux ont souvent tenté de contrer l'action de l'État, ils ont aussi su instrumentaliser la légitimité étatique pour asseoir leur propre pouvoir. La relation entre les populations locales et les pouvoirs centraux n'a jamais été univoque.

### ***B) Chapitre II – Révolte et guerre civile au Soudan-Est (années 1870-1888)***

Dans le second chapitre, la transformation du contexte socio-économique dans les années 1870 est analysée pour expliquer la dynamique de la mobilisation mahdiste à partir de 1883 (1300). L'arrivée de la *da'wa* mahdiste au Soudan-Est, par l'intermédiaire du *'āmil* 'Uthmān Dīqna, est traitée dans la seconde partie. À rebours du récit dominant, l'adhésion au mahdisme ne se confond pas avec les catégories tribales et ne se limite pas aux nomades bijāwī, mais révèle des tensions beaucoup plus complexes au sein des populations du Soudan-Est. La nature du conflit qui opposa les forces mahdistes aux troupes anglo-égyptiennes de 1883 à 1885 (1301-1302) est traitée, du point de vue des combattants bijāwī, dans la troisième partie, tandis que l'éclatement de la guerre civile bijāwī en 1886-1888 (1303-1305) est l'objet de la dernière partie.

Ce développement est une tentative d'ancrer l'histoire de la Mahdiyya dans un territoire spécifique et de narrer cette histoire depuis la perspective des populations du Soudan-Est. L'objectif central de ce second chapitre est de nuancer les narrations historiques qui mettent en avant le caractère exogène du message mahdiste et qui donc analysent sa diffusion de manière univoque, comme un projet qui émanerait exclusivement de la figure du Mahdī, avec le résultat que sa trajectoire est exclusivement vue par le prisme de son expansion territoriale progressive. Au contraire, la première section dresse le portrait d'une région profondément affectée par des dynamiques globales et régionales et les adaptations de la population locale à ces changements. À cet égard, cette analyse s'écarte des récits précédents en mettant en avant la complexité des motifs qui ont pu amener certains Bijāwī à participer au *jihād*. Surtout, elle remet en question la caractérisation du mouvement mahdiste au Soudan-Est comme essentiellement rural et tribal. Depuis les années 1860, et avec une intensité accrue dans les années 1870, l'économie du Soudan-Est a été partiellement intégrée dans les circulations mondiales, notamment du fait de la montée en puissance du commerce intérieur avec l'ouverture des territoires du sud soudanais et de l'intensification des échanges commerciaux en mer Rouge avec l'inauguration du canal de Suez en 1869. Ceci eut des conséquences importantes pour les communautés urbaines et pastorales de la région. Contrairement à ce que l'on a longtemps pensé, le succès initial du mahdisme n'a pas été

fondé sur le pur opportunisme des nomades bijāwī, attirés par la perspective d'un butin et animés d'un irrésistible désir de se battre. Si l'opposition aux États centraux est une dynamique historique de long terme, et s'il ne convient pas de nier son importance pour expliquer la mobilisation de certains clans bijāwī, il convient de souligner que le noyau de la mobilisation mahdiste était divers et que les marchands bijāwī de la Sawākiniyya y occupaient une place centrale. Les premiers individus qui se joignirent au mouvement initié par ʿUthmān Dīqna et soutenu par le *shaykh* al-Tāhir al-Majdhūb des Majādhīb dont l'influence était alors considérable sur les populations de la région, ne peut s'expliquer qu'en faisant référence à un réseau complexe d'interactions entre les différents segments d'une population aux aspirations diversifiées. En d'autres termes, les premiers *ansār* n'étaient pas des Bijāwī qui faisaient montre par leur participation au *jihād* d'un antagonisme ancestral à toute structure étatique et qui auraient instrumentalisé le mahdisme pour servir leurs propres désirs d'indépendance vis-à-vis du régime colonial égyptien, mais plutôt d'un ensemble hétéroclite d'individus réunis justement par la relation qu'ils entretiennent avec l'État. Ceux qui se sont mobilisés sont ceux qui ont été affectés par la reconfiguration des relations socio-économiques observées pendant les années 1870. Comprendre l'adhésion au mahdisme requiert donc de sortir d'un modèle qui ne verrait dans le Soudan-Est qu'une périphérie et dans les populations locales les agents passifs d'un message millénariste adopté pour des motifs opportunistes.

Il convient, cependant, de ne pas nier la puissance des relations familiales, claniques et tribales, qui ont également joué un rôle majeur dans la mobilisation. Les Dīqnāb et les Majādhīb ont été des acteurs centraux et le sont restés tout au long de la période. Les solidarités de groupe ont été primordiales pour la diffusion rapide du mouvement au Soudan-Est. Pour autant, ces logiques d'appartenance ne doivent pas être vues comme les seuls facteurs déterminants. Clans et tribus constituaient des communautés politiques potentielles qui pouvaient servir de vecteurs de mobilisation, mais elles pouvaient aussi, et ce fut souvent le cas, être profondément divisées et ses membres adopter des positions antagonistes. Ce second cas était d'autant plus probable que l'adhésion au mahdisme était d'abord un engagement personnel et individuel.

Ce chapitre évite, autant que faire se peut, les développements sur les aspects proprement militaires parce que ceux-ci sont bien connus, notamment grâce aux multiples témoignages disponibles du côté britannique au sujet des campagnes de 1884 et 1885. Toutefois, les considérations religieuses, souvent négligées par les observateurs contemporains, sont fondamentales pour expliquer les formes de guerre adoptées par les *ansār*. Contre les représentations essentialistes et exotisantes véhiculées par les témoignages écrits pour la plupart par des officiers britanniques qui vantent le courage des combattants bijāwī mais confinent l'action de ces derniers à une forme de sauvagerie irrationnelle alimentée par un fanatisme religieux, il

convient de souligner la puissance des attentes millénaristes ainsi que l'intensité de l'adhésion de ces hommes au projet mahdiste. Toutes deux ont façonné les formes mêmes du combat, ce qui impose de considérer celui-ci non pas tant à travers un prisme stratégique ou tactique, mais comme une action sociale totale et la manifestation de la prégnance des idéaux énoncés par le Mahdī.

Malgré le fait que la mobilisation mahdiste était initialement une décision individuelle et religieuse, les dynamiques tribales et claniques ont elles aussi contribué à structurer le mouvement. La fin des opérations anglo-égyptiennes à l'extérieur de Sawākin à partir de 1885 (1302/3) et l'affirmation d'un contrôle territorial sur l'ensemble du Soudan-Est avec la capture de Kasalā en juillet 1885 (Shawwāl 1302) ont permis la stabilisation de l'autorité mahdiste. Les tentatives pourtant modérées du nouveau pouvoir de s'affirmer, notamment par l'introduction d'une nouvelle fiscalité, ont très rapidement suscité d'importantes résistances, d'abord dans le nord, à partir de 1886, avant que le mouvement n'atteigne le Tāka à partir de l'été 1887 (fin 1304). Dans ce contexte de fortes tensions, les affiliations tribales et claniques regagnèrent de leur vigueur. La capture de Sawākin et l'expulsion des « Turcs », les deux principaux objectifs du *jihād* au Soudan-Est, représentaient un objectif auquel la plupart des individus bijāwī pouvaient adhérer. La fin temporaire des combats, le résultat du retrait des troupes anglo-égyptiennes derrière les murs du port de la mer Rouge, laissa un vide. La relative unité bijāwī qui avait prévalu jusqu'alors se fissura et l'opposition au régime mahdiste gagna de nombreux segments de la population locale. Mais les intérêts divergents des différentes communautés, entre autres au regard des avantages qu'ils espéraient obtenir des autorités mahdistes, ne permit pas la formation d'un front commun. Au contraire, le mouvement d'opposition se transforma vite en une guerre civile à l'échelle de l'ensemble de la région. Dans ce cadre, tant 'Uthmān Diqna que les gouverneurs de la mer Rouge tentèrent, souvent avec peu de succès, d'instrumentaliser ces rivalités. Il convient, cependant, de ne pas réifier ces dernières, mais de les historiciser et ainsi, les réinscrire dans l'histoire longue engagée au premier chapitre et poursuivie au début du second. En effet, ces dynamiques sont cruciales pour expliquer les positions fluctuantes des différents groupes installés au Soudan-Est.

### ***C) Chapitre III – La formation des autorités provinciales mahdistes au Soudan-Est (1883-1891)***

La violente campagne de répression contre les communautés bijāwī réfractaires au pouvoir mahdiste prit fin à l'été 1888, notamment en raison de l'épuisement des groupes belligérants, les autorités provinciales dirigées par le *'āmil* 'Uthmān Diqna commençant à affirmer leur pouvoir avec plus d'intensité. Ce processus s'accompagna d'un mouvement de bureaucratisation qui aboutit à la fondation d'un trésor à Tūkar à la fin de l'année 1888. Ainsi ce chapitre est d'abord dédié à la



question de la territorialisation du pouvoir mahdiste par l'établissement d'une structure de pouvoir provincial. La deuxième partie est focalisée sur la province du Soudan-Est afin d'étudier la construction progressive d'une administration locale, d'abord à Kasalā, puis à Handūb, et enfin à Tūkar à partir du début 1889. Enfin, la question de l'encadrement des populations et de leurs dirigeants une fois qu'ils ont proclamé leur soutien au régime mahdiste occupe une place centrale dans la pensée politique du Mahdī dès le début du mouvement. L'enjeu est en effet crucial. À ses débuts, la principale manifestation de l'adhésion à la *da'wa* de Muḥammad Aḥmad impliquait de réaliser la *hijra*, le pèlerinage vers le Mahdī, d'abord à Qadīr dans les monts Nūba puis à al-Ubayyīd à partir de janvier 1883 (Rabī' I 1300). De ce point de vue, les premiers agents provinciaux de la Mahdiyya étaient de simples intermédiaires chargés d'organiser le départ des nouveaux disciples du mahdisme. Ce n'est que dans un second temps, une fois l'insurrection stabilisée et le pouvoir mahdiste installé dans un cadre urbain que fut amorcée la transformation du mouvement révolutionnaire en une structure étatique. Elle impliquait la mise en place d'une hiérarchie claire, un processus qui ne fut jamais tout à fait achevé. Surtout, elle entraîna un renversement presque total des modalités de la mobilisation. Pendant la première phase du mouvement, les combattants du *jihād* devaient rejoindre le Mahdī où il se trouvait. Le mouvement se réalisait donc de la périphérie vers le centre (selon la géographie mahdiste). Les agents mahdistes dans les provinces étaient pour la majorité des *shuyūkh* soufis, c'est-à-dire des figures religieuses locales qui étaient accréditées par le Mahdī par le biais d'une licence (*ijāza* pl. *ijāzāt*) et qui utilisèrent leur légitimité et leur autorité pour soutenir et organiser le mouvement. À partir de 1883, la plupart d'entre eux furent remplacés par des administrateurs qui avaient été nommés directement par le Mahdī et dont ce dernier n'avait pas à craindre les velléités d'autonomie. Ceci constituait un renversement radical du processus de contrôle territorial. Désormais, les représentants de la Mahdiyya se rendraient d'abord auprès du Mahdī pour ensuite être envoyés dans les provinces. Ce processus fut poursuivi en parallèle de l'imposition graduelle du droit islamique suivant les interprétations du Mahdī, à l'origine d'une forme de territorialisation légale du pouvoir mahdiste.

