

# Mahmud Muhammad Taha

## his life in Sudan



Edward Thomas  
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Dedicated to my parents, who started it all off



# Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work

# Abstract

This thesis is a biography of Mahmud Muhammad Taha, the charismatic leader of a small group of religious and political activists, the Republican brothers and sisters. They vigorously publicised his call for a mystical, inclusive reinterpretation of Islam; they worked mainly in urban areas of central Sudan in the 1970s and 1980s. Taha's views were opposed by Sudanese Muslims close to the state, and they eventually brought about his execution in 1985. Since his death, Taha has been adopted as a symbol of resistance, tolerance and human rights, and his strange and compelling views about religion and law have been the subject of several studies.

This thesis gives an account of the influences that impelled Taha to become a legal reformer. It studies his family, education, pastimes, work, and his experience of religion, ethnicity and social class. Taha founded a political party, and ended up in a colonial jail, where he had a mystical experience that shaped the rest of his life. Taha's leadership of the organisation that arose out of his jail experience is narrated from oral sources, from his writings and the writings of his followers.

This thesis examines Taha's ideas about law, religion and society. It argues that Taha attempted to establish an unprecedented, working distinction between ethics and law in an Islamic idiom, drawing on the insights of the mystical, or Sufi, traditions of Sudan and the Middle East. His close identification with Sudanese and international Sufism led him to view personal spiritual eminence as a central component of his mission. This thesis shows how Taha's dreams of perfection became the target of polemic against him.

Taha was a legal performer as well as a legal reformer. This thesis places his ideas in the context of Sudan's competing legal systems, its jails, judges and police. Sudan's legal confusion is related to its cultural diversity, and there is an attempt to connect Taha's life to the historical experience of an African country on the edge of the Arab and Muslim world, where the interplay of religion and ethnicity has major consequences for the division of wealth and power.

# Table of contents

Acknowledgements	xiii
Transliteration	xv
Map 1: Sudan	xvi
Map 2: Language in Sudan	xvii
Map 3: Urbanisation and industrialisation in Sudan	xviii
Introduction	1
The aim of this thesis	1
Sources	1
Spoken history	2
Written history	3
Writings about Taha	5
Terms	6
Sudan	6
Islam	7
State	8
Outline of chapters	10
Part 1 <i>Khalwa</i>	11
Chapter 1 Remembering childhood	12
Rufa'a and Heglig	12
Mahmud's parents	12
Heglig	13
Affectionate attachments	14
Initiations 1	15
The Rikabiya	16
Initiations 2	17
Religious life	18
Functions of religion	18
Mahmud and Muhammad	19
Land and food	20
Sorghum	20
The law of the land	21
Conclusion	23
Chapter 2 Sudan from 1500 -1900	24
Pre-modern Sudan	24
Diversity	24
Islam	25
The end of pre-modern Sudan	26
The Turkiya 1820 - 1885	27
Slaves and cash	27

Kissing cousins	29
Official Islam	30
The book and the law	31
<b>The Mahdiya, 1881 - 1898</b>	<b>32</b>
Islamic reform movements	32
Moon of my nights	33
The Mahdist state	35
Reconfiguring power	36
Cultural revolution	37
The uses of conformity	38
<i>Kafirs</i> and caliphs	38
<b>The Mahdiya falls to the British</b>	<b>39</b>
Trying to end time	39
Irish Republicans and British public school-boys	40
Tribes and state	40
The south	42
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>43</b>
Identity	43
Anonymous states and expressive faith	43
<b>Chapter 3 Escaping the village shop</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Education</b>	<b>45</b>
Before the twentieth century	45
Education in the condominium	46
Rufa'a schools	47
Taha's schooldays	47
<b>Rufa'a in the 1920's and 1930's</b>	<b>49</b>
International capitalism	49
Dancing Marissa girls	50
Manly chaps, tribal shaykhs and the intelligentsia	51
<i>Effendis</i> and grass huts	52
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Chapter 4 Training an <i>effendi</i></b>	<b>55</b>
<b>Gordon College</b>	<b>55</b>
A better class of boy	55
Curriculum	56
Taha's life at Gordon College	57
<b>Urban nationalism and rural power</b>	<b>60</b>
Religious sects and their leaders	60
Economic power	61
Detribalised groups	61
The 1924 revolt	62
Football, poetry and nationalism	63
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Chapter 5 Starting work and getting married</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Going to work</b>	<b>67</b>
Engineering jobs	67
Atbara and clubs	68
Cheap police	69
Taha's views in the 1930's and early 1940's	69

Workers, patricians, intellectuals	69
Taha's activism	71
World war	72
Marriage	72
A visit to Rufa'a	72
Thread talk	74
Omdurman	75
Conclusion	77
The end of private life	76
<b>Part 2 The magic ring</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Chapter 6 The Republican party</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>The struggle for independence</b>	<b>79</b>
Independence for the elite	79
A house in Omdurman	81
The Republican party message	82
<i>Al-sifr al-awwal</i>	82
Republican activism	83
Using the newspapers	85
Success and freedom	86
<b>The Rufa'a incident, 1946</b>	<b>87</b>
Female genital mutilation	87
Fatma Amasayb	88
Using the newspapers	90
Long term effects	91
Native Administration	91
Conclusion	92
<b>Chapter 7 Taking the lift to the fields of heaven</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>Prison in Wad Medani and Khartoum</b>	<b>94</b>
The vilest social classes	94
A strange friend	95
<i>Khalwa</i>	96
Kober	97
Books	97
Authentic self	99
Jesus	99
Home for more	100
Friends	102
<b>The meaning of a <i>khalwa</i></b>	<b>103</b>
Incarceration and poverty	103
Books	103
Authenticity, past and present	104
Publicity	105
Conclusion	106
Amna has a toothache	106
<b>Chapter 8 Giving up abstinence</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>Omdurman, 1951-1955</b>	<b>108</b>
Clark Gable	108

<b>The big question</b>	109
The Black Bloc	110
Communists	111
Muslim brothers	112
Republicans	113
My Way	113
The party	114
Small parties	115
Women and politics	116
<b>Private life</b>	117
Family tragedy	117
Kosti and Korea	117
Dr Girgis Iskander	119
<b>Conclusion</b>	120
<b>Chapter 9 Independence for the elite</b>	122
<b>The challenge to the state</b>	122
Parliamentary elections	122
Torit - the first challenge	123
Sudan's constitution	123
Pedagogy and literacy	124
A constitutional committee	125
Joda - the second challenge	126
<b>From the shrine to the club</b>	128
<i>Wasil</i>	128
Visiting the dead	129
The shrine and the club	130
Taha the teacher	131
<b>Conclusion</b>	132
<b>Chapter 10 Battle lines</b>	133
<b>Abboud</b>	133
Sudan's Muslim establishment	133
Theoretical religion	134
Becoming an infidel	135
Clampdown	135
Battle lines in the south	136
Arab-Muslim	137
<i>Al-islam</i>	138
A visit to a <i>shaykh</i>	139
A bed of roses	141
<b>Conclusion</b>	141
<b>Part 3 Romancing Sudan</b>	143
<b>Chapter 11 Glorious October</b>	144
<b>The October revolution</b>	144
Professional Front	144
Out with the old	144
How was it for Taha?	145
Taha goes full time	146

The prophet and the constitution	147
Centre and regions	149
War and religion	150
<i>Asala</i>	150
<b>An apostasy trial</b>	151
The trial	152
The significance of the trial	154
Sufis and the shari'a tradition	155
After the trial	156
The hero of a dream	157
<b>Conclusion</b>	157
Scottish memories	159
<b>Chapter 12 Pyramids</b>	160
<b>History of shari'a</b>	160
History of golden ages	160
Muhammad and empire	161
Abrogation and tradition	162
<b>Analysing law</b>	164
A world without law	164
1. Enforced law and privileged rights	165
2. Law and ideology	166
3. Law and theology	167
<b>Taha and shari'a</b>	170
Abrogation	169
New rules and rights	171
Imprecision	172
Evading precision	174
An example of legal argument	175
Slaves and liberation	176
Taha and his audience	177
Making the case for the second message with non-legal discourses	178
Sufi biology	178
Sufi pre-capitalist economic formations	179
Law and ethics	180
Sufi pyramids	181
Time for a change	182
<b>Conclusion</b>	184
Domestic violence	184
Sufi law	184
<b>Chapter 13 Modern Sufi</b>	187
Nimeiri	187
Peace	187
Country boy	188
<b>Modern Sufi</b>	189
Oh happy man	189
Social movements	189
Fatin Hamama and football clubs	191
Al-Ghazali pop	192
Indigestion	192
Republican sisters	193

Republican daughters	193
Life stories	194
<b>Poverty and love</b>	196
Asceticism for cats	196
Voluntary poverty	197
Involuntary poverty	197
Marriage	198
Authenticity and poverty	199
A ban	199
<b>Conclusion</b>	201
<b>Chapter 14 <i>Wafd</i></b>	202
<b>After the ban</b>	202
Full-time teacher of law and mystery	202
Umm Kulsum and prayer	203
Mixing with the natives	203
Communion wafers and long beards	204
Muslim missionaries in the south	205
Sons of bitches	206
Opening up to the countryside	206
Conversion and self-realisation	206
Narrow social group	208
<b>Another trial</b>	209
Missions and trouble	209
Evaluating the <i>wafds</i>	210
<b>Conclusion</b>	211
<b>Chapter 15 Perfect</b>	213
<b>Muslim brothers</b>	213
National reconciliation	213
Religion and cash	214
Redivision	215
Republicans fight back	216
Mutual incomprehension	217
<b>Perfect man</b>	218
Getting spiritual	218
Everybody's special	219
The star of David	220
The one and only	220
Pyramid and person	221
<b>Conclusion</b>	224
<b>Part 4 The perfect ending</b>	226
<b>Chapter 16 The end</b>	227
Banks, guns and shaykh Ahmad's dream	227
TV evangelism	228
New legitimacy	231
Laws for the rich and poor	232
Abrogation theory hits the headlines	234
Constitutional chaos	235
Taha's release	235



Back to work	236
Either this or the flood	236
A day in court	237
The redeemer	237
Arrest	238
The trial	238
Sentence	239
Judicial review	240
Who pulled the trigger	241
The hanging	242
<b>Chapter 17 Aftermath</b>	<b>244</b>
<b>Penitence</b>	<b>244</b>
Hoarding	244
Praise be to God	244
<b>Redemption</b>	<b>245</b>
Debating in the cell	245
Was Taha a redeemer?	245
Republican responses	246
Sociable movement	247
Civil rights movement	247
Jesus	248
<i>Shubbiha</i>	248
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>250</b>
<b>Winners</b>	<b>250</b>
Muslim brothers lose	250
Muslim brothers win	250
Taha's political failure	251
<b>Diversity</b>	<b>251</b>
Between Damascus and Kashmir	251
Sudan of the heart	252
<b>Legal reformer</b>	<b>254</b>
Reworked <i>shari'a</i>	254
Patrician fudge	254
Ustaz Mahmud	256
<b>Appendices</b>	
<b>Appendix 1</b>	<b>258</b>
Constitution of the Republican Party, 1945	
<b>Appendix 2</b>	<b>259</b>
Political groups mentioned in this thesis	
<b>Appendix 3</b>	<b>262</b>
Taha's pyramids	
<b>Appendix 4</b>	<b>265</b>
Text of the last Republican pamphlet	
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>267</b>
<b>Acronyms</b>	<b>273</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>273</b>
<b>Unpublished sources and official reports</b>	<b>274</b>

Archive material	274
Official reports	274
Private papers	274
Other unpublished sources	274
Interviews	275
Published sources	276

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Thanks

# Transliteration

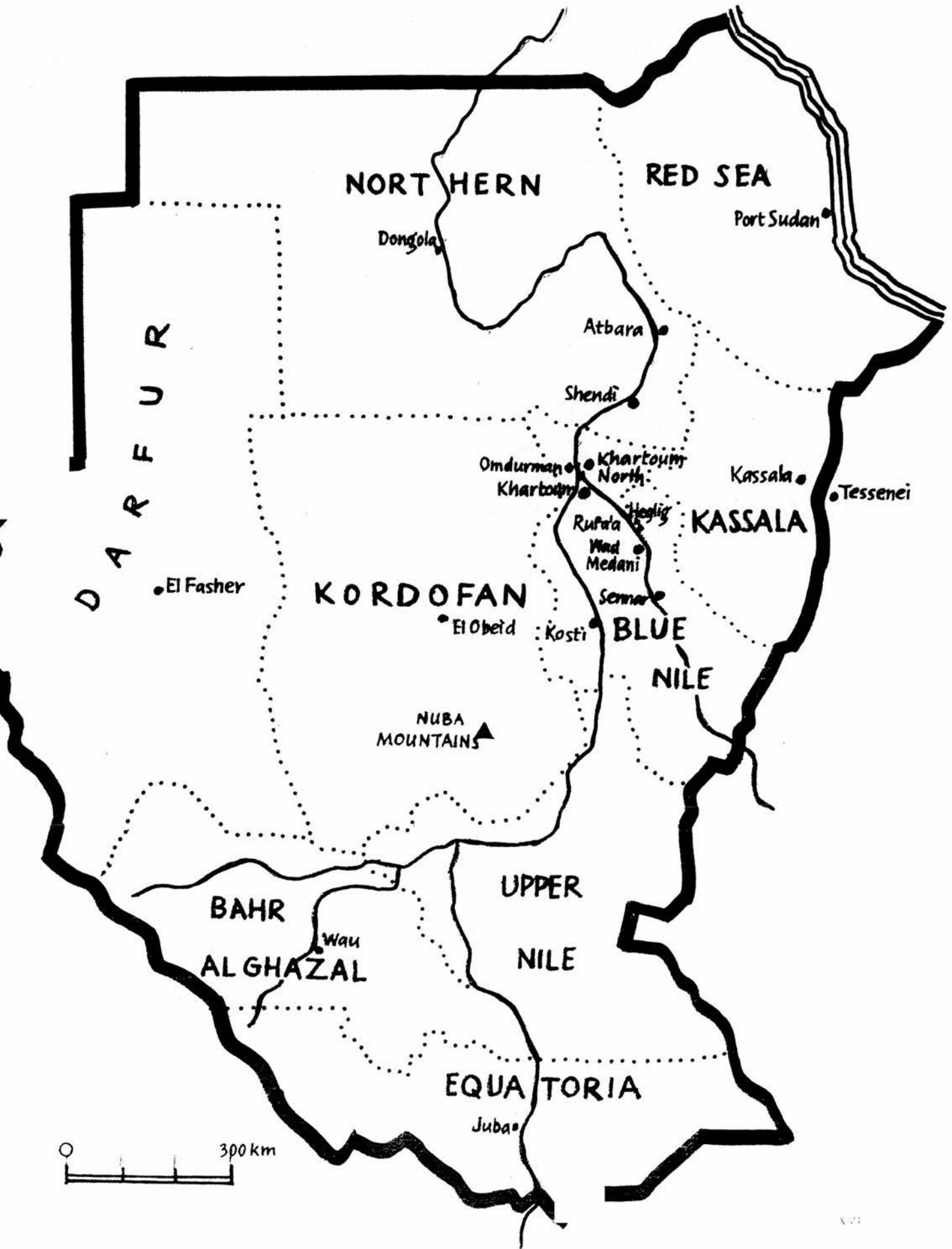
This thesis adopts a flexible approach to transliteration. Words transliterated from Arabic texts follow a modified version of the system adopted by the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. The thesis does not use the diacritical marks of that system, except for the symbol ' , taken to represent the Arabic letter 'ayn and the medial and final hamza.

Oral sources are treated differently. In Sudan, the Arabic letter *qaf* is pronounced hard *g*, and the long and short vowel sounds *o* and *e* appear, and this is reflected in transliteration of informants' speech and also of proper names and words with special meaning in Sudanese Arabic. For example, *akhwan* appears when spoken and *ikhwan* when written, to represent the same word for brothers. *Tariga* is usually adopted instead of *tariqa*, to represent a word usually translated as Sufi order. This is to stress the distinctive character of the Sudanese Sufi institutions and others.

Arabic and other foreign language terms used in quotations and citations follow the usage of their authors.

# Map 1: Sudan

This map shows the regions of Sudan as they were in the 1980s.



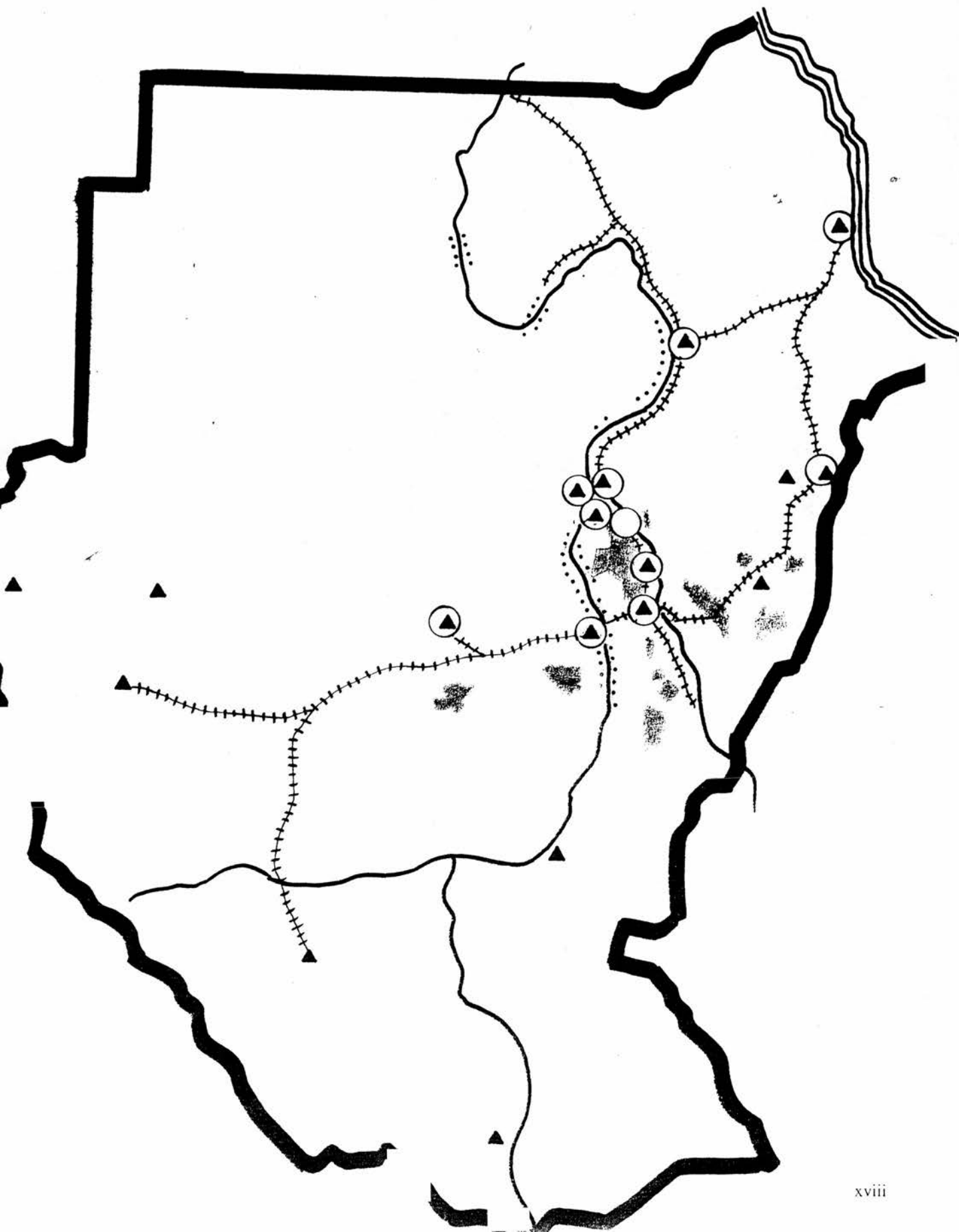
## Map 2: Language in Sudan

This map is a rough guide to Sudan's cultural geography, showing the distribution of Arabic and non-Arabic languages. It should be studied in conjunction with map 3, which shows how Sudan's wealth is concentrated in the areas where Arabic is spoken.



### Map 3: Urbanisation and industrialisation

This map shows how wealth was concentrated in the central northern Sudan in the 1970s. Grey areas show mechanised agriculture, dots along the river show irrigation schemes. Triangles are towns that had more than 20,000 inhabitants in 1966; circles show towns with more than 1,000 industrial workers. The map also shows the railways of Sudan in the 1960s.





# Introduction

This is a biography of Mahmud Muhammad Taha, the charismatic leader of a small group of religious and political activists, the Republican brothers and sisters. They called for a mystical, inclusive reinterpretation of Islam, and became a picturesque and articulate feature of Sudanese street life in the 1970s and 1980s. Taha's views were opposed by Sudanese Muslims close to the state, and this led eventually to his execution in 1985.

## The aim of this thesis

Before his execution, Taha appeared in few works about Sudan. His opponents eventually took command of the state, and Taha (widely viewed as a martyr) has been adopted by other Sudanese as a symbol of resistance, tolerance, and human rights. Since his execution, Taha's ideas have generated much secondary literature, most of it relating his strange and compelling views to modern and pre-modern debates about Islamic religion and law (see below). This thesis acknowledges the importance of Taha's ideas, but tries to go beyond Islamic textual traditions. It examines Taha as a legal performer as well as a legal reformer, and pays attention to Sudan's conflicting legal systems, its jails, judges and police. Sudan's legal confusion is related to its cultural diversity, and the thesis sets out to relate Taha to the historical experience of an African country on the edge of the Arab and Muslim world, where the interplay of ethnicity and religion has major consequences for the division of wealth and power. Finally, it tries to offer a brief assessment of Taha's success as a political, religious and legal figure.

## Sources

Rather than placing Taha in textual traditions, this thesis interprets his life through more fluid concepts that make up human identity. Taha's identity, like that of many Sudanese people, was related to ethnicity, class, literacy, migration, religion, urbanisation and rural life. This thesis looks at sport, songs, recipes, school curriculums, servitude, newspapers and televisions, domestic arguments and architecture, in order to explain relationships between text and identity. Evidence was gathered through interviews and correspondence with over 30 of Taha's contemporaries who generously contributed time and memory. The result is not an oral history of Taha's life, but a study which uses oral sources to interpret primary written sources: books,

pamphlets and letters which were either written by Taha or written under his supervision; colonial archive material; contemporary news reports and analysis. In addition, the thesis refers to a wide range of secondary literature, ranging from academic works on Taha's ideas, Sudanese, Middle Eastern and African history, law, anthropology, economics, political science, poetry, agriculture, nutrition, sociology and religion.

This thesis depends heavily on the contributions of others, in interviews and in the texts they have written. I have tried to allow each of these contributors to speak for himself or herself, leaving any evaluations to the very end. For some historians, a reliance on different perspectives represents a retreat from "historical objectivity" and a way to evade the historian's duty to verify facts. For others, a polyphonous history, with all its retreats and evasions, has a modesty and certainty that "historical objectivity" has never attained. A history of many voices gives an indisputably accurate account of what people want to think about the past, a subject of value in itself. The different voices sometimes corroborate each other virtuously, and that helps to solidify the past into certainty. For some of the periods covered in this thesis, however, it was simply not possible to corroborate evidence, and where only a single voice remembers, I have used phrases such as "according to so-and-so", or "so-and-so claims", in order to remind readers that in looking carefully at what people want to believe about the past they sometimes have to let the past itself fly from their grasp.

## Spoken history

The gap between spoken and written in Arabic is a particularly sharp one. Spoken Arabic varies according to time, place, age, class and gender, while written Arabic usually aspires to the style and vocabulary of its most prestigious pre-modern texts. Textual accounts of Taha's life often use this scripted formality, acquired in the classroom and not on the lap. The written praises and denunciations of his controversial life are sometimes fraught with erudition, and the formulaic phrases suggest an uncertain emotional fluency. In contrast, almost all informants chose to express themselves in spoken Sudanese Arabic (a few kind souls used English). For many speakers, it has a more precise and accessible repertoire of taste and feeling. Oral sources invest history with drama and emotion, and give a sense of life as a performance.

Some history writers feel that memories spoken are too fickle a source for history, and prefer to contextualise texts and their writers through texts. This rivalry between the written and the spoken has major consequences in a country like Sudan, where literate groups dominate non-literate ones. Studies of non-literate, marginal societies depend on anthropological methods and oral sources, while studies of and by the literate elite tend to draw on texts. Sudan's ethnic class and cultural divides thus spill over into historiography. In a paper on Sudan

historiography, Spaulding and Kapteijns note how the textual fixations of colonial historians were used to construct ideals of Islam and Arabness. Sudanese people who claimed Arab and Muslim identity were unfavourably compared with these ideals: Sudanese people who did not relate their lives to those texts were relegated to sub-human status<sup>1</sup>. "Orientalism" is a term used to describe this colonialist method of extracting inert stereotypes from history which can be used to misrepresent and dominate the lived experience of diverse societies<sup>2</sup>. The text-led approach to the history of partially literate societies in Sudan has been used to solidify these stereotypes. In contrast, oral sources can suggest a more complex past, using memory to give meaning to other records, and reporting on the strange and dynamic relationship between past events and present significance<sup>3</sup>.

## Written history

Spaulding and Kapteijns analyse the pervasive nature of orientalism on western scholars and colonialists. However, the inert past also has its uses for indigenous Sudanese ruling groups, who have effectively, but violently, used the ideological repertoire of the Arab-Muslim state to centralise power since the eighteenth century and before<sup>4</sup>. Arabised, Muslim elites, sponsored by colonialists, dignified their past with references to Arabic or Islamic culture, and denied the cultural rights of non-literate societies<sup>5</sup>. Sudan's narrow nationalist movement, dominated by these elites, defined Sudan's "national character" as Arab and Muslim. In the mid- twentieth century, nationalists conflated the successful paradigm of the Arab-Muslim state with an imagined Sudanese nation - a linguistic, cultural and ethnic unit of Arab Muslims.

The Arabised, Islamised history of Sudan is still deployed by Sudan's ruling class. Al-Turabi, a senior figure in the current Sudanese government, claims that Sudan was Arabised and Islamised by migrating Arab tribes who brought "the rest of its people slowly into the mould of Arabness and Islam"<sup>6</sup>. His passive Sudanese do not appropriate or reinvent dynamic identities and metaphors for God and life, but meet external, ideals of genetics and theology.

Other historians, however, have tried to recover Sudan's diversity. Kapteijns (1985), O'Fahey (1980) and Spaulding (1985) examine the histories of different states in Sudan before colonialism. Anthropologists and historians have shed light on the histories of societies at the margins of Arabness and Islam (Johnson 1993, James 1979, Simonse 1992, Ewald 1990,

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<sup>1</sup>Spaulding and Kapteijns in O'Brien and Rosebery eds, 1991:139

<sup>2</sup>Said 1995

<sup>3</sup>Portelli in Perks and Thomson 1998

<sup>4</sup>Bruce 1964:230

<sup>5</sup>Hassan al-Turabi, cited in Mawut 1986:20

<sup>6</sup>al-Turabi 1991:22

Sikainga 1996). Anthropology came much later to northern Sudan, after a preference for textual history had been established there. Anthropological studies of northern Sudan challenge inert stereotypes by asserting the diversity and historicity of these societies (Cunnison 1966, Asad 1970, el-Hassan 1993). The anthropological focus on the particular has been taken up by historians and social scientists who have built up pictures of complex, inter-related societies (Björkelo 1989, Harir and Tvedt 1994, Deng 1995, Ali ed, 1995).

The concern to assert Sudan's diversity has produced many histories of culture and society which discuss how Arabness and Islam achieved political importance in Sudan. This, in turn, sometimes leads historians to emphasise the nineteenth century, when an Ottoman-Egyptian regime (the Turkiya) asserted Islamic themes to legitimate its rule, only to be supplanted by a Sudanese revolution which reworked those themes and defined itself as Arab in distinction to the "Turkish" invaders<sup>7</sup>. This stress on the culturally decisive nineteenth century sometimes obscures the importance of the economically decisive twentieth century. Niblock (1987) and Daly (1986 and 1991) explore forgotten economics, demonstrating how British colonialism gave economic foundation to ethnic inequalities. Sudan's economic history has received little attention, and the most important trade of the nineteenth century - slaves - is relatively understudied, although its consequences for the country are enormous.

The migrations of slavers and slaves brought people from different parts of Sudan in contact with each other; the institution of slavery brought cruel class stratifications to northern Sudan and a long aftermath of historical polemic. Western writers of the nineteenth century attacked Muslims, Arabs and Islam for the injustice of slavery, whose abolition was a major justification for colonial intervention (see Ali 1972). The association of Islam and slavery spurred an exculpatory genre of historical writing from some twentieth century northern Sudanese historians, which claimed Sudanese and Muslim slavery was mild, and diminished the complicity of Arabised Muslims in the whole institution<sup>8</sup>. More recent works have analysed the historical experience of slaves and the economic rationale of slavery (Sikainga 1996, Makris 1996).

The fascination with social particulars has been forced on historians of Sudan who want to challenge prevailing historical stereotypes. Yet this fascination has led to a neglect of economic history. Equally, there is a neglect of the larger historical themes that pour into the Nile basin from west Africa, central Africa, east Africa, the Arabian peninsula, the Middle East and from European colonialism. These larger themes exist, and sometimes it is easier to

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<sup>7</sup>See for example James et al in Schuver 1996:246f

<sup>8</sup>For example, Beshir 1982:30ff or Ali, 1972

find them in works on agriculture and climate (Craig ed 1991), nutrition (Dirar 1993), Islam (O'Fahey 1990, Hasan ed, 1971), or law (Akolawin 1973, An-Na'im and Deng 1990, Hasan ed, 1971). Taha's biography is not the place to examine Sudan's *longue durée*<sup>9</sup>. However, Taha is a good biographical subject because he was in touch with many of these wider themes. This thesis tries to relate Taha to the themes his life touched, and to show why he was isolated from other major themes in Sudan.

## Writings about Taha

Most works on Taha deal with his religious opinions. Taha's religious opponents began litigating and writing about his views soon after he began to publicise them. Da'ud (1974) and Zaki (1985/6) attacked Taha's curvaceously mystical logic, using transcripts of Taha's apostasy trial in 1968. This trial, initiated by Zaki and Da'ud, took place in Sudan's *shari'a* or Islamic law system, a network of courts which had an important role in legitimating the state, but only minor jurisdiction. Sudan's Muslim establishment cautiously accepted the judgement of Sudan's *shari'a* courts. Yusuf Hasan (interview, 12/6/1997), a senior Mahdist figure, sees Taha as a sympathetic and engaging thinker, but one who ultimately crossed the bounds of normative Islam. Rogalski (in 'Ali ed, 1992) and El Zein (nd) place Taha in the context of a long-running antagonism between the Sufi and *shari'a* traditions, Rogalski arguing that Taha gave this antagonism an unprecedented "ideological and political depth". Muhammad Mahmoud (in Westerlund and Rosander eds, 1997) sees Taha as a "neo-Islamist" who synthesised Sufism and socialism.

An-Na'im's widely available work (1990) analyses Taha in the traditions of modern Islamic law reform, showing how Taha's system was able to cope authentically with the sources of Islam while thoroughly reforming the laws and rights. He and Mukhtar look at the implications of Taha's work for an Islamic ethical framework for human rights (An-Na'im and Deng 1990, Mukhtar 1996). Mahgoub Mahmoud (1998) responds to these attempts to replace Islamic law with Islamic ethics.

Taha is also studied as a theologian and social philosopher (Eltayeb 1995, Ali ed 1992). Eltayeb, using a particularly wide range of sources, also explains Taha's sometimes impenetrable theology. Renaud (nd) a Christian theologian, sees Taha's irenic reworking of Islamic tradition as a starting point for inter-religious dialogue, a point also taken up by An-Na'im (1988). Although most secondary literature deals with Taha as a religious thinker, since

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<sup>9</sup>See Johnson 1997



his death he has made an appearance in almost every work on Sudanese contemporary history, politics, culture or religion cited here.

## Terms

Taha's preoccupations were with Sudan, Islam and the state which related between them. These preoccupations form a large part of this thesis. This section briefly defines those terms.

## Sudan

Many commentators on Sudan divide the country into north and south. Northerners are taken to be Arab and Muslim; southerners are African and follow Christianity or Noble Spiritual Beliefs<sup>10</sup>. This division is careless - some northern Sudanese speak Arabic as a first language, others speak African languages. The most thoroughly Arabised and Islamised area is the central northern Sudan, which runs up the Nile valley from the Egyptian border to the swamps below the twelfth parallel, and is infrastructurally linked with urban areas of northern Kordofan and the Red Sea coast. It is also the most economically developed area, and its elites overwhelmingly dominate political and commercial life (see maps 2 and 3, pages xvii and xviii). Non-Arabised groups in northern Sudan practice different versions of Islam. Their Islamic affiliation sometimes implies an acceptance of the prestige of Arabness. However, non-Arabic speakers whose interests are threatened by the Arab-Muslim elite sometimes identify and elaborate non-Arab versions of ethnicity in an attempt to resist Arab dominance<sup>11</sup>. Other groups associate certain styles of dress, marriage practices, and female circumcision with prestigious Arabness, and consciously adopt those forms (see page 38). In northern Sudan, Arabness is as much an aspiration as an ethnicity. In the south, "Arab" is a common, and often pejorative term to describe northerners, who are identified by ascribed ethnicity and not religion.

In this thesis, the developed core of Sudan is called "central Sudan" or "the northern Nile valley". "The far north" describes the Nile valley north of Khartoum. Central Sudan includes some towns in Kordofan and the Red Sea hills and coast. The rest of Kordofan with Darfur is termed "the west". "The south" is the non-Arabised area below the tenth parallel. The term "northerners" generally refers to the peoples of the northern Nile valley and their culturally related political allies. The term "riverain tribes" is used to distinguish Nile valley northerners from other Arabised Muslim groups.

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<sup>10</sup>This term is borrowed from the 1973 Sudanese constitution, to describe religious movements elsewhere termed "pagan", "animist", or "African traditional".

<sup>11</sup>See Hale 1996a

## Islam

For Taha, Islam is an all-inclusive perfecting process that stretches from pre-history to heaven<sup>12</sup>. Taha believed that the prophet Muhammad lived out this final perfection, but that he accommodated human frailty with temporary, concessive regulations for human affairs. Most Muslims believe that these laws, which they call *shari'a*, are eternal, and many believe that the institutions that arose from *shari'a* are definers of Muslim culture and identity. In contrast, Taha claimed that the Qur'an had an ethical message that would supersede its legislative content. The world would only come to this supreme ethical message through a supremely ethical man, and Taha, drawing on the mystic Sufi tradition of Islam, aspired to a personal perfection that would inaugurate an age of goodness.

Taha played on the tensions between the Sufi and *shari'a* traditions of Islam. The *shari'a* tradition is sometimes depicted as a puritanical antagonist of Sufism, which is in turn, is depicted as a gentle exotic theosophy that was subordinated to *shari'a* and became a vernacular, latitudinarian religion of the Islamic periphery. Lapidus's history of Islamic societies (1988) shows that this description caricatures a complex historical relationship between two major Islamic trends. Nor do they fit Sudan, where *shari'a* was sometimes scorned by the Sufi mainstream, a mainstream organised around local orders or organisations called *tarigas*. Sufi celebrities institutionalised their spiritual prestige with community leadership, educational activity and trade. Before 1820, *shari'a* was not a "tradition" in Sudan; it was a set of laws adopted by successful merchants to modernise commerce. However, *shari'a* was used by Ottoman-Egyptian colonialists to negotiate their authority over Muslim Sudanese, to marginalise local *tarigas* and to exclude most Sudanese non-Muslims from legal protection. The *shari'a* tradition decisively entered the idiom of the state in 1820, but it did not destroy other Muslim forms. Small *tarigas* retained their importance in local settings. New, larger *tarigas* centralised spiritual authority and extended their followings beyond the local, inspiring Muhammad Ahmad, the Sudanese Mahdi, whose movement reached across most of Sudan to overthrow the Turkiya in 1885.

Sudan's British colonialists redeployed *shari'a* as an authoritarian measure against the Sufism they viewed as quixotic and rebellious. However, they eventually solicited the support of Sufi leaderships in an attempt to extend their control over rural Sudan. Sufi elites, reconstituted as colonial agents, became the backbone of a patrimonial relationship between the state centre and the periphery, and eventually inherited the state. These elites used their affiliation to Arabness and Islam to explain their good fortune. As a result, Sudanese nationalism acquired

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<sup>12</sup>Taha, *The Second Message of Islam*, 1987:117

its Arab-Muslim colouring. Challenges to the state from junior elites were often articulated through *shari'a*, and the post-colonial state accordingly sought to extend the authority of *shari'a* laws and affiliate itself to the *shari'a* tradition.

Sudanese Sufism has a number of historical peculiarities not shared by other manifestations of Sufism. Unless otherwise stated, the discussions of Sufism in the thesis refer to the Sufism of modern Sudan. The term "small *tariga*" or "localised *tariga*" is used to describe the oldest Islamic institutions in Sudan, "large *tariga*" or "centralising *tariga*" to describe the wider, more literate organisations that sprang up in the nineteenth century. The Mahdist movement (also known as the Ansar) rejects comparison with *tarigas*, and it is sometimes termed a "sect". Sufi leaders with political power are described as "patricians". The '*ulama*', or official exponents of the *shari'a* tradition are called "legists". "The *shari'a* tradition" denotes what another 'age described as orthodoxy, but it is sometimes distinguished from "*shari'a* law", the enforceable content of a religious-legal system. It is sometimes contrasted to "Sufi theosophy", a range of views on spirituality articulated by committed Sufis of different historical periods, with common themes that challenge the formalism that Sufis detect in the *shari'a* tradition. Finally, the term "Islamist" is used to describe people who call for a greater Islamisation of state and society. Islamists are usually taken to be people committed to the *shari'a* tradition, but in Sudan, the term can cover Sufi patricians, *shari'a* judges, members of junior elites who want to redefine the *shari'a* tradition, and antagonists of the *shari'a* tradition, like Taha. Sudan's most politically active Islamists in the 1970s and 1980s were a coalition drawn from the first three groups who tried to overturn the dominance of the two largest patrician parties by promoting a prestigious and textual version of Islam. These politically active Islamists are here termed "Muslim brothers and their fellow travellers".

## State

Taha seldom uses this word. However, he wrote about the need for "a social order and a governmental order which makes the realisation of these [divine] commandments an easy matter for individuals"<sup>13</sup>. He believed that an educative and coercive authority was needed until an adequate framework for individual freedom was attained - he may have believed that the state would ultimately work itself out of a job. In the thesis, the word state is taken to mean a centralising coercive authority with interests independent of the society it rules.

Pre-colonial Sudan had a particularly diverse array of states and stateless societies. The Turkiya used the paradigm of the Mediterranean Muslim state to extend its authority over this

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<sup>13</sup>Taha, *al-islam* 1968:35



diversity. Such states often use violence to impose their authority on the conflicting influences of their diverse "political fields", argues Zubeida (1993). This authority was legitimised by reference to an imagined past which drew connections between the days of the prophet and later urban societies of the Middle East, linked by trade with Sudan, although many Sudanese had no congruent imagined past to that of the ruling class. The Mahdi's militant Sufism drew its legitimacy from his dream encounters with the prophet, and regulated social life with his version of *shari'a*. Even the British borrowed the prestige of the *shari'a* tradition to establish their authority.

The purpose of British colonialism was not to create an Arab-Muslim state but to exploit the riches of the country. In addition to *shari'a*, Turkiya and later British colonialists imported civil laws that could allow foreign capital and personnel to function in the country.

Colonialists could not afford to accord civil rights to all Sudanese. They were able to control rural Sudan by reconstructing rural leaderships as ruling classes with private police forces. Many rural ruling families in northern Sudan had links to Sufi leaderships. Sufi organisations were a crucial part of the patrimonial relationship between the state and rural Sudan. African post-colonial states inherited the patrimonial system (see Mamdani 1996), and in post-colonial Sudan, Sufi patricians used tribe and religion to build political parties which had enormous electoral success. But some post-colonial groups challenged the patrimonial system that related the town to the countryside. In the towns, political parties were organised through the network of modern institutions set up by the colonialists - schools, clubs, state and capitalist enterprises. Some areas of rural Sudan set up regional parties, although some of these parties were eventually incorporated into the patrician system. South Sudan, which had little to gain from the Arab-Muslim state, had its own range of political movements that operated at the periphery of power.

Sudan had two colonial episodes under two or three powers. This thesis calls the first episode, the Ottoman-Egyptian regime of 1820-1885 the "Turkiya", in deference to Sudanese usage. The Mahdist state that overthrew it is called the "Mahdiyya". The second colonial episode, from 1899-1956, was officially called "the Anglo-Egyptian condominium", but usually referred to as "the British period". Nominally, it was an experimental form of dual sovereignty; in fact, the regime was comprehensively dominated by the British. Sudanese political parties appeared after 1945, and often changed their names. Some had intimate links with religious, social or ethnic groups. These links, and different names are set out in Appendix 2.

## Outline of chapters

Taha's biography is presented in a more-or-less chronological order. Chapter one (1911-1921) deals with Taha's first ten years; chapter two (seventeenth century to 1911) relates the time and place of Taha's childhood to the wider Sudan. Chapters three and four (1921-1936) look at Taha's schooldays in his home town of Rufa'a and in the capital Khartoum, and the changes his society underwent in the heyday of British colonialism. Chapter five (1936-1945) deals with his marriage and the end of his private life. In chapter six (1945-1946), Taha founds an activist political party and goes to jail for his pains. He spends chapter seven (1946-1951) in jail and in an ascetic retreat, and begins to reflect on the inclusive character and transformative power of religion. In chapters eight and nine (1951-1958), Taha returns to life in the mainstream, making money, watching Sudan become independent and occasionally talking about his prison revelations, which attract some hostile attention. This hostility does not stop him from publicising his beliefs in chapter ten (1958-1964). In chapter 11 (1964-1969) he returns to an ascetic life, writes books, begins to attract young intellectuals, and is accused of apostasy by radical exponents of the *shari'a* tradition. Chapter 12 discusses the books that Taha has written and places them in the context of the *shari'a* and Sufi traditions in Sudan. Chapter 13 (1969-1976) goes on to discuss how Taha reinvented Sufi ideas and organisational methods, and relates Taha's experiences to a Sudan ruled by a military regime that tried to reconfigure power away from the Muslim patrician system into a multi-cultural autocracy. Chapter 14 (1973-1982) deals with Taha's attempts to spread his message outside his urban base and to engage with the wider Sudan. Chapter 15 (1977-1983) describes how Sudan's military regime became dominated by new-style religious politics, and looks at the confrontation that developed between Taha and the Muslim Brothers. In chapter 16 (1983-1985) that confrontation ends with Taha's execution. Chapter 17 (1985 onwards) looks at the aftermath of that execution and tries to answer the questions asked in this introduction.

# Part 1

## *Khalwa*

*How wonderful are the days of the khalwa  
And marvellous the green childhood<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup>Al-Tigani Yusuf Beshir, a favourite poet of Taha's, quoted in El Shoush 1963:29

# Chapter 1

## Remembering childhood

Part 1 looks at the society that Taha was born into, and the first three decades of his life, and this chapter gives an account of his earliest years. Here he is called Mahmud, to distinguish him from his father, Muhammad Taha.

### Rufa'a and Heglig

The people who still remember Mahmud's boyhood do not recall the circumstances of his birth. He himself did not know exactly when it happened - either in 1909 or 1911. His birthplace was in the populous and fertile Blue Nile region, in the most economically developed part of the northern Nile valley. Mahmud's contemporaries disagree as to whether he was born in Rufa'a, a small east-bank town about 200 miles south of Khartoum, or Heglig (al-Hijaylij), a hamlet ten miles north of Rufa'a. Heglig was where his father had a farm on the rainfed lands of the Butana, away from the river; and Rufa'a was then a town of several thousand people which lay on the river, and where many of his relations lived<sup>1</sup>. He spent his early boyhood between the two places, going to Heglig to plant and harvest when the rains came (between July and November).

### Mahmud's parents

Muhammed Taha al-Malik Fadul, Mahmud's father, married twice, and Mahmud was born to his second wife, Fatma Mahmud. Her family was from the far north, but had settled in Sifita, a village on the west bank of the Blue Nile. They had five children together: Batul and Kulsum, the daughters, came first, and Mahmud was followed by a brother Mukhtar, born in 1913. Ahmed al-Mustafa, born in 1915, lived only a few months. Mahmud also had a half brother named Ahmed wad al-Birr. Muhammed Taha, the father, was a farmer of modest means and some respectable connections. He had houses in Heglig and Rufa'a - the Rufa'a house was plain - a courtyard of 1,500 square metres, and two rooms of unbaked mud with old-fashioned windholes instead of windows. Houses had separate quarters for women and men, built in a

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<sup>1</sup>Interview, Sayyida Lutfi 17/6/1998

mud courtyard enclosed with a high wall. The grass huts and thorn enclosures of the African interior start a little further up the Blue Nile, but respectable houses in Rufa'a kept to Arab architectural ideals of domestic privacy. Muhammad Taha lived near the house of Muhammad Lutfi, a promising young school teacher, and next to the house of Zahra Abdallah, Fatma's special friend. Zahra would breast feed the young Mahmud when his mother was busy. The men-folk would gather in Lutfi's house for their meals together<sup>2</sup>.

As well as a farm, Mahmud's father had an oil press that he worked with his sons and possibly his slaves or hired men. The press was the simplest kind, made out of a hollowed tree and powered by a camel. The extra income probably meant that the family was comfortably off, and the sesame oil also spiced up Fatma's social life. Sesame oil is used for cosmetics as well as cooking, and women came to Fatma's house for communal make-up sessions. The women rubbed their skins with ointments and sat under a thick black blanket around the embers of aromatic woods and spices. The blanket trapped the smoke and the smoke sweetened and softened their skin, and then they went back to their husbands<sup>3</sup>.

## Heglig

In Heglig, where Mahmud spent the rainy season, people lived in closer proximity. The men worked their fields and then collected a plate of stew from their wives, eating together with guests staying in the village *khalwa*. *Khalwas* were originally retreats for village mystics, but they became religious and cultural centres for small communities. The *khalwa* was a place for congregational prayer, a guest house, a kindergarten, and a place to eat a meal and idle away an evening in male company.

For many informants who spoke about Rufa'a, the food was memorable. The first study of diet in the area took place in the 1940s, and it showed that people depended heavily on one crop, sorghum, most commonly eaten as a sour bread pancake called *kisra*. The roasted grains were used to treat nausea and charred stalks made a flavour enhancing potash called *weikab*<sup>4</sup>. Heglig folk memories recall the poor diet of their village - the monotonous diet affected people's night vision so badly that they needed

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<sup>2</sup>Interview, Ahmad Omer 3/12/1997

<sup>3</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>4</sup>"Diet in the Gezira irrigated areas of the Sudan", Culwick papers, Sudan Archive, Durham [henceforward SAD] 428/5/45,54

guide-ropes to get home from the *khalwa* after their evening meal. It was only when vitamin-rich mustard-cress was introduced that the problem cleared up<sup>5</sup>.

Sorghum stalks made toy flutes for boys and girls turned the leaves into trumpets<sup>6</sup>. Rufa'a was a town where girls and boys mixed together into late childhood, and Mahmud's sister-in-law remembers that he played with the boys and girls of his part of the town, Daym Graydab (Qaridab). They played games like *shilayl*, which has children hiding and finding scraps of bone or cloth, shrieking nonsense chants in enthusiastic accompaniment<sup>7</sup>. Mahmud also played football - a recent arrival in Rufa'a taken up by a famous and far-sighted educator, Babikr Bedri<sup>8</sup>. Rufa'a boys played an enthusiastic, barefoot game<sup>9</sup>. When the Rufa'a boys went to Wad Medani, the provincial capital for the annual competition, there were so many of them that they were sometimes put up in the jail<sup>10</sup>.

### Affectionate attachments

In 1915, Mahmud was five. It was a year of famine and disease. A meningitis epidemic struck Rufa'a – meningitis was called "the axeman". Mahmud's mother was struck down and died in the epidemic. On a rainy day, Muhammad Taha took the children by camel to Heglig, away from Rufa'a's sad memories. Mahmud loved the farming and the simplicity of Heglig, and he stayed there until his father died in 1920. Then, the children were taken to live with their maternal grandmother, Zeinab Hamza, who lived with one of her sons in Rufa'a<sup>11</sup>.

Mahmud himself would later tell people that he was brought up by someone called al-Rabb Biyyud, a name which translates as May God Be Bountiful. Anyone hearing her name in northern Sudan would guess that she was a slave. Slaves were captured in the south or the Nuba mountains, where people followed the Noble Spiritual Beliefs of Africa and spoke African languages. Their African names were replaced with Arabic names - Good Morning, or Rose, or Friday - often intended to make their Arabised, Muslim owners feel cheerful or pious. By the time Mahmud was born, slavery had been abolished by colonial law, but the authorities encouraged slaves to

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<sup>5</sup>Interview, Muhammad Ali Malik 6/12/1997

<sup>6</sup>Dirar 1993:48

<sup>7</sup>Interview, Sayyida Lutfi 17/6/1997; Muhammad nd:29,41

<sup>8</sup>Bedri 1980:121

<sup>9</sup>"Blue Nile Trek", 1908, Thomson papers, SAD 404/5/11

<sup>10</sup>"History of Football in Sudan", Garrett papers, SAD479/8/184

<sup>11</sup>Letter, Batoul Mukhtar 25/8/1998

stay with former owners, because it was believed that liberation would make slaves idle or licentious and seriously hamper agricultural production.

Some colonialists excused their half-hearted opposition to slavery by claiming the Sudanese institution was benign:

Between many of the Sudanese slaves and their Arab masters there had developed in the course of years an affectionate attachment like that which prevailed between the Negroes in the southern states of the USA and their owner<sup>12</sup>.

Al-Rabb Biyyud was a *dada* in Sudanese Arabic, a "mammy" in southern US English. When Mahmud was a boy, she was young and beautiful, with no family but Mahmud and his siblings, whom she brought up strictly but lovingly. She called Mahmud *al-darraaj* (an unobtrusive helper of the disabled) because he would help a rheumatic aunt with her walking. Mahmud always felt indebted to al-Rabb Biyyud for her love, believing that she sacrificed the chance of marriage in order to devote herself to him and his brothers and sisters. She fasted and prayed as a Muslim and seems to have given Mahmud a lifetime of faithfulness<sup>13</sup>. She lived with him until she died in the 1970's, and he buried her himself. Mahmud's daughter Asma, for whom al-Rabb Biyyud was a kind of grandmother, gave this tribute:

[Mahmud Muhammad Taha] called her *ummi* [my mother]. She gave up her life altogether when the *ustaz*'s mother died. She preferred to live and bring up the *ustaz* and his brother and sisters ... she said that if she had married a man, he might not have treated them well. She lived her life, all of it, for them. The *ustaz* respected her very much and considered her his mother, no-one else was his mother.<sup>14</sup>

## Initiations 1

Mahmud acknowledged to a close friend and follower, Ibrahim Yusuf, that the death of his parents and his experience as a boy farmer made him depend on himself<sup>15</sup>. Perhaps this emotional independence helped him develop novel ideas about society and religion, and helped him to stand up for his ideas when they were repeatedly challenged. Yet his early years brought him into the rituals and collectivities of the intensely social rural Sudan. The death of parents did not necessarily interrupt this process, and the young Mahmud's initiation into social life left him with an abiding loyalty to the people of Heglig and Daym Graydab<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup>Jackson 1955:94

<sup>13</sup>Interviews, Ahmad Omer 3/12/1997, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997, Sayyida Lutfi 17/6/1997.

<sup>14</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud 28/11/1997. *Ustaz* is a respectful title for a teacher or professional, and Mahmud Muhammad Taha's followers all use the term to refer to him.

<sup>15</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf 13/6/1997

<sup>16</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud 28/11/1997



Mahmud had his face scarred with the markings of his Rikabiya tribe, three roughly vertical lines on each cheek. These scars, called *shillukh*, now seldom mark the faces of children, but they appear in the earliest figurative art of Sudan, in the pharaonic period, and continued to the middle of the twentieth century. They acquired a complex of meanings - ornamentation, tribal identification or affiliation to a particular Sufi *tariga*<sup>17</sup>. In the nineteenth century, when Arabised ethnic groups increased in prestige, and some non-Arabised groups were routinely enslaved, the *shillukh* became a mark of belonging to a tribe that was free from the fear of slavery<sup>18</sup>.

## The Rikabiya

After the 1950's few northern Sudanese were marked with the tribal *shillukh*. But when Mahmud was a boy, tribes were important because the British-dominated colonial government controlled rural populations by promoting the authoritarian potential of tribal leaderships, sometimes foisting new tribal identities on small groups, or rewarding obedient notables with tribal chiefdoms<sup>19</sup>.

Mahmud's tribe was not a colonial invention, however. Its genealogy goes back to the fourteenth century when Ghulamallah ibn 'A'id, claiming descent from the prophet Muhammad, came to Dongola in the far Nubian north. His descendants included Muhammad 'Abd al-Sadig, one of the first Sufis in Sudan; and Hasan wad Bilayl, a Dongola miracle worker who was Mahmud's ancestor. The Rikabiya people had a history of migration, and their presence in the rangelands of the Butana goes back to 'Abd al-Sadig's day. In the early eighteenth century the Rikabiya may have been strong enough to make a bid to dominate the Butana, a sparsely populated area about the size of Ireland, but the lands came under the sway of Shukriya tribe, camel-nomads with Arabian origins who dominated the area until Mahmud's day<sup>20</sup>. The Rikabiya still had prestige, because of their claim to be descended from the prophet and because 'Abd al-Sadig's own progeny led a *tariga* called the Sadigab<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup>Hasan 1976:62f

<sup>18</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 10/2/1997

<sup>19</sup>El Hassan 1993:11

<sup>20</sup>Tribal history of the Butana, narrated by the Shukriya shaykh 'Awad al-Karim Abu Sinn to the local British district commissioner. Acland papers, SAD777/14/34

<sup>21</sup>MacMichael 1, 1922 :198



## Initiations 2

Around the time that his mother died, Mahmud entered the *khalwa* as a pupil. Probably he attended two, a main one in Rufa'a and another in Heglig in the rainy season<sup>22</sup>. The *khalwa* was run by a *faki*, a man with some knowledge of the Qur'an<sup>23</sup>. *Fakis* were given food by the villagers, and some had small-holdings which their pupils helped to farm. The Qur'anic text supplemented their income in other ways - they sold verses as charms, they inked verses on a wooden slate and washed them off, selling the washings as medicine<sup>24</sup>. Like kindergartens, *khalwas* give men their first memories: the fire that was built in the brief chill before dawn, to light the wood-slates where the boys wrote with pens made of sorghum stalks and memorised their lessons; the *faki*'s blows when they made mistakes. Boys learned to weed fields and say their prayers, and they would be let off learning altogether at harvest, when they worked their fathers' fields<sup>25</sup>.

The first year or two of *khalwa* is called "the bitter course" because pupils are hit for each mistake. Mahmud may have passed beyond the blows to the stage of memorising the Qur'an - he was bright and religiously inclined. Although he never claimed to have memorised the whole book, he always recited the Qur'an from memory when speaking in public, and he scarcely wrote a page without quoting it.

But Qur'anic learning was not the main point of the *khalwa*. It offered a kind of vernacular pedagogy which aimed at initiating boys into communal work and social hierarchy<sup>26</sup>. Colonial authorities had little respect for the education offered in *khalwas*, although they eventually used them as a cheap method of extending pre-school education. Some officials recognised the *khalwa*'s function as a place for children to be socialised. "A *khalwa* is valueless, we are told, for education, but it surely has some value as a school for manners", wrote Rufa'a's assistant district commissioner in 1934<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>23</sup>*Faki* is a Sudanese word that relates to two Arabic terms, *faqih*, legist; and *faqir*, poor man or ascetic.

<sup>24</sup>Kenyon 1991:141

<sup>25</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>26</sup>See al-Tayib 1963:60

<sup>27</sup>"Handing over notes" 1934, Longe papers, SAD641/5/40

# Religious life

## Functions of religion

Religion plays a central part in Sudanese identity, and the story of Sudanese Islam is often written as a progression from the romantic quest for oneness with God of the first Sufi spiritual celebrities who came to Sudan in the fifteenth century, to the localised Sufi *tarigas*, which they founded, and then to the organised, literate Islam of the Middle Eastern metropole, which grew up alongside Sudanese states and gradually dominated them. This account of mystical passion and state politics neglects the personal attachments of ordinary people. Religion has other functions too - it can establish peace and order in a social space, create belonging, and express the significance of the individual to herself or himself. Private devotion allows people to configure their lives around the life of a person of spiritual eminence and allow him or her to mediate between the devotee and God. It can be used to exclude - Muslim women participate in few communal Islamic activities in the northern Nile valley<sup>28</sup>. Vernacular religious beliefs have a vogue amongst women and other marginalised groups in northern Sudan - like the *Zar* spirit-possession cults which allow devotees to assume different personae whose eminence makes their hopes and prayers more effective<sup>29</sup>.

When the British came to Sudan, they counted 68 *khalwas* in Rufa'a district alone<sup>30</sup>. But Mahmud's earliest feelings about all this religion are not clear. Sayyida Lutfi, his sister-in-law, and the nearest witness to Mahmud's childhood, does not remember any more than perfunctory religious observances:

Only old people belonged to *tarigas* in those days. An old person, when he got old, would go on the pilgrimage [to Mecca], would go to the *tariga* and the prayer sessions. The father would not force his son to go to his *tariga*. All our boys were polite and said their prayers and fasted.<sup>31</sup>

According to Sayyida Lutfi, Mahmud learned the lesson of respect for elders early, always asking permission to go out to a wedding party, and never lying nor letting his playmates lie to protect him.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>See Kenyon 1991:147ff

<sup>29</sup>See Kenyon 1991:184ff, al-Shahi 1986:108ff, Makris 1996, Boddy 1989

<sup>30</sup>Wingate 1905:275

<sup>31</sup>Interview, Sayyida Lutfi 17/6/1997

<sup>32</sup>Interview, Sayyida Lutfi 17/6/1997

## Mahmud and Muhammad

Rural education was based on a religious text, but there were non-literate religious initiations too. Mahmud's society made innumerable references to the life of the prophet Muhammad. He appeared in dreams and he was invoked in ardently passionate hymns and ecstatic dances. The Sadigab clan of the Rikabiya claimed him as their ancestor, and were a kind of incarnation of the prophet's blessing. Even his sandals appeared as a formalised squiggle on the pupil's slate in the *khalwa*. The prophet's birthday was celebrated, with all the *tarigas* of the town setting up tents where the *shaykh* would sit and receive his guests. Boys recited the Qur'an, ate sweets, and speeches were made in classical Arabic<sup>33</sup>. At the *mi'raj*, a celebration of Muhammad's night journey to heaven, Sadigab tradition involves a trip to Faw mountain in the Butana. There, the faithful repeat the formula "There is no god but God" 70,000 times, in the hope that one time it is said purely, and their praise is accepted. A handful of the most devout have themselves incarcerated in stifling little mud enclosures and abstain from food, drink and sleep for ten days. Then they go back to the Sadigab *masid* (a Sudanese word for a religious centre) and stand in a big circle for *zikr* (repetition of the name of God). They almost bend double, so the word "God" is pronounced as a grunting cry from their insides<sup>34</sup>.

After the ceremonies, people sing hymns about the glories of *walis*, saintly departed *shaykhs*. Their tombs are visited for prayer - one of the few openings for women to participate in Sufi practices. In later life, Mahmud commented on the special devotion of women visitors to these tombs, "speaking to the *wali* with unfeigned faith, as if to someone actually present".<sup>35</sup> One *wali* was *shaykh* Taha wa'd 'Abd al-Sadig, the Sadigab leader, who died in the 1915 meningitis epidemic that took the life of Taha's mother. His followers built a domed tomb for him in Rufa'a - he was the last to die in that epidemic, and some believed his death had killed "the axeman", meningitis<sup>36</sup>. Although he was very young when *shaykh* Taha died, Mahmud recalled his death in the last speech of his life, saying it had redeemed his followers from the power of disease<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup>"Diary", 1923, Robertson papers SAD531/1/48f

<sup>34</sup>Interview and video record, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>35</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud 29/11/1997. The idea that "women are prior to men in religion" was the theme of a short tract published by Taha's Republican brothers movement. Republican Brothers [henceforward RB], *al mar'a wa al-tadayyun* 1975

<sup>36</sup>Bedri 1980:183

<sup>37</sup>Speech text in Ibrahim Yusuf papers

One source for the history of Rufa'a at this time is Babikr Bedri. His chatty and shrewd memoirs depict him as a devout Muslim and daredevil soldier in the Mahdist armies. But Bedri was a sometimes cynical observer of Sufi devotion. The Anglo-Egyptian administrators believed that the *fakis* were fanatics who could stir their followers to Mahdist rebellion and they tried to limit their influence, but they were careful to respect religious observances. When a woman in Rufa'a had a vision of a *wali* standing in the grounds of the district commissioner's house, she wanted to build a shrine there. The district commissioner (DC) contacted Bedri, who paid the woman to have a vision in a less important place<sup>38</sup>. Bedri did not like it when his rakish brother Yusuf found religion and devoted his life to meditation on the mystical names of God. He would have preferred for his brother to go back to his drink and women. His brother-in-law Abu Zayd kept up with the Names, went mad and killed a slave girl<sup>39</sup>.

Sufism in Rufa'a linked tribes, religion, education and even madness - it was central to vernacular culture. It is difficult to trace Mahmud's relationship with Sufism in his early life, but it played an enormous part in his later life. He looked to *walis* for guidance and came to believe that the prophet personally directed his meditation. The Sufi environment of Rufa'a and the Rikabiya were a crucial part of his upbringing.

## Land and food

### Sorghum

Childhood in Rufa'a is remembered with warmth. The hospitality and poverty, the religion and the farming, the smell of incense and smouldering sandalwood and acacia all crop up in the memories of place. The Nile allowed for sedentary farming and in Heglig, ten kilometres from the river, farmers could live somewhat precariously off the rains. Colonialists exerted pressure on farmers to increase production for export, in order to teach the Sudanese that "a man must work or starve"<sup>40</sup>. But fluctuating yields led to a famine around 1914, just before Mahmud's mother died. In Rufa'a, Babikr Bedri met a farmer starved out of his wits. The Sudan

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<sup>38</sup>Bedri 1980:202

<sup>39</sup>ibid 107

<sup>40</sup>Cromer, 1903, quoted in Daly 1986:216

government had to draw on Indian stocks of corn to provide seed for farmers, and some merchants made fortunes out of the price changes<sup>41</sup>.

Mahmud, his father, and his father's slaves farmed the Heglig rainlands in the rainy season in the years after his mother's death and the famine, raising fodder and sorghum, harvesting at the end of the rains. Sorghum prices fell by more than half in the year after the famine, and everyone could eat in "the twenty year", when prices fell to twenty rials.<sup>42</sup> Mahmud enjoyed farming - he told Ibrahim Yusuf that it taught him self sufficiency, and he later won school prizes for it<sup>43</sup>. The food he grew was the food of plain subsistence, a food which he preferred to eat all his life, for its taste and its association with Sudan and with simplicity.

Sorghum was the staff of life for all the groups of the area, although the diet included pulses, green vegetables and dates. *Ful* beans, now an urban staple, were more expensive than meat in some areas<sup>44</sup>. The diet was based around *kisra* and *mulah*, a stew usually based on dried fermented okra. The widespread use of fermented foods is a mark of the west African influence on Sudanese food, according to Dirar, a Sudanese nutritionist. In the nineteenth century, colonialists brought new foods to Sudan that now make up the diet of modern Khartoum - wheat bread, *ful* beans, salads, and meat and onion stew. This diet was little known in rural Sudan at the start of the century, but it was spread through large scale colonial institutions (like schools and railways) and then enthusiastically promoted by the Sudanese elite which took over the country in 1956.

Dirar's history of indigenous foods shows how Middle Eastern foods with prestigious imperial connections became the food of the elite and began to encroach on the diet of ordinary people in the course of the twentieth century<sup>45</sup>. This interplay between the Middle Eastern and the African is one of the central dynamics of Sudanese history, and the power imbalances it generates have skewed relationships between individuals and between groups. Mahmud's tastes were fixed at a young age - his favourite food was *kisra* and *mulah*, the simplest meal of the village. In later life, he seems to have preferred it because it was poor man's food, and he was fiercely

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<sup>41</sup>Bedri 1980:182

<sup>42</sup>Interview, Ahmed Omer, 3/12/1997

<sup>43</sup>Gordon Memorial College [henceforward GMC] "Report and Accounts" 1935, SAD556/8/30

<sup>44</sup>Interview, Abdallah al-Dabi, 5/12/1997

<sup>45</sup>Dirar 1993:106ff

ascetic<sup>46</sup>. Although he lived his life at the fringe of an urban elite, he kept to the tastes of rural childhood.

## The law of the land

In the first decades of the century, some foods, like wheat, were cash imports to Rufa'a and Heglig. The merchants who speculated on the 1914 famine worked on the idea of an agricultural market, rather than a subsistence farm. That market had been developing for some centuries in Sudan, with enormous economic and social consequences, and land law provided a great deal of work for government administrators.

Rufa'a was a *merkaz*, or administrative centre, run by an assistant DC, often a young British graduate on his first posting. J W Robertson, later a governor-general, arrived in the town in 1922, when Mahmud would have been about 11 years old. His diary tells of his meetings with the local tribal leader, 'Awad al-Karim Abu Sinn, the court cases he heard and the endless land disputes he had to judge.

I went to a place called Heglig, where there was a bitter dispute about land. I made the various parties walk about with the Koran held above their heads - saying "I swear on this excellent book of God, my boundary runs here" - and then when each had perjured themselves sufficiently I made a rough division and marked it out and left them.<sup>47</sup>

Land law was one of the first concerns of the British conquerors. It was a formal expression of class structures which had been developing in Sudan over centuries, making a commodity out of the principal means of production and promoting monetary exchange. It simplified taxation and empowered the state, which became increasingly involved in supervising production. However, Sudan's administration was complex - the colonial powers had to balance two rival forms of imperial legitimacy expressed in two law codes, one drawing on the western tradition and the other on *shari'a*. Rural areas were ruled by tribal leaderships, given authoritarian powers to implement colonial social and economic policy. Land cases involving inheritance were dealt with by *shari'a* courts, while all other disputes were resolved by a land registration ordinance of 1899 and the improvisations of men like Robertson<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup>Interview, Amna Lutfi, 28/11/1997

<sup>47</sup>"Diary", 1923, Robertson papers, SAD531/1/45

<sup>48</sup>"Handing over notes" 1934, Longe papers, SAD641/5/35



## Conclusion

Mahmud's home, farm, school and religious beliefs all brought him in contact with a wider world - the world of Africa, the Middle East, Islam and European imperialism. He retained many of the tastes, values and relationships of his early life. He associated them with the goodness of simplicity, and when he later turned ascetic, he returned to those tastes and values for inspiration. However, the material simplicity, and pre-modern forms of allegiance and association of this time and place could be deceptive. Perhaps the colonisers were deceived by simplicity too - their understanding of rural Sudan was based around static ethnic and religious stereotypes. But Taha's society was anything but static - it had passed through a century of violent and confusing social change, and was being jerked into a world where money infiltrated every transaction, and class every relationship. The next chapter tries to explain the enormous changes that Mahmud's world was undergoing.

Until now, Mahmud Muhammad Taha has been called Mahmud, to distinguish him from his father - Sudanese people have patronymic surnames. With his father's death behind him, he will now be called Taha.

# Chapter 2

## Sudan from 1500 -1900

This chapter looks at Sudanese society between 1500 and 1910. It concentrates on the northern Nile valley, where Taha was born, and relates that area to the rest of Sudan, Africa and the Middle East

### Pre-modern Sudan

#### Diversity

The territory of the present republic of Sudan has been home to a diverse array of social organisations. Since pharaonic times, the Nile valley has had centralised states, but from then until today, other groups have maintained small-scale subsistence societies. In the sixteenth century, a group known as the Funj set up an agrarian state in the northern Nile valley. Funj trade, in slaves and exotic goods, developed towards Mediterranean markets, and their rulers began to adopt its Islamic forms. Funj sultans garnered the support of Arab settlers in Sudan, and converted to Islam. They used Islamic symbolism to enhance their prestige, but their monopolistic trading system had none of the subtlety of Muslim commercial law. Muslim merchants introduced *shari'a* courts to deal with their disputes in the early seventeenth century: their independent jurisdiction helped weaken Funj power<sup>1</sup>.

Darfur in the west had a stratified society and central authority from the seventeenth century. It had ethnic, Islamic religious and trading links with west Africa, but gradually was drawn into the Nile valley and the Mediterranean periphery. Its trade with Egypt, dominated by slaves, became economically important. The slaves were captured by huge state sanctioned expeditions, in the western plateau of south Sudan, called Dar Fertit, an area inhabited by stateless tribes<sup>2</sup>. The Azande state whose border lay on the Congo-Nile watershed, appeared in the seventeenth century<sup>3</sup>. Although it had slaving interests, it played no part in the Mediterranean system.

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<sup>1</sup>Spaulding 1977

<sup>2</sup>Hargey 1981:8f

<sup>3</sup>Evans-Pritchard 1971:267



The small-scale societies that surrounded these states were often defined by slavery. Tribal names like Nuba, Berti, Bergu come from a word in the tribal language for slave<sup>4</sup>. These groups often succeeded when isolated from state power, behind swamps and in highlands. In the late nineteenth century, foreign travellers reported a range of communal subsistence economies without law codes or class stratification<sup>5</sup>. Local historians recall how similar communities adopted state forms to protect themselves from the encroachments of the state slavers of the Funj and Darfur<sup>6</sup>.

## Islam

Some small-scale communities followed their own Noble Spiritual Beliefs, but Sudanese state elites adopted the prestigious religions of the Middle East. Sometimes, their devotion was only nominal - the Muslim Funj rulers only respected *shari'a* enough to eat pork in secret, while their subjects ate it in public<sup>7</sup>. The Islam that engaged the Sudanese religious imagination was a religion of miracles and dances, although *shari'a* was always part of the scene.

Ghulamallah ibn 'A'id was a Yemeni who claimed descent from the prophet, and one of the earliest Muslim names in Sudanese history. He arrived in the fourteenth century and taught Islamic studies in the far north of Sudan. His son Rubat was the forebear of four brothers, the sons of Jabir, who had a school for *shari'a* in the late sixteenth century<sup>8</sup>. Jabir's grandson Muhammad Sughayirun was invited by a Funj sultan to start a school for Islamic studies in the Funj territories<sup>9</sup>. Another of Ghulamallah's sons, Rikab, gave his name to Taha's Rikabiya tribe. His descendants included Muhammad 'Abd al-Sadig, a contemporary of the sons of Jabir and founder of the Sadigab *tariga* at Mundara, some 120 kilometres east of Rufa'a in the Butana. Another of Rikab's descendants was Hasan wad Bilayl, a Dongola miracle worker who founded Taha's Rikabi clan, the Bilaylab.

Elephant tamer, avid polygamist and man of prayer, Muhammad 'Abd al-Sadig was sharply distinguished from his *shari'a* cousins. Like other flamboyant Sufis, he was a *malamati* (blame-seeker), who committed outrageous sins in order to be condemned by the world, thereby increasing their dependence on God. The *Tabaqat*, an eighteenth century biographical dictionary and one of the main pre-modern Sudanese textual sources, stresses the antagonism

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<sup>4</sup>Arkell 1955:177

<sup>5</sup>Schuver 1996:151f

<sup>6</sup>Ewald 1990:181f

<sup>7</sup>James Bruce, a seventeenth century traveller to Sennar, quoted by Mahmoud in Westerlund and Rosander eds, 1997.

<sup>8</sup>Karrar 1992:16

<sup>9</sup>Osman 1990:60

between legists and Sufis. One of 'Abd al-Sadig's outrages was to marry over ninety women including two sisters, in defiance of *shari'a*. A *shari'a* judge named Dushayn declared the marriage null.

When *shaykh* al-Hamim came to the Friday service in Arbaji, justice Dushayn declared his opposition ... [he said] "You have married five and six and seven. All this has not been enough for you. And now you marry two sisters at the same time." The *shaykh* said "What do you intend to do?" The Judge said, "I intend to dissolve your marriage because you have defied God's book and the Way of the Messenger of Allah, Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him." The *shaykh* said, "The Messenger of Allah has given me his permission."<sup>10</sup>

The *Tabaqat* lets 'Abd al-Sadig keep his wives, and gives the judge a nasty rash. "This negative view of the judge reveals a clear bias of the popular mind in favour of the Sufi institution and its *shaykhs*," comments Mahmoud<sup>11</sup>. In the *Tabaqat* 'Abd al-Sadig represents Sudan's Sufi mainstream against the interlopers of the *shari'a* tradition. However, other Sufi contemporaries, like Idris wad Arbab, condemned his malpractices<sup>12</sup>.

*Tarigas* thrived under the Funj. The Blue Nile, Taha's birthplace, was home to many of the localised *tarigas* that benefited from Funj patronage<sup>13</sup>. Their education and mediation services attracted followers, and their centres became linked to trade routes. Some Sufi families enriched themselves through trade and landowning at this time - asceticism was often a virtue of the *tariga* founder not inherited by his sons<sup>14</sup>. The trade and "worldliness" of these mystical groups opened them up to the greater Arab and Islamic world, and gave a distinctive character to northern riverain Sudan.

## The end of pre-modern Sudan

By the end of their lifetimes, the Funj and Darfur states had begun a process of affiliation with the wider Muslim world. In the Nile valley, this was accompanied with a sense that Arab lineage was a mark of prestige. When the Funj state began to disintegrate in the eighteenth century, tribes, merchants and holy men acquired more political power, and the tribes that dealt best with the breakdown of central authority were nomads with Arab origins, such as the Shukriya of Rufa'a<sup>15</sup>. Following the nomad example, sedentary and urban groups began to ascribe to themselves Arab ancestry, and the idea of a past Sudan roamed by nomad hard-men with pious ancestors began to take hold. In Darfur, people began to associate the Islamic part of their heritage with literacy, trade and state-formation. Their myth of a "wise stranger", a

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<sup>10</sup>*Tabaqat*, quoted by Mahmoud, in Westerlund and Rosander ed, 1997:167

<sup>11</sup>Mahmoud, in Westerlund and Rosander eds, 1997:167

<sup>12</sup>"Preliminary Note on the Tribal History of Medani District and the Gezira", Henderson papers, SAD660/10/41

<sup>13</sup>McHugh 1994

<sup>14</sup>see Al Karsani in Daly ed, 1985

<sup>15</sup>Spaulding 1979:332

foreigner who brings "civilized habits" and founds a dynasty, began to be given a Muslim and Arab pedigree<sup>16</sup>.

Groups which claimed Arab lineage increased in prestige, as other groups lost it. Ethnic differences acquired new socio-economic importance, closely associated with slavery and freedom. Merchants began to share the privilege of slave-ownership with the Funj elite, and the ideology of slavery was adjusted to allow for this. Slave owners became concerned with defining just who could be made a slave, a common pre-occupation of Islamic jurisprudence, which does not allow the enslavement of free Muslims. Arabness, skin colour, and Islam all acted as charms against the heavy wooden slavers' fork, and the Muslims of the north "created derogatory ethnic labels to refer to non-Muslim groups in the south"<sup>17</sup>.

## The Turkiya 1820 - 1885

In the nineteenth century, the developing class, ethnic and cultural hierarchies in Sudan were eagerly appropriated by new colonial rulers. They brought Sudan closer to the markets and societies of the Middle East and entrenched class and ethnic distinction through the institution of slavery, the increasing commoditisation of land and the spread of cash transactions.

In 1820, invading Ottomans from Egypt overthrew the collapsing Funj state. The Turkiya (as the regime was known) was intended as a modern African colony providing gold and slaves for Egypt's economic development. It negotiated its authority over the Arabised Muslim population of the north in Islamic terms, importing prestigious Middle Eastern forms of Islam and setting up *shari'a* institutions to challenge the power of the *tarigas*. *Shari'a* forbade them, however, from enslaving Muslims, so they took their human booty from the diverse, small-scale societies of the south. Sudan was divided into "a juristically Islamic, directly-administered northern zone and an anarchic southern slave-catchment area"<sup>18</sup>. Egypt imported slaves, but they also flooded into the north, and became the mainstay its production, where previously they had been a domestic luxury for royals and merchants<sup>19</sup>.

### Slaves and cash

In the north, Arabised Muslims contended with dramatically changed agricultural modes of production. Farmers without access to cash sold previously inalienable land to cash-rich

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<sup>16</sup>O'Fahey 1980:123

<sup>17</sup>Sikainga 1996:8

<sup>18</sup>Spaulding and Kapteijns in Craig ed, 1991:92

<sup>19</sup>Lovejoy 1983:203

merchants with Turkiya connections, in order to meet new demands for cash taxation<sup>20</sup>. *Shari'a* inheritance law divided and individuated rural land, and this also facilitated land commoditisation<sup>21</sup>. Merchants used the *shayl*, a usurious form of agricultural credit, to bring free peasants into debt-dependence, and sometimes replaced landless peasants with wageless slaves<sup>22</sup>. The militarised atmosphere and the changes in agrarian life impelled many farmers to leave the land-poor area of the far north and work as slavers or petty traders. They were called *jallaba*, and their migration fuelled the demand for slave labour. Shuqayr, a witness to the Turkiya, explains:

When the Egyptian soldiers came to Sudan with their firearms, gunpowder began to be used much more. A single Arab could terrify a whole tribe of blacks with a rifle ... raiding and capturing blacks became the trade of many.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike the far north, the Blue Nile region had vast tracts of land needing cultivators, and few indigenous people migrated. However, many Ja'alis (a northern tribe) were given land by the local notables in Rufa'a, the Abu Sinn family of the semi-nomadic Shukriya tribe, based in the Butana rangelands<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, Daym Graydab, Taha's Rufa'a home, was named after one of these Ja'ali groups<sup>25</sup>. But many Ja'alis joined, and eventually supplanted, the European entrepreneurs who took over the state's slaving work in the south after 1850. It took ten years of devastating violence to establish the *zariba* system, a network of trading and slaving stations owned by merchant houses in Khartoum.

The Turkiya had chosen the frontier between Islam and the Noble Spiritual Beliefs as an ideological dividing line between slavery and freedom. But for Sudanese Muslims from the Arabised villages of the Nile, this ideological divide was constructed from ethnicity as well as religion. A ruling of the caliph 'Umar (d 644) against enslaving Arabs was touted as a guarantee of freedom for people who claimed Arab ancestry, and "Arabs" packed their genealogies when they travelled, to show to anyone trying to capture them<sup>26</sup>. The *shillukh* or tribal markings acquired new senses - by identifying a face as Arab and not "black", they became a charm against enslavement (see page 17).<sup>27</sup> Islam consoled the exiled *jallaba*, and legitimated their violence - even Christian owned *zaribas* flew banners with Qur'anic exhortations to *jihad*, or religiously legitimated warfare.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Björkelo 1989:111

<sup>21</sup>ibid:62

<sup>22</sup>Spaulding 1982:6

<sup>23</sup>Shuqayr 1972:555

<sup>24</sup>"Handover Notes for Rufa'a" Sept 1932, Longe papers, SAD641/4/6

<sup>25</sup>Interview, Khalid Muhammad al-Hasan 23/11/1997

<sup>26</sup>Encyclopaedia of Islam, new edition, 1 26

<sup>27</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 10/2/1997

<sup>28</sup>Mire in Willis ed., 1985:115.

The slaves left little testimony. Like Shuqayr (quoted above), some captured slaves cited the military superiority of the slavers as the reason for their capture<sup>29</sup>. Travel writers record the horror that the sight of the slave-fork brought to the slavers' prey<sup>30</sup>. Slaves have recorded their thirsty captive trek to market<sup>31</sup>. When slaves were sold, their treatment might improve markedly - usually it did not. Women slaves who bore children to their masters had some status, but others could be forced into prostitution, providing entertainment, cash and slave children for unscrupulous masters<sup>32</sup>. Slaves were given strange names, some unbearably ironic, like Lucky, or some free of all irony, like Sea of Lusts<sup>33</sup>. Slaves were often taken as tax by the Turkiya and this dissolved the quasi-familial bond between them and their masters sometimes found in other Muslim countries. They were sometimes left unburied at death to save money<sup>34</sup>.

In Rufa'a, by the end of the nineteenth century, almost all households had slaves, and they performed much of the agricultural work. When Taha was a boy, slavery was technically abolished although many slaves stayed and worked in their masters' homes without wages - runaways were officially pressured to return to their masters. Slave owners even used manumission - frequently mandated by *shari'a* - against their slaves, as a cheap pension-scheme. When slaves were too old to work, they were freed to fend for themselves, their owners receiving spiritual benefits and saving the cost of the slaves' upkeep<sup>35</sup>.

## Kissing cousins

In the first years of Islam, *shari'a* rules transformed Arabian society with the practices of the metropolitan near east. These ancient cities based their economies on individual property rights, and required female chastity in order to safeguard inheritance. The prophet Muhammad mandated a form of their patrilineal marriage and inheritance law, whose individuation of property served capital accumulation<sup>36</sup>. According to Tillion, the aim of Muhammad's laws was not to oppress women but to destroy the tribe "and thus to equalize, modernize, revolutionize and democratize Arab society"<sup>37</sup>. Endogamy (cousin marriage), says Tillion, was the principal strategy by which tribes attempted to circumvent the devastating effects of

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<sup>29</sup>"Statement of an ex-slave in Kabkabeiya", Dupuis papers, SAD402/5/17

<sup>30</sup>Schuver 1996:201

<sup>31</sup>Hargey 1981:13

<sup>32</sup>Hargey 1981:20

<sup>33</sup>One slave was called Bakhita (Lucky) by her captors because she survived a particularly vicious slave raid. She ended up in an Italian household in Khartoum, went to Italy, became a nun and was beatified in 1993.

<sup>34</sup>Spaulding 1982:12

<sup>35</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>36</sup>Ahmed 1992:4

<sup>37</sup>Tillion 1983:30

*shari'a* inheritance law on their common ownership of capital. Kissing cousins kept the money in the family.

Northern riverain Sudan is now an area where endogamy is widely practised, but some recent research suggests that endogamy may be a relatively new phenomenon. Spaulding argues that as *shari'a* law spread in the last days of the Funj, women were gradually excluded from landholding<sup>38</sup>. Elsewhere, he shows that marriage preferences in one small community in the late 1860's were decidedly exogamous, while in the twentieth century endogamy became the norm<sup>39</sup>. A study of Sudanese folk-tales showed that the most widespread fairy tale reported by Sudanese students interviewing village grandmothers was that of Fatma the Beautiful. Fatma's parents ask her to marry her own brother. She runs away with all the girls of the village, telling them that the men of the village had decided to marry each girl to her brother, and after long adventures, marries a kind young man<sup>40</sup>. Fatma's parents propose a dramatically total solution to the problem of excessive sub-division of inherited land, and the whole story explores the boundaries of marriage for children to reflect on. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the meaning of this little skit on endogamy, land and love is related to the need to protect land that has become the commodity of an individual, and perhaps this need came about as a result of the Turkiya.

## Official Islam

The Turkiya regime in Sudan was Africa's first colonial state. Like the European colonisers after them, the Turkiya claimed to provide dignified cultural standards and just laws that Africans had not managed to provide for themselves. This culture and law was needed to justify the confiscation of wealth to fund a coercive state apparatus, and it implied new class divisions. The religious policy of the Turkiya was part of this justification; it imposed official Ottoman Islam, based on the *shari'a* tradition. Turkiya *shari'a* courts jeopardised the religious authority of Sufi *shaykhs*, but *shari'a* extended slave and land ownership and enriched the merchants who had pressed *shari'a* commercial law on the Funj state<sup>41</sup>.

*Shari'a* jurisdiction was slowly extended from Turkiya personnel to Sudanese Muslims<sup>42</sup>. However, in the nineteenth century, Egypt and the Ottoman empire began to modify *shari'a* rules with western legislation. The Ottomans used western laws to reconfigure economic power in their empire, and allow for its integration into the world markets created by western

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<sup>38</sup>Spaulding in Hay and Wright eds, 1982

<sup>39</sup>Spaulding 1992

<sup>40</sup>Al-Shahi and Moore eds, 1978:101ff

<sup>41</sup>Spaulding 1982

<sup>42</sup>Hill 1959:43



empires. Like subsequent European colonial states, the Turkiya used discrete legal systems the centre and the hinterlands. Muslim subjects of the centre were ruled by *shari'a* and new, non-*shari'a* legislation that was adopted across the Ottoman empire to allow for its integration into world markets created by European imperialism. In the hinterland, the Turkiya ruled through chiefs, turned into taxmen by the new administration<sup>43</sup>. Funj Sudan had informal styles of rural community leadership under centrally appointed overlords<sup>44</sup>. The Turkiya, however, made some tribes into commodities, selling hereditary chiefships to slavers and merchants with access to cash<sup>45</sup>.

Mamdani, discussing the nature of colonial states in Africa, uses South Africa's apartheid state as a model. This model promised, in the words of Cecil Rhodes, "equal rights for all civilised men"<sup>46</sup>. It produced a "bifurcated state", a state where the "citizens" of the directly ruled centre attained rights assigned by new laws, while the "subjects" of the countryside were ruled indirectly. Instead of legally assigned rights, they had "decentralized despotism" - traditional tribal leaderships reconstituted as hierarchies under the colonial government<sup>47</sup>. This bifurcation, argues Mamdani, has been inherited by the post-colonial state, and its effects will be examined in subsequent chapters. Hill's work on Turkiya law and administration suggests that this model could be applied to the Turkiya. Many scholars have noted how Sudan was bifurcated in the nineteenth century as a result of the creation of a slave-raiding zone in the south, but the Turkiya attempts to turn northern tribal leaders into a rural ruling class was a social bifurcation that is less well noted.

## The book and the law

The Turkiya's "Islamically-correct" court system masked the fact that the Turkiya did not keep to the letter of *shari'a*. For example, the regime permitted usury and imposed a poll tax on Muslims, in defiance of *shari'a*, which applies it to non-Muslims only. This point was stressed by the Mahdi, who eventually overthrew the Turkiya and its "evil legists"<sup>48</sup>. However, Turkiya Islam brought a range of new practices to Sudan - warfare for the faith, and slave-ownership as the right of an ordinary Muslim. They made *shari'a* part of the idiom of the state, as El Zubeir Rahma, a slaver who controlled much of the south and eventually controlled Darfur, makes clear:

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<sup>43</sup>ibid:36

<sup>44</sup>Spaulding 1973:33

<sup>45</sup>Schuver 1996:106

<sup>46</sup>Mamdani 1996:17

<sup>47</sup>ibid:37f

<sup>48</sup>Abu Shouk and Bjørkelo 1996:xxviii

I became king there ... and I ruled over the land in accordance with the Book and the law of Mohammed. I then undertook the civilisation of the country, making it fit for habitation, and causing it to progress along the paths of commerce and peace<sup>49</sup>

The idea that "The Book and the law of Mohammed" legitimated a state, however predatory, was crucial to Turkiya ideology, but was not crucial in pre-colonial Sudan. In the 1880s, the new ideology was dynamically appropriated, re-invented and turned against the colonial state<sup>50</sup>. The re-inventors of Sudanese Islam drew their inspiration from different parts of the Muslim world, but also on new methods of organisation in Sudanese Islam. The Sudanese expelled the colonialists in 1885, using the book and the law that the Turkiya had stressed so insistently. They also used ethnicity, cruelly reconfigured as a life or death issue, pitting Sudanese "Arabs" against "the Turk". The first successful challenge to Turkiya rule came after the regime threatened the survival of its central economic institution - slavery. In the 1870's, the Egyptian khedive, at the urging of Christian, commercial and humanitarian interests in Europe, began to repress the slave trade. European governors in the south destroyed the *zariba* system, and the defeated *jallaba* began to search for a leader.

## The Mahdiya, 1881 - 1898

Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi used a newly constructed Arab ethnicity and used Islamic themes prevalent in west Africa to produce a new version of the hegemonic religion championed by the Turkiya. He united the aspirations of disaffected groups from the Nile valley and the west and seized control of the apparatus of the modern state built by the Turkiya.

### Islamic reform movements

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw Islamic reform movements in Muslim societies linked to Sudan. The rigorist ideology of the Arabian reformer Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), helped a military leadership unify local tribes and conquer Arabia. 'Abd al-Wahhab's version of Islam challenged official Ottoman religion with a call to return to the textual sources of Islam. His textual revisionism influenced Islamic studies in Mecca, a meeting place for scholars and Sufis from all over the world. African Sufis in Mecca returned home to use 'Abd al-Wahhab's idea of allegiance to a saving book to build new political structures. Their laws offered guarantees against enslavement for Muslims in the age of the

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<sup>49</sup>El Zubeir Rahma Mansur 1970:31

<sup>50</sup>Bayart discusses how colonial subjections are turned against the power of the foreign conqueror. Bayart 1993:27



Atlantic slavery<sup>51</sup>. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the economic hopes of marginalised tribes were mobilised by reformers' denunciations of non-Islamic or partially Islamised societies to begin a century of *jihad*, wars which used the ideology of a pristine Islam to create a state and enslave people who failed to meet the state's definition of Islamic correctness. These wars created Islamic states based on a slave mode of production across sudanic Africa.

However, these reformers differed from 'Abd al-Wahhab in that their legitimacy was not based on book-knowledge alone, but also on mystical visions, where Sufi saints of the past girded them with swords<sup>52</sup>. Mysticism gave a certainty that the text could not give, as Taha was to find out in his own life (see chapter 7). It looked to the end of time to make sense of a confused present, to a charismatic deliverer or Mahdi who would lead his people to the eschaton. Islamic mystical experience encouraged millenarian expectations across sudanic Africa during the nineteenth century<sup>53</sup>. More activist forms of Mahdism encouraged migration to the east, seen as a parallel to the prophet's migration to Medina and an effective expression of dissent. One of these migrants was probably the great-grandfather of 'Abdullahi al-Ta'ayshi a West African who had attached himself to one of the Baggara tribes. The Baggara are Arabised and Muslim cattle nomads who lived on the borderlands between north and south Sudan.

Al-Ta'ayshi was a man in search of a deliverer. His first hope was El Zubeir Rahma Mansur, who rejected him. A few years later he went to join Muhammad Ahmad's *tariga*. Muhammad Ahmad had begun to believe that he might be called to the highest spiritual office. He told a *shaykh* of his own *tariga* that he was the Mahdi, but that claim had been spurned<sup>54</sup>. Now, in 1881, he accepted Abdullahi's acclamation. With the Sufi celebrity he had acquired in the Nile valley, he went to gather support in western Sudan, more open to the Mahdist expectations of west Africa.

## Moon of my nights

The Mahdi successfully exploited the millenarian themes of west African Islam, but also deployed new understandings of Islam that had become part of Sudanese life. Sudanese Sufism, like that of other peripheral Islamic societies, was a vernacular religion which used the charismatic appeal of the *shaykh*, and behind him the prophet, to engage with people's

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<sup>51</sup>Brenner in Levtzion and Voll eds. 1987:44

<sup>52</sup>Levtzion in *ibid*:35

<sup>53</sup>Lovejoy and Hogendorn 1990:219

<sup>54</sup>Trimingham 1949:94

hopes. Early Sufi theosophists had interpreted the person of Muhammad as a pre-existent creative emanation of God, and this theme was turned into ardent love poetry that enjoyed a vogue across the northern half of Africa<sup>55</sup>. These poems became popular in the thirteenth century, but according to al-Bashir, the earliest Sufi poetry in Sudan celebrated the charisma of local *shaykhs*, rather than that of the prophet. One woman poet wrote in colloquial Sudanese Arabic of her longing to visit Mecca with her *shaykh*, Sharf al-Din wad al-'Araki:

Sharf al-Din I live by God and you,  
who touched the [prophet's] window with your hand  
oh let me be the sole of your shoe  
and blessed by you each day<sup>56</sup>

Al-Bashir argues that Sudanese poets adopted classical Arabic in the nineteenth century, when passion for the *shaykh* deferred to a more "orthodox" passion for the prophet Muhammad. Songs celebrated the prophet as "lord of being", "the light" and "the guider", part of an emotional repertoire which allowed people to link their deepest feelings to their sense of the prophet's presence in their lives<sup>57</sup>. This change happened as the Turkiya brought Sudan under the influence of metropolitan Middle Eastern religion.

Devotion to the prophet instead of to the *shaykh* was not, however, a consequence of military invasion. Indeed, the Turkiya adopted a hostile attitude towards Sufi song, as one poet complained:

Listen and see, oh audience  
they (Turkish rulers) said don't praise the Chosen [Prophet Muhammad]<sup>58</sup>

Although Sufism was promoted in other parts of the Ottoman empire, it was repressed in its Sudanese colony. Perhaps the Turkiya, trying to mediate religion through the colonial state and its *shari'a* law, was agitated by the claims of other mediators, even the prophet:

The moon of my nights' has a delighted forehead,  
he has a deep-black and large eyes and split teeth.  
His nose is straight like a sword  
and his neck is more beautiful than that of the gazelle<sup>59</sup>

What brought Sudanese Sufism out of its parochialism was not so much the arrival of *shari'a* courts, as a new development within Sufism. Holy families with their local power bases were vulnerable to advocates of a more literate Islam. The challenge came in the nineteenth century with the introduction of centralised Sufi *tarigas* to the northern Nile valley. Activist, literate, missionary and with some prestigious Meccan connections, these groups had come under the

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<sup>55</sup>Osman 1990:37ff

<sup>56</sup>Quoted in al-Bashir 1972:24

<sup>57</sup>Al-Bashir 1972:32. For an alternative view, see Osman 1990:68

<sup>58</sup>Haj al-Mahi, quoted in Osman 1990:71

<sup>59</sup>ibid:329

influence of Ahmad ibn Idris (d 1837), a Moroccan based in Mecca. His movement tried to invigorate folk-Sufism with the textual tradition of Islam. The movement made Sudan into a country where writing could be an avocation: the Majdhub family of reformers wrote prolifically in the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century some family members produced some of Sudan's most famous secular poetry<sup>60</sup>. Taha was himself a prolific writer, and Muhammad al-Mahdi al-Majdhub was for a while a member of his party.

The new Sufis successfully challenged the locally organised *tarigas* in Sudan, with their parochialism and latitudinarian tolerance for non-Islamic rule. The most important of these new *tarigas* was the Khatmiya, founded by Muhammad 'Uthman al-Mirghani (1793-1852) in the 1820's. He set up a network of followers through marriage alliances, mosque-building and indefatigable propaganda. His *tariga* was different from the older ones because it spread across the Nile valley and the east of the country while retaining central control. This centralised, well connected group was able to communicate effectively with the Turkiya authorities, while smaller groups were politically marginalised.

The Sufi leaderships of the Nile valley were custodians of its Arabised and Islamic culture. They responded equivocally and tardily to the Mahdi's attempt to blend their version of Islam with the millenarian hopes of the non-Arabised west. His successful reworking of these cultural themes gave east and west Sudan a kind of cultural coherence that was infused with Arabness and Islam, and was important for subsequent nationalist movements. The Mahdi mobilised the military power of tribes like the Baggara, who were overtaxed by the state but had probably never thought of taking it over. He promised the uprooted *jallaba* that he would reinstate the slave trade, whose abolition had crippled the Turkiya system<sup>61</sup>. In 1885 he took Khartoum, and the old order was finished.

## The Mahdist state

The Mahdi died six months after his triumph. He was succeeded by 'Abdullahi al-Ta'ayshi, who inherited the institutions of the old regime and built an independent Sudanese state which survived for 12 years in the rush of the European scramble for Africa. Al-Ta'ayshi needed to co-ordinate the Mahdi's disparate coalition, and put down localised resistance in the Nuba mountains, and the western borderlands of Darfur and Dar Masalit<sup>62</sup>. Tribal leaders or even whole tribes of doubtful loyalty were controlled by a policy of forced migration. Al-Ta'ayshi's own nomadic Ta'aysha tribe were coerced to Omdurman where initially they depended

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<sup>60</sup>Hofheinz in O'Fahey ed, 1994:243

<sup>61</sup>Warburg in Lovejoy ed, 1981:247

<sup>62</sup>Kapteijns 1985:78

parasitically on the sedentary population. This caused tensions with the most reluctant members of the Mahdist coalition, the riverain tribes. These highly Arabised and Islamised groups had been developing into Sudan's elite, but now they were supplanted by a group of nomads from a tribe of low status<sup>63</sup>. In 1891 al-Ta'ayshi had to suppress a coup attempt led by the Mahdi's family, who led the riverain tribes.

Al-Ta'ayshi maintained the momentum of the Mahdist revolution with a series of *jihads* against neighbouring states. But this ended in 1889 when an invading Mahdist army was routed just over the Egyptian border. Defeat in Egypt and a great famine sapped the regime, which became increasingly identified with al-Ta'ayshi's family. Tribal deportations ceased, and tribal autonomy returned to the periphery. In 1896, the Anglo-Egyptian regime in Sudan began to prepare for the reconquest of Sudan, reaching Omdurman in 1898.

## Reconfiguring power

The Mahdiya entrenched the centrality of the state in the lives of ordinary Sudanese. The migrations that were a result of the commercialisation of agriculture in the Turkiya were replaced by more dramatic migrations by diktat. The regime weakened the tribes in order to strengthen the state, even ordering that the genealogies that had become the touchstone of tribal legitimacy be burnt<sup>64</sup>. Peripheral tribes with a history of autonomy, such as the Nuba and Masalit, were forced to submit to the regime's ideology. The state treated rebellious tribes severely: oral historians in the south remember the period as one of indiscriminate brutality<sup>65</sup>. Like them, the Kababish, rebellious camel nomads, remember a government that "used to cut off people's heads and destroy them"<sup>66</sup>. However, the Mahdiya was not able to extend its influence in the south - after some attempts to win the trust of southern tribal leaders through the release of slaves, the regime tried to carry on slave-raiding in the region, but eventually withdrew from the south because it was fighting border wars on so many different fronts<sup>67</sup>.

Mahdiya military policy showed an adept understanding of state power, with a profusion of security forces. Only slave troops and bodyguards were allowed firearms, a means of controlling Sudan's huge army, estimated at 250,000 men<sup>68</sup>. The Mahdi made male slaves a state monopoly<sup>69</sup>. He also tried to ease the plight of slaves by enforcing the *shari'a* laws of

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<sup>63</sup>Slatin 1898:51

<sup>64</sup>Smirnov 1974:91

<sup>65</sup>Johnson 1993:52

<sup>66</sup>Asad in Cunnison and James eds, 1972:141

<sup>67</sup>Johnson 1993:51

<sup>68</sup>Smirnov:1974:102

<sup>69</sup>Nugud 1995:91

slavery, which forbade certain excesses such as castration, but this does not seem to have stopped owners doing as they pleased with their slaves<sup>70</sup>. The state did not challenge the fundamental socio-economic structure which depended heavily on slaves.

The Mahdiya maintained the Turkiya tax system, keeping many of its foreign personnel in jobs. Turkiya taxes were replaced with a 2½% tax on agricultural produce, inspired by the Qur'anic alms-tax, the *zakat*. Farmers also had to meet the food needs of marching armies. When the border wars abated and the state was consolidated after 1891, an additional 10% tax was levied on merchandise<sup>71</sup>. Taxes and economic blockades by the regime's hostile neighbours weakened trade, but a market economy survived the Mahdiya.

The Mahdi acknowledged the new forms of land ownership, even the enforced sales of Turkiya, but landowners could not claim rent on land they could not exploit personally. According to Holt, this was an attempt to lessen the hardship of cultivators<sup>72</sup>. However, it also allowed the state to assume more powers over land use, and this ruling was used to grant lands to tribes that had been forced to migrate from their homes<sup>73</sup>. The Mahdiya entrenched the state's control of finance and production, starting the first African indigenous mint<sup>74</sup>. It nationalised all shops, mills and oil presses, and monopolised all exports, buying Sudanese raw material at a discount and selling it high<sup>75</sup>.

## Cultural revolution

The Mahdi identified himself as a religious leader, and his version of Islam demanded a number of changes in Sudanese society. Women's slow disappearance from town life has been traced back to the last days of the Funj, and the Mahdi continued this process, imposing the veil on women. Women who took part in the rural economy could not work the fields and wear the veil, and slave women went unveiled as a mark of their inferior status, to underline the point that a working woman was a social shame. Divorce rights and freedom of movement for women were also restricted, and the Mahdi prohibited jewellery, circumcision and marriage feasts, mourning, the ululation and wailing of women, and fixed the bridewealth at two Egyptian pounds (£E)<sup>76</sup>. These social changes breached older traditions which involved women in landownership, production and community social events. They brought their lives

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<sup>70</sup>ibid:118

<sup>71</sup>Holt 1970:256f

<sup>72</sup>ibid:129f

<sup>73</sup>Al-Gaddal in Naqr ed, 1981:134

<sup>74</sup>ibid:156f

<sup>75</sup>Abu Shouk and Bjørkelo 1996:xxxi

<sup>76</sup>In the early 1870's, one Egyptian pound was the monthly wage of a domestic servant, twice the wage of a farm labourer, or the price of a cow. Bjørkelo 1989:113

into line with the urban Islamic societies of the Middle East. Some societies resisted the intrusion of *shari'a* courts in their lives, but changing attitudes to women were taken up in unlikely places. The Baggara adopted the severest form of female circumcision in the late nineteenth century because of its prestigious associations<sup>77</sup>. The rite is associated with Islam, Arabness and the urbanised centre of Sudan, as a southern woman recently testified: "I am a Christian but I am circumcized because city women in Wau [in southern Sudan] think that is the way it should be, like the Northern women do"<sup>78</sup>.

## The uses of conformity

The Mahdi's religious policy followed the same centralising tendency of the Turkiya. However, his centre was not the historical heartlands of Islam, but his own charismatic and reformist calling. Even the official liturgy bore his title: *ratib al-mahdi* (the prayer-book of the Mahdi). The Mahdi abolished the Sufi *tarigas* and the schools of law, and those who rejected his Mahdship were declared infidels. He changed the five pillars of the faith: the confession of faith included his name, *jihad* took the place of pilgrimage to Mecca, which was forbidden.

The Mahdi was not the first person to try and build a centralised religious organisation. He had much to learn from the Turkiya's use of state controlled religion, and also from the centralising techniques of the Khatmiya *tariga*<sup>79</sup>. In different ways, al-Mirghani and the Turkiya understood the power of book religion to reconfigure small-scale societies<sup>80</sup>.

## *Kafirs* and caliphs

For aspiring Muslim leaderships in Sudan, this reconfiguration of religion needed new standards of Islamic correctness, drawn from religious texts. "Incorrect" Muslims could be stigmatised as unbelievers, and stripped of legal rights. This process has an Arabic name, *takfir*, and was used to justify enslavement or to liven up squabbles between *tarigas*. Al-Mirghani's Khatmiya used the term *kafir* (infidel) against *tarigas* like the Majdhubiya, who opposed the Turkiya<sup>81</sup>. Likewise, the Mahdi used it against his "Turks" and the slavers used it against their prey. *Takfir* marks the Islamising of discourse and the entry of textual standards of belief. It can be used to polarise society in order to build support for militant action and Islamic state formation. The Mahdi used *takfir* and the centralising potential of new *tarigas* to set up a national movement opposed to the Khatmiya, who were bitter enemies of the Mahdi from the beginning, and whose leadership spent the Mahdist period in Egyptian exile.

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<sup>77</sup>Trimingham 1949:181f

<sup>78</sup>Ismail and Makki 1990:192

<sup>79</sup>McHugh 1994:186

<sup>80</sup>see Lapidus 1988:251

<sup>81</sup>Al-Karsani in Daly ed., 1985:86



Like west African reformers, the Mahdi energised his call for a *shari'a* state with the fillip of mysticism. The Mahdi made fluent use of Sufi symbolism in his letters to Sufi leaders, which dwelt on asceticism, on the revival of the way of the prophet, and on his vision of the prophet calling him to the Mahdship. He drew parallels between his own life and the prophet's. When he retreated to the west it was a *hijra* like the prophet's migration to Medina; like the prophet, he called his followers *ansar*, and his deputies were *khalifas*. Although the Mahdi used some of the themes of textually-correct religion, such as *takfir*, he relied much more heavily on the power of the vision where the prophet Muhammad girded him with a sword in the presence of Sufi saints, and told him to lead a *jihad*. The Mahdi was at pains to stress his descent from the prophet, to fulfil one of the criteria mentioned in the 30 of Muhammad's sayings (*hadiths*) which mention this title. But these *hadiths* were not the touchstone of his authority: when his claims were repudiated by Turkiya legists, arguing from the criteria of the same *hadiths*, the Mahdi did not respond with more texts. Instead, he dismissed argument as a human contrivance and demanded submission to the categorical truth of his visionary experience<sup>82</sup>. Like him, Taha was to use the Sufi tradition to reinterpret Islamic texts and to propose widespread changes to Sudanese society.

## The Mahdiya falls to the British

### Trying to end time

By choosing the title of Mahdi, Muhammad Ahmad signalled to his followers that they were living at the end of time. His new ideology allowed him to substitute war for pilgrimage as a pillar of the faith. It allowed him to present the discontent of bankrupted traders, marginalised Sufi leaders and over-taxed peasants and pastoralists towards a complex, centralising state as a contest between light and darkness. But in the end, the state itself was the winner. Rural Sufi leaders conceded religious authority; Baggara pastoralists were deported en masse to the urban centre; merchants had their property nationalised; slavers had to sell to the treasury - in every case the state gained authority and coherence. The Mahdiya did not have the consolidation of the colonial state as its priority - its priority was to end time and usher in an era of justice. But the strengthening of the state was one of its main bequests to its conquering successors.

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<sup>82</sup>Holt 1970:106f

## Irish republicans and British public school-boys

The Mahdiya was the first African state to expel a colonial power. This dramatic event made the Mahdi world famous. The British ruling class held the Mahdiya in particular contempt, because the Mahdi's troops had killed Charles Gordon, a British general in the service of the Egyptian khedive, whose heroism was a talisman for the British public school system, and a popular theme of Victorian empire literature. But the Mahdi drew other responses: the Muslim reformer al-Afghani in Paris used the Mahdi for anti-British polemic<sup>83</sup>. African Americans vacillated between hate and admiration for the liberating slaver; the New York Times reported that Irish Americans intended to travel to Sudan for a crack at fighting the British<sup>84</sup>.

All the same, the Mahdiya state fell in 1898 when the British general Herbert Kitchener led an Anglo-Egyptian army to Omdurman, killing an estimated 15,000 Mahdist troops. The British claimed that they came to Sudan to rescue it from al-Ta'ayshi's barbarity, but intra-European imperialist strategies were a more substantive motive, allied to the common late Victorian desire to avenge the death of Gordon. Kitchener threw the Mahdi's skull in the Nile.

## Tribes and state

The second colonial period in Sudan began a decade before Taha was born. Although the British and Egyptians were nominally co-rulers, British dominance was overwhelming. The British were reluctant, however, to acknowledge that they had acquired a country with a state - they persisted with the colonial view of a country made up of a patchwork of warring tribes which needed the just hand of British administration to survive. Like the Mahdists, however, they slotted themselves into a state system that maintained class structures and a taxable cash economy. Sudan was to be used to provide raw materials for the British economy, and the Egyptian co-domini were used in the first 15 years of the new century to finance the reconstruction of a country ravaged by wars and famines<sup>85</sup>.

The Mahdiya had tried to diminish the authority of the tribes in order to create a new and centrally controlled identity for Sudan, but the British regime, like the Turkiya, went to great lengths to categorise the country into tribes, even creating some new ones. Tribal leaders were their taxmen, and they found it hard to find non-tribal political structures for "detrribalised elements": the slaves, and individuals and groups displaced by the wars of the period. Slavery was a vexing issue for the colonialists - the campaign to abolish slavery had been a powerful propaganda tool for their campaign against the Mahdiya, but the British believed that the abolition of the slave trade had been a major cause of the fall of the Turkiya, and wanted to

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<sup>83</sup>Text of Al-Afghani's articles in *L'Intrangiseant*, December 1883, in Kedourie 1966:74ff

<sup>84</sup>al-Bashir in El Naqar ed, 1981:189

<sup>85</sup>Daly 1986:194-7



change things slowly. They feared that "detrified" bands of slaves would turn to prostitution and thieving and quietly encouraged slaves to stay with their masters.

One of the first concerns of the conquerors was to ensure that land was registered. The Mahdist period had widened state intervention in systems of land ownership, with population displacements and land grants to loyal tribes<sup>86</sup>. In the Blue Nile, some peasant cultivators were given ownership of land, but the rights of the big landowners to some of the crop were maintained. The British consolidated the movement towards the commoditisation of land, begun before the Turkiya, and eventually built up a large agricultural export sector. Slaves filled the labour gap - in Rufa'a, slave numbers actually increased by 10% to 5,311 between 1905 and 1912<sup>87</sup>. The Blue Nile was the centre of cash crop expansion, the most populous area in Sudan.

Like the Turkiya, too, the British adopted a central religious policy with a "Board of Ulema" (*shari'a* legists) imported from Egypt. Their network of *shari'a* courts was supported by a *mufti*, who could make official rulings on *shari'a* questions (*shari'a* jurisdiction was restricted to family law - all other law was produced by the colonial authorities)<sup>88</sup>. The *shari'a* system was supposed to counteract the dreaded "*faki* influence" which would stir another revolt. Indeed, for the first decade of British rule, Sudanese resistance was phrased in Mahdist idiom - the most serious revolt took place at Katfia on the Blue Nile, near Rufa'a, when grievances at government land reforms turned into a revolt of Mahdist sympathisers which ended in the public execution of their leader in 1908<sup>89</sup>.

The British soon made their peace with the Sufi *tarigas*, through the good offices of al-Mirghani, the Khatmiya leader who had spent the Mahdiya in Egypt. He was given a knighthood in 1915, a token of the support he had given the government. By that time, Britain was at war with Turkey, the major Muslim power, and the Sudan government was trying to garner the support of Muslim Sudanese against the Turkish enemy. The Mahdist movement (the traditional enemy of the Turks) was rehabilitated. The Mahdi's son 'Abd al-Rahman signed the "Sudan Book of Loyalty" an effusion of support for the British war effort. The small-scale Sufi *tarigas*, who had been marginalised by the Turkiya and given their loyalty to the Mahdiya only to see themselves abolished, emerged again. In some respects, the

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<sup>86</sup>Mahmoud 1984:17f

<sup>87</sup>Sikainga 1996:43

<sup>88</sup>Daly 1986:63

<sup>89</sup>Daly 1986:125

experience of powerlessness had strengthened them, as they had been forced back on their Sufi legacy and "became a succor and a shield for the lower classes"<sup>90</sup>.

## The south

The British acknowledged class as well as ethnic distinctions in their colony, even though the class distinctions did not fit snugly with their idea of Sudan as a tribal patchwork. Kitchener wanted to be "thoroughly in touch with the better class of native"<sup>91</sup>. Like the Turkiya before them, the British developed existing hierarchies to help consolidate a stratified state society with a developed export sector. Their tribal policy was based around a search for a chief who could mediate the authority of the state, be responsible for tax collection and help fix land ownership. Tribal chiefs were counterbalances to indigenous religious leaderships and the relatively powerless Egyptian sector of the government. But they were hard to find. In 1920, some provincial governors concluded that "there were no tribal institutions of a political nature to foster and there were no sufficiently strong figures to act as Paramount Chiefs"<sup>92</sup>

Chiefless communities of the south stymied the British policy of making a chief into a tax collector. The Nuer of the Upper Nile resisted the British until the late 1920's, inspired by a group of prophets. The British felt that the prophets "had to be eliminated before proper chiefs could emerge and administrative processes take root"<sup>93</sup>. Accordingly, the population was concentrated in small areas and bombed by the air force until they agreed to be assigned chiefs and sub-chiefs.

The astonishing social diversity of the region and limited government funds were factors in the policy of neglect which the British operated in the south. In part, the neglect was intended as benign - the British believed that minimising contacts with the economically developed north would protect the south from slavers and unscrupulous traders<sup>94</sup>. Some British officials studied the lives of their subjects with patience and admiration; others burnt the villages of people who resisted their orders.

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<sup>90</sup>McHugh 1994:186

<sup>91</sup>Kitchener circular, 1900, quoted in Niblock 1987:171

<sup>92</sup>Bekheit in Hasan ed 1971:259

<sup>93</sup>Daly 1986:401

<sup>94</sup>Daly 1986:149

# Conclusion

## Identity

When Taha was born in 1911, Sudan's astonishing diversity had survived almost a century of colonisation and war. But the nineteenth century had associated power, wealth and prestige with certain groups. This chapter has tried to show that Islam and Arabness helped to construct a privileged Sudanese identity linked to the state. However, southern groups, with their Noble Spiritual Beliefs, their African languages and their diverse social organisations, were not able to cope with the concentration of power amassed by state forming elites and their clients. Many were enslaved and formed the agricultural labour force for the more fortunate, landowning section of the privileged northern group. Those who escaped enslavement found their home territory a place of war. The distinction between people organised in a state and those outside it ended up as the difference between slavery and freedom - a distinction which is still "the basic criterion for stratification of the village"<sup>95</sup>. These two identities are not social classes - people belonging to either group could be rich or poor. Nor were they the only identities in Sudan, but they were influential ideological constructs. To some extent, they were constructed by northern Sudanese elites, but they were appropriated by colonisers, who used them in their effort to create a stratified society which generated large, liquid surpluses.

## Anonymous states and expressive faith

The state in Sudan could influence, for good or ill, the lives of many people. Yet one curious fact of the nineteenth century's headlong rush towards centralised power is that the state went under an assumed name. Because the state was explained in highly coloured religious language, it sometimes pretended to be something else - a midwife for the end of the world, or an international slaving corporation spreading religious law, for example. This may have helped the British towards their misconception of Sudan as a seething mass of stateless tribes, but it helped many Sudanese towards misconceptions too.

In contrast, Islamic religious feelings were articulated unambiguously and frequently. Taha's world experienced different styles of Islam - the small-*tariga* Sufism of the Sadigab, the memory of the Mahdiya, the *shari'a* legists of the colonialists, the Noble Spiritual Beliefs of the poorest groups.

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<sup>95</sup>Hayder Ibrahim Ali quoted by Makris in Ali ed, 1995:53

This chapter has dwelt on class stratification in Sudan, a pre-occupation of many of the history books cited here. However, it should be remembered that the highly stratified society of Rufa'a is remembered by Taha's contemporaries as a simple and unified society - a warm, aromatic and loving place to live. What he made of the place and time in which he was born is the subject of the rest of this thesis.

# Chapter 3

## Escaping the village shop

"I could at best have been a village shopkeeper in Heglig, if my mother had not died and we had not moved to Rufa'a", said Taha to one of his followers in later life<sup>1</sup>. Rufa'a was only 15 kilometres away, but it was one of the leading educational centres in Sudan.

### Education

#### Before the twentieth century

Literate education began in the Blue Nile with the Funj, who encouraged *khalwas* with land grants and tax privileges<sup>2</sup>. These *khalwas*, originally Sufi retreats, became centres for community services and access to the power of religion. They taught boys Islamic studies, and some schools even attracted students from outside Sudan. Turkiya education policy maintained the *khalwa* system, but also brought colonial schools to Sudan, aimed at training personnel to work in colonial administration. Turkiya educators established schools in major towns, teaching geometry, grammar, handwriting and religion to a few hundred boys, the clerks of tomorrow<sup>3</sup>. European missionary societies also opened schools under Turkiya supervision.

There were no Turkiya schools in the Blue Nile region, although the *khalwas* continued their educational work, with some official encouragement. *Khalwas* became more involved in the provision of social services during the Turkiya, because the political and judicial functions of *tarigas* were whittled away by the colonial state (see page 30)<sup>4</sup>. This small educational edifice was swept away by the Mahdi, whose cultural policy emphasised the venality of Turkiya institutions and religion. The Mahdiya had a complex relationship with the small *tarigas* and their *khalwas*. Their Arab culture prestigiously defined Sudan against the Turks; their (reluctant) political support was crucial to the Mahdi's campaign against the Turkiya. But his

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<sup>1</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar, 10/2/1997

<sup>2</sup>Beshir, 1969:10, McHugh 1994:85ff

<sup>3</sup>Beshir 1969:15

<sup>4</sup>McHugh 1994:191

hostility to non-Mahdist Islam, and the long wars of the period, seriously affected *khalwa* education<sup>5</sup>.

## Education in the condominium

Sudan's British administrators were ambivalent about the virtues of education. Educated Sudanese administrators kept down staffing costs, and education was part of a "civilising mission", but it could create an articulate class that might threaten the colonialists' authority. Condominium policy was formulated by Lord Cromer, the British representative in Egypt. He wanted primary education that would create a native class of artisans and administrators. The English language was to be avoided because "it could furnish the subject races with a very powerful arm"<sup>6</sup>. However, James Currie, the first British education secretary, argued that secular education would counteract the influence of *fakis*. In the first years of the condominium, the British viewed the *fakis* as suspiciously Mahdist. Until 1912, violent anti-colonial resistance in northern Sudan often had Mahdist overtones, and secular education was expected to "exorcise" this influence<sup>7</sup>.

At the same time, the Gordon myth, central to the propaganda of conquest, brought a different model of education. Kitchener decided to commemorate Victorian England's martyr with an elite school for "the sons of leading men". This educational institution, he said, would win Britain "the first place in Africa as a civilising power"<sup>8</sup>.

By 1906, the authorities had introduced an education tax in the five northern riverain provinces, and spent over 3% of their budget on schooling<sup>9</sup>. School building followed the colonial concentration of development in the riverain areas and urban centres of Kordofan and the coast, reinforcing existing class and regional imbalances or creating new ones<sup>10</sup>. For example, by 1936 Darfur had four sub-primary schools for a population of half a million people<sup>11</sup>. In the south, a handful of schools used education to create a "better class", refusing to admit "waifs and strays"<sup>12</sup>. Among wealthier groups of central Sudan, however, the promise of government employment created a demand for education.

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<sup>5</sup>See 'Abd al-Hamid 3, 1949:101, Beshir 1969:21 for different views.

<sup>6</sup>Cromer, quoted in Daly 1986:242

<sup>7</sup>Beshir 1969:31

<sup>8</sup>Kitchener letter 1898, quoted in Beshir 1969:213

<sup>9</sup>Beshir 1969:194ff

<sup>10</sup>See Bray, Clarke and Stephens 1986:60

<sup>11</sup>Daly 1986:383

<sup>12</sup>"A Note on Missions and Educational Policy in Upper Nile Province" by J B Bowers, 1942, quoted in Beshir 1969:119

## Rufa'a schools

Small-scale *tarigas* maintained their popular support in the rural Blue Nile throughout Sudan's long nineteenth century. They were no longer the Muslim establishment in Sudan: they had conceded status to Turkiya *shari'a* courts; to new, large-scale *tarigas*; and to the Mahdi's hegemony. These concessions forced small *tarigas* to concentrate on their role as providers of spiritual and social services and brokers for cultural identity. In 1905, the British counted 68 *khalwas* in Rufa'a district alone<sup>13</sup>.

According to Ali Lutfi, Rufa'a's extensive experience of *khalwa* education encouraged Babikr Bedri to establish a secular school there<sup>14</sup>. Bedri had been a Mahdist soldier and then a merchant: in 1903, he set up Rufa'a's first secular school, in spite of opposition from local *fakis*, who may have feared a loss of income or status<sup>15</sup>. Secular education was popular with the townspeople. When Bedri tried in 1910 to teach boys to memorise the Qur'an, as they did in the *khalwa*, parents refused, preferring a modern education for their children. British support for this kind of education was more ambivalent - in 1910 Bedri was unable to get an English teacher for his school, which would have upgraded it to a post-elementary primary school. Currie the education secretary was afraid of the spread of English<sup>16</sup>. It was several years later that a primary school was built in Rufa'a.

Bedri's biggest innovation was to open Sudan's first girls' school in 1907. Sufi educators, including one family of *shaykhs* in Rufa'a, had occasionally taught girls in the past, and very occasionally a woman would rise to *tariga* leadership,<sup>17</sup> Girls' education influenced gender relations in Rufa'a, where the social exclusion of women did not have the same air of respectability that it acquired in other Nile valley towns<sup>18</sup>. In the Rufa'a of today, women of Taha's generation read the Qur'an and the newspapers<sup>19</sup>.

## Taha's schooldays

Taha was about ten years old when he entered a secular elementary school, around the time that his father died. Muhammad Lutfi took over as headmaster, just before Taha joined the school. The syllabus covered arithmetic and Arabic reading and writing. He was successful

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<sup>13</sup>Wingate 1905:274f

<sup>14</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>15</sup>Bedri 1980:120

<sup>16</sup>ibid:162

<sup>17</sup>Interview, Sayyida Lutfi 17/6/1997

<sup>18</sup>Interview, Saadia Izz al-Din 23/11/1997

<sup>19</sup>Interview, Khalid Muhammad al-Hasan 23/11/1997



enough to gain entrance to the post-elementary primary course, which lasted another four years.

Taha was an old schoolboy. Most pupils entered elementary school around the age of seven, but he was ten before he joined. Assuming that he was born in 1911, the later of two dates he gave for the year of his birth, he would have started elementary school in 1921 and finished primary school in 1932. The course only lasted for eight years in total, so he may have spent some years working, as one contemporary, Girgis Iskander, later heard claimed<sup>20</sup>.

Sudan's ten primary schools charged fees, although one fifth of the students had free places. It was a small school when Taha went there - in 1933, a year for which figures are available, Rufa'a primary had only 34 boys and 4 staff<sup>21</sup>. The curriculum was based around religion, arithmetic, literacy and dictation. In primary school he began to study English, a subject available only to the 1,300 boys in all Sudan who reached post-elementary education<sup>22</sup>. It was taught with endless grammar analysis<sup>23</sup>. The British were more reluctant to allow history teaching, for fear of "encouraging Moslem feeling"<sup>24</sup>

The British wanted education to reinforce class division, and Rufa'a's schools were for the better class. Bedri had told an earlier generation of pupils "Do not play with the children in the street. Play the usual games in a place private to the children of your family and your friends"<sup>25</sup>. Bedri was a keen learner and stimulating teacher, who admired his Egyptian and British senior colleagues<sup>26</sup>. He named his Sudanese colleagues after Egyptian staff - that is why Muhammad Lutfi came by his name. Egyptian names like Lutfi, Fahmi and Shukri had a minor vogue as nicknames in the period.

Muhammad Lutfi was a talented man who rose to become an educational inspector and opened his own girls' school. In later years Daym Graydab became called Daym Lutfi, in his honour. Lutfi's daughter, Sayyida, does not recall whether Taha was a pupil of her father's. But Taha knew the Lutfi girls, who were allowed to leave the house on their own. Sayyida herself often spoke to Taha, although he was not a close relative, and girls were not supposed to speak to boys outside the immediate family. Taha agreed with her that it was a fine thing

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<sup>20</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander, 7/8/1997

<sup>21</sup>GMC "Report", 1933, SAD555/6/6

<sup>22</sup>"Sudan Education Ladder", Education Department, 1927, Cox papers, SAD662/2/1

<sup>23</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander, 7/8/1997

<sup>24</sup>Cromer letter, quoted in Daly 1986:246, see also page 382

<sup>25</sup>Bedri 1980:158

<sup>26</sup>ibid:123



for girls to have their freedom, and his youthful courtesy towards women was recalled in later life by al-Rabb Biyyud<sup>27</sup>.

Some of Taha's schoolfriends remained close to him throughout his life. Amin Muhammad Siddig came to Rufa'a primary from El Geteina, a village on the east bank of the White Nile. Amin Siddig's father was a Khatmiya *faki*, but he had open-minded views and was pleased to have his son improve himself<sup>28</sup>. Like Taha, he succeeded at primary school and was one of the fortunate few to make it to the country's only secondary school - Gordon Memorial College. Other students of Rufa'a primary, like Muhammad al-Hasan Muhammad al-Khayr, who was a few years below him at school, stayed friends with Taha and eventually became supporters of his political and religious movement<sup>29</sup>.

## Rufa'a in the 1920's and 1930's

### International capitalism

Taha stayed in Rufa'a until 1932, when he was at least 21 years old. It was a small, spacious market town, with a few foreign merchants, some grander houses, and trees in the streets. Taha's house was built of unbaked mud, but other houses were made of baked brick<sup>30</sup>. In Taha's day, the rains were part of the agricultural cycle, and the dry lands around the town would burst into green life at the end of summer, when the rains came<sup>31</sup>. At that time too, many people worked their own land with their former slaves, before the growth of an agricultural labour market.

In the 1920's, huge irrigation schemes were being built in the Gezira, the triangle of land below the confluence of the two Niles that had been chosen as the leading cotton growing area of Sudan. After the first world war there was a cotton boom, which brought unfamiliar riches to many farmers across the water from Rufa'a. The Gezira plain was particularly suited to irrigation, and the colonial regime set up a syndicate owned by shareholders to provide raw cotton for the English textile industry. Gezira lands were registered and then leased to the government, which sold tenancies to farmers via the syndicate. Much of the syndicate's profit

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<sup>27</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud 28/11/1997

<sup>28</sup>Interview, Mahmoud Amin Siddig 3/12/1997

<sup>29</sup>Interview, Khalid Muhammad al-Hasan 23/11/1997

<sup>30</sup>Beasley 1992:181, Bedri 1980:164

<sup>31</sup>Interview, Khalid Muhammad al-Hasan 23/11/1997

went to expatriate shareholders, but in the cotton boom of the early 20s, local farmers had a happy encounter with international capitalism:

the Gezera farmers were rolling in money as never heard or seen before in the Sudan. There were bank notes for 50, 100 and more pounds ... Some used their money wisely and acquired land and houses; some went merry and sought the dancing Marissa girls [*Marissa* is a local sorghum beer]. We heard that the farmers used to stick a 100 pound banknote on a dancing girl's forehead.<sup>32</sup>

## Dancing Marissa girls

Who were the "dancing Marissa girls"? They were another product of British policy. The British abolished slavery in 1899, but passed laws to keep notionally liberated slaves with their masters, believing that real abolition would destroy the agricultural labour system. But by the 1920's the regime's cash agricultural schemes had created a market for agricultural labour - the British used wage labour to induce former slaves and west African migrants into the schemes, and slave numbers in Rufa'a and the Gezira declined sharply<sup>33</sup>. Colonial labour officials found it hard to attract the settled population of the Gezira into the uncertainty of wage labour<sup>34</sup>. In the 1920s, local people responded to the new scheme with dismay - it was believed that the scheme would rob local notables and slave-owners of their authority, and would make workers "like a soldier in the camp"<sup>35</sup>. Like many non-Sudanese observers, they disliked the "monotonous rectangles" and "strict discipline" of capitalist agriculture<sup>36</sup>.

Changing modes of production helped get rid of slavery, and at the same time, humanitarian pressure from Europe impelled the government to enforce existing legal measures against the institution. The slave-holding class protested through the religious leaders of northern Sudan. 'Ali al-Mirghani, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi and Yusuf al-Hindi wrote a letter to the director of intelligence that claimed Sudanese slavery was benign and complained that freed slaves turned to drink, sloth and prostitution<sup>37</sup>. Although the British accepted these derogatory labels, only wages would attract the manpower they needed for the new plantations.

But, says Sikainga, "the colonial economy offered few opportunities for female slaves. Thus many of them had no alternative but to work as domestic servants, become prostitutes or sell local drink".<sup>38</sup> They became dancing *marissa* girls. *Marissa* is a thick, sour sorghum beer that has long been a staple of Sudanese diet. A Persian envoy to the kingdom of Meroe, in the

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<sup>32</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander, 15/8/1997

<sup>33</sup>Sikainga 1996:104

<sup>34</sup>ibid:123ff

<sup>35</sup>Local saying, quoted by Bernal in Isaacman and Roberts eds, 1995:105

<sup>36</sup>Memorandum from local DC, quoted in ibid:105; "Note", Acland papers, SAD707/15/20

<sup>37</sup>Text in Sikainga 1996:207f

<sup>38</sup>Sikainga 1996:83

northern Nile valley (500 BCE - 300 CE) was told that it helped the king's people live to be 120 years old<sup>39</sup>. Even in the nineteenth century, nursery rhymes had Abdullahi al-Ta'ayshi asking for a drink<sup>40</sup>. In colonial Sudan, however, these African fermented foods and beers were denigrated, and deliberately associated with the African periphery (see chapter 1). At the beginning of the twentieth century, *marissa* was drunk at wedding and circumcision parties in eastern Sudan and the northern Nile valley, but the custom began to dry up as the century progressed. The latitudinarian religion of those societies was being replaced by a more textually-correct form of Islam<sup>41</sup>

## Manly chaps, tribal shaykhs and the intelligentsia

The changes which led Sufi leaders like al-Mirghani to represent the demands of landowners will be discussed in chapter 4. This section looks at the life of Rufa'a, and Taha's home in Daym Graydab. It was a better part of the town, populated by Rikabiya people, who said they were the prophet's descendants, and 'Arakiyin, from a Sufi family as distinguished as the Sadigab, up the river. Other groups had come from the north, during the Turkiya migrations. These tribes prided themselves on their origins, and they had mostly good relations with the Shukriya people whose dominance of the region was established in the days of the Funj<sup>42</sup>.

The British liked to make the most of tribal leaders. The leaders of the Shukriya were the Abu Sinn family (collectively called the Sinnab) . They had a small police force, and wide judicial powers. Like the Turkish authorities, the British made the Sinnab into tax collectors for the state, as well as devolving decisions about land registration to them<sup>43</sup>. Land commoditisation was an idea clearly fixed in people's minds by the 1930's. As one British official put it "the people of Rufa'a District look to these lands as private property and when the ownership is disputed, they go the courts"<sup>44</sup>.

People were reluctant to go behind the backs of the Sinnab to the British authorities - except for one group, identified by a local DC, John Longe in 1932 as:

... the "Intelligentsia" of Rufa'a town. These last are mostly of the schoolmaster type both active and retired and are the first to criticise "NA" [Native Administration, or the use of tribal leaders in administration] if the opportunity arises.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Dirar 1993:42

<sup>40</sup>Hillelson 1918:26

<sup>41</sup>Dirar 1993:270

<sup>42</sup>"Handover notes for Rufaa", September 1932, Longe papers SAD641/4/6f

<sup>43</sup>ibid

<sup>44</sup>"Rufa'a lands", 1940 Simpson papers, SAD627/11/28

<sup>45</sup>"Handover notes for Rufaa", September 1932, Longe papers, SAD/641/2



Taha's set certainly belonged to this group - articulate and reasonably well-off, with links to the religious establishment. The group related more easily to the central government, personified by the British DC and the ministry of education, than to the local chief.

By the 1920's, the military conquerors who began Sudan's second colonial administration had largely been replaced by the men of the Sudan Political Service. Its staff came from public schools and Oxford and Cambridge universities. Academic merit was not a bar to recruitment, but athletic prowess was mandatory, which led to the service joke that Sudan was a "country of Blacks ruled by Blues" (a blue is a member of a university sports team). J W Robertson, whose first posting was in Rufa'a in 1922, and who rose to be the civil secretary, wrote that "athletic prominence at school gave us the self-confidence to cope with loneliness"<sup>46</sup>. His diary of his first days in Rufa'a is affectionate and paternalist: people were "like children"; the children themselves had cheeky, smiling faces, and "all salute as we go past and jump down from their donkeys and stand to attention"<sup>47</sup>. (The children may have dismounted because previous British personnel in Rufa'a sometimes assaulted people who did not)<sup>48</sup>. Robertson frequently joined the schoolboys for a game of football. This tickled the onlookers, but he wanted to encourage boys to play after school.

Rufa'a people seemed to view the Sinnab *shaykhs* as more important than the young British administrators. Robertson may have shared that view: when he arrived in Rufa'a, he dressed the foot sores of Ibrahim Abu Sinn, the Shukriya mayor<sup>49</sup>. Longe complained that his ability to influence events was diminished by the power of the *shaykhs*:

the people of Rufaa are so 'tribal' in their outlook and thus so loyal to (or afraid of) their sheikhs that grievances which elsewhere would quietly reach the D.C.'s ears would in Rufaa be hushed up until at last when the burden had become too heavy to bear, the whole district would rise up in protest.<sup>50</sup>

## *Effendis* and grass huts

Longe - who noted the emergence of an "intelligentsia" in Rufaa - was aware of one of the fundamental dilemmas of colonial rule, the fact that the country was run by conflicting sets of laws, with civil law at the urban centre and a colonialist interpretation of tribal law in the countryside. Mamdani, who was quoted in chapter 2, attributes many contemporary African political problems to the fact that colonialists reconstituted tribal leaderships as rural ruling classes. This "decentralized despotism" was a policy of the Turkiya and of the British, and it

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<sup>46</sup>Mangan 1986:87

<sup>47</sup>"Diary" 1922, Robertson papers, SAD531/1/9-10.

<sup>48</sup>Bedri 1980:199

<sup>49</sup>"Diary" 1923, Robertson papers, SAD531/12

<sup>50</sup>"Handover notes for Rufaa" Sept 1932, Longe papers, SAD641/4/2

was clearly being resisted by Rufa'a's anomalously large educated class in the 1920s. When Muhammad Lutfi, much later, tried to set up his own school, Sinnab opposition reached the level of death-threats<sup>51</sup>.

In the 1920's and 1930's, romantic British adventurers sometimes had to restrain their contempt for the educated junior "employee despising his origins"<sup>52</sup>. Longe agreed that he preferred the "rustic arab" to the "semi-educated man", but admitted that he fought against his bias towards rural simplicity<sup>53</sup>.

But the rural was not simple. Taha lived in a complex and changing society. By the time he left Rufa'a in the early 1930's, he was affiliated to one of the classes in his stratified small town. This class, the intelligentsia, were sometimes called the *effendiya*, an Ottoman term for the bureaucratic class. Sudanese *effendis* were a fluid category, rather than a social division. They could belong to the higher ranks of the bureaucracy, or be affiliated to the landowning and religious elite, or they could be small-town teachers and engineers. The group was defined not by class but by their European or Egyptian work clothing, and their education, which was anything between elementary and university. Their modest salaries, and the relative scarcity of consumer imports in Sudan, meant that they did not develop radical new consumption patterns which were used as class markers - like the tastes of the Cairo *effendiya* for orientalist borrowings of French styles and architecture, and for gateaux constructed with the same lacquered exoticism as their Louis XV furnishings<sup>54</sup>.

The Sudanese *effendiya*, like Sudanese elites before them, adopted Egyptian styles that were common before Europe was chic there. Domestic architecture was becoming Arab - an architecture which emphasises the seclusion of women and the inward-looking nature of an endogamous society. Nineteenth century Cairo's bourgeois housing had private apartments hidden up narrow stairs, down dark corridors and behind wooden screens. "The principal aim of the architect is to render the house as private as possible, particularly that part of it which is inhabited by the women"<sup>55</sup>. In the Blue Nile, walled brick houses with closed women's quarters began to replace the conical grass hut in the nineteenth century<sup>56</sup>. This was the home

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<sup>51</sup> Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>52</sup> MacMichael 1934:269

<sup>53</sup> Daly 1991:69

<sup>54</sup> See Hourani 1991:336

<sup>55</sup> Lane 1895:39. The writer describes the nineteenth century house. There are few remaining examples of houses from earlier periods, but those which do are surprisingly similar to nineteenth century houses (Noor in Hyland & Al-Shahi ed, 1984:61)

<sup>56</sup> See O'Fahey and Spaulding, 1974:80

for an *effendi*, simply furnished with beds strung with rope and a chest for clothes<sup>57</sup>. The food was Sudanese, *kisra* and *mulah*, although *effendis* were likely to come across wheat bread and *ful* beans, foods sponsored by the colonial power and common in colonial institutions such as schools<sup>58</sup>. Arab influences defined social aspiration.

## Conclusion

Taha's education saved him from a life of farming, or the counter of a village shop. There was a saying in Rufa'a - "education divides people" - and Taha was joining a new social division<sup>59</sup>. The *effendiya* were in a difficult social position: they were aware that the colonial state was setting up a kind of civil society at the centre, but knew that their civil rights were equivocal, while those of the British were inalienable. And they chafed at the dominance of tribal leaders, rustics who had not attained the same level of cultural dignity as they had themselves. The dignity which the *effendiya* awarded to their culture was a confused one, too. Some of it was borrowed from the British, who often denigrated the act of borrowing, and some of it came from a competing Arab and Muslim culture. As will be seen below, the British tried to limit *effendiya* influence, and constantly worried that the awkward position occupied by the *effendiya* would create disaffection that would undermine British rule. Many years later, when Taha became disaffected, he formed a small nationalist party, and some of his first followers were drawn from the Rufa'a intelligentsia.

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<sup>57</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander 15/7/1997

<sup>58</sup>Dirar 1993:108

<sup>59</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 10/2/1997



# Chapter 4

## Training an *effendi*

In 1932 there were little more than 1,300 boys in ten Sudanese post-elementary primary schools<sup>1</sup>. If Taha had finished his education there, he might have hoped for a job as a junior clerk or elementary teacher, at about £E 50 a year<sup>2</sup>. Instead, he was one of about 400 boys, almost all from the elite, who made up the country's only secondary school, where he enrolled as an engineering student. This chapter describes his studies and the political and cultural atmosphere of the time.