C'est dans ce cadre que 'Uthmān Dīqna fut nommé *'āmil* du Soudan-Est en mai 1883 (Rajab 1300). Toutefois, son rôle ne fut, dans un premier temps, que militaire. Ce n'est qu'à partir de la fin 1885, après la mort du Mahdī, que son successeur, le Khalīfa 'Abdullāhi acheva le processus de constitution de provinces avec des limites relativement fixes. C'est alors seulement qu'émergea une véritable administration provinciale placée sous le contrôle d'un trésor. Les évolutions de ce dernier, surtout à partir de 1888 quand une institution distincte de celle de Kasalā fut créée à Handūb, montre la complexité des dynamiques qui façonnèrent l'administration provinciale mahdiste. Contrairement aux analyses précédentes qui insistaient sur le rôle prépondérant

du Khalīfa dans l'institutionnalisation de cette administration, l'exemple du trésor de Tūkar permet de montrer que non seulement les continuités avec le processus initié par le Mahdī étaient importantes, mais aussi qu'une partie significative de la structure établie au Soudan-Est (comme dans d'autres régions) a été façonnée par des décisions locales liées à des circonstances endogènes. Malgré ses limites, l'appareil administratif centré sur le trésor de Tūkar était une institution complexe qui tentait de répondre à des besoins spécifiques avec des ressources limitées, et non une imitation brouillonne d'un trésor central qui ne pouvait fonctionner que grâce à la participation des anciens administrateurs de la Turkiyya. Par conséquent, l'autonomie provinciale est une réalité qu'il ne faut pas écarter d'emblée, et le modèle élaboré par l'historien Peter M. Holt qui distingue entre les "provinces militaires" et les "provinces métropolitaines" doit être abandonné au profit d'une approche plus nuancée qui met en avant les influences réciproques entre le centre du pouvoir et les provinces, ainsi qu'entre les provinces elles-mêmes, à travers la circulation des hommes et des pratiques administratives.

Le rôle de ces institutions provinciales n'était pas seulement comptable. L'administration mahdiste avait pour principale fonction de maintenir un équilibre entre les différentes sources d'autorité. Les procédures administratives complexes mises en œuvre par le trésor visaient à concrétiser les principes énoncés par le Mahdī d'un gouvernement juste et égalitaire. De ce point de vue, l'organisation interne du trésor de Tūkar reflétait l'importance accordée non pas tant à la dimension proprement comptable du travail administratif, mais plutôt au caractère légitime de chacune des opérations. En d'autres mots, la principale fonction du trésor n'était pas de tenir un inventaire des denrées, des produits, et de l'équipement, mais bien de conserver la trace de chaque entrée et sortie afin d'en vérifier la légalité, et potentiellement, de pouvoir répondre à toute contestation de la part des *anṣār* ou des *umarā'* quant à l'origine de telle ou telle décision. Le dense réseau d'autorisations, de relevés et de registres produits par les agents du trésor de Tūkar formait la base d'une économie morale mahdiste qui prescrivait la juste répartition des ressources entre les combattants. Du fait de cette position stratégique au cœur du pouvoir provincial, le trésor devint le principal terrain d'affrontement des ambitions concurrentes des dirigeants mahdistes, comme celles qui ont causé la rupture entre 'Uthmān Dīqna et son second, Muḥammad 'Uthmān Abū Qarja. Ces développements étaient suivis de près par le Khalīfa qui s'appuyait presque exclusivement sur le dense réseau épistolaire fondé par le Mahdī pour surveiller ses agents dans l'ensemble du Soudan nilotique. Cependant, les lettres ne pouvaient que contribuer à résoudre ces rivalités et autres tensions émanant de ces communautés. La convocation des chefs locaux à Umm Durmān permettait au leader mahdiste d'avoir accès à une information de meilleure qualité que celle qui lui parvenait de manière irrégulière depuis les centres provinciaux. Cependant, même les réunions annuelles

étaient difficiles à organiser, d'autant plus qu'elles provoquaient des vacances de pouvoir problématiques dans les quartiers généraux provinciaux, souvent à l'origine d'un redoublement des contestations et conflits internes. L'envoi de délégués, une pratique initiée par le Mahdī mais formalisée par le Khalīfa, lui permettait de réaffirmer son autorité et d'imposer une surveillance directe sur les activités des agents provinciaux. Souvent vu comme une manifestation de l'absence d'autonomie des provinces à l'égard du pouvoir central, ce système montre au contraire une attention véritable de la part du Khalīfa à l'égard des dynamiques locales et de la nécessité d'adapter le pouvoir au contexte régional. À cet égard, la variabilité des configurations provinciales ne doit pas être interprétée comme le signe d'une absence d'organisation, mais comme des adaptations à des contextes particuliers et évolutifs. Pour donner un sens à ces spécificités, il faut renouveler notre compréhension des liens qui unissaient les différents espaces politiques du régime mahdiste. Cela ne remet pas en cause le caractère centralisé de l'État mahdiste, même si un examen attentif des pratiques de l'administration provinciale révèle un tableau contrasté. Les relations entre le centre politique et les territoires extérieurs étaient plus réciproques que cela n'était pensé auparavant. Des expériences et des adaptations pouvaient être menées dans un contexte provincial pour être avalisées *a posteriori* par la Khalīfa, parfois maintenu délibérément dans un état d'ignorance nébuleuse des détails de la situation. En outre, certains aspects des politiques locales ou de l'organisation locale du pouvoir pouvaient être transférés d'une province à l'autre et même se retrouver à Umm Durmān.

#### ***D) Chapitre IV – L'économie de guerre mahdiste et la guerre économique britannique***

La mobilisation de combattants pour le *jihād*, le principal objectif des leaders mahdistes, nécessitait l'acquisition et la gestion de ressources qui étaient, et sont toujours, assez rares au Soudan-Est. L'importante documentation produite entre 1888 et 1891 (1306-1308) par la bureaucratie mahdiste offre une rare fenêtre sur l'économie provinciale mahdiste. Le niveau de détail inégalé de ces documents permet une analyse approfondie du budget mahdiste en dehors de la capitale et peut également être utilisé pour retracer les politiques commerciales adoptées à la fois par les autorités britanniques à Sawākin et par les dirigeants mahdistes. Le chapitre est structuré autour des trois ressources essentielles du pouvoir mahdiste au Soudan-Est. L'argent, évidemment, occupait une place centrale dans cette économie. Le système fiscal imposé aux populations ne représentait pas seulement un moyen d'extraire une partie de la richesse locale pour financer la mobilisation des *anṣār*. Parce que l'insurrection mahdiste fut en partie une réaction aux pratiques du régime colonial égyptien considérées comme prédatrices, il était impératif pour la fiscalité mahdiste de se démarquer de ce contre-modèle, avec un succès limité. Du fait de sa position au croisement de

routes commerciales importantes, la province du Soudan-Est pouvait également compter sur la captation d'une partie des flux marchands entre l'intérieur du pays et la mer Rouge. La gestion des produits collectés dans ce cadre était une des tâches les plus importantes du trésor et permit, en partie, de compenser la fragilité intrinsèque des prélèvements fiscaux. Enfin, les céréales, le sorgho (*dhurra*) et le millet (*dukhn*) étaient absolument nécessaires à l'alimentation des *anṣār*. Dans le contexte extrêmement tendu de la famine de l'an six (*sanat sitta*) de 1889-1891, l'approvisionnement en grain était un enjeu crucial pour l'administration mahdiste, mais aussi pour les autorités anglo-égyptiennes à Sawākin qui instrumentalisèrent la pénurie pour provoquer l'effondrement du pouvoir de 'Uthmān Dīqna.

À l'origine, la fiscalité introduite par le Mahdī devait se conformer aux prescriptions islamiques et reposait donc sur les deux impôts canoniques : la *zakāt* et le *'ushr*. En principe, le premier était une taxe individuelle de 2,5 % sur le capital tandis que le second était un prélèvement de 10 % sur les revenus, tout particulièrement les opérations de ventes et d'achat. L'implémentation de cette fiscalité au Soudan-Est fut un processus complexe qui suscita de nombreuses résistances. Il est délicat de dresser un portrait cohérent des dispositifs fiscaux. Ceux-ci évoluent, les appellations changent fréquemment et surtout, le cadre théorique n'est jamais établi. En effet, le cadre fondé par le Mahdī n'avait pas réellement pour vocation d'être utilisé tel quel. Il s'agissait d'établir un système idéal (même si le Mahdī pouvait prêter attention à certaines spécificités de la culture du Soudan nilotique) qui contraste avec les pratiques de la Turkiyya. Quand les administrateurs provinciaux voulurent taxes les populations locales, le cadre posé par Muḥammad Aḥmad était difficilement applicable. Cette fiscalité a donc connu de nombreuses modifications et adaptations. La relative confusion qui entourait ainsi les opérations fiscales a longtemps été considérée comme le signe de leur caractère extra-judiciaire. La fiscalité mahdiste a donc longtemps été conçue comme essentiellement prédatrice et fondée sur le pillage. Il est vrai que l'administration mahdiste au Soudan-Est, et cela est également vrai pour les autres administrations provinciales et centrale, était structurellement déficitaire. Les taux d'imposition et les assiettes de la fiscalité mahdiste étaient trop réduits pour permettre de financer l'État, surtout dans le cadre de la mobilisation massive de la population pour le *jihād*, autant d'hommes et de femmes qui dépendaient entièrement du régime pour subvenir à leurs besoins. Les extractions violentes de ressources par le biais de raids étaient donc fréquentes, mais celles-ci ne constituaient pas la norme. En effet, pour palier ce déficit, l'administration de Tūkar n'eut pas d'autres choix que d'emprunter des sommes très importantes auprès des marchands en activité dans la région, les seuls à même de disposer d'un capital suffisant. Contrairement à l'image caricaturale d'un État peu soucieux de la légalité de son action, les documents produits par le trésor mahdiste témoignent de l'attention portée à l'enregistrement de ses

emprunts. Plus surprenant encore, ceux-ci ont fait l'objet de remboursements certes incomplets mais néanmoins réguliers sur l'ensemble de la période. Ceci s'explique d'une part par la nécessité d'entretenir de bonnes relations avec les crédateurs, en vue de contracter d'autres prêts, mais aussi par l'intensité des relations entre les milieux marchands et l'autorité mahdiste au Soudan-Est.