## Gordon College

### A better class of boy

Girgis Iskander, one of Taha's school friends in Khartoum, says that Taha worked for the government after he finished school in Rufa'a<sup>3</sup>. Other contemporaries believe he went straight from Rufa'a to Gordon Memorial College. If Taha's guess about his age was correct, he was in his early 20s when he arrived there in 1932, a little above the average leaving age of 20½ years<sup>4</sup>. He was small, about 1.6 metres, and slight. He came from a minor town, yet for the Khartoum and Omdurman students, he was a country boy. Gordon College gave him an introduction to life at the centre of the Sudan, and brought him into contact with ideas from all over the Arab and Islamic world and the British empire. What kind of place was it?

Girgis Iskander recalls the highly selective admissions procedure to the college. Students were streamed by ability, although the college would make exceptions for the sons of tribal leaders. Official college reports, however, categorise students by class and ethnicity. Students were listed as Arab, Berberine, *mustawtan* (Sudanese of mixed Egyptian or Levantine origin) and *sudani*. The last term, Sudanese, described non-Arabised or recently Arabised groups, the southerners who lived in the north. "Arabs" overwhelmingly dominated the school (see table below), and most students were sons of merchants or government officials, two groups near

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<sup>1</sup>Education department, "Sudan Educational Ladder", 1927, Cox papers, SAD662/2/1

<sup>2</sup>ibid. Sudan's currency, the Egyptian pound, was worth a few pence more than the pound sterling.

<sup>3</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander 7/8/1997

<sup>4</sup>"Report of the De La Warr Commission", 1937, Cox papers, SAD665/2/39



the centre of the colonial state. Teachers complained that the sons of officials were duller than the sons of "illiterate peasants"<sup>5</sup>. The 1935 report called for the recruitment of "more sons of sheikhs and landowners from all the northern provinces"<sup>6</sup>.

The college was a place where the British entrenched the dominance of Sudan's developing elites. The authorities wanted to include provincial *shaykhs* of the Native Administration in the elite, as a counterbalance to the educated bureaucratic class they were creating. By denying admission to students from the south and the west (there was only one Darfur pupil) the authorities helped concentrate development in the riverain centre and the towns of Kordofan and the coast.

### Ethnicity and class at Gordon College, 1932-1935<sup>7</sup>

#### i. nationality

year	Arabs	Sudanese	<i>Mustawtans</i>	Berberines	miscellaneous	total
1932	342	11	85	32	-	470
1933	308	10	79	24	-	421
1934	277	9	74	22	2	384
1935	240	8	71	23	2	344
1936	208	9	55	17	2	291

#### ii. parentage

year	officials	officers	farmers	headmen	merchants	craftsmen	total
1932	177	20	137	13	99	24	470
1933	159	17	102	13	102	28	421
1934	185	11	74	7	86	21	384
1935	169	16	61	1	78	19	344
1936	147	22	49	1	64	19	291

## Curriculum

A recent work on African education and society (Bray, Clarke and Stephens 1986) defines three goals of education: instrumental, expressive and normative. Instrumental goals give students work or life skills; expressive goals seek to create group cohesion and identity; normative goals standardise beliefs and behaviour<sup>8</sup>. This section concentrates on the second two goals, and tries to understand what outcomes British teachers intended from a Gordon College education. It also tries to show continuities between the traditional education of the *khalwa* and the secular education of the colonial state.

*Khalwas* were good places to learn about group cohesion and identity, and the teaching monologue gave students a set of moral and theological certainties. The *khalwa* initiated

<sup>5</sup>GMC "Report and Accounts for 1936" SAD/Sud.A.PK1528.4 Gor, page 17

<sup>6</sup>GMC, "Report" 1935, SAD556/8/8

<sup>7</sup>GMC "Report and Accounts for 1936" SAD/Sud.A.PK1528.4 Gor, page 17

<sup>8</sup>Bray, Clarke and Stephens 1986:87

pupils into a traditional society, where individual choice counted for less than custom. Colonial schools also had "expressive" functions. The political service juniors who taught there were keen to encourage group cohesion through team sports. Football taught fair play and competitive spirit, whereas the *khalwa* weeding sessions taught more about collective effort. In contrast to the *khalwa*, the colonial school aimed to provide students with technical competence that would serve the state and the developing capitalist economy. The colonialists were aware that by detaching young men from traditional society, and giving them a new set of aspirations, they might create a disaffected group. But this group was necessary for the state's existence.

The college students (called boys by their British teachers) followed a two year general course and then spent two years on a specialisation - science, engineering, teaching, accounts, or *shari'a*. English language instruction took up almost a quarter of the course, along with history, geography, religion and classical Arabic<sup>9</sup>. These cultural studies were peripheral to Taha's engineering course but they were the normative core of the syllabus. Taha studied the History (it had a capital H) of Sudan, Greece, Rome and Persia, and the Arabs, and the Geography of Africa, Egypt Sudan and Europe<sup>10</sup>. Religion aimed "at imparting a sound education in ethics and morals rather than a mere memorisation of a number of rules and laws"<sup>11</sup>. It was taught by Egyptians from al-Azhar university, who also taught the course for *shari'a* judges. Some were influenced by al-Azhar's leading modernist Muhammad 'Abdu<sup>12</sup>.

Taha and his contemporaries had two "normative" educations, that is, they were inducted into two traditions, colonial and Islamic. The disjunction between the grand narratives of each tradition troubled some sensitive students, including Taha. However, there were also continuities: both grand narratives stressed the power of the text and the authenticity of the past over the present. Taha attained a fluent understanding of these traditions, but in later life, he began to look for authenticity in the present, as subsequent chapters show.

## Taha's life at Gordon College

Taha's school day was carefully mapped out - roll call at 6 am, baths, exercises, the first period and then breakfast. There were five more periods before lunch (*ful*, lentils or an

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<sup>9</sup>GMC "Syllabus" 1927, SAD666/11/2

<sup>10</sup>GMC "Report and Accounts for 1932" SAD/Sud.A.PK1528.4 Gor, page 18

<sup>11</sup>GMC "Report and Accounts for 1933" SAD/Sud.A.PK1528.4 Gor, page 20

<sup>12</sup>EI-Affendi 1991:28

unpleasant but nutritious meat and vegetable stew) and then work stopped for the afternoon heat. In the evening there were games, homework and supper<sup>13</sup>. Outside the curriculum, school societies organised debates on undemanding topics like the pen and the sword. Others produced magazines, or performed Shakespeare in Arabic. There were sports and music classes, lectures and visits<sup>14</sup>. 50 boys joined the social service society, which started literacy courses in the *dayms*, the slums around colonial Khartoum where groups displaced by war and enslavement lived. This elitist attempt to educate the poor failed, however, because their *daym* students stopped attending the classes<sup>15</sup>.

Taha's name only appears once in the school reports - he won a prize for gardening in 1935<sup>16</sup>. Students could choose to work on gardens by the Nile banks close to the school instead of doing physical training in the morning, and Taha chose to continue his farming. Another village boy, Amin Siddig, felt that Khartoum boys looked down on his poor clothes and unlaced shoes, while the village boys thought they were more straightforward than the townies<sup>17</sup>. One fellow student, Girgis Iskander, remembers Taha as "silent, quiet, dignified", a young man who took his religious duties very seriously and prayed regularly<sup>18</sup>. Taha was something of a recluse, thought Girgis Iskander<sup>19</sup>:

A quiet polite small person (we were probably smaller then) devoted and probably devout. After school he would only be praying or studying on his prayer mat. Never heard him laughing or making noise. He commanded respect and a degree of awe. To the ordinary student he was rather stiff but there was no nonsense<sup>20</sup>.

Amin Siddig entered the college to study *shari'a* but changed to accounts. His father, the *faki* from Geteina, was very unhappy, but Siddig could not stomach the obsequiousness of the *shari'a* section students towards their religious teachers. Siddig told his son about the his own youthful japes at the college, but he also remembered Taha's seriousness - Taha would not allow his fellow students to dodge fares on Khartoum's public transport<sup>21</sup>. Taha may have been somewhat aloof, but his time at the college brought him into contact with some of the brighter minds in northern Sudan, who were allowed the "literary education" denied to the rest of the country's students. The British did not like the "half-baked *effendi* ideas [which]

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<sup>13</sup>GMC "Report and Accounts for 1936" SAD/Sud.A.PK1528.4 Gor, page 17

<sup>14</sup>GMC "Report and Accounts for 1932-1936" SAD/Sud.A.PK1528.4 Gor

<sup>15</sup>GMC "Report and Accounts for 1936", SAD/Sud.A.PK1528.4 Gor, page 33

<sup>16</sup>GMC "Report and Accounts for 1935" SAD/Sud.A.PK1528.4 Gor, page 31

<sup>17</sup>Interview, Mahmud Amin Siddiq, 3/12/1997

<sup>18</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander, 31/7/1997

<sup>19</sup>ibid

<sup>20</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander, 27/7/1997

<sup>21</sup>Interview, Mahmud Amin Siddiq, 3/12/1997

resulted from exposure to European learning"<sup>22</sup>. But some *effendis* had an erudition that alarmed the British, like Moawiya Nur, a student at the college in the 1920s. He gave up a medical career to take a degree in English literature in Beirut, and had minor success as a writer<sup>23</sup>. Taha was one of Nur's many admirers<sup>24</sup>. Nur's story ended unhappily - his education, said his admiring teacher Edward Atiyah, had alienated him from his own society, and the British did not know what to do with a man who understood their literary canon better than they did themselves. After several bouts of mental illness he died<sup>25</sup>.

Atiyah, a Lebanese Oxford graduate who later worked in the colonial intelligence service, taught at the college in the late 1920's. His autobiography described the college atmosphere of young intellectual eagerness in a colonial backwater. The students followed the careers of Mohandas Gandhi, and the Turkish and Arabian nationalists Mustafa Kamal and Ibn Sa'ud in the Egyptian press. Alongside anti-imperialist articles and Fabian papers the students read film-stars' gossip<sup>26</sup>. The English masters were aloof, the non-European teachers felt suppressed, and discipline was sometimes harsh - a flogging by a drill sergeant in front of the warden and a tutor<sup>27</sup>.

Girgis Iskander points out that the students antipathy to the colonial authorities was mild, and that they "were greatly influenced by the older generation, who held the British in veneration"<sup>28</sup>. But there were occasional problems. In 1931, a strike with political overtones closed the college. The students protested against a cut in graduate salaries. The strike involved a sugar boycott, inspired by Gandhi, who began his boycott campaign against the salt tax in India in 1930<sup>29</sup>. Gordon College was a centre for young nationalist thinking in Sudan - Mekki Shebeika, a Sudanese historian who was then an assistant housemaster for Rufa'a students, describes the college after the strike as follows:

The trials of the days of the strike, the threat of expulsion and the fear of not getting a job, and the discussions between [the authorities and the students] were a practical lesson, where [students] learned nationalist principles, patience, struggle, discussion of general questions - these lessons qualified many of them to take part in the nationalist battlefield in days to come<sup>30</sup>.

However, the hostility of these young elites towards colonialism was muted. Radicalism had become unpopular in Khartoum, as the next section of this chapter shows.

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<sup>22</sup>Daly 1991:70

<sup>23</sup>Atiyah 1946:179

<sup>24</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 10/2/1997

<sup>25</sup>Atiyah 1946:179

<sup>26</sup>ibid:141ff

<sup>27</sup>GMC "Report and Accounts for 1936" SAD/Sud.A.PK1528.4 Gor, page 31

<sup>28</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander 1/8/1997

<sup>29</sup>Abd al-Rahim 1969:124

<sup>30</sup>Shibeika 1965:503

# Urban nationalism and rural power

## Religious sects and their leaders

The nineteenth century enhanced greatly the status of Sufi, commercial and tribal elites in Sudan, and those elites realised soon after the British conquest that their future lay with the new colonialists. Initially, the British distrusted the "fanaticism" they perceived in Sudanese Islam, and tried to counter its influence by reviving the *shari'a* court system created by the Turkiya. But they had to canvass support from Sufi leaders in 1914, when Britain declared war on Turkey, a leading Muslim power which had partial and nominal suzerainty over the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. The British feared that the Muslim subjects of their empire would revolt, and in Sudan and elsewhere, they tried to build a network of collaborating elites. Those Sufi leaderships who had spent the nineteenth century building large scale centralised organisations were able to offer an attractively wide spectrum of political support, but the British also patronised smaller *tariga* leaderships, by incorporating them into rural power-structures. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi (the Mahdist leader), 'Ali al-Mirghani and Yusuf al-Hindi (leader of the Hindiya *tariga*) were the most important religious leaders of the period, and they helped persuade their rural constituencies to accept the new agricultural modes of production implied by colonialism<sup>31</sup>.

Mahdism had served Muhammad Ahmad's radicalism and al-Ta'ayshi's autocracy. When the British came, it changed again, under the leadership of his son, 'Abd al-Rahman. At first the British restricted his movements, but after 1914, they began to collaborate with him. They gave him land grants, and he astutely built up a fortune that financed the revival of his movement. The northern Nile valley was not a promising place to build support - it was dominated by the Khatmiya and the small *tarigas*, who often looked on the Mahdiya as a tragic time of national division. Instead, 'Abd al-Rahman went west, where Mahdism was more popular. In the 1920's and 1930's 'Abd al-Rahman's paid agents organised support in Darfur and Kordofan. To neutralise British suspicions, the agents informed on unruly local *fakis* to the intelligence services. In the early twentieth century, centralised religious groups continued the nineteenth century process of undermining local religious leadership to their advantage<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup>El Hassan 1993:72ff

<sup>32</sup>Al-Karsani 1987:398

## Economic power

During the Turkiya, Khartoum entrepreneurs had dominated Sudan's trade. Although the Mahdiya's isolationism and monopolistic practices affected trade, Sudan still had a commercial elite when the British arrived, who petitioned Kitchener to allow multinational trading companies to return to Sudan<sup>33</sup>. By the mid 1920's, the government had created a class of agricultural capitalists. The Gezira cotton farmers, who featured in chapter 3 (page 49) worked with the government-sponsored plantation syndicate, but the cotton lords had even better fortune – they owned private pump irrigation schemes, often on land given them by the state. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi and 'Ali al-Mirghani figured prominently among these men - it was pointed out in chapter 3 that they led the protests of the agricultural capitalists against the liberation of slaves.

The British decision to sponsor elites who had come to the fore in the nineteenth century meant that the latter's claims to the superiority of their culture and religion were vindicated in a flood of cash. This cash bought their allegiance to the colonial state and also allowed them to expand their political activity - as will be seen below.

## Detribalised groups

The British continued the Turkiya process of turning tribal leaderships into colonially-sponsored elites (see page 51). They found it harder to deal with groups which did not fit their categories of traditional leader and nomad or peasant tributary. Some of the groups which the British saw as anomalous were an established feature of Sudanese society, like the commercial elite. The government patronised them when they sought economic development but restricted their activities in times of political turmoil, when "tribal" society had to be maintained<sup>34</sup>.

Other "anomalous" groups were created by colonialism. The *effendiya* were described on page 51. They, and the men who worked in colonial enterprises like the railways, the Gezira scheme, and the postal service, were bringing a commercial and infrastructural unity to Sudan that was necessary for colonial economic policy, but chafed at the British picture of a tribal land. The urban working classes were particularly puzzling to the British - many were ex-slaves who lived in the *dayms*, the slum areas where Gordon College students had tried and failed to promote literacy. They sometimes adopted ethnic identities from the old slaving frontier, or occupational identities, like the postal workers of Daym Telegraph. The British appointed "tribal" chiefs for these fluid micro-societies, and used them to organise the labour

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<sup>33</sup>Björkelo and Abu Shouk 1996; Bedri 1980:83

<sup>34</sup>Spaulding and Kapteijns in Craig ed, 1991:95



supply of the *dayms*<sup>35</sup>. In Khartoum, a city so modern that its streets were laid out in the shape of the British union flag, the British imposed a picture of African social hierarchies transformed to meet their economic and political needs.

## The 1924 revolt

The dislocated and dynamic experiences of "detrivalised" groups threatened the British idyll of a tribal Sudan. The first decade of British rule saw localised Mahdist risings, but the next major challenge to the British settlement in Sudan came from detrivalised Sudan. In the early 1920's a group of educated junior officials from established commercial families began small-scale secret agitation for union with Egypt, and against the construction of a religious and tribal elite<sup>36</sup>. They became the White Flag League (WFL). They only met with political successes when they gained the support of 'Ali 'Abd al-Latif, a cashiered army officer of slave origin. He was able to mobilise the support of military cadets, junior clerks and skilled manual workers, such as the post workers, who introduced new organisational tactics to Sudan, distributing political leaflets by post<sup>37</sup>. Many of 'Abd al-Latif's supporters were detrivalised, Muslim southerners<sup>38</sup>. A contemporary British report described them as:

negroids ... outside the orbit of normal control or of appeal to tribal and national sentiment ... This class has shown itself readier in the past than most others to avail itself of the educational facilities offered since the British occupation, and is, consequently, strongly represented in the lower ranks of officials, military and civilian, and similar capacities in commercial life.<sup>39</sup>

*Hadarat al-Sudan* was the only Arabic newspaper in the country, owned by Sufi leaders who were patronised by the British. It mocked 'Abd al-Latif's slave origins, and they dismissed his followers as "the scum of society" who "disturbed people of status, merchants, businessmen and men of good origin"<sup>40</sup>.

The events of the period have been widely documented elsewhere - an army mutiny in 1924 was put down with bloodshed and Egyptian personnel were expelled from Sudan<sup>41</sup>. The 1924 movement is important, however, because it redefined the term "Sudanese" as a nationality. Previously, a *sudani* was an ex-slave, and the "nationality" given in official forms denoted

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<sup>35</sup>Sikainga 1996:79ff

<sup>36</sup>Kurita in Hag el-Safi 1989:27

<sup>37</sup>Adu Boahen 1990:254

<sup>38</sup>Niblock 1987:166

<sup>39</sup>Ewart report on political agitation, 1925, quoted in Daly 1986:291

<sup>40</sup>*Hadarat al-Sudan* editorial, 1924, quoted in Mahmoud 1984:134f

<sup>41</sup>See Beshir 1974:81f



ethnicity (see, for example, the table on page 55). Sudan's first nationalists, from the capital's "good families" were inspired by Egyptian nationalism and the wider Arab world<sup>42</sup>.

But 'Abd al-Latif resisted this Arab identification. He gave a new meaning to the word "Sudanese" as a nationality rather than the subaltern ethnicity of British official reports. This meaning was taken up by elite actors, like 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi, who called for a "Sudan for the Sudanese"<sup>43</sup>. 'Abd al-Rahman could not oppose the nationalists by calling for a British Sudan, and so he appropriated a term which had been applied to disadvantaged ethnic groups. However, this borrowing was also a re-invention - 'Abd al-Rahman and the elite nationalists began a process of defining a nationality in terms of Nile valley culture<sup>44</sup>. The Sudanese elite had learned well the lesson of nineteenth century Sudan - that large populations would accept the authority of an Arab-Muslim state, a violent centralising force that draws on a constructed Islamic past in order explain its power over a heterogeneous political present<sup>45</sup>. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi and his supporters reconstituted the Arab-Muslim state as an imaginary "nation" - a population linked by common culture, language or ethnicity.

The Sudanese elite were in a good position to propagate their views. The British responded to the 1924 uprising with a campaign to diminish the power of restive urban groups by empowering "traditional" leaders, reconstructed in their own image. New judicial and administrative powers were awarded to native *shaykhs*. School discipline became harsher and school entry was restricted - the primary section of Gordon College was packed off to Rufa'a, "part of a policy of discouraging educational activities in urban centres in favour of remote rural areas"<sup>46</sup>. They closed the military school, and began to encourage football in schools, government departments and the railways "to keep the minds of the public off the events of the past few months"<sup>47</sup>.

## Football, poetry and nationalism

As the workers turned to football, the beneficiaries of the new order - tribal and religious leaders - consolidated their power. Al-Mahdi and al-Mirghani competed for influence with the British, and began to look for urban power bases too, forming mutually hostile intellectual coteries and patronising education with the money they had built up from their religious activities and government land grants.

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<sup>42</sup>Kurita in Hag el-Safi ed, 1989

<sup>43</sup>Beshir 1974:103

<sup>44</sup>Makris in 'Ali ed 1995:54

<sup>45</sup>See Zubeida 1993

<sup>46</sup>Sanderson 1976:77

<sup>47</sup>"History of Football in Sudan", Garrett papers, SAD479/8/10

Older graduates gravitated towards the wealth and power of the patricians and became embroiled in their personal and sectarian rivalry. However in the late 1920s younger men began to organise independently. They formed secret urban study groups, which discussed literature and politics. Literature, they believed, dignified their struggle: many (like Taha himself) saw 'Abd al-Latif as too uneducated to lead the country. Classical Arabic poetry in Sudan was first produced by the more literate Sufi *tarigas* of the nineteenth century - in the twentieth century, Sudan's small legist class and the first graduates of Gordon College began to write nostalgically about an Arab and Islamic past that was not their own, and to denounce the lax morals of the Sudanese present that was<sup>48</sup>. In the 1930s, new influences began to enter elite culture, as the first Sudanese returned from literary educations in Beirut and Cairo. They were influenced by Arab and European literary trends, and turned from the imagined past to the complex present. One of Taha's favourite poets, Al-Tigani Yusuf Beshir, wrote romantically about Sufism and the loss of faith; others discarded the calibrated metres of traditional Arabic poetry and wrote on socialist themes<sup>49</sup>.

El-Affendi suggests that the intelligentsia saw Egypt as "the citadel of Islamic culture ... against the submersion of Sudan in the jungles of heathen Africa"<sup>50</sup>. Egyptian culture had a much more significant impact on educated Sudanese after 1936, when an Anglo-Egyptian treaty restored limited Egyptian influence to Sudan, and brought in a wide variety of Egyptian literature in, to which the intelligentsia became addicted<sup>51</sup>. But by the 1940s, some poets were discussing their African identity in Arabic<sup>52</sup>. In spite of the evidence of diversity, Sudan's literary movement was oriented towards the cities of the Middle East. Muhammad Ahmad Mahjub, later a prime minister, described the study groups as follows:

The objective towards which the literary movement in this country should be directed is to establish an Islamic-Arabic culture supported and enriched by European thought and aimed at developing a truly national literature which derives its character and inspiration from the character and traditions of the people of this country ...<sup>53</sup>

Younger intellectuals had access to radical political ideas. When al-Fajr, one of the study groups, began publishing in 1932, they produced some rudimentary class analysis, supporting the marginalised against the patricians and *effendiya*<sup>54</sup>. Their magazine dealt also with Middle

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<sup>48</sup>el Shoush 1963:22ff

<sup>49</sup>ibid:32

<sup>50</sup>El-Affendi 1991:35

<sup>51</sup>I am grateful to Girgis Iskander for making this point clear

<sup>52</sup>Muhammad Muftah el-Faituri in el Shoush 1963:35

<sup>53</sup>In 'Abd al-Rahim 1969:114

<sup>54</sup>'Abd al-Halim Muhammad in al-Fajr, 1937, quoted in el-Amin 1981:15. See chapter 5 for more on their politics.

Eastern and European literature, and Islamic thought<sup>55</sup>. Al-Fajr's followers wanted to be an educational vanguard for Sudan, but culturally, they and other 1930s nationalists continued the process of affiliating Sudan with Middle Eastern forms. Like the British colonialists, they had a hierarchical understanding of different cultures, and the cultures of Sudanese people at the margins of the state came low on their list. The societies of the south were not studied or understood, while French novelists and Egyptian religious reformers had intellectual attention lavished on them.

This, in part, was due to a British policy of minimising northern influence in the south. The British policy of Native Administration kept Sudanese people in self-contained ethnic units. Southern policy protected the south from what the British saw as a predatory Islamic and Arabic culture and commercial system, and more or less banned northerners from the region. In doing so, they also prevented African influence seeping north, and fastened the grip of Arab and Muslim identity on the questing young intellectuals who played an earnest role in the definition of Sudan's national identity (some of them went on to lead the country).

## Conclusion

Girgis Iskander, Taha's schoolmate, admits that it is difficult to know what influenced Taha at this time. "He was deeply religious, more so than the others, with a dash of nationalism"<sup>56</sup>. Nine years after he left the college he began his own nationalist movement, a movement that saw itself as an intellectual vanguard. Taha's education had left him with a strong sense of the importance of the intellect and the spirit in making change. He does not seem to have responded to the government sponsored religion on offer from the Egyptian *shari'a* teachers at Gordon College, but his schooling introduced him to colonial and Islamic super-structures of knowledge. He spent much of his later life articulating a highly personal, experiential idea of knowledge, but he never lost his respect for the eternal texts of his colonial and Islamic education.

Taha's move to Khartoum gave him technical skills and brought him in contact with many new ideas and identities, and with people much richer than himself. This chapter has tried to show the fluidity of Sudanese identity in the 1930s, but that Sudanese elites pressed for an Arab-Muslim identity. In the 1930's, Sudanese nationalism was dominated by patrician power, and its younger radical wing was reflective and literary rather than activist. Many "radicals"

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<sup>55</sup>Abd al-Rahim 1969:113; el-Amin 1981:13

<sup>56</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander, 1/8/1997

stressed Islamic and western culture, they had an elitist educational mission, they stood for social justice, and opposed the power of the patricians. Although their passivity irritated Taha, who went on to found an activist party, he and other radicals were influenced by their literary and educational approach<sup>57</sup>. Like other *effendis*, Taha was unsympathetic towards 'Ali 'Abd al-Latif, believing him "too immature and uneducated to lead a revolution"<sup>58</sup>.

Taha's education also isolated him. There were no southerners, and few *sudanis* at Gordon College, to challenge the idea that Arab and Islamic culture were a norm for Sudan. Taha's educators eagerly worked up the distinctions between the Sudanese, and then ranked the cultures they had defined. As Girgis Iskander explains:

No, I don't think the students knew or cared about any African religion ... I am not deriding the Southerners if I say they did not exist in the GMC at our time. They were out there in the Southern jungle segregated by the Colonial order ... Many students could only think of Southerners as slaves or servants. Rather disgusting to think about it.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>See el-Amin 1981

<sup>58</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar, 10/2/1997

<sup>59</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander 7/8/1997

# Chapter 5

## Starting work and getting married

In 1936 Taha was a qualified engineer in his mid-20s. This chapter is based on contemporary oral accounts of his not-yet public life. It recounts, in loose chronological order, some of the experiences Taha had between 1936 and 1945. He got work, made money, married and had a son. He began to participate in Sudan's independence struggle, and was part of the British war effort and the labour migrations of the colonial era.

### Going to work

#### Engineering jobs

Mr Souper was Khartoum's municipal engineer and the senior engineering lecturer at Gordon College. About 15 of his students graduated each year, and he used his contacts to arrange their employment. Some of them found it hard to get work in the aftermath of the worldwide slump<sup>1</sup>.

New commodity exports, especially Gezira cotton, paid for Sudan's administration and development until the late 1920's. Then, world depression hit cotton prices, government expenditure, and capitalist development all at once. The anti-nationalist measures after 1924 restricted Sudan's economic expansion - the newly empowered tribal *shaykhs* were inefficient tax-collectors, and although they extended individual land ownership, they did not get involved in agricultural development. But by the mid 1930's, the worst was past, and a new governor-general pressed for economic development. The British needed fairly quick returns, and so they concentrated development around a "growth pole", the areas of central Sudan which were able to respond most quickly to investment<sup>2</sup>.

By the time that Taha left Souper's classroom in 1936, economic conditions were better, and the railway was looking for staff<sup>3</sup>. Taha joined a small and prosperous salariat, going to work

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<sup>1</sup>GMC, "Report and Accounts for 1933", SAD/ Sud.A. PK1528.4 Gor. page 21

<sup>2</sup>Daly 1991:84f

<sup>3</sup>"Report of the De La Warr Commission", 1937, Cox papers SAD665/2/52

on Sudan Railways, a big enterprise at the forefront of colonial modernisation. At this time, Taha made his only trip outside Sudan, a brief visit to Egypt<sup>4</sup>. Then he started work in Atbara, a town created by the Anglo-Egyptian authorities as the railway centre of Sudan, being the point on the Nile nearest the Red Sea.

## Atbara and clubs

Atbara was once the dusty home to the Egyptian Army railway battalion. When that army was expelled in 1924, there was a huge need for labour, which was largely supplied by thousands of Nubians and Ja'alis, villagers from the land-poor northern region of Sudan. This was the area most affected by migrations of the Turkiya period attendant on the changes in land inheritance. Atbara was smaller but newer than the capital, and it was responsive to modern ideas and structures. The people who moved there had to improvise new forms of social organisation: Sikainga says that although people from different areas lived together, they founded regional clubs which "all used the Western model of organization; each had a written constitution, which provided for annual election of committees and offices"<sup>5</sup>.

The government allowed these new forms of social organisation, and indeed sponsored one of the most important social groupings of the period - the (school) Graduates General Congress (GGC), founded in 1938. The GGC campaigned for more state funding for education and training, still lagging at around 3% of the budget, and lower than that of neighbouring British colonies<sup>6</sup>. Graduates could mobilise urban residents and workers in large-scale colonial enterprises, some of whom began to petition the GGC for political assistance in disputes with the authorities<sup>7</sup>. One person, grateful that the Congress had founded a school in his area asked who his father was, thinking Congress was the name of a rich man<sup>8</sup>.

However, the graduates deferred to Mahdi and Mirghani domination of the commercial life and patrimonial political structures that the British had determined for Sudan, and as a result were highly factionalised between Mahdists and the Ashigga'. The Ashigga' were members of a study group increasingly linked to 'Ali al-Mirghani. Like the early leaders of the WFL, they supported close ties with Egypt in order to free Sudan of British power. The Mahdists had a traditional hostility towards Egypt and instead called for Sudanese independence.

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<sup>4</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 10/2/1997

<sup>5</sup>Sikainga 1995:39

<sup>6</sup>Beshir 1969:196, Daly 1991:84

<sup>7</sup>Beshir 1974:156

<sup>8</sup>Interview, Yusuf Lutfi 3/12/1997



## Cheap police

The GGC took its name from the Indian Congress, hoping that the graduates would build a similar grassroots organisation. But its squabbling factions never developed popular support in rural areas<sup>9</sup>. The British ensured that rural Sudan related to the centre only through the elites that it had sponsored. In the countryside, administration was contracted out to junior *shaykhs* at £E 48 a year - the wage of an elementary school teacher<sup>10</sup>. The *shaykhs* were seen as "traditional" leaders, but in fact their little police forces reinvented them as agents of the centre, and sometimes their concentrated authority stratified previously communal societies. In the late 1930's, the British began to restrict the powers of tribal leaderships in all but the most economically underdeveloped areas. Municipalities were to be administered by tribal leaders working with the local intelligentsia<sup>11</sup>.

In contrast, the civil laws of the centre were developed to meet the needs of foreign capital and its personnel. Civil law was understood by educated, commercial and religious elites; colonially-constructed customary law changed the structures of wealth and power in the hinterland. But there was a third legal system, the Turkiya network of *shari'a* institutions revived by British Christians to give their state a dash of Islamic legitimacy, and to undermine the legitimacy of Sufi organisations. Nile valley Muslims accepted *shari'a*'s Islamic prestige - Amin Siddig's *faki* father was angry when his son gave up *shari'a* studies for accountancy (see page 58). But the riverain fairy tales about its inheritance laws suggest a deeper ambivalence (see page 30). In other parts of Sudan, Muslims were less accepting of *shari'a*'s prestige - a colonial *shari'a* judge posted to a Baggara community was chased out<sup>12</sup>. *Shari'a* only covered family law but it had a dynamic effect on Sudanese identity - for people near the centre, it was closely linked to their self-perception as Muslims and to the ideology of the state. *Shari'a* excluded non-Muslims from the Sudanese identity promoted by groups close to the state.

## Taha's views in the 1930's and early 1940's

### Workers, patricians, intellectuals

Evidence of Taha's views in the 1930's and early 1940's is scanty. Contemporaries recall his sense of identification with workers, and his hostility to the fact that Sudanese politics was

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<sup>9</sup>Beshir 1974:133

<sup>10</sup>"Handover notes for Rufaa" Sept 1934, Longe papers, SAD641/5/31

<sup>11</sup>Bekheit in Hasan ed, 1971:260

<sup>12</sup>Trimingham 1949:122



becoming a dialogue between native and colonial elites, rather than relying on the Sudanese people. He may have developed an antipathy to patrician dominance - 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi once complained to Muhammad Lutfi, who became Taha's father-in-law, that Taha would not kiss his hand<sup>13</sup>. In the early 1940s, Taha was unhappy with the Ashigga' dominated GGC which was drawing closer to Egypt<sup>14</sup>. Some of these ideas are found in his party's first publication, *al-sifr al-awwal*, which appeared in 1945. In spite of the anachronism, this work is referred to in the following section, where it corresponds to the memories of informants who knew Taha at this time or recall his reminiscences in later life.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Republican historians stressed Taha's early opposition to patrician and *shari'a* institutions. However, his first work reserved its harshest criticism for the GGC's intellectual laziness and its co-operation with colonial powers. His focus on the intellectual failings of the GGC suggests that he believed strongly in the duties of an intellectual vanguard, and his distaste for popular deference to the patricians suggests that he believed that education had distinguished intellectuals from the institutions and political symbolism of Sudan's patrimonial politics.

Taha's nationalism - his sense that the cultural identity of the Sudanese ought to be given political recognition - was a central plank of his first work. He strongly believed in the idea of "Sudan for the Sudanese", a slogan full of ironies. As noted above (page 62), the slogan was invented by the WFL, taking the colonial ascription of ex-slaves as a triumphant form of self-description. The elite refused to join that revolt, but by then, the slogan had become an inescapable one for Sudanese nationalism, and its elite leaders promptly co-opted it. They, however, defined the "Sudanese" that Sudan was "for" in terms of their own Arabised and Muslim cultural identity, in effect using the slogan against the "Sudanese" who were excluded by this culture. Sudanese intellectuals took the western idea of the political rights of a nation - a linguistic, ethnic and cultural unit - and conflated it with their own recent history of the state. In nineteenth century Sudan and before, large-scale communities and states were constructed using Islamic idioms and political structures borrowed from the Middle East. This process enhanced the status of groups associated with Islam and Arabness. In the twentieth century, the Arab-Muslim Sudanese state became the Arab-Muslim Sudanese nation. Taha's first work did not challenge the idea of an Arab-Muslim nation, as will become clear in chapter 6, but he was committed to a Sudanese nationalism that did not depend on a colonial power.

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<sup>13</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997. The date of this event is not clear.

<sup>14</sup>Interviews, Mahmud Amin Siddig 3/12/1997; Yusuf Lutfi 3/12/1997

## Taha's activism

Taha praised GGC educational activism when he began writing in 1945<sup>15</sup>. Although he does not seem to have joined the GGC, he was one of the founders of a club for graduates in Atbara<sup>16</sup>. Yusuf Lutfi visited him there in 1942, Taha was organising public meetings and attending literary circles where people would read the Egyptian press and study books together<sup>17</sup>. He believed that he was targeted by the regime for his activities. His schoolfriend, Amin Siddig, was also harassed by the security services, and had difficulty gaining employment after he left the college, because he was a critic of the colonial regime<sup>18</sup>.

Some contemporaries present a picture of a mercilessly fervent activist. When Taha found people at the graduates club playing cards and dominoes, he would knock over their tables and tell them that intellectuals had a duty to oppose the injustice of colonialism, and should not while away the time on games<sup>19</sup>. His strident nationalism was not unique - other young graduates were looking for confrontation with the British. But Taha was different from most radical young *effendi* nationalists, according to the accounts of his contemporaries. Most radicals played on British fears of an Egyptian take-over, while Taha wanted instead to threaten the British with the power of the Sudanese people.

Taha's relations with different social groups is often remarked on. He had warm relations with workers and artisans, although he himself was a professional<sup>20</sup>. In 1939, the GGC was seen by some urban workers and slum residents as the means to address the colonial authorities. Taha, too, was involved in the mobilisation of groups outside the educated elite. Rail workers and professionals had adjoining clubs in Atbara, and when Taha became president of the club for senior workers, he broke down the wall between them. Ali Lutfi, who tells this story, sees Taha as one of the first union organisers in Atbara, the centre of Sudanese trade unionism, which began to develop after the authorities granted permission to workers to form clubs in 1934<sup>21</sup>. Al-Fajr's literary and educational activists welcomed their establishment, and saw them as a prelude to trade unions, which were not permitted until 1948<sup>22</sup>. Atbara's artisans

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<sup>15</sup>RB, *al-sifr al-awwal* 1976:16f

<sup>16</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997

<sup>17</sup>Interview, Yusuf Lutfi 3/12/1997

<sup>18</sup>Interview, Mahmud Amin Siddiq 3/12/1997

<sup>19</sup>ibid

<sup>20</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>21</sup>Fawzi 1957:34. The country saw a number of strikes by labourers and workers in Sudan's nascent industries in the 1930s and 40s, Beshir 1974:192

<sup>22</sup>El-Amin 1981:17

club opened in 1935, and by the early 1940's they were discussing the need for union action - prices were rising but the wages were not<sup>23</sup>.

## World war

In July 1940, three people were injured when Italian bombers attacked Atbara<sup>24</sup>. The world war had come to East Africa, with an Italian front in Ethiopia threatening British power in the Red Sea. German and Italian propaganda was reaching Gordon College<sup>25</sup>. The Sudanese elites, including the GGC, made effusive declarations of loyalty, and political agitation was laid aside until British and Sudanese forces defeated the Italians in March 1941. Before that battle, the military asked Sudan Railways to build a line to Tessenei, just over the Ethiopian border<sup>26</sup>.

Taha believed that the British authorities had labelled him as a trouble maker. At some point during the war they transferred him to the Tessenei line as a travelling engineer on the eastern section of the railway<sup>27</sup>. The line was built at the edge of the Khor Gash, a seasonal river which caused havoc with the railway line when it flooded<sup>28</sup>. It was on the border that was being contested by Italian arms. Taha regarded this obscure posting as a demotion<sup>29</sup>.

According to Amna Lutfi, who married Taha at this time, she and Taha went to live in Atbara again after a period of wandering around Eastern Sudan in a railway car, probably around 1943.

## Marriage

### A visit to Rufa'a

The people who remember Taha's life at this time are not exactly sure of dates. But before Taha left the railway, he went home to Rufa'a and got married. His wedding was in 1940 or 1942, which would have made him about 30 years of age, old for a Sudanese bachelor. His bride was a good catch - Amna Muhammad Lutfi, the daughter of his headmaster. She was educated and had a certain freedom from traditional restrictions on women. Even in his early years, Taha had approved of the liberal domestic arrangements of Lutfi's home<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup>Sikainga 1995:40

<sup>24</sup>Daly 1991:130

<sup>25</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander, 31/7/1997

<sup>26</sup>Hill 1965:113

<sup>27</sup>Interview, Amna Lutfi, 28/11/1997

<sup>28</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>29</sup>ibid

<sup>30</sup>Interview, Sayyida Lutfi 17/6/1997

"Traditional" restrictions on woman were, however, a fairly new thing, adopted by bourgeois Muslims in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. There were plenty of woman who still did not need to be "liberated" from them, because they had never been restricted in the first place. In western Sudan, woman were still involved in agricultural production, and even in Rufa'a, ex-slave women displayed their lower status by not wearing a veil and freely going to the market, a place from which "respectable" women were excluded<sup>31</sup>. Muhammad Lutfi, the education inspector was part of bourgeois Rufa'a society, but at the same time, he was an *effendi* closely involved in women's education, with sympathies for European ideas. The women-folk of his house were given freedoms from the restrictions of the Arab and Muslim world<sup>32</sup>.

Amna married an engineer, and her sister Sayyida wed a doctor - both men travelled around colonial Sudan doing prestigious jobs. Their wives followed them, but although they were educated, they did not work. The female graduates of colonial schools had begun to join the professional classes, but many of them had to contend with the prejudice that a working woman was not respectable enough to marry. By the 1940's, educated women had premium marriage value, but not all of them used their education in the labour market.<sup>33</sup>

Taha was a good catch too - from a modest but respectable branch of the family (the couple shared a great great grandfather)<sup>34</sup>. He had made it to Gordon College and got a well paid job with the government. Her father, now an inspector of education, was an admirer of his young student and neighbour, and Taha paid £E 40, two or three times the going rate for Amna's bridewealth, and almost as much on her trousseau<sup>35</sup>. (Bridewealth is a payment from the groom to the bride usually held in trust by her male guardian).

Amna Lutfi is now known as *ummina* Amna [our mother Amna] amongst Taha's followers. Her sister, Sayyida, spent time with Taha when he was growing up, but Amna does not recall seeing him much before the wedding. She went off to her aunt's house to learn how to do the dance of her lifetime, a dance with a suggestive, mincing step that is performed only once, at a virgin's wedding. But Amna was very shy, even as she practised before the small girls at her aunt's house, and before the wedding Taha told her that she did not need to do the dance if she did not want. She danced anyway.

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<sup>31</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>32</sup>Beasley 1992:41

<sup>33</sup>ibid:347, 352

<sup>34</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi, 5/12/1997

<sup>35</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi, 5/12/1997

It was a fairly big occasion for Daym Lutfi, and the celebrations lasted for three days. Amna wore a robe of silk and gold, and their procession visited the river, and a shrine to *sayyid* Hasan, a Sufi saint who had appeared in a vision in Rufa'a<sup>36</sup>. *Sayyid* Hasan (the title refers to his descent from the prophet) built up his father's the Khatmiya *tariga* in Sudan, and was the grandfather of 'Ali al-Mirghani, a leading patrician of condominium Sudan. The visit was a nuptial formality, but it shows that Taha had not lost his veneration for Sufi saints in his hostility to the politics of their children. Indeed, as will be seen in chapter 10, Taha was an admirer of Mirghani spirituality.

Some of Taha's own family were still in Rufa'a. His half brother, Ahmad was working as a driver, and his full brother, Mukhtar, had become a Sufi *shaykh*. He probably joined the 'Arakiyin, one of the old, small-scale *tarigas* of the Blue Nile. Although Mukhtar had not progressed in colonial schools, he knew all sorts of things, like how to repair a watch or a car, and he was an innovative educator. He tried to re-invent the *khalwa* tradition, by starting a university which taught crafts and technical skills as well as religious studies<sup>37</sup>. His mosque had seven or eight shops around it, where students could learn and ply a trade<sup>38</sup>.

Mukhtar's modern Sufi centre was near Lutfi's house. On Sundays and Thursdays his followers held the *zikk* (congregational recitations of the name of God) This Sufi ceremony often involves a big cowhide drum. Mukhtar's drum kept Muhammad Lutfi awake at night, and he would complain to Mukhtar about the noise, but Mukhtar just carried on. Lutfi got so used to the drum that one night when it was not used he went next door and asked Mukhtar to start drumming, to help him sleep<sup>39</sup>.

## Thread talk

Shortly before the Mahdiya fell, a Sufi *shaykh* in Rufa'a called Farah wad Taktuk said that the Sudanese would soon be ruled by a green-eyed race, who travelled in houses and spoke with threads - *al-safar bil-buyut wa al-kalam bil-khuyut*<sup>40</sup>. He was prophesying the trains and telegraphs of modern colonial Africa.

After Mahmud Taha and Amna Lutfi wed, they left Rufa'a to live in the foothills of the Ethiopian highlands in a travelling house, a railway car fitted out for itinerant engineers. With them was al-Rabb Biyyjud, who helped Amna around the house<sup>41</sup>. Taha believed he was

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<sup>36</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi, 5/12/1997

<sup>37</sup>Letter, Batoul Mukhtar 25/8/1998

<sup>38</sup>Interview, 'Abd al-Rahman 'Ali al-Shaykh 17/6/1997

<sup>39</sup>ibid

<sup>40</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander 4/10/1997

<sup>41</sup>Interview, Amna Lutfi 28/11/1997

repaying his obligations to al-Rabb Biyjud by including her in his own kinship network - many female ex-slaves stayed with their masters at the time, however, because they had few other options (page 49). It was an isolated but curiously modern lifestyle for al-Rabb Biyjud and Amna. They lived in Taha's railway car while he worked on the railway lines in his pith helmet, jacket and shorts.

Amna returned to Rufa'a in 1944 to have her first child. He was a son, named Muhammad after his grandfather. A photograph survives of a slight child with a long face and large, serious eyes. The couple lived in Atbara for a time, and Taha probably continued his involvement in political activities. But around the time that Muhammad was born, Taha decided that his political activities and his support for workers' rights were seriously hampering his career. In 1943 or 1944, he resigned from the railway and got a job with the Sudan Light and Power Company (half owned by the government), which ran the trams in the capital. Taha told people in later life that he left the railway because his views about workers conditions conflicted with those of the British<sup>42</sup>. He also wanted to join the independence struggle<sup>43</sup>.

## Omdurman

Sudan's capital lies at the confluence of the Blue and White Niles, and is made up of three cities. To the north-west of the confluence lies Omdurman, a higgledy-piggledy bazaar town and the capital of the Mahdiya: it was the preferred residence of most Sudanese. Khartoum North, to the north east, was an industrial area developed by the colonialists, and Khartoum itself, below the confluence, was a gleaming British administrative capital with a fancy "Arab market". Over the railway tracks were the slums. Taha chose to stay in Omdurman. The world war was ending: it had caused new migrations in Sudan, as the economy swelled to meet the demands of the military and people moved, or were forced to move, to fill jobs. Sudanese troops fought in African theatres of war, and the unsettling experience made many prefer the city over the village on return<sup>44</sup>.

Economic forces did not cause Taha's migration, and he and his young family did not move to the crowded slums. The end of the war brought him fortune - he bought up a load of scrap metal from an army base, which suggests that he had money to speculate with<sup>45</sup>. He stayed in a house in al-Morada, next to the Mahdist arsenal that the British had converted into a

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<sup>42</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 10/2/1997

<sup>43</sup>Lichtenthaler 1993:14

<sup>44</sup>Galal al-Din in Pons ed, 1980:429

<sup>45</sup>Interview, Mahmud Amin Siddig 3/12/1997



football stadium, perhaps hoping that the conversion would also mean that football would replace anti-imperialist sentiment<sup>46</sup>. The house had been let by Amna Lutfi's father from Dardiri Muhammad Osman, a schoolmate of Taha's who had become a leading figure in the GGC<sup>47</sup>. Taha's house was quite comfortable, and he now had chairs and a sofa instead of the traditional *angareb* or wooden bed strung with rope<sup>48</sup>. Some war veterans moved to the area, along with rural people drawn to Sudan's cash nexus by the fortunes of war. Taha and his family moved to a house nearby, in Bayt al-Mal, a short time after they arrived<sup>49</sup>.

The British were looking to include the *effendiya* in the running of the state. Since the late 1930's, the British had become aware that their sometimes contemptuous attitude towards Sudanese elites was untenable. Some administrators believed that

we must make up our minds to mix on much freer terms with them in our homes and our clubs and so reach the stage when by freer and friendly exchange of ideas we can better understand their aspirations.<sup>50</sup>

Sudanese nationalists hoped Britain would repay Sudan's loyalty during the war. Mahdists accepted the government's good intentions when in 1945 it offered to include elites in an Advisory Council, along with the religious, commercial and tribal elites. Others, like the Egypt-unionists who dominated the GGC, preferred to use the spectre of an Egyptian Sudan to threaten the British into concessions. Taha was unhappy with Mahdism and Egyptian influence: with like minded friends from his schooldays, he began to discuss alternatives. His house became a place for them to meet and talk, and out of their discussions was founded one of the first political parties in Sudan, the Republican party. Its story is taken up in the next chapter.

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<sup>46</sup>"History of Football in Sudan", Garrett papers, SAD479/8/17

<sup>47</sup>Interview, Yusuf Lutfi 3/12/1997

<sup>48</sup>*ibid*

<sup>49</sup>*ibid*

<sup>50</sup>"Circular, strictly confidential" 1946, Morgan papers SAD408/1/41



# Conclusion

## The end of private life

Taha's time as an engineer in Khartoum was the end of his private life. After the war he became involved in nationalist agitation and soon became a political prisoner. What were the experiences that shaped these 35 years? The scarcity of evidence makes it difficult to be clear about this. Taha's contemporaries describe a serious man who was strict with himself, but very generous with his money and friendships. He had done well at his job and made a range of contacts among the *effendiya* and industrial workers, but he had not forgotten Rufa'a, where he returned to marry, and where his son was born. He was a pious Muslim, he told friends later in life that he was searching for a way to express his ideas in religious ways, but had not found one. He put his energy into the independence struggle instead<sup>51</sup>.

In his search for education and work, Taha had travelled far from the farm in Heglig. He does not seem to have forgotten the warmly particular Sufi environment of the Blue Nile. He probably developed sympathies for the western ideas and Islamic-Arab culture that were being avidly propagated in Khartoum, and probably felt that he needed to reconcile the two traditions in himself. And he learned about new methods of social organisation in Atbara. He had joined a colonial elite, but he had worked harder than many in order to do so. He was an orphan boy from a small farm, who found the strength of character to get to Gordon College and well paid work. The long journey of his youth gave him an independent streak, as he acknowledged to Ibrahim Yusuf (see page 16). He was reluctant to go along with the nationalist institutions, although he shared many of their aims, and some of their limitations. Independent, forthright, and forceful, Taha was a candidate for leadership of something. He spent his next 40 years finding out what that candidacy might be.

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<sup>51</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 10/2/1997

# Part 2

## The magic ring

*In the late sixties - his son had died earlier - I remember a fleeting moment, we were talking about how children look up to parents. He [Taha] said, "A child expects his father to be capable of everything. I used to have a son who once asked me 'I want khatim al-muna [the magic ring]'. I had a child who asked me for khatim al-muna. I am of course still trying to get it for him."*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im, 8/11/1997. *Khatim al-muna* comes from Sudanese fairy tales, it is like Aladdin's lamp, because it gives every wish.

# Chapter 6

## The Republican party

Part 2 covers the period from 1945 to 1964. These chapters look at the period from the perspective of marginal political groups, examining their exclusion from power, their organisational methods and ideologies<sup>1</sup>. Chapter 6 looks at the events of 1945 and 1946. Taha started agitating for independence, but his party met with limited success, until he managed to gain the attention of British prosecutors. He served two jail sentences, which changed his life forever.

## The struggle for independence

### Independence for the elite

The rivalry between two colonial masters spiced up Sudan's nationalist struggle, otherwise a largely bloodless transfer of power to Sudanese elites. British colonialists transformed existing tribal and political-religious elites into a patrimonial system and created new elites: graduates, military officers, and large-scale agrarian capitalists. But the British were reluctant to analyse class structures, preferring ethnic classifications still recognisable in Sudan today. Areas linked to favoured ethnicities benefited from British rule much more than others. Sudan's export economy was based on the northern Nile valley, and people from other areas could only enter this "cash nexus" by migrating and selling their labour there. The Arab and Islamic culture of the cash nexus became linked explicitly to its economic success, and partially Islamised or Arabised groups adopted practices regarded as Islamic or Arab (see page 38).

The nationalist movement was a narrow one. Only urban people with sufficiently close experience of the workings of the colonial state could effectively challenge it - the elites, and ordinary people drafted into colonial enterprises. In 1956, just over half a million people worked in the modern sector, out of a population of just over ten million<sup>2</sup>. Yet the modern

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<sup>1</sup>For more detail, see 'Abd al-Rahim 1969, Niblock 1987, Khalid 1990 and Daly 1991

<sup>2</sup>Figures from Niblock 1987:86ff

sector of the economy, with its huge income differentials, accounted for over half the country's cash wealth<sup>3</sup>. Urban and rural Sudan were developing away from each other.

In the years following World War II, many songs and school plays clearly depicted the quarrel between the urban and the rural. People in the emerging cities rejected anything that was rural, including the clothing, the dialect, the homes, the animals, the manual farm work, and the food<sup>4</sup>

Urban political groups excluded from the patrimonial system looked for something new. They turned to institutions created after the arrival of the colonial state. These schools, clubs and unions were places where smaller parties could build up a following. The schools that the British and Egyptians built after the war at nationalist prompting, provided recruits for nationalist agitation. In 1946, schoolboys around the capital wore badges calling for the evacuation of British forces, provided by Egyptian agents working through their educational missions in Khartoum<sup>5</sup>. The intelligence services worried about the frequent demonstrations and "the underlying restlessness of the student class and of the smaller intelligentsia"<sup>6</sup>.

Across Africa, colonialism inspired the growth of new social formations and associations, created out of the new institutions and experiences that the colonists brought<sup>7</sup>. In Sudan, social clubs brought together men whose lives had been shaped by colonialism, and created new social bonds by improvising western models of organisation. British security men monitored these developments, "dealing firmly with attempts to wreck existing social clubs with the introduction of politics"<sup>8</sup>. Yet these clubs mushroomed after the war - the number of football clubs in the capital doubled between 1936 and 1946, to 60<sup>9</sup>. Clubs eventually became part of Sudanese urban identity, allowing people to organise themselves by categories which they could choose and help to define. They were a secular urban counterpart to the traditional northern Sudanese community organisation, the Sufi centre. Workers clubs were organised by class and occupation; football clubs were often organised by neighbourhood, sometimes reflecting the neighbours' common ethnic or geographical origin. Their relative autonomy meant that political actors outside the state could use them as a forum for their views. The club was one of the ways in which the colonised appropriated and transformed the organisational models of the colonisers.

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<sup>3</sup>Osman and Suleiman in Robson and Lury ed, 1969:439

<sup>4</sup>Dirar 1993:62

<sup>5</sup>Sudan Political Intelligence Summary (henceforward SPIS) 56, Jan-Apr 1946 in Public Record Office file (henceforward PRO/) FO/371/53328

<sup>6</sup>SPIS 56, Jan-Apr 1946 in PRO/FO/371/53328

<sup>7</sup>Case studies in d'Almeida Topor et al 1992

<sup>8</sup>SPIS 1947 series, 3, April-May 1947, in PRO/FO371/63047

<sup>9</sup>"History of Football in Sudan", Garrett papers, SAD479/8/87

## A house in Omdurman

In 1945, Taha was staying at al-Morada, in Omdurman. Amna Lutfi's brother Yusuf lodged there while attending an Omdurman school. He remembers the house as a busy place, full of young *effendiya* friends of Taha who came to eat and talk politics. In the capital, they sometimes ate the *tabikh* stews associated with Egyptian cuisine, wheat bread and green salads which colonialists had popularised.

Taha was doing well, he was working full time for the municipal trams, and he had a busy social life, but "he would read the Qur'an all the time, and pray"<sup>10</sup>. He was fond of listening to *maddahs* (itinerant hymn singers), who came to chant the Qur'an. *Maddahs* played an important part in the religious entertainments of a village, but many who came to the towns were little more than beggars<sup>11</sup>.

Around October 1945, Taha and his friends held the first meeting of a new party, *al-hizb al-jumhuri*, or the Republican party. Six people attended and five of them became office bearers on the executive council. The party had a western style constitution, like a trade union or club, rather than the informal and charismatic structure of a Sufi *tariga* (see appendix 1). It was briefly active in the mid 1940's, but it never had more than 23 members in those years<sup>12</sup>. Many of these men had had a Gordon College education, and jobs in Khartoum. Two of them described themselves as writers and poets - one of these, Muhammad al-Mahdi al-Majdhub, was from a Sufi holy family, the Majadhib of al-Damer. Many of them had a connection with other literate Sufi *tarigas* of the nineteenth century, like Amin Siddig whose father was a Khatmiya *faki*, or Zanoon Gubara, who came from the village of al-Shaykh al-Tayyib, a nineteenth century scholar who had his own *tariga*. Zanoon Gubara had travelled to London, Cairo and the Soviet Union, so he had a fairly wide range of experiences: others like Taha had not seen much of the world outside Sudan<sup>13</sup>.

Taha and his young friends were religious. When they joined, they swore a vow not to steal and not to engage in non-legal sex<sup>14</sup>. And they were hyper-active. They would eat a meal together and then write a pamphlet which would be printed on a roneo that Taha had in the house. The pamphlets were wrapped up in a cloth and given to Yusuf Lutfi to smuggle out of

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<sup>10</sup>Interview, Yusuf Lutfi, 3/12/1997

<sup>11</sup>Interview, Yusuf Lutfi, 3/12/1997

<sup>12</sup>RB *ma'alim 'ala tariq tatawwur al-fikra al-jumhuriya khilal thalathin 'aman 1945-1975*, 2, 1976:58

<sup>13</sup>Interview, Mona Zanoon Gubara 12/7/1998

<sup>14</sup>Interview, Mahmud Amin Siddig 3/12/1997

the house - the colonial security services were thought to be watching<sup>15</sup>. Then they would go to work, spreading the message. What was it?

## The Republican party message

Among many common traits, the Ashigga' and the Mahdists - who were increasingly identified with the new Umma party, funded secretly by 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi - shared a commitment to monarchy, led either by 'Abd al-Rahman or Farouk of Egypt. Taha and his friends saw their shared monarchism as evidence of the two groups' complicity with the colonialist powers, and their distance from the people. They chose the "Republican" name to emphasise their reliance on the Sudanese people – the Arabic word *jumhuri* connotes public rule slightly more strongly than its Latin/English translation.

### *Al-sifr al-awwal*

The party's manifesto was called *al-sifr al-awwal* ["The first volume"], and appeared in October 1945. It made scathing remarks about the professional politicians who were taking over the GGC, which it attacked for restricting political activity to the exchange of memoranda with the government. Instead, said the manifesto, the GGC should address the people. The political problem of Sudan would be resolved by educating people to self-confidence; economic problems would be resolved through self reliance. Modern education alienated the youth from manual work, instead of teaching them free thought and respect for labour. The manifesto contained a section on the rights of women, which stressed their maternal vocation.

The Republicans cheerfully tweaked the GGC's subordination to the colonialists. But *al-sifr al-awwal* flits between political satire and gnomes of philosophical and religious wisdom - the virtues of free thought, the relative values of western civilisation and Islam. The manifesto is a Muslim one in many respects, introduced with a Qur'anic exhortation to faithfulness in affliction, and full of optimistic expectations of religious education:

The Republican party wants a life lived under the guidance of true religion. It wants to return life to what it was like in the days of 'Umar - the great 'Umar [Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second caliph or successor of the prophet Muhammad, d. 644]. The days when men were human, as human as Adam, the days when people feared God and feared nothing else ... and the Republican party's way [to that goal] is education.<sup>16</sup>

The manifesto devotes much of the short section on economics to the question of development of the south: "for whom twentieth century civilisation has ordained a life barefoot and naked, hungry, sick and ignorant"<sup>17</sup>. The concern for southern "ignorance" might be taken to suggest

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<sup>15</sup>Interview, Yusuf Lutfi 3/12/1997

<sup>16</sup>RB, *al-sifr al-awwal* 1976:25

<sup>17</sup>*ibid*:16

a sense of educative mission, but in fact, the manifesto is equally concerned with the (re-)education of the north, and it calls for no discrimination between citizens. Sudan is mentioned more often than religion<sup>18</sup>. It was noted in chapter 5 that elites who previously identified themselves as Muslim Arabs began to identify themselves as Sudanese, expecting all other Sudanese to join them in a cultural and linguistic unit. This process influenced Taha, who wrote about the nationalist movement leading the country to a new dawn "under the guidance of Islam, with a consciousness of Arab excellence"<sup>19</sup>.

## Republican activism

While nationalist leaders manoeuvred to control the state, the Republicans took their message to the public squares, cinemas and cafés. The pamphlets that Yusuf Lutfi smuggled past the police outside Taha's house were collected by the members who distributed them in coffee houses and cinemas. Activists made brief speeches and then dived off to another venue, so that in one night they covered three or four places, making the party appear bigger than it was. The activists' choice of venue was also a choice of audience - the younger, male citizens of modern Sudan, who shared their exposure to the modern and the foreign, paying for their leisure in cafes and cinemas. Sometimes the police picked up the party men, and they spent a night in custody - they even sent a telegram to the speaker of the British House of Commons to complain at the government's "war against freedom of expression"<sup>20</sup>. This telegram poses a minor chronological problem - all Republican sources surveyed here date the party's formation to the 26<sup>th</sup> of October 1945, when the manifesto was published, but the telegram is dated the first of October. It seems likely that the party later took the manifesto's publication as the date of foundation, but that they organised informally before this.

The party's secrecy allowed them to produce and disseminate instant and aggressive analysis of the political scene. One pamphlet was in English, entitled "Islam: the way out". Another, *al-nadhir al-'uryan* ("The naked warning") appeared in 1946, and attacked the GGC, the Umma and Ashigga' for resorting to the power of the patricians, instead of developing an authentic ideology; and for playing off one colonial power against the other, instead of building up the power and self confidence of the Sudanese people. Independence would only mean "exchanging the English for English in Sudanese skins"<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup>ibid:21f

<sup>19</sup>ibid:20.

<sup>20</sup>Telegram 1/10/1945 in PRO/FO/371/53257.

<sup>21</sup>Part of the text of *al-nadhir al-'uryan* is reproduced in RB, *ma'alim*, 1, 1976:5



Taha believed that the Khatmiya and Mahdist sects had served a purpose in giving a national consciousness to northern Sudan. However, they now dominated and divided Sudan's nationalist movement, whose competing parties "repeat ... the ugly song of sectarianism"<sup>22</sup>. Like other Muslims from the Nile valley, Taha was suspicious of Mahdism. He felt that the Mahdiyya was a chaotic period, and disliked the Mahdi's shrewd son 'Abd al-Rahman, who used his religious prestige to appropriate his followers' labour on plantations given to him by the British.

'Ali al-Mirghani was also deeply involved in the colonial economy and represented the concerns of economic elites to the colonial regime, but Taha saw him as true Sufi who had personally abandoned wealth<sup>23</sup>. He and Amin Siddig paid al-Mirghani a visit around 1945. Siddig would not bow in his presence, even though he was the son of a Khatmiya *faki*. Al-Mirghani could cope with young hotheads, however; he seated Siddig personally, to the consternation of the deferential Mirghani entourage<sup>24</sup>. Taha thought that al-Mirghani was a casualty of the patrician system's success, who was trying his best to prevent a Mahdist takeover. A 1946 pamphlet, addressed to the "calamitous" Umma and Ashigga parties, read: [One of ] you exploit one patrician [al-Mirghani] who does not know what he wants, and [one of ] you is exploited by another patrician [al-Mahdi] who knows what he wants. Both of you are at the brink of an abyss<sup>25</sup>.

Taha had sympathy for al-Mirghani the Sufi, but he had no time for the *shari'a* establishment set up by the colonialists. In 1946, Sudan's *mufti* issued a judgement against "political" preaching in mosques. Taha was already using mosques as a forum for his ideas. The party responded with a pamphlet entitled *muftina wa muftihim* ("Our *mufti* and their *mufti*"), which compared Sudan's obedient Muslim establishment with Palestine's *mufti*, then at the forefront of the anti-colonial struggle<sup>26</sup>.

In March the police picked up some inflammatory pamphlets published by Communists and Republicans. Taha was interviewed by the criminal investigation department and in May, he was summoned by the police magistrate to execute a bond of £E 50 to keep the peace. The magistrate was W C McDowall, a Glaswegian who arrived in Sudan at the beginning of the war and had been kindly disposed to the "bright and friendly" young *effendis* he had met at his first posting in Eastern Sudan<sup>27</sup>. He tried a few young educated agitators in Khartoum.

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<sup>22</sup>Republican pamphlet dated 18/2/1946, in RB, *ma'alim*, 1, 1976:36

<sup>23</sup>Letter, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 17/9/1998

<sup>24</sup>Interview, Mahmud Amin Siddig 3/12/1997

<sup>25</sup>Republican pamphlet dated 18/2/1946, in RB, *ma'alim*, 1, 1976:36

<sup>26</sup>Quoted in Ibrahim Yusuf papers.

<sup>27</sup>"Memoirs", W C McDowall, SAD815/8/13

[Their] seditious speeches were never taken too seriously and were generally dealt with by fines or short terms of imprisonment. I received occasional threatening letters, including two death threats, which I passed on the Sudan Police.<sup>28</sup>

Taha refused to be bound over, and accepted instead a one year jail sentence, served in Khartoum's Kober prison. He began to figure in the political intelligence summaries, a monthly summary compiled by the security service and sent to province governors.

The Republican Party, hitherto an insignificant handful of slightly unbalanced young men who attracted no particular public attention, achieved in June, an unexpected prominence, as a result of the prosecution of their President, Mahmud Mohamed Taher, for distributing in May a highly seditious and dangerously inflammatory pamphlet ... he refused [to be bound over] ... and was accordingly committed to prison ... Every effort was made, unsuccessfully, to explain to him and to his friends that he was not being required to denounce his Republican principles but merely to undertake to propagate them by legitimate means. He preferred the role of 'political martyr' and has been hailed as such by the [graduate] Congress and the local vernacular press. As a result of this advertisement, the Republican Party's shares have boomed and its membership risen to nearly 100 [sic].<sup>29</sup>

Before 1945, the police were responsible for prisons. After the war, prisons were given their own department, and an effort was made to "encourage industry and self-respect among prisoners, and so to develop the reformatory element of imprisonment"<sup>30</sup>. The state appropriated prisoners' labour in quarries, farms, and domestic service. The post-1945 emphasis on social intervention led to the establishment of a "criminal lunatic asylum" and children's prisons with scout troops<sup>31</sup>. Taha differentiated between his political imprisonment and the cases of other offenders, and he believed that he should not be obliged to work in the prison. He also refused to stand up for British officers. After one day of this behaviour he was put in solitary confinement on bread and water. Taha's friends began agitating for his release at their usual haunts. The civil secretary was obliged to make a press statement on the Taha affair<sup>32</sup>.

## Using the newspapers

Taha's stand against the authorities won him some publicity. *Al-Ra'y al-'Amm*, the leading newspaper of the day gave details of his disobedience in jail<sup>33</sup>. When he was unconditionally released after 50 days, the intelligence services wrote it up as the governor general's "act of clemency"<sup>34</sup>. But the nationalist movement sent telegrams and poems of congratulation to the

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<sup>28</sup>ibid, SAD815/8/21

<sup>29</sup>SPIS 57, May-June 1946 in PRO/FO371/53328

<sup>30</sup>"Report by the Governor-General on the Administration, Finances and Condition of the Sudan in 1947", 1949:16

<sup>31</sup>ibid

<sup>32</sup>Text of article in *al-Ra'y al-'Amm* 26/6/1946 in Ibrahim Yusuf papers

<sup>33</sup>*Al-Ra'y al-'Amm*, 26/6/1946, in Ibrahim Yusuf papers

<sup>34</sup>SPIS 58, July-August 1946 PRO/FO371/53328

party leader who had "gone in a man and come out a hero"<sup>35</sup>. Republican writers believe that he was released because the authorities "did not want to make a hero out of Taha", in the words of an un-named British official whom they frequently quote<sup>36</sup>.

## Success and freedom

Taha's first brush with the law was a marvellous success. The nationalist movement in Sudan was a timorous one by African and Middle Eastern standards: most of the senior nationalists had too much to lose, and all the riches of the state to gain, and the younger radicals were easily dismissed as "smaller intelligentsia" and easily dealt with in police courts. But Taha called the magistrates' bluff and came off the winner. His self-projection as a political martyr paid instant dividends, as police membership estimates show (see above).

Taha's success may have made the party more aggressive. The deputy secretary of the party, Amin al-Tinay, disagreed with Taha and formed the Liberal Republicans. "How many men constitute a party?" asked the Ashigga' press snootily<sup>37</sup>. The Liberal Republicans wrote to the British foreign secretary to demand independence. But when Amin al-Tinay's journalist brother wrote up Amin al-Tinay's opinions as those of the Republicans, Taha went and confronted the journalist at night<sup>38</sup>. In another incident, Taha and Amin Siddig (who kept a gun) threatened a broadcaster from the radio station in Omdurman who had broadcast a negative report on the party<sup>39</sup>.

Perhaps the trial gave Taha a sense of the dramatic potential of the law courts, and the publicity value of martyrdom. All the same, few people from Taha's class were prepared to go to prison for their convictions, and he could have been kept in for a year and come out with nothing. He was one of the "smaller intelligentsia", of the derisive police dossiers, but he was a man in his mid-thirties with a career, and a husband and father too. In June 1946, when Taha was in prison, Amna went back to Rufa'a and had a daughter, called Asma<sup>40</sup>. Taha's family had to come to terms with the fact that their young *effendi* was away making a bid for political influence.

Taha was out of prison at the end of July 1946, but not for long. He was important enough to be a guest speaker at the Umma party Bairam festival in September - the Bairam recalls the

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<sup>35</sup>Telegram from a nationalist in El Obeid, in RB, *ma'alim* 1, 1976:31

<sup>36</sup>Sadig 1988:56

<sup>37</sup>SPIS 58 July-August 1946, PRO/FO371/53328

<sup>38</sup>Interview, Yusuf Lutfi, 3/12/1997

<sup>39</sup>Interview, Mahmud Amin Siddig, 3/12/1997

<sup>40</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud, 29/11/1997

patriarch Abraham's sacrifice of his son. Security men heard both of Sudan's colonial rulers condemned roundly<sup>41</sup>. The intelligence services believed that the Republicans were now part of the Independence Front, a grouping led by the Umma party that opposed links with Egypt<sup>42</sup>. In February, the Republicans had described the Umma and Ashigga' parties as "more calamitous for this country than calamity upon calamity"<sup>43</sup>. But according to Al-Baqir Mukhtar, Taha was not joining the political mainstream - he attended the Bairam meeting to speak out against the Umma party and the Ansar sect that supported it<sup>44</sup>.

## The Rufa'a incident, 1946

### Female genital mutilation

In September, Taha involved himself in another legal challenge - this time a new law against female circumcision, or genital mutilation. This practice scarred the overwhelming majority of northern Sudanese women, and was and is widely seen as a prerequisite for marriage<sup>45</sup>. The British campaign against circumcision began in the 1930s, and had elite support. In March 1945, the Sudan medical service published a booklet with explicit and harrowing warnings of the dangers of the practice<sup>46</sup>. The *mufti's* foreword to the booklet said that infibulation, the severest form of circumcision, was un-Islamic and should be ended, citing pre-modern Muslim legists for support<sup>47</sup>. 'Ali al-Mirghani and 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi attacked the "vicious custom"<sup>48</sup>. In 1946, the Advisory Council (a policy making body comprised of northern notables) approved the law, which interdicted even the relatively mild *sunna* circumcision, which most of the *mufti's* legists were prepared to support<sup>49</sup>.

The history of this campaign appears in detail in many sources<sup>50</sup>. How did Sudanese people react to it? Ina Beasley was a colonial educator who arrived in Sudan in 1939. She involved herself with the government campaign and recorded some contemporary perceptions. Two of her closest collaborators were from Rufa'a. Batoul Muhammad 'Isa was a midwife who left

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<sup>41</sup> SPIS 58, August-September 1946 in PRO/FO/371/53328

<sup>42</sup> SPIS 61, November 1946, reports the Republican departure from the front. PRO/FO371/53328.

<sup>43</sup> Text of *al-nadhir al-'uryan*, in RB *ma'alim* 1 1976:5

<sup>44</sup> Letter, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 17/9/1998

<sup>45</sup> A 1980 study of over 3,000 women from northern Sudan found that 98% were circumcised and over 83% were infibulated. El Dareer 1982:1

<sup>46</sup> Pridie et al 1945

<sup>47</sup> 'Abd al-Tahir in Pridie et al, 1945

<sup>48</sup> 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi in Pridie et al 1945.

<sup>49</sup> Sudan Government Gazette, Legislative Supplement, 762, 15/2/1946 (Civil Secretary, noting the discussions of the standing committee on female circumcision, 2/4/1949, in PRO/FO371/ 73668)

<sup>50</sup> For example, Sanderson 1981

Rufa'a's girls' school in 1926.<sup>51</sup> A second collaborator, Nafissa Awad al-Karim, was unmarried. She had an intimidating fluency in classical Arabic, which was deployed against male audiences<sup>52</sup>. Taha would almost certainly have known of this campaign, which was welcomed by Beasley's women informants:

"Why were we not born twenty years later?" some of the Girls' Training College students used to say. "It is all very well," said the old women. "We have always been told we are stupid and that men know all about religion. They told us this was part of our religion and we have undergone all this suffering. Now suddenly they say it is not our religion and we ought not to do it. That it is our fault that it goes on. All right, but first you must assure us that without it we shall get husbands for our daughters."<sup>53</sup>

Douglas Newbold, a senior official and dedicated opponent of the practice, reported this stock male response after a debate with Gordon College students, all of whom agreed that "women were the only obstacle to reform among the educated classes"<sup>54</sup>. Beasley responded scathingly to the self-exculpation of Sudanese men. For her, mutilation was proof of Sudan's cultural inferiority:

The young men might sulk and be resentful that their barbarous habits were brought to the light of day just when they were beginning to claim their fitness to hold high office and achieve self government<sup>55</sup>

Beasley's subordination of the right of self-determination to the rights of women accurately represents Republican perceptions of the colonisers. They believed that the British were using the law to portray the Sudanese as too backward for independence. In a tract published in 1945, the Republicans pointed out that the practice, which they did not promote, could not be excised from Sudanese society by legislative fiat, but only by education. They agitated against the law on the streets and in the mosques<sup>56</sup>.

## Fatma Amasayb

Fatma Amasayb, now a television actor, was circumcised in Rufa'a in 1946. In September, her mother Minayn bitt Hakim was the first person to be arrested under the new law against circumcision. R H Dick, the local DC, sentenced her to four months in jail<sup>57</sup>. Taha was in Rufa'a at the time, fresh from his victory in Kober jail. He confronted the authorities again, in a Friday sermon in the mosque:

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<sup>51</sup>ibid:74

<sup>52</sup>Beasley 1992:287

<sup>53</sup>ibid406

<sup>54</sup>"Note of a camp-fire debate on female circumcision held on 26/8/38 ..." Newbold papers, SAD761/4/10

<sup>55</sup>Beasley 1992:405ff

<sup>56</sup>RB *ma'alim* 1, 1976:40

<sup>57</sup>"Diary" 23/9/1946, Johnson papers, SAD751/11/3

This is not a time for worship in seclusion or in houses of prayer, people, this is a time for struggle [*jihad*] ... any of you who see a victim and does not vindicate him, God will not vindicate him to his enemies ... and he has not even a nail-paring's worth of faith.<sup>58</sup>

Taha led a demonstration from the mosque to the *merkaz* (local administrative centre) where Minayn was detained. The crowd freed her, but she was re-arrested that night by a policeman relative and handed over to 'Abdallah Abu Sinn, the Shukriya mayor of Rufa'a. Minayn was held in Hassa Heisa, across the Nile. The next day, the schools and market closed as Taha led about one thousand of Rufa'a's angry menfolk to smash up the *merkaz*. Abu Sinn's life was threatened<sup>59</sup>. Although the ferry was stopped, the demonstrators were jam packed into commandeered rowing boats. At one school, the boys left their classes to join the demonstration - a young Hasan al-Turabi, later closely involved in Taha's execution, also joined in<sup>60</sup>.

They reached the *merkaz* in Hassa Heisa and began stoning it, with three British officials inside. According to 'Abd al-Rahman 'Ali al-Shaykh, the demonstrators threatened to kill Dick, the DC<sup>61</sup>. His father 'Ali al-Shaykh was a Rufa'a's elder who threatened to circumcise Dick's wife himself, with Taha translating for him<sup>62</sup>. The telephone lines to the provincial capital were cut down; Dick feared for his life (according to the nervous diary kept by Winifred Johnson, the wife of a local inspector on the Gezira irrigation scheme) and he told two British visitors to run for it<sup>63</sup>.

The crowd released Minayn, and the next day a company of Nuba troops came from Wad Medani, the provincial capital, to Rufa'a. The non-Arabised soldiers could presumably be trusted to fire on "Arab" demonstrators. According to al-Shaykh, Taha led a crowd armed with sticks, swords and even rifles to the *merkaz*, chanting "Death, death, death and martyrdom". The troops fired low, and a number of people were hit.

The situation was defused by 'Abd al-Karim Abu Sinn, a local *nazir* (tribal leader), who negotiated the crowd's dispersal. He was sensitive to the criticisms levelled at his family, and to the nationalist (as opposed to the tribal) feeling of the crowd: "I don't speak to you as a *nazir khatt*, but as a fellow citizen", he said. One of the crowd's demands the day before had

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<sup>58</sup>RB *ma'alim* 1, 1976:41

<sup>59</sup>"Diary" 23/9/1946, Johnson papers, SAD751/11/4

<sup>60</sup>SPIS 59, August-September 1946, PRO/FO371/53328. Turabi's involvement is noted in Lybarger 1997:31

<sup>61</sup>Interview, 'Abd al-Rahman 'Ali al-Shaykh, 17/6/1997

<sup>62</sup>Interview, Ahmad Omer, 4/12/1997

<sup>63</sup>"Diary" 23/9/1946, Johnson papers, SAD751/11/5



been that Native Administration should be abolished, because the involvement of 'Abdallah Abu Sinn in Minayn's second arrest had roused existing resentment against him<sup>64</sup>.

Taha, his brother Mukhtar, and several others were arrested and taken to Hassa Heisa, and demonstrations died down immediately. In October, 16 of them were tried in Wad Medani. The judge was Muhammad Abu Rannat, later the first Sudanese chief justice, and known as "the black Englishman" amongst some Sudanese, because of his willingness to collaborate<sup>65</sup>. Taha refused to defend himself, and was convicted of inciting hatred against the government<sup>66</sup>. He got two years and his co-accused received lighter sentences. Taha's father-in-law, Muhammad Lutfi, who had joined the demonstration, was in court to see the verdict. He was very relieved at the leniency of the sentence, went home and told his daughter Amna, and thanked God<sup>67</sup>.

## Using the newspapers

A few Republican activists in the capital were arrested after they made speeches in their leader's defence outside cinemas and cafes<sup>68</sup>. But the security men were no longer worried about the Republican party. They did not even bother to prosecute Amin Siddig, the party's secretary, when he published an "actionable" article in *Sawt al-Sudan*: "public interest has subsided and [Taha] is regarded as having got his deserts," they said<sup>69</sup>. Taha's imprisonment won him immediate and widespread publicity. *Al-Ra'y al-'Amm* carried the story throughout October. 'Abd al-Wahhab Zayn al-'Abidin, who was the secret head of the Communist movement in Sudan, and active as the secretary of the GGC, wrote a defence of Taha with the secretary of the United Front of pro-Egyptian parties. They were hauled in by the police to explain themselves, and according to the account of their interrogators, they back-tracked<sup>70</sup>. Social clubs in several towns closed in protest.

Using newspapers meant that Republicans only addressed a small proportion of Sudanese people - literacy rates were around 4%<sup>71</sup>. In 1947, the aggregate circulation of Sudan's nine newspapers was just over 15,000, and even then many of the copies were bought by the government, partly as a way of influencing their editors<sup>72</sup>.

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<sup>64</sup>Interview, 'Abd al-Rahman 'Ali al-Shaykh, 17/6/1997

<sup>65</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>66</sup>Ali ed 1992:11

<sup>67</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>68</sup>RB, *ma'alim* 1 1976:46

<sup>69</sup>SPIS 61, November 1946, PRO/FO371/53328

<sup>70</sup>SPIS 59, August-September 1946, PRO/FO371/53328.

<sup>71</sup>Trimingham 1949:268

<sup>72</sup>SPIS 1947 4 in PRO/FO371/63047



## Long term effects

The Rufa'a incident brought Taha publicity, but its long-term effect is assessed negatively by Lilian Sanderson, a campaigner against genital mutilation:

The Government must have viewed this demonstration with considerable alarm because an army detachment was sent to Rufa'a and a clause was added to the Law, that thereafter no-one could be prosecuted without the permission of the Governor of the province ... [Taha] admitted that his was a gesture against a non-Sudanese administration rather than support for continued mutilation. It made British authorities very cautious about prosecutions in rural areas, and thereby probably influenced successive independent Sudanese governments not to take more effective action against those mutilating girls.<sup>73</sup>

Taha's stridency was hampered by his ambivalence - he opposed both female circumcision and the law against it. In fact, his opposition to the practice may not have been clear to Rufa'a - one schoolboy participant later came to the conclusion that he had joined a reactionary protest in support of infibulation<sup>74</sup>. Muhammad al-Mahdi al-Majdhub, a poet and party member, described Taha as "an Arab rebel for [sexual] honour and religion"<sup>75</sup> Taha's opportunistic protest was, nevertheless, an effective piece of resistance to the colonisers, one which they feared more than *effendiya* outbursts on the evils of imperialism. Many African nationalist movements were no more than educated clubs with cadres numbered in the hundreds. Rural power was much more awesome to the colonialists. When the Kenyan nationalist Jomo Kenyatta opposed British legislation against female circumcision in the 1930s, his Kikuyu organisation grew from 300 members to 10,000<sup>76</sup>.

Like Kenyatta, Taha believed the practice would only end through education<sup>77</sup>. Taha had the support of a surprising array of Sudanese opinion for this stand. Fatma Ibrahim, the leader of the Sudanese Women's Union, and a former Communist MP, believes that the challenge to the colonialists was more pressing than the campaign against circumcision<sup>78</sup>. Hasan al-Turabi, later a bitter enemy, accepted Taha's nationalist credentials<sup>79</sup>. Later Republican writers defended the integrity of his action, although they opposed circumcision: however, the practice continued even within Republican families for some time after the incident.

## Native Administration

The challenge to Native Administration, the cornerstone of British perceptions and administrative policy is given no space in official Republican histories. But the incident

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<sup>73</sup>Sanderson 1981:93

<sup>74</sup>Sa'id Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi quoted in RB *ma'alim* 1, 1976:49

<sup>75</sup>Muhammad al-Mahdi al-Majdhub poem, November 1946, in Asma Mahmud papers

<sup>76</sup>Bayart 1989:155

<sup>77</sup>Kenyatta 1961:130ff

<sup>78</sup>Interview, Fatma Ibrahim, 21/8/1997

<sup>79</sup>Lybarger 1997:32

throws some light on the conflict between increasingly educated Rufa'a people, and their Shukriya masters in the Native Administration. Before the Rufa'a incident, Taha's following was dominated by Khartoum *effendis*; after it, he had a wider support amongst the people of Rufa'a<sup>80</sup>. 'Abd al-Rahman 'Ali Al-Shaykh said that the demonstrators demanded the removal of the Sinnab mayor who deceitfully surrendered Minayn to the *merkaz* after she had been freed. This demand does not appear in the intelligence report on the event, but it was a direct attack on the colonially constructed rural elites who maintained order cheaply. It may reflect the *effendiya* irritation with the power of men who did not meet their educational standards, mentioned in chapter 3.

## Conclusion

The representation of this early period of Republican activity is distorted to some extent by Republican historians of the 1970s, when Republican hostility was directed at Muslim Brothers and patrician parties. Later writers concentrate on Taha's early opposition to patrician parties and colonially-sponsored *shari'a* legists. The sources surveyed here suggest that he reserved his strongest criticisms for the intelligentsia's handling of the independence struggle. Although the Rufa'a incident may have been an attack on the patrimonial system of rural Sudan, Republicans did not exploit this. Taha railed against Sudan's *shari'a* legists for their collaboration with colonialists, but he does not seem to have attacked al-Mahdi and al-Mirghani, although they denounced the "backwardness" of female circumcision at a time when Taha thought that such a description would hamper the independence struggle.

Some Republicans retrospectively suggest that Taha was at this stage more of a nationalist than an Islamic activist. The sources surveyed here suggest that, while he attacked the British vociferously, he was already using Islamic idioms fluently. His *jihad* for Minayn bitt Hakim was an attempt to mobilise local indignation at a colonialist attack on pre-Islamic customs, indeed a custom which his movement did not support. *Jihad* was a term commonly used by people with grievances against the non-Muslim authorities - striking workers, people who had lost taxes, slaves or land to foreign law. Taha, however, picked a fight with the colonialists on a cultural, not an economic issue

Taha's relations with other political actors in Sudan were complex. His criticism of the nationalist movement was noteworthy for its attention to the southern problem, and for the

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<sup>80</sup>Interview, Sayyida Lutfi, 17/6/1997

need for southern unity, as Khalid points out in his history of the period<sup>81</sup>. He was prepared to look further for solutions than many contemporary northern politicians. However, he was not prepared to look further than the Arab-Muslim state. Chapter 5 discussed how Sudanese nationalism, dominated by a small elite, conflated the idea of the Arab-Muslim state and an imagined Arab-Muslim Sudanese nation. Like most nationalists, Taha was unable to make this crucial distinction between the Sudan imagined in an urban school and the diverse societies of the hinterland. Tellingly, Taha's British prosecutors do not seem to have noticed his opposition to the new-born political parties: they saw his anti-Egyptian party as a subsidiary of the overwhelmingly Umma Independence Front; above all they saw him as a man who wanted a religious republic - "A small fanatical party of reactionaries"<sup>82</sup>.

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<sup>81</sup>Khalid 1990:87

<sup>82</sup>"Note on Present Set up of Political Parties in Sudan," Secretariat Central Office, 28/10/1951 in PRO/FO371/90114

# Chapter 7

## Taking the lift to the fields of heaven

"I felt," said Taha "when I had settled into the prison, that I had come there by God's will, and I made my retreat to him"<sup>1</sup>. His retreat lasted through his time in prison and for two years afterwards. The thoughts and dreams he had during this time guided his life and brought him to his death.

## Prison in Wad Medani and Khartoum

### The vilest social classes

Taha was tried and jailed in Wad Medani with 16 others from Rufa'a. With about 50,000 inhabitants, it was the second largest city in Sudan, and the capital of Blue Nile province. Its prison held over 500 prisoners<sup>2</sup>. Prisoner in Sudan's jails were divided into grades, distinguished by their uniform, with the best uniforms reserved for white prisoners. Taha was offered first class treatment, but he refused - although he had made an effort to be treated as a non-criminal political prisoner in his first spell in prison<sup>3</sup>. He wore the third class '*aragi damuriya*, a knee-length robe of cheap cotton which was the traditional dress of rural Sudan before the long Egyptian *jallabiya* became popular in the twentieth century<sup>4</sup>. *Al-Ra'y al-'Amm* denounced the government for putting him in with "the vilest social classes"<sup>5</sup>.

The internal class structure of the prison reflected its place in the external class structure of Sudan. The majority of people in prisons were not from Taha's *effendi* class - Medani jail was a place where he could mix with another Sudan, the law-breakers of a large provincial town. Externally, the colonial prison was an institution of the new urban society, a place which helped to define the class divisions promoted by the state. From the first days of colonialism, the British authorities had used prisons as holding pens for "idle persons" and "vagabonds"

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<sup>1</sup>Taha, letter to *al-Sha'b* newspaper, on his return to public life, 27/1/1951, text in Ibrahim Yusuf papers

<sup>2</sup>Luce papers, SAD828/3/10-14

<sup>3</sup>Interview, Muhammad Ali Malik 6/12/1997

<sup>4</sup>ibid

<sup>5</sup>*Al-Ra'y al-'Amm* newspaper, 24/10/1946, quoted in RB *ma'alim* 1, 1976:47

(escaped slaves)<sup>6</sup>. British officials may have drawn analogies from prevalent ideas amongst the ruling class at home about the need to check the criminal propensities of the lower orders<sup>7</sup>. The belief that criminality is associated with class, of "the criminal as existing before the crime and even outside it" was part of the history of punishment and correction in Europe<sup>8</sup>. It was taken up by the Sudanese elite, who believed that the poorest classes inclined to "prostitution ... drinking and laziness"<sup>9</sup>.

If Taha formed relationships with prisoners, they were not memorable enough for him to mention. He was still involved in the struggle - for a brief period he was able to maintain links to the outside, and his brother and others were with him inside<sup>10</sup>. Sudanese social networks made prison walls porous membranes - a relative of Muhammad Lutfi who worked as a nurse in Wad Medani managed to visit him every day. This conduit allowed Taha to continue to write and follow party activities in jail<sup>11</sup>. He also began a fast, news of which reached people outside the jail. The papers, urged on by the Republican party, reported it as a hunger strike against British rule. Taha, however, told them to stop. His was a Muslim fast broken every night, not a hunger strike, he said.

## A strange friend

Taha's links with the outside were discovered, and he was transferred out of Wad Medani to Kober jail in Khartoum. Before he left Wad Medani, however, a strange friend appeared. 'Ali al-Mirghani, the leader of the Khatmiya sect, whom Taha and Amin Siddig had met in 1945 or 1946, asked the British as a personal favour to release the young hothead<sup>12</sup>. "Some malignant fate seems to lead the Sayed [al-Mirghani] only to intervene in cases where the Government cannot possibly yield," sighed the compiler of November's intelligence summary<sup>13</sup>. Al-Mirghani's petition failed, and Taha was transferred out of Wad Medani to Kober prison in Khartoum - Mukhtar and the others were freed after a few months, and Taha spent most of his sentence alone. The governor there remembered him from his stay in May, when his refusal to work had given him some jail celebrity. Taha was given a separate cell, and left alone to make his retreat - or *khalwa* - to God<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup>"Regulations as to Sudanese who leave their masters" 1907, in Sikainga 1996:196

<sup>7</sup>See Chanock 1985:126

<sup>8</sup>Foucault 1991:252

<sup>9</sup>"Letter, sayyid 'Ali al-Mirghani, sharif Yusuf al-Hindi and 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi to the director of the intelligence department", 1925, in Sikainga 1996:207

<sup>10</sup>Letter, Batoul Mukhtar 25/8/1998

<sup>11</sup>Interview, Ahmed Omer 12/1997

<sup>12</sup>Letter, Al-Baqir Mukhtar, 17/9/1998

<sup>13</sup>SPIS 61, November 1946, in PRO/FO371/53328

<sup>14</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf, 13/6/1997

## *Khalwa*

The word *khalwa* connotes withdrawal, seclusion and contemplation. In central Sudan, these places of seclusion became community centres where people could partake of the blessing of a saint's prayers. *Khalwas* withstood the centralising forces of the nineteenth and twentieth century: "the deep social imprint of the *khalwas* was never effaced, many of them surviving as foci of ethnic identity and local government"<sup>15</sup>. They offered spiritual direction to people who aspired to wider spiritual experience. *Shaykhs* directed these aspirants through stages of initiation. The ascetic rigour and esoteric knowledge of the experience made them *khawass* (elect), while run-of-the-mill adherents were *murids* (aspirants) or *'awwam* (laity)<sup>16</sup>.

Retreat was an ideology for the earliest Middle Eastern Sufis. It allowed them to leave the corruption they perceived in their world. They took the terms *khawass* and *'awwam*, used by the earliest Muslim social scientists to describe class distinctions, to assert a different kind of human hierarchy<sup>17</sup>. Renouncing the world was a way of denouncing it, and esoteric knowledge secretly censured the public science of the state - the *shari'a*. This antagonism has generated much historical analysis<sup>18</sup>. But Sudanese Sufism, born outside the Muslim state, does not fit neatly into these categories. Early Sufi writings stress instead the vivid psychological experiences, charisma and social activism of a few leading figures. Oral and written accounts of their retreats are epic narratives of asceticism, theophany and miracle. Ahmad al-Huda, who brought the west African Tijaniya order to Sudan in the nineteenth century, spent 40 days prostrate on the ground, without food, drink or consciousness<sup>19</sup>. Others made themselves insensate through weeks on the rosary, or fasted fasts of abandoned zeal - a handful of sorghum for ten days, or even no food, drink or sleep for ten days<sup>20</sup>. These intense experiences were often public, and they conferred a celebrity on the men and women who underwent them. For the Sudanese, that celebrity was *baraka* or blessing, to be used by the community. The *shaykh's khalwa* became a place for significant groups in the community to meet and express its generosity. His special knowledge, a special connection with God, would burst out into miracles and cures for illness.

Taha's *khalwa* was a similarly huge, public psychological event. However, there are few records of the experience itself - the social and political consequences of the experience are the pre-occupation of his own writings and those of his followers. He and they used the celebrity

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<sup>15</sup>McHugh 1994:86

<sup>16</sup>Karrar 1992:125ff

<sup>17</sup>See Marlow 1997:9

<sup>18</sup>See for example Qamar-ul Huda, 1996

<sup>19</sup>Trimingham 1949:132

<sup>20</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997



conferred by the spiritual moment to inspire their activism. Taha did not write down what happened in his cell, but it is possible to make some guesses about his experience from remarks he later made to his circle, and from recollections of contemporaries.

## Kober

Taha wore his prison *'aragi* and did not cut his beard or hair for four years. Alone in the cell, he fasted by day and spent the night in prayer, sometimes following the most arduous fast, abstaining from all sustenance. His fasts have a legendary quality: three days, then five, then ten, then 29 days without any food or water. Ali Lutfi says that Taha's condition drew the incredulous attention of the prison doctor. According to one story, the authorities weighed the water in his shower bucket, and then weighed it coming out the drain, because they could not believe he was not drinking it<sup>21</sup>. Taha's dreams became very vivid to him. Like the dreams of many African Sufi reformers, they involved an encounter with the prophet. Unlike the Mahdi's dreams, there were no swords of truth or calls to *jihad* - instead, there was agrarian calm with a modern twist:

... [Taha] said to me that he was in a lift, taken up very high, up to the clouds, and he found huge fields and a man there - Muhammad. He said, "Praise God, you have come to your farm, take your farm. [Taha] accepted the farm"<sup>22</sup>

## Books

Taha's technological eclogue brings together two of his life's preoccupations - modern knowledge and the Sudanese authenticity of the farm. But Taha's fondness for farming did not make him a farmer - as the preceding chapters have shown, Taha was an urban Sudanese *effendi*, who played a part in the nationalist struggle. This struggle was dominated by economic elites who wanted to preserve their privilege, and by an educated elite trying hard to make a "nation" of Sudan, a nation whose people were brought together by the Arabic culture of the Middle Eastern metropole and a kind of Islam and Arabic language that met with the approval of its academies.

The jail library had books from these pre-modern textual traditions of Islam - the Qur'an and works by al-Bukhari and al-Ghazali. Al-Bukhari (d 810) is widely regarded as the most scrupulous recorder of *hadith*, oral accounts of the prophet's sayings and actions<sup>23</sup>. Al-Ghazali (d 1111) was a Muslim polymath who left a plum post at a Baghdad university to live in a minaret and meditate, when he found that he could no longer make sense of the legal and

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>23</sup> Siddiqi 1993:55



theological books which made up his life<sup>24</sup>. Taha had two of al-Ghazali's works, one dealing with the knowledge he had received from God, and one about pitfalls on the way of perfection. He only read the latter, to save him time on his trip to heaven. He told Ibrahim Yusuf that he was not interested in al-Ghazali's knowledge secondhand: "You must find your own knowledge from God"<sup>25</sup>.

"He who has no *shaykh*, his *shaykh* is Satan", said Abu Yazid al-Bistami (d 874), one of the earliest Sufi theosophists, in a phrase current in Sudan<sup>26</sup>. Taha had no *shaykh*, but he took the prophet as his spiritual director, his presence mediated through visions and through the writings of al-Bukhari<sup>27</sup>.

In jail [Taha] read al-Bukhari. The most accurate *hadith*. There's a lot of spirituality in it. Al-Bukhari would perform his ablutions and pray two prostrations before writing down a *hadith*. In al-Bukhari he said he found out how the prophet worked [his life] - his ablution, prayer and sleep. The details. He took them from al-Bukhari and lived the prophet in his actions and words, and his spiritual condition<sup>28</sup>

Taha used al-Bukhari's fragments of the prophet's life to live out Muhammad's story in a colonial cell, and he used fasting to enhance his imaginative perception. He later gave a description of the experience to Girgis Iskander, a doctor who felt that Taha's experience tallied with that of many mystics:

He said it was like a nervous breakdown which can be brought about by some physical mechanism like fasting or crushing longing for an unattainable goal. Fasting here is the mere [repression of the] demand of the body for food, and not as prescribed by any religion. This demand for food is pitted against a determination to continue depriving the body of nourishment until the nervous system gives way = nervous breakdown. When such a state is reached, a person might see visual images, "hallucinating", or he might give any verses from a religious text particular meanings.<sup>29</sup>

After a while, Taha found the intense psychological experience of the visions unsatisfying. He gave them up to study the Qur'an. Taha was looking for intimacy in his cell, and he found it in the Qur'an's secret meanings unrevealed to anyone before<sup>30</sup>. In 1951, he recalled his decision to continue his retreat after leaving the prison:

Was it the desire for knowledge that kept me in [retreat]. By God, no. It was work for another end which kept me there, an end greater than knowledge, an end for which knowledge is but a means. That end is my self, which I had lost in the heap of delusions and trivialities. It was my duty to seek it [the self] under the guidance of the Qur'an. I wanted to

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<sup>24</sup>Saeed Sheikh in Sharif ed, 1 1993:582ff

<sup>25</sup>Taha, quoted by Ibrahim Yusuf, interview 13/6/1997

<sup>26</sup>Karrar 1992:126

<sup>27</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf 13/6/1997

<sup>28</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf 13/6/1997

<sup>29</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander 19/8/1998

<sup>30</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf 13/6/1997

find it, and I wanted to spread it, and I wanted to be at peace with it, before calling anyone else to Islam ... He who lacks a thing cannot give that thing.<sup>31</sup>

## Authentic self

Theosophical Sufis use scripture as a mystic primer - it allows them to turn textual obscurities and difficulties into a virtue as they puzzle out a meaning intimate to themselves. Other people might long for friends in isolation: Taha longed for authenticity. He articulated his longings in Sufi language, and found Sufi answers - he believed that he encountered God in his cell, and that this encounter transformed him into a different human being, an *asil* (someone who has found his own authenticity). Abdullahi An-Na'im, who met Taha 20 years later, described this authenticity:

It was existential, not intellectual. It was a lifestyle, not what he would do. The key is that he is truly a holistic person, everything related to everything else. There were no departments, no divisions<sup>32</sup>.

For Taha, authenticity was a stage to a higher spiritual station. If he reached it, his personality would disappear into perfection. That incarnation of perfection would transform the world justice and peace. His *khalwa* taught him that the political transformation he wanted for Sudan could only come about through personal transformation, and he believed that his duty was no longer to attack the British but to purify himself. Taha's trip to the absolute had been sketched out by previous Sufis, who described the highest stage with the picture of a perfect man, *al-insan al-kamil*, who has vanquished human frailty through long processes of failure and forgiveness. Taha seems to have drawn imaginative links between this perfect or perfected man and Jesus; and between Jesus and *al-maqam al-mahmud*, a Qur'anic use of Taha's first name to describe "a laudable station" where a human being could directly address God. These ideas were incorporated into the Sufi picture of Muhammad, and sung in the hymns of the *maddahs*, but Taha, like other Sufi theosophists, tried to relate them to himself.

## Jesus

Taha's secrets eventually led him to be tried for apostasy. One person he met in Kober was later to become an enemy - 'Ali Taliballah. Like Taha, he was looking for religious answers, and he was close to the Egyptian Muslim Brothers. In 1947, Taliballah was jailed for ten months for possessing a pistol<sup>33</sup>. In 1968, he was a witness to Taha's apostasy. Taliballah told the court that Taha claimed authority over *shari'a*, but a few days later he told the grand *qadi*, Sudan's senior *shari'a* judge, that Taha's claims were even more comprehensive, as the grand *qadi* explained to the press:

<sup>31</sup>Taha, letter to *al-Sha'b* newspaper, 27/1/1951. Text in Ibrahim Yusuf papers

<sup>32</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im, 8/11/1997

<sup>33</sup>El-Affendi 1991:51

Mr 'Ali Taliballah said that he was with Mahmud Muhammad Taha in prison, and knew from some imprisoned Muslim *effendis* that Mahmud Muhammad Taha had informed them the night before that he had become the master of time, and that he was called to bear the message of religion, and that he was Christ the son of Mary. The next day, he [Taliballah] went to [Taha's] cell ... and asked him about the truth of this matter. [Taha] said it was true, that he was Christ, and that Islamic *shari'a*, as it had come to the prophet (peace be upon him) had come to an end and that he would be the person responsible for interpreting the true meaning of the Qur'an, and that anyone who died without believing in him, would die an infidel. Mr 'Ali Taliballah says that he was concerned about the matter and wrote to the late *shaykh* Lutfi in Rufa'a to come and visit Mahmud in his prison, out of pity for what had happened to him<sup>34</sup>.

Taha was a political prisoner, and as Taliballah testified, Taha's secret Qur'an taught him about the legal problem of the Islamic state and not only about personal transformation. Taliballah may have exaggerated Taha's claims in the heat of an apostasy trial, but Taha's retreat was a time when he fixed on the need to reform the *shari'a*, to make it fit the needs of a modern state and the modern world. Taha's modernising urge has parallels with contemporary Islamic movements towards reform or modernity. But it differed in two areas. First, Taha's reworking of the *shari'a* radically advocated the abandonment of some *shari'a* laws. Secondly, Taha came to believe that reform, modernisation and revival would only come about through the reform, modernisation and revival of one individual, whose dynamic purity could turn the world over, "like the flip of a coin"<sup>35</sup>. 'Ali Taliballah and many others believed that Taha claimed to be that person, although few close to Taha heard him say he was. His *khalwa* gave him the belief, rather, that such a person must exist, and that he himself must try to become that person, whether or not his attempt succeeded. He was a candidate for the highest office - a will which he wrote at the time expresses his sense of disjunction from the lives of others and the life of his own body. In his will, Taha said that he should be buried unwashed, unshrouded and without prayers said, in an unknown place<sup>36</sup>. (Which is exactly what happened).

## Home for more

When Taha left prison at the end of 1948, his father in law Muhammad Lutfi came to meet him, and take him back to his wife and two children in Rufa'a. He was sorely missed by the people in Rufa'a. Ali Lutfi, Muhammad's son, was a schoolboy then, and his father told him to compose a verse in his honour, about tears of joy. He recited it to an unfamiliar Taha: a small

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<sup>34</sup>Grand qadi Abu Gusaysa in *Al-Ra'y al-'Amm* newspaper 21/11/1968, quoted in Da'ud 1974:98f

<sup>35</sup>Taha, quoted by Abdullahi An-Na'im. Interview 8/11/1997

<sup>36</sup>Interview, Khalid Muhammad al-Hasan 24/11/1997, see also An-Na'im in Taha *Second Message* 1987:17n. It has not been possible to examine this will, but several informants have attested that it covers these topics.

*effendi* wrapped in white Sudanese clothes, the *'aragi* and a white wrap, and a turban. Underneath the turban was long, thick hair and a huge beard, uncut for two years.

The hair and beard remained uncut. Taha decided to continue with his search for the self after leaving prison (see page 98). He stayed in Muhammad Lutfi's house, with his wife, son and daughter. It was another period of isolation for the family - although Taha was now physically present, he was travelling in his world of mysterious scriptures and visions. The family came and went from Taha's room in the house, where he prayed his days away. But as a retreatant, he had to spend time away from his children - the cares of the world - and from conjugal relations.

Taha's behaviour and appearance caused alarm in Rufa'a. An engineer, and the son-in law of *shaykh* Lutfi, he would wander around the town in a torn robe and worn out shoes, and eat the plainest village food. He would go down to the river in the brief cool dawn, and tell bemused onlookers that he was listening to the waves on the Nile extolling God<sup>37</sup>. Muhammad Lutfi, his father-in-law, paid for all this devotion, maintaining Taha and his young family from his own pocket. Muhammad Lutfi was still an admirer of his former pupil, but people who wanted to criticise Taha would always bring up this neglect of duty<sup>38</sup>.

Taha's defence of Minayn bitt Hakim had won the admiration of the people in Rufa'a. His first followers had been young *effendis* like himself, but he had persuaded a rural constituency of the power of protest. Now, however, there were plenty of people to criticise him. Amna Lutfi's sister, Sayyida, would tell him to hurry up and get a life. "What's it all leading to," she said, "are you going to stay like that forever?" Taha never answered, not to her or to Amna, but he would smile at her and say "*in sha' allah*", a phrase which means "God willing", but is also used to evade direct questions and unwelcome requests<sup>39</sup>.

Taha continued his search for true religion and the true self. One of his visitors at this time was from the Badrab, a Sufi family of the Gezira. He wrote down what Taha was thinking, that the day of God would come on earth, and humanity would reach perfection in the flesh. He spoke a lot about Jesus and prophecy<sup>40</sup>. Some people put stranger words into Taha's mouth: "He said 'I am Jesus, I am Jesus'"<sup>41</sup>. No-one close to Taha heard him say that, but at

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<sup>37</sup>Interview, Khalid Muhammad al-Hasan 23/11/1997

<sup>38</sup>Interview, Yusuf Lutfi 3/12/1997

<sup>39</sup>Interview, Sayyida Lutfi 17/6/1997

<sup>40</sup>This comes from a newspaper article, written after Taha's death, in the papers of Yusuf Lutfi. Date and author are missing from the clipping..

<sup>41</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

this time he did make one arresting, and well-attested, statement to one of his relatives,

Mukhtar 'Ali al-Shaykh:

Everything that happened to Jesus will happen to me.<sup>42</sup>

## Friends

Living in Rufa'a was a return to small-town Sudan for the young *effendi*. His brother-in-law Ali Lutfi stayed in his father's house, a student at intermediate school. One of the duties of young adolescents was to wait on their elders, and Ali Lutfi brought Taha his meals, and he has many recollections of this time. Although Taha's dress and manner emphasised his separation from the world of respectable Rufa'a, he met and talked to many people. 'Ali al-Shaykh, the old man who had threatened the wife of the DC in Rufa'a, would come and upbraid Taha. He had an uncomplicated approach to politics and religion - the Qur'an said "We have made you one nation (*umma*)", and so everyone should support the Umma party that was becoming increasingly identified with 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi's interests. 'Ali al-Shaykh was straight, he was an old man, frank about his differences, and Taha was fond of him for it - he was not so keen on the people who kept up the acquaintance but criticised him behind his back.

The tanner, who washed his skins in the Nile, was another old man. One day he decided to go and visit Taha, and they struck up a friendship. The tanner could not read, but he saw visions, and he and Taha would discuss what they had seen as Taha assiduously served him tea<sup>43</sup>. He was a staunch defender of Taha: "You don't know what you've got. You've got a treasure here" he would say to people<sup>44</sup>. Pious old men fitted easily into Taha's life but the complications of family life he gratefully left to his father-in-law and his wife. He was living in a world of his own - Yusuf Lutfi recalls going into Taha's room and finding him so lost in contemplation that he could not sense the intrusion. He would pray mighty prayers too, spending ninety minutes on each of the five daily prayers, and rising after midnight to perform a supererogatory one. Amna Lutfi's uncle once secretly counted his prostrations - 493 in one hour of prayer<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup>Mukhtar told this to Elnur Hamad, interview 29/11/1997

<sup>43</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>44</sup>Interview, Yusuf Lutfi 3/12/1997

<sup>45</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

# The meaning of a *khalwa*

## Incarceration and poverty

Past Sufis redefined and transformed the class hierarchy of Muslim state societies, substituting for it a hierarchy of piety that they traced back to the Qur'an. Sufi dissidents used retreat and withdrawal as a means of resistance to the state. Taha used his incarceration against his British prosecutors, taking the routinised, "rational" oppression of the colonial state in its most institutional form, using it for political publicity and turning it into a travelling machine connecting to the fields of heaven.

Taha challenged the idea of prison as a place for the ideological enemies of the state, but he did not challenge the idea of prison as an institution at the sharp end of a class stratified society, a place where the delinquency attributed to its lowest class could be created and maintained<sup>46</sup>. Although he accepted the indignity of a low-grade prison uniform, Taha was not challenging class structures, he was adopting voluntary poverty, like the asceticism that he admired in 'Ali al-Mirghani. Al-Mirghani slept on a simple Sudanese *angareb* bed, without mattress or pillow. This austerity, thought Taha, was the mark of a true Sufi. He had wealth, but was not corrupted by it<sup>47</sup>. Although al-Mirghani was prepared to use his wealth and influence against the poorest class in the country (see page 50), Taha saw him as a prisoner of a patrician system that had played a historic role in uniting the people of north Sudan, a system now being used against them.

The next chapter shows how Taha turned from poverty to voluntary wealth. Later in life, however, he renewed his asceticism and gave it a social, rather than spiritual meaning. It was a means of identification with the poor. Perhaps his prison experience, where he adopted the dress and the food of Sudan's poor in his *khalwa*, made him a keener advocate of the redistribution of wealth. But Taha's "socialism", a feature of his post-*khalwa* writings, never extended to an economic analysis of class and power in Sudan.

## Books

Taha's reading list is surprising. Who would have thought that British jailers would keep copies of al-Ghazali's "Revivification of the Religious Sciences" for their wards? Taha sought to make sense of his experiences through pre-modern Middle Eastern texts. In an overwhelmingly non-literate Sudan, these books had small, elite Sufi readerships. This chapter

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<sup>46</sup>See Foucault 1991:301

<sup>47</sup>Remarks by Taha to Abdullahi An-Na'im, interview 10/11/1997



has suggested that early Middle Eastern Sufis opposed the class hierarchies which developed in early Muslim states to a spiritual hierarchy of their own invention, redefining terms like *khawass* (elite or elect).

However, the connection between Sufi retreat and resistance was seldom made in 1940s Sudan, where the leaderships of large-scale *tarigas* competed for control of the state. For over a hundred years, successive Sudanese states had tried to co-opt the leaderships of small-scale *tarigas* to help them control rural areas of central Sudan. Sufi leaderships became part of the ruling class. Four religious notables, and many of their relatives, sat on the 75 member Legislative Assembly, which in 1948 replaced the Advisory Council as the native policy-making body of Sudan<sup>48</sup>. By the twentieth century, Sudanese Sufi leaderships were a state as well as a spiritual elite - they were *khawass* in both senses of the word. They were separated from the broad mass of their support by modern education and increasing involvement in the cash economy, and often by the fact that they had moved from their village on the banks of the Nile to a house in one of the major urban centres. According to Abdullahi An-Na'im, urban Sufi elites in the 1940s and 1950s set up study groups where intellectuals from the families met together and discussed esoteric knowledge. They puzzled over the obscure and difficult poetry of pre-modern Sufi poets like 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulsi (d 1731) and Muhi al-Din ibn al-'Arabi (d 1240), and recited their poems in a song. Abdullahi An-Na'im identifies Taha with these groups, and describes them as follows:

Probably it is a reflection of a spiritual longing and a strong affiliation with Islamic Sufi traditions and therefore the Middle East. And Arabic would be the language. Given the obscurity of the sources and the subtlety of the meanings it would be a very closed circle of elites who already have a Sufi orientation<sup>49</sup>.

## Authenticity, past and present

Like many nationalist ideologues of his generation, Taha turned to the literary traditions of the Arab Muslim metropole (see chapter 4). It was suggested in chapter 4 that Taha's education introduced him to two grand historical narratives - Islamic and European colonial. In some senses, these grand narratives exclude each other. The contradictions between them pained sensitive men like Moawiya Nur, the Gordon College man who immersed himself in western literature, only to have a fatal psychological collapse (see above, chapter 4). But both narratives had similar socio-economic aims - developing class structures and commerce, and denigrating non-literate cultures and societies organised outside the state. Culturally, both narratives asserted in different ways the inauthenticity of the present and the eternal value of the past - which is perhaps why British jailers were not averse to copies of Muslim classics.

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<sup>48</sup>Niblock 1987:62ff

<sup>49</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 10/11/1997



Taha's deference towards the past, however, was not based on a rejection of human diversity. He saw the mutability of the present moment as a cause for reverence not fear. His *khalwa* taught him to reject one grand narrative of Islam, the *shari'a* tradition, for the sake of the complex present. In a 1951 letter he wrote that *shari'a* had to change.

I do not mean the Islamic legislation that the Muslim legists gabble on about today. That legislation has had its day, has had its social structure, and has served its purposes - to the point of exhaustion. What remains for us is to distil the essence which is still appropriate for our present social structure, and then continue to perfect legislation under the guidance of the Qur'an. I want to be clear: I mean by "Islamic legislation" that which relates to behaviour, and not worship ... and I mean by "our present social structure" a national social structure, and not a racial social structure<sup>50</sup>.

Taha's sense of the authenticity of the past was always part of his writing. However, his spiritual experiments in the *khalwa* taught him the importance of present experience, and drew him away from seeking to make sense of his life through books:

It was important to [Taha] that people took up the prophet's way. To free their inner gifts and knowledge. He would tell the literary types this. "Don't read so much - application [is the important thing]"<sup>51</sup>

The prophet led Taha to his own inner gifts, and he began to wonder if the prophet might draw him further into God.

## Publicity

Taha's prayers had a human audience. He no longer appeared in the political intelligence summaries, but his activities were noted by people in prison, in Rufa'a and in the Republican party. In this respect, his *khalwa* was like those of Sudanese Sufi leaders who went on to found *tarikas* - they used the drama and intensity of their spiritual experience to organise a following and mobilise a community. Yet Taha seldom spoke about the psychological events of his experience, even to close followers. Taha recognised the connections between his experience and that of older Sufis, but he wanted to distinguish his *khalwa* from that of a Sufi *shaykh* who used the spiritual celebrity of his or her moment with God as the basis of the message. Taha believed that the value of his message was to give ideological direction to the Sudanese nation, not to mobilise folk piety. His brother-in-law Ali Lutfi retrospectively compares Taha's mission to that of his tribal forebear 'Abd al-Sadig.

[Taha] said that Sufism had served its purpose ... it had produced good Muslims. But it could not cope with international knowledge. For example ['Abd al-Sadig] al-Hamim tamed elephants with his stick. That's a miracle, but that is not for the twentieth century, which has reached Mars<sup>52</sup>.

<sup>50</sup>Text of letter to *al-Sha'b*, 28/1/1951 in Taha, *rasa'il wa maqalat* 1973:8

<sup>51</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf 13/6/1997

<sup>52</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

Republicans speak of two "lacks" in Sudan's nationalist struggle that were met by Taha. The first was a "lack of zeal", the fact that many nationalists were reluctant to confront the British, and even more reluctant to take their case to the Sudanese people<sup>53</sup>. The Republicans met nationalist timidity with strident activism. The "lack of ideology" was harder to meet. Yet from the start, the Republicans were concerned that "the lack of free reflecting intellect" was the cause of the GGC's lack of political success. Taha told followers that before the *khalwa*, he knew that the answer to Sudan's problems lay in religion, and that it was not the religion of the patricians or the legists, but he knew no more than that<sup>54</sup>. The *khalwa* was a time when Taha constructed a new religious synthesis, that took account of "international knowledge" and "the guidance of the Qur'an". That synthesis, rather than his spiritual celebrity, was what he wished to publicise.

## Conclusion

### Amna has a toothache

One day around the beginning of 1951, Amna Lutfi had a toothache. She went to see her father about it, and he decided to take her to Khartoum to see the dentist. Amna went in to tell Taha, but he told her to go and get him a razor. When she brought it, he asked her to shave his four-year beard. Amna had never shaved anyone before, but she started the job anyway, and began to tell him about her tooth and the trip to Khartoum. "Right", said Taha, "I'll go with you". Amna dropped the razor and ran to her father saying "Abu Muhammad is going with us to Khartoum!"<sup>55</sup>. Muhammad Lutfi was very happy, everyone was happy. From that day, Taha wore no facial hair, not even a moustache (a facial decoration so common in Sudan that one joke even has moustaches on watermelons). Taha had returned from his trip to heaven without a moustache, to remind him of the eternal youthfulness of God.

This complex, public psycho-spiritual experience defined the rest of Taha's life. He developed ideas about Islam, *shari'a*, and a mystical change that would sweep Sudan and the world, and these ideas will be analysed in subsequent chapters, for he had not yet begun to speak about them. Taha's own words suggest that his most compelling motive for the *khalwa* was to discover himself, and he linked this self-discovery to the Qur'an. But his retreat was also an attempt to recast past truths in present idioms, and the drama of the moment conferred on him

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<sup>53</sup>Sadig 1988:59

<sup>54</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 10/2/1997

<sup>55</sup>Interviews, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997 and Amna Lutfi 28/11/1997. Sudanese spouses seldom use each other's first name, but call each other "the father of" (*abu*) or "the mother of" (*umm*) their eldest son.

a celebrity that could be used to address new groups of people. Not everyone accepted what he had achieved, but Taha felt unavoidably drawn to play out this drama.

# Chapter 8

## Giving up abstinence

After four years of ascetic seclusion, Taha returned to mainstream life and personal wealth. He went into private practice as an engineer, gained minor political prominence and raised several families. His Republican party gave up aggressive activism, and began to attract politically aware, pious and progressive young men. This chapter compares their political programme with others on offer.

## Omdurman, 1951-1955

### Clark Gable

Marriage made Amna Lutfi's life strange. She wandered the foothills of the Ethiopian highlands in a railway car with al-Rabb Biyyud, and lived in the urban centres of the Nile valley, bore two children, watched her husband build himself into a nationalist hero and win the support of Rufa'a - and then turn prisoner and then again eccentric recluse, leaving her to mind the children and her father to feed them. Now, as Taha shaved his beard and moustache, and gave up asceticism, she went back to life in Omdurman. Taha spent his first days of freedom wandering round shops he had last seen four years before, scrupulously paying off petty debts. Then he went for a trip round Sudan with 'Awad Lutfi, Amna's brother and an early member of the Republican party<sup>1</sup>.

At the end of Taha's *khalwa*, his brother died. *Shaykh* Mukhtar Muhammad Taha, who could mend cars and watches, and who had set up his own small *tariga* and craft school in Rufa'a, was struck down in a meningitis epidemic. It was like the one that had swept away his own mother and *shaykh* Taha of the Sadigab. Mukhtar Muhammad Taha had gone through his own *khalwa* experience to reach his truth, a combination of Sudanese Islam and technical knowledge, and he met his end with fortitude. When he was told that a doctor had been called, he refused to see him. "I know it is the end", he said, and died<sup>2</sup>. But Mukhtar had married five times, and he had children by each wife - large families, now without a provider. Taha

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<sup>1</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>2</sup>ibid

maintained all the children, bought them a house in Bayt al-Mal in Omdurman and paid for their educations<sup>3</sup>.

Taha rented a big house in Mulazimin, in upmarket Omdurman. The Mahdi family lived nearby and the children went to Comboni College where Italian priests and nuns taught the elite in English<sup>4</sup>. It was the high life. Taha got work with the tram company, his old employer, and had enough money to support his now enormous family. Early in the 1950's, Taha resigned his post in the tram company. He set himself up as a private contractor with an office above some shops in the 'Arabi market of Khartoum. It had two or three rooms opening off a reception area. Instead of the mystic's torn *'aragi*, he was once again wearing the colonialist's shorts and pith-helmet. He began to go to the cinema, where he watched his favourite stars: Clark Gable, Gary Cooper, Humphrey Bogart.

Taha was still somewhat withdrawn from society - he seldom paid social calls. He spent more time in the office, not only working, but also holding meetings for a small coterie of young men interested in his new ideas. The meetings would go on late, so he would only catch the second showing of the film, after 9.30 pm. He took his friends along, and afterwards they would discuss the storyline. Thursday nights (the start of the weekend) he would sometimes take his son Muhammad to an Arabic film<sup>5</sup>.

## The big question

many have now acknowledged [that] the major problem which ought to have been addressed immediately after independence was the constitutional definition of the socio-political entity of this multi-ethnic and multi-religious country<sup>6</sup>

Sudan's big question was ignored by almost all political actors in the run-up to independence. Five years before independence, the British still imagined they had many years ahead of them in Sudan, and the draft constitution they produced in 1951 envisaged a continuing British presence. The Legislative Assembly (an elected body drawn from the elite) adopted this transitional document in 1952 only after safeguards for southern autonomy had been removed. Ismai'l al-Azhari, leader of the National Unionist Party (NUP, a grouping of the Ashigga' and other Egyptian-union parties) and soon to be first prime minister of Sudan, ruled out any

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<sup>3</sup>Interview, Amna Mahmud 28/11/1997

<sup>4</sup>ibid

<sup>5</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi, 5/12/1997

<sup>6</sup>Abusabib 1995:113

redistribution of wealth and power. The elite did not intend to change Sudan's ethnic and economic structures.

Sudan's complex independence struggle is narrated in detail elsewhere<sup>7</sup>. Briefly, the GGC split into parties affiliated to the two patricians, and the rival colonial powers haggled over a post-war settlement, eventually agreeing on self-determination for Sudan. The under-developed south was annexed to the north in spite of armed protest. The electorate chose the NUP, to forestall the monarchical ambitions of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi. At the last minute, he was reconciled to 'Ali al-Mirghani, and the resulting coalition opted for a republic independent of Egypt. It was not the republic Taha wanted: the powers of the colonial state passed smoothly to the native elites it had patronised.

Nationalist parties represented the elites, and related to some non-elite groups in the modern, urban sector in Sudan. The common interests of the elite meant that ideological divisions were secondary to factional conflict - a major complaint of Taha's first work<sup>8</sup>. There are a variety of classifications for these factions. British security men classed them by size and allegiance to the colonial rivals<sup>9</sup>. Some Sudanese historians divide political actors into "modern forces", who challenged the dominance of traditional elites through Marxist or neo-Islamist ideology, and the "traditional parties" of the elites<sup>10</sup>. The following analysis of Sudanese parties in the 1940s looks only at the tiny pre-independence "modern forces", and it tries to relate those political movements to the constitutional question raised above. In addition, the chapter will try to assess how those groups responded to economic and gender imbalances.

## The Black Bloc

Some groups concerned themselves directly with problems such as ethnicity, poverty and the state. These groups were not always able to get a colonial license to operate as a party, but their organisation was to some extent determined by experiences created by the colonial state - migration, ethnic categories, urban neighbourhoods, large-scale enterprises. One such group was the Black Bloc, which arose out of neighbourhood clubs and co-operatives catering for ex-slaves and discharged soldiers in Omdurman. It called for "elimination of social distinctions between Sudanese citizens"<sup>11</sup>. The British estimated its strength at 3,000, and in 1948, two of its leaders were elected to the Legislative Assembly, even though the Bloc had no

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<sup>7</sup>See 'Abd al-Rahim, 1969; Beshir, 1974; Daly 1991

<sup>8</sup>RB, *al-sifr al-awwal* 1976:16

<sup>9</sup>"The Sudanese Parties and Sects - December 1951" Sudan government research department paper in PRO/FO371/90113

<sup>10</sup>For example, Khalid, 1990:131 and El-Affendi 1991:44

<sup>11</sup>Sikainga 1996:168



party license<sup>12</sup>. The Bloc had the cautious support of the Umma party in the assembly. Its constituency, however, did not extend to southerners who had recently arrived in Khartoum, who sometimes barred Arabised and Islamised southerners from their social clubs. This mistrust was reciprocated: Zayn al-'Abdin 'Abd al-Tam was a member of the Legislative Assembly from the Bloc, but he opposed concessions to the south: "if minority problems were created, the whole structure of the state might collapse", he told the assembly<sup>13</sup>. But northern parties were reluctant to give support to groups they saw as "racist", and the British eventually restricted the Bloc's activities to social affairs. The movement fell apart, although its members later were involved in parties formed in the mid-1950's representing non-Arabised groups such as the Nuba and the Beja<sup>14</sup>.

## Communists

People drawn into the colonial economy also had new methods of social organisation, through labour activism. Pay freezes and inflation during the war, and the political openness of the post-war years helped mobilise the labour force in large scale colonial enterprises. A wave of strikes in 1947 culminated in the establishment of the Sudan Workers Trade Union Federation in 1948, with the support of the Sudanese Movement for National Liberation (SMNL, later the Communist party). Sudanese students from Egyptian universities had secretly established the party in 1946.

Unlike the Republicans, who were hostile towards the GGC, the Communists initially sought to co-opt bourgeois nationalism. They won seats on the GGC executive, and worked in the students union at Gordon College. A new leader in 1947 moved the SMNL away from elite politics to the struggle of the workers in the labour unrest of 1947-8. Republican pamphlets had to contend with Communist competition, and Communist graffiti specialists<sup>15</sup>. Their pamphlets began to attack bourgeois nationalists in language even more vehement than the Republicans':

Down with the Criminal Imperialist Government. Long Live your struggle against oppression. Ask Azhari what he had achieved in Egypt. What are you going to do with a man who spends his time leisurely at the Continental [hotel]? ... Remove the traitors from Congress<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup>SPIS 1948 7, September 1948, in PRO/FO/371/69251

<sup>13</sup>Legislative Assembly debate on the Constitution Commission, quoted in 'Abd al-Rahim 1969:198

<sup>14</sup>Sikainga 1996:170f

<sup>15</sup>See el-Amin 1996

<sup>16</sup>Text of a 1948 circular in a police note on the SMNL quoted by el-Amin in *Middle East Studies* 33 (1) 1997:131.

Like the Black Bloc, the Communists used social networks created by colonialism, and through their involvement in the trade union movement they won themselves a lasting constituency. Sudan's small industrial proletariat sought their help in labour unrest, but they voted for patrician parties in general elections, even though the religious families jostling to control the state had no sympathy for their struggle - when Port Sudan dockers went on strike, Maryam al-Mirghani (one of Sudan's few female religious leaders) urged them to return to work<sup>17</sup>. Communist core support was among educated northerners. They were able to address Sudan's big question through Marxist analysis of the state as a creator of class divisions<sup>18</sup>. As early as 1954, Communists were talking about the state's complicity in creating ethnic divisions, calling for regional autonomy for south Sudan<sup>19</sup>.

## Muslim Brothers

Patrician legitimacy was based on religious institutions built around a holy family. Other groups, influenced by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood or Saudi Wahhabis, used the ideological resonance of *shari'a* to build their support<sup>20</sup>. The Islamic Liberation Movement (ILM) was one of the first of these *shari'a* pressure groups, established in Gordon College in 1949 by students from rural areas. Like Taha and Amin Siddig, they were uneasy with the lax morals of the town. The ILM drew heavily on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, indeed after 1954 they took their name. They had a hostile admiration for Communist tactics, but were not able to expand as fast as their rivals<sup>21</sup>. They did not become a significant force outside educational institutions until the 1960s.

'Ali al-Mirghani, an old-style Islamist, mournfully remarked that "there are no longer any true religious *tariqas*, only politicians"<sup>22</sup>. Perhaps he sensed that the ILM, like the Republicans, were alienated by patrician involvement in colonial politics, and the deferential culture of Sudan's institutional religion. This sense of moral mission, says El-Affendi, distinguishes the ILM from patrician parties<sup>23</sup>. The ILM were also different in that they represented an educated sub-elite - their distance from patrician interests is clear from their early espousal of socialism<sup>24</sup>. But their answer to the constitutional question was the same as the patricians' - they wanted to rework an imagined Arab-Muslim past to impose an Arab-Muslim state on a highly diverse nation. Like the patricians, they were often obliged to ignore that diversity.

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<sup>17</sup>SPIS 1947 3, in PRO/FO371/63047

<sup>18</sup>Al-Gaddal in Mamdani and Wamba-dia-Wamba eds, 1995:92

<sup>19</sup>Warburg 1978:154

<sup>20</sup>See El-Affendi 1991:42ff

<sup>21</sup>ibid:57

<sup>22</sup>SPIS 1948 1 in PRO/FO371/63047

<sup>23</sup>El-Affendi 1991:29

<sup>24</sup>ibid:153f

## Republicans

Republican activities restarted after Taha's *khalwa* ended. At a party meeting in November 1951, Taha explained his ideas for a new Islam, an ideology that would balance informed individual freedom with the needs of society. Islam was the ideology that was lacking from Sudan's factional political conflict:

There is no good government without Islam .... If the Sudanese call for a struggle to exalt the word of God, they will have made true the struggle and purified their souls. If ... [the Legislative Assembly] ... succeeded in ousting the colonialists, we fear that this would lead us to all out civil war ... for we are divided into two great sects with a historic enmity between them. ... Our nationalist movement can accomplish nothing if it does not gather up the fragments of groups and sects and parties too, around the eternal idea which Islam has brought<sup>25</sup>.

## My Way

In 1952, Taha published a second booklet, *qul hadhihi sabili* ["Say: this is my way"]. He did not talk about his *khalwa* mysteries, but proclaimed a new Islamic civilisation of eastern spirituality and western material development. Islam, he said, resolved the competing demands of absolute human freedom and total social justice<sup>26</sup>. The booklet maintained Taha's concern for nationalist activism, calling for civil disobedience to remove the colonialists.

Freedom in this second booklet was freedom from fear, ignorance and poverty, involving just distribution of wealth and land owned by a central government and managed co-operatively. Private ownership would exist only in the home. Democracy was curiously mixed with educational elitism - voting should be a right for the educated, he said, and in order to extend the suffrage, the largest government ministry should be the ministry of knowledge. It would organise a comprehensive educational strategy for the country, teaching chastity and self-reliance, as well as medicine and astronomy<sup>27</sup>. Taha believed that sport was part of the curriculum of virtue - perhaps he had appropriated British ideas about football's reformatory qualities. Education would liberate the mind and unite the individual's spiritual abilities and material needs. People would maintain a constant spiritual alertness through following the *tariq* (path) of Muhammad. The use of the word *tariq* here is significant - it suggests a mystical Sufi path. Taha was thinking Islamically, but most Islamists would prefer to revive the *sunna*, another "path" but one which had been defined by centuries of jurisprudence rather than spiritual exercises. His new civilisation would spread to the world, giving it spiritual unity, a personal and global *tawhid*. This Arabic word means monotheism, literally "coming together as one".

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<sup>25</sup>RB *ma'alim* 1, 1976:55

<sup>26</sup>Taha, *qul hadhihi sabili* 1976:12

<sup>27</sup>Taha, *qul hadhihi sabili* 1976:16

*Qul hadhihi sabili* differs from Taha's 1946 work he asserts more stridently the need to redistribute wealth. Taha also changed his analysis of the state. He still hoped that independent Sudan would provide a golden age of goodness, as he had suggested in his first manifesto. But *qul hadhihi sabili* had none of the references to "Arab excellence". He no longer wanted an Arab-Muslim state for Sudan, but he wanted Sudan to be a model for a coming world government, where Islamic values formed a framework for local diversity - indeed, he came to see Arab nationalism as racist<sup>28</sup>. Taha was thinking hard about Sudan's constitution, and the fruits of his reflections came out in a book in 1955, discussed in chapter 9.

## The party

Many early members of the party left when they realised that Taha had turned from nationalist action to religion. Amin Siddig, Zanoon Gubara, Muhammad Fadul and 'Awad Lutfi were among the few who remained with Taha. However, Taha gathered a new following of young men of religious outlook. Among the first to join the new Republican party (in 1951) were Sa'id Shayib and Jalal al-Din al-Hadi, both secondary students from Wad Medani<sup>29</sup>. The students, and a few older Republicans, attended discussions at Taha's office. Taha did not contribute much, but he introduced, moderated and summed up the discussion. He used the remarks of others to build up a case, so that each person felt a part of the conclusion: "In the end, you would think it was your own idea", said one participant<sup>30</sup>.

Taha was making himself into a religious leader, but he was not a *tariga shaykh*. Instead, he took the title of a teacher - *al-ustaz* Mahmud. The party was already centred around him, and he became the sole spokesman at meetings and lectures. Party men no longer roamed the cinemas and cafes dodging policemen. Instead, Taha wrote learned letters to the press. In 1953, he wrote against *shari'a* as a basis for the constitution, and for the need for a new kind of Islamic state of virtue<sup>31</sup>. But Taha's *khalwa* transformation was not apparent to British security, who still saw Republicans as "a small party of fanatical reactionaries"<sup>32</sup>. They occasionally followed his lectures in clubs:

[Taha] addressed the officials in their club at Wad Medani and the workers at the Workers Club urging them to stick to their Islamic Religious principles by means of which they could attain their national aspirations<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup>Taha wrote an open letter to the director of UNESCO in 1953 called for a world government. Taha, *rasa'il wa maqalat* 1973:32; RB, *ma'alim* 1, 1976:7

<sup>29</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 18/8/1998

<sup>30</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi, 3/12/1997

<sup>31</sup>Letter to *Sawt al-Sudan* in Taha *rasa'il wa-maqalat* 1973:38

<sup>32</sup>"Note on the Present Set-up of Political Parties in Sudan", Central Office Secretariat, 28/10/1951 in PRO/FO/371/90114

<sup>33</sup>SPIS 8 1954, PRO/FO371/108328

In 1954, the party started its own short-lived newspaper, *al-Jumhuriya*. One of the contributors was Sadig al-Mahdi, the grandson of 'Abd al-Rahman, who became a regular attendee at Taha's salon in the 'Arabi market. He was a student at Comboni College at the time, like Taha's own children, but he left for university in England, from where he would write to Taha to ask for explanations of Islam<sup>34</sup>. Taha's own capacity to question religious and social norms and yet emerge full of certainty, reassured these young men.

## Small parties

Small urban parties had certain ideological and organisational similarities. The ILM, the SMNL, the Black Bloc and the Republicans all organised in the new clubs and unions. Graffiti, pamphlets and lectures were new forms of communication for Sudan, eagerly taken up by these aspiring, but relatively powerless, political actors.

Three parties shared a sense of unease about the direction of the state towards the interests of the Arab-Muslim elite. The Black Bloc was the only radical group which addressed the problem of ethnicity in Sudan, and it was suppressed. The Marxist critique of the state helped Communists recognise something of Sudan's diversity. The Republican understanding of diversity, in contrast, was mediated through Taha's nuanced feel for Islam in Sudan. The different traditions that influenced him allowed him to conceive of an Islam that could work as a unifying force for the personality and the country, rather than the imposition of the norms of the Arab-Muslim state.

Taha shared similarities with the ILM too. He spoke in mosques and preferred religion to economics. Muhammad Yusuf, a founder of the ILM, was aware of these similarities. Yusuf visited Taha in his Rufa'a *khalwa* to ask him to lead his student movement. El-Affendi says that "After a lengthy discussion he decided that Taha's views were too unorthodox for him to lead the [ILM]"<sup>35</sup>. Taha was not interested anyway. He did not like Muhammad Yusuf's idea that Islam could be taken off the shelf and made into a constitution. "They thought Islam was ready-made, it was just a matter of getting the people together. Taha thought that Islam needed new understanding," says Ibrahim Yusuf<sup>36</sup>.

The ILM found it hard to recognise Sudan's diversity. They flirted with socialism when they began organising in Sudan, but their main fixation was to incorporate *shari'a* into state law. By aligning Sudanese society to past urban metropolitan societies of the Middle East, they

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<sup>34</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi, 3/12/1997

<sup>35</sup>El Affendi 1991:65

<sup>36</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf 13/6/1997

believed that they were restoring a lost authenticity to Sudan<sup>37</sup>. This claim found a response in educated urban Sudan, which for over two centuries had seen the future in the urban Mediterranean, even if it tried not see the past in Sudan. *Shari'a* was a way to "upgrade" Sudan from an African past to a prestigious Middle Eastern future.

## Women and politics

Class and ethnicity played a significant role in determining Sudanese women's rights - women in small-scale subsistence economies had a role in production, but respectable urban women stayed at home, wore elegant but cumbersome clothing and did not go to the market. In the towns, poorer women could still work - as late as the 1950's, women could be seen in small-town market places, their uncovered hair proclaiming their former slave status<sup>38</sup>. Women members of the elite participated at the margins of power through the education they had shared with their brothers. The elite who led independent Sudan needed women in the workforce. But the work performed by tea-ladies and nurses was stigmatised as female and low-class (slave) work. The state elite did not grant women the vote until 1965.

The Black Bloc has been little studied, and the position of women in its ranks cannot be assessed. However, Sudan's political parties created women's sections in the 1940's and 1950's. Groups run by the Muslim Brotherhood (as the ILM came to be known in 1954) and the Umma party followed the fortunes of their sect. The Communists had an early foothold in the Sudan Woman's Union (SWU), founded in 1952<sup>39</sup>. The literate women who joined were committed to the kind of educational reformism that was a feature of Taha's thinking. Taha's 1952 work devoted one of its four sections to women. He still defined women in terms of their family role. His was not a radical feminist document, although it called for the abolition of the veil. However, Taha was beginning to think about ways for women to express their femininity in his new civilisation, and that in itself would greatly influence the history of his movement.

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<sup>37</sup>See al-Turabi 1991:27ff, El-Affendi 1991:40ff, Zayn al-'Abidin 1991:5ff

<sup>38</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 3/12/1997

<sup>39</sup>See Hale 1996b:170



# Private life

## Family tragedy

After 1951, the Republican party was much less prominent, indeed, some British security men wondered if it was still in existence<sup>40</sup>. While Taha nurtured his small following in Khartoum, calamity struck in Rufa'a. In 1953 or 1954, Amna Lutfi and the children were visiting. Muhammad, her son, was down at the river with the Rufa'a boys. They were all village boys who could swim, but he had been in Omdurman, playing in parks and going to cinemas. He went into the river anyway, and drowned. Taha was not with the family, but someone came and told Amna:

An old lady came and sat with me. She brought some goat's milk, the best thing, she said, for this kind of tragedy. They searched for Muhammad, they never found him. They found someone else who had drowned, a clerk, drowned in his clothes and his watch. But that one was not found.<sup>41</sup>

Amna lay on the bed and the old lady held her while her sisters ran to the river to look. The search lasted three days. Everyone noticed her patience, she did not cry, and she told the tearful: "Don't cry. God ordains patience. That's all"<sup>42</sup>. Taha came down on the train the next day. He did not show his emotion either. This inscrutable piety in the worst of times is a striking feature of some funerals of Muslim children, and one admired by the Lutfi women<sup>43</sup>. Taha only stayed in Rufa'a for three days and then went back to the city to carry on with his work. Amna stayed on with her daughter and her enormous patience.

Amna had another daughter that year, called Sumaya. The death of Muhammad may have marked a turning point in the family. Taha's feelings about the incident were not clear even to his contemporaries, and the death of a child carries too many meanings for anyone to speculate about its effects. But Taha was more and more often away, and eventually moved out of Omdurman. Amna went back to Rufa'a. Over the next ten years they saw little of each other.