En effet, malgré l'effondrement du commerce à partir de 1883 et la fermeture du port de Sawākin, des quantités significatives de biens continuèrent à transiter par le littoral soudanais de la mer Rouge. Afin de poursuivre leurs activités, tant les marchands soudanais qu'étrangers durent composer avec l'administration mahdiste. Dans une certaine mesure, ils devinrent les financeurs du mouvement. En contrepartie, ils obtinrent accès à un certain nombre de ressources, y compris celles placées sous monopole étatique comme les esclaves, l'ivoire, et la gomme arabique. Les autorités anglo-égyptiennes à Sawākin réalisèrent très rapidement tout l'avantage qu'ils pouvaient tirer de leur contrôle sur ces flux. Puisque le noyau mahdiste était essentiellement composé d'individus issus de communautés directement impliquées dans les échanges commerciaux, la fermeture des portes du principal port soudanais sur la mer Rouge et l'imposition d'un blocus côtier constituaient, selon eux, des outils particulièrement efficaces pour fragiliser le pouvoir mahdiste et soutenir les groupes rebelles en leur y accordant un accès privilégié. Cette politique connut de nombreux retournements au gré des positions des gouverneurs de Sawākin, ainsi que de l'évolution de la position des Mahdistes. À l'instar de de la construction de l'administration provinciale, la correspondance entre 'Uthmān Diqna et le Khalīfa permet de nuancer le caractère centralisé du processus décisionnel. Là aussi, l'administration provinciale disposait d'une certaine autonomie et contribua à définir la politique commerciale de Umm Durmān.

Kitchener, le gouverneur du littoral de la mer Rouge de 1886 à 1888 comptait parmi les officiers les plus préoccupés par ce qu'il estimait être une contradiction interne de la politique anglo-égyptienne à l'égard des flux marchands. Convaincu que ceux-ci alimentaient directement les Mahdistes, il considérait la poursuite des échanges comme une grave erreur qui seule permettait le maintien du pouvoir mahdiste dans la région. Celui-ci était en effet très dépendant de la production locale, localisée essentiellement dans les deltas du Baraka et du Qāsh. Quand une série de chocs externes – une période d'aridité combinée à une invasion de sauterelles – élimina cette source, les Mahdistes et l'ensemble des communautés bijāwī se retrouvèrent intégralement dépendantes des importations depuis la vallée du Nil et la mer Rouge. L'action des autorités britanniques témoigne d'une volonté affichée et d'un effort concerté d'interdire toute entrée de grain sous le prétexte d'une épidémie de choléra. Alors même que les greniers de Sawākin étaient remplis, la population à l'extérieur de ses murs fut laissée presque entièrement démunie.

Il est difficile d'évaluer les effets de la famine de 1306 sur la population du Soudan Est. Les

estimations démographiques sont fragiles et les recensements ultérieurs effectués dans le Soudan nilotique notoirement problématiques, entre autres parce que la puissance coloniale nouvellement établie avait toutes les raisons d'amplifier l'effondrement de la population du Soudan nilotique au cours de la Mahdiyya. Lors du premier recensement de 1903 (1320/1), la population du Soudan oriental a été estimée à 140 000 personnes, contre 800 000 en 1882 (1299/300). L'estimation de l'historien Steven Serels (210 000) est certainement beaucoup plus proche de la réalité. Il n'en reste pas moins qu'un tiers de la population de la région aurait disparu en deux décennies. La politique britannique fut un succès. Le pouvoir mahdiste fut durablement fragilisé par la famine de 1306. Ceci permit au colonel Hotted Smith de mener en janvier et février 1891, quelques mois seulement après la réouverture du commerce à Sawākin, des opérations contre Handūb puis contre Tūkar qui aboutirent à la défaite complète des *anṣār*. La capture du centre administratif d' Afāfīt et du delta de la Baraka scella le sort du régime mahdiste au Soudan-Est. En prenant le contrôle de la principale zone agricole, les autorités anglo-égyptiennes se sont assurées que 'Uthmān Diqna serait incapable de nourrir ses troupes, tandis que le recours à des transferts en provenance d'autres régions n'était plus une option envisageable. Contrairement aux précédents revers subis par les forces mahdistes, au lendemain de leur défaite à Afāfīt, les *anṣār* ne se replièrent pas sur les collines de la mer Rouge, qui leur avaient servi de refuge entre 1883 et 1886 (1300-1304), mais se retirèrent jusqu'à Kasalā et Adarāma sur la rivière 'Aṭbara. Ceci marque la fin d'une évolution initiée avec la guerre civile bijāwī qui a progressivement isolé le mouvement millénariste des populations locales. Elle n'a cependant pas mis fin à la tentative de former une nouvelle société réformée respectant les principes édictés par le Mahdī.

### ***E) Chapitre V – Mahdisme, territoire et population***

Le pouvoir provincial mahdiste était chargé de subvenir aux besoins des hommes qui avaient rejoint le mouvement ainsi que de leurs familles, de gré ou de force. Les besoins de base devaient être satisfaits (et ils l'étaient rarement), mais le projet mahdiste était beaucoup plus radical et exigeait la transformation de ces groupes épars en une société mahdiste idéale. Dans cette optique, le régime mahdiste développa une gouvernamentalité propre que ce dernier chapitre explore. Sa première dimension est spatiale. Cette politique vise à inscrire le régime millénariste dans un territoire qu'elle refaçonne selon des dynamiques propres. Toutefois, l'espace lui-même n'est pas la cible du pouvoir. Celui-ci est uniquement intéressé par les populations. Il ne s'agit pas de contrôler un territoire, mais de convertir et transformer les individus qui y résident. Il s'agit de changer leur identité et effacer les formes concurrentes d'allégeance, notamment tribales et claniques, pour permettre la fondation d'une société proprement mahdiste. La gestion de cette communauté constitue le cœur du projet mahdiste. Elle répond à des principes qui sont à la fois originaux, et en même temps profondément inspirés de ceux qui régissent les confréries soufies.

Fortement inspiré par les cadres spatiaux canoniques de l'islam, notamment l'opposition entre le domaine de l'islam (*dār al-islām*) et celui dit de la guerre (*dār al-ḥarb*), le régime mahdiste divisait l'espace entre celui de la Mahdiyya, pensé dès lors comme un territoire en expansion mais délimité, et un espace extérieur, où les principes mahdistes ne sont pas suivis. Dans cette perspective, la première manifestation de l'adhésion au mahdisme était géographique et impliquait un déplacement, sur le modèle de la *hijra*, vers le Mahdī. La territorialisation du régime par la formation d'administrations provinciales limita quelque peu la puissance de l'attraction exercée par le Mahdī lui-même, dépositaire d'une forme de *baraka* qui faisait directement écho aux pratiques soufis alors dominantes dans la haute vallée du Nil. À sa mort, le tombeau érigé par son successeur à Umm Durmān devint le centre de gravité de cette topographie spirituelle. Toutefois, les principes spatiaux formulés par Muḥammad Aḥmad ne furent pas abandonnés. Intégrer les populations à l'ordre mahdiste impliquait d'abord de les déplacer afin de les couper de leur communauté d'origine et de leur environnement socio-économique. La politique de déplacements forcés (*tahjīr*) fut très largement appliquée, en particulier au Soudan-Est. Il s'agissait pour le régime de fonder une société de surveillance, là encore empreinte de l'influence du modèle disciplinaire développé par les confréries soufies. Les circulations étaient contrôlées de près et chaque déplacement nécessitait l'aval des autorités, à l'origine d'un réseau dense de traces scripturales.

La seconde étape du projet mahdiste de refondation sociale devait permettre la reconfiguration des identités individuelles par leur intégration dans une structure militaire, la bannière et la *muqaddamiyya*. L'intention était bien de dissoudre les identités régionales, tribales et familiales pour obtenir l'allégeance pleine et entière des *anṣār*. Les résultats de cette politique furent mitigés et cela pour deux raisons principales. D'une part, les affiliations tribales, mais surtout claniques et familiales, jouaient un rôle central dans la mobilisation pour le *jihād*. Même si l'administration tenta d'invisibiliser ces logiques, les bannières avaient chacune une tonalité tribale qui pouvait être dépassée, mais qui n'en était pas moins déterminante. D'autre part, la concentration de nombres importants de combattants, le plus souvent accompagnés par leur famille étendue et, pour certains, leurs esclaves, dans un camp, que ce soit à Kasalā, Handūb ou Tūkar, amena des individus de milieux très différents à se retrouver en contact direct. S'il est difficile de mesurer les effets concrets de cette situation inédite, il est permis de penser qu'elle aboutit à un renforcement des logiques identitaires.

Cela ne revient pas à dire que l'ensemble du projet mahdiste échoua. Au contraire, il convient de remarquer sa résilience. Il est même possible de considérer que c'est en province qu'il est resté le plus vigoureux ; là où des hommes et des femmes, qui avaient pour certain tout abandonné pour participer à la vision du Mahdī, le défendirent et tentèrent de mettre en pratique ses

principes. En effet, la gouvernementalité développée par le régime mahdiste reposait sur trois injonctions fortes pour une société juste, égalitaire et pieuse. Il appartenait à l'appareil administratif de faire vivre la communauté selon ces principes. L'enjeu était tout d'abord de prendre soin des membres de cette communauté mahdiste. Il fallait subvenir à leurs besoins et surtout s'assurer que ceci se fasse de manière équitable, tous les combattants devant être traités de la même manière. Le trésor était ainsi le premier recours des individus confrontés à des difficultés particulières ou des dépenses extraordinaires. Un des principaux champs d'application de cette régulation mahdiste du corps social fut celui des relations matrimoniales. Parce que le régime mahdiste visait la séparation des individus de leur milieu socio-économique d'origine, ceux-ci ne pouvaient faire appel à leur propre communauté d'origine pour organiser les mariages. Ceci fut donc investi par le pouvoir mahdiste qui n'hésita pas instrumentaliser cette séparation pour renforcer son contrôle sur cette population. Enfin, le régime devait également assurer l'éducation religieuse des troupes mahdistes. Les piliers de la pratique mahdiste, les prières et la lecture du livre de dévotion du Mahdī, le *rātīb*, occupaient une place centrale dans la vie quotidienne des *anṣār*.

Ce dernier chapitre s'efforce de mettre en lumière la cohérence et la puissance du projet social mahdiste. Le mahdisme, en tant qu'idéologie, était censé transformer radicalement les communautés soudanaises. Cela constitue la nature proprement révolutionnaire de ce mouvement qui cherchait à discipliner les comportements individuels, à affaiblir les liens tribaux et à former une société réformée, perpétuellement mobilisée pour la victoire de l'islam. Bien que marqué par de fréquentes lacunes et des concessions pragmatiques résultant des limites de l'autorité politique exercée depuis Umm Durmān, le projet social développé pendant la Mahdiyya n'a jamais été abandonné et est resté tout au long de cette période l'élément moteur de la structure et du fonctionnement de son appareil administratif. L'appel mahdiste à l'égalité et à la justice a été entendu par beaucoup, hommes et femmes, et la société formée sous ses auspices a été organisée pour assurer le respect de ces principes. Cette construction politique et sociale pourrait être interprétée comme une nouvelle forme de gouvernementalité étendant les pratiques disciplinaires des institutions soufies à l'échelle d'un État.