## Kosti and Korea

Taha turned to party activity - meetings in his office building, lectures in clubs, occasional tracts on the political situation. He began to make trips to Sufi shrines, where he would test his new beliefs in prayer and dialogue (see page 129). But he was also supporting Amna in Rufa'a and also his brother Mukhtar's children in Omdurman, and he went to where the money

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<sup>40</sup>"The Sudanese Parties and Sects - December 1951", Foreign Office Research Department paper in PRO/FO/371/90113

<sup>41</sup>Interview, Amna Lutfi 28/11/1997

<sup>42</sup>Interview, Sayyida Lutfi 17/6/1997

<sup>43</sup>ibid

was. In 1955 he left Khartoum for Kosti, to work as an engineer on new agricultural pump schemes

Kosti is a provincial capital on the White Nile 200 miles south of the capital, at the southern tip of Aba Island, where 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi had his estates. Named after a Greek trader, it symbolises in many ways capitalist Sudan. When the Sudanese elite took over administration in 1953 they spent heavily on education (a GGC priority), but they ruled out the possibility of redistributing wealth. The colonialist policy of concentrating development along the Nile Valley and the central provinces was continued. Market forces were expected to correct the sharp regional and class divisions in the country: government intervention was restricted to land grants for a few wealthy clients of the elite<sup>44</sup>.

The Korean war in 1950 sent cotton prices up. Sudanese with access to information, land and cash were quick to employ them in cotton farms. With cotton at £E 50 a hundredweight, the pump schemes boomed - 185 were built in four years<sup>45</sup>. The pump schemes offered some of the best returns on investment in Sudan at the time. The colonial government's agricultural investment in the share-cropping schemes of central Sudan paid off: it covered administrative costs and left Sudan with a healthy £E13 million surplus of revenue over expenditure in 1956<sup>46</sup>. Elites sponsored by the colonialists had invested their winnings mainly in private pump schemes, slightly more rapacious than the government schemes (which provided welfare services to tenant farmers and landless workers)<sup>47</sup>. On some private pump schemes the tenants' share of their crops was as low as 25%<sup>48</sup>.

Private pump schemes along the White Nile, primarily for cotton production, proliferated in the 1950s, and Taha's skills were at a premium<sup>49</sup>. He moved to the Kosti resthouse, a small hotel run by the railway department set in three or four acres of neglected garden. It was there that he saw Girgis Iskander, a doctor of Coptic origin whom he had first met at Gordon College. Girgis Iskander became a close friend, and his sympathetic but critical reminiscences of Taha shed a great deal of light on his character.

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<sup>44</sup>Khalid 1990:152

<sup>45</sup>Shalgami 1991:65

<sup>46</sup>Niblock 1987:338.

<sup>47</sup>ibid:31

<sup>48</sup>ibid:33

<sup>49</sup>I G & M C Simpson in Craig ed 1991:274

## Dr Girgis Iskander

Girgis Iskander felt rather reserved when he first saw Taha. He was a Christian, and Taha had a reputation as a starchy Muslim - he remembered his prayers at school, his conservative rebellion at Rufa'a, the way that he referred to the prophet as "the infallible [one]", a primly theological honorific used by the kind of Muslim hard-liners who would take Girgis Iskander's religion as a cause for offence. Reserve did not last long - Taha was charming, friendly and candid. Girgis Iskander did not recognise the severe and pious schoolboy he remembered, and he did not hear any crazy talk about religion.

Taha was still strange. Most of his friends were made through his work, but when he eventually rented a house, a little coterie of "not quite presentable people" would come round to his house for help<sup>50</sup>. They were often *maddahs*, poor hymn-singers<sup>51</sup>. Such men often attached themselves to Sufi *shaykhs* who provided food and hospitality for them, and many of them began to stay at Taha's house - sometimes they would help themselves to small valuables, but Taha would not mind<sup>52</sup>. They did not prevent Taha from keeping up relations with richer groups in Kosti. He had friends among the cotton lords, judges, doctors and merchants of the town. One friend, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Nagar was a left-wing merchant whom Taha employed to distribute charitable gifts to poor people. He had a small survey staff too, who sometimes stayed in the house. It gradually became a small salon where members of a provincial elite with an interest in religion or politics came and talked. Taha was a great talker and listener, as Girgis Iskander explains:

... when he informed me of his global politics, and being medically trained, I diagnosed him as suffering from paranoia. As we proceeded to argue and discuss, I quickly revised my views, nay! I was infected with his 'BUG'. And being only human, I behaved like the privates in the Congolese army. When the Belgians were there, there was a Congolese army of privates and no generals. As the colonialists left, every individual in that army promoted himself into a general and there were no privates. So when I caught his bug, I made myself the General and Mahmoud became my prophet!!

My brain and my whole being began to act in fantastic ways, ideas flowing smoothly and mystically to my great astonishment and dazzlement. Being still medical I applied my skills to understand myself. My diagnosis was that I was raving mad at that moment. Mahmoud was egging me not to be a coward and push on and on ...

Mahmoud was like a terrific whirlwind blowing on my personality and brain. Ideas and self possession, life and death were uprooted and blew to where no one could predict yet it was all very pleasant and unique experience. Eventually I sobered up ...<sup>53</sup>

Girgis Iskander still went along for a talk most days. More and more people came to meet this sympathetic listener with wild ideas and perfect manners. And Taha was rich and successful.

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<sup>50</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander 4/9/1997

<sup>51</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf 13/6/1997

<sup>52</sup>Interview, Elnur Hamad 30/11/1997

<sup>53</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander 11/9/1997

He was making six times as much as Girgis Iskander, himself a busy doctor making ten to 30 Sudanese pounds (£S) a day - up to 120 times as much as a labourer<sup>54</sup>. Eventually he bought a Land Rover. Girgis Iskander heard the cynics say that the promise of super-profits in agriculture had seduced Taha away from his religious life. But asceticism still lingered around him - he rented a shabby house in a middling area of Kosti, which he furnished sparsely and opened to all. Girgis Iskander took to him:

Personally I think he had sobered up and become an abnormal normal person ... on one level he had normal feeling and compassion like other humans and on the other level he still had his mega ideas ... after his sojourn in the land of the unknown and the unseen he emerged but he was still there.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusion

In the early 1950s, Taha built up a small support base. His regular meetings in Khartoum were interrupted by his stay in Kosti, where he also had a small following. Although his friends noticed his indifference to material comforts, he was now a rich man. He made generous provision for his extended family, and doled out money to various needy people. Some of contemporaries say that Taha had left the railways in the 1940's because of his frustrated sympathies with workers' demands for rights. But now, in Kosti, his answer to the exploitation of migrant labour in plantation agriculture lay in education for a new civilisation. In some respects, his views tallied with the graduates in the government - their notion of state investment in development was to double the education budget, not to challenge the economic order. Taha was an educational reformist, like the intellectuals who had joined up with the patrician parties. Yet he held himself aloof from those parties - the Republicans, like other small urban parties, rejected the patrimonial structure of the state, and adopted policies for change drawn from European and Islamic traditions which they encountered in their education.

Taha's *khalwa* had changed him for good. The intimacy that he found in his cell in Kober overshadowed every other intimacy in his life. He and his wife used their religious faith to cope with their son's death. But the experience may have marked a change in the family, with Taha looking harder at his religion. He was a charming and charismatic figure, and his life now had a purpose which drew him away from the ordinary and into the absolute. This attracted many people to him - the professional men of Kosti discovered a man who listened to them intently, and spun out their thoughts wildly, and gave them a sense of their own

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<sup>54</sup>In 1956, the Sudanese pound replaced the Egyptian one as Sudan's currency. It was tied to the dollar, and was valued at over \$2.50 until the late 1970s.

<sup>55</sup>ibid 16/8/1997

extraordinariness. However, these were his friends - the people who committed themselves to his ideas tended to be younger men. When Taha began to travel around Sudan speaking and listening in clubs and Sufi shrines in the late 1950's, he was accompanied by men 20 years his junior. Much of the rest of his life was lived with young people.

# Chapter 9

## Independence for the elite

Independence, which came in 1956, was independence for the Arab-Muslim elite. They did not address the ethnic and economic imbalances which colonialists had done so much to create. This chapter examines the years from 1953 to 1958, and Taha's writings about Sudan's big questions. It also looks at his expectation that Sudan and the world would be flipped over into perfection.

## The challenge to the state

### Parliamentary elections

In Bahr El Ghazal Province the Aliab tribe, who considered the elections to be merely a plot to gather the people together so that they might be killed or enslaved, flatly refused to vote in 3 of the electoral divisions<sup>1</sup>

An Anglo-Egyptian agreement on self-government in 1953 prepared the way for elections later that year, supervised by an international commission. Independence came in 1956. Sectarian conflict led to street riots when the Umma party lost the elections in the face of a powerful, Egyptian-funded campaign for the NUP<sup>2</sup>. But the civil war Taha had predicted (see page 113) did not happen, thanks to an agreement reached by the two patricians in 1955. Their alliance saved Sudan for the elite and marginalised the radicals. The new order was seriously challenged twice in the six months between August 1955 and February 1956.

The Aliab verdict on the elections was not without foundation. Sudan's independence marked the renewal of war against the south, with murder and enslavement allegations continuing to this day<sup>3</sup>. British colonialists had violently instituted tribal leaderships to mediate their authority in the south (see page 42). Now, they and the northern elite induced a few Southern leaders to accept union with the north.

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<sup>1</sup>SPIS November 1953 in PRO/FO371/102702

<sup>2</sup>See "Report of the Sudan Electoral Commission" 1953, for Mahdist objections to the campaign. PRO/FO371/108336

<sup>3</sup>See for example Human Rights Watch 1994:71f



## Torit - the first challenge

Southerners began to feel cheated when official posts promised to their own people were doled out to northerners - the south was promised instead "the force of iron in dealing with any Southerner who dares to divide the nation"<sup>4</sup>. In 1955, when northerners replaced southern technicians at an Equatorial cotton scheme, six southerners died in riots. The incident caught the southern mood: in August, resentment spilled over into armed resistance. When the soldiers of the southern Equatorial Corps were ordered to Khartoum, without ammunition, they believed they were about to be massacred. They killed several hundred northerners, including the officers sent to relieve them. Independence went ahead a few months later in January 1956, and the bloody challenge of the southern mutineers ended on the gallows - over 70 were hanged.

Sudan's elite had won independence, and in the next few months, more people who challenged their idea of Sudan were to die. In 1955, while they were still alive, Taha wrote down his idea of Sudan- "The fundamentals of Sudan's constitution" (*usus dastur al-sudan*).

## Sudan's constitution

The Legislative Assembly passed the British draft constitution in 1952 after removing concessions for southern autonomy. Communists resisted this centralisation in a 1954 call to devolve power to the south<sup>5</sup>. Taha's book calls for a similar devolution of power for all five regions of Sudan. He wanted a hierarchy of popular representation, five levels of autonomous councils from village to nation<sup>6</sup>. Taha's constitution even allowed for regional legislatures to dissolve the central legislature. The constitution envisaged its own development: the centre was to cede its power gradually to the regions<sup>7</sup>.

But Taha's constitution acknowledged existing imbalances in Sudan. One parliamentarian would represent 200,000 southerners or westerners, while representation would be 1:50,000 in the developed centre of Sudan<sup>8</sup>. Taha's proposals for regional representation were more imbalanced than those of the electoral commission (see table). However, Taha envisaged the cession of central power and eventual equal representation, while actual representation over the subsequent 30 years aggravated ethnic imbalances.

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<sup>4</sup>Speech by prime minister Isma'il al-Azhari in August 1954, quoted in Sanderson and Sanderson 1981:340

<sup>5</sup>Warburg 1978:155

<sup>6</sup>Taha, *usus dastur al-sudan* 1968:12

<sup>7</sup>ibid:26

<sup>8</sup>ibid:40

## Regional share of representation in 1953 and 1986 elections

- parliamentary representative: population<sup>9</sup>

region year	Upper Nile, Bahr al- Ghazal, Equatoria	Darfur and Kordofan	Central and eastern Sudan
1953 election/1956 census	1:126,500	1:134,391	1:84,403
1986 election/1983 census	1:146,416	1:143,883	1:69,571

## Pedagogy and literacy

In 1955, an "International Commission on Secondary Education" toured Sudan, made up of British and Egyptian educators under an Indian chairman. One member was 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Sayyad, an Egyptian professor. He was scandalised by the Dinka lifestyle of rural Bahr al-Ghazal (Dinka people in that time and place wore little in the way of clothing).. Dinkas had to be forced to fit in to the life of the rest of the country, he said, and he refused to allow that the Dinka might be happy as they were:

if human beings are to be happy they have to live as other members of the human race ... if these people are too backwards to think for themselves ... it will be the duty of the Government to think for them<sup>10</sup>

Al-Sayyad's negative account of a non-literate pedagogy and of a society that exists without a state, faithfully reproduces prejudices common in Islamic metropolises and colonial administrations. These prejudices are sometimes implied in Taha's constitution:

[Province governors should] make it possible for pastoralists to settle, by providing water for them and their animals and by conserving their land ... before settling, there can be no education and no civilisation ... It goes without saying that education is the one method which will destroy differences and bring together customs and work towards the unity of the people through unity of language, killing or weakening local dialects.<sup>11</sup>

Like al-Sayyad, Taha believed that education qualified people for democracy, and his reluctance to grant the vote to the uneducated, expressed in *qul hadhihi sabili*, finds some echoes in his constitution. However, Taha rebutted the suggestion that "primitive" people need educations in order to "deserve" sovereignty:

This is used as an apology for absolute rule ... although people need education, absolute rule ... can only give them the education of slaves. Absolute rule will not prepare people for democracy, but for conformity and docility. We want to alert people to the devastating danger of this trend, and to assert that there is no way for educating any people except to put

<sup>9</sup>1953 election returns in Niblock 1987:72f; 1986 election returns in Keen 1994:151, compared to 1956 and 1983 census figures in Ministry of National Planning 1983

<sup>10</sup>"Some Notes on the Southern Sudan Education (Wau)", 10/2/1955; Abd al-'Aziz al-Sayyad, quoted in Sanderson and Sanderson 1981:338

<sup>11</sup>Taha, *usus* 1968:53

before them their problems, and help them understand them, and find ways to solve them by themselves<sup>12</sup>.

Taha believed in modernity and Islam; he also believed in grassroots action and individual self-expression. His universalising modernism could adopt a murderous attitude towards linguistic diversity. His Islam was another universalist ideology, and it could be used to try and standardise belief and culture, and assert a universal law: "Law is above all powers and above the people ... for us it is self-subsistent and independent of the human mind"<sup>13</sup> However, Taha's law, based on the Qur'an, was not only the framework for the constitution: it was the law of the human heart<sup>14</sup>. The purpose of the law was not to preserve the state, but to abolish class distinction through communal ownership of the means of production and narrow, fixed income differentials. The purpose of his fierce educational policy was also to remove class from society:

We develop all resources, animal, mineral, vegetable and industrial, in order to develop human resources, improving their kind and destroying their differences through intellectual cultivation and civilisation ... so that all classes can relate to each other, and in that way classes will be abolished.<sup>15</sup>

Al-Sayyad saw little value in social and cultural diversity, but that is not the lesson of Taha's book. Social uniformity was a means to the goals of his constitution - he believed that the abolition of class differences would allow individuals to develop their own talents independently, in autonomous communities to which power was gradually devolved by an educative state. While modern Sudanese commentators see Sudan's big question (see page 109) in terms of the politics of ethnicity and religion, Taha, from an earlier age, was more concerned with class.

## A constitutional committee

In 1956, the cabinet set up a committee to replace the 1952 constitution with a permanent one. Three of its 46 members were southerners, and they left after the committee rejected autonomy for the south<sup>16</sup>. Taha, the Republican party representative, only lasted a few months. He objected to the fact that the committee was answerable to the government and not the legislature. When he failed to persuade the committee to claim its independence, he resigned<sup>17</sup>. The next month 'Ali al-Mirghani and 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi announced that Sudan should be an Islamic parliamentary republic, a recommendation taken up by the committee, to southern dismay. However, a military coup in 1958 ended the discussion. Taha played no part

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<sup>12</sup>ibid:23f. I am grateful to Al-Baqir Mukhtar for pointing out this passage.

<sup>13</sup>Taha, *usus* 1968:28

<sup>14</sup>ibid:12

<sup>15</sup>ibid:60

<sup>16</sup>Khalid 1990:129

<sup>17</sup>RB, *ma'alim*, 2 1976:10

in these decisions - he was an oppositionist, and he responded uneasily to his brief taste of official power.

## Joda - the second challenge

Taha arrived in Kosti in mid 1955, the last year of British rule, and he stayed there for over ten years. He observed Sudan's independence from an economically dynamic vantage point. He discussed the Torit events with friends in Kosti. The convolutions of British policy in the south, and the bad faith of the northern politicians were, in his view, the main reason for the tragedy<sup>18</sup>. But Taha was part of a Sudan integrated into the world economy, where Korean wars meant more to daily life than hinterland massacres. He was nearer to the second challenge to the regime, which happened in Joda, in February 1956, just after independence<sup>19</sup>.

Joda was a privately owned pump scheme south of Kosti. Its 700 tenant farmers had not been paid for the 1955 harvest, and refused to deliver any more crops without payment. With support from Communist agitators, they also demanded increased profit shares and union recognition, and some of them were arrested. Rural Sudan was still dominated by Native Administration, and a Baggara chief / judge dealt with the strikers. He found urban Kosti too restrictive for the case, and moved his court to the Joda home of the scheme owner.

Demonstrations there led to several deaths. Over 300 farmers were arrested and taken to Kosti, and locked in a sealed-up barrackroom, 18 metres by six. All requests for water and ventilation were ignored. The next day, 189 of the prisoners were found dead of heat exhaustion and carbon monoxide poisoning. They were buried in a secret mass grave. 111 living prisoners were found stripped and chanting the Qur'an.

The Communists (at that time called the "Anti-Imperialist Front") roamed Kosti's streets calling for vengeance<sup>20</sup>. The Communist trade union leader al-Shafi' Ahmad al-Shaykh told Kosti demonstrators that the incident exposed the regime's hostility to "the working classes"<sup>21</sup>. Communists pointed out that the colonialists' Native Administration bore a significant part of the blame. In the capital, students went on strike, and lawyers marched to the prime minister's office demanding the government's resignation. The government replaced the out-classed Native Administration with emergency laws and civil judges who sat at dead of night. Small parties protested - the Muslim Brothers (formerly the ILM) denounced the prime minister,

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<sup>18</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander, 3/3/1998

<sup>19</sup>Shalgami (1991) reproduces accounts of participants in the Joda incident.

<sup>20</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander 3/3/1998

<sup>21</sup>Speech of Communist trade union leader in Kosti, quoted by Shalgami 1991:115

Isma'il al-Azhari; the Republicans called for the resignation of the interior minister "for neglecting the people in the twists of party competition for power"<sup>22</sup>.

Girgis Iskander wrote an attack on Communist tactics in the press - he believed that the poor farmers had little idea where the Communists were leading them, and that the Communists ought to acknowledge their part in the tragedy, rather than attacking the state. He discussed the matter with Taha, who agreed that the Communists were exploiting the situation. However Taha sympathised with the workers demands:

[Taha]was rather accepting [of] the idea that the Communists had to arouse the farmers to take action to gain more rights<sup>23</sup>.

Al-Azhari's government lost al-Mirghani's support and fell in June 1956. Al-Mirghani's Khatmiya now supported the People's Democratic Party [PDP], who formed a government with their Mahdist rivals in the Umma party to ride out two years of fractious coalition and diminishing economic returns. The war in Korea was still more important. After it ended in 1953, cotton gradually slumped until it reached a quarter of the 1950 price. In 1958, the Umma prime minister Abdallah Khalil handed power over to a general, Ibrahim Abboud, as the sectarian coalition fell apart and the balance of payments plunged. Cotton still amounted to about two-thirds of the value of agricultural production<sup>24</sup>. Khalil and al-Azhari got pensions, and the Communist leader al-Shaykh got a five year sentence. Al-Mahdi and al-Mirghani blessed the new government; the Republicans, like many of Sudan's elite saw Abboud as the leader of a "benevolent military regime"<sup>25</sup>. Taha had little time for a parliamentary version of the Arab-Muslim state, and he was in any case spending his time trying to find out what he should do with his revelations.

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<sup>22</sup>Shalgami 1991:116. Shalgami quotes a statement of *al-hizb al-jamhuri*, the Republican Party, but it is possible that he refers to the Republican Socialist Party, a short lived group which had three representatives in parliament.

<sup>23</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander 3/3/1998

<sup>24</sup>Osman and Suleiman in Robson and Lury ed 1969:444

<sup>25</sup>Recollections of Abdullahi An-Na'im of Republican views at the time - interview 10/11/1997



# From the shrine to the club

## *Wasil*

Taha was a wealthy member of Sudan's modern economic sector, but he had not stopped roaming his imagination for answers to the world's questions. Although he now considered himself a socialist, he no longer concerned himself with workers' rights - instead he looked for global solutions for poverty, ignorance and fear. His *khalwa* experience made him believe that he had reached a watershed in understanding these problems..

Asma Mahmud, Taha's daughter, saw little of him, but she heard about his strange ideas. One day she asked him why he did not pray, and he told her to wait until she was older to understand<sup>26</sup>. Since the end of his *khalwa* he had ceased to pray the canonical prayers of Islam<sup>27</sup>. Taha believed he was a *wasil*, which translates as "someone who has arrived". He later described the state of *wusul* (arrival) in a letter to the American writer John Voll:

To the great Sufi consciousness has two levels. One fundamental and supreme. It transcends time and space. It is well-nigh static. This level is the attribute of the Infinite, of the elect, of God.

The other level of consciousness is dynamic, and evolutionary. It is the attribute of the finite. These two levels of consciousness have a difference of degree not of kind.

Every Sufi tries, through his spiritual development, to work his way up the ladder of consciousness, from limitation to abundance, from Man's opportunity, to God's proximity.

At a certain stage along that ladder discord gives place to harmony and the inner conflict cools down. The individual enjoys eternal bliss. This stage of progress is called *wusul*. The Arabic word "*wusul*" literally means arrival. The Sufi, in his spiritual development, is exemplified metaphorically, to the traveller who arrives at his destination after a weary and hazardous journey through the desert. That would be an oasis. It has its temptations ... Many spiritual mediocres forget their eternal journey and happily settle down.

To the great Sufi the stage of *wusul* only marks the beginning of unity with God.<sup>28</sup>

Taha made the claim of *wusul* or the analogous claim of *asala* to some of those around him in the mid 1950s. He explained to one friend that "in this state one arrives to his own *asala* (authenticity or self-attainment) and no longer needs to imitate anyone or follow the road of others, including that of the Prophet Muhammad"<sup>29</sup>. This idea was linked to that of *al-insan al-kamil*, often translated as "perfect man", a person whom Taha associated with Jesus and who was part of the speculations of early theosophical Sufis, like ibn al-'Arabi. Ibn al-'Arabi described the type:

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<sup>26</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud 28/11/1997

<sup>27</sup>Interview, Elnur Hamad 29/11/1997

<sup>28</sup>Text of letter to John Voll in Taha *rasa'il wa maqalat* v 2, 1971:7. This was written about fifteen years after the period under discussion, and it is one of the few English texts that Taha produced. However, Taha's remarks tally with remarks he made to Girgis Iskander in the 1950's, and so his own words are quoted anachronistically here.

<sup>29</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander 23/1/1998



... the highest type of Sufis "who keep their esoteric doctrine to themselves and never divulge its mysteries to the public or even to one another"<sup>30</sup>

Other Sudanese Sufis also abandoned canonical prayer in pursuit of perfection, men like Muhammad 'Abd al-Sadig, Taha's flamboyant forebear, or 'Abd al-Bagi al-Mukashfi who led a small Blue Nile *tariga* in the nineteenth century. Taha's audience were familiar with this kind of evasion of the rules, and like Ibn al-'Arabi, they associated it with "the highest type of Sufi" - the *khawass*, the Sufi spiritual elite. Taha could make his experience comprehensible by identifying himself with this spiritual elite.

But Taha was not sure that the *khawass* should have it all. Ibn al-'Arabi's belief in secret mysticism opposed Taha's democratic and socialist instincts. Taha accepted the spiritual eminence of the *walis*, but wanted to invite everyone to the mystical feast. His huge psychological experience had given him a sense of mission, and the strength to return to a new kind of life and leadership, but he still was unsure about the knowledge he had received. Was it for everyone?

## Visiting the dead

For Taha, the answer to this question lay not so much in the books read by intellectual Sufis in Khartoum, but with Sudan's spiritual leaders. He asked them whether his proposals for modernising Sufi Islam deserved publicity. Throughout the 1950's he toured the *masids* and *khalwas* of Sudan, seeking guidance from living and dead Sufi *shaykhs*. Three young men accompanied the middle-aged Taha - Sa'id Shayib, Jalal al-Din al-Hadi and 'Abd al-Latif 'Umar. The last had joined in 1955; he was from the Shaygiya area of northern Sudan. He arrived in Khartoum in the early 1950's and worked as a water seller, one of the most menial of occupations. After he met Taha and became committed to the Republican cause, he learned to read and write and became a newspaper proofreader and one of the party's most prolific writers<sup>31</sup>.

Taha and his friends tried to visit every Sufi centre in Sudan. Taha explained his transformative ideas about Islam to the local *shaykhs*. His controversial views sometimes sparked off fights<sup>32</sup>. If living *shaykhs* rejected him, Taha could always pray for the support of their dead forebears. According to Abdullahi An-Na'im, Taha was not proselytising the *shaykhs*, but securing their blessing for his mission<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup>Ibn al-'Arabi, quoted in Affifi 1939:93

<sup>31</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 6/7/1998

<sup>32</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>33</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im, 10/11/1997

## The shrine and the club

In the late 1960's, Taha wrote that

[The spiritual] heights used to be the habitat of the chosen few. The rank and file teemed at the bottom of the ladder, trying to work their way up ... This state of affairs will not be allowed to continue. Our present civilisation of collectivism and impersonal bigness is giving way to the age of small things - the individual, the man-in-the-street. Every individual is, authentically, an end in himself. He is not a means to any other end. He - even if he were an imbecile - is a "God" in the making, and must be given the full opportunity to develop as such<sup>34</sup>.

Abdullahi An-Na'im says that Taha's conversations at the shrines helped him conclude that the distinction between the *'awwam* and *khawass* should end, and that the secret knowledge of self-realisation had to be shared by an ever-growing circle of people<sup>35</sup>.

Taha wanted to transfer the secret knowledge, hidden in the *khalwa* experiences of Sudanese saints, to the people of modern Sudan. He went from the shrine to the club, providing a continuity between the beloved old ways of society and the inescapable new ones. In the clubs, he tried to persuade people of the need to free society, and Islam, from fear. He seldom mentioned his wilder Sufi ideas in these places, although he was already making claims about the new Islam. A lecture in Wad Medani, for example, in the late 1950's, took the title "Islamic *shari'a* is not eternal"<sup>36</sup>.

Taha believed that his controversial new *shari'a* needed to be incarnated in an authentic individual who would bring authenticity to the world, just as the fiery psychological experiences of Sudan's founding Sufis had brought healing knowledge to small communities. Was he to be that incarnation? Taha hoped so, but he thought that he needed to convince people of the need to rework *shari'a* before he could move them on to more esoteric knowledge. But legal reform was not Taha's dearest wish. Although he was a middle-aged man, he was still looking for the magic ring that would grant every desire (see page 78). Like many religious idealists, he thought he could find it by desiring perfectly. He accepted that perfection was far off, but his spiritual ambition was enormous:

He believed that he, Mahmoud, would be that Perfection which humanity is yearning for!!!!? And that he is actually 'God in the making'. It would only be one step before that final quantum leap!? He had actually fixed the locality where that fantastic transformation would take place<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup>Letter to John Voll (in English) in Taha, *as'ila wa ajwiba* 2, 1971:7

<sup>35</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im, 10/11/1997

<sup>36</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf 13/6/1997

<sup>37</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander 10/9/1997. Girgis Iskander does not believe that Taha claimed any sort of divine status in his conversations, only that he [and possibly others] would gain that status. Letter, 14/2/1998

## Taha the teacher

Taha believed that he, and everyone, was a God in the making. His newspaper articles and lectures tried to bring this belief to the people around him, but these methods effectively restricted his message to a chosen few - "chosen" by their presence in Sudan's modern sector. Its methods of social organisation were new, diverse and responsive to change. However, for Taha, individual self-realisation was for everyone. That was the purpose of the social and educational changes envisaged in his constitution for Sudan. Although his reforms may have been influenced by urban Muslim prejudices like those of the professor from Cairo (see page 124), they were intended to use Islam to liberate the individual, not to twist peripheral social groups into the logic of the state.

Taha's desire to impose literate pedagogies on non-literate societies was based on his belief in the transformative power of education, an education that would turn the *'awwam* all into *khawass*, or make them all Congolese generals, as Girgis Iskander would put it. Changing each individual heart was a long teaching endeavour. In the 1950's, Taha's views on the nature of social change led to an amicable parting from one of the Republican party's early members, Muhammad al-Mahdi al-Majdhub. He was a poet with a wide readership from a Sufi family based at al-Damer, one of the most prolific groups of Sudanese Sufi writers in Sudan<sup>38</sup>. When Taha emerged from the *khalwa*, he felt that the way to achieve change in Sudan was to go through this protracted period of education, but Muhammad al-Mahdi al-Majdhub said that this was too slow to be a solution. Taha responded that it was the only way, and any short-cut would turn out to be longer<sup>39</sup>.

Taha turned decisively from political to educational activism. In 1958, Sudan's only teacher training institute recognised this, asking him to write proposals for a new curriculum (a concern of the Republicans' 1946 work, *al-sifr al-awwal*). Taha proposed that schools should train people for work and in virtue. Exemplary teachers were needed, he said, not a course in religious studies. Rather, students should read the life stories of great men and women, both Muslim and non-Muslim:

By focusing on the higher qualities of the great characters, Muslims and non-Muslims, we are going to inculcate in the minds of the pupils the glorified human experience<sup>40</sup>.

Having chosen to walk a long road, Taha gave his time to people around him, inviting them in to his beliefs. However, he never demanded that people accept what he taught, and no-one was rejected for rejecting his ideas: they could be committed Republicans or they could be

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<sup>38</sup>Hofheinz, in O'Fahey ed, 1994:243

<sup>39</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 18/8/1998

<sup>40</sup>Eltayeb 1995:210

"friends". He was increasingly based in Kosti, but he maintained his office in Khartoum. About 20 people would attend his gatherings at his office there, and when the party met in Wad Medani, they could all fit into a small room<sup>41</sup>.

## Conclusion

It is hard to "place" Taha in the politics and culture of this period. This chapter has drawn parallels between him and the Sudanese political, Sufi and commercial elites, Communists and even a short-tempered Egyptian professor. Although this might suggest that Taha was assenting to many of the values of Sudan's rulers in his own contrary way, there are other parallels to be drawn too - he still sympathised with workers' rights, and he could make and keep friends from poor classes, even if they sometimes took advantage. If they were interested they could join his inner circle of comrades, - like 'Abd al-Latif 'Umar, the water-seller whose life was changed when he met Taha. Taha is difficult to place because he mixed widely and thought promiscuously - in some respects, this makes him a good biographical subject, because he was beginning to touch an ever-wider circle of African and Arab themes and concerns. His vantage point, both spiritually and economically, was warm and comfortable, but he was reflecting hard about how he could bring this warm comfort to everyone.

In his *khalwa*, this kind of reflection had made him shabby and incomprehensible. Now, he was attractive again - people wanted to be part of his life, and they hurried round for meals and chat. This attraction was to become his chief political weapon. His experience in the constitutional convention suggests that he could not handle the strictures of government work, that he was an oppositionist at heart. But he was a tolerant man, and his organisation tried to avoid the exclusivity of the *tarigas* - people could join, or they could be friends, or they could leave and still be friends. Taha threw away the kind of party disciplines that most groups use to maintain coherence and order - instead, he learnt to offer himself to those around him, drawing them in to his generosity, hospitality and imagination.

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<sup>41</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi, 3/12/1997

# Chapter 10

## Battle lines

In 1958, Sudan's squabbling parliamentary parties handed over the state to a general named Ibrahim Abboud. Abboud coped with Sudan's fluctuating economic fortunes, and his military regime was able to turn the ethnic and religious prejudices of the elite into decisive action. Taha initially welcomed the change, but for him military rule was the beginning of a confrontation with Sudan's Muslim establishment.

## Abboud

### Sudan's Muslim establishment

Taha's new ideas about Islam had not yet brought serious conflict with Sudan's diverse Muslim establishment. He had published attacks on the political power of the patricians, but managed to keep up good relations with 'Ali al-Mirghani throughout his life. There had been some scuffles during his visits to Sufi centres, but he had friends amongst the Sufis too. As well as the two large sects and the smaller *tarigas*, Sudan still had the colonialists' network of *shari'a* courts under a grand *qadi*, and a *shari'a* institute with branches around Sudan which taught Islamic studies in the traditions of the metropolitan Middle East, *al-ma'had al-'ilmi*, (the religious institute, later to become Omdurman Islamic University). These courts still played an important role in legitimating the state, but their jurisdiction remained restricted to family law. Sudan's legislature dealt with all other matters. In spite of this restricted influence, Taha had already begun to propagandise against *shari'a* legists in his 1946 pamphlet on the *mufti* (see page 84). The legists were a driving force behind the call for the incorporation of *shari'a* rules into Sudanese law.

The Turkiya brought the legists to Sudan, the Mahdi expelled them, and the British rehabilitated them. British and Turkiya policy explicitly aimed at fostering authoritarian, Middle Eastern forms of Islam. Taha, and others, criticised legists for trying to revive anachronistic rules in modern Sudan, but in some respects, *shari'a* legists were the wave of the future, representing the sophistication of colonial cultural policy. Sudanese Muslim leaders, like the Mahdi, denounced this policy as inauthentic and self-serving, but for aspiring

educated young men it had the glamour of power and the promise of textual rigour, more attractive than the spiritual decay they perceived in Sudan's squabbling nineteenth century religious institutions<sup>1</sup>.

## Theoretical religion

Direct confrontation between Taha and *shari'a* legists began in the late 1950s and did not finish until his death. In 1958, Taha got to know some of the students of the religious institute, and his ideas began to penetrate Sudan's small legist circle. One student, Ibrahim Yusuf, was from a Sufi family based near Wad Medani. He was a religious young man, and in his village felt the attracting power of textual metropolitan Islam, the "theoretical religion" that was lacking from his religious home<sup>2</sup>. He was disappointed:

At that time it was the early fifties, the nationalist movement was on, speaking of freedom, socialism, women's rights. That wasn't part of our studies - our aspirations as citizens and as people. What was useful to me as a young man wasn't in the books. They were all about the past. We lost our hope in *fiqh* [*shari'a* jurisprudence]. And we were in a difficult position, because we thought that *shari'a* jurisprudence equalled religion. We might have left religion altogether were it not for one thing in our favour. We found al-Ghazali. [His book,] "The Revivification of the Religious Sciences". He was a legist and became a Sufi ... He found that *fiqh* is not religion.<sup>3</sup>

Al-Ghazali rescued Ibrahim Yusuf's faith in Islam, but he did not answer his questions about contemporary Sudanese society. He was looking around for an answer when he walked into Taha's office with a couple of student friends.

We went and greeted him. It was a warm greeting. He said, "Are you Republicans or friends?". We said, "We are Ghazalians". He said, "Ghazali stands over me as teacher".<sup>4</sup>

Taha invited them to his home for an evening meal. As the sun went down, they took the chairs out to the courtyard to sit in the evening breeze. Taha explained everything, straight from the Qur'an and the *sunna*. The teachers at the religious institute had told them that Taha was not an *'alim* [a recognised teacher, or *shari'a* legist]. But, says Ibrahim Yusuf, Taha knew the books and had the answers, and he and his friends defied their teachers to become Republicans. Ibrahim Yusuf and Muhammad al-Khayr al-Mihaysi, another Republican, were both studying the university level course at the institute, where teachers debated with students, rather than using the rote-learning of the *khalwa*. Taha's views started to crop up in the religious institute's classrooms. His Islam got rid of many *shari'a* laws, including the

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<sup>1</sup>See Voll in Warburg and Kupferschmidt ed, 1983:133

<sup>2</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf, 13/6/1997

<sup>3</sup>ibid

<sup>4</sup>ibid



traditional *shari'a* discriminations against women, and Ibrahim Yusuf defended women's rights to his teachers<sup>5</sup>.

## Becoming an infidel

The institute did not respond to the students' critique of *shari'a*. Instead, in January 1960, they launched an attack on Taha's prayer life. Taha believed that his spiritual station of *wusul* exempted him from the five daily canonical prayers of Islam - his followers were still required to pray as Muslims. Girgis Iskander, a Christian, had told him that he was good enough to be president of Sudan, if only he would stick to the rules of prayer, but Taha said he had to be true to himself<sup>6</sup>. Taha's antinomianism aligned him with past Sufis. In 'Abd al-Sadig's day, the Sufi mainstream could cheerfully challenge "foreign" *shari'a* tradition (see page 26). In Taha's day, Sudanese Muslims ceded some authority to the colonially sponsored legist class, which was established specifically to delegitimise Sudan's old-time religion. *Shari'a* legists now had the power to label Taha a heretic, and they did.

According to *al-Ra'y al-'Amm* newspaper, Ibrahim Yusuf and his friends declared that Taha was above the common obligations of Islam, and was infallible<sup>7</sup>. One student, Muhammad al-Khayr al-Mihaysi reportedly said "Mahmud Muhammad Taha, if he prayed I wouldn't follow him"<sup>8</sup>. The students were expelled. Taha was sorry to have brought their educations to an end, and challenged the institute staff to a debate which would reinstate them if he won. He was refused. Instead, the institute and its supporters outside - former students who had jobs as *shari'a* judges and mosque preachers - began a campaign of sermons and petitions against him. They said he was an infidel, and could be killed with impunity<sup>9</sup>. Abboud's security forces promptly clamped down on Taha's activities, and he was no longer able to speak in public.

## Clampdown

Taha had thought that Abboud would save Sudan from the incoherent sectarian coalition that had brought it to independence. In the event, he was not the only one to feel it clamp down. Abboud's dictatorship maintained the connections between wealth, power and the Arab-Muslim elite that had been nurtured by the British.

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<sup>5</sup>Women have secondary rights in marriage, divorce, child custody, legal testimony and inheritance. *Shari'a* can also be taken to exclude women from production and formal authority over adult males.

<sup>6</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander, 4/10/1997

<sup>7</sup>*Al-Ra'y al-'Amm* 22/1/1960, quoted in Da'ud 1974:75

<sup>8</sup>Da'ud 1974:77.

<sup>9</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf 13/6/1997

Post-independence regimes faced challenges to the colonialist legacies they inherited, such as the Communists' criticism of Native Administration (see above, page 125). Other colonialist legacies, however, were not challenged, and became part of the assumptions underlying the post-colonial state. The British used ethnic categories to analyse Sudan, and came up with a patchwork of tribes that were variously warlike, indolent, mercantile or whatever. The warlike tribe of the north was the Shaygiya, based on the bend of the Nile north of Khartoum. The Shaygiya consequently dominated the higher ranks of the army: Abboud and most of his staff were from this group. Most Shaygis followed the Khatmiya *tariga*, and the Abboud regime had close links with 'Ali al-Mirghani and his supporters. The economic fortunes of the Khatmiya elite were tied in with Mediterranean markets, and the period saw closer ties with Egypt. The regime made some progress in addressing economic problems, liberalising cotton prices and modestly improving infrastructure. After a few years of stability, the trade balance fell again<sup>10</sup>.

Both patricians welcomed Abboud, who did little to harm their interests. 'Ali al-Mirghani remained loyal, but when a Mahdist general was supplanted by two Khatmiya brigadiers in 1959, the Mahdists distanced themselves from the regime. However, leadership problems obstructed Mahdist opposition. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi died in 1959, and his son Siddig died two years later, whereupon Siddig's brother, al-Hadi, became leader of the Ansar, the sect behind the party. Siddig's son Sadig was now an Oxford graduate in his 20s, tried to challenge his uncle for the political leadership of the Umma, starting a feud which ran until al-Hadi's death. Neither of the patrician parties posed an immediate threat to the regime, and opposition came from a different source - the regional and Communist movements. The latter led some vocal campaigns against military rule, and managed to co-opt and then ditch the Umma party. In 1963, a small group of Communists began to move towards armed struggle. The movement was short-lived - armed struggle was the preserve of regional groups in the hinterlands of Sudan, and not of the urban intellectuals.

## Battle lines in the south

Military command of the state allowed the northern elite to impose more decisively its view of the country. But the Torit mutineers had not gone away. They did not turn into a rebel army overnight, but the realisation spread across the South that independence for Sudan would not promote southern interests. Rural areas of the south still had "bandits" - that is, the former soldiers and tribal groups who still resisted the new northerner DCs<sup>11</sup>. They did not become an

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<sup>10</sup>Osman and Suleiman in Robson and Lury ed 1969:444

<sup>11</sup>See Simonse 1992:302ff for accounts of relationships between traditional leaderships and northern bureaucrats.

organised force until the early 1960s when Abboud's military regime followed a policy of assimilating the south to Arabised Muslim Sudan, which began in tactlessness and ended in brutality. Sunday and Christmas holidays were abolished; Christian missionaries (who provided most of the social services of the region) were expelled; mosques and branches of the religious institute were set up, and government posts were filled by northerners. *Al-Ra'y al-'Amm* denounced Equatorial Christianity as a religion of "gross immorality"<sup>12</sup>. Educated southerners began to organise resistance in the bush and in Congo and Uganda. In 1963, localised guerrilla groups began to attack the government, gradually forming themselves into a series of movements called Anyanya. The army responded with assassinations, massacres, and burnings of villages. The civil war eventually brought down the regime (see chapter 11).

## Arab-Muslim

Sudan's complex ethnic conflict had been manufactured by state-paradigms imposed by colonialists and adopted by the elite. Taha had already begun to criticise the idea of an Arab-Muslim state, and in the 1950's he turned away from the idea that Arab ethnicity or culture bestowed privilege. The party had not been very active politically - its paper folded in 1954, and it now produced occasional topical pamphlets. But the question of ethnicity was often a theme. Taha disliked Arab nationalism, and began to characterise it as racist<sup>13</sup>. He denounced the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser for using Arab nationalism against the western world, and therefore in favour of international communism. Although Taha kept up relations with Sudanese Communists, the Republicans regarded the Soviets with greater alarm than the God-fearing west<sup>14</sup>. Taha believed that Arab nationalism was not just a tool of Soviet expansion, but a racist idea. Arabs should take pride in Islam, not their ethnicity

Taha confronted the notion of Arab superiority in religious language. He did not attack the social construction of racism in Sudan, where culture, religion, language and skin colour were hierarchically ranked. Nineteenth century travellers described local colour distinctions: "blues" had the darkest skin while "yellows" had the lightest<sup>15</sup>. The Funj were a dark skinned elite, but by the colonial period, the Mediterranean premium on fairer skins is clear from an unhappily accurate measure - the price of female slaves, which depended on age, beauty and colour. Muslim slave-owners paid high prices for lighter skins<sup>16</sup>. In Turkiya Sudan fair skinned

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<sup>12</sup>Report of an interview between Abboud and bishop Allison, 24/8/1960, Allison papers SAD803/11/2

<sup>13</sup>RB *ma'alim* 1, 1976:5

<sup>14</sup>Text of a letter to Nasser on the revolution in Iraq, 1958, in RB *ma'alim* 2 1976:27

<sup>15</sup>Spaulding 1973

<sup>16</sup>Toledano 1982:62f on nineteenth century Istanbul and Jeddah prices; Austen, in Savage, ed, 1982:216f, on seventeenth and eighteenth century Cairo prices.

women cost 20-70% more than their dark-skinned sisters<sup>17</sup>. Lighter skin colours were still prestigious, but colour prejudice was not as significant as prejudice against the culture and religion of non-Arabised groups, and the policy of ignoring the economic development of non-Arabised regions. Taha defended the economic rights of the south in his first works. In the 1960s, he and the Christians and followers of Noble Spiritual Beliefs in the south were targets of the Muslim establishment. Taha's Sufism and his attachment to Jesus symbolism made him sympathetic to followers of other religions. By the late 1970s, Republicans were campaigning extensively for non-Muslim rights.

From his religious standpoint, Taha advanced the claim that Sudanese Arabism was racist. The Arabic word *'unsuriya*, racism, is seldom used to describe the belief that Arab language, culture and genes are better than the others on offer in Sudan. Indeed, Sudan's educated elite preferred to use the word to denigrate groups which advanced the interests of disadvantaged ethnic groups, a - even the Republicans used the word in this sense in a 1984 book<sup>18</sup>. Their universalism was uncomfortable with the regional particularism of groups like the Beja Congress, the Black Bloc, and southern parties which began to organise before independence. Those that existed in the Abboud period were repressed, although some began to organise illegally<sup>19</sup>.

### *Al-islam*

Taha's concern with class rather than ethnicity was discussed above (page 124). However, his work dwelt overwhelmingly with religious topics. In the 1950s, he wrote a stream of press articles on the inapplicability of *shari'a* in the twentieth century and the need for a new civilisation built on Islam that would supersede communism and capitalism<sup>20</sup>. But he had not yet set out his beliefs in detail. Abboud's ban, and the strident attacks on him in the mosques forced him to bring out a short book in 1960, *al-islam* ("Islam"). It was Taha's first book-length attempt to explain his new view of *shari'a*. Taha began with an account of the theory of relativity. Its identification of energy and matter is proof of the unity of God and the world, a unity that is written into the heart's desire. Religion attempts to express that desire for unity, in language whose precision increases as humanity develops<sup>21</sup>. Human society refines its laws towards a framework for individual freedom in God. Taha believed that humanity inevitably developed towards goodness, as defined by the Qur'an. The secret of the Qur'an, said Taha,

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<sup>17</sup>Hargey 1981:14

<sup>18</sup>RB, *al-mawqif al-siyasi al-rahin: hawl hawadith al-sa'a*, ["The current political scene: on the events of the hour"] 1984:13

<sup>19</sup>Umar 'Abd al-Rahim Adam in Ali ed, 1995:184

<sup>20</sup>Many of them are reproduced in Taha, *rasa'il wa maqalat* 1973

<sup>21</sup>Taha, *al-islam* 1968:13

was this teleological Islam. The Muslim scriptures had two messages. One fitted a harsh, rudimentary past that Taha constructed out of evolutionary theory; the other fitted a golden future where just society allowed the free development of the individual<sup>22</sup>. Some verses of the Qur'an expressed the first message, and others the second. The first message was nearer to the law of Moses, the second to the law of Jesus – but Islam was better than Christianity, he said, because Islam provided a "social regime and a governmental regime" wherein people could achieve self-realisation<sup>23</sup>. Taha gave a long account of how this regime would work – fixed income differentials to end class distinction and allow inter-marriage; collective (not state) ownership of capital to empower communities against the state; elections for local and national government and for the management of collective capital<sup>24</sup>.

Taha also explained his prayer life – canonical prayer was a temporary injunction, and when someone became *asil* (authentic, the equivalent of *wasil*) he or she could leave off the imitation of Muhammad and learn from God. He quoted Qur'an 4:103 "Prayer is a timed prescription for the believers"<sup>25</sup>. The word "timed", *mawqutan*, is usually taken to mean that worshippers had to perform the prayer promptly<sup>26</sup>. Taha admits this, but goes on to expound the controversial secret meaning: for authentic believers "a time when [this prayer] will end has been fixed"<sup>27</sup>. His book ends with a testimony to his personal view of truth: "This account is true and faithful, for me, and I hope that it is true and faithful for God"<sup>28</sup>.

*Al-islam* is a short work, but it is very hard to summarise – Taha's mind roams from Albert Einstein to the laws of prayer. This eclecticism is part of all of Taha's longer works (to be discussed in detail in chapter 12). They are a useful pointer to his audience too – his mix of physics and *fiqh* would only be taken up by the most educated group of Sudan's society. *Al-islam* set the direction for Taha's ideas, and he called it "the mother-book"<sup>29</sup>.

## A visit to a *shaykh*

Until the late 1950s, Taha spent his free time visiting dead and living *shaykhs* seeking their blessing for his endeavour. However, by 1960, he was much more confident about propounding them. When his student followers were expelled for upholding Republican beliefs, he began to feel that his ideas were being distorted. Opponents fixed their aim on

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<sup>22</sup>ibid:23ff

<sup>23</sup>ibid:35

<sup>24</sup>ibid:36

<sup>25</sup>ibid:45

<sup>26</sup>Jalalayn 1987:95

<sup>27</sup>Taha, *al-islam* 1968:45

<sup>28</sup>ibid:48

<sup>29</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf 13/6/1997

Taha's anomalous prayer life, and the grand *qadi* warned against discussion of his ideas. Taha wanted to explain his beliefs about *shari'a* before entering any discussions about Sufi theosophy. But the attack on his prayer life wrong-footed him, and in his first book on *shari'a's* development - *al-islam* - he was obliged to include an excursus on prayer. Taha was no longer allowed to speak in clubs, and newspapers were quietly told not to publish his views<sup>30</sup>. The party was still small - about 100 members mostly in Wad Medani and Khartoum - and held meetings in private houses. Taha campaigned against his followers' expulsion in the press and also tried to explain himself to opinion formers in Sudan. Influential people were invited to presentations of his beliefs<sup>31</sup>.

One of these meetings was at the home of 'Ali al-Mirghani, in 1962<sup>32</sup>. 'Ali al-Mirghani had met Taha in the 1940s (see page 84) and subsequently tried to spring Taha from jail. Although Republicans attacked his involvement in the patrician system, they respected his Sufi piety, contrasting it with the feverish politicking and economic exploitation of the Mahdi family. Al-Mirghani's Khatmiya *tariga* had its power base along the Nile valley, and supported parties that represented the interests of its commercial elite, while the Mahdist Umma was more involved in the west and with the big-time farmers. Taha and his followers were from the Nile valley, and this may have enhanced their respect for the ascetic power-broker. Al-Mirghani invited them to tea, but Sadig al-Mahdi, formerly on the fringes of the movement, was now making a bid for power and could not afford to dally with the idealists<sup>33</sup>.

When they arrived, Al-Mirghani asked brightly, "Where's the Shaygi?". He was referring to Amin Siddig, the son of a Khatmiya *faki* who had refused to kiss al-Mirghani's hand at their meeting 17 years earlier (see page 84), and who had the Shaygi *shillukh* on his cheek,<sup>34</sup>. Al-Mirghani sat Taha next to him on his simple bed. Al-Mirghani's followers were taken aback by this presumption, but Taha explained his ideas and left a copy of *al-islam*. 'Ali made no comment on Taha's ideas apart from nodding and saying "good, very good"<sup>35</sup>. He asked Taha one question: "Have you [God's] permission for this?". Taha said he did. Al-Mirghani died a few years later, without ever responding to *al-islam*.

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<sup>30</sup>RB *ma'alim* 2, 1976:12

<sup>31</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf 13/6/1997

<sup>32</sup>Information from Al-Baqir Mukhtar, 18/10/1998

<sup>33</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997

<sup>34</sup>Interviews, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997, and Mahmud Amin Siddig 3/12/1997

<sup>35</sup>Letter, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 17/9/1998



## A bed of roses

After 1955, when Taha was touring Sudan's Muslim shrines, writing to Egyptian leaders, lecturing on *shari'a*, becoming an infidel, dazzling his friends with his talk and charming them with his manners, his family were getting on with life in Rufa'a. Amna Lutfi, with her daughters Sumaya and Asma, along with al-Rabb Bijjud, did not see much of Taha.

Having a saint in your life can be as thorny as a bed of roses. Taha was not often home: he came for funerals, the most inescapable obligation in northern Sudanese society, but not for much else. When Asma saw him, there would be lots of Republicans there. She thought they were his friends, and that they were talking about politics<sup>36</sup>. Taha's absence was not unusual - many marriages in Sudan were lived apart because of the migrations that people underwent. However, some observers decided that Taha's family had become a casualty to his spiritual ambitions. In the mid 1950s, a *shari'a* judge in Rufa'a told Muhammad Lutfi that he would grant Amna a divorce - a difficult thing for a Muslim woman to obtain. Muhammad Lutfi said she did not want one, and Amna rejected the offer with an angry look. This talk came to Taha's attention, and he asked if Amna herself had requested the divorce. She had not - she was, in the words of some Republicans, a partner in his mission<sup>37</sup>. He told Amna that he was away collecting her bridewealth. Amna understood that this bridewealth was mystical knowledge and perfect worship. Taha did not ask his daughters to understand what he was doing, but they eventually became his close collaborators.

## Conclusion

During Sudan's military regime, battle lines were drawn in Sudan and in Taha's life. For Sudan, military rule meant that the ethnic and religious divisions of the country were translated into decisive military action. The civil war that resulted from this decisiveness eventually brought down Abboud's regime, as the next chapter shows. Followers of Christianity and Noble Spiritual Beliefs were the victims of the elite's attempt to assert the Arab-Muslim state.

Asserting the Arab and *shari'a* themes in Sudan also led to an attack on Taha. His literate reworking of antinomian and latitudinarian themes, some of them culled from the Sufi mainstream of pre-modern Sudan, implied a rejection of *shari'a* laws and the state structure that upheld them. Taha's battle was not with the whole Muslim establishment - he had tacit

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<sup>36</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud

<sup>37</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi, 5/12/1997. Other informants date this event to Taha's retreat in Rufa'a, 1948-1951, when he was widely criticised for neglecting his family.

support from senior figures - but he had an abiding antipathy for the *shari'a* legist class. This was amply reciprocated by the mosque-preachers and *shari'a* teachers who campaigned against him. Taha challenged their institutions, but he was also beginning to challenge *shari'a* laws, the building blocks of a hegemonic legal system. His opponents did not discuss this challenge, but instead directed their fire at his ideas about prayer. This tactic turned the debate into a struggle between the Sufi and *shari'a* tradition, and it became the standard form of attack against Taha. His strange claims to mystical importance were cast into open battle, and this hampered his attempts to propagate new legislative proposals.

# Part 3

## Romancing Sudan

*Sudan is placed in Africa in the place the heart, and its shape is like a heart<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup>Taha, *al-din wa al tanmiya al ijtima'iya* 1974:19

# Chapter 11

## Glorious October

Part 3 deals with the period from 1964 to 1983. Taha's optimistic philosophy of time will be discussed in the next chapter. Taha lived this optimism in his daily life too - he watched the changes in Sudan's government and waited for his fantastic moment of perfection. In October 1964, he watched a revolution in Sudan and thought it was glorious.

## The October revolution

### Professional Front

In 1964, Abboud's regime was seriously weakened by the southern rebels and was no longer delivering economic stability. Urban radicals in the north, who had been sidelined in the independence struggle, were now able to use their tactics of urban mobilisation against a flailing military regime. In October, their demonstrations brought down Abboud. Now it was the patricians' turn to be sidelined. The unelected cabinet of radicals and intellectuals who took control in 1964 proposed land reform and the ending of Native Administration, measures which would have seriously affected the rural power structures of patrician parties. In 1965, the Mahdist Ansar were sent out to demonstrate for parliamentary elections, which they knew would be won by the leaders of Old Sudan and not by the Professional Front, the Communist-dominated cabinet. In the event, the radical parties only won seats in constituencies reserved for graduates. Groups representing marginalised areas - the Beja Congress and the Nuba Mountains Union - fared better than the intellectual movements. It was the first time that parties representing non-Arabised areas of northern Sudan had parliamentary representation.

### Out with the old

Khartoum crowds chanted: *la za'ama lil-gudama'* (no leadership for the old)<sup>1</sup>. The revolution began with riots at Khartoum university - the former Gordon College. Even in Taha's day, Gordon College had been a centre of political agitation. In the run-up to independence, radical parties and Egyptian agents, seeking a foothold in the Sudanese political scene, paid court to youth there. In the 1950s, educational institutions were strongholds for small radical parties.

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Khalid 1990:199

After independence, Communists and Muslim Brothers traded control of the student union at Khartoum university. After October, the patrician dominated parties realised the value of the trade, and established their first youth organisations in the colleges<sup>2</sup>.

Colonialists feared their new educational institutions would foster political agitation, and they did. Graduates pressed the British to expand educational provision, which forced the pace of the nationalist movement. Student numbers grew enormously after independence: in 1956, the total number of students from primary to university level was 232,539; in 1964, it was over 542,000. Those at higher secondary level and above were most likely to be politically active - in 1964, there were almost 30,000 of them, almost half in Khartoum and Gezira<sup>3</sup>. In Taha's day, there were less than 400.

The new generation of students was radicalised in the colleges and began to compete with the older educated elite - which had been incorporated into Sudan's sectarian power structure - for control of the state. Habermas believes that universities in traditional societies are agents of social change. They give students a "consciousness of modernity", taking them out of the family and into a campus which initiates them "into the universalistic roles of a society in the process of modernisation, [they] can connect the typical developmental experiences of adolescence with changes in social structure"<sup>4</sup>. October, seen as a victory of unarmed intellectuals against a military state, made that connection for students.

## How was it for Taha?

Taha was in El Obeid in October. The Republicans, who now identified themselves as educators, not agitators, played no part in the revolution<sup>5</sup>. But like Habermas's students, Taha saw deep connections between personal, national and global development. He believed that October's model of non-violent change was the first stage of a revolution. In a 1972 work, *al-thawra al-thaqafiya* ["Cultural revolution"], he said that although October had been frustrated by the patrician parties, the revolution's "second stage" had yet to come. It would empower people with knowledge and make effectual changes<sup>6</sup>.

Taha's generous and enthusiastic imagination offered that sense of educational empowerment to young intellectuals. He, in turn, was looking for his young teaching vanguard to spread his secret knowledge. In 1965 or 1966 he moved back to Omdurman, to a house by the river.

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<sup>2</sup>El Tayeb 1971:50

<sup>3</sup>Ministry of Culture and Information 1974:48ff

<sup>4</sup>Habermas 1971:14

<sup>5</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf 13/6/1997

<sup>6</sup>Taha, *al-thawra al-thaqafiya*, 1972:8

Amna Lutfi and the children had stayed in Rufa'a for the past decade. Sumaya, Amna and al-Rabb Biyjud moved back to the capital, to be together - Asma was at school in Shendi. Taha rented a house in Bayt al-Mal, just a few yards from the river, where the children could play down by the water<sup>7</sup>. One of his brother's children had become an architect. He built Taha a house in Sawra, a residential area in Omdurman, in gratitude for Taha's support for his family<sup>8</sup>.

Taha gave away his Land Rover, and concentrated on his message. He held meetings in his office in the 'Arabi market, with the words "Republican Party" over the door. Students came along to meet Taha. At 9pm, he caught the Omdurman bus, but the students, whose university accommodation was nearby, would hang around the office and talk. They could get a *ful* sandwich, city fast-food from a street stall, and wander back to campus<sup>9</sup>.

### Taha goes full time

Taha was free to lecture, now that Abboud's security men had stopped watching, and in the late 1960s, the party opened a centre in Morada, Omdurman. Taha produced four major books between 1966 and 1968. The movement was small enough for him to find time to write, and three full time party workers helped produce the books<sup>10</sup>. Some were short pamphlets, but several ran to 200 pages. These books appeared in shops, but most were sold by the party's assiduous colporteurs who were becoming a feature of the capital's streets and campuses. The income from booksales allowed Taha to support his family.

Taha's books are examined in chapter 12 - they were the fruits of his *khalwa* reflections and his conversations with the dead saints. Now he believed he had their blessing to publish their elite knowledge and bring the techniques of Sufi self-realisation to the masses. In 1965 the party addressed a statement "to the followers of all *tarigas* and all sects" which announced that the *tarigas*, which had served a noble purpose, must now unite in the *tariq* (way) of Muhammad, and follow his actions perfectly by devoting themselves to the study of the Qur'an and al-Bukhari's *hadith*, as Taha had done in jail<sup>11</sup>.

Taha's decision to begin his mission had been pre-empted by the campaign against his ideas at the religious institute. That campaign attacked his personal prayer life, and not his ideas about *shari'a* (see page 135). Taha felt that he could not explain his spirituality without first

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<sup>7</sup>Interview, Mona Zanoon Gubara 12/7/1998

<sup>8</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud 28/11/1997

<sup>9</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997

<sup>10</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997

<sup>11</sup>Taha, *tariq muhammad*, nd:28f



explaining his reworked *shari'a*, but he was forced to come up with *risalat al-salat* ("On prayer") in 1966, before producing his main work on *shari'a - al-risala al-thania min al-islam* ("The Second Message of Islam") - in 1967. In these works, Taha argues for an Islamic connection between personal and global development. People develop towards a perfect religion; although their first efforts are crude, they are refined by human development. Modern lessons supersede and abrogate ancient ones, and the *shari'a* and Sufi traditions give way to personal and global worship.

## The prophet and the constitution

The 1965 elections brought to power the Umma party, divided between Sadig al-Mahdi and his uncle al-Hadi. The Muslim Brothers fought the election under the banner of the Islamic Charter Front (ICF). They won two seats in the new parliament, and the Communists won 11. The ICF had two main strategies: first, to subvert their Communist rivals; and secondly, to galvanise the traditional parties into adopting an Islamic constitution. The traditional parties were acutely aware of how Communists had outflanked them in October, and gratefully supported the ICF campaign against the leftists. Usefully, a hot-headed young Syrian Communist publicly defamed the prophet in November 1965, and the party was eventually banned, in defiance of the constitution. The ICF were astonished by the success of their anti-Communist campaign, and began to press for an Islamic constitution. They and their fellow-travellers in the patrician parties and the *shari'a* court system set up a committee to include *shari'a* in Sudan's constitution, drafted by a British judge in 1951.

Al-Hadi al-Mahdi, the leader of the Mahdist Ansar sect, energetically supported the Islamic constitution, threatening to impose it by force<sup>12</sup>. Other senior members of the patrician parties were more equivocal, as a British ambassador recorded in 1966. He met 'Abd al-Salaam, the son of the Mahdi's successor Abdullahi al-Ta'ayshi; Abdalla Khalil a former Umma prime minister; Muhammad Abu Rannat, Taha's 1946 judge, now a retired chief justice linked to the Khatmiya; and 'Abd al-Rahman Abdun, an Umma member of the collective presidency. The last two told him:

it was wrong to talk about an Islamic constitution. The Sudan was not an Islamic country because of the two million non-Moslems in the South. If there was no way of avoiding some reference to Islam the right solution might be to have a paragraph in the constitution saying that it should be drawn up in the spirit of Islam but they both obviously hoped that even this could be avoided<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup>RB, *waqa'i' qadiyat bursudan* 1, 1975:39

<sup>13</sup>Letter to British foreign ministry from ambassador R W D Fowler, PRO/FO371/190421

However, neither *shari'a* nor western civil law applied to most Sudanese: as late as 1968, colonially constructed customary law served 80% of the people<sup>14</sup>. Powerful parties controlled rural patrimonies by working the colonial Native Administration system, but their reliance on Islamic forms of legitimacy made it necessary for them to support the ICF campaign. In private, they saw no need for an Islamic constitution, but they told the British ambassador that they could not imagine a Sudan without Native Administration<sup>15</sup>. Some Umma modernisers were committed to ending Native Administration, but they caved in to the opposition of tribal leaders in 1969<sup>16</sup>. In contrast, Sudanese leftists, and some impatient rural people demanded that the despotic powers of tribal leaders be removed<sup>17</sup>. Only then could they begin the process of distributing wealth and power away from the ethnic lines that had been fortified by the colonialists. The first Muslim Brotherhood organisation had toyed with socialist slogans in the 1940s, and the ICF made half-hearted attempts to organise labour support, but their successes came in working the patrician system. They and their fellow-travellers denounced socialism as an attempt to "stir up class war"<sup>18</sup>.

Taha the oppositionist aligned himself with radical secularists, and he gained prominence as a result. When the *shari'a* courts issued a statement telling the hapless Syrian Communist, now in an asylum, that defamers of the prophet had three days to repent or die, Taha wrote a blistering attack on their "malice" in *al-Maydan*, the Communist newspaper<sup>19</sup>. "Anyone who closes the door of [God's] mercy in the name of religion has no right to talk of religion"<sup>20</sup>. According to the southern politician Bona Malwal, Taha joined him on a secret committee formed to combat the anti-Communist campaign<sup>21</sup>. (However, Fatma Ibrahim, a Communist member of parliament [MP] at the time recalls little Republican involvement in the committee<sup>22</sup>). The call for free expression dominated Republican lectures, newspaper articles and leaflets. Sadig feels that the campaign "helped greatly in publicizing the Republican and Communist thoughts. It is during this period that the Republican party started to influence a large number of university students and graduates"<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup>Akolawin in Hasan ed, 1971:295

<sup>15</sup>Letter to British foreign ministry from ambassador R W D Fowler, PRO/FO371/190421

<sup>16</sup>Khalid 1990:237

<sup>17</sup>Bekheit in Hasan ed, 1971:264

<sup>18</sup>Statement of the National Council for the Islamic Constitution in 1968, quoted in Taha, *al-dastur al-islami, na'm wa la* 1968:21

<sup>19</sup>Da'ud, 1974:3

<sup>20</sup>*al-Maydan* 15/11/1965, quoted in Da'ud, 1974:13-14

<sup>21</sup>Interview, Bona Malwal 19/8/1997.

<sup>22</sup>Interview, Fatma Ibrahim 21/8/1997

<sup>23</sup>Sadig 1988:68

Communists tried to widen their bases in marginalised rural areas, but they only had real success at the centre of power. They set up links with radical army officers who modelled themselves on the "Free Officers" of the 1952 Egyptian revolution<sup>24</sup>. This alliance eventually brought them briefly into government. The Muslim Brothers had been urged to do the same by their Egyptian colleagues in the 1950s, and had a peripheral role in minor coup attempts of the 1950s and 1960s<sup>25</sup>.

## Centre and regions

Many political histories of the period - including Republican ones - concentrate on the dogfight between 13 ICF and Communist parliamentarians. In hindsight, the most significant change in the 1965 elections was the 17 MPs from the Nuba Union and Beja Congress. These groups continued the radical politics of ethnicity, pioneered by the Black Bloc in the 1940s. Sadig al-Mahdi regarded them as a danger equal to Communism - they represented the first attempt by marginalised non-Arabised groups to challenge the constitutional order, at a time when the war in the south was in full swing<sup>26</sup>. In the 1960s they were joined by non-parliamentary groups from Darfur<sup>27</sup>. Their views were uncompromising:

O people of Kordofan, the Nubia Mountains, the Darfur, the Suni Organization appeals to you to unite against the Norther bloodsucking imperialism which has sucked your blood in the name of religion, the religion which has absolved them ... We in the Free Suni Organization implore and caution you against the northern imperialists who have killed your brothers in the south ... murdering nearly two million - African Suni Organization [sic].<sup>28</sup>

Darfur radicals successfully scared the local northern elite, but the Umma party, which dominated the political scene in western Sudan, eventually co-opted Darfur's activists<sup>29</sup>. In the south, it was a different story. The Anyanya's war there had helped topple Abboud. In 1965 the October revolutionaries in Khartoum tried to conciliate southerners with a round-table conference that promised political autonomy and economic development - originally proposed by the Communists in 1954. The conference was one of the few times that northern and southern leaders met on equal terms, and northerners were shocked by the extent of southern bitterness towards the north<sup>30</sup>. However, the October radicals were swept away by the patrician parties in the elections that year, and those parties decided to deal with the south through military confrontation and Islamisation. The war spread.

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<sup>24</sup>Khalid 1990:246

<sup>25</sup>El-Affendi 1991:60ff

<sup>26</sup>Radio address by Sadig al-Mahdi 17/12/1965, quoted in Warburg 1978:117

<sup>27</sup>Adam in 'Ali ed, 1995:171ff

<sup>28</sup>Text of communiqué in British embassy note on political parties, 6/4/1966. PRO/FO371/190419

<sup>29</sup>Harir in Harir and Tvedt eds, 1994:155ff

<sup>30</sup>See Beshir 1968:96

## War and religion

The African Suni Organization and the southern rebels were wearily familiar with the themes of war, ethnicity and religion, Taha was thinking of these themes too. But Taha's was a shorter conflict - the 1967 six-day war between Israel and her Arab neighbours. He chose this as his topic for a lecture in Kosti. Taha had disavowed Arab nationalism, saying it was a racist idea; and that Gamal Abdel Nasser, its Egyptian leader, was a demagogue and the Soviet doorman in the Middle East. He wrote in 1968 that Islam did not hold favours for particular ethnic groups - it was instead the purpose for everything. The Arabs' enemy was not Israel, but themselves, and they should recognise the Jewish state<sup>31</sup>. On the first day of the war he gave a lecture saying that the Arabs would lose to Israeli technology. Muslim Brothers waited outside, yelling "Mahmud is a Zionist agent", but Taha ignored police advice not to walk past them. The next day, Egyptian forces collapsed and the Republicans hired a taxi to go round Kosti announcing that Taha would speak on the Middle East crisis. He got a full house<sup>32</sup>.

Taha's forceful, capricious intervention on the questions of war and peace, Islam and Arabness in 1960's Sudan did not discuss the south. His book on the Middle Eastern problem, published in 1968, was all about the Arabs, the Jews, the Soviets and the west<sup>33</sup>. Like many urban Sudanese, Taha lived in a different world from that of the African Suni Organisation. When he heard God speaking, God spoke about the Arab catastrophe, not the southern massacres<sup>34</sup>. His audience listened to the same God, and wanted to hear about war in Sinai.

## *Asala*

Taha had wandered Sudan for guidance, but now he took to the road with a handful of followers to spread the message whose time had come. He had a striking command of classical Arabic, but he used plenty of Sudanese idioms in his speeches: he wanted comprehension not admiration. He was an attractive speaker who could fill a cinema with people<sup>35</sup>. In the late 1960's, Republican party membership was around 300, and they began to organise outside Khartoum<sup>36</sup>. Taha, formerly the sole spokesperson of the movement, began to invite others to contribute to his lectures and debates. Most contributors were from the generation which joined in the 1950's, who were eventually given leadership positions. Around 1966, the party

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<sup>31</sup>Taha, *mushkilat al-sharq al-awsat* 1968:5ff

<sup>32</sup>Interview, Muhammad Ali Malik, 6/12/1997

<sup>33</sup>Taha, *mushkilat* 1968

<sup>34</sup>*ibid*:5ff

<sup>35</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf 13/6/1997

<sup>36</sup>Figure based on party joining dates listed in a 1988 survey - 35.8% of Republicans questioned said they had joined in this period. Sadig 1988:21

faced a strange challenge from one of its most loyal members<sup>37</sup>. Muhammad al-Khayr Mihaysi was the student expelled from the religious institute for his belief in Taha's authentic prayer life (*asala*, see page 128). Mihaysi declared that he too had found *asala*, an immediate and authentic relation with God.

The movement could not accept the direction of two separate *asils*. Al-Mihaysi, who had sacrificed much for Taha's beliefs, was told that an *asil* must work alone, and generate his own following. So he was dissociated from the movement that meant so much to him<sup>38</sup>. Al-Mihaysi's departure underlined the importance of Taha's spiritual claims to the party's structure. Taha believed that *asala* was for all people, that it was only a stage on the way to the transformative perfection he sought for himself. But Republicans felt that the movement's spiritual hierarchy could not be challenged if the movement was to survive.

## An apostasy trial

Taha's other-worldliness did not prevent him from entering into Khartoum's political fray. The Muslim Brothers and their fellow-travellers did not rule the country, but they dominated political discourse with their committee for an Islamic constitution and their anti-Communist attacks. Taha's tactical support for the Communists won him new supporters in Khartoum university: his attack on the proposed Islamic constitution was to do the same. In 1968, Taha responded to the campaign for an Islamic constitution with a book and lectures entitled *al-dastur al-islami, na'm ... wa la* ("The Islamic constitution: yes ... and no"). He gave prominence to a question raised by Philip Ghaboush, an Episcopalian priest and leader of the Nuba Union, who asked the Muslim Brothers how a non-Muslim could hold high office in a Muslim state. Neither questioner got a straight answer<sup>39</sup>. For Taha, the committee evaded *shari'a* discriminations towards non-Muslims, and could not produce a constitution for a multi-religious country. He asked Sudan's Islamists (*du'a al-islam*) to consider the strange Republican idea that Islam should provide a framework of values for co-operation, rather than a set of laws drawn from the past<sup>40</sup>. Taha's informed but non-conformist attack on the idea of an Islamic constitution made him a good target for another ICF campaign against free speech - this time, it was an apostasy trial.

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<sup>37</sup>Interview, Mona Zanoon Gubara 12/7/1998

<sup>38</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997

<sup>39</sup>Taha, *al-dastur* 1968:3f

<sup>40</sup>*ibid*:42

## The trial

In November 1968, two lecturers from the Islamic institute petitioned a *shari'a* court to declare Taha an apostate, divorce him from his wife, dissolve his party, and sack Republicans from government jobs. Although the *shari'a* courts had declared the Syrian communist an apostate, they had no jurisdiction in apostasy cases, and no judgement in such cases could have any legal force.

But in spite of this legal nullity, all the protagonists in the trial invested it with great significance. Republicans believe that the trial was fixed in advance, and this seems to be borne out in the trial reports which the Islamic institute men themselves produced after the trial. The lecturers published letters of support from Sudan's collective presidency, and contacted the trial judge and the grand *qadi* (the senior judge in the *shari'a* court system, which only had jurisdiction in Muslim family law) to see if they would hear a non-constitutional case<sup>41</sup>.

The trial was a brief affair. Taha's first accuser, Amin Da'ud, was a Gordon College contemporary of Taha's, and author of a book against him. He gave a hostile and sometimes distorted record of Taha's views: that Islam discriminates against women, that believers should share all surplus capital, and not the fixed percentage of the *zakat* alms tax. Taha, he added, believed that prayer was unnecessary, did not fast Ramadan, and like past Sufis, he made the pilgrimage to his own heart, not Mecca<sup>42</sup>. Taha's second accuser, Husayn Zaki, began with a Qur'anic verse on hellfire and unbelief. Zaki quoted Taha's "Second Message of Islam", which says that perfected human beings could "live God's life, know God's knowledge, will God's will ... and be God"<sup>43</sup>. This was blasphemy, said Zaki. Taha also attempted to recast the Muslim doctrine of hell as purgatory:

It is the greatest falsehood to think that the torments of the fire will never end; it makes evil a fundamental principle of Being... When torment is eternal it is the revenge of an envious soul.<sup>44</sup>

This passage of Taha's, said Zaki, accused God of envy. Unforgivably, Taha overturned God's judgement of eternal damnation for unbelievers. His rejection of *jihād* denied "almighty God's lack of love for unbelievers and sinners"<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> *al-Ra'y al-'Amm* 14/11/1968, quoted in RB *mahkamat al-ridda: 'ar al-quda' al-sudani* 1981:8

<sup>42</sup> For example, Ibn Farid (a favourite author of Taha's), quoted in Nicholson 1921:239

<sup>43</sup> Taha, *al-risala al-thania min al-islam* 1968, quoted in Zaki 1985/6:152

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*:152

<sup>45</sup> *ibid*:156



Other Muslim Brothers testified to Taha's bizarre beliefs, including 'Ali Taliballah, the Muslim Brother who had heard Taha claim in Kober prison in 1948 that he was Jesus the son of Mary:

The accused informed him [Taliballah] when they were together in prison in 1948 that he - that is Mahmud - had been made accountable for Islamic *shari'a*, and that all the *shari'a* that had gone before was abrogated, and that anyone who died not believing this died an infidel<sup>46</sup>.

Taliballah was now, like the grand *qadi*, on the council for an Islamic constitution.

After three hours of evidence, the judge retired for 20 minutes to consider his verdict. (This haste led Republicans to conclude that the judgement had been prepared in advance)<sup>47</sup>. He found Taha guilty and gave three days to recant. Taha's views on prayer proved the case, said the judge - Taha was a Sufi rebel against *shari'a*. His judgement rumbled through Ottoman law books.

Ibn 'Abidin said in his chapter on apostasy: "a Muslim should not be judged an infidel if his words can be construed in a good sense". [However] the defendant persists in his beliefs and acts to publicise this doctrine in the name of the Islamic religion, and this action is one of those which the noble *shari'a* declares to be false, such as his belief and declaration that he is relieved of [the duty of] prayer<sup>48</sup>.

This judgement was legally null as it was spoken, because *shari'a* jurisdiction was still restricted to family law. The judges in this secondary jurisdiction were paid less than their civil colleagues and spent most of their lives listening to unhappy families, often from the poorest section of society, who were seeking divorces<sup>49</sup>. Taha and his *effendi* friends did not have much time for their brand of religion - Amin Siddig, one of the party's oldest members, had left the *shari'a* section of Gordon College because of its obsequiousness (see page 58), and Taha had traded accusations with them for several years. Although Taha was influenced by their brand of Ottoman official religion (see below, page 153) he saw it as reactionary and compromised by foreign imperialism, against his progressive Sudanese faith. He refused to attend the trial. Instead, he and his followers stood in the courthouse corridors distributing their books<sup>50</sup>. Amin Siddig, one of the party's oldest members, feared things might get out of hand. He came up from Wad Medani with a revolver and three rifles in case of trouble, but Taha forbade him to use them - it was better to die than be a killer, he said<sup>51</sup>. Taha fired off some words instead: in a pamphlet published that day he attacked the links between *shari'a* judges and the colonial state

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<sup>46</sup>Court report in Da'ud 1974:93

<sup>47</sup>RB, *ma'alim* 2, 1976:24

<sup>48</sup>Text of al-Sadiq's judgement in Da'ud 1974:97. Ibn 'Abidin is a name given to two Ottoman legists of the nineteenth century.

<sup>49</sup>Fluehr-Lobban 1987:70f

<sup>50</sup>RB, *mahkamat* 1981:13

<sup>51</sup>Interview, Mahmud Amin Siddig 3/12/1997

I was the first and the most stubborn opponent of colonialist terrorism in this country ... I did this when the *shari'a* judges were licking the boots of the English"<sup>52</sup>.

The responses of the litigants caught up in the bitterness of broken endogamous marriages to Taha and his eager tractarians are not recorded. But the grand *qadi* 'Abd al-Majid Abu Gusaysa was infuriated by Taha's vitriol. Abu Gusaysa rounded on Taliballah's self-appointed messiah.

Mister Mahmud ... you have claimed you have no father, because you are Jesus the son of Mary. Are you sure ... that Mary the chaste virgin came to Daym Graydab? Or that Gabriel, peace be upon him, descended there?<sup>53</sup>.

## The significance of the trial

In the 1960's, Sudanese urban politics was dominated by arguments between secular and Islamist radicals over the nature of the state and the law. Taha's trial showed his tactical alliance with the secularists, and this publicity brought him new converts. The trial also encouraged the patrician-dominated parties to support the Muslim Brothers' constitution - six days after the trial, president al-Azhari told Abu Gusaysa that he believed the *shari'a* judges should have seniority over the civil judges<sup>54</sup>.

Taha challenged the Muslim establishment's notion that the official book-Islam of the Muslim heartlands could provide the laws for to a peripheral, partially-Islamised, multi-cultural state. Instead of using the Qur'an to generate legislation, Taha wanted to use it to generate constitutional values. Both sides, however, ignored the important legal fact that most Sudanese, subject to customary law, were little affected by changes in either *shari'a* or civil law. Sudan was not a "post-Ottoman" Middle Eastern state trying to reconcile modern western laws with older *shari'a* laws and institutions: it was a "post-colonial" state where *shari'a* was one of a number of modernising, divisive forces.

The Republicans flitted between a secularist rejection of the Islamic constitution and an Islamist acceptance of the importance of religion to state and society. Their concern with legal theory allowed them to ignore the legal facts of Sudan - the multi-cultural state still functioned through a pluralist legal system. When Taha and his followers tried to conceptualise that diversity of law and culture, they were forced to use the Islamic terminology of Ottoman cities - there was no mention of Sudan's Noble Spiritual Beliefs.

Calling these courts "*shari'a* courts" misleads and deceives people [into thinking] that *shari'a* is in force. The correct term for these courts is "confessional courts" [*mahakim milliyya*, an Ottoman term for minority religious jurisdictions]. The secular colonialist

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<sup>52</sup>Ibrahim Yusuf papers

<sup>53</sup>Da'ud 1974:99

<sup>54</sup>RB *waqa'i'* 1 1975:39

government, when it occupied the country, designated courts for each confession of the people of this country, Muslims, Christians and Jews, so that personal law cases could be judged according to their religions. Worse than this, no judgement of what we call a *shari'a* court was ever carried out except by the English district commissioner, because executive authority was in his hands and not in the hands of the "*shari'a* judges".<sup>55</sup>

## Sufis and the *shari'a* tradition

A second significance of Taha's trial was the explicit references it made to pre-modern conflicts between the Sufi and *shari'a* tradition. To some extent, Taha accepted these terms of debate. His insistent appeal to the Qur'an and the faith gave purpose and legitimacy to the polemical, religious and sometimes exasperatingly intellectual life led by men like Zaki and Da'ud. The latter identified themselves with the *shari'a* tradition, with its transcendent God and pragmatic understanding of the political and legal potential of Islam. Taha was not unwilling to represent pre-modern Sufis, and their experiential knowledge of an immanent God.

A Sufi could coherently make Taha's claim that worshippers could "be God", meaning they could cede their personal uniqueness, veiled in flesh, to the extravagant uniqueness of God, in spirit. But legists emphasise the incongruity of God and flesh. Zaki, the hellfire man, responded pugnaciously to Taha's claim:

Lifting the veil between God and his servant will in no circumstances happen in this world. That is what the almighty declares: "It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him, except by revelation, or from behind a veil" [42:51]. The veil will be lifted on the day when Mahmud Muhammad Taha and his people know the truth about themselves, the day when God's promise comes: "We have now removed from thee thy covering, and so thy sight today is piercing" [50:22] ... How many heretics and atheists has God shattered before they have damaged Islam even a little: the heretics' and atheists' words remain in the books, which find no audience amongst Muslims up to today.<sup>56</sup>

The legists needed a textual and historical context to try a thought-crime. They trawled Middle Eastern religious history to find parallels between Taha and Muslim heretics - messiahs, incarnationists and Baha'is<sup>57</sup>. Their parallels were sometimes strained: Taha had access to Baha'i literature from Girgis Iskander. Both Taha and the Baha'is acknowledged the validity of different religions, and the dynamic development of revelation, but Taha's search for mystical union with the divine is not part of Baha'i teaching<sup>58</sup>.

There may be more tangible motives for the awakening of Sufi-legist tensions at the trial. One of the long term aims of Sudanese Muslim Brothers is to supplant the Islamic legitimacy inherited by Sufi holy families whose charismatic power holds the voting allegiance of most of

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<sup>55</sup>RB *mahkamat* 1981:11

<sup>56</sup>Zaki 1985/6:98

<sup>57</sup>Zaki:1985/6:153, Al-Husayni 'Abd al-Majid Hashim in *ibid*:11

<sup>58</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander, 4/9/1997

Sudan in its grip. Replacing that structure of legitimacy with one where urban-educated intellectuals with little rural organisation can hold the loyalty of the masses requires an invocation of the power of the book<sup>59</sup>. The Muslim Brothers needed a tactical monopoly over the interpretation of the book. By this reading, the Taha-problem, then, was not his Sufism, but his fluent use of "their" texts. Taha was a competitor in the tight market for urban intellectualised Islam in Sudan, and he had to be put out of business.

## After the trial

Taha's conviction encouraged people to support his movement. Mansur Khalid, then a journalist, published an attack on supine *shari'a* judges<sup>60</sup>. Newspaper secularists pointed out that the courts had no rights to hear such a case, that free thinkers had a raw deal, and that Taha was a nationalist hero<sup>61</sup>. The publicity brought the movement many converts in the next few years, and Khartoum university became a centre for Republican activity<sup>62</sup>. Taha was in his late fifties, but he could appeal to much younger people, and students could relate his ideas about spiritual development to their own experience in a socially dynamic institution.

Taha gave up his engineering work and devoted himself to the party. Most members were professionals from the northern Nile valley, the developed core of Sudan. Some got jobs in the regions, and the party began to have a presence in Darfur and the east. They would all join together at the end of Ramadan and the feast of sacrifices (*'id al-adha*, also called the great Bairam) for a party congress<sup>63</sup>. His daughter Asma had finished school and was now at the university of Khartoum studying law. She chose law because it was her father's favourite subject. She admired him, because he was committed to women's rights, and he encouraged her independence.

[Taha] always wanted you to experiment, he didn't give you direct guidance ... I am one of the people closest to him, and he didn't intervene in my freedom. For an oriental Muslim man it's unusual. They treat their daughters strictly, they create lots of barriers. The *ustaz* didn't. He had me go out alone and ride the bus alone ... he said these are things you must practice because they make your personality mature<sup>64</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> see O'Fahey in Brenner ed., 1993:30ff

<sup>60</sup> Mansur Khalid, quoted in *waqa'i' 1* 1975:26

<sup>61</sup> RB *mahkamat* 1981:14f

<sup>62</sup> Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*, 11/11/1997

<sup>64</sup> Interview, Asma Mahmud 28/11/1997

## The hero of a dream

Khartoum university had all sorts of opinions on offer - Communists and Muslim Brothers competed with Nasserists, Ba'athists and Democratic Socialists. There were also southern students, who had separate political affiliations (a few joined the Communist party). Students, many from relatively rich families, had state subsidised educations, so they could spend four years enjoying themselves. Although the university was unquestionably part of modern Sudan, one Sudanese student leader of the 1970s chose to dwell on the traditionalism of his contemporaries:

Hero-worship is deeply rooted in Sudanese society. It is reflected in the saint cult, in the glorification of witch-doctors and fekis, in the popularity of football players, singers and film stars ... Even the Sudanese Communists are traditionalists. Once they have accepted Marx or Lenin, they reject any other Communist philosophy, such as Mao or Marcuse.<sup>65</sup>

Taha was a hero. One of the law students who was friendly with Republicans was al-Nayl Abu Gurun. He was the son of a Sufi *shaykh*, but his fine singing voice had led him away from religion, and he was viewed as something of a scapegrace. In 1969, Abu Gurun had a dream, seeing himself in a huge gathering of people with Taha up above them<sup>66</sup>. Taha was told about Abu Gurun's dream. Taha was very interested in dreams. He asked about people's dreams in the morning, like a psychoanalyst. He often asked a strange question: "Has anyone see me die in a vision?"<sup>67</sup>. Dreams offer Sufis a compelling internal reality, a way into the spiritual world, which Taha sometimes described as a collective unconscious:

This long story [of all life] grew up in the unconscious, made of such stuff as dreams are made of. From this same matter was made the Qur'an.<sup>68</sup>

Abu Gurun did not understand his dream, but it came true all the same, as chapter 16 will reveal.

## Conclusion

In the late 1960s, Sudanese political actors realised the importance of the country's educational institutions, after educated radicals overtook the patrician system for the first time. The patrician parties and the Republicans began to organise in Khartoum university: for the Republicans, this decision was to prove very successful. Taha's complex ideas were responsive to the intellectual needs of the students, and his trial brought them wide publicity.

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<sup>65</sup>El Tayeb 1971:37f

<sup>66</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 17/11/1997

<sup>67</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud 30/11/1997

<sup>68</sup>Text of letter to *Sawt al-Sudan* in Taha *rasa'il wa maqalat* 1973:36

The late 1960s were also a time when regional problems became prominent. Political groups began to articulate Sudan's big ethnic questions. However, in the late 1960s, the parliamentary regime was discussing *shari'a*, the key Muslim Brother demand, and ignoring federalism, the key southern demand, echoed by groups in the east and west. These groups were marginalised because they did not understand the Arab-Muslim state system. The Muslim Brothers, in contrast, understood it too well. They knew that the patricians had to welcome their calls for *shari'a* in order to maintain their Islamic legitimacy. Their campaigns against Communists and Republicans kept attention fixed on the *shari'a*/civil law question of the centre, rather than the big question of the relationship between the centre and the regions.

Taha benefited from the trial - his movement began to grow rapidly - but the trial itself kept attention focused on the Muslim Brothers' agenda for Sudan. In the late 1960s and 1970s, most Middle Eastern countries were trying to unify their dual *shari'a*/civil law jurisdictions, and a few African countries were trying to reconstruct their legal system away from the power-relations of colonialism<sup>69</sup>. Sudanese Muslim Brothers imagined a more-papist than-the-pope Arab-Muslim state system, at a time when Arab Muslim states were moving towards civil law. They were articulating the aspirations of northern Nile valley elites for the prestige and dignity they saw in Middle Eastern culture.

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<sup>69</sup>Coulson 1969:96ff



## Scottish memories

In 1968, a draft Islamic constitution reached parliament just before the government fell. The pro-Khatmiya PDP merged with the NUP which it had broken with in 1956, to form the Democratic Unionist party (DUP) in 1967. New northern elections brought a coalition of the DUP and an Umma faction to power, and they sent the draft to a committee. The supreme court vindicated the Communists in their appeal against parliamentary expulsion. However, parliament persisted in its ban, and the chief justice resigned to join the Communist politicians and radical officers and talk about a coup. The war in the south worsened<sup>70</sup>.

Taha's lecture topic in 1969 was "Islam's first message is not suited to the twentieth century". Muslim Brothers, Ansar al-Sunna, and policemen sometimes tried to interrupt the lectures at universities and social clubs. Once he was even assaulted<sup>71</sup>. In the summer of 1969 he went off on another tour of Sudan. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of May he predicted the fall of the tottering sectarian coalition in El Obeid. The next day, Sudanese people woke up with an uneasy reminder of their Scottish cultural heritage. This heritage is limited to a few military marches - many of the tunes are Scottish. When they are played all day on the radio, it means that the army has taken over.

Educated Sudanese often believe that soldiers' training (one year's march and one year's run, as the joke goes) does not equip them to run the country. The Republicans who accompanied Taha to El Obeid were dismayed at the end of democracy. But Taha told them not to worry, that the parliamentary sham of the past four years was better off ended. Perhaps he believed that the time for change, the missed October, had arrived. Taha's relationship with the new regime is examined in chapters 13 to 17. The next chapter looks at some of the books he wrote in the 1960s.

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<sup>70</sup>Khalid 1990:213

<sup>71</sup>Taha, *al-islam bi-risalatih al-ula la yuslih li-insaniyat al-qarn al-'ishrin* 1969:4

# Chapter 12

## Pyramids

Taha's *khalwa* led him to conclude that he could construct a comprehensive new ideology for Sudan and the world from Islam. He produced several books in the 1960s and early 1970s: *risalat al-salat* ("On prayer", 1966), *al-risala al-thania min al-islam* (1967, translated 1987 as "The Second Message of Islam"), *al-marksiya fi al-mizan* ("Marxism in the balance", 1968) and *tatwir shari'at al-ahwal al-shakhsiya* ("The evolution of personal status *shari'a*", 1971). More inspirational than analytical, these works set out an unprecedented approach to the textual sources of *shari'a*.

## History of *shari'a*

### History of golden ages

*Shari'a* is sometimes translated as "Islamic law", meaning the laws derived from the Qur'an and the prophet's *sunna* (all that he said, did or tacitly approved). But *shari'a* was not just law: it had unenforced rules for etiquette and prayer; and implied a network of political, educational and economic institutions<sup>1</sup>.

It is difficult to find a historical framework to analyse this system, whose origins have been contested since the eighth century. *Shari'a* legists themselves claim that *fiqh*, the process of codification, began with the prophet and his companions<sup>2</sup>. Taha, representing a learned modern Sufism, disputes this. For him, the prophet was not a legist but the leader of a golden age when human life opened up to heaven. But 30 years after his death, says Taha, Islamic rulers codified *shari'a* as a law of empire<sup>3</sup>. Taha stresses the historical fluidity of *shari'a* origins in order to construct a golden-age/dark-age chronology of spiritual authenticity.

Like Taha, western scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth century asserted that the origins of *shari'a* lay in the political and social flux of the first centuries of Islam, and not in the life of

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<sup>1</sup>See Brown 1997:363

<sup>2</sup>Mukhtar 1996:182

<sup>3</sup>Taha, *tariq muhammad*, nd:31

the prophet. They used their conclusion to construct a golden-age/dark-age chronology of cultural vigour. *Shari'a* began in the bustle of history, but it soon left the human world: "floating above Muslim society as a disembodied soul, freed from the currents and the vicissitudes of time"<sup>4</sup>. Edward Said, whose criticisms broke the back of orientalist scholarship, points out that orientalists preferred to treat Islam as a static and immutable thing, in order to ignore or control its lived experience<sup>5</sup>. Contemporary Islamists, like early legists, are reluctant to admit that historical uncertainties played a part in the creation of *shari'a*, and like orientalists, stress its immutability: "*Shari'a*, which God prescribed to regulate the life of humanity, is therefore, cosmic *shari'a*, it is linked to the general law of the cosmos," wrote Sayyid Qutb, a leading Egyptian Islamist<sup>6</sup>. Ahistorical *shari'a* has its uses for Islamists - their golden age/dark age of obedience is used to rally support for a new political programme. Some recent historians avoid golden age/dark age chronologies in order to communicate the historical responsiveness of *shari'a* to everyday life, and to show that Muslim society can be studied like any other<sup>7</sup>. The following summary of *shari'a* development tries to take that historical approach.

## Muhammad and empire

Muhammad was a merchant from Mecca, an Arabian town developing towards the markets of the Mediterranean. After a period of meditation, he began to hear promises and threats from God, and stories about past prophets. He called his fellow-citizens to accept his revelations, and take up a moral contract with his personal God, in return for paradise. Mecca's commercial economy was creating too few winners, and Muhammad called for a system which alleviated poverty by *zakat* - redistributing taxed wealth<sup>8</sup>. His moral message enraged Mecca, and he fled to nearby Medina. Medinans accepted his message and the preacher became a political actor. His revelations became more legal than homiletic. Muhammad's laws created a tax-system and army, and his sensitive understanding of the lineage system fortified alliances between citizens of Arabian towns and the nomads who ran their trade routes.

Within a few decades Arabian armies over-ran most of the empires of Byzantium and Persia. The Arabian lineage system which kept the armies together could not cope with highly stratified imperial towns. Nor could the (meagre) legal material of the Qur'an be used to govern - Muslims tried to incorporate it into legal structures, but they often had to rely on local precedents. Circles of pious legists began to criticise the luxury and legal syncretism of

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<sup>4</sup>Coulson 1964:2

<sup>5</sup>Said 1995:93

<sup>6</sup>Qutb 1993:111

<sup>7</sup>See for example Brown 1997; Fadel 1997; Messick 1993; Mitchell 1988; Zubeida 1995

<sup>8</sup>Shaban 1971:8

the new empire, inspiring a revolution by the Abbasids in 750. The Abbasids were the prophet's kin, and they allied themselves with non-Arab Muslims, whose social advancement was obstructed by the Arab lineage system. Legist condemnation of imperial luxury became part of the ideology of the Abbasids, who gratefully patronised the law schools.

These schools legislated from the Qur'an the *sunna*, which was recorded as *hadith* and became a fundamental source for law. There was initial reluctance to countenance any textual authority other than the Qur'an, but when the legislative needs of the state demanded new texts, too many texts appeared, and the *hadith* became a vast body of disputed material. Collecting *hadith* was an important way of influencing the content of legislation, but some schools depended more on legists' opinion, or on deduction by analogy, to legislate from the sources. Other schools objected to the idea that legists could overrule judgements ascribed to Muhammad.

## Abrogation and tradition

These disagreements vexed the Muslim state. Muhammad Idris al-Shafi'i (d 820) came up with a methodological coup to rid the law of inconsistency. He made *hadith* an infallible, fundamental source of law. Al-Shafi'i's creation of a new corpus of infallibility long after the end of revelation was problematic. To solve the problem, he modified an existing doctrine of abrogation, based on a Qur'anic verse (2:102) that states that later passages of the Qur'an are better than earlier ones. Later verses of the Qur'an abrogated earlier ones, he said, and later *hadiths* abrogated earlier *hadiths*, but the subordinate *hadith* could not abrogate Qur'an, nor vice-versa<sup>9</sup>. Where once it had played a pivotal role in synthesising sources into law, human agency in legislation was largely restricted to dating and authenticating *hadith*. Conflicts between *hadith* and Qur'an still needed the effort of human reasoning (*ijtihad*), but by the tenth century, the sources had been synthesised into *shari'a* texts and institutions, and *ijtihad* was deemed redundant.

Tradition (*taqlid*) supplanted *ijtihad*. Republicans, like many orientalist scholars, saw this shift as a defeat for creativity: "the jurists ... ossified religion"<sup>10</sup>. But, says Fadel, *taqlid* met legal needs. It allowed the justice system to operate consistently, if not creatively, when consistency was needed<sup>11</sup>. Legists had functioned as important ideological critics of the state, but they became increasingly bureaucratized.

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<sup>9</sup>Al-Shafi'i 1961:123ff

<sup>10</sup>RB, *al-din wa rijal al-din 'abr al-qurun* 1975:4

<sup>11</sup>Fadel 1996

*Taqlid* could be used as an ideological bulwark of the state, and in political crises, its custodians could assume leadership<sup>12</sup>. However, the dominance of the *shari'a* tradition was such that many challenges to the state were articulated as attempts to purify or extend *shari'a*. Reformers who challenged existing states, or created new larger-order communities, often claimed the right to practice *ijtihad*, to enhance their control over *shari'a* ideology.

Bureaucratic *shari'a* served the needs of the Ottoman empire, one of the most enduring Muslim states, but it could not cope with the needs of European capital, which began to penetrate the empire in the nineteenth century. *Shari'a* commercial laws were displaced by laws that could respond to capitalist investment. *Shari'a* schools and courts survived, but often dealt with a new set of rules. The displacement of *shari'a* as law caused much heart-searching amongst *shari'a*-minded Muslims. They asked themselves whether foreign institutions and ideas should be assimilated into Muslim society; and how the unified authority of the Ottoman empire, with its religious legitimacy, could be transferred to the colonial state and then to the nation state. In addition, European rule granted power to the new groups it organised: urban industrial classes and educated sub-elites who could grasp quickly the uses of new technologies. European-inspired Ottoman liberalism promised enhanced rights to previously subordinate groups: non-Muslim minorities, women and slaves<sup>13</sup>.

Muslims negotiated the new political and legal changes in differing ways. Revivalists wanted to return to a rigorist *shari'a*. Modernists sought to mediate between Islamic traditions and modernity, and secularists wanted to relegate Islam and its laws to the periphery of the state's power. Feminists and other modernisers in the twentieth century took a slightly different tack. They could not argue for equal rights for women on the basis of *shari'a*, and made appeal instead to Islam's "ethical vision"<sup>14</sup>. Fadel notes:

Many Muslim feminists have argued that at the core of Islam lies a gender-neutral belief system that has been obscured by a centuries-long tradition of male-dominated interpretation. Although this gender-neutral system of belief had been almost entirely suppressed by the ruling Islamic discourses, according to Leila Ahmed, marginalized discourses such as Sufism ... were able to preserve Islam's message of the ethical equality of men and women.<sup>15</sup>

In the twentieth century, speculation about the need for change in *shari'a* became a pervasive part of intellectual culture in Muslim societies.

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<sup>12</sup>See Lapidus 1996

<sup>13</sup>Davison 1973:55

<sup>14</sup>Ahmed 1992:65

<sup>15</sup>Fadel 1997:185

# Analysing law

## A world without law

An analytical framework for Taha's challenge to the *shari'a* tradition needs to deal with three different factors. First, it must compare historical and ahistorical approaches to law, in order to cope with the fact that one set of protagonists in this debate saw history as an incommunicable golden age followed by a confused dark age, while the other saw history as process and evolution. Secondly, it must be sensitive to the social history of law, because social evolution is a major concern of Taha's. Taha uses a somewhat historical approach to law in order to make distinctions between state enforced law (positive law) and ethics, and the third requirement of the framework is to be able to analyse that distinction.

Some exponents of the *shari'a* tradition find historical analysis disturbing and are reluctant to make any distinction between *shari'a* as enforced law and *shari'a* as an ethical system<sup>16</sup>. Many modern Islamists, like Taha, accept the need for social and historical categories, a law for the past and another for the present. These "modern Islamists" include *shari'a* exponents like Hasan al-Turabi of the Sudanese Muslim Brothers and Sadig al-Mahdi of the Umma party<sup>17</sup>. They tend to address the law/ethics distinction in the context of an international debate about human rights, although their aim is to demonstrate that *shari'a* is the moral equal of any non-Islamic system, rather than fiddle with the legal ontology that Taha assiduously debated in the clubs and newspapers of Sudan<sup>18</sup>.

The law/ethics distinction was picturesquely expressed in Islamic tradition by its own legal sceptics - antinomian Sufis like Muhammad 'Abd al-Sadig. An influential modern form of legal scepticism is provided by communist theorists, whose social analysis of legal history has helped clarify the past. For Marxists and anarchists, law is part of ideology, a means for society to explain and justify power-relations<sup>19</sup>. Legal rules - like a slave's bill of sale, or tax laws - are an ideological code which allow the state and its allies to act independently of society. But this code, says Engels, is abstracted away from the laws to acquire a formal importance that obscures their economic importance - "the rule of law" becomes the stock of state ideologists. Finally, laws are philosophised away from material realities into religious ideas deemed independent from social relations and economic realities<sup>20</sup>. The straightforward

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<sup>16</sup> See Al Azami 1985:5-14

<sup>17</sup> al-Turabi, quoted in Mukhtar 1996:322

<sup>18</sup> al-Mahdi 1992a. See Mukhtar 1996:270ff for a thorough account of different approaches

<sup>19</sup> Pashukanis 1978:73, Kropotkin 1970:174ff

<sup>20</sup> Engels, in Marx and Engels 1970:370ff



Marxist critique of ideology and law misses some important points - for example, it portrays the losers of the process as dupes, and tends to gloss over their ideological negotiations and appropriations<sup>21</sup>. Nevertheless, Marx and Engels's critique of positive law - law laid down in courts and institutions - allowed them to suggest that society did not depend on the existence of states, taxes and prisons.

Taha himself used historical analysis of law to establish a similar distinction between law and ethics that was much more far-reaching than anything in Muslim tradition. Before looking at how Taha dealt with history, it is useful to look at the historical functions of law, as defined by Engels's "abstractions". *Shari'a* has had different historical functions: it is a set of laws to organise society; an ideological weapon to support reform or the status quo, and a theological metaphor for the importance of obedience. These historical functions are analysed below.

## 1. Enforced law and privileged rights

In eighteenth and nineteenth century Sudan, *shari'a* was used to introduce Middle Eastern urban mores, commoditise land, and justify the social stratifications implied by landlessness and slavery (see chapter 2). Sudanese Muslim reformers saw *shari'a* as a means of "purifying" a corrupt society but also as a means of "upgrading" a traditional one. Many writers detect Islam's dynamic, modernising force in its earliest history - it stimulated commerce and was a template for building larger-order communities, cities and states<sup>22</sup>.

Braudel argues that Muhammad's laws for commerce, the seclusion of women, and communal prayer imply the presence of an urban throng, a preference for towns over pastoral Arabia<sup>23</sup>. For Ahmed, Muhammad's marriage laws explicitly affiliated his system to the imperial cities of Persia - their individuated property rights required female chastity in order to safeguard inheritance. Muhammad mandated their patrilineal marriage forms<sup>24</sup>.

Islam adapted quickly to the social and commercial structures of those cities. By the second Muslim century, social scientists could identify different urban classes: rulers, bureaucrats, merchants, educated middle ranks, and the "vanishing scum" of the lower class<sup>25</sup>. But Islam did not, as AlSayyad points out, impose an urban form on society<sup>26</sup>. Many subjects of Muslim empire lived in rural subsistence economies. Muslim regimes created or expanded a cash sector, which allowed for the ownership of the means of production and the development of

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<sup>21</sup> See Caton in Khoury and Kostiner eds, 1990:74ff, Said 1995:16,21

<sup>22</sup> Lapidus 1988:251

<sup>23</sup> Braudel 1993:50

<sup>24</sup> Ahmed 1992:4

<sup>25</sup> al-Barmaki (d 808) quoted in Marlow 1997:38

<sup>26</sup> AlSayyad 1991:3

wage labour. Rodinson argues that *shari'a* commercial law fixed class relations in Muslim towns early on, and the cash they produced drew primitive-communal societies into their system<sup>27</sup>.

*Shari'a* laws assigned privileged rights to males, Muslims, owners of slaves and capital. The success of these laws can be seen in the fact that they were maintained over a wide range of times and places. Where they did not meet needs, privileged groups could invent loopholes. "Loopholes" (*hiyal*) became a special branch of *shari'a* commercial law - they allowed the cash sector of the economy to buy and sell credit in spite of a prohibition against usury<sup>28</sup>. People without legislative power found other strategies to manipulate the law. Women slaves used for sexual services could get special rights by bearing male children to their masters. Tribal groups whose social organisation was threatened by *shari'a* inheritance laws could marry their daughters to their nephews, and keep the patrimony in the family (see page 30).

But some laws were quietly abandoned where they did not work. Republicans repeatedly pointed out that the Qur'an (eg 4:89) obliged Muslims to kill, enslave or punitively tax people who opposed or even disagreed with the new faith. The Qur'an admits that this intolerance is difficult: "Fighting is prescribed for you, though it is hateful to you" (2:216), and toleration is a characteristic of many Muslim societies. However, in al-Shafi's synthesis these later verses abrogated earlier verses of toleration.

## 2. Law and ideology

*Shari'a* could be a "route to modernity"<sup>29</sup>. It could also be an ossifying force, as Amna bint Ahmed found out. She was a slave woman in Kordofan who ran away from her master in 1932. Her owner found her and took away her children (his property) and a local *shari'a* court affirmed that he had acted within *shari'a* norms. The British governor of Kordofan did not intervene: "as long as the *Shari'a* was immutable, there was very little he could do"<sup>30</sup>. This view of *shari'a* as an eternally valid ideal was a powerful ideological weapon for scholars, reformers and state authoritarians, even if they happened to be Christian colonialists.

The scholars who supported the Abbasids successfully used the text against the state. Opposing an idealised *shari'a* to "inauthentic" authority became a commonplace of Muslim reform movements. Some, like Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d 855) and Taqi al-Din Taymiya (d 1328)

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<sup>27</sup>Rodinson 1974:62

<sup>28</sup>ibid:30ff

<sup>29</sup>Zubeida 1995:152

<sup>30</sup>Sikainga 1996:114

used their allegiance to *shari'a* to mount a challenge at the heart of the Muslim state<sup>31</sup>. The Ottoman ruling class bureaucratised the *shari'a* system in response<sup>32</sup>. At the rural margins of the Ottoman empire, reform movements could mobilise social groups not integrated into the state, with the appeal to the demands of the tradition. In Arabia, tribal coalitions were given ideological direction by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (d 1792), and reformed central authority in Arabia. Sometimes reformers appealed to *shari'a* to defend practices which were scarcely Islamic. One nineteenth century Hijazi leader called for a *jihad* to defend the right to own slaves (no more than a peripheral part of *shari'a*), after the Ottomans had begun to outlaw the practice<sup>33</sup>.

The power of textual tradition was not only used against the state. Reformers used *shari'a* criticism of folk religious practices to revolutionise and control popular culture. The Mahdi's "liturgical centralism" (see chapter 2, page 37) weakened Sufi *tarigas* but gave Sudan a coherent Arab-Muslim identity. West African reformers used *shari'a* schools to penetrate rural culture, and used *shari'a* standards to decide whether the people of a tribe were infidels who could be enslaved (see chapter 2, page 37).

These interpretations of *shari'a* made one person free and another his or her slave. They could challenge the state, but more often were appropriated by the state, which could use them to construct a social hierarchy. As well as providing laws and an ideological focus for society, it created a prestigious kind of theological reflection. This "*shari'ah* minded" piety had the dignity of the text behind it, and could grant or withhold that dignity to all other forms of Islam.<sup>34</sup>

### 3. Law and theology

In his "Second Message of Islam", Taha promised people that they could "become God"<sup>35</sup>. In contrast, his prosecutor Zaki wanted a veil between God and humanity (see page 155). Their antagonism reprised past battles of Sufis and legists, but also expressed different approaches to life. Legist spirituality drew on themes such as obedience and clear direction, and disliked theological speculation.

Theologians close to the *shari'a* tradition established a deterministic and indisputably objective notion of revelation which frustrated the need of the human subject to comprehend the content of revelation. Theological determinism attempted to "safeguard" God's distance.

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<sup>31</sup>Lapidus 1988:166; Sivan 1990 :99

<sup>32</sup>See Gilson 1992:32

<sup>33</sup>Toledano 1982:129f

<sup>34</sup>Hodgson 1, 1974:350

<sup>35</sup>Taha, *Second Message* 1987:109

The same urge for "coveted objectivity" and fear of over-reaching knowledge is found in the legists' idea that law is independent of the human subject<sup>36</sup>. Scholars hoped to make the truth truer by lifting it out of human experience. Their prestigious, obedient spirituality was often state-controlled, but it was not always successful in winning converts, especially converts outside Muslim territories. Sufi missions, which drew on other traditions, were more successful in winning marginal groups for the faith.

Sufism originated in ascetic rejections of the sumptuous Muslim empire. Ascetics paid particular attention to the ethical and religious doctrines of the Qur'an, at the same time that the scholar circles scrutinised the law. These ethical purists were open to mystical ideas from non-Muslim traditions, and looked for different modes of perception, ultimate unities and inner meanings. Theosophical Sufis identified God as a lover - sometimes they believed their own personality was dissolved in God's and sometimes tried to speak in the divine voice that had taken over their own. *Shari'a* legists executed al-Hallaj (d 922) for making remarks like "I am the Truth".

This strange Sufi gnosis and disconcerting monism opposed the inaccessibly objectified knowledge and stark moral dualism of the *shari'a* tradition. The flamboyant theosophists and the legists reached a compromise in the ninth century, with influential Sufis distancing themselves from the wilder reaches of the Sufi imagination<sup>37</sup>. Around the same time, legists like Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d 1111) looked for a more accessible God<sup>38</sup>. Instead of trying to identify with God, Sufis began to identify with Muhammad. For them, he was not so much a legislator as a pre-existent symbol of God's creativity. Sufi spiritual writers and celebrities translated this idea into hymns and songs, which attracted many people at the social and geographical peripheries of the Muslim world to Islam (see page 33f)<sup>39</sup>. Sufi spirituality facilitated widespread conversions to Islam.

Sufis challenged the spiritual and ideological functions of *shari'a*, but, with a few exceptions, they did not challenge the legal detail. Only the *malamatiya*, an international Sufi school which had a vogue in Sudan, challenged enforceable *shari'a* laws. Men like Muhammad 'Abd al-Sadig al-Hamim deliberately committed illicit acts to train themselves in contempt for the world's blame (and by extension, praise). They were playing with irony, not proposing a

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<sup>36</sup>Weiss in Heer ed, 1990:59

<sup>37</sup>Rahman 1979 :138

<sup>38</sup>al-Ghazali 1959 :16

<sup>39</sup>See Osman 1990:37ff

reform of *shari'a*. However, Taha used the Sufi tradition to mount an unprecedented attack on *shari'a* spirituality, ideology, laws and rights. This attack is discussed below.

# Taha and *shari'a*

Taha wanted to rework *shari'a* in order to produce a comprehensive ideology for a country whose social and political systems were not working. Challenging this social and political system - the Arab-Muslim state - meant challenging a political ideology and an associated spirituality which drew on themes like obedience to immutable laws. It also meant challenging the laws themselves. Sudan's divisions, as Taha saw them, were between women and men, rich and poor, Muslim and non-Muslim. Taha felt that *shari'a* rules could not adequately deal with these divisions, and he proposed a new set of rules in their place.

## Abrogation

In the 1950s, Taha distinguished between *shari'a*, that could no longer be used as legislation, and Qur'anic ethics, that should form the basis of constitutional law<sup>40</sup>. In a work published in 1960, he made this distinction clearer: he said that there were two messages in Islam, appropriate to different historical periods<sup>41</sup>. The second message, the second period, was to be more egalitarian than the first. Like other modernists, Taha wanted to do away with legist historical "accretions" to the "ethical core" of Islam. However, many contemporary Muslim reformers identify that core with the Qur'an and *sunna*, and the accretions with later legists<sup>42</sup>. Taha identified the ethical core within the Qur'an and *sunna* themselves. In his 1960 work, he said that "greater" verses of the Qur'an should replace "lesser" ones<sup>43</sup>.

In 1967, Taha published his best known work, "The Second Message of Islam". Here, Taha explicitly said that there are two classes of texts in the Qur'an. The first class of texts have an eternally valid message which calls all humanity to moral purity and to faith in the oneness of God and of creation. The ethical standards of these texts proved too high for the people of Arabia to meet, and accordingly a set of concessive standards appeared. The second class of texts was revealed in response to the dictates of Muhammad's time and contained legal standards that were enforced by Muslim authorities. These two classes of texts correspond approximately to the revelations at Mecca and Medina. In Mecca the prophet invited a hostile polytheist audience to believe in one God and to recognise that acts had moral consequences, and had a handful of followers who were prepared to make personal sacrifices for the sake of

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<sup>40</sup>"Letter to the Pakistani attorney-general on the matter of Pakistan's constitution and the Qur'an", in *Sawt al-Sudan* 1953; text in Taha, *rasa'il wa maqalat* 1973:38ff

<sup>41</sup>Taha, *al-islam* 1968:26

<sup>42</sup>See for example al-Turabi 1980

<sup>43</sup>*ibid*:36. I am grateful to Eltayeb Hassan for pointing this out to me



his message. However, in Medina the prophet addressed a group of people who accepted his authority but were unable or unwilling to make similar sacrifices.

Taha employed a similar approach when he dealt with the *sunna*. He contrasted *shari'a*, "that degree of religion addressed to ordinary people in accordance with their level of understanding"; and *sunna*, which is the higher standard by which the prophet lived<sup>44</sup>. Muhammad performed certain supererogatory practices, and enjoyed certain legal privileges, which legists claimed were inapplicable to ordinary Muslims. In contrast, Taha claimed Muhammad's *sunna*, or higher standards, were *tariqa* (*tariga*), the Sufi way<sup>45</sup>.

Taha thus extracted from the Islamic sources two opposed sets of standards: a later, concessive set, which he called the first message of Islam, and an earlier, absolute set, which he called the second message. The second message was revealed first, however, in order to demonstrate that the people who lived at the time of the revelation could not live by ethical standards, and to show them that they had chosen to be controlled by lower laws. In 1967, Taha used his new abrogation theory to make the shift. He said that the second message was abrogated, while the first message ran its course, until society had acquired the capability to enact it. When the first message no longer applied, the second message returned to abrogate the first.

Abrogation was a technique used since the time of Muhammad to harmonise conflicting verses of the Qur'an<sup>46</sup>. Al-Shafi'i felt that abrogation was being used too loosely - he used it to centralise legislative authority and retard localised development of the law. Abrogation gave the interpreter enormous powers over the powerful text, and subsequent Muslim scholars tried to minimise its application and keep its power in the distant past<sup>47</sup>. But Taha used abrogation as the starting point for a set of reflections on the mutability of rules and the growth of spiritual knowledge.

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<sup>44</sup>Taha, *Second Message*, 1987:33

<sup>45</sup>*ibid*:35

<sup>46</sup>Burton 1990:20

<sup>47</sup>*ibid*:185

## New rules and rights

From early times, Sufis had challenged *shari 'a's* claim to provide ideological and spiritual frameworks for society. Taha could go further - by reinventing the old theory of abrogation, he could recast the hierarchy of rights that *shari 'a* institutes, and overturn its laws. Taha got rid of privileged rights assigned to Muslims, slave-owners, property owners, males, and to the Muslim state. Instead, the second message of Islam accords freedom to slaves, and legal and moral equality to women. Here is a summary of the major legislative changes proposed by Taha.

### Women

*Shari 'a*, drawing on Medinan passages in the Qur'an, assigns subordinate rights to women. Men are their guardians, with rights to physically assault them (Qur'an 4:34)<sup>48</sup>. Women can only marry one man, while a man can marry several women (4:3)<sup>49</sup>. A woman's testimony (2:282) and inheritance (4:11) is worth half that of a man. The Medinan Qur'an deals with divorce from a male perspective (2:226f), and *shari 'a* impedes women's rights to divorce<sup>50</sup>. The Qur'anic obligation to pay bridewealth (4:4) could be taken to suggest that a wife is the purchase of a husband<sup>51</sup>. Taha's theory abrogates all these subordinations with Meccan verses that assign equal moral responsibility to all humans (eg 74:68).

### Capital

The Qur'an allows for ownership of capital: accumulation is only impeded by a 2½% alms tax called *zakat* (eg 9:103). However, Taha takes 2:219, "They will ask you what they should disburse. Tell them [to disburse] the surplus", as a higher injunction to share all surplus. One *hadith* commends an Arabian tribe which had no private ownership, says Taha<sup>52</sup>. Socialism, the sharing of surplus, is thus the second message of Islam.

### Jihad

When Muhammad was at Mecca, he was no more than a persuader (88:21). At Medina, says Taha, he was obliged to resort to warfare or *jihad* to prevent non-believers from abusing their freedom (eg 2:190). This violence has no place in the second message, says Taha: the original technique of persuasion abrogates *jihad*<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup>Taha, *Second Message*, 1987:139

<sup>49</sup>*ibid*:140

<sup>50</sup>Taha, *tatwir shari 'at al-ahwal al-shakhsiya* 1979:76

<sup>51</sup>*ibid*:73

<sup>52</sup>Taha, *Second Message*, 1987:156

<sup>53</sup>*ibid*:132ff

## Slavery

The Qur'an accepts the institution of slavery (eg 30:28). Taha sees this permission as a consequence of *jihad*, to force resisters to accept Islam or lose their freedom. Islam assigned limited rights to slaves, but they are due full rights in the second message, where they are enabled to cope with the uncertainties of freedom.<sup>54</sup>

## Democracy

The Qur'an only expects Muslim leaders to consult their subjects (42:38), so Muslim subjects have no rights to self-determination, says Taha. A Meccan verse (88:21) which says that Muhammad has no dominion over people is taken to mean that in the second message of Islam, Muslims can participate in democracy. Muhammad and his successors were only granted a temporary guardianship over his followers who could not face up to moral responsibility themselves.<sup>55</sup>

The next section evaluates the consistency of Taha's legal theory.

## Imprecision

Taha had to show that the Qur'an could be clearly divided into two classes of text, and he needed to find Qur'anic authorisation to shift from one to the other and then back again. By doing so, he could turn al-Shaf'i's methodological coup on its head. The following section shows that Taha's version of Qur'anic authorisation is plausible but somewhat perfunctory and his division of the Qur'an is vague.

### 1a. Qur'anic authorisation

Taha seeks authorisation in a variant reading of the proof text for all abrogation theory, 2:106.  
And for whatever verse We abrogate or cast into oblivion, We bring a better or the like of it: knowest thou not that God is powerful over everything?<sup>56</sup>

The word translated by "cast into oblivion" is *nunsiha*, "we cause it to be forgotten", but Taha chooses an established variant, *nunsi'uha*, "we postpone it". He interprets the verse as follows:  
The phrase "Whenever we abrogate any verse" means cancel or repeal it, and the phrase "or postpone it" means to delay its action or implementation. The phrase "We bring a better verse" means bringing one that is closer to the understanding of the people and more relevant to their time than the postponed verse; "or a similar one" means reinstating the same verse when the time comes for its implementation ... The dictates of the time in the seventh century were for the subsidiary verses. For the twentieth century they are the primary verses.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>ibid:137

<sup>55</sup>Taha, *tatwir* 1979:45, citing Qur'an 3:159; Taha, *Second Message*, 1987:157

<sup>56</sup>2:102, Arberry 1986:13

<sup>57</sup>Taha *Second Message* 1987:40

### 1b. Perfunctory reworking of abrogation

Lichtenthaler points out that verse 2:106 is crucial to Taha's attempt to conceptualise a higher ethical core Islam which can be used to overturn the laws of the lower concessive Islam<sup>58</sup>. But Taha does not acknowledge that he is using a variant reading, and even the variant used, *nunsi'uha*, is not the same as that used by most authorities, *nunsa'uha*<sup>59</sup>. His whole exegesis of the verse only runs to one paragraph.

Al-Shafi'i's abrogation theory stipulated that Qur'an only abrogates Qur'an, and *hadith* only *hadith* (see page 154). In contrast, Taha is willing to abrogate Qur'an with *hadith*. He wanted to end the Qur'anic practice (4:3) of paying bridewealth, because he believed that it suggested that brides were bought by their husbands. Taha refers to an alternative practice in *hadith*: the prophet permitted the marriage of a penniless man who could only offer his wife the Qur'anic verses he had memorised. These verses, says Taha, are a spiritual bridewealth to replace the monetary one<sup>60</sup>. However, he does not acknowledge the significance of his jurisprudential innovation.

### 2a. Two classes of texts or two classes of message?

Exegetes of the *shari'a* tradition acknowledge the distinction between Meccan and Medinan texts. Many editions of the Qur'an classify the texts in the rubric of each *sura* (chapter). Muslim exegetes used the recollections of Muhammad and his companions to date *suras*<sup>61</sup>. Western exegetes prefer to use linguistic evidence - certain themes, rhythms or phrases are associated with earlier revelations. Taha prefers linguistic evidence. Medinan passages, he says, can be distinguished by the fact that some verses are addressed to believers, they mention *jihad*, and they criticise the hypocrites who were beginning to appear in the new religion of the town Muhammad ruled. Meccan passages can be distinguished by the fact that some verses are addressed to humankind, they refer to prostration, and the *suras* are prefaced by mystical letters. But, says Taha, there are exceptions to these rules, because there are overlapping stages between the two messages.

The Meccan and the Medinese texts differ, not because of the time and place of their revelation, but essentially because of the audience to whom they are addressed<sup>62</sup>.

Taha establishes two classes of text (Meccan and Medinan) and two classes of message (first and second) and he does not clearly define the relation between them. Meccan verses are

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<sup>58</sup>Lichtenthaler 1993:24

<sup>59</sup>al-Tabari 1, 1968:287f

<sup>60</sup>Taha, *tatwir* 1979:73

<sup>61</sup>Bell and Watt 1970:108

<sup>62</sup>Taha, *Second Message* 1987:125

defined by certain categories, such as the mention of prostration, for example. Exceptions to these categories are then listed - *suras* two and three mention prostration, but are Medinan. Taha's defining and excepting categories do not fit accepted Qur'anic chronologies - for example, 48:29 is an accepted Medinan verse that mentions prostration. It is not clear if Taha is proposing a new Qur'an chronology. Nor is it clear if Taha's exceptions relate to the classes of text or the classes of message:

any chapter which uses the phrases: "O, mankind," or "O, children of Adam" is Meccan, with the exception of *surat al-Baqara* [sura 2] and *al-Nisa* [sura 3]<sup>63</sup>

Taha says *sura* two is an "exception": is it excepted from meeting the linguistic definition of the Medinan Qur'an; or is it excepted from the Medinan first message? Taha does not say, but he sometimes assigns Medinan verses to the second message.

## **2b. Taha says Medinan verses can abrogate other Medinan verses**

Taha's abrogation theory states that Meccan verses were abrogated and postponed in the first message of Islam and then re-instated in the second. However, the theory is difficult to evaluate because of the looseness of his definitions. He does not always produce an abrogating verse, and sometimes produces a Medinan verse. For example, Taha cites a Medinan verse to promise equal rights to women in the second message: "Women have such honourable rights as obligations" (2:228) to establish the rights of women in the second message<sup>64</sup>. 2:219, the verse which abrogates alms tax and makes surplus shared, is Medinan<sup>65</sup>. However, this confusing use of abrogating Medinan verses may be justified by the "overlap" mentioned above.

## **2c. For Taha, jihad defines a verse as Medinan, but there is a Meccan jihad verse**

For Taha, the mention of *jihad* establishes that a text is Medinan, and therefore subsidiary. There is, however, at least one Meccan *jihad* verse, 25:52, "Obey not the unbelievers but struggle with them (*jahidhum*)". Taha does not mention this, nor an awkward *hadith* which says that "*jihad* shall remain valid to the day of resurrection"<sup>66</sup>

## **Evading precision**

Taha's second message invites people to look beyond the complex world which needed Muhammad's pragmatic but authoritarian laws, to a world where all people lived as one. By keeping his readers' attention fixed on a golden future, Taha can evade the demands of legal precision. For example, although Taha sought to grant divorce rights to women, he envisaged

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<sup>63</sup>ibid

<sup>64</sup>Taha, *tatwir* 1979:79

<sup>65</sup>ibid:40f

<sup>66</sup>Kamali 1989:153

a time when people would no longer need divorce, when all marriages are made in heaven<sup>67</sup>.

The Qur'anic verse he uses to abrogate all divorce laws (41:53) is a strange one:

We shall show them Our signs in the material world, and within themselves, until it becomes clear to them that He is the Truth<sup>68</sup>.

What has this to do with divorce? Taha believes that a wife is a total "sign", a marker of male self-recognition, the means by which God reveals man to himself. This compelling abstraction means that Taha does not need to find more specific Meccan legislation against divorce.

## An example of legal argument

Taha's imprecision and abstraction might suggest that he was more interested in mysticism than in law. However, there are reasons to avoid that conclusion. First, Taha's reworking of abrogation was an unprecedented Sufi assault on *shari'a* as a system of laws which instituted a hierarchy of rights. Sufis who attacked the *shari'a* edifice had never made such a systematic attempt to criticise *shari'a* laws. Secondly, documents and reminiscences from the 1970s show that Taha and the Republicans seriously engaged with the *shari'a* tradition.

In 1971, the Republicans produced a pamphlet entitled, *khutwa nahw al-zawaj fi al-islam* ("A step towards marriage in Islam")<sup>69</sup>. The pamphlet proposed a means of extending rights to brides without overstepping *shari'a* limits. It used an existing provision in one of the *shari'a* schools of law, the Hanifiya: a pre-nuptial contract conceding rights to the wife. In the Republican version of the contract, the man conceded that the marriage would be monogamous and granted the unilateral right of divorce to the wife. The contract reduced the bridewealth to a nominal £S 1. Republicans publicised the contract, which met all the requirements of *shari'a*, in the streets and even on the television and radio<sup>70</sup>. Taha was prepared to use Hanafi jurisprudence to assign equal marital rights to women with the consent of their husbands, without directly challenging the *shari'a* edifice.

The debate that led up to the publication of this contract shows how seriously Republicans engaged with *shari'a*. Republican leadership was a top-down hierarchy, but Taha encouraged diversity of opinion, and his discussions involved some of the cleverer legal minds in Sudan. The party line was determined at debates, where Taha would moderate the discussion, using different opinions to build consensus. A visiting Catholic priest described his meetings in 1973 (they were open to outsiders):

During meetings, he takes his place at the door of the room, on a seat like any of the others, putting himself out to bring a chair or cushion for those who come late. Far from ...

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<sup>67</sup>Taha, *Second Message* 1987:142

<sup>68</sup>*ibid*:142

<sup>69</sup>The work is summarised in Eltayeb 1996:52f and An-Na'im in Taha, *Second Message* 1987:6ff

<sup>70</sup>Taha, *tatwir* 1979:9



monopolising the conversation, he never resorts to speaking in public gatherings, except to bring the discussion back to the point at issue or to promote dialogue and research<sup>71</sup>.

The Republican debate on marriage contract examined one painful question. The Hanafi contract replaced the right assigned to the woman's legal guardian to prevent an undesirable marriage, with a duty assigned to the woman, to marry within her social class. This principle of social parity, *kafa'a*, was adopted from the pre-Islamic practices of urban Persia, and was one of the ways in which *shari'a* was used to reinforce urban social stratification (see page 29)<sup>72</sup>. *Kafa'a* does not allow slaves or those of slave ancestry to marry the free-born.

Abdullahi An-Na'im explains:

We had a very divisive debate about this. We [were] a group of radical, anti-slavery, [young members], even any reference to slavery in Islamic history we were ashamed of. We maintained that this should not be an issue in Sudanese society ... Taha was not open to that, he said "it is not an irrelevant factor because you cannot impose your choices on society. Slave ancestry is still a social issue, and ... you cannot pretend it's not an issue". And he said that in intimate family relations, when a man is becoming part of the family by marrying into the family, it is reasonable for the father to object to this man on the grounds of slave ancestry. But he would qualify that by saying "but if the woman wishes to go her own way, she can still do that, but she will be over-riding an objection, not that there is no objection"<sup>73</sup>

## Slaves and liberation

Slave ancestry was and still is the major class marker in Northern Sudanese villages, and according to Republicans, few of the Nile valley elite, not even Communists, then questioned why people of slave ancestry should not marry outside their class<sup>74</sup>. A 1968 study of Khartoum university student attitudes found that people of slave ancestry still carried the drink-and-prostitution tag which British and Sudanese elites used against them<sup>75</sup>. People of slave ancestry had heterogeneous experiences, however: some urban groups attained a higher status than the members of the peripheral societies from which their ancestors were stolen<sup>76</sup>. In 1973, a young woman who intended to marry an educated man of slave origin had to take her father to the *shari'a* high court to establish her right to marry her fiancé. The court, which used Hanafi law, acknowledged the couple's social parity and ruled that Sudanese slavery, based on kidnap and sale, had been practised in defiance of the *shari'a*<sup>77</sup>. In 1971, however, Taha was not able to rule against the aftermath of slavery so neatly. Although his legal theory

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<sup>71</sup>Henri Coudray, quoted in Renaud, nd:3

<sup>72</sup>Coulson 1964:49

<sup>73</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997

<sup>74</sup>Interviews, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 10/2/1997 and Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997; see Al-Shahi in Cunnison and James eds, 1972

<sup>75</sup>Noredenstam 1968:104f, 200f

<sup>76</sup>Makris 1996

<sup>77</sup>Sikainga 1996:120

opposed slavery, he acknowledged a painful and discriminatory cultural construct of the class system in order to enhance women's freedom.

## Taha and his audience

The needs which Taha's ideas met were not the needs of the people who would stand to benefit from their implementation, they were the needs of the modernist educated elite of Sudan who followed him. What they wanted was a way to live out their Islamic identity in a country deeply attached to Sufi Islam, yet not see that identity used to oppress marginalised groups.

One of Taha's followers, Abdullahi An-Na'im, says strongly in a later work:

It is morally repugnant, in my view, to subject women and non-Muslims to the indignities and humiliation of *Shari'a* today. I believe the public law of *Shari'a* was fully justified and consistent with its own historical context ... [but] these aspects of the public law of *Shari'a* are no longer politically tenable.<sup>78</sup>

Taha's audience was not the poor and the non-Muslims likely to benefit from his new rights. Women later became central to his movement, but in the 1960s, they were still peripheral. In any case Taha's written style in the 1960s did not aim at widespread comprehension. He used a language that was sometimes bafflingly obscure.

The obscurity of Sufi language might spring from its eternally frustrated desire to express the inexpressible. It might also be a way of isolating Sufi speculation from mainstream religion, or encoding otherwise censored criticism of the law<sup>79</sup>. But Taha used the ancient vocabulary for publicity, not secrecy. Abdullahi An-Na'im says that Taha fully accepted the author's responsibility to explain as against the audience's duty to understand<sup>80</sup>. Yet his choice of idiom reflected a choice of audience. His new ideology was directed to a small, urban, Arabised audience familiar with relatively inaccessible Islamic sources. In one book, he addressed the reader as follows:

You are in the city of Omdurman, where the rule of law prevails and security men are vigilant - there is no virtue in your walking the streets with a weapon ... but what is a virtue in Omdurman is not a virtue in the desert of the Kababish, or the Red Sea hills, or the southern jungles<sup>81</sup>.

Taha satisfied his audience with this choice of idiom. Erudite and spiritual rather than forensic, Taha's books use non-legal discourses to subvert *shari'a* and to re-construct a tolerant and cirenic Muslim identity for a place where Islam had been used as a war ideology,

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<sup>78</sup>An-Na'im 1990:59

<sup>79</sup>Lapidus 1988:195

<sup>80</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im, 10/11/1997

<sup>81</sup>Taha, *tatwir* 1979:46

as well as opening up for educated women a means of expressing their loyalty both to their Islamic faith and to their new western education.

## Making the case for the second message with non-legal discourses

The pyramid is one of the most frequently used metaphors in the "Second Message":

(Appendix 3 shows some of the pyramids). Taha's fondness for the metaphor, which he sometimes uses with impenetrable complexity, seems to lie in the fact that the pyramid is both ecumenical and teleological: that is, it has a broad base which encompasses the multiplicity of creation, and a fine summit which expresses soaring aspiration. Usefully, it has a top and a bottom, so it can be employed to bring opposed dualities into unexpected unities, or to use Taha's terminology, to say that all differences are difference of degree, not kind. Taha uses the pyramid metaphor to give a positive interpretation of evolution, from gases through solids to the human, which would have satisfied the most confident Darwinist (see pyramid 7). The metaphor also serves to unite opposites such as God's irresistible "will" and perfect "desire". The thorny theological problems of predestination and theodicy are given surprisingly convincing pyramid treatments. Taha's pyramids can be taken to unite two historical schemas: the first is the *shari'a* tradition's view where a brief moment of authenticity towers over an inauthentic past and future, and the second a slow evolution towards perfection, that has its counterpart in the Sufi spiritual quest. The pyramid is an expressive metaphor for the ecumenical, teleological and monist themes of Sufism.

Taha deals dextrously with these Sufi themes, but he also engages with his audience's western educations. He uses Sufism to explain and develop western ideas about evolutionary biology, sociology and anthropology.

## Sufi biology

Taha's account of evolution is given in a long introduction to *risalat al-salat*, which sees "all living things as links of one connected chain"<sup>82</sup>. The secrets of evolution and the physics of creation are hidden in the Qur'an, for example: "Then He lifted Himself to heaven when it was smoke and said to it and the earth, 'Come willingly, or unwillingly! They said, 'We come willingly'" (41:11), which Taha interprets as follows:

Smoke means water, in a state of vapour, and heaven and earth were a cloud of water vapour, all held together: they were torn apart, and diversity appeared out of this unity. The human seed was not absent then, it was a drop of that water vapour<sup>83</sup>.

Poetic verses like this one teased the minds of Sufis like Suhrawardi (d 1234)<sup>84</sup>. Like them, Taha used them to give a positive account of human development. Life moved from one-cell

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<sup>82</sup>Taha, *risalat al-salat* 1979:10

<sup>83</sup>ibid:11

organisms to *bashar*, people, who have yet to evolve into *insan*, human beings<sup>85</sup>. God created many morally sentient Adams before the Adam of the Qur'an and Bible appeared. The prophet Adam came later, after the extinction of many failed Adams "of the lineage of mud"<sup>86</sup>.

The first two stages of evolution are inorganic and organic matter, which Taha calls *al-islam al-'amm*, general Islam. General Islam expresses the irresistible divine will (*irada*) to which all is submitted. The third stage is the creation of mind, which inaugurates *al-islam al-khass*, special Islam. Special Islam offers humanity the chance to follow God's perfect desire (*rida*) instead of involuntary submission to his will (*irada*). God's desire leads humanity to the highest stage of evolution, perfection. Early Muslim social scientists used the cognate terms *khawass* and *'awwam* (elites and masses) to make class distinctions. Sufis used the same term to describe spiritual hierarchies (see page 96). Taha turns this distinction around: instead of having elect groups, he has an elect stage of Islam for everyone.

For Taha, religion is biology and the point of biology. It evolved for many centuries before Muhammad's revelations. He uses a poeticised account of evolutionary sciences to embellish pre-modern Sufi interpretations of these verses.

### Sufi pre-capitalist economic formations

The long introduction to *tatwir shari'at al-ahwal al-shakhsiya* deals with human pre-history, using themes from anthropology, sociology, and Islamic and Marxist thought. Taha's 1968 lecture gave a thoughtful and positive account of Marx's evolutionary thinking and his economic analysis<sup>87</sup>. He accepted too, Marx's search for material explanations for the mystery of human society: history was a record of class struggle culminating in the commercial frenzy of European colonialism<sup>88</sup>.

Taha's pre-history is a very legal one. Humanity's first laws regulated sex and property, two areas that need to be protected for society to come into existence. Early societies had to reconcile the individual's need for personal freedom with society's need for collective justice. At first, this reconciliation was effected through the bloody law of the jungle, with the excessive use of the death penalty, but present day efforts refine the means of reconciliation.

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<sup>84</sup>Dar in Sharif ed, 1 1993:362

<sup>85</sup>Taha uses two words usually translated as "human" - *bashar* and *insan*. The latter is the highest humanity which was Muhammad's experience and is the vocation of all men and women. Taha, *tatwir* 1979:39

<sup>86</sup>Taha, *risalat al-salat* 1979:13

<sup>87</sup>Taha, *al-marksiya fi al-mizan* 1977:21f

<sup>88</sup>ibid:17ff

Taha claims that the first message of Islam, the *shari'a* laws which marginalised women, slaves and non-Muslims, were appropriate for their time. Much of his work tries to vindicate these laws as necessary for the cruel past he constructs from Marx's history of class struggle and the Islamic picture of the *jahiliya* (the barbarous ignorance before Muhammad's revelation). *Shari'a* is only a modified form of the law of the jungle, an attempt to regulate the excesses of the *jahiliya* with the coercive power of the state. Pashukanis criticises this use of the past:

bourgeois scholars easily transfer law to pre-class society, find it in the pre-state life of primitive tribes, and conclude that communism is unthinkable without law. They turn law as an empty abstraction into a universal concept devoid of historical content<sup>89</sup>.