APPENDICES

**Appendix 1: Bijawī Genealogies**

*i) Table 1: Genealogies of the Bishārīn and the Ammār'ar*

	Bishārīn	N	Ammār'ar	N
Foreigner	<b>Kāhil</b> + Ḥaḍārība (from the Kawahla tribe)	0	<b>Kāhil</b> (from the Kawahla tribe)	0
First Founder	Muḥammad / Ḥasab Allāh <b>Bishār</b> ( <i>jabal</i> 'Ilba)	1	<b>'Ammār</b> ( <i>khūr</i> Arba'āt)	1
First division	(1) Maḍkūr → <i>Maḍākīr</i> (2) Shibal → <i>Mashbūlāb</i> (3) Šāliḥ → <i>Qarāb</i> and <i>Adiluyāb</i> (4) <b>Kūkā</b>	2	(1) Fādīl → <i>Faḍlāb</i> (2) <b>'Ishīb</b> → <i>'Ishīshāb</i> (3) 'Āmil → <i>'Āmlāb</i> (4) Muḥammad → <i>Muḥammadāb</i> (5) Nahad/Nahat → <i>Nahdāb</i>	2
Contraction	<b>Balig</b> (among seven brothers) (1) 'Alī (five sons but no lineages) (2) <b>Kadabub</b>	3 4		3
Second founder	<b>Fāṭima</b> + “merchant” <b>Anak/Anakw</b> → <i>Bishārīn Anakwiyābāb</i>	5	<b>Maryam</b> + 'Ajīb 'Abd Allāh <b>Atmān/'Uthmān</b> → <i>Ammār'ar Atmaan</i>	4
Second Division	Umm 'Alī (1) <b>'Alī</b> (2) <b>Ḥamad</b> (3) Umm Nājī (1) <b>'Nājī</b> (4) ('Aṭbara) (1) 'Isā Fāṭima b. (1) Qwīlāy Hannār (2) Balig (3) Barkat (4) 'Alī (1) Manšūr → <i>'Alyāb</i> (2) 'Āmir → <i>'Amrāb</i> (3) Shantūr → <i>Shantūrāb</i> (4) Manšūr → <i>Manšūrāb</i> (5) 'Isā	6 7a	(1) 'Alī → <i>Minuyāb</i> (2) Nūr → <i>Nūrāb</i> (3) Kurb → <i>Kurbāb</i> (4) <b>Qwīlāy</b> (1) Daughter + Artayqa: <b>Mūsā</b> → <i>Mūsāyāb</i> (2) Daughter + Bishārī: Fagar → <i>Fagarāb</i> (3) Daughter + Ashrāf: 'Abd al-Rahmān → <i>'Abdalrahmānāb</i> (4) Daughter + Hadanduwa: Ḥamid → <i>'Umarhassāyāb</i> and <i>Sindirayt</i> (5) Daughter + Bānī 'Āmir: Muḥammad Qwīlāy	5 6a
Third Founder	<b>'Isā</b>	7b	<b>Mūsā b. Qwīlāy</b>	6b
Fourth divisions	(1) <b>'Umrān</b> w. 'Isā (2) Nāfi' → <i>Nāf'āb</i> (3) Muḥammad Irāb → <i>Irāyāb</i> (4) Muḥammadit → <i>Muḥammaditāb</i> <b>Ḥamad w. 'Umrān</b> (c. 1760s)	8 9	'Ajīm/'Aqīm b. Mūsā <b>Muḥammad b. 'Ajīm/'Aqīm</b> (c. 1770s)	7 8
Expansion	(1) <b>'Umrān</b> → <i>Hamadāb</i> (2) Ibrāhīm → <i>Ibrāhīmāb</i> (3) Wayl 'Alī → <i>Wayl'alyāb</i> [?]	10 11	Mūsā b. Muḥammad Muḥammad b. Mūsā <b>Ḥamad Hasāy</b> (d. c. 1839)	9 10 11
Turkiyya	<b>Muḥammad Isnī</b> Ḥamad b. Mohammed Isnī Muḥammad abū 'Isā	12 13.1 13.2	Ṭāhir b. Ḥamad Hasāy Ṭāha b. Ṭāhir Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir	12 13.1 13.2
Mahdiyya	[Mūsā?] Bashīr b. Mūsā	14	Ḥamad Maḥmūd Hasāy (d. 1886) Muḥammad b. Ḥamad (1902-1904)	14 15.1
Condominium	No unified <i>shaykship</i> (1902-1922) Aḥmad Karar Aḥmad (1928)	15	Aḥmad w. Ḥamad (1916)	15.2

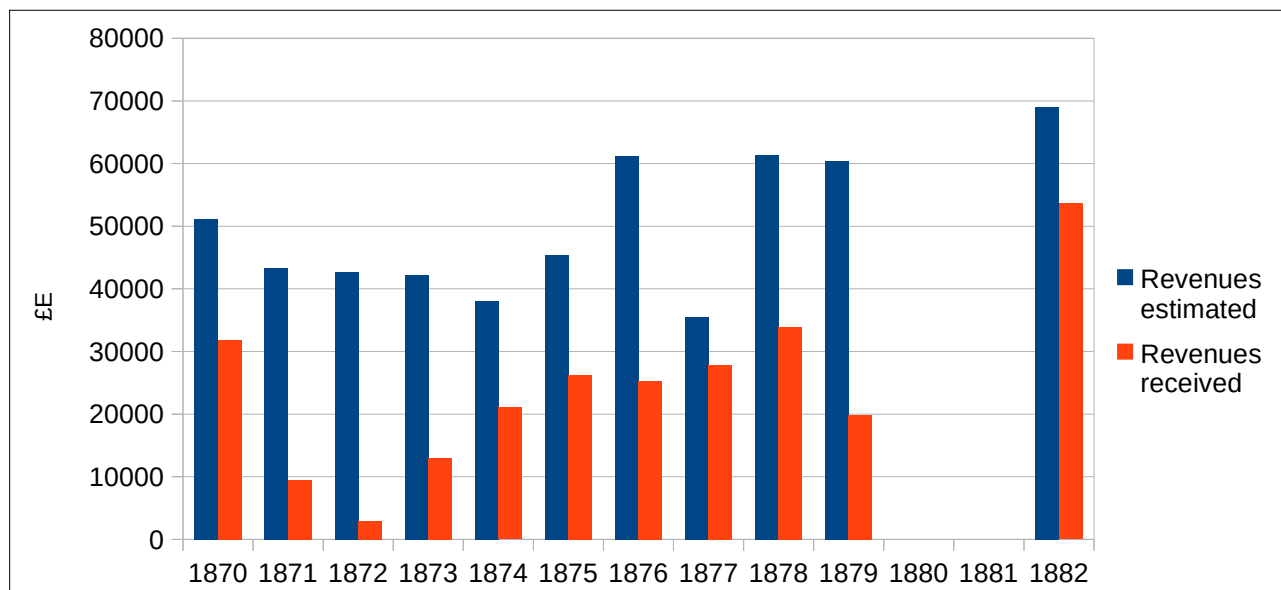
ii) Table 2: Genealogies of the Hadanduwa and Banī ‘Āmir

	Hadanduwa	N	Banī ‘Āmir	N
Foreigner	Muḥammad Hadāb/al-Mubārak	0	‘Alī Nābit/Thābit	0
Founder	<b>Aḥmad Bārakwīn</b> <i>jabal Awkūr</i>	1	‘Āmir	1
			Nāṣiḥ	2
First division	(1) <b>Maḥmūd Na’yatīb</b> (2) ‘Alī Qurhab → <i>Qurhabāb</i> (3) <b>Ḥamza/Ḥamlāb</b> (4) <b>Ṭayyib al-Dīn/Shabūdīn</b> → <i>Shabūdīnāb</i> (5) <b>Ja’far al-Ṭayyār/Kilāy</b> (6) Wayl Ḥammād (7) <b>Yūsuf Bāshūk</b>	2	(1) Absa’ād (2) ‘Alī ‘Akkasa → <i>‘Ad Hāsri (Nabtāb)</i> (3) <b>Ukud</b> (4) Idrīs (5) ‘Awaḍ ‘Allāh → <i>‘Ad ‘Awaḍ Allāh</i>	3
	(1) <b>Mūsā/Abshādīn</b> Maḥmūd (2) Mīsh → <i>Mīshāb</i> (3) Kulūl → <i>Kalūlāy</i> Ḥamlāb (1) Qāyd → <i>Qāydāb</i> Shabūdīn (1) Jamīl → <i>Jamīlāb</i> (2) Daughter + Shukrī → <i>Bushāryāb</i> Kilāy (1) <b>Hamīs</b> → <i>Bayūdāb</i> and <i>Ḥāmidāb</i> (1) Hākūl → <i>Hākūlāb</i> Yūsuf (2) Daughter + Ja’alī → <i>Shar’āb</i> (3) Daughter + Ja’alī → <i>Qar’īb</i> (4) Daughter + Kurd → <i>Samar’ar</i>	3	(1) Idrīs (2) Nūr → <i>‘Ad Nūr</i>  Ukud b. Idrīs  Ḥamad b. Ukud  Mūsā b. Idrīs (d. 1730)  Ḥamad b. Mūsā	4 5.1 6.1 5.2 6.2
Second Founder	<b>Wayl ‘Alī I b. Mūsā</b> → <i>Wayl’alyāb</i> Muḥammad b. Wayl ‘Alī	4 5	‘Alī Bakīt/Bakhīt b. Hamad (d. 1772) Ḥāmid Awaḍ b. Hamad (1772-1789)	7 7.2
Expansion	<b>Wayl ‘Alī II b. Muḥammad (al-ṣaghīr)</b> Mūsā b. Wayl ‘Alī Muḥammad b. Mūsā Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad	6 7 8 9.1	[Idrīs] Awlibāb b. Mūsā Muḥammad b. Ukud Ibrāhīm b. [Idrīs] Awlibāb (d. 1829) Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad (d. c. 1844)	8.1 8.2 9.1 9.2
Turkiyya	<b>Muḥammad Dīn b. Muḥammad (d. c. 1844)</b> Mūsā b. Ibrāhīm (c. 1844-c. 1884)	9.2 10	Ḥāmid b. Muḥammad (d. 1875) Muḥammad b. Ḥāmid (1875-1878)	9.3 10
Mahdiyya	Muḥammad b. Mūsā (c. 1884-1903) Aḥmad b. Mūsā (1903-1905)	11.1 11.2	‘Alī Bakhīt/Bakīt b. Hamad (1878-1884) Mūsā b. Hamad (1884-1885)	11.1 11.2
Condominium	Ibrāhīm b. Mūsā (1905-1927) Muḥammad Tirik (1927)	11.3 12	Hamad b. Muḥammad b. Hamad (1885-1890) al-Ḥusayn b. Ḥāmid (1890-1934)	12 13

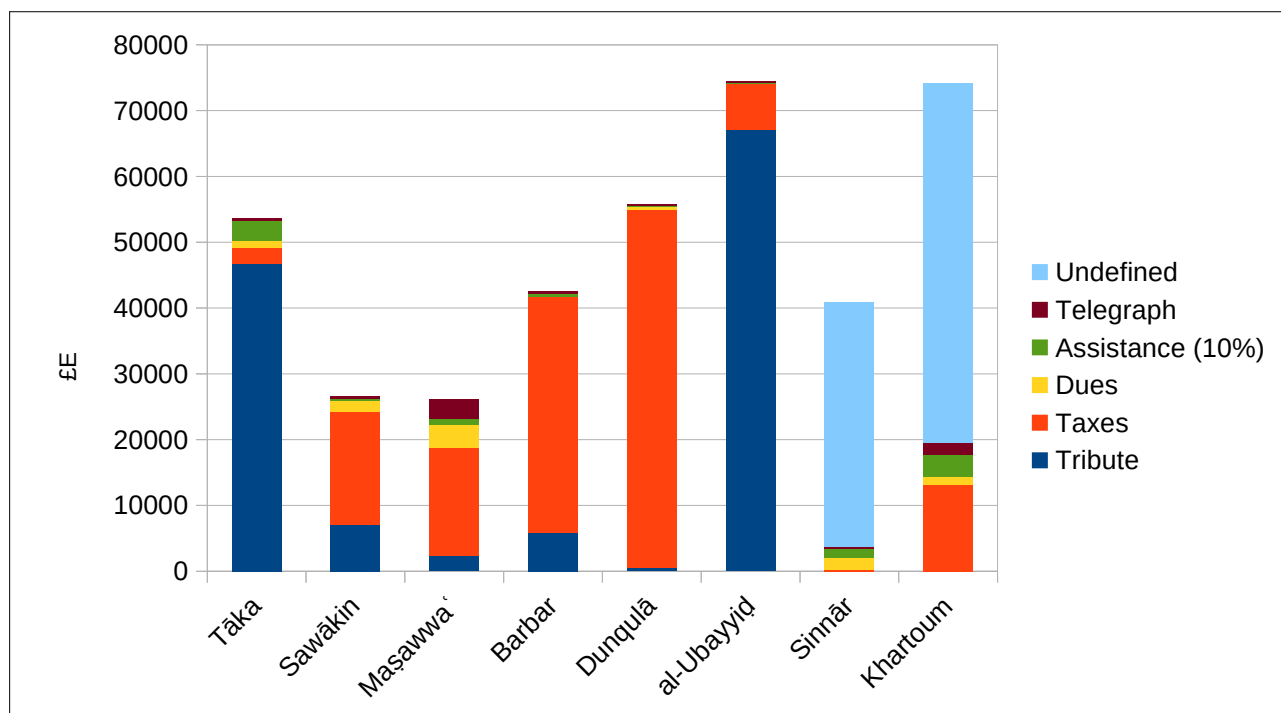
**Sources:** Bishārīn (Ḍirār, Sandars), Ammār’ar (Ḍirār, Sandars, Hjort af Ornäs and Dahl), Hadanduwa (Ḍirār, Owen, Crawford), Banī ‘Āmir (Ḍirār)

## Appendix 2: Provincial Finances during the Turkiyya (1870-1882)

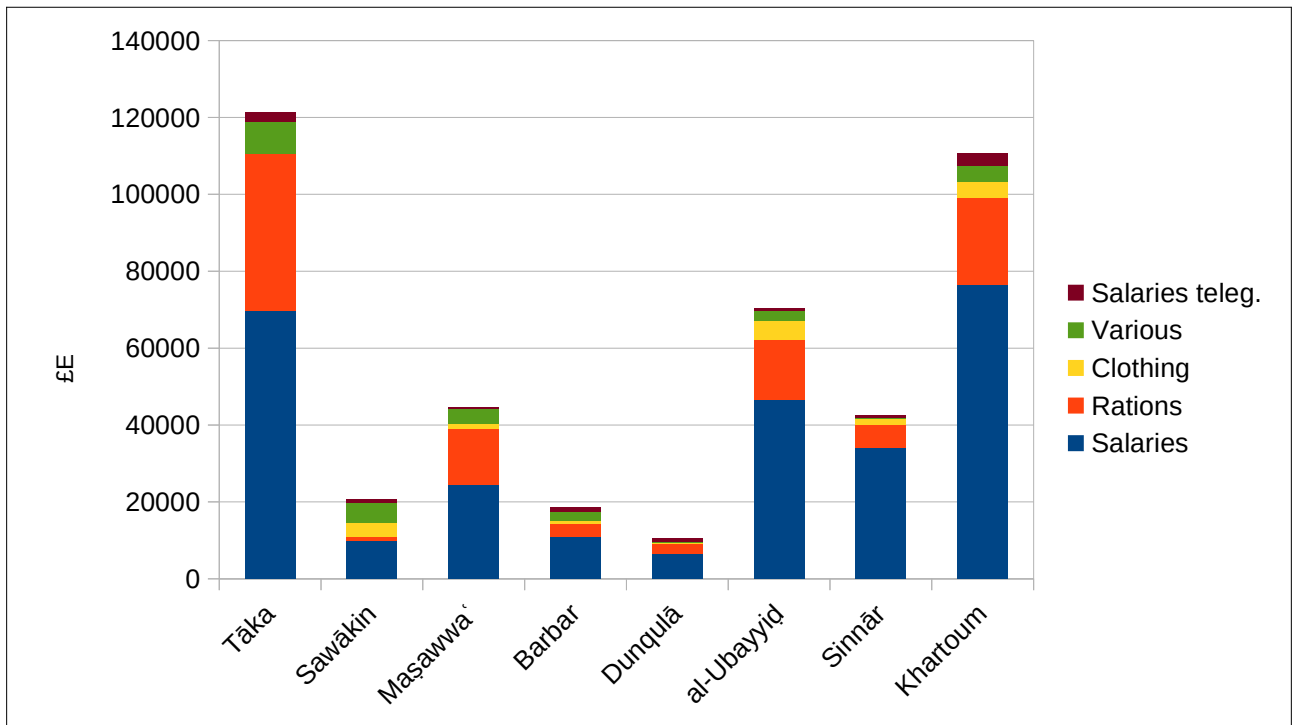
i) Table 1: Budgets of the mudīriyya of Tāka (1870-1882)



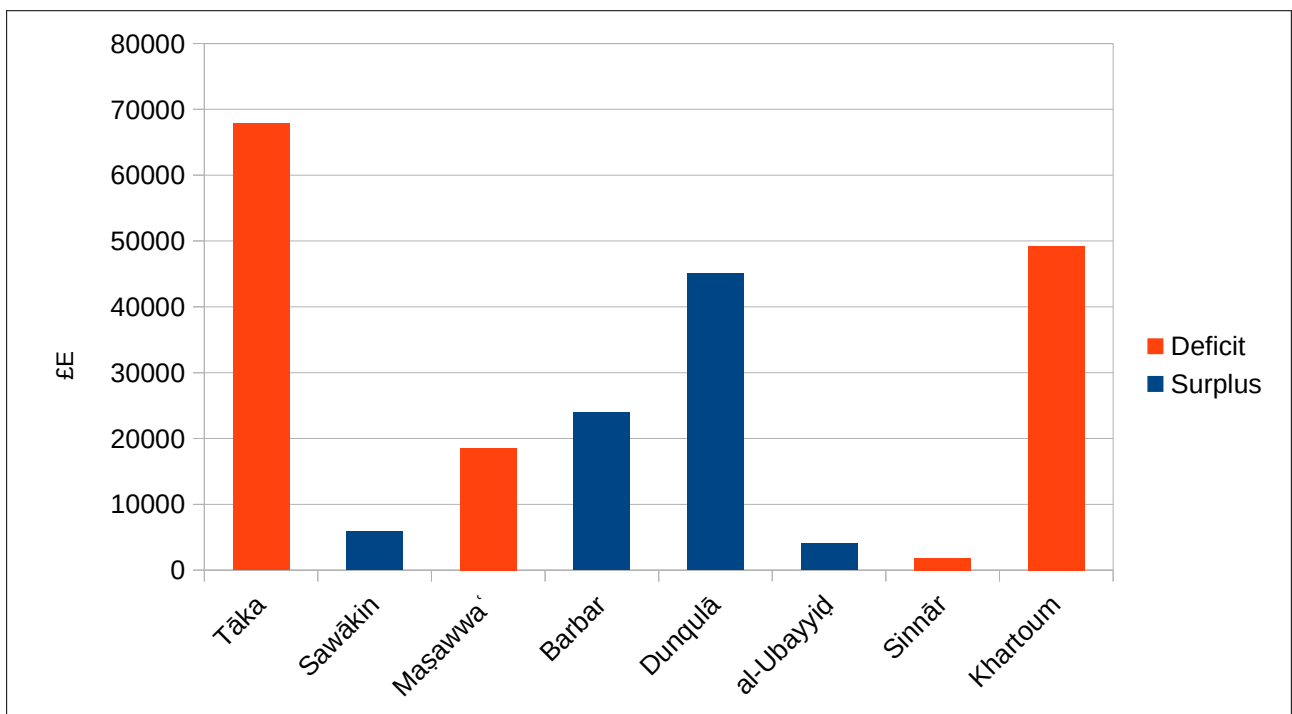
ii) Table 2: Revenues of the mudīriyyāt in 1882



iii) Table 3: Expenses of the mudīriyyāt in 1882



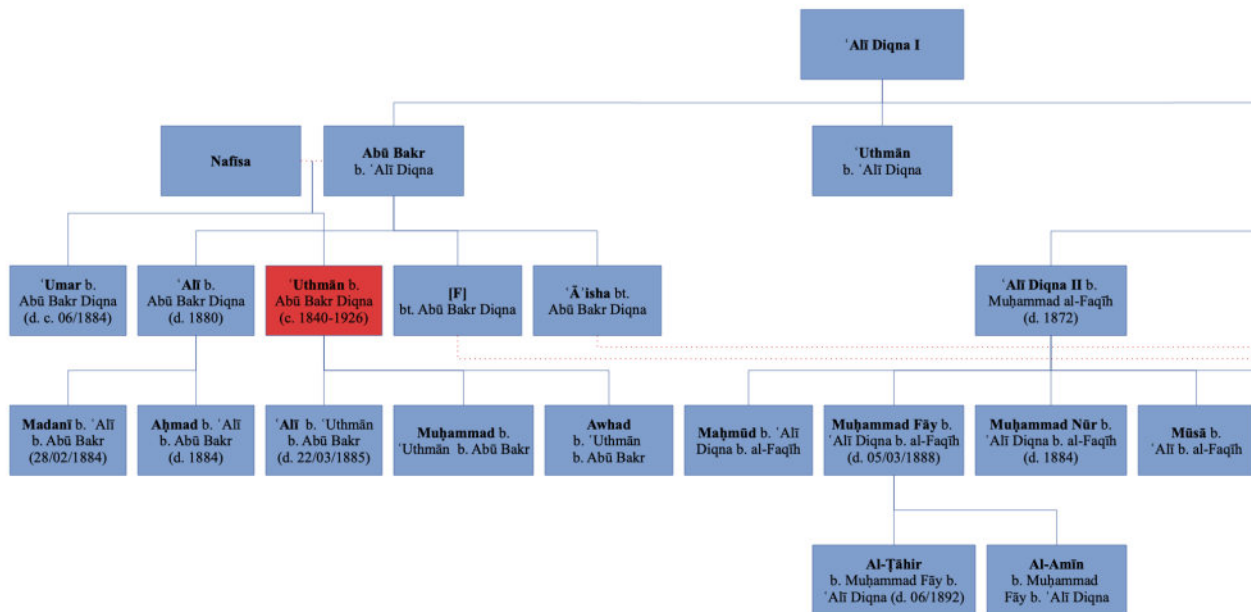
iv) Table 4: Balance of the budgets of the mudīriyyāt in 1882