## Law and ethics

Taha is not really one of these "bourgeois scholars". He shares communist scepticism about positive law - the idea that the rules and institutions of the law come from textual or other sources embellished with abstract mystifications and imposed by police and courts.

Comparisons between the *shari'a* tradition and Taha's laws are problematic, because he often redefines legal terminology. In 1952, Taha used *qanun wad'i* to mean positive law, but while most Muslim legists define *qanun wad'i* in contradistinction to *shari'a*, Taha (like many legal sceptics) defines it in contradistinction to ethics, or "heavenly law"<sup>90</sup>.

Taha's attempt to distinguish between the legal and the ethical owed much to Sufi antinomianism. However, he also drew on the *shari'a* tradition's own attempt to acknowledge that laws and ethics can be different. In Islamised states, only part of the *shari'a* corpus is enforced law: the *mu'amalat*, or transactions, which cover everything from divorce to sales; and the *hudud*, the stoning, crucifixion and amputation for specified offences stipulated in the Qur'an. These Qur'anic punishments are considered to be the irrevocable rights of God, whereas all other laws are the rights of humanity. Taha assigned these irrevocable rights to his ethics. The *hudud* perfectly express his fundamental ethic, the golden rule of reciprocity, do as you would be done by. That principle states that when people respond to freedom by choosing the good, they are rewarded with more freedom; when they choose the bad, that freedom is taken away. Law is a means of teaching freedom, it is an "educational programme"<sup>91</sup>.

Taha's proposals overturn part of the positive law content of *shari'a*, the laws of transactions (*mu'amalat*). For Taha, the rest of *shari'a* is ethical: the rules of worship, and the *hudud*, the

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<sup>89</sup>Pashukanis 1980:281f

<sup>90</sup>"Positive laws and heavenly laws" 25/8/1952 in Taha *rasa'il wa maqalat* 1973:22vf

<sup>91</sup>Taha, *al-risala al-thania* nd:43

rights of God<sup>92</sup>. And even these rules eventually disappear when "the self shall appear in all its glory"<sup>93</sup>. Mahmoud (1998) criticises Taha for overlooking the ethical content of *shari'a*, but Taha probably felt he was vindicating that content.

For Taha, the law withers away through God's grace, while for Marx, class struggle has the same effect. Marx did not understand that divine goodness makes the history of class struggle only a temporary phase, says Taha. But *shari'a* is a progressive programme, which aims for a human ethic, *shari'at al-insan*. Human law will be the outcome and the reward for all this struggle, a perfect balance of social and individual needs. Finally, human law is recast as self-expression, as will be seen in the next section.

## Sufi pyramids

For Taha, the outcome of struggle is predestined to goodness. Drawing on an account of creation first given by ibn al-'Arabi, Taha says that all creatures obey the creative decree (*al-amr al-takwini*) of God in order to come into existence<sup>94</sup>. God does not desire involuntary submission to his will (*irada*), so he draws people into his perfect desire (*rida*) through a rudimentary form of law, collective *shari'a* (*shari'a jami'iyah*). Lower, collective *shari'a* restricted freedom by creating a powerful, paternalist state, so in order for humanity to be invited into God's desire, God provides them with a higher, individual *shari'a* (*shari'a fardiya*). For Taha, this invitation to goodness is greater than creation, it is the legislative decree of God (*al-amr al-tashri'i*). The law of each individual gives him or her the liberating choice to do good, which for Taha is absolute freedom (see pyramids 1,2 and 3). Thus the law is the same as creative self-expression, in the way that God's self-expression is regular and creative.

The law, then, is not a means for expressing power relationships at all, but a means for expressing the self. The individual chooses good or evil, but when evil is chosen, it is through God's permissive will (*irada*). God uses the law to coax believers into doing the good because they love it, so that they may enjoy the goodness of goodness. As the worshipper becomes more engaged with God, prohibitory laws have less and less meaning. And eventually, on earth or in hell, people will learn to choose goodness and thereby enter paradise. Thus all creatures, all religions, all laws lead inexorably to God. God accepted the law of the jungle, that is, the law that might makes right. He revealed traditional *shari'a* to curtail the excesses of jungle law. However traditional *shari'a* is not perfect, or at least its perfection:

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<sup>92</sup>See for example RB *lajnat ta'dil al-qawanin bija'liha lihadd al-khamr ta'ziran tuzayyif al-shari'a wa tu'awwaq ba'th al-din* 1979:11.

<sup>93</sup>Taha, *Second Message* 1987:107

<sup>94</sup>Affifi in Sharif ed, 1, 1993:418



consists precisely in the ability to evolve, assimilate the capabilities of individuals and society, and guide such life up the ladder of continuous development ... It is in fact those who are perfect who evolve and develop<sup>95</sup>.

Taha's pyramids draw the lesser up to the level of the greater, they include complexity in unity. That is to say that they express the ethical and monist themes in Sufism. Taha's pyramidal understanding of the relationship between law and ethics is expressed in pyramids 2 and 5. The summit of law is not about prohibition or permission, but self-expression. Is Taha speaking here in earth or in heaven? He does not say. If he envisages this on earth, his ideas bear more than a passing resemblance to the Marxist idea of the withering away of state and law in the communist utopia, through the efforts of an educative state which works itself out of a job.

Taha's accuser Husayn Zaki repeatedly criticises Taha's attempt to conceptualise absolute individual freedom - for him, life without enforceable *shari'a*, or positive law, is unimaginable<sup>96</sup>. But Taha's legal scepticism is bound up with the idea of *haqiqa* (ultimate reality, the aspiration of Sufism). The movement from collective law to individual law is the same as that from *shari'a* to *haqiqa*, and similar to the move from traditional *shari'a* to ethics (see pyramids 3 and 5). These grand upward movements are like a pyramid that leads from earth to heaven (pyramid 6).

Taha's pyramid symbolism is nuanced and suggestive, but does not make for clear law. Rather he is calling for a new form for human unity - the unities of the law, the state and doctrine are all in fact causes of strife, but humanity can unite around *'ilm* (mystical knowledge, equivalent to ultimate reality). "The miracle of the second message is the 'mysticality' (*'ilmiya*) of the Qur'an", to which might be added, the "mysticality" of the law<sup>97</sup>.

## Time for a change

The introduction to this chapter noted how different actors on the Islamic scene conceptualise different chronologies of past golden ages, and then use these chronologies for political purposes (see page 160). The *shari'a* tradition's chronology runs as follows: creation, barbarous and cruel period before revelation, short infallible period of revelation, period after revelation, and the end of time. But Taha spent his prison *khalwa* in a different time, an eternal present where golden past and future met. He did not see the present as a hiatus between the thunderous voice of revelation and the cataclysm of judgement, but saw the whole

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<sup>95</sup>Taha, *Second Message* 1987:39

<sup>96</sup>Zaki 1985/6:128ff

<sup>97</sup>Taha, *tatwir* 1979:89

of history through the optimistic monist chronology of Sufism, which unites God, the world and time in a progressive upward movement.

Taha's pyramidal vision swerves perspective and allows these two conflicting chronologies to slide into unity. The *shari'a* revelation is not the centre of linear time, it is half-way up a pyramid to perfection. Beneath *shari'a* lies jungle law, above it, perfect unity. But all laws have their own time and purpose, and every form of human understanding leads to God. "It is wrong to reject anything in human heritage by judging it as absolutely vain", he said<sup>98</sup>.

Religion did not descend from on high, it grew on earth and was purified by heaven as it rose upward. Taha says that God even willed atheism and polytheism (Taha uses the inoffensive term '*aqidat al-ta'addud* rather than the anathematising *shirk*)<sup>99</sup>.

Taha has to explain why the time is now ripe to enact this higher human law, which assigns equal rights to all humans. What allows Taha to switch from one chronology to another? In *tatwir shari'at al ahwal al-shakhsiya* he settles for a familiar answer: changes in the modes and relations of production imply legal and social changes. The time has now come to change because, "by God's grace, technology has come to take on work instead of slaves, and production is abundant"<sup>100</sup>. Equally, women can expect rights because changing relations of production - including women in the highest professions - mean that they are capable of the highest responsibility<sup>101</sup>.

But Taha believed strongly in the relation between the global and the personal, and the new introduction to the 1971 edition of his "Second Message" hints that the change will come about through a man whose stature compares with the prophet Muhammad's. Taha says that while Muhammad was the last prophet (*nabi'*), there were still messengers (*rasuls*) to come. Both terms are titles of Muhammad, but Taha was trying to suggest that the change to the new society would come about through the perfection of one man, "who knows the Qur'an, and is authorised to speak"<sup>102</sup>. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Taha began to make more explicit references to the place of this perfect man in his new order, as chapter 15 will show.

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<sup>98</sup>Taha, *al-marksiya* 1977:8

<sup>99</sup>Taha, *tatwir* 1979:20

<sup>100</sup>*ibid*:35

<sup>101</sup>*ibid*:48

<sup>102</sup>Taha, *al-risala al-thania* nd:11

# Conclusion

## Domestic violence

This chapter has tried to show that Taha's abrogation theory was both vague and persuasive. Taha used pre-modern Sufi themes to articulate a widespread Islamic-modernist distinction between an ethical kernel and a legal husk to the Qur'anic message. This notion is not just the preserve of Harvard feminists like Leila Ahmed - the Libyan president Muamar al-Gaddafi has tried to reconfigure the sources of Islam, and even more widely, many Muslims intuitively avoid the harsher permissions and obligations of the law, as the Qur'an itself admits (see above, page 165). Abdullahi An-Na'im accepts the comparison, but argues that Taha's contribution was definitive. No other Muslim reformer can satisfactorily account for changing the legislative content of the Qur'an, which permits wife-beating:

The Muslim who says "I will never strike my wife" has no response to the Muslim who does, and who has a legal right to do so. It is becoming rarer and rarer in urbanised middle-class communities ... [A] middle class professional career man is increasingly unlikely to hit his wife - but the legal right [to do so] remains under *shari'a*.<sup>103</sup>

Taha may have used abrogation theory carelessly but that does not diminish his contribution. He was able to subvert *shari'a* rules in a way that al-Gaddafi, Ahmed and many happily married Khartoum professionals might want to do. This was unprecedented. Al-Shafi'i forcefully used abrogation to end the uncertainties of revelation, and create an ideological product that could be more easily handled by a centralising state. Taha used it in a completely different way - to express the dynamism and responsiveness of Islam to changing society, and to point Islam towards a Sufi utopia.

## Sufi law

Taha's use of Sufi themes was psychologically necessary - his ideas about *shari'a* were born in his intense moment of reflection which lasted from 1946 to 1951. His legal theory was bound up in his own self realisation, and that self-realisation was bound up with Sudan's Sufi heritage. He had the courage and breadth of imagination to mount an explicit challenge to *shari'a*, but those virtues were so closely tied to his religious experience that he could not untie them, even if it prevented his message being understood by people outside his tradition - the Muslim Brothers and the *shari'a* legists who prosecuted him, the followers of other religions, the uneducated women whom he wanted to liberate.

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<sup>103</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 11/11/1997

Finally, Taha's use of Sufi idioms to express his legal scepticism makes sense, because Sufi antinomianism has long implied a critique of *shari'a*. In the past, Sufis could criticise *shari'a* as a theological metaphor, or as an ideological tool of the state, through their flamboyant encounters with God and their dissident retreats. Apart from the crazy ironies of the *malamatiya* (see page 25), they had never attempted to subvert *shari'a* laws. Other Muslims had manipulated the rules with commercial loopholes, and slaves and tribes had adopted strategies to extract concessions from *shari'a*. Taha had the self-confidence to rework the sources systematically. He took the existing legal scepticism of Sufism and used it to deconstruct the rights instituted by *shari'a* laws, turning Sufi theosophy into an activist political platform and not just a justification for pious dissent. Sudanese Sufi leaderships were familiar with Sufi antinomianism. But their attachment to the highest Islam, *haqiqa*, was private - they used *shari'a* to deal with the common herd. They were never able to use Sufism to challenge the increasing use of *shari'a* as a form of state legitimacy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and that is why the Sufi patricians were vulnerable to the *shari'a* claims of the Muslim Brothers and their fellow travellers. Taha's contribution was not a small one, then: he used Sufism not merely to resist the law, as other Sufis had done in the past, but to legitimise a comprehensive reconstruction of the law.

# Chapter 13

## Modern Sufi

This chapter looks at Taha and his movement between 1969 and 1973. It shows how Taha used traditional methods to create a modern urban organisation, and suggests how that influenced the cultural identity of himself, his followers and Sudan. During this period, he set up a movement for women, which developed its own identity over the coming years, and the chapter follows Taha's Republican sisters into the mid 1970s.

## Nimeiri

### Peace

In May 1969, Nimeiri's troops set up a government dominated by progressive military officers and radicals affiliated to the Communist and Arab nationalist parties. It was significantly different from the last coup, where patricians and their supporters had done a deal with the military high command. This time, small radical parties joined junior officers for a revolution. However, the parties were soon to be marginalised by alliances between the military and the south.

The May regime canvassed for support in rural Sudan and began abolishing Native Administration. Nimeiri and his military supporters then proceeded to liquidate rival political forces. The leader of the Mahdist Ansar, al-Hadi al-Mahdi, was killed with several thousand supporters in a bombing raid on his Aba Island home after resisting the regime. Mahdist assets were confiscated in a sweeping but short-lived campaign of nationalisation. Communists manoeuvred for control of the revolution, but when a Communist major attempted a coup in 1971, the party was ferociously repressed. With Nimeiri's rivals destroyed, his May regime looked south for new allies. The war was going well for southern militias, now under a unified command, and the regime was able to broker a deal. A 1972 peace accord led to a permanent constitution for Sudan in 1973, which gave approximate

parity to African Noble Spiritual Beliefs, Islam and Christianity<sup>1</sup>. The widely-acclaimed accord attracted foreign capital and some able technocrats to the regime<sup>2</sup>.

## Country boy

Taha did not mourn the passing of the ICF and the sectarian parties, and he voluntarily dissolved his own party. The Republican offices in Morada closed and Taha's house in Sawra became the busy centre of the new Republican Brotherhood, as the party came to be called. Over the subsequent few years, Republicans passively supported Nimeiri. Taha saw him as a simple but straightforward country boy, *wad al-balad*, and he did not criticise the regime's violent suppression of the Mahdists and Communists, although he had defended Communist rights in 1965. He felt that their armed challenges to the state justified a severe response<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, he kept his distance from the regime, and Republicans refused to join Nimeiri's corporatist Sudan Socialist Union (SSU), which had a network of popular councils and party committees extending from village to nation, surprisingly similar to Taha's 1955 constitutional proposal (see page 123)<sup>4</sup>. These institutions were closely identified with the May regime, and became weakened by top-heavy centralisation<sup>5</sup>.

## Modern Sufi

### Oh happy man

The ban on party activity gave the Republicans time to consolidate. They spent the next few years talking and discussing, occasionally producing books and supporting pamphlets which would be accompanied by a series of lectures or debates led by Taha. Since the late 1960's, Republicans had held meetings at the end of Ramadan and *'id al-adha* a feast recalling Abraham's sacrifice of his son. These feasts are family occasions, but Republicans preferred Taha and the brotherhood to the company of their relatives. The Republicans began to function as a social group rather than as Taha's coterie. Two hundred Republicans celebrated the Ramadan feast at the 'Arakiya shrine at Abu Haraz in 1970, on the invitation of the *shaykh*<sup>6</sup>. Taha sent letters to the shrines of 'Araki *walis* he visited. One read:

If you know of any lack of guidance or sincerity in us, we hope you will turn with us to the blessed and exalted God that he might meet our needs by the blessing of our visit to you<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Text in Khalid 1985:47

<sup>2</sup>Fuller histories of the period in Niblock 1987, Khalid 1990

<sup>3</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar

<sup>4</sup>Interview, Abullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997

<sup>5</sup>Niblock 1987:257

<sup>6</sup>RB, *ma'alim* 2, 1976:45. The 'Arakiya are an localised Gezira tariga.

<sup>7</sup>ibid:52



The letters were placed in the tombs of the *walis*: a worshipper who later visited the shrine heard in a dream a voice calling from one of the shrines "Oh happy man! Come and get the answer to your letter"<sup>8</sup>.

The next year, the Republicans visited the Sadigab at Mundara, the Butana shrine of Taha's tribal forebear, Muhammad 'Abd al-Sadig al-Hamim. Taha and his followers chanted *zikr* (repetition of the name of God) from sunrise to forenoon, when they returned to Omdurman, with hearts "overflowing with joy, faces aglow with the light they had gained from that auspicious visit"<sup>9</sup>.

## Social movements

Taha used a repertoire of Sufi organisational techniques to create a new social movement. Communal *zikr*, hospitality, asceticism, charisma and charitable works: all established continuities with the religious experiences of his followers, many of whom were raised in the small-scale *tariga* environment of the northern Nile valley. Taha had the sympathetic authority of a Sufi *shaykh*, but he used it to attract educated people. Probably he viewed the intellectual project of reform, and the personal development of his followers as more important than institution building. Taha did not want to use his spiritual celebrity like a miracle-worker - he sought intellectual conviction from his followers, not ritual initiation<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless the movement had the authoritarian structure of a *tariga*. Taha appointed deputies based on his appreciation of their spiritual merit. One exclusivity that may have helped group cohesion was a Republican ban on prayer in mosques - Republicans would only be led in prayer by one of their number. They did not go on pilgrimage, preferring to spend the money on the movement's propaganda. These Republican obligations separated people from their families and built loyalty to the movement. The Republicans had many of the characteristics of social movements in Sudan - they offered an urban identity and a new set of relationships, which did not imply family or market ties. Such movements do imply the presence of the state, however. The Republican movement responded to the processes of education and urbanisation which had their roots in the state, and a high proportion of them were linked to what was then Sudan's only university, producing about 600 graduates a year in the early 1970s<sup>11</sup>.

Recent African studies writing has examined the growth of "social movements" as part of the growth of "civil society", two notions analysed by Mamdani<sup>12</sup>. Some commentators argue that

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<sup>8</sup>ibid:55

<sup>9</sup>ibid:57

<sup>10</sup>Interview, Omer El Garrai 25/11/1997

<sup>11</sup>Ministry of Culture and Information 1974:55

<sup>12</sup>Mamdani and Wamba-dia-Wamba 1995, Mamdani 1996

autonomous, voluntary organisations can relate to public opinion and culture and redefine the market, the family and the state, thereby promoting democracy, regardless of economic imbalances<sup>13</sup>. Mamdani criticises this view, arguing that civil society alone cannot democratise the patrimonial socio-economic systems of post-colonial Africa. It did not seem like that in 1970s Sudan, however, when Taha's social movement enthusiastically exploited new arenas for dialogue in the hope that their persuasive powers would reinvent the state.

The students held public debates on campus, introducing political, cultural, social or religious topics and then opening them up for discussion. These debates eventually were held on street corners, squares and roundabouts. Republicans came to see these "free forums" as the means to challenge the popular loyalties to patrician elites which thwarted Sudan's democratisation, and to challenge the "imported" ideologies of the Communists and Muslim Brothers (the ICF had reverted to its old name)<sup>14</sup>. The Republicans believed that they empowered people to decide their own futures.

Debate became a central part of the Republican movement's internal and external structure<sup>15</sup>. Chapter 12's account of the debate on marriage and slavery indicates how divisive these debates could be. Younger, more "rationalist" Republicans had a radical approach to social questions, which Taha sometimes opposed. Abdullahi An-Na'im, commenting on a later debate, notes that Taha was a gracious opponent and made a point of thanking him when he challenged Taha's views<sup>16</sup>. The significance of the marriage-slavery debate was not only legal - it highlighted a division in the movement which began to be obvious in the late 1960's, between Republican rationalists and mystics. Abdullahi An-Na'im was from a secularist background, and identified with other young rationalist Republicans. These Republicans were young, clever activists who wanted a persuasive ideology for the Republican free forums. Other Republicans put more faith in a higher power. After one debate, Taha asked Abdullahi An-Na'im:

Do you think Abdullahi that people will come to our way by persuasion? The way you wish?  
No, its going to be a transformation, like the flip of a coin<sup>17</sup>.

Against the young rationalist Republicans were a group called the *waqtajiya*, or those awaiting the time of transformation. They worked just as hard in the street discussions, but they did not have the modernising approach of some university men. The movement was not

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<sup>13</sup>Mamdani 1996:14f

<sup>14</sup>RB, *al-sulh khayr* ("Reconciliation is good") 1977:12

<sup>15</sup>See Howard 1988

<sup>16</sup>Interview, Abdullahi an-Na'im 8/11/1997

<sup>17</sup>ibid

broad enough to include Muhammad al-Khayr al-Mihaysi, who left because he claimed the same spiritual rank as Taha, but it was broad enough to include radically different approaches to life and politics, mediated by Taha's personality.

## Fatin Hamama and football clubs

After Taha wrote about new marriage laws, an Egyptian film called *urid hallan* ("I want a dis/solution") was in the cinemas, and Taha urged everyone to watch it. Fatin Hamama (one of Taha's favourite actors) topped the bill: she was married to a tormentor, and was looking for a divorce.

Taha convincingly blended the modern and traditional. He wanted Republicans to study *shari'a* with a beautiful Egyptian at the cinema, and he taught *shari'a* in football clubs. Mosque preachers, under the influence of the Muslim Brothers and their fellow travellers, refused Taha a hearing, so he would go and speak in the clubs set up by neighbourhood football teams. Football had been used by the British to reform leisure and to act as a political bromide (see page 63) but it had been eagerly taken up by the Sudanese. It was not just a sport - it offered communities a means of setting up small-scale social movements outside the control of the state or religion, and these autonomous spaces were perfect for Taha's purposes<sup>18</sup>.

Other aspiring political groups used these autonomous spaces - the Muslim Brothers and the Ansar al-Sunna, a group following the radical, anti-Sufi Islam of the Arabian preacher ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. Clubs also invited experts to talk about medicine or science. Television was underdeveloped at the time and clubs were still a place for informing and explaining<sup>19</sup>. Taha was better at it than most: he could draw 200-400 people, spilling out on to the street. He could manage an entertaining and complex religious and cultural argument in half an hour. He would hang around after the talk, and walk people home rather than disappearing into a car. Some of his lectures have been preserved, on tape or in print, and they are often more accessible and compelling than his longer works. Instead of Sufi obscurities, he would draw examples from stories in the papers, quote sonorously from the Qur'an, or make precise little analogies with popular science and culture<sup>20</sup>. "When he spoke, you couldn't leave until he finished", says Yusuf Hasan, then a philosophy student and now a senior official in the Ansar, whom Taha never persuaded<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup>Interview, Omer El Garrai 25/11/1997

<sup>19</sup>Ministry of Culture and Information 1974:55

<sup>20</sup>For example, text of lecture in RB *al-ustadh mahmud muhammad taha yuhaddith al-nisa' fi huquqihinn* ("Ustaz Mahmud Muhammad Taha speaks to women about their rights"), 1976

<sup>21</sup>Interview, Yusuf Hasan 14/6/1997

## Al-Ghazali pop

Taha used group religious activities to create group cohesion, including a distinctive *zikh* - the Republicans would only repeat the word Allah, and not use the divine epithets chanted by the *tarigas*. It was noted in chapter 6 that Taha was fond of the *maddahs*, hymn singers who would sing for their supper at family celebrations and Sufi centres. The Republicans did not use their *madih*, or hymns, but improvised a new form of religious music which they called *inshad*, songs. They had popular and recognisably secular melodies and style. Across Africa, new economic and social distinctions, and urbanisation gave rise to new musics to cope with the explosion of new identities<sup>22</sup>. This secular music was eagerly appropriated by Taha's young intellectuals.

Republican poets put the melodies were to words and Republican musicians sang them<sup>23</sup>. They also used Middle Eastern Sufi poets like al-Ghazali, sending away to Baghdad for particularly obscure pre-modern writers who dealt with Sufi themes of love for God<sup>24</sup>. It was noted in chapter 2 how Sudanese Sufis distinguish between older demotic poetry in praise of local *shaykhs*, and newer material about the prophet and God which was deemed more literate and theologically respectable. Republican songs were about God and the prophet, but they would also sing in honour of Sufi *shaykhs*, like Hasan al-Mirghani.

The songs have one or a number of lead singers with a congregational response at the end of each verse. They are full of solemnity and passion, introduced with long explanations which borrowed eclectically from the Qur'an, *hadith*, Arabic gospels, and Sufi poets. Often the congregation was led by a woman singer, a sound as strange as a female muezzin<sup>25</sup>. Nile valley women may have sung *madih* within the family or at women-only occasions, but they did not sing for common worship<sup>26</sup>. But these women would put on a professional performance of mystical praise, every dawn, with the cocks crowing in the background.

## Indigestion

In other ways, Taha appropriated traditional and modern themes from his own background. In his early 20s, he was still one of Mr Souper's "boys" at Gordon College, and the young people who later surrounded him were going through a similar experience, living a lengthening gap between parental home and marriage. It was an increasingly common experience for the young men of the nascent middle class in Sudan, to leave a village home and share a small cheap

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<sup>22</sup>Manuel 1988:17

<sup>23</sup>Sadig 1988:29

<sup>24</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf 13/6/1997

<sup>25</sup>Audio tape 21/6/1979

<sup>26</sup>Osman 1990:123

house with other students or professionals. In the mid 1980s, Hanan Bulabula, the Sudanese singer, summed up the experience in a song that is a beguiling invitation to marriage:

Indigestion, indigestion, that's bachelorhood  
You eat *ful* and lentils in bachelorhood

Many young men, eating urban fast-foods and waiting for marriage, turned to Taha, and it was decided that they should have a house together near Taha's. He did not like the usual term *bayt al-'azaba* (bachelors' house) and decided it should be called *bayt al-akhwan*, the brothers' house. In 1973 there were three of the houses in Khartoum, and their monastic arrangements drew the approval of a visiting Jesuit priest, Henri Coudray:

Men and women live there for a period of ... detachment from the world to consecrate themselves to God, which means in particular sexual continence. They live in quarters segregated ... In these communities, they receive training to live out the virtues of the "Second Message of Islam": personal and communal prayer, especially in the "last third of the night", in accordance with Sufi and Brotherhood practice; sharing of goods by making communal a part of their salaries for the community's needs; militant action and teaching; organising retreats; debates and the distribution of the works of Mahmud Taha in the streets<sup>27</sup>.

The Republican houses spread around the major towns of Sudan, and each one had a leader appointed by Taha. There were 20-40 men in each house, sharing the cooking and cleaning. Not everyone was committed to the movement - some people stayed with Republican family members, but the movement had the kind of fuzzy borders that allowed for their presence.

## Republican sisters

### Republican daughters

Since 1946, Taha had written on the question of women's rights. Like many intellectuals of his generation, he accepted the idea that women had the right to be involved in society. However, there were no Republican women's groups analogous to the Communist-leaning Women's Union or the women's sections of the Umma and Islamic Charter Front. In the late 1960's, a few women had begun to attend the party headquarters in Omdurman. They were all junior relatives of senior Republicans - the daughters of Taha, Muhammad Fadul, Zanoon Gubara, and Taha's niece Batoul Mukhtar<sup>28</sup>. In the 1970s, more middle class women went to university - almost 500 attended tertiary education institutes in the capital in 1973, and the movement began to recruit them<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup>Quote in Renaud, nd:2

<sup>28</sup>Interview, Mona Zanoon Gubara 12/7/1998, letter, Elnour Hamad 12/4/1998

<sup>29</sup>Figures in Hale, 1996b:129

As the movement spread through colleges and universities, it got bigger and younger. Women began to join up in greater numbers in the mid-1970's. Women's education had gained increasing acceptance in northern Sudanese Muslim society, but the expectation that women should live with a male relative and guardian was almost universal. This was not a social norm that Taha could lightly ignore, and it was decided that Republican sisters, as they were called, could stay with his family - his wife, daughters and niece. His sister Umm Kulsum stayed there too, as did al-Rabb Biyjud, the granny of the house. The sisters became an important part of the movement: although most of them were related to Republican men, they developed their own identity. Eventually, they began to participate in Republican street debates. Although Taha had abolished the veil in his "Second Message of Islam", sisters chose to wear the elegant Sudanese *tob* (a sari-like wrap) out of sensitivity for local custom. They wore white *tobs*, because white was the colour of working women's *tobs*, and they believed that their missions were work. The brotherhood offered women religious equality and a chance to engage in communal worship which was denied them by most other Islamic groups in Sudan. Women could even give the call to prayer.

## Life stories

Women's religion in Sudan is more eclectic as a result of women's exclusion from collective worship. Women, and people of slave ancestry, dominate the spirit possession cults, and in some areas, women use some Christian rituals - a grandmother may mark the heads of sick children with a watery cross, in a ritual reminiscent of baptism. However, educated women with access to textual religion found these practices unsatisfying or associated them with heterodoxy, poverty, and non-literate culture. For example, Asma Gizouli, a Rufa'a woman, wanted to express her religious devotion, and she turned to the Tijaniya, a Moroccan *tariga* which spread across west Africa and Sudan in the nineteenth century<sup>30</sup>. She followed the *tariga* for 17 years, but she never once saw her fellow worshippers - they would drop books and rosaries through her door and expect her to get on with her devotion alone. She knew Taha - she had watched him praying by the river during his *khalwa*, and eventually she became a Republican. Her daughter, who joined up in 1974, attributes her mother's decision to the lack of pastoral care in the Tijaniya. Republican sisters had the attention and guidance of Taha and the leadership, which included women<sup>31</sup>.

'Awatif 'Abd al-Gadir joined the next year. She was a school student from a religious Kosti family, and she had a strong sense of the discrimination that she and other women faced. She got hold of one of Taha's books from her brother (two of her brothers were Republicans). It

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<sup>30</sup> Abu Nasr 1965:157ff

<sup>31</sup> Interview, Fatma Yusuf 5/12/1997



was the first time that she had read that women and men were equal. When she visited Omdurman that summer, she went to visit Taha's house. She stayed the whole summer, and there she met women professionals, women judges, older women who could express their commitment to a prestigious, textual Islam, without having to adopt the practices she believed were oppressive. "In my mind, a woman could not be zealously religious unless she was stupid - because it gives her nothing," she said, but when she saw the respect that Taha accorded to her and heard more of his views, she joined up. Taha made a point of praising women who spoke up in large meetings for the first time<sup>32</sup>. Some of her family opposed her, but her father was glad to see that Taha had provided her with answers: "He thought that the *ustaz* had taken a big burden from him. He shut me up!"<sup>33</sup>.

1975 was the United Nations' International Year of Women, and the Republicans took up the cause. Taha decided that the sisters should join in the movement's activities, and he sent them out on the streets to preach. He had been accompanied by women followers before, and taken them into the clubs where he spoke. Sudanese women were excluded from urban mosques and market places in the Nile valley, and it was strange to see them in a club. Whatever Taha's topic, the first question was always: "Why are those girls here?"<sup>34</sup>. Taha's decision to have sisters preaching on the street was even more of a challenge to the picture of feminine invisibility that had been promoted alongside the *shari'a* tradition in Sudanese towns for a couple of centuries. One sister, Fatma Abbas, did not read or write but learned to make public speeches on the need for a new Islamic jurisprudence - Taha called her "*burhan al-fikra* (the proof of [Republican] ideology)"<sup>35</sup>. Howard notes:

The women often endured insults while speaking or trying to distribute Republican literature on the streets of Khartoum. Because the members considered their efforts to raise the status of women the hallmark of the movement's progressive philosophy, the sisters bore the double burden of acting as symbols while trying to understand the changing order<sup>36</sup>.

In 1974, Taha began a series of talks for women, with a few fathers present to ensure propriety. He told them that they were the equal of men, and ran through his ideas about the second message, the fallacies of *fiqh*, the difference between the Meccan and Medinan Qur'an. Taha used broad Sudanese dialect to phrase this dauntingly intellectual message, and then published his lectures in colloquial Arabic, a language seldom written down. By 1975, the movement was producing a large volume of pamphlets on the rights of women, the veil, women's spirituality, polygamy and the Sudanese Women's Union. Batoul Mukhtar and Asma Mahmud were the first to take to the streets, and they were later joined by others. They joined

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<sup>32</sup>Howard 1988:88

<sup>33</sup>Interview, 'Awatif 'Abd al-Gadir

<sup>34</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud 29/11/1997

<sup>35</sup>ibid

<sup>36</sup>Howard 1988:90

in the delegations which travelled around Sudan. Republican sisters could choose to stay in Taha's own home - they participated fully in the long round of activity from before dawn to late at night. Al-Rabb Biyyud lived there too, now an elderly woman and a Republican sister, accorded the deference due to Taha's mother by the educated young women in the house<sup>37</sup>. She died there, in the early 1980s, and Taha buried her in Omdurman.

## Poverty and love

### Asceticism for cats

Taha's spiritual children now were taking up more time, and his devotion to the cause had led him deeper into asceticism. In the late 1960s he had given up engineering and exchanged his pith helmet for a turban. He ate sparingly, with the women and children - who, according to Sudanese custom, usually had the leftovers of men's meals<sup>38</sup>. He became a vegetarian, a highly unusual step in Sudan, and began to wonder about animal rights. Since the 1950s, Muslim Brothers and Communists had looked for friends in the army - Taha was still asking Buddhist questions:

What's the difference between Pif-Paf and a machine gun?<sup>39</sup>

Pif-Paf is a domestic insecticide spray. Taha would not kill mosquitoes, flies or scorpions. He liked going to the zoo, and all the local cats knew to come around at mealtimes. The cats might have done well, but Taha's intense morality meant that his family was getting poorer, and the food at home was getting less presentable. He travelled fourth class ("Because there is no fifth class" he said, quoting Gandhi, to anyone who asked why he was slumming it). He gave up his office and kept his possessions in a suitcase. The family also lived like this. Amna Lutfi had only one *tob* (wrap), and her only shoes had a hole. One day she was visiting her neighbour and cut her foot. She was crying, because she was the daughter of a school inspector who did not even have proper shoes. And one of her guests turned up her nose at the thin *mulah* stews she produced for her vegetarian husband. Taha would tell her that valuing your own humanity meant that you did not own much. Amna took some time to be convinced, but Taha's daughters, and his niece Batoul Mukhtar, were eager to hear about Taha's ideas. Eventually Amna gave up material prosperity and pretty frocks for Taha's values<sup>40</sup>. She became mother Amna to hundreds of young Republicans.

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<sup>37</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar

<sup>38</sup>Interview, Yusuf Lutfi 3/12/1997

<sup>39</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 17/6/1997

<sup>40</sup>Interview, Amna Lutfi and Asma Mahmud 28/11/1998

## Voluntary poverty

Taha expected some asceticism of his followers. By the mid 1970's, both Asma and her cousin Batoul Mukhtar had got jobs in government service, and they took responsibility for Taha and his wife. Amna was not well and finding life at home hard going, and she bought a house nearby, so that she could retreat at night from the incessant activity of Taha's house. Amna and Sumaya commuted between the two houses, but Batoul Mukhtar, their cousin, stayed with Taha. She paid his way for him, and Asma supported her mother<sup>41</sup>. Taha never touched money again. The brotherhood's funds came from voluntary contributions from the members and the sale of books.

Taha was "obsessed" with self-reliance, and he depended for funds on a group of young professionals, mainly teachers and students, plus the pennies that they charged for their pamphlets produced on a roneo<sup>42</sup>. The movement did not seek riches, and its outgoings were small too. Taha distributed his own household money, and the movement's funds, to people from disadvantaged groups. The Republicans were not involved in collective social action, organising people for change, but Taha had a function analogous to that of a small *tariga shaykh*, providing cash and access to a network of people with up-market professional services, for needy people outside the kinship group<sup>43</sup>. The kind of people who asked were mendicant dervishes and hymn singers, people from Heglig, his home town, and local poor people. Taha could get them the services of a Republican lawyer or doctor, or pay for a prescription. However, unlike rural *tariga shaykhs*, Taha did not encourage these people to join the movement, or even to acknowledge his religious claims - the movement was dominated by the educated<sup>44</sup>.

## Involuntary poverty

The brotherhood had no grass-roots social programme that would have mobilised marginal groups, and its theoretical preoccupations were unlikely to entice people whose time to think was taken up with toiling for subsistence. Republicans are keen to dispel the idea that theirs was a purely intellectual movement. Taha himself used to say that Republican recruitment was based not on texts or speeches, but on *lisan al-hal*, communicating spirituality<sup>45</sup>. Taha's spontaneous and unorganised response to poverty in Sudan was part of that attempt to communicate spirituality, and not an attempt to reconstruct economic power. Other political groups organised the economic interests of urban workers or professionals, but Taha's

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<sup>41</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud 30/11/1997

<sup>42</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997

<sup>43</sup>Interview, Elnour Hamad 30/11/1997

<sup>44</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud 30/11/1997

<sup>45</sup>Taha, quoted by Elnour Hamad, interview 30/11/1997

extempore charity was not aimed at mobilising a following. Taha believed that his charity, and contempt for wealth, was a means to his goal of perfecting self-expression through becoming a perfect expression of God. That perfection, he believed, was more dynamically effective than economic and social action.

## Marriage

By the late 1970s, there were over 200 sisters in the movement, most of them from Republican families<sup>46</sup>. Taha paid special attention to their needs, he would say: "my work is my female disciples"<sup>47</sup>. Republican youth were unsurprisingly interested in marriage, and encouraged to marry each other. These marriages took place under the spartan conditions of the Republican marriage contract, where the bridewealth paid by the man was only one Sudanese pound, and there were no extravagant wedding parties. Girgis Iskander, who no longer saw much of Taha, but still kept in touch, criticised him for condemning young people to bleakly ascetic marriages, where commitment to Republican ideas outweighed any commitment to gladdening the heart. But the young Republicans, he believes, were content with their lot: Taha was giving them the keys to life's mystery, promising a future of messianic gold, as well as some interesting travel for the present<sup>48</sup>. In addition, Taha played on psychological links between asceticism and romantic ardour: for him, a wife is "a sister of your soul, an emanation of your soul"<sup>49</sup>.

Republicans do not recall their life with Taha as bleak - they often contrast his clean-shaven and quietly humorous demeanour with the scowling, bearded solemnity they associate with most religious leaders. They also recall how Taha's kind heart got in the way of his asceticism. Asma Mahmud, Taha's elder daughter, was a lawyer in the attorney-general's chambers. But she had no bed or pillow, and slept on a crowded floor. One day, a poor woman who was to marry a *darwish*, or religious mendicant, came to ask Taha for help with some tight finances. Taha told Asma and Batoul Mukhtar, his niece, "She's a bride. Go and get her some clothes". The two young professionals went out to the market to buy her a suitcase-full for her wedding<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup>Letter, Elnour Hamad 12/4/1998

<sup>47</sup>Eltayeb 1995:210

<sup>48</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander, 4/10/1997

<sup>49</sup>Taha, *tatwir* 1979:59

<sup>50</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud 30/11/1997

## Authenticity and poverty

Taha's movement was ascetic, intellectual and mystical, but it also tried to celebrate Sudan and Sudanese simplicity. Fourth class rail travel and thin *mulahs* were prized for their Sudanese-ness, but Taha's plain meals followed the elaborate rules of northern Sudanese hospitality<sup>51</sup>. He washed the hands of guests and arranged their dishes<sup>52</sup>. Thin *mulah* and fourth-class rail travel linked Taha to Sudanese-ness<sup>53</sup>. Dirar's history of African foods notes how colonialists tended to promote the use of European wheat breads against sorghum pancakes. This prejudice was taken up by the Sudanese elite, who have spent huge sums since independence subsidising wheat, and denigrating sorghum. Wheat was explicitly associated with progress, and sorghum was labelled a "killer food" by a senior politician in the late 1960s<sup>54</sup>. According to Dirar, food was one of a number of markers for culture and identity, in a country conventionally bifurcated into Arab and African. This shorthand does little justice to Sudan's diversity, and to the fact that someone like Taha wanted to identify with the Sudanese or the African even when he had a fluent and appreciative understanding of Middle Eastern culture and religion<sup>55</sup>. For him, railways, hospitality and Sufism had a Sudanese-ness that he desired.

Taha's Sudanese-ness was his attempt to place his revolutionary ideas in the personal and the local - his revolution was to come about through the perfection of a perfect man. In a 1974 work on religion and social development, Taha wrote that Sudan was the heart of Africa, and Africa was the first home of humanity and the place where it would find freedom. Technology and mysticism (the word *'ilm* covers both) would be able to unite its dazzling diversity into a unity that would revolutionise the world<sup>56</sup>. The Republicans' Sudan romanticism was for a while to dominate their propaganda effort, and bring to Taha's middle class, Nile valley Muslims a taste of the hugely diverse country in which they lived. A government ban helped them make the decision to widen their preaching.

## A ban

Taha could not keep out of the cut and thrust of politics. Nimeiri effectively out-manoeuvred Sudan's political forces, liquidating the Mahdist and Communist opposition to the May regime and cowing everyone else. He turned political attention to a new range of forces - the south and the marginalised regions. However, he needed political support in Sudan's developed core.

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<sup>51</sup>Interview, Steve Howard, 23/11/1997.

<sup>52</sup>Henri Courday quoted in Renaud, nd:4

<sup>53</sup>Interview, Steve Howard, 23/11/1997.

<sup>54</sup>Dirar 1993:106f

<sup>55</sup>See Howard 1988

<sup>56</sup>Taha, *al-din wa al-tanmiya al-ijtima'iya* 1974:16ff

He could not use the Mahdi and Mirghani family power bases, but many of his ministerial technocrats had links to the small-scale *tarigas* of the Nile valley. In 1974, he set up a ministry of religious affairs, which drew these *tarigas* into the structure of his SSU<sup>57</sup>. The Muslim Brothers used this ministry to penetrate the government.

Taha continued public lectures, which increasingly became the targets of protests from Muslim Brothers and their allies. Meetings often ended in a breach of the peace, and the police were called in, although prosecutions were never pursued with much vigour<sup>58</sup>. The Republicans could be just as litigious: in 1973 they raised a suit against Kosti preachers who were defaming Taha, one of a number in the 1970s<sup>59</sup>. The State Security Organ (SSO) began to see Taha's lectures as a liability for their operatives, and in 1972, Taha's prosecutors at his apostasy trial persuaded the Research Council of Cairo's al-Azhar university to denounce Taha. The Azhar legists complained to the ministry of religious affairs that Taha's writings were *kufur*, the capital crime of unbelief, because he had divided Muhammad's message into two "fundamental" and "subsidiary" messages. They petitioned the ministry to stop his "destructive activities"<sup>60</sup>. In 1973, the National Security Council banned Taha from public speaking<sup>61</sup>. Republicans take the ban to be an example of collusion between Muslim Brothers and their allies in the ministry that Nimeiri had just set up, and the security forces, tired of policing troublesome lectures<sup>62</sup>. But the ban was a loose one: in 1974 he lectured to students of the Islamic University, the former religious institute which had expelled Republican students 14 years before<sup>63</sup>. In 1975, al-Fatih 'Ali Mukhtar invited him on his Thursday night radio show, describing him as "the great Islamic thinker"<sup>64</sup>. The Republicans had little access to the state controlled media, and this made them depend on tracts and street discussions - the regime tolerated this activity, and Taha could rest from speaking, which was now increasingly the responsibility of his followers<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>57</sup>El Hassan 1993:85

<sup>58</sup>An-Na'im in Taha, *Second Message* 1987:8

<sup>59</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 17/11/1997

<sup>60</sup>Text of letter in RB, *al-din wa rijal al-din 'abr al-sinin* 1975:40

<sup>61</sup>An-Na'im in Taha, *Second Message* 1987:7f, and interview, 8/11/1997

<sup>62</sup>Interview, Eltayeb Hassan 21/8/1998

<sup>63</sup>Text in Taha, *al-din wa al-tanmiya*, 1974:25ff

<sup>64</sup>RB, *liqa' idha'i ma' al-ustadh mahmud muhammad taha* ("A radio interview with ustaz Mahmud Muhammad Taha") 1977:8

<sup>65</sup>Interview, Eltayeb Hassan 23/8/1998



## Conclusion

Taha's movement began to take off after the publicity of his trial. In the early 1970s, he began to use his leadership skills to build a new kind of social movement, which had similarities with Sudanese small-scale *tarigas* and modern social organisations. One of his most lasting innovations was to include women at the centre of his movement - he was able to attract over 200 to his cause over the next few years.

Republicans sacrificed time and money to join Taha's movement. Young women had to swap elegance for plain frocks and white office tobs, and young men had to give up tobacco, alcohol and substitute the camaraderie of their young friends for the prayer fellowship of the Republican houses<sup>66</sup>. Taha's views were idiosyncratically progressive, but young members warmed to them. In part, this was because Taha's ideas answered questions about their personal religious experience and allowed them to make sense of modern education and social ambitions. However, Taha's warm introspection, indefatigable activism, and personal generosity were a significant attracting forces. The next chapter shows how his followers appropriated his insights and tried to disseminate them around the country.

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<sup>66</sup>Interviews, Khalid Muhammad al-Hasan 23/11/1997 and Awatif Abd al-Gadir 25/11/1997

# Chapter 14

## *Wafd*

The first Republican *wafds*, or delegations, had toured Sudanese cities in the 1960s, with Taha leading and speaking. In the 1970s, Taha was banned from public speaking and he directed a new kind of delegations from his home. Republicans, from a fairly narrow ethnic and class group, tried to engage with unfamiliar people and societies on the margins of Sudan.

## After the ban

### Full-time teacher of law and mystery

In 1973, Taha could shrug off the SSO ban on free expression. Rather than turn against Nimeiri, he began to move from passive to active support - he still believed that Nimeiri's centralised secularism was better than the sectarianism it replaced<sup>1</sup>. Taha did not condemn Nimeiri when he bombed the Ansar, nor when he repressed the Communist movement that they had both worked to defend a few years earlier.

Taha's movement was growing, and the Republican houses provided comprehensive spiritual formation to his young followers, that entitled them to speak on his behalf. He, in turn, could concentrate on their spiritual training, and become a full-time teacher of law and mystery. He produced spiritual self-help books, with titles like "Learn how to pray" (*ta'allamu kayfa tasallun*), and encouraged his followers to seek to express their authentic selves through scrupulous imitation of the prophet, just as he had done in Kober prison<sup>2</sup>. Taha's interest in dreams was noted in chapter 11 (page 156), and his notion of prehistoric libidinal instincts was discussed in chapter 12 (page 179). His self-help books mixed Sufi and psychoanalytic terms for the unconscious. He said that prayer was like a psychotherapy session, "a chance ... to engage in dialogue with psychological complexes repressed in the layers of the inner self"<sup>3</sup>. Since the late 1960s, Taha had delegated speaking authority to his followers, at first asking them to answer questions in public meetings, then letting them speak themselves. This

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<sup>1</sup>Interview, Abdallah al-Dabi 5/12/1997

<sup>2</sup>Al-Karsani, nd:4

<sup>3</sup>Taha, *ta'allamu kayfa tasallun* 1972:64

devolution of power led to a greater stress on internal dialogue. The movement would debate an issue, and then appoint a group to write up the party line, which would then be distributed and discussed in their street meetings. When Taha was banned, he had a large cadre of trained and enthusiastic young people to speak for him. They no longer limited themselves to urban streets, but took off to the distant corners of Sudan, to spread the Republican message.

Nimeiri's ban was Taha's opportunity:

From the mid-seventies, the movement took off. His house was totally open, he had no privacy day or night ... You could go at six o'clock or five o'clock in the morning and people would be in his room. You could leave at 1am and people would be there<sup>4</sup>.

## Umm Kulsum and prayer

The houses of the young brothers and sisters were full of people at prayer. Taha encouraged the supererogatory prayer in the last third of the night, a time when the prophet prayed. At that benighted hour, there were so many fervent worshippers that it was hard to find a place to kneel. Taha, of course, did not pray the canonical prayers. In the evening, the Republicans joined together for *zikr*, and as the call to prayer drifted across the evening sky, he would send the brothers and sisters off to pray together. Then he would retire to his room and listen to the news from the BBC, or to the long Egyptian love songs of Umm Kulsum, the most popular singer of the Arabic speaking world<sup>5</sup>.

The book campaigns and street corner debates were part of Republican spiritual formation too. Taha believed that his own period of retreat was making his life whole, so that everything in his life would relate to everything else. This was his template for the unity of his followers, of Sudan and the world. Republican spirituality emphasised connections between prayer and propaganda. Young people prayed arduous night prayers, and in the morning rose for more, sang together, held a discussion on the day's activity, and joined in *zikr*. There would be more *zikr*, prayer and discussion of the day's mission at night. Opposition on the streets and the hunger of fasting were part of spiritual formation<sup>6</sup>.

## Mixing with the natives

During summer holidays the students, and some older members, would travel in delegations of ten or more to spread the second message of Islam. They went as far as Darfur in the west and Juba near the Ugandan border. When they arrived in a town, they organised a frenetic series of activities - sales of Republican literature in the streets in the morning, a discussion corner at noon, more book sales at dusk then a lecture in the club at night. They sometimes organised

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<sup>4</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997

<sup>5</sup>Interview, Omer El Garrai 25/11/1997

<sup>6</sup>Interview, Khalid Muhammad al-Hasan 24/11/1997

exhibitions. The group would split up and go to outlying villages, and seek out a *shaykh*, a teacher or a student, anyone likely to know of their cause, and ask them to introduce them to the people<sup>7</sup>.

The experiences of these delegations is a story in itself: everyone who was interviewed about them spoke of them as a formative experience in his or her life. In the mid 1970s, most Republicans were from fairly privileged Nile valley backgrounds. Their identity drew on Arabic language, the Sufi Islam of the Khatmiya or the small *tarigas*, and their city educations. Some of them had travelled outside the Nile valley to the poorer regions of Sudan, but they usually travelled without leaving home - they would stay with relatives working in regional cities who held important posts, and they would not mix with the "natives", non-Arabised, poor agricultural workers, non-professionals<sup>8</sup>. But the delegations changed all that - the delegation was a chance for these graduates to engage with Sudan's diversity. They would travel by camel, bus, or walk between villages, sleep rough or in village *khalwas*, and try to meet people who were different from themselves. These meetings were moments of spiritual training, they introduced city kids to another Sudan. Perhaps the encounter gave a social rationale to the movement's ascetic tendencies. Republicans belonged to a middle-class, urban movement which forsook material wealth for spiritual glory, but now their voluntary poverty was used to identify with people from poorer, traditional communities.

## Communion wafers and long beards

There was so much to see that their own class of people did not see. Muhammad Ali Malik, for example, remembers El Obeid's cathedral, the communion wafer that he wanted to taste, the cushioned prie-dieu, which compared favourably with the Islamic prayer mat<sup>9</sup>. Asma Mahmud remembers the scratchy woven palm mats she sat on, as she tried to shake obedient village wives and the local Muslim Brother with her brand of feminism. She remembers being shaken in turn by their knowledge, kindness, anger or submissiveness<sup>10</sup>. Al-Baqir Mukhtar recalls the disruptions of the Muslim Brothers and their fellow travellers. The villagers, he says, welcomed his literate Sufi retorts to the Muslim Brothers, who opposed the villagers' introspective and miraculous rural Islam. Khalid Muhammad al-Hasan remembers turning up in a northern village at sunset, with no food or place to stay. He and his companions went to the village shop to buy dates and biscuits to eat, when a man with a long beard - the sign of an Islamist radical - came in. Sudanese hospitality got the better of theological controversy: the

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<sup>7</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar 10/2/1997

<sup>8</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 11/11/1997

<sup>9</sup>Interview, Muhammad Ali Malik 6/12/1997

<sup>10</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud 29/11/1997

Muslim Brother would not hear of them eating dates in the open, and took them home to eat and sleep there<sup>11</sup>. Elnour Hamad remembers how easy it was to beat a Muslim Brother in debate, and how Taha warned him against feeling good about it - that kind of debate, said Taha, just reduced personal potential, it was a necessary tool to be used against the Muslim Brothers, but no more<sup>12</sup>.

## Muslim missionaries in the south

The unlikeliest Republican missionaries were the ones who went south, in the late 1970s. By that time, Nimeiri had allied with the Muslim Brothers, and tensions between south and north were resurfacing. The Republicans were preaching in an area where Islamic missions have never enjoyed wide success. They accepted that southerners had bitter associations with Islam - slavery, coercive conversion, wars and massacres. Yet before the May revolution, Sudanese governments continued heavy-handed Islamic propaganda attempts, which were increasingly resisted by local people. Abboud's government had pressed tribal leaderships to convert, and round up boys into *khalwas* where they would learn Arabic and the Qur'an. Educated young members of the tribes were often Christian converts, and they gave tribal resistance a Christian tone, although they often were joined by followers of other Spiritual Beliefs. As early as 1959, the conflict between the Arab-Muslim state and the marginalised southerners was expressed as a feud between rival monotheisms: "Mohammad has come to break our divine laws" ran one Dinka song, that invoked the aid of a missionary father expelled by Abboud<sup>13</sup>.

Republicans were aware of the history of Islam in the south, and they accepted, long before many other northern intellectuals, that the problems of the south could only be solved after the imbalances of northern Sudan had been rectified. According to Al-Baqir Mukhtar, they went south to preach Sudan, rather than religion:

In the south, they would preach a reformist understanding of Sudan and the project for a new Sudan, that nobody is to be barred from any office for religious reasons<sup>14</sup>.

The delegation spoke at Juba University and to people in the streets and markets. Most of the people who listened were educated - the Republicans spoke English and Arabic, not African languages. As the era of peace in the south was drawing to a close, these missionaries wandered around Juba, preaching the unity of Sudan and the world in English, and selling their book, *The Southern Sudan: the Problem and the Solution*<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup>Interview, Khalid Muhammad al-Hasan 23/11/1997

<sup>12</sup>Interview, Elnour Hamad 29/11/1997

<sup>13</sup>Sanderson and Sanderson 1981:404

<sup>14</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar

<sup>15</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar. Unfortunately, this book is unobtainable

## Sons of bitches

Another unlikely Republican mission came in 1975. Ibrahim Yusuf, who joined in the late 1950's (see page 134) led a delegation to Cairo, and tried to distribute their books among the cultural elite there. They did not have much success, although Al-Ahram newspaper later published an attack on their ideas, based on some literature picked up by one of their correspondents<sup>16</sup>. Ibrahim Yusuf and his friends met Tawfiq al-Hakim, the novelist, who was not taken with their ideas but greatly enjoyed one of their books, *al-din wa rijal al-din 'abr al-qurun* ("Religion and men of religion through the centuries"). It was part of an increasingly strident Republican campaign against the Muslim Brothers, in the wake of the 1972 Azhar condemnation and a subsequent attack by a Saudi organisation (see page 215). The book was an engaging rant against lickspittle Egyptian clerics and flat-earther Saudi legists. According to Muhammad Ali Malik, al-Hakim spent an evening with the Republicans complaining of the "sons of bitches" of Cairo's al-Azhar university<sup>17</sup>.

## Opening up to the countryside

The Republican movement into the countryside was linked to Nimeiri's own policy of opening out to rural Sudan, which was first mooted in 1970. Communist cadres had in the past tried to build support in the Nuba mountains and among the tenants and workers of the agricultural schemes<sup>18</sup>. But the political and cultural mobilisation of rural northern Sudan was usually left to the rural ruling class and local religious leaders, who gave the Mahdi and Mirghani patricians their support in return for representation at the centre of the state. Like many African leaders of the 1970s, Nimeiri proposed to reconfigure the urban-rural link a single party, overcoming patrician control of Sudan's ethnically structured political fragmentation. Taha applauded Nimeiri's authoritarian centralism as the only way to overcome patrician dominance of the countryside<sup>19</sup>. Muhammad Abd al-Khalig, then a student in Atbara, enjoyed Republican debates, but he sometimes found their vocal support of the May regime exasperating. The Republicans believed Nimeiri protected the country from the sectarians and the Muslim Brothers, and would not criticise the arrests of Communists and Democratic Unionists that were happening in the town at the time<sup>20</sup>.

## Conversion and self-realisation

The Republicans had daily campaigns in the streets, exhibitions which they held in an marquee which could travel from town to town, and the delegations, which visited rural areas. Every

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<sup>16</sup>RB, *al-ikhwan al-jumhuriyun fi jaridat al-ahram al-misriya* 1976

<sup>17</sup>Interview, Muhammad Ali Malik 6/12/1997

<sup>18</sup>Mubarak 1994

<sup>19</sup>Taha deals with this theme in his last interview, published in *al-Jami'a* magazine in May 1985.

<sup>20</sup>Interview, Muhammad Abd al-Khalig 17/6/1997



evening the day's activities would be reviewed in a session at his home. When delegations returned, they would provide a report, lasting up to three hours, of their activities<sup>21</sup>.

Republicans worked feverishly to produce religious material and instant comment on events in Sudan in the world. They distributed two million books and pamphlets, the vast majority of them during the May regime (1969-1985).

**Books and pamphlets published by the Republicans<sup>22</sup>**

date subject of books	1945-57	1958-69	1970-83	TOTAL
Republican thought	3	6	43	52
Anti-fundamentalism		4	48	52
On women's question			31	31
Other	1	4	70	75
TOTAL	4	14	192	210

Taha always wanted detailed accounts of public responses to his mission teams. He encouraged the *atyam* (Republicans used a broken Arabic plural of the English word team) to evaluate their exchanges with people, to find the best method of getting the message across. But although Taha expected Republicans to give their all to the message, and was always concerned about its intelligibility, he acknowledged that the main purpose of the whole system was the spiritual development of the Republicans. Taha's mission was to inspire his followers to elaborate their own existence with confidence, rather than generate a mass following<sup>23</sup>.

Taha thought conviction was important, but he was reluctant to express his own certainties. He preferred to talk in the subjunctive, hoping that his truth was God's truth, that his worship was acceptable, that he might reach a higher spiritual station<sup>24</sup>. He wanted Republicans to be able to communicate certainty. Taha told people he was not sure about himself, but he wanted other people to be sure<sup>25</sup>. Being sure about goodness was freedom:

The aim of the Republican party is to bring about the free individual: we believe that this is the individual who thinks as he wishes, speaks as he thinks, acts as he speaks - and from all this produces only goodness<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>21</sup>Interview, Khalid Muhammad al-Hasan 23/11/1997

<sup>22</sup>Sadig 1988:26

<sup>23</sup>Interview, Khalid Muhammad al-Hasan 23/11/1997

<sup>24</sup>Taha, *al-islam* 1968:48; text of letter to Republicans 14/2/1984, in Yusuf Lutfi papers; interview, Muhammad Ali Malik 6/12/1997

<sup>25</sup>Interview, Khalid Muhammad al-Hasan 23/11/1997

<sup>26</sup>Taha, *usus* 1968:67f

## Narrow social group

Taha's preoccupation with self-realisation and his baffling Sufi idioms may have made it difficult to recruit people outside the group that best understood his Nile valley Sufism, with its obscure borrowings from pre-modern older Middle Eastern literatures. Until the late 1970's, most Republicans shared Taha's religious culture: "They were mostly from small *tarigas*. They did not belong to the *tarigas*, but they were respectful [of them], maybe someone in the family would belong"<sup>27</sup>. However, when the movement reached its peak, Republicans managed to recruit people from Mahdist backgrounds. There was still a certain amount of religious tension between Mahdism, with its strongholds in western Sudan, and Nile valley Sufism. Taha, like many Nile valley Sufis believed that the Mahdiya was a period of chaos, and that the Mahdi family had fewer political scruples than their Khatmiya rivals<sup>28</sup>.

A sociological study of Republicans was undertaken in 1987, after the movement had folded. Sadig interviewed 84 members, out of a total estimated at 1,000. (Others estimate two or three times as many). The vast majority belonged to the professional classes (86%), were aged under 40 (86%), and were from central Sudan (75%)<sup>29</sup>. 37.5% were university graduates, and 54.5% had some form of education: only 8% were illiterate. "It is safe to maintain that many of them belong to the middle or lower middle classes of Sudanese society", concludes Sadig<sup>30</sup>.

Why were the Republicans such a narrow group? Many Republicans feel that a literate education was needed for people to understand Taha's theosophy. His fondness for the warmly introspective Sufism of the village may have excluded people from the more militant Mahdist tradition. Republicans were expected to be committed to legal and social change, having gone through a demanding period of political and religious education. Most of the members were highly educated, and they understood that it was difficult for uneducated people to affiliate to their strange ideas:

People in Sudan have an awareness of education. If you're a boy who tells his uneducated family [about some aspect of knowledge], they're all right about it. But if it's a new idea, they won't accept it. But if you're a graduate, they'll hesitate. They'll say "He's studied". Someone who has studied has the power to go outside tradition<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup>Interview, Ibrahim Yusuf 13/6/1997

<sup>28</sup>Interview, Ali Lutfi 5/12/1997. A 1977 booklet dealing with sectarian misdeeds claimed that Mahdist (Ansar) politics was many times more corrupt than that of the Khatmiya. RB, *al-sulh khayr* 1977:4

<sup>29</sup>Sadig 1988:17ff

<sup>30</sup>Sadig 1988:18

<sup>31</sup>Interview, Omer El Garrai 26/11/1997

# Another trial

## Missions and trouble

The delegations, and the street debates and exhibitions, could be rowdy affairs. Abdelwahab El-Affendi recalls one fiery Muslim Brother who would go along to university debates where Republicans would provoke him until he lashed out, and then the Republicans would raise complaints against him<sup>32</sup>. Others recall the verbal and sexual harassment faced by Republican sisters on the streets. Sometimes, sympathetic passers-by would intervene heavy-handedly to protect the sisters from the taunts of Muslim Brothers and their allies, but some sisters scolded anyone who resorted to violence to protect pacifists.

Republicans gratefully used opposition for publicity purposes. In 1975 a judge, Ibrahim Jaddallah, from the Port Sudan personal status courts complained to the police about a Republican exhibition in his local club which displayed Taha's opinions about *shari'a* judges. "And as for your declaration of my apostasy from Islam, well you have declared nothing except your ugly ignorance of Islam", said one of Taha's posters addressed to *shari'a* judges<sup>33</sup>. The police brought a case against Taha and the Republican delegation. They had to prove that ugly ignorance was no slander against Jaddallah, so they subjected him to a quiz show about Islam and world politics. Jaddallah had no chance with Taha and his clever young men - when they got to the question about the North Atlantic Treaty the poor plaintiff cried: "God, is this an exam? Is it a politics exam? I don't remember, but I read something about it once, but I don't remember"<sup>34</sup>.

Taha's examination turned to a Hanafi rule that acquits husbands of their duty to maintain a wife when she is not available for his sexual gratification. He sneaked out of Jaddallah the admission that a man who did not maintain his sick wife was contravening his religion but not contravening *shari'a*. Having set up his legal/ethical distinction, he worked the theme, drawing attention to an unpalatable law which legists prefer to overlook. In his Kosti days, Taha was friendly with a *shari'a* judge who had been forced to find in favour of a husband who refused to meet the costs of his wife's birth because of the law. Taha wrote to the grand *qadi* asking him to change the ruling, because it was "not in the spirit of religion". The grand *qadi* replied "We agree with what you are saying, but we are under the text"<sup>35</sup>. Jaddallah was not the man to defend this ruling - he conceded to Taha, in words that Taha himself could have

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<sup>32</sup>Interview, Abdelwahab El-Affendi 31/3/1998

<sup>33</sup>quoted in RB *waqa'i'* 1, 1975:8

<sup>34</sup>RB *waqa'i'* 2, 1975:26

<sup>35</sup>RB *waqa'i'* 18

written, "I think that jurisprudence has developed and maybe that sort of talk was justified in its day"<sup>36</sup>.

The Port Sudan case was followed eagerly in the town. One story which attached itself to Taha's name wryly alluded to wild sayings of al-Hallaj (see page 168). Taha was said to have been asked his name with the third person Sudanese formality *ism al-karim?* (what is the name of the noble gentleman?) and he answered "Allah". The judge was taken aback at the blasphemy, until the question was repeated and he realised that Taha's reply was scrupulously orthodox - *al-karim* is one of the ninety-nine names of God, and strictly should not be applied to a human. The story is apocryphal - in fact, the question asked in court is *al-ism bil-kamil?* (your full name?). However, Taha's audience in the town were playing with their perceptions of Taha's Sufism, his learning and pedantry, and the fact that he had out-foxed the Muslim establishment with his verbal skills<sup>37</sup>.

In the end Jaddallah withdrew the suit. According to Al-Baqir Mukhtar, the reasons for the plaintiff's retreat were not intellectual, but to do with a secret session which was held in the court. The case attracted much popular attention and the public began to feed the Republicans with information about the unpopular judge. A woman had come to him complaining of problems with her husband, and the judge had liked the look of her, divorced her from her husband and taken her as his own second wife. When the Republicans mentioned this scandal, Jaddallah dropped the case<sup>38</sup>. The Republicans taped the trial, and rushed out a triumphant transcript a few weeks later, which suggests there was sufficient interest in the story to justify the effort.

## Evaluating the *wafds*

Girgis Iskander criticised Taha's confrontational tactics and his relentless opposition to the *shari'a* system in Sudan, in a letter that Taha never replied to<sup>39</sup>. Fatma Ibrahim, who has worked in the leaderships of the Communist party and the Sudan Women's Union, also criticises Republican missions. She has experience of similar community education work in Sudanese villages, and believes that Taha's attempt to bring theosophy to the masses was doomed to failure<sup>40</sup>. Republicans themselves have different views of their activities. Asma Mahmud, who went on some women-only delegations, does not describe herself as a

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<sup>36</sup>RB *waqa'i'* 18

<sup>37</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar, 17/6/1997

<sup>38</sup>Interview, Al-Baqir Mukhtar, 17/6/1997

<sup>39</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander 17/2/1998

<sup>40</sup>Interview, Fatma Ibrahim 21/8/1997

theosophist, but a feminist challenging the new discriminations that *shari'a*-minded customs brought to rural Sudan. She opposes this to a slightly romanticised view of Sudanese customs: Customary law had a big influence in gender relations. People still had innocence and purity. There were ordinary relations between men and women. But as soon as *shari'a* entered, there was all this affectation, that people had to separate ... In the village, men and women would walk together, shake hands, meet at wedding dances. There were many non-*shari'a* practices. When you go to areas with *shari'a*, you find this burdensome separation between men and women<sup>41</sup>.

Other participants mention religious rather than social lessons of the delegations. Taha and his followers cultivated and sometimes attained a dazzling sense of certainty, that was useful in debate, but may have hampered dialogue. The period they spent immersed in rural Sudan transformed their lives. The motive for this self-transformation was not so much to learn from the societies they encountered, as to teach those societies the Republican version of the truth, which they kept intact throughout the transformation. Omer El Garrai used the experience of explaining a means to deepen his convictions:

When I debated, I would become more committed ... Republican ideology is comprehensive. The theory is true and cannot be changed. Dialogue is not the goal<sup>42</sup>.

Elnour Hamad is not so sure: he wonders why he wanted to convert people, instead of helping them to grow the way they are. And Abdullahi An-Na'im is hesitantly critical:

It was seen as - I'm guessing here - not an openness to have our ways of thinking or lifestyle transformed by the people we interact with, but rather to influence them in their lifestyle, their ideas, by the ideas we thought would make all the difference in their lives ... In retrospect I see it as negative. I see it as colonial. It's just being Muslim and believing that Islam is the answer to everything and that we have the key to understanding Islam. Now, ten or 15 years later, I'd be more open to a two-way exchange<sup>43</sup>.

## Conclusion

Public debates and literature sales made the Republican brothers and sisters a feature of city street life in the 1970s, and Republican delegations were a novel response to Nimeiri's policy of opening up to the regions. They began at a time when Taha faced relatively little pressure from his opponents, and the delegations show that he wanted to engage with Sudan's diversity, as he had done in his 1955 constitutional proposals.

This chapter has tried to show that Republican missions were often rowdy, and the Republicans matched the feverishly polemical approach of their opponents. Yet Taha did not feel that this activity was an end in itself: he wanted his young followers to develop

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<sup>41</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud 29/11/1997

<sup>42</sup>Interview, Omer El Garrai, 26/11/1997

<sup>43</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 11/11/1997

themselves. His commitment to personal self-realisation meant that he allowed his followers to draw their own lessons from their experiences of travelling around Sudan and speaking to people on the street. But he saw Republican missions as an opportunity to prepare Sudanese audiences for his strange ideas. First, they would be taught his new view of *shari'a* and then they would be invited to consider that his perfect society could only come about through the dynamic perfection of an individual. This search for a perfect man might end in himself, thought Taha. While the movement's external purpose was to explain new rules and rights cast in an old Sufi theology, its internal purpose was different:

The movement was an attempt to create an environment whereby the candidacy of *ustaz* Mahmud to become the perfect man [messiah] was successful<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997



# Chapter 15

## Perfect

This chapter has two concerns: first, the rise of the Muslim Brothers between 1977 and 1983, and the Republican response to it. Secondly, it examines how Taha, who believed that his missionaries had successfully explained his novel ideas about *shari'a* to a wide range of people, began to turn to even more spiritual topics.