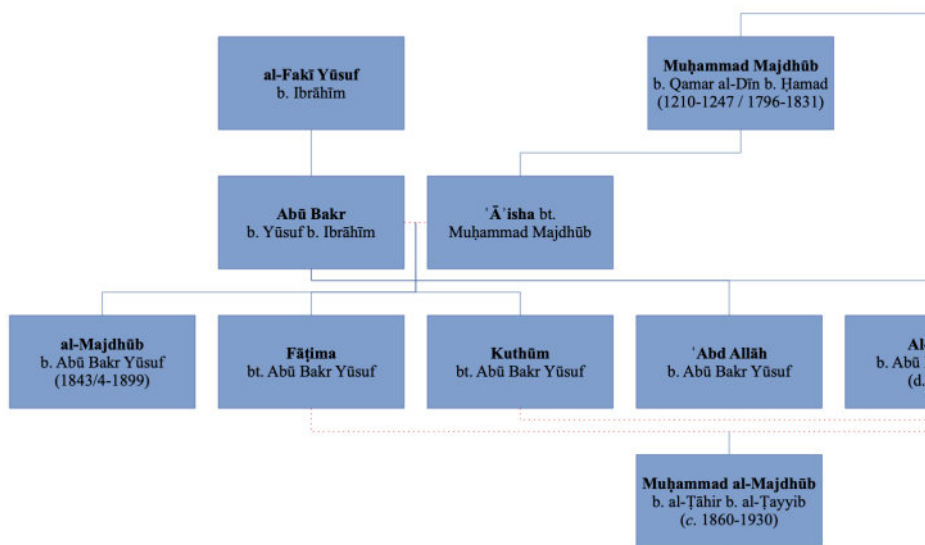
Source: Stewart's Report

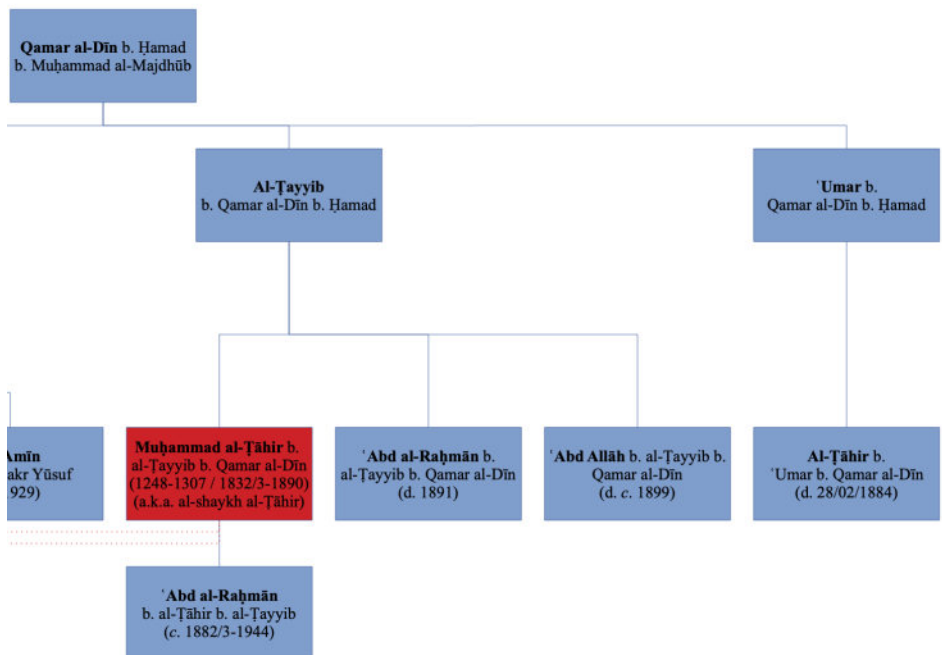
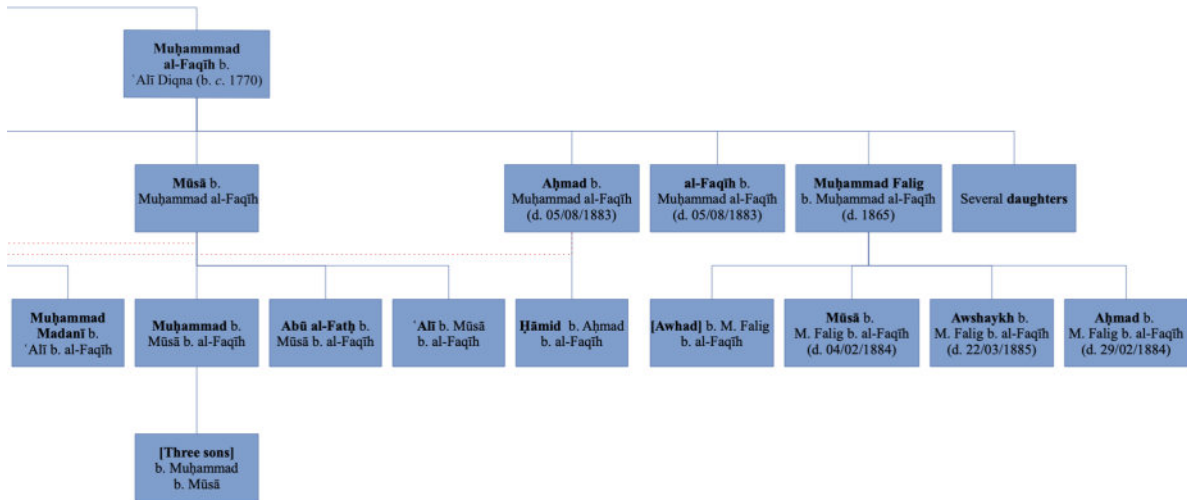
### Appendix 3: Genealogies

#### i) Genealogy of the Diqnāb



#### ii) Genealogy of the Majādhīb







## Appendix 4: Examples

### i) Example 1: Letter from the Mahdī to the beloved (1<sup>st</sup> Rajab 1300)

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

الحمد لله الوالي الكريم والصلاة على سيدنا محمد وآله مع التسليم  
و بعد، فمن عبد ربه محمد المهدي بن السيد عبد الله الى احبابه في الله المؤمنين بالله وبكتابه.  
اعلموا ، ايها الاحباب ، ان الخير كله في تقوى الله واتباع سنة رسول الله

صلى الله عليه وسلم والافتداء بمن هدي الله من الأنبياء والمرسلين وامناء دن - وان من شرح الله صدره للاسلام فهو على نور من نور ربه ومن اراد الله به ابصره بعيوب نفسه واستعمله في طاعته وجعل في قلبه سراجا من نور في" والسعيد من اتعظ بغيره والاحمق من اتبع نفسه في هواه واغتر بالاماني.

هذا وان الله قد اظهر هذا الدين الحنيف واوجب اقامته واشادته وجعل عزه في الجهاد ، فمن أخذ منه حظه في زمانه كان كمن شاهده كله وشارك من مضى فله من الغزاة. ومن تباطأ عنه في زمانه فقد شارك المتخلفين عن رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم في انهمم وعارهم. وكثير ما ورد في فضل الجهاد والمجاهدين كتابا وسنة ، وكفى بالانذر منه قوله تعالى : "هل أدلكم على تجارة تنجيكم من عذاب اليم تؤمنون بالله ورسوله وتجاهدون في سبيل الله باموالكم وانفسكم ، الآية. ونال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم : ماجميع اعمال العباد عند المجاهدين في سبيل الله الأكمثل خطاف اخذ بمنقاره من ماء البحر. وقال ايضا : اتقوا اذي المجاهدين في سبيل الله فان الله تعالى بغضب لهم كما يغضب للانبياء والرسل ويستجيب لهم كما يستجيب للانبياء والرسل. وورد عنه وعيدا على ترك الجهاد توله عليه الصلاة والسلام : اذا اخذتم اذنان البقر ورضيتم بالعود عن الجهاد سلط الله عليكم ذلا لا يبتزعه منكم. وحيث كان كذلك والاجتماع لقتال الكفار واجب بدليل قوله تعالى : "وقاتلوا المشركين كافة كما يقاتلونكم كافة" ، فلماذا التخلف والعود عن طاعة الملك: المعبود ؟

والحال انه قد بلغكم امرنا وجهادنا للترك اعداء الدين المكذبين الضالين مع ما حصل في ذلك من الكرامات التي هي معجزات الأنبياء عليهم الصلاة والسلام من ابادة المذكورين وقتلهم واستئصال شافتهم وحرقي النار الجلودهم من طعن الرماح ، وهو خارق للعادة وفيه عبرة لمن اعتبر. وفي كل وقعة من الوقعات التي بلغكم شأنها ما هو نوع من العذاب ويولون الدبر مع ما عندهم من القوة العددية والاسلحة ارية. وما ذاك إلا لأني على نور الله وتأييد من رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم.

كيف لا وقد خلفي بالمهدية مرارا واجلسي على كرسيه بحضرة الخلفاء والاقطاب والخضر عليه السلام. وايدنى الله تعالى بالملائكة المقربين وبالا ولياء اجمعين احياء وأمواتا من لدن آدم إلى زمننا هذا ، وكذلك المؤمنين من الجن. وفي ساعة الحرب يحضر معهم امام جيئى سيد الوجود صلى الله عليه وسلم بذاته الكريمة والخلفاء والاقطاب والخضر عليه السلام ، واتاني سيف النصر من حضرته صلى الله عليه وسلم واعلمت انه لاينصر على معه احد ولو كان الثقيلين الإنس والجن. ثم اخبرني سيد الوجود صلى الله عليه وسلم بان الله جعل لي على المهدية علامة وأبان لي عنها فاذا هي الحال على خدى الايمن. وكذلك اخبرني بانه تعالى قد جعل لي علامة اخرى وهي ان تخرج راية من نور وتكون معي في ساعة الحرب يحملها عزرائيل عليه السلام فيثبت الله بها قلوب اصحابي وينترل الرعب في قلوب اعدائي فلا يلقاني احد بعداوة الا خذله الله تعالى، إلى آخر ما اسدى ووعده به المدد، حتى انه على ذلك بحمد الله تعالى قد حصل الظفر التام والفتح العام لجميع كردفان ونواحيها وغير ذلك ، كما سمعتم، وسيعم الفتح ان شاء الله بلادكم وجميع الارض ويهلك المتمردون الجاحدون لمهديتنا ثلة بعد ثلة كما أهلك الله اخوانهم الأولين وتلك سنة في

الكافرين. قال تعالى : "ألم نهلك الأولين ثم نتبعهم الآخرين كذلك تفعل بالمجرمين ويل ييومئذ للمكذبين".

فهلا كان واجبا عليكم ان تصدقوا قول خير من بشر بظهور المهدي المنتظر وتدعوا لامر الله تعالى وتبادروا للهجرة اليها لأجل نصرته الدين ، فما الذي حملكم ودعاكم إلى التأخير ! أكذبتكم الخبر الوارد عن رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم ام استعظمتكم ملك الترك وسطوتهم فخشيتهموهم والله أحق أن تخشوه ! أما تعلمون أن جموع ذوي الالحاد مكسرة وان كانت بالاعداد مكثرة ، وجيوش اولى العناد مدبرة وان كانت بعقولهم مقدمة مدبرة ، وعزمات رجال الضلال مؤنثة مصغرة وأن كانت ذواتهم مكبرة ، ولذا جعل الله تعالى كله مسلم يغلب منهم اثنين كما أن للذكر مثل حظ الأنثيين ويؤكد هذا كله نص كتابه المبين ، قال تعالى : "ولن تغني عنكم فتنتكم شيئا ولو كثرت وان الله مع المؤمنين".

فاذا فهمتم ماذكرنا فاعلموا اني قد جنتكم بامر من الله ورسوله فان كنتم مؤمنين بالله واليوم الآخر ومصديقين قول رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم : بدئ الاسلام غريبا وسيعود غريبا كما بدأ فاطيعوا امرى ، فان الله تعالى اظهرني لاهياء دينه واکرمكم بظهورى واوجب عليكم طاعتي. واخبرنى سيد الوجود صلى الله عليه وسلم أن من شك في مهديتي كفر بالله ورسوله ، هكذا بلفظه الشريف وكرره ثلاث مرات. فحققوا ذلك.

وانى من نسل رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم ، فابي حسي من جهة ابيه وامه وامى كذلك من جهة امها وابوها عباسى ولى نسبة إلى الحسين ، والله أعلم. وقد هاجرت سياسة جبل قدير بامر النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم ثم حضرت بكردفان بامرهم أيضا وكاتبته الجهات كذلك ومن الجملة انتم.

فاذا بلغكم جوابي هذا فدعوا طاعة الترك واخرجوا من بينهم وبادروا بالهجرة اليها ولا تلهكم أموالكم ولا أولادكم عن ذلك بل لا بد من الهجرة ولو الى اقرب بلد منكم وقتال الكفار بقوله تعالى : "قاتلوا الذين يلونكم من الكفار" ، الآية.

واعلموا أنى موجه اليكم اميرا من هذا الطرف لأجل اقامة الدين واهياء سنة سيد الأنبياء والمرسلين وهو الشيخ عثمان دقنه السواكني. فاذا حل بدياركم فاجتمعوا عليه ووازره وبايعوه على السمع والطاعة وانصروه واخرجوا معه للغزو والجهاد وطهروا الأرض من الشرك والفساد، فقد خرج قبلكم اصحاب رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم افواجا افواجا خفافا وثقالا وتحزبوا في الله احزابا احزابا وتركوا الأوطان والاموال فنصروا دين الله وقوموه بسيفهم حتى اثنى الله عليهم ومدحهم في كتابه بقوله : "رجال صدقوا ما عاهدوا الله عليه فمنهم من قضى نحبه ، بالموت في سبيل الله ومنهم من ينتظر" الموت بالقتال. فهل لكم في رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم اسوة حسنة ! فهذا امتحان من الله لكم ليميز الخبيث من الطيب كما قال تعالى : "أم حسبتم أن تدخلوا الجنة ولما يعلم الله الذين جاهدوا منكم ويعلم الصابرين" وقال أيضا : وانما المؤمنون الذين آمنوا بالله ورسوله ثم لم يرتابوا. وجاهدوا بأموالهم وانفسهم في سبيل الله أولئك هم الصادقون". فمن امتثل امر الله رضى الله عنه وجعل الجنة مثواه ، ومن تخلف من اجابة داعي الله واتبع هواه فالسيف من ورائه وهو اجره وجزاه وفي الآخرة النار مسكنه ومأواه. فهذه نصيحتي لكم ، فانتم بالخيار في سلوك طريق الجنة او النار وهي حجة عليكم الى يوم الدين، ولا حول ولا قوة الا بالله العلى العظيم ، والسلام.

غرة رجب سنة ١٣٠٠

Source: Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ABŪ SALĪM, *Al-āthār al-kamīla*, Khartoum, Khartoum University Press, 1990, vol. 1, letter 109.

ii) Example 2: Report on the goods distributed from those collected through the 'ushr (17 D. al-Qa'da 1306)

The manuscript page contains a table with approximately 15 columns and 30 rows of handwritten entries. The entries are organized into several sections, likely representing different categories of goods or recipients. The text is written in a cursive Arabic script on aged, yellowed paper. The table is filled with numbers and names, indicating a detailed record of distribution. At the bottom of the page, there are several lines of text, possibly a summary or a concluding statement, and a date '17 D. al-Qa'da 1306' is visible. The paper shows signs of age, with some staining and irregular edges.

Source: NRO Mahdiyya 5/20/68, document no. 5

## Appendix 5: Fractions in Mahdist Accounting

Symbol		Fraction	Qirāt	Decimal value
	مو 0,25	1/48	0,5	0,02
	مو 0,5	1/24	1	0,04
	مو 0,75	3/48	1,5	0,06
	مو 1	1/12	2	0,08
	مو 1,5	1/8	3	0,125
	مو 2	1/6	4	0,17
	مو 2,5	5/24	5	0,21
	مو 3	1/4	6	0,25
	مو 4	1/3	8	0,33
	مو 6	1/2	12	0,50
	مو 7	7/12	14	0,6
	مو 8	2/3	16	0,66
	مو 9	3/4	18	0,75
	مو 10	5/6	20	0,80
	مو 11	11/12	22	

## Appendix 6 : Accounts of the Tūkar Treasury

Category	Section	Section	Folders
Daily accounts	Daily monetary operations	Ḥisābāt yawmiyya bi-l-naqdiyya	5
	Daily in-kind operations	Ḥisābāt yawmiyya bi-l-ṣanf	5
	Daily operations of the granary	Ḥisābāt yawmiyyat al-ghilāl / al-shūna	3
Segmented accounts	Operations on goods and articles	Ḥāṣil al-baḍā' i' wa al-aṣnāf	3
	Operations on the 'ushr	Ḥāṣil al-'ushr	2
	Operations on loans	Ḥāṣil al-maṭlūbāt	3
	Operations on commissions	Ḥāṣil al-'uhad	1
Accounts of expenses	Expenses of the banners and the treasury	Maṣrūfāt al-rāyāt wa bayt al-māl	8
	Salaries and pays	Murattabāt wa māhiyāt	4
Troops management	Banners and dependents	Rāyāt wa awā'il	2
	Status of the troops		1
Circumstantial accounts	Goods attached to merchants	Badā' i muta' allaqa al-tujjār	1
	Collect in Kasalā and al-Qaḍārif	Daftar al-taḥaṣṣūl min mudiriyyat Kasalā wa al-Qaḍārif	2
	Compilation of decisions	Ṣūrat al-iṣḍārāt	1

### A) Daily Accounts

#### i) Daily Monetary Accounts (5 folders)

- 5/01/05 [04-05/1306 ; 102 p.] : 2 months
- 5/02/09 [06-10/1306 ; 284 p.] : 5 months
- 5/02/10B-C [11-12/1306 ; 101 p.] : 2 months
- 5/06/29 [10-12/1307 ; 88 p.] : 3 months
- 5/07/33 [01-05 1308 ; 99 p.] : 5 months

	Muh.	Safar	Rabi I	Rabi II	Jum. I	Jum. II	Raj.	Shab.	Ram.	Shaw.	Qa'da	Hijja
1306												
1307												
1308												

#### ii) Daily In-kind Accounts (5 folders)

- 5/01/04 [04-05/1306 ; 98 p.] : 2 months

- 5/02/08 [06-07/1306 ; 94 p.] : 2 months
- 5/02/07 [08-12/1306 ; 209 p.] : 5 months
- 5/05/20 [01-12/1307 ; 224 p.] : 12 months
- 5/08/36 [01-05/1308 ; 30 p.] : 5 months

	Muh.	Safar	Rabi I	Rabi II	Jum. I	Jum. II	Raj.	Shab.	Ram.	Shaw.	Qa'da	Hijja
1306												
1307												
1308												

*iii) Daily Granary Accounts (3 folders)*

- 5/03/12 [03-09/1889 – 07/1306-01/1307 ; 158 p.] : 7 months
- 5/06/25 [09/1889-01/1890 – 01-07/1307 ; 93 p.] : 5 months
- 5/08/37 [01-02/1891 – 05-06/1308 ; 21 p.] : 2 months

	Muh.	Şafar	Rabi I	Rabi II	Jum. I	Jum. II	Raj.	Shab.	Ram.	Shaw.	Qa'da	Hijja
1306												
1307												
1308												

**B) Segmented Accounts (10 folders)**

*i) Goods and Articles (3 folders)*

- 5/04/16 [03-08/1889 – 07-12/1306 ; 132 p.] : 6 months
- 5/05/21 [09/1889-03/1890 – 01-07/1307 ; 156 p.] : 7 months
- 5/06/27A [04-08/1890 – 08-12/1307 ; 109 p.] : 5 months

	Muh.	Safar	Rabi I	Rabi II	Jum. I	Jum. II	Raj.	Shab.	Ram.	Shaw.	Qa'da	Hijja
1306												
1307												
1308												

*ii) 'Ushr (2 folders)*

- 5/04/15 [04/1306-08/1306 ; 48 p.]: 5 months
- 5/03/13 [09-12/1306 ; 101 p.]: 4 months

	Muh.	Safar	Rabi I	Rabi II	Jum. I	Jum. II	Raj.	Shab.	Ram.	Shaw.	Qa'da	Hijja
1306												

1307												
1308												

*iii) Loans (4 folders)*

- 5/05/19 [08/1889 – 03-12/1306 ; 59 p.]: 10 months
- 5/07/32 [09/1889-08/1890 – 01-12/1307 ; 151 p.]: 12 months
- 5/04/18 [01-04/1308 ; 62 p.]: 4 months
- 5/06/27B [01-05/1308; ± 48 p.]: 5 months?