## Muslim Brothers

### National reconciliation

It was noted in chapter 12 that SSO restrictions on Taha's freedom of expression made him a keener supporter of the regime. Why? The title of a 1975 pamphlet, *al-ta'ifiya tata'amir 'ala al-sha'b* ("Sectarianism conspires against the people") gives a clue: Nimeiri's modernisation was going through rough times, and the traditional parties were beginning to figure in Sudanese politics. In 1975, a group of Kordofan soldiers staged an unsuccessful coup attempt. Nimeiri's policy of opening up to the regions was not working. The south had won considerable autonomy, but the less rebellious west (Muslim but largely not Arabised) had little to show for itself. Nimeiri dismissed the coup as "racist" and hastily granted himself more emergency powers<sup>1</sup>. In 1976, Sadig al-Mahdi staged another coup attempt from exile. His supporters were hanged, but Nimeiri, his attention now fixed on the politics of Sudan's centre, moved to conciliate the sectarian parties. In 1977, he concluded a pact of national reconciliation.

When restless regions and world oil price rises threatened political and economic stability, Nimeiri brought the Mahdi family and the Muslim Brothers into the cabinet. Republicans welcomed the news cautiously. A 1977 booklet contained the text of a letter to Nimeiri warning him of sectarian misdeeds, and asking him to include the Communist party in the reconciliation (he did not)<sup>2</sup>. The Muslim Brothers, used to subverting government for specific political ends, deftly infiltrated the May regime. In contrast, Sadig al-Mahdi's Umma party

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<sup>1</sup>Khalid 1985:143

<sup>2</sup>RB, *al-sulh khayr* 1977:31

was marginalised. As in 1964, modern forces with urban power bases proved more adept at influencing a military regime (see page 144).

## Religion and cash

The Mahdi's oath of allegiance demanded renunciation of worldly goods, and his pillars of the faith included abstinence as well as war<sup>3</sup>. However, his son 'Abd al-Rahman reconfigured his father's support in a colony of British capitalism. He appropriated his followers' labour on his farms, telling them that his wealth was for the cause of God<sup>4</sup>. The move from asceticism to accumulation was part of the process of institution building, and it occurred in many smaller Sufi *tarigas*<sup>5</sup>. The Muslim Brothers were never ascetic, but they moved away from the socialism of youth to an acceptance of patterns of production and accumulation set up by capitalist states in Sudan (see page 148). From the mid 1970's, Sudan's Muslim Brothers became the force of the future in Sudanese politics - part of this achievement is linked to the financial maturity they achieved in this period.

The ministry of religious affairs which the May regime set up in order to co-opt minor Islamic institutions encouraged those institutions to raise funds in the Arabian peninsula. El Hassan (1993) argues that these funds empowered rural religious leaderships, just as the rural political elite (the Native Administration) lost authority to new SSU structures. (Rural political and religious elites were often members of the same kinship group). The cultural agenda of Sudan's Arabian donors was to re-orient Sudanese Islam to their rigorist, textualist and anti-Sufi Wahhabi form of Islam. Wahhabi cash and ideology exacerbated existing disjunctions between wealthy Sufi elites, who understood the textualist call, and poor rural followers, who still wanted miracles and dancing<sup>6</sup>.

Much of Sudan's development was funded through the super-profits of the Arab oil-producing countries<sup>7</sup>. Saudi money, and its ideological riders, were influencing Sudanese Sufism and transforming Sudanese politics. The Muslim Brothers, whose accountancy was as deft as their politics, understood this. They were closely involved in the development in 1977 of Islamic banks - financial institutions which deal in profit-shares or options rather than the interest bearing loans which are forbidden by *shari'a*<sup>8</sup>. The banks were set up with Saudi funds,

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<sup>3</sup>From a list of Sufi and Mahdist virtues written by an informant who requested anonymity

<sup>4</sup>Warburg 1978:40

<sup>5</sup>See El Hassan 1993

<sup>6</sup>See Al-Karsani in Brenner ed 1993:146

<sup>7</sup>Niblock 1987:280

<sup>8</sup>Faisal Islamic Bank nd:2ff

granted exceptional tax exemptions and by 1981, some were making over 100% returns on share capital. Faisal Islamic Bank alone controlled 30% of all Sudan's commercial capital<sup>9</sup>.

Taha did not have the same appreciation of Saudi money or religion. In 1973, Republicans had met the Saudi cultural attaché and a delegation of Saudi *shari'a* legists. They wanted to discuss their strange ideas with the Saudis, but according to the Republican account, the meeting did not last long - one of the Saudis saw the word "socialism" on a poster that the Republicans had displayed, cried "*a'udhu billahi*", a phrase used to ward off the devil, and insisted that the meeting stop<sup>10</sup>. In 1975, the Muslim World League in Mecca condemned Taha as a would-be messiah and called for his execution for apostasy<sup>11</sup>. Republicans fought back. In 1976, they tried to make their case in mosques, but the ministry of religious affairs banned them from speaking there. A pamphlet that year, *ismuhum al-wahhabiya, wa laysa ismahum ansar al-sunna* ("They are Wahhabis, not Ansar al-Sunna") attacked Saudi Islam, Saudi princes and Saudi intervention in Sudanese Islam (the Ansar al-Sunna are a small Sudanese Wahhabi group)<sup>12</sup>. The May regime was trying hard to attract Arab capital, and the Republican attack on the Saudi ruling class did not help. Taha and eight other Republicans were detained for a few weeks in January 1977, as a gesture to the Saudi royals.

The detention did not affect Republican support for the regime, but it was a marker of the increasing influence of Arabian culture and finance in Sudan's political scene. After 1977, the Republicans became increasingly embroiled in a conflict with the Muslim Brothers and their allies. In 1977 a committee was set up to bring Sudan's laws into line with the *shari'a*; in 1978 Hasan al-Turabi, the leader of the Muslim Brothers, became attorney general. Republican attacks on *shari'a* became more strident, and the party began to publish detailed legal arguments against the legislative content of *shari'a*, which showed a familiarity with many of the source texts used by *shari'a* legists. Republican legal writing from this period was increasingly concerned with non-Muslims' rights, but it defended those rights without the grand vagueness of Taha's works of the 1960s<sup>13</sup>.

## Redivision

Nimeiri had removed some ethnic disparities in political structures by centralising state power, and jeopardised the Arab-Muslim state by addressing the interests of Sudan's non-Arabised majority. In the late 1970s, the politics of the Arab-Muslim state returned to Sudan with the

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<sup>9</sup>Shaaeldin and Brown in Barnett and Abdelkarim eds 1988:131ff

<sup>10</sup>RB, *al-din wa rijal al-din* 1975:16

<sup>11</sup>Text of Muslim World League letter in RB, *al-din wa rijal al-din* 1975:38

<sup>12</sup>Interviews, Abdullahi An-Na'im, 8/11/1997; and Eltayeb Hassan 23/8/1998

<sup>13</sup>See RB, *lajnat ta'dil* 1979

Muslim Brothers and the patrician parties. Muslim Brothers, who began to dominate the regime with their coherent but divisive programme, wanted to impose a re-invented Arab-Muslim state on the diverse nation which had managed to find a measure of self-expression in Nimeiri's 1973 constitution.

Southern political forces were major allies of Nimeiri, but for the Arab-Muslim state to succeed, they had to be marginalised. From 1980, the May regime used ethnicity to undermine southern political institutions set up after the 1972 peace accord. Nimeiri played on tensions between the majority Dinka groups and the many small tribes of Equatoria. Some Equatorians, sponsored by Nimeiri, wanted to redivide the south. This policy was formally proposed in 1981. Nimeiri tribalised the schools (the scene of fighting between Equatorians and other tribes), imposed military rule, and jailed supporters of a unified south. Localised conflicts, which had been managed through local political structures, could no longer be contained, and the south headed towards war.

## Republicans fight back

Republicans told Nimeiri in their 1977 letter that they wanted a "human constitution" for the republic<sup>14</sup>. Now Sudan was moving towards the Islamic constitution they had for so long opposed. Around 1982, they abandoned their delegations to the regions, and the sisters stopped speaking on the streets, as they concentrated their efforts on their opposition to the Muslim Brothers' programme for Sudan<sup>15</sup>. Republicans maintained their legal and theological attack on the Muslim Brothers, publishing a long study on Faisal Islamic Bank in 1983 which attacked its shaky understanding of *shari'a* commercial law and its funding of Muslim Brother expansion<sup>16</sup>.

But the tiny Republican movement was no match for the powerful and organised Muslim Brothers. The latter penetrated the SSU, and the co-operatives that distributed rationed food; organised demonstrations to celebrate Khomeini's revolution in Iran; built up a network of social clubs and scouting camps; sponsored mosque preachers; spoke on the television and radio; gained ground in the military by teaching their ideology to officers; set up exhibitions and then arranged, through the education ministry, to bring schools to see them<sup>17</sup>. Perhaps

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<sup>14</sup>RB, *al-sulh khayr*

<sup>15</sup>Interview, Khalid Muhammad al-Hasan, 24/11/1997

<sup>16</sup>RB, *bank faysal al-islami!?* ("Faisal Islamic Bank!?!")1983

<sup>17</sup>Muslim Brother activities for the period 1977-1983 are described in RB, *fitnat iran* 1979; RB, *ila mata hadha al-'abath bi-'uqul al-nas wa bi-din allah* ("How long will they fool with people's minds and God's religion")1980; RB, *al-mawqif* 1984; Muti'i, 1986; Ali in Guazzone ed, 1995:198

their most important activity was banking. Islamic banks funded Muslim Brother activities, provided soft personal loans to government figures and access to capital for Sudan's growing domestic bourgeoisie. Patrician dominance of Sudan's cash economy had been weakened by Nimeiri's nationalisations in the early 1970s: in the late 1970s it was challenged by an ambitious middle class able to attract Arabian capital through ideological persuasion, and to use it in a host of get-rich schemes. The petty municipal classes mocked in British police dossiers had come to power.

The new capital movements did not prevent rapid economic deterioration - the banks were helping to pay for an import boom that was bankrupting the country and bringing it under the tutelage of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)<sup>18</sup>. IMF structural adjustments increased pressure on the urban poor, whose street demonstrations helped maintain food subsidies in the towns. However, in the early 1980s when drought in the west and war in the south resulted in widespread famine, the regime was not so quick to respond to rural desperation.

In war and famine, Taha still refused to criticise Nimeiri. He believed that Nimeiri (already in hock to the Muslim Brothers) was the only force that could protect the country from Muslim Brother encroachment. Taha, a natural oppositionist, had become a government loyalist. Urban opposition to the regime was led by the Communists. The Muslim Brothers were officially allies of Nimeiri, but they sometimes pitched in against him to maintain pressure on the regime (Nimeiri sometimes called them "Satan's brothers"). The Republican defence of the regime led them to attack Communist campaigns against IMF-sponsored price rises in the early 1980s. They also claimed, more hesitantly, that Nimeiri's decision to divide the south and destroy the 1972 peace deal was supported by "a large body of southerners". They expressed the hope that southerners would resolve their differences in a state-appointed commission<sup>19</sup>.

## Mutual incomprehension

The Muslim Brothers owed much of their support to their appropriation of the Muslim, Arab identity developed in central areas of Sudan over centuries. It had previously been the property of the great religious sects. However, their religious institutions were vulnerable to the claims of reformist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, whose allegiance to the sacred texts could undermine those institutions. Taha's Republicans subverted the Muslim Brothers' mastery of the written sources of Islam with another fluent and literate Islam. Each party was

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<sup>18</sup>Tadamon Islamic Bank 1984 and Faisal Islamic Bank (Sudan) 1984 gives details of banks' involvement in imports in the early 1980s.

<sup>19</sup>RB, *atfa'u nar al-fitna: hawl hawadith al-sa'a* ("Extinguish the fire of conflict: on the events of the hour")1982:18

arguing in idioms which the other did not fully understand, and this no doubt added to the fury of the debate. An indication of this furious incomprehension was the 1979 trial in El Obeid of a man who threatened al-Amin Ahmad Nur, a Republican brother: "You want to be God ... and we will kill you"<sup>20</sup>. The accused, al-Jili Zayn al-'Abidin, was referring to Taha's claim that the devout worshipper could become God. A *shari'a* judge testified that he knew nothing of the facts, but that the defendant deserved a vote of thanks for doing his religious duty in threatening to kill a blasphemer. This attempt to turn a criminal defence into a *shari'a* prosecution was explicitly rejected by the civil judge who heard the case. He said that the law that applied in his court was the secular 1973 penal code, and not the Qur'an. Al-Jili was convicted and the Republicans rejoiced at the vindication of secular law.<sup>21</sup>

## Perfect man

### Getting spiritual

In the 1950s and 1960's Taha wrote his first books, and he wanted to deal with the reform of Islamic legislation. He used a Sufi idiom to explain and justify the changes he proposed in *shari'a*, and argued that the change was justified because of higher modern standards of knowledge, or because of changes in the mode of production<sup>22</sup>. In his letters to the press and to individuals, he acknowledged that: "the most effective instrument for the purification of Islam is the appearance and guidance, in the Islamic world, of the muslim who has first purified Islam in himself"<sup>23</sup>. This more personal and esoteric explanation became more significant over the next few years. For example, in 1971, he brought out the fourth edition of his "Second Message" which made clear that his legislative proposals, could only come about through a *rasul* (messenger, a traditional ascription of Muhammad). "The messenger of the second message ... is the one to whom God granted understanding from the Qur'an and authorised to speak"<sup>24</sup>. Taha, who conceived of theology as "higher" than law, only he began to broach theological and spiritual topics in the early 1970s. In 1971, he wrote a long book, *al-qur'an wa mustafa mahmud wa al-fahm al-'asri* ("The Qur'an and Mustafa Mahmud and contemporary understanding") an abrasive Sufi response to a Qur'an commentary by Mustafa Mahmud. The commentary was serialised in an Arabic magazine and generated controversy

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<sup>20</sup>RB *mahkamat* 1981:20

<sup>21</sup>RB *mahkamat* 1981:20ff

<sup>22</sup>Taha, *Second Message* 1987:167; Taha, *tatwir* 1977:35

<sup>23</sup>Taha, *as'ila wa ajwiba* 2, 1971:5 (English text).

<sup>24</sup>Taha, *al-risala al-thania* 1971:42



around the Middle East. Taha complained that Mustafa Mahmud had an insufficient understanding of spirituality and the modern world.

Apart from a prison memoir written in 1984, Taha's last book was written in 1976. He sometimes had to leave Omdurman for the Butana village of Arbaji in order to find the time to write them<sup>25</sup>. In 1973, he was banned from public speaking: although his work-load was diminished by the ban, he found himself too busy to visit the shrines of Sufi saints or even write. The production of Republican literature was delegated to Republican committees and individuals, who would summarise the outcome of Republican debates in a writing style modelled on Taha's own.

### Everybody's special

By the mid 1970's Taha was an elderly man surrounded by a large, devoted audience - up to 300 people would attend his weekly meetings. They treated him like a Sufi *shaykh* - lowering their gaze as they approached him. The deferent young Republicans were slightly nonplussed by the carefree affection with which Taha's older, non-Republican friends would greet him<sup>26</sup>. Taha might have been a furious polemicist, but he was a convincing religious leader partly because he was able to focus himself on the individual in front of him - he persuaded many of his interlocutors that they were the most important and beloved person to him. Taha believed that everyone had talents, and that human authenticity and perfection was attained by "discovery and effervescence of these talents, until they all express the self together"<sup>27</sup>. Taha's attentive and gracious manner was perhaps the talent through which he found self-realisation. People sought his company at dawn, and he was still receiving guests in the middle of the night.

Everyone feels at home in his presence. It's not that he's trying to be accessible, he is accessible. It's not that he's trying to be courteous, it's just a way of being ... it was effortless and relentless<sup>28</sup>

This attention empowered his followers to take up an itinerant and sacrificial life, and led them out to the street debates and delegations in the country. Many who experienced it still feel gratitude, but Taha had his critics. In the late 1970s, Girgis Iskander wrote to Taha to say that Taha was misleading his followers by promising paradise. He attacked Taha's polemical methods and his vehement rejection of the Muslim establishment, his use of the courts, his

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<sup>25</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud 28/11/1997

<sup>26</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 17/11/1997

<sup>27</sup>RB, *al-taqlid!! wa al-asala!! wa al-usala'!!* 1982:3

<sup>28</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997

reliance on Nimeiri, and his pamphleteering approach to social change that only led to breaches of the peace<sup>29</sup>.

## The star of David

Taha acknowledged Girgis Iskander's letter, but never got round to a reply. It did not change a drift towards a yet more esoteric understanding of life, on the one hand, and a yet more vehement confrontation with Muslim Brothers on the other. In August 1979, there were food riots after IMF cuts on food subsidies took effect. What did the Republicans do? They took to the streets on Christmas day, with a pamphlet with the star of David on its cover, entitled *'awdat al-masih* ("The return of Christ"). Many Republicans see this book as a point in the movement's history when it began to embrace mystery more wholeheartedly than ever before. The book used the figure of the "Muhammadan messiah", an equivalent to the idea the perfect man, promising his imminent arrival, to unite the Christian, Muslim and Jewish faiths in a world system that would express all their virtues:

The notion of the Super Man, which contemporary man finds extremely interesting and artistically inspiring, deeply illustrates this longing for the coming of the ultimately able man whose coming is dictated by immediate living necessities<sup>30</sup>.

Had the Republicans gone mad? Or were they responding to Sudan's economic gloom with a toke of millenarian opium? There were other groups in Sudan pushing millenarianism at the time - the Niassiya, originating in west Africa, promised every follower a chance of reaching *qutbaniya*, another of the technical terms of Muslim mysticism for the trip to the absolute. Awad al-Karsani lists some of the movements at the university of Khartoum which preached the end of the world<sup>31</sup>. Abdelwahab El-Affendi, a historian with links to the Muslim Brotherhood, recalls a clever student of French there who, he says, listened to too much Republican mysticism, went mad and called himself Abu Zafira, the Mahdi. El-Affendi was asked if Taha was in the same category:

Taha had a special mission ... his followers believed in this - it surfaced at university. One of them said the mission will happen whether you accept it or not. But they're not the same as Abu Zafira, who lost touch with reality. There's a difference between [that] and having a plausible theory which justifies distance from reality<sup>32</sup>.

## The one and only

Taha continued with his drift into abstraction. In 1982, the Sudanese pound lost a third of its value, the regime tried again to remove food subsidies and faced uncontrollable riots. At one of his weekly meetings, Taha announced a new message to the Republicans. Much of his

<sup>29</sup>Letter, Girgis Iskander 10/2/1998

<sup>30</sup>RB, *The Return of Christ* nd:26 (English version of 1979 pamphlet).

<sup>31</sup>Al-Karsani in Brenner ed 1993:149

<sup>32</sup>Interview, Abdelwahab El-Affendi 31/3/1998

previous teaching democratically suggested that every person had the germ of their own authenticity, *asala*, within them, and that this authenticity would be revealed in an encounter with God that made them authentic, *asil*. In 1971, he dedicated a book as follows:

To the person that humanity awaits  
whose appearance they expect  
the *insan* [human being]  
and so, to men and women  
do you dream of him?  
he is within you  
the Qur'an will reveal him<sup>33</sup>

In 1982, Taha said that this authenticity was still available for all, but that he believed only one person would attain it in this life<sup>34</sup>. *Waqtajiya* Republicans who were waiting for the time of the imminent messiah saw this as a sign of hope, a clarification of past teaching, but many Republicans found the idea difficult to grasp. Some feared that the movement was becoming a cult<sup>35</sup>. Republicans discussed this new departure at length, and then took to the streets with a pamphlet, *al-taqlid!! al-asil!! wa al-usala'!!* ("Tradition!! the authentic one!! and the many authentic people!!"). Taha's new message clearly implied that he was the sole candidate for human perfection. Surprisingly, this may explain his continued support for Nimeiri at a time when Nimeiri was dropping his commitments to all the achievements which Taha held dear. For Taha, Sudan was "the most spiritual country in the world", and it had an enormous spiritual vocation<sup>36</sup>. He carefully observed the times, waiting for the messianic dawn to arrive. Perhaps he believed that Nimeiri's chaotic time was somehow connected to the time for perfection.

## Pyramid and person

In the 1960s Taha used pyramids to express the diversity, upward movement and final unity of life and history. By 1982, Republicans were using a more expressive and obscure evolutionary symbol. The perfect man, *al-insan al-kamil* of Sufi theosophy, was the symbol of creation:

God allowed the body of the perfect man to rise from the level of vegetable to the level of animal, to the level of human, and it is the highest level of all<sup>37</sup>.

The perfect man, for Taha, was the apotheosis of humanity who would bring about the end of time. Republicans wrote about this person in imprecise and highly coloured language. They associate the perfect man with the messiah, the "Muhammadan reality" (the pre-existence of

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<sup>33</sup>Taha, *al-qur'an wa mustafa mahmud* 1971:1

<sup>34</sup>RB, *al-taqlid!!* 1982:14

<sup>35</sup>Interview, Elnour Hamad 29/11/1997

<sup>36</sup>Interview, Steve Howard 23/11/1997

<sup>37</sup>RB, *adab al-salik fi tariq muhammad* 1982:57

the prophet Muhammad), and with "the laudable station", *al-maqam al-mahmud*, mentioned in a Qur'an verse that encouraged Muslims to perform the supererogatory night prayer which was part of Republican spiritual training<sup>38</sup>. The phrase in the Qur'an is ambiguous, and is consequently used by Muslims of different traditions to talk about the last things: perhaps it had a special meaning to Republicans because *mahmud*, laudable, was Taha's name. Taha could have used the persona of the Mahdi to talk about the last days, but that title is associated with God's vengeance on the wicked: he preferred the more eirenic perfecter.

Throughout their history, Sufis of a literary bent tried to express their psychological states in symbols. To say God has a human form runs counter to the transcendental theme that dominates the Qur'anic description of God, a theme that fits the *shari'a* picture of obedience to a mysterious sovereign. Sufis looked for more than obedience, and tried to express how God could be known. They accepted the *shari'a* tradition's assertion of inaccessible divine transcendence - this characteristic of God was "the essence". But they asserted that there were knowable aspects to God, descending from this essence, and one of these emanations was *al-insan al-kamil*, the perfect man. This person is a perfect expression of the essence, not the essence itself<sup>39</sup>. This complex theosophy had wide effects in Sudan and the Muslim world. It gave Muslims a kind of religious love poetry, and established the importance of religious feeling against obedience. Sufi poems saw the prophet not as a legislator, but someone whose "saliva is sweeter than fresh water"<sup>40</sup>. The effect of this religious passion differed with time and place and person. For members of the *shari'a* tradition, Sufism could inject feeling into their religious life: for people at the non-literate periphery, the figure of this perfect man had an attraction which legal treatises could not rival. The links between Muhammad's perfection and the perfection of his followers are obscure, but they were part of an imaginative repertoire that Taha and his audience understood. Taha believed that he could, through a process of trial and error, identify himself with the perfection of God through Muhammad, conceived by the Sufis as the organising force behind creation. His *asala* (authenticity) was a proof of his progress, but the perfection he hoped for would transform more than just himself. None of the people interviewed for this work ever heard Taha claim he was the perfect man, although he believed that he had a duty to aspire to be him<sup>41</sup>. In 1980, the Muslim Brothers accused Taha of claiming "that he was the perfect man and that he would judge [all] people on the day of

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<sup>38</sup>RB, *adab al-salik* 1982:50; Qur'an 18:79

<sup>39</sup>See Nicholson 1921:77ff for more on the perfect man, and Eltayeb 1995:130ff for more on Taha's views on the subject

<sup>40</sup>Haj al-Mahi, quoted in Osman 1990:307

<sup>41</sup>Interviews, Abdullahi An-Na'im, Asma Mahmud, Khalid Muhammad al-Hasan, letters from Girgis Iskander.

resurrection"<sup>42</sup>. The Republicans said this claim was never made, and accused the Muslim Brothers of slander<sup>43</sup>.

Nevertheless, Taha seems to have drifted from a concern with law to a concern with mystery. Was this a change of direction for the movement? Many of Taha's followers look on developments in Taha's thoughts as clarifications, not changes. They hold that Taha had worked out all his ideas in his 1946 *khalwa*, and was slowly initiating his followers and Sudan into his strange ideas. He revealed new ideas to audiences whom he felt were ready for them. According to this view, Taha sought and received the permission of Sufi saints to spread his message, and began the gradual process of educating his followers, and then Sudan and the world, about the new *shari'a*. Finally, he would be able to explain his new theosophy, Sufi self-realisation for the masses. This syllabus for utopia was interrupted by Muslim Brothers, who forced Taha into complex explanations about his prayer life (*risalat al-salat*, 1966) before he had begun his legal work in his "Second Message" (1967). Throughout the 1970's and 1980's, Taha began to write and speak about messiahs and perfection, and this process reached its peak after the late 1970s.

Another view might say that Taha's vivid spiritual experience in the 1940s helped him reach some conclusions about the need to change *shari'a* and to express his sense of self-realisation in striking Sufi language. The sources surveyed for this thesis are not comprehensive, but it would appear that Taha's view of abrogation first saw the light of day in 1967. Taha's change of symbols in the 1970s - from pyramid to perfect man - may have marked a new stage in his self-realisation. It is very difficult to judge Taha's personal feelings, because he voiced them in circumlocutions: "Our Sufi friends say ..." was one code for his opinion<sup>44</sup>. Another difficulty is that Taha wrote no books after 1972, because he devoted himself full-time to the spiritual formation of his followers. This was the period when Taha's mysticism became most pronounced, but the texts dealing with it were mostly written by Republicans and then edited by Taha<sup>45</sup>.

It is tempting to interpret the movement's messianic turn to its increasing political marginality and the effects of IMF economics. Yet there are reasons for avoiding that conclusion. Taha had spent many years trying to understand if his Sufi ideas were for the masses, and he seems to have gradually come to the conclusion that they were. In any case, Taha's had isolated himself

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<sup>42</sup>Quoted from a Muslim Brother poster in RB, *ila mata hadha al-'abath* 1980:23

<sup>43</sup>RB, *ila mata hadha al-'abath* 1980:23

<sup>44</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997

<sup>45</sup>I am very grateful to Eltayeb Hassan for clarifying some of the developments in Taha's thoughts.

to some extent from economic troubles through his asceticism. Abdelwahab El-Affendi remarks that Taha embodied moral integrity in the machiavellian world of Sudanese politics, and this sincerity is another reason not to dismiss Taha<sup>46</sup>. Republicans may have counselled other-worldliness when food prices made Sudan's world unbearable (see above page 216) but they had little to gain from their political stand. One remarkable feature of the movement is its exceptionally low attrition rate to the Muslim Brothers. That movement expressed the political and economic aspirations of Sudan's growing middle class. It offered substantial political and material rewards in a time of economic disaster. After the Iranian revolution, some Sudanese leftists, not least of them Nimeiri, began to affiliate themselves to the Muslim Brothers. Republicans were a highly educated group who could reasonably expect to prosper if they joined up for the Muslim Brother political project, but none of them did.

The movement retained internal tolerance in spite of its shrill attacks on opponents, and in spite of its extravagant messianic fervour. Some members sincerely believed that Taha was about to be transformed into the perfect man, others believed that he had solved an intractable contradiction between Islam and modernity. Women followers of Taha looked on him as a guarantor of their human dignity. Yet they could share their movement with less committed people, the movement's circle of friends, who came along for its social activities, hospitality, even free food at the Republican houses<sup>47</sup>. The movement had little ethnic or class diversity, but it allowed for a diverse range of experiences, and no-one was pressed to accept more than they could believe. When the Republicans had their debates, Taha would welcome opinions contrary to his own, perhaps feeling that his stated opinions swayed many of his supporters.

## Conclusion

Taha's work in the 1960s used Sufi legal scepticism and Islamic modernist disaffection with legal content to challenge the Muslim Brothers on *shari'a* rules. His literate and activist Sufism was a good target for the Muslim Brothers, who needed to delegitimise Sudanese Sufism in order to legitimise their own view of Islam, which aspired to the *shari'a* tradition and linked Sudan to the Arab and Muslim world. Taha responded to Muslim Brother attacks vehemently, and his movement became caught up in a struggle to preserve and develop a Sufi vision of Sudan.

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<sup>46</sup>Interview, Abdelwahab El-Affendi 31/3/1998

<sup>47</sup>Interview, Steve Howard, 23/11/1997



In the 1970s Taha launched the more familiar Sufi challenge to *shari'a* piety and theology. Taha's pamphleteering theosophy accompanied his increasingly strident attacks on Muslim Brothers and their allies. He believed that the years spent by the Republicans publicising his novel ideas had borne fruit, and that his attacks on the wider *shari'a* system had a chance of success. Yet the content of his teaching in the 1980s is sometimes alarmingly mystical. Messianism and millenarianism had a political currency in Sudan at the time. Political actors who used these themes stepped up their confrontation with Taha. Taha accepted the challenge serenely; he may have been wondering if it was all going to end, perfectly.

# Part 4

## The perfect ending

*[The search for perfection is] like a golf ball, you can hit it as many times as you like, but it only scores if it falls into the hole<sup>1</sup>.*

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<sup>1</sup>See page 255

# Chapter 16

## The end

This chapter looks at Taha's last conflict with his political enemies, and relates it to the religious, social and economic turbulence of Sudan in the mid-1980s.

### Banks, guns and shaykh Ahmad's dream

In 1983, the May regime was in serious difficulty. After a period of low rainfall that had lasted the length of the regime, and increasingly hampered its progress, drought began in the west. Increasing pressure on food subsidies brought serious rioting to the towns. In the south, war began in earnest in protest at the government's decision to nullify the south's federal status.

How did people respond to these events? In Darfur, people worked out poor-man's strategies for survival<sup>1</sup>. In the dry borderlands with the south, former Mahdist fighters were turned into farm labourers; they and their tribal groups acquired small arms from the war-zones of Africa in preparation for war<sup>2</sup>. In the cities, Communists called for opposition to the regime's economic policies from wall newspapers and pamphlets<sup>3</sup>. Muslim Brothers in the restive unions participated in the demonstrations against the regime<sup>4</sup>. Muslim Brothers dominated the political scene, at once the chief allies and opponents of Nimeiri, who was trying to manoeuvre between them, the army, his remaining southern supporters, and his coterie of loyalists in the bureaucracy and security services. Banking was booming - eight new financial institutions were created in 1983 and 1984<sup>5</sup>. The new Islamic banks dominated the cash sector of Sudan's economy. Muslim Brothers built support in the military with courses on Islamic ideology for officers previously renowned as Sudan's hardest drinkers.

It was 1404, four years into the fifteenth Muslim century. Muslims influenced by Mahdist and Shi'a thought attach a mystical significance to that century, which is believed to herald the last

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<sup>1</sup>De Waal 1989:172

<sup>2</sup>De Waal in Daly and Sikainga eds, 1993:149

<sup>3</sup>RB, *atfa'u* 1982:9

<sup>4</sup>RB, *atfa'u* 1982:11

<sup>5</sup>Tadamon Islamic Bank 1984:8

days. With life getting bleaker, many Sudanese took to reflection on the eschaton. West African migrants expressed their sense of the turbulence of the time by relating it to a foreseeable end. Roneo copies of "Shaykh Ahmad's dream", a pre-modern narrative about the corruption before the last days, began to circulate in Khartoum<sup>6</sup>. In February 1983, the state *ifta'* council, which issued *fatwas* or official *shari'a* opinions, officially denied the truth of a prophecy that calamity would strike Sudan that month<sup>7</sup>. And Taha had just announced that he was the only *asil*.

Al-Nayl Abu Gurun, who saw Taha in his dream in chapter 9, had become a singer, and then a judge, and finally turned to his Sufi family and spiritual ambitions. In 1978, he published *sirat al-mustaqim* ("The straight path"), a book about prayer which attacked Taha. His *tariga* believed that in the fifteenth century, a Mahdi would be chosen from the Sufis who had reached the highest spiritual station, and he may have seen Taha as a competitor for this station<sup>8</sup>.

Nimeiri too had been influenced by the year 1400, when there was Islamic revolution in Iran and Islamic disturbances across Africa and Arabia, and he began to wonder if he might be part of the end of the world<sup>9</sup>. Nimeiri was getting religious - he had given up whisky, and began to sack judges for drinking<sup>10</sup>. But he was not a Muslim Brother: he sought his guidance from the small *tariga shaykhs* around Khartoum, where he visited *walis* and danced at *zikh*<sup>11</sup>. Al-Nayl Abu Gurun was one of his presidential advisers. Nimeiri used the indefatigable Muslim Brothers to prop up his system, sponsoring and frustrating them as political exigency required: they in turn posed as allies and opponents of the May regime as they saw fit. But the only supporters who saw Nimeiri through to the end were his coterie of bureaucrats and security men, and Abu Gurun.

## TV evangelism

'Umar Muhammad al-Tayyib was the first vice-president and head of the State Security Organ (SSO). Like Nimeiri, he was a soldier with a weakness for Sufi celebrities<sup>12</sup>. He was a Nimeiri loyalist, rather than a fellow traveller of the Muslim Brothers, but he had a mosque in the capital where Muhammad Najib al-Muti'i was a regular preacher. Muti'i was an Egyptian

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<sup>6</sup>Al-Karsani in Brenner ed 1993:149

<sup>7</sup>Zein 1989:125

<sup>8</sup>Zein 1989:74

<sup>9</sup>See Khalid 1985:259ff; Zein 1989:197

<sup>10</sup>Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), 3, 1983

<sup>11</sup>Zein 1989:64

<sup>12</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997

firebrand - he had run a mosque in a poor Cairo suburb which had witnessed thousands of arrests after armed clashes between Christians and Muslims<sup>13</sup>. Now he was far from the Egyptian jails where his fellow rioters languished, developing relationships with Muslim Brothers and their allies in Sudan. He taught *hadith* in the Islamic university and a diploma course in *da'wa* (Islamic mission or ideology) to military officers - this diploma was one of the means used by the Muslim Brothers to penetrate the army. Muti'i was hostile to Christians and to Muslims who did not share his ideas about Islam. His television series brought his brand of Egyptian TV evangelism to the people of Sudan, attacking Republicans, Christians and Sufis - the last were an old target of the *shari'a* tradition and its radical modern exponents which most Muslim Brothers were wise enough to avoid attacking<sup>14</sup>.

Muti'i was in a different league from the Republicans, who were still printing their roneos. Television had been extended across Sudanese cities from the mid 1970s, and in 1983 there were over 100,000 sets in the country<sup>15</sup>. The new media were the preserve of the state, and the state had excluded Taha from every form of communication - mosques, clubs, newspapers - except the street. In 1946, Republican roneos were near the cutting edge of political technology, but the movement never developed beyond them - Republicans were reluctant to abandon the combination of written word and personal encounter that pamphleteering implied. However, Republicans were unable to rebut Muti'i's attacks:

[Republican] young men and women mix together in distributing pamphlets ... each girl travels with a boy to underdeveloped areas, crossing the desert wastes of Sudan ... a half-naked, tender skinned buxom girl, for they have taken off their beautiful Sudanese *tob* and exchanged it for a mini or a micro-skirt<sup>16</sup>.

Muti'i had a keen eye for the female figure, but he may not have noticed the chaste white *tobs* of the Republican sisters. He declared that Republicans could be killed with impunity<sup>17</sup>. The Republicans turned to the regime to save them. A pamphlet entitled *al-hawas al-dini yuthir al-fitna li-yasil ila al-sulta* ("Religious fanaticism stirs up discord to take power") came out in May 1983. It criticised the failure of al-Tayyib, as security chief, to protect them from Muti'i, who preached in his mosque:

The spearhead of the campaign of organised distortion against Republican thought is an Egyptian legist who works as a professor at Omdurman Islamic university (Muhammad Najib al-Muti'i). He has preached in al-Taqwa mosque whose flock includes the vice president. He began his distortion campaign with [al-Tayyib] ... which has given him the

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<sup>13</sup>Ibrahim Yusuf papers

<sup>14</sup>Ibrahim Yusuf papers

<sup>15</sup>Frost ed, 1983:317

<sup>16</sup>Muti'i 1986:18

<sup>17</sup>Interview, Abdallah al-Dabi 5/12/1997

courage to step up his campaign against us in this mosque and on the television, stage by stage.<sup>18</sup>

Al-Tayyib responded to the pamphlet by confiscating the movement's printing facilities, books and the tent in which exhibitions were held. He began to arrest leading Republican brothers and sisters in the capital, Kosti, Medani, El Obeid, Dongola, Kassala and Port Sudan. Taha was detained on the thirteenth of May 1983. He was held in an SSO detention centre, the home of Bona Malwal, a former minister, who was held next door. It was comfortable, and according to Bona Malwal, there was little harsh treatment<sup>19</sup>. Taha was joined in detention by an acquaintance named Khalil Osman, one of Sudan's biggest capitalists.

Khartoum Republicans were held in two wings of Kober prison. The Republicans had a strong sense of hierarchy, with every delegation, team, house or region having its own leader, and this hierarchy followed them into jail. Sa'id Shayib led one wing, and Jalal al-Din al-Hadi the other. The *waqtajiya*, Republicans who had the highest expectations of Taha and his future spiritual status, saw the moment as a blessing. Ibrahim Yusuf kept a diary where he described his chance to re-live the spiritual retreat that Taha underwent in Kober after 1946<sup>20</sup>. More "rationalist" Republicans, like Abdullahi An-Na'im, saw it differently:

I saw it as a political experience - not rejecting the spiritual dimension - but Ibrahim Yusuf saw it as a transformative, symbolic experience. I felt the Sufi feeling that to ask hardship of God is not really good. We should ask to be merciful and compassionate and to avoid suffering<sup>21</sup>.

Some Republicans believe that al-Tayyib met Muti'i and his friends from the radical Islamist movements in the Republican palace to run a campaign against Taha<sup>22</sup>. Others felt that the SSO was responding to Republican provocation with a short period of detention, just as they had done in 1977. However, later that month a new political rationale to Taha's detention appeared - he was a warning to other Muslim groups in the country who might oppose new *shari'a* legislation proposed by Nimeiri. In September, the Republicans were joined by Sadig al-Mahdi and Mahdist prisoners: he had been jailed after a speech against the new laws (see below). Sadig was the real threat to Nimeiri - he had his inherited support, but he did not acquiesce in the new laws, like the Khatmiya leadership. Even Communists mooted his name as an alternative to Nimeiri. Sadig himself encountered Taha in his detention centre. According to Sadig al-Mahdi's account of the meeting, he questioned Taha's support for "one

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<sup>18</sup>Part of the text of *al-hawas al-dini* in Muti'i 1986:19

<sup>19</sup>Interview, Bona Malwal 19/8/1997

<sup>20</sup>Ibrahim Yusuf papers

<sup>21</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1998

<sup>22</sup>Ibrahim Yusuf papers



of the worst dictatorships in Africa<sup>23</sup>. But, says Yusuf Hasan, a close associate of Sadig's, their discussion was good-natured<sup>24</sup>.

## New legitimacy

Nimeiri used his relationship with small-scale Sufi *tarigas* as a base for his new, Islamic legitimacy, which replaced the legitimacy conferred on him by the 1973 peace deal. Many southern leaderships were still prepared to deal with him, but he had to juggle them with the other alliances he had made. In 1983, he broke decisively with most southerners, announcing the redivision of the south in July, and replacing the secular laws based on the 1973 constitution with a version of *shari'a* in September<sup>25</sup>. Southern officers from the Sudanese army mutinied, and formed the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which began a violent campaign to co-opt southern tribes. One Muslim Brother minister explained that Nimeiri was going to hand over the government to his movement, "But we told him that he should hand over the South to us as he found it before 1972. We know how we will deal with [the southerners]"<sup>26</sup>.

Nimeiri's decision to implement *shari'a* was a complex one. In 1977, the Muslim Brothers persuaded him to set up a committee to oversee the modification of laws in line with the *shari'a*. He produced a book on the Islamic way in 1980 - highly praised in a Republican response<sup>27</sup>. He drew closer to the small-scale Sufi *shaykhs*. There was an underlying antagonism between the Sufi *tarigas*, with their traditional practices, and the Muslim Brothers, who wanted to reconfigure Sudanese power structures, replacing Sufi patrician leadership with an urban, professional leadership with prestigious connections to the wider Muslim world. In May 1983, Nimeiri attended the Abu Gurun festivities for the *mi'raj*, or night journey of Muhammad, where al-Nayl Abu Gurun agreed to produce a new, Islamic penal code for Sudan. One *shaykh* promised that the childless Nimeiri would have a son if he returned to the true path<sup>28</sup>. The decision to implement *shari'a*, according to Zein, was taken in May 1983, with the support of Abu Gurun's small scale Sufi leadership. Nimeiri bypassed, and "stunned" the Muslim Brothers, who nevertheless decided to back the measures<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup>Sadig al-Mahdi lecture, 11/6/1997

<sup>24</sup>Interview, Yusuf Hasan 14/6/1997

<sup>25</sup>See An-Na'im 1986 for a fuller account of the legislative changes

<sup>26</sup>Quoted by Badal in Harir and Tvedt ed, 1993:112

<sup>27</sup>See Hamid 1991:201

<sup>28</sup>Miller 1996:137

<sup>29</sup>El-Affendi 1991:122f

The pervasive debate about the place of *shari'a* in modern Islamic states and societies was noted in chapter 12. These states had different historical experiences of *shari'a*. In Middle Eastern cities, *shari'a* was a set of institutions, laws and rules which had framed a relatively stable class structure and regulated commerce and family life. Sudan's experience of *shari'a* was different. Some modern radical exponents of the *shari'a* tradition make the unsupported claim that the Funj sultanate was a *shari'a* state<sup>30</sup>. Spaulding suggests that *shari'a* courts were a largely urban phenomenon in pre-colonial Sudan, and that their influence was resisted by the Sufi mainstream<sup>31</sup>. *Shari'a* attained importance in Sudan because Turkiya and British colonialists regarded it as a prestigious and authoritarian religious form, and used it to bolster their own legitimacy. The Mahdi took up the centralising potential of *shari'a* when he built his state. However, the colonialists were interested in *shari'a* institutions rather than laws - their laws were drawn from western codes and were intended to facilitate a class-based mode of production. Modern radical Islamists accepted *shari'a* institutions but felt keenly the absence of enforceable *shari'a* law<sup>32</sup>. Their campaigns for *shari'a* envisaged extending the jurisdiction of an existing institutional structure, and sometimes smacked of tokenism. Zein, who broadly supports Nimeiri's *shari'a* experiment acknowledges this:

It was understood that the degree of seriousness and sincerity of Islamization would be measured by the implementation of the part of the *hudud* that was considered by the West as inhumane ... and contrary to the declaration of Human Rights which was accepted by Sudan<sup>33</sup>.

Abu Gurun and his associates saw Sudan's legal deficiencies as an absence of Islamic laws and punishments. Accordingly, they attached Islamic punishments to crimes defined in the terms of western jurisprudence - strikers would be lashed, for example<sup>34</sup>. For them, *shari'a* was narrowly defined as a set of legal rules, and not as institution, process, or ideology. Other political groups, even those committed to *shari'a*, were not so sure that *shari'a* laws alone could transform a starving country. Sadig al-Mahdi explained to a crowd of his Mahdist supporters: "If a man's family is starving and he steals to feed them, we cannot rule that his hand should be cut off"<sup>35</sup>.

## Laws for the rich and poor

Colonial law and institutions entrenched class stratification, and the introduction of *shari'a* was not intended to address class divisions in the country. For example, Sudan's *shari'a*

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<sup>30</sup>For example, Zayn al-'Abidin 1991:5

<sup>31</sup>Spaulding 1977

<sup>32</sup>For an account of an analogous, but different process in Middle Eastern Islam, see Brown 1997

<sup>33</sup>Zein 1989:200

<sup>34</sup>Khalid 1990:310

<sup>35</sup>EIU 4, 1983

criminology was at ease with the western model of the prison, which was an emphatic class-marker in Sudan even in the 1940's (see page 94f). The new rules jeopardised marginalised groups who did not fit in the *shari'a* system, as the Republican sisters discovered in jail. Asma and Sumaya Mahmud, Batoul Mukhtar and Huda Osman were for a time the only politicals in Omdurman women's prison. The women in with them were mostly from poor backgrounds, and many had fallen foul of the new rules on alcohol. Brewing *marissa* was still a traditional occupation for poor urban women, and many did not understand what they had done wrong:

God, we brought up our children up on this *marissa*, and the children of the prison guards too!<sup>36</sup>

*Shari'a* rules against alcohol consumption have different effects. In Sudan, they criminalised a diet that was associated with the rural and the African. State intervention in diet has been noted before - the colonialists' preference for wheat was taken up by Sudanese elites (see chapter 11). Sudan spent hard currency on wheat farming and imports, while European livestock ate Sudanese sorghum<sup>37</sup>. Diet could be used to mark class divisions, and the *shari'a* ban on fermented nutrients was used to distinguish between the poor people from marginalised ethnic groups and the city tastes of the Muslim Brothers. Sudan's class structure reached into the jail: when an air hostess from an important family was jailed for smuggling alcohol, she was freed in two days, whereas the Republicans witnessed pregnant women miscarrying as a result of the floggings they received for their brewing activity. Asma Mahmud recalls:

No-one asked after them, no-one cared for their health and treatment, their families. They were just put there like animals. This was an experience. It was important - it showed you what really happened in Sudanese society<sup>38</sup>.

Asma coped with the experience by writing letters to her father, telling him about the dreams of wild animals she was having, and reading and summarising his books. Amna Lutfi had to cope with freedom while her husband and two daughters lay in jail - she only saw them every few weeks<sup>39</sup>. In Kober, prisoners wrote and prayed, for many Republicans the period was a happy time<sup>40</sup>. Taha wrote a religious and political essay, *dibaja*, in 1984, and a number of letters to the Republicans from his own separate detention centre, his "blessed retreat"<sup>41</sup>. Affectionate and spiritual, he encouraged them to remember that the blessed present was full of concealed meaning. It was easy for these letters and messages to slip in and out of Sudan's porous prison system, and Taha's letters were passed around lovingly:

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<sup>36</sup>A prisoner quoted by Asma Mahmud, interview 30/11/1997

<sup>37</sup>Dirar 1993:108

<sup>38</sup>Interview, Asma Mahmud 30/11/1997

<sup>39</sup>ibid

<sup>40</sup>Interview, Steve Howard 23/11/1997

<sup>41</sup>Text of letter, Taha 14/11/83, in papers of Ibrahim Yusuf

If we are doing any work, or meeting someone significant, or if we have to give a talk or debate, for example, we must not be impatient for our *shari'a* [the personal *shari'a* of worship, or the law of perfect freedom] to come, nor should we live outside the present moment. We live in the moment of meeting, the moment of talking, the moment of debating, busy in readiness for what we love to say, before there comes the time [when the world is perfected]<sup>42</sup>.

In some ways, it was harder for Republicans on the outside. They provided for the prisoners' families, and kept up the pressure on the regime. They went out to preach and distribute pamphlets, not knowing if they would come back at night. Although they would not pray in mosques, they began to attend mosques in order to listen out for signals of the regime's intentions<sup>43</sup>.

## Abrogation theory hits the headlines

At the beginning of 1984, Nimeiri offered Taha and the sisters their freedom. Taha refused to accept it without the release of the rest of the brothers, but he told the sisters to leave jail.

Republicans on the outside managed to publish a booklet on the September laws, *al-mawqif al-siyasi al-rahin* ("The present political situation"). It looked at Republican history and the happy days of the 1972 peace accord. The pamphlet was one of the few Republican attempts to analyse the social problems of marginalised groups in Sudan. It discussed women brewers, sorghum prices, prostitution, starving villagers in Darfur, and the attrition of southerners' rights<sup>44</sup>. The September laws (as Nimeiri's *shari'a* was known) gave Republican fixations about law and society a dramatic credibility. Republicans established their case for a change in law by quoting pre-modern writers from the *shari'a* tradition, such as the exegete Ibn Kathir (d 1373) to show that the *shari'a* tradition made compulsion part of religion, and could not be sustained in a multi-religious state like Sudan<sup>45</sup>. Ibn Kathir, for example, claimed that the Qur'an's sword verse "Kill the unbelievers wherever you find them" (4:84) is definitive and final:

Every pact of the prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, with any of the polytheists, is abrogated ... as ibn Abbas says, there is no longer any pact or protection for polytheists since [this verse] was revealed<sup>46</sup>.

In fact, Nimeiri maintained legal protection for Noble Spiritual Beliefs (which many Sudanese Muslims carelessly identified with polytheism). But for 'Awad al-Jeed, his legal draftsman, "it was a sin to protect those beliefs"<sup>47</sup>. Abrogation theory was being discussed in unlikely places: a pastoral letter from the Catholic archbishop of Khartoum exhorted his flock to keep away

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<sup>42</sup>Text of letter dated 14/2/1984, papers of Yusuf Lutfi

<sup>43</sup>Interview, Steve Howard 23/11/1997

<sup>44</sup>RB, *al-mawqif* 1984:60ff

<sup>45</sup>RB, *al-mawqif* 1984:78

<sup>46</sup>Ibn Kathir, quoted in RB, *al-mawqif* 1984:78

<sup>47</sup>Quoted in Zein 1989:242

from Nimeiri's theatres of punishment. Jesus, said archbishop Gabriel Zubeir Wako, abrogates harsh laws<sup>48</sup>. Wako's beliefs are surprisingly similar to those of the Republicans, waiting for a perfect man to abrogate *shari'a* discriminations against women and non-Muslims.

## Constitutional chaos

Nimeiri claimed that his presidential decrees were in effect a new Islamic constitution. However, he could not get parliament to revoke the 1973 constitution and shelved the proposal. Two Republican judges, (one of whom was a woman, Rashida Muhammad Fadul) claimed that the presidential decrees, with their *shari'a* discriminations against women and non-Muslims, violated the constitution, but their legal challenge failed in court.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, criminal justice was in turmoil: Nimeiri introduced emergency courts and then Instant Justice courts; some judges refused to co-operate, and Nimeiri replaced them with unqualified Muslim Brothers, who used the courts to settle scores with other factions. The country was treated to a carnival of floggings, amputations and executions, as the economy collapsed, corruption widened, and the IMF refused to bail out the regime with more loans. Famine deaths in Darfur were counted in tens of thousands, and different militias contested the highly militarised south, with the SPLA gaining the upper hand. There were waves of strikes and demonstrations, and Philip Ghaboush, the leader of the Nuba Mountains political movement, was arrested for allegedly threatening a Nuba uprising in the armed forces<sup>50</sup>.

## Taha's release

Nimeiri had little room to manoeuvre: he had the support of the Americans, the Muslim Brothers, and his coterie of loyalists. Sometimes he said he would abolish the September laws, and sometimes he jailed cronies for corruption. But he had a stranglehold on political dissent - in December 1984 he could even afford to free Sadig al-Mahdi and his followers, who kept quiet on release. A weak Sadig was a good counterbalance to the Muslim Brothers. Nimeiri also decided to release Taha.

Muhammad Ali Malik and Abdallah al-Dabi were two former SSO officers who became Republicans in the mid-1970s. They had to explain to their colleagues the Republican belief that state security was about awareness raising, not repression, and they were soon gently moved on, but now al-Tayyib, the vice president and SSO chief, decided to negotiate through them. On the eighteenth of December, they were taken from Kober prison to Taha's detention

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<sup>48</sup>"To all Christian faithful", Letter from archbishop Gabriel Zubeir Wako, 23/9/1983, Allison papers SAD813/4/7

<sup>49</sup>An-Na'im 1986:205

<sup>50</sup>See Woodward 1988; Daly and Sikainga 1993; Barnett and Abdelkarim 1988 for more information.



centre. Taha welcomed them with hot sweet lemon, told them not to be bitter, and look for the hand of God behind it all. He said they should ask al-Tayyib for an explanation for the detention, and for the return of the printing press. Taha said that if there was to be a release, it must simultaneously include all the Republican detainees in the cities around Sudan. The two ex-security men went to 'Umar Muhammad al-Tayyib's office. Al-Tayyib was like a baby in a general's uniform, says Muhammad Ali Malik, all tears and affection, telling them how much he respected Taha's mission to the Sudanese people. He spoke of his Sufi regret for the political exploitation of *shari'a* and said that he had been forced to detain Taha. Al-Tayyib worried that Taha might not accept release. Muhammad Ali Malik and Abdallah al-Dabi conveyed Taha's wishes to al-Tayyib. Taha and the Republicans detained in different cities were released on the nineteenth.

The two Republicans sensed that there was a conspiracy afoot, and that their old boss al-Tayyib was trying to distance himself from it<sup>51</sup>. Taha knew that the regime wanted to finish him off. He told the Republicans to prepare for struggle, he told some of his friends to be careful because the regime was "planning something big".

## Back to work

After the happy reunions, the Republicans went back to their old activities - meeting in Taha's house and then getting into buses to the centre of Omdurman or Khartoum where they would hold *zikr* in public squares and stations, and sell books. Taha led the processions, dressed in his simple white Sudanese clothes and skull-cap. On the 25th of December, Christmas, the Republicans published a short pamphlet entitled *hadha ... aw al-tufan* ("Either this or the flood"). Taha told the brothers and sisters, who met at his home daily, that only those who were convinced of the truth of the pamphlet, and who were ready to face the consequences of distributing it, should join in the distribution efforts. Busloads of Republicans accepted the challenge and distribution went ahead, preceded as ever by half an hour or more of *zikr*. Their efforts were concentrated around the university, and some of them were arrested.

## Either this or the flood<sup>52</sup>

The pamphlet, which appears in appendix 3, was a lucid and brief denunciation of the September laws. It said the laws deviated from normative *shari'a* law, and, echoing al-Sadiq al-Mahdi's speech at Aba, said that it was not right to amputate the hands of thieves in the current economic conditions. The laws "humiliated and insulted the people", and it was "futile

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<sup>51</sup>Interviews, Abdallah al-Dabi 5/12/1997 and Muhammad Ali Malik, 6/12/1997, Ibrahim Yusuf papers.

<sup>52</sup>Text in An-Na'im's introduction to Taha *Second Message* 1987:



to claim that a Christian person is not adversely affected". Non-Muslims' rights were only provided for in the "authentic Islam". It called for the repeal of the laws and the end of the war and the revival of Islam through education. There was no long excursus into gnostic Sufism. According to Ibrahim Yusuf, the pamphlet had a good reception, and dominated the discussions of the Republicans each evening. (A few months before someone outside the movement had been jailed for possession of Republican material, so even acceptance of the pamphlet must have implied the reader's approval)<sup>53</sup>.

## A day in court

At the end of December, senior Republicans learned from the attorney-general al-Rashid al-Tahir (a lapsed Muslim Brother now close to Taha) that the minister for criminal affairs, a Muslim Brother named Muhammad Adam 'Isa, had instructed prosecutors to press capital charges of sedition, inciting unlawful opposition, and membership of an illegal organisation against some Republicans detained for breach of the peace. Republicans led a procession through the capital and held an *zikr* circle outside the court, to keep up the spirits of the accused, only to find that the case had been adjourned for a week. The president had to sanction the capital charges. They went back to distributing the pamphlet, conscious of the popular astonishment at their tenacity<sup>54</sup>.

## The redeemer

Republicans spent several days celebrating Sudan's independence day (the 1st of January). On the fourth, Taha gave his last interview to *al-Jami'a* magazine. He spoke about presidential and parliamentary government, Islamic banks and the nationalist struggle. But that night, Taha retreated into the private Sufi discourse that had nourished the Republicans in their detention. "The time has come for our knowledge to be incarnated" he told them, and reminded them of how Sufi *walis* redeemed their people from the power of plague:

*Sayyid* Hasan [al-Mirghani] died in a plague, and the plague stopped. In 1915, *shaykh* Taha [wad 'Abd al-Sadig] in Rufa'a died from the meningitis that spread wildly, and no-one escaped without death or disablement. *Shaykh* Taha died and the sickness stopped. This story is regularly told among the Sufis, but the secularists find it hard [to grasp]. Now, you must redeem the Sudanese people from the humiliation and degradation that has come on them ...<sup>55</sup>

Many Republicans had high expectations of Taha; some even thought he was going to be the perfect man, or messiah. Not to discourage such speculation is to encourage it, and Taha did no more than keep silent. If someone asked him if he was the perfect man, he answered "I hope

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<sup>53</sup>Ibrahim Yusuf papers

<sup>54</sup>ibid

<sup>55</sup>ibid

to be"; if someone asked him if he was a Republican, he gave the same answer<sup>56</sup>. On the night of the fourth of January, Taha made his most explicit statement about his aspirations; he said "I am not the perfect man, but I hope to be"<sup>57</sup>. Taha's prosecutors, it will be seen, tried to link him to far-away gnostics like al-Hallaj, but Taha drew comparisons with Sudanese Sufism instead. Sudan, the heart of Africa, the most spiritual place in the world, was the place for a perfect man, he believed, a man in the tradition of *shaykh* Taha whom he may have met as a small boy.

## Arrest

At noon on the fifth, SSO men with submachine guns escorted the elderly mystic to the police cells in Omdurman. He was interviewed by a police officer and the public prosecutor. He accepted full responsibility for the pamphlet and gave them a talk on Republican history and *shari'a*. Taha was happy to be jailed with non-political prisoners in the police cells. Instead of looking for special treatment, as he had done in Kober in 1946, he bothered himself about the conditions of his fellow detainees, asking the Republican lawyers to be sure to help them out<sup>58</sup>. Taha had spent years linking his asceticism to the poverty of Sudanese people, and perhaps his asceticism made it easier for him to link the authenticity of his spiritual quest to the authenticity of the poor man's struggle with the law.

## The trial

Taha went to the dock on the seventh, with four Republicans arrested the week before: Khalid Babikr Hamza, Muhammad Salim Ba'shar, 'Abd al-Latif 'Umar (one of his four deputies), and Taj al-Din 'Abd al-Raziq. Nimeiri sanctioned capital charges and applied the bizarre section 458(3) of the penal code, which allowed the court to impose any *hadd* (Qur'an-specified penalty such as flogging or stoning; the singular of *hudud*) in the absence of specified punishments<sup>59</sup>. Sudan's confused and incomplete legal system had always allowed judges to fill legislative vacuums with their own initiative, but this chaotic capital case even had judges making up *hudud*.

It was hard to find judges who could cope with such laws. The man chosen was Hasan Ibrahim al-Mahalawi, a relative of Abu Gurun not yet qualified as a judge. The Republicans, many coming from outside Khartoum, again processed through the streets to the court, which had to be moved to a larger courtroom to accommodate the crush. A policeman went through

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<sup>56</sup>Interview, Muhammad Ali Malik 6/12/1997

<sup>57</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997; al-Sharif 1996:14

<sup>58</sup>Ibrahim Yusuf papers

<sup>59</sup>An-Na'im in Taha *Second Message* 1987:13.

his investigation of the offence and submitted the sole piece of evidence, Taha's pamphlet, to the judge, who read it nervously. Ibrahim Yusuf felt that even the prosecutor was moved. The process took less than an hour, and when the judge turned to the defence case, Taha and his co-accused denounced the September laws and announced their boycott of the proceedings.

Taha spoke at the end:

I have repeatedly declared my view that the September 1983 so-called Islamic laws violate Islamic *Shari'a* law and Islam itself. Moreover, these laws have distorted Islamic *Shari'a* law and made them repugnant. Furthermore, these laws were enacted and utilized to terrorize the people and humiliate them into submission. These laws also jeopardize the national unity of the country. These are [my] objections from the theoretical point of view.

At the practical level, the judges enforcing these laws lack the necessary technical qualifications. They have also morally failed to resist, placing themselves under the control of the executive authorities which exploited them in violating the rights of citizens, humiliating the people, distorting Islam, insulting intellect and intellectuals, and humiliating political opponents.

For all these reasons, I am not prepared to cooperate with any court that has betrayed the independence of the judiciary and allowed itself to be a tool for humiliating the people, insulting free thought, and persecuting political opponents.<sup>60</sup>

There was nothing that al-Mahalawi could say except that he would pass judgement the next day, and there was nothing the Republicans could do except publish Taha's court-room speech in a pamphlet. But that night, Nimeiri announced that he had pardoned Philip Ghaboush and 200 of his Nuba supporters from Western Sudan, who were facing state security charges for an alleged conspiracy to mutiny<sup>61</sup>.

## Sentence

The morning of the eighth, Republicans marched in procession to the court, only to be met by security forces. They made it to the court after some protest. Al-Mahalawi started off his judgement with a discussion of Taha's Sufi secrets:

It is true that the Qur'an has intricacies and secrets with which God favours those of his servants he wishes to favour, when he reveals to them the truths of things. [Such a servant] sees things not as ordinary people see them: these are individual states of consciousness which should not be propagated because they are favours, and because propagating them stirs up discord among believers.<sup>62</sup>

An-Na'im comments that al-Mahalawi seemed to be groping his way towards an apostasy conviction when he suddenly concluded by convicting all five men of the crimes against the state<sup>63</sup>. He passed death sentences for sedition, but said the accused could be reprieved if they recanted. This was a clear conflation of security laws with the *shari'a* law of apostasy.

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<sup>60</sup>in Taha *Second Message* 1987:14

<sup>61</sup>EIU 1, 1985

<sup>62</sup>RB, *al-kayd al-siyasi wal-mahkama al-mahzila*, 1985:16

<sup>63</sup>An-Na'im in Taha *Second Message* 1987:15

## Judicial review

The death sentence had to be reviewed by a higher court, and that court met on the twelfth of January with al-Mukashafi Taha al-Kabbashi presiding. He was from a Sufi family, but had joined the Muslim Brothers. Ahmad Mahjub Hajj Nur, a Muslim Brother with a reputation for savage sentencing, and Muhammad SIRR al-Khatim were sitting with him. Taha had been tried by a small-*tariga* Sufi: for al-Mahalawi, his crime was to reveal secrets to the unworthy. For the Muslim Brothers, his crime had always been that he believed those secrets. The Muslim Brothers were not prepared to discuss Taha's abrogation theory, his direct challenge to *shari'a* rules. Instead, they concentrated on his spiritual secrets, locating him in a distant Sufi challenge to *shari'a* theology, and caricaturing his Sufi dreams of perfection (linked to Sudan's religious mainstream) as an ancient heresy. The Muslim Brothers wanted to use the trial to delegitimise Sufism, a necessary part of their strategy to win over the constituencies of Sudan's Sufi patricians. They did not want to allow Taha to put forward his proposal to delegitimise *shari'a*. So when the Muslim Brother judges came to review the bizarre verdict, they made sure to add the unbelievable secrets to it. The judges brought new evidence to the case, picking through Republican works of the late 1980s which dealt with incarnation and authenticity (*asala*)<sup>64</sup>. They used his references to the incarnated life of God, the Muhammadan messiah or the station of Mahmud, as evidence that he was reviving the heterodoxies of ancient heretics. Like the protagonists of the 1968 trial, the judges sought to play out the ancient Islamic role of infuriated *shari'a* rigorists against Taha's Sufi martyr. In 922, the theosophist al-Hallaj faced a *shari'a* judge who insisted on taking his wild statements literally, and had him crucified. But Taha did not seem to want the role of al-Hallaj<sup>65</sup>. He confined his few public remarks to denouncing the inadequacies and injustices he saw in Nimeiri's version of *shari'a*, and in traditional *shari'a*.

The appeal judges relied heavily on the apostasy charge implied by al-Mahalawi, (for which Taha and his followers had not been tried), but they confirmed the sentences for the state security charges and sentenced them to "the *hadd* of apostasy"<sup>66</sup>. Apostasy was not one of the September laws, but the appeal court judges simply used the sweeping provisions of section 458(3), which allowed them to make up *hadd* punishments as they pleased. Most of the review was taken up with the apostasy of the accused. They quoted extensively from the records of Taha's 1968 trial and the condemnations from foreign *shari'a* authorities.

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<sup>64</sup>Al-Kabbashi 1986:85ff

<sup>65</sup>For an alternative view, see El Zein nd

<sup>66</sup>Text of review in al-Muti'i 1986:265

## Who pulled the trigger

The Muslim Brothers supported the trial and sentence, but they were not the main force behind the affair. Several months later, when crowds stormed through the Republican palace, they found a memo from Abu Gurun to Nimeiri, telling him not to miss a golden opportunity to get Taha<sup>67</sup>. Abu Gurun's disciple al-Mahalawi gave an indication of his master's concerns about Taha in his condemnation of Taha's democratic approach to Sufi secrets. Why was this an offence?

It was suggested in chapter 7 that many of the leaderships of Sudan's small-scale *tariqas* had gradually been co-opted into the colonial state. This process was continued by Nimeiri's ministry of religious affairs, who used the leaderships as a means of extending control over the rural Nile valley. This process helped these leaderships to identify the spiritual elitism of their Sufi heritage with the class structures of state society. For men like Abu Gurun and al-Mahalawi, the Sufi secrets shrouded in the impenetrable symbolism of pre-modern Sufi poetry, were a mark of spiritual and social eminence. Taha's attempt to communicate them was a threat to that eminence.

Taha's offence may have been more personal. It was noted above (pages 219 and 227) that 1980s Sudan was full of wild eschatological rumours, and that some of Sudan's leaders were wondering if they might have a role in the last things. Taha claimed a high spiritual station for himself, but his claims may have been contested by men like Nimeiri and Abu Gurun. Zein suggests that Abu Gurun may have wanted the Sufi secrets for himself:

Ustaz Mahmud was popularly perceived as an eminent Sufi Saint who was a dangerous competitor to their [Abu Gurun's] *tariqa*. Furthermore, Ustaz Mahmud himself claimed that he was seeking to reach that *maqam* [the high spiritual station which Abu Gurun believed qualified a Sufi for the status of Mahdi - Taha used the term messiah or perfect man]<sup>68</sup>

The political motivation for the trial is more straightforward: it kept pressure on Sadig al-Mahdi to stay quiet, and sent a signal to worldwide representatives of the *shari'a* tradition that Nimeiri was one of their number. The SSO was unhappy with the sentence, they worried about international reaction and possible Republican suicide attacks, and they arrested hundreds of Republicans<sup>69</sup>. Human rights lawyers flew into Khartoum to plead for clemency, and Communists and some Republicans discussed how they could thwart the execution. But many Republicans refused to plead for clemency. Some believed that it would be a betrayal of

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<sup>67</sup>Interview, Abdallah al-Dabi 5/12/1997

<sup>68</sup>Zein 1989:74

<sup>69</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997

Taha's long-standing rejection of the authority of state over belief<sup>70</sup>. Others believed that Taha's spiritual power was more than a match for Nimeiri and his gallows.

## The hanging

On the fifteenth of January, Taha was sentenced to immediate execution, without possibility of repentance. He was judged an incorrigible heretic, but his four co-accused were given a month to recant. Nimeiri confirmed the judgement the next day, with a bullying defence of his actions on state television two days later; anyone who tried to "interfere in the course of justice will receive an appropriate punishment"<sup>71</sup>. Nimeiri's confirmation of sentence was based again on *shari'a* apostasy law, but like others involved in the bizarre legalities, he did not mention the offence by name.

Asma did not believe it would happen. She went to visit her father to tell him so, but he just looked at her. When she felt worked up or sad, she had always gone to look in his eyes, and that gave her an unusual comfort. This time, she felt some comfort, but she still believed that something would stop it, or that heaven would intervene<sup>72</sup>. Muhammad Ali Malik also got to see him. The doctor who examined noted an abnormal physical calm about him. Taha was wearing the same prison *'aragi* that he wore in Kober in 1946. He looked down on his white robe as Muhammad Ali Malik left, and his last words to him were: "Mmhuh, the noblest uniform"<sup>73</sup>.

Abd al-Mun'im Abd al-Latif Sa'd was a prison warder who volunteered to guard Taha. He wanted to see history in the making. At four o'clock on the seventeenth, the prison authorities informed Taha that he was "going to the next world in the morning"<sup>74</sup>. He had no requests, but his diabetes troubled him, and there was no toilet in the condemned cell, just a palm mat and a blanket. Sudan's capital had an uneasy night. The Muslim Brothers were preparing for a feast, but many Sudanese who had been fed hundreds of lurid trials for drinking, corruption, and the novel offence of attempted non-legal sex (sometimes taken to implicate a man and woman walking in the street) felt restless and dismayed at this new show.

The next morning, the eighteenth of January 1985, crowds gathered around the prison walls. They were mostly Muslim Brothers, including Hasan al-Turabi, but some foreign journalists came to watch a Muslim state dramatically assert its "fundamentalism". Some Republicans

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<sup>70</sup>Interview, Fatma Ibrahim 21/8/1997

<sup>71</sup>Hamid 1991:203

<sup>72</sup>Interviews, Asma Mahmud, 29/11/1997 and 30/11/1997

<sup>73</sup>Interview, Muhammad Ali Malik 6/12/1997

<sup>74</sup>Sa'd 1985



came, convinced that Taha would not die, but transform himself and the world to perfection. Some were arrested for shouting that he would not die<sup>75</sup>.

Taha's historian-warder described Taha's last moments