	Muh.	Safar	Rabi I	Rabi II	Jum. I	Jum. II	Raj.	Shab.	Ram.	Shaw.	Qa'da	Hijja
1306												
1307												
1308												

*iv) Commissions*

- 5/07/31 [1307 ; 76 p. ; photos : p. 15]

	Muh.	Safar	Rabi I	Rabi II	Jum. I	Jum. II	Raj.	Shab.	Ram.	Shaw.	Qa'da	Hijja
1306												
1307												
1308												

**C) Expenses Accounts**

*i) Expenses of the Banners and the Treasury (8 folders)*

**Definitive Accounts**

- 5/01/03 [04-06/1306 ; 85 p.] : 3 months
- 5/03/14 [09-10/1306 ; 200 p.]<sup>1</sup> : 2 months
- 5/05/22 [01-07/1307 ; 235 p.] : 7 months
- 5/06/26 [08-12/1307 ; 184 p.] : 5 months
- 5/08/35B [01-04/1308, 159 p.] : 4 months

	Muh.	Safar	Rabi I	Rabi II	Jum. I	Jum. II	Raj.	Shab.	Ram.	Shaw.	Qa'da	Hijja
1306												
1307												
1308												

<sup>1</sup> Approximative number of pages as part B is missing.

### Provisional Accounts

- 5/08/35A [04-05/1306 ; 44 p.] : 2 months
- 5/08/39 [09/1306 ; 41 p.] : 1 months
- 5/02/10A [10/1306 ; 14 p.] : 1 months

	Muh.	Safar	Rabi I	Rabi II	Jum. I	Jum. II	Raj.	Shab.	Ram.	Shaw.	Qa'da	Hijja
1306												
1307												
1308												

#### ii) Salaries and Wages (4 folders)

- 5/03/11 [05-12/1306 ; 47 p.] : 8 months
- 5/04/17 [07-12/1306 ; 44 p.] : 7 months
- 5/02/06 [09-10/1306 ; 50 p.] : 2 months
- 5/06/24 [01-12/1307 ; 42 p.] : 12 months

	Muh.	Safar	Rabi I	Rabi II	Jum. I	Jum. II	Raj.	Shab.	Ram.	Shaw.	Qa'da	Hijja
1306					1	1	2	2	3	3	2	2
1307	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
1308												

### D) Gestion des troupes

#### i) Number of men, family members and horses

- 5/05/23 [10-12/1306 et 01-06/1307]

	Muh.	Safar	Rabi I	Rabi II	Jum. I	Jum. II	Raj.	Shab.	Ram.	Shaw.	Qa'da	Hijja
1306												
1307												
1308												

#### ii) Censuses

- 5/07/34 [1307 ; 46 p.]
- 5/08/38 [1308 ; 101 p.]

	Muh.	Safar	Rabi I	Rabi II	Jum. I	Jum. II	Raj.	Shab.	Ram.	Shaw.	Qa'da	Hijja
1306												
1307												
1308												



## ***E) Others***

### *i) Compilation of Decisions*

- 5/01/02 [04-07/1306 : 54 p.]

	Muh.	Safar	Rabi I	Rabi II	Jum. I	Jum. II	Raj.	Shab.	Ram.	Shaw.	Qad'a	Hija
1306												
1307												
1308												

### *ii) Transfer from Kasalā and al-Qaḍārif to Tūkar (1889/90 - 1307)*

- 5/06/28 [08-12/1307 ; 23 p.]
- 5/06/30 [12/1307 ; 31 p.]

## Appendix 7 : Views of Eastern Sudan



Tomb of the *shaykh* al-Ṭāhir al-Majdhūb in Afāfīt (Tūkar)



One of the main streets of modern-day Tūkar



The road from Sinkāt to Arkawīt



View of Arkawīt from ‘Uthmān Diqna’s tomb



View of Sawākin from one of the cities’s minarets



The Gwineb seen from the Red Sea Hills (near Arkawīt)



**Unedited primary sources**

*A) National Records Office (NRO, Khartoum)<sup>1</sup>*

*i) Mahdiyya*

- Mahdiyya 1 [various correspondence]
  - Mahdiyya 1/30-31: ‘Uthmān Diqna’s papers and correspondence
  - Mahdiyya 1/42/01: translations of ‘Uthmān Diqna’s correspondence
- Mahdiyya 2 [various provincial administrative documents]
  - Mahdiyya 2/70/01: orders from ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf (1306-1308)
  - Mahdiyya 2/70/02: various receipts from Tūkar’s treasury (1306-1307)
  - Mahdiyya 2/70/03: receipts from Tūkar (1308)
  - Mahdiyya 2/75/01: accounts for Trinkitāt, Adūbana and Kasalā (1307)
- Mahdiyya 5 [Eastern Sudan and the Tūkar treasury]
  - Mahdiyya 5/01-08/01-39: see appendix 6
  - Mahdiyya 5/09/40: drafts, receipts, and various letters (1306-1307)
  - Mahdiyya 5/10/41: documents from Dunqulā (1305-1313)
  - Mahdiyya 5/10/42: documents from Dunqulā (1293-1313)
  - Mahdiyya 5/10/43: documents from Dunqulā (1301-1314)
  - Mahdiyya 5/10/44: letters from the treasury of Dunqulā (1309-1313)
  - Mahdiyya 5/11/45: letters and receipts from ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf (1299-1308)
  - Mahdiyya 5/12/46: letters to the Khalīfa without relation to Eastern Sudan (1300-1315)
  - Mahdiyya 5/13/47: orders from ‘Abd Allāh and Majdhūb Abū Bakr Yūsuf (1306-1308)
  - Mahdiyya 5/13/48: receipts on expenses and ‘*ushr*’ (1306-1307)
  - Mahdiyya 5/14/49: orders from ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf (1306)
  - Mahdiyya 5/14/50: orders from ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf (1306-1307)
  - Mahdiyya 5/15/51: receipts transmitted to various departments (1306-1308)
  - Mahdiyya 5/15/52: receipts for the *zakāt* and the ‘*ushr*’ (1306-1307)
  - Mahdiyya 5/15/53: receipts for the ‘*ushr*’ (1306-1308)

<sup>1</sup> The descriptions of the NRO’s collections are only indicative because the catalogue does not offer that level of detail and because, often, the division in folders within a box as well as each folder’s internal order was lost and had to be reconstituted. Unless stated otherwise, all documents emanated from Eastern Sudan’s *‘imāla*.

- Mahdiyya 5/15/54: requests presented to ‘Abd Allāh Abū Bakr Yūsuf (1306-1308)
- Mahdiyya 5/16/55: receipts for the ‘*ushr* in Adūbana and for shrouds (1306)
- Mahdiyya 5/16/56: various letters to administrators of the Tūkar treasury (1302-1308)
- Mahdiyya 5/17/57: spending orders to Tūkar’s granary (1306-1307)
- Mahdiyya 5/17/58: various orders and communications (1305-1308)
- Mahdiyya 5/17/59: various documents including on transfers and slaves (1306-1307)
- Mahdiyya 5/18/60: spending orders and receipts (1306-1308)
- Mahdiyya 5/18/61: receipts for purchases, sales, ‘*ushr*, *zakāt* and grain (1306-1307)
- Mahdiyya 5/18/62: requests to the treasury (1305-1307)
- Mahdiyya 5/19/63: receipts for grain and money (1306-1308)
- Mahdiyya 5/19/64: orders to the *amīn* of the money department (1306-1308)
- Mahdiyya 5/19/65: reports on expenses of cash and grain (1307-1308)
- Mahdiyya 5/19/66: various accounts including from Kasalā
- Mahdiyya 5/20/67: reports on ‘*ushr* levies in Adūbana (1306-1307)
- Mahdiyya 5/20/68: reports on expenses (1306-1308)
- Mahdiyya 5/20/69: various drafts (undated)
- Mahdiyya 5/20/70: various receipts (1306-1308)
- Mahdiyya 5/20/71: various documents including lists of sold slaves (undated)
- Mahdiyya 5/20/72: lists of combatants (1306)
- Mahdiyya 8 [letter-books]
  - Mahdiyya 8/07/60: *Daftar ‘Uthmān Diqna*
  - Mahdiyya 8/07/62: *Waqā’i ‘Uthmān Diqna*

ii) *CairInt [Cairo Intelligence / DMI]*

- CairInt 1 [British military operations in Sudan]
  - CairInt 1/03: letters and memos related to British operations in Eastern Sudan (1884-1885)
  - CairInt 1/08/39: suppression of the Sudan Bureau (1885-1887)
  - CairInt 1/09/40: A. B. Wylde’s letter on policy in Eastern Sudan (1885)
  - CairInt 1/09/45: Turkish cooperation in Eastern Sudan (1885)
- CairInt 3 [reports on Sudan]
  - CairInt 3/02: various reports on Eastern Sudan (1885-1891)
  - CairInt 3/03: various reports on Eastern Sudan (1891-1897)

## **B) Durham University Library (DUL, Durham)**

### *i) Intelligence Reports [DMI – online]*

- Suakin (1889-1891)
- Eastern Sudan (1891-1892)
- Main Series (1892-1903)

### *ii) SAD [Sudan Archive Durham]*

- SAD 14/12/2M: microfilm of *Daftar 'Uthmān Diqna*
- SAD 179/1/19: map of Eastern Sudan showing tribal positions (1889)
- SAD 253/1: Wingate, "Report on the Dervish Rule in Eastern Sudan" (1891)
- SAD 606/1: A. N. Gibson, manuscript entitled *An Outline of the History of Soudan Customs* (c. 1914)

### *iii) WYL [Wylde papers]*

- WYL 72: Augustus B. Wylde's correspondence (1876-1883)

## **C) British National Archives (BNA, London)**

### *i) FO [Foreign Office]*

- FO 32/6127: correspondence from generals Wolseley and Graham (1885)
- FO 141/238: correspondence from consuls in Sawākin (1885)
- FO 403/128: "Summary of recent correspondence respecting a proposed delimitation of Italian territory and influence on the littoral of the Red Sea and in the Interior of the Eastern Sudan" (1890)
- FO 633/53-61: Affairs of Egypt (1884-1891)
- FO 881/5700: "Memorandum on events and negotiations in connection with the Retention of Suakin since 1883" (1888)

### *ii) WO [War Office]*

- WO 28/371: Col. Holled Smith, "Report on the Beni Amer Country" (1892)
- WO 32: various reports from officers in Sudan (1884-1885)
- WO 78/262: map of Sawākin (1890)
- WO 106/223: "Diary of the principal events in Suakin" (1884-1885)

- WO 147/44: Sawākin and the Soudan Expedition (1883-1886)
- WO 925/374: map of Eastern Sudan's tribal boundaries (1890)

#### **D) Private Archives**

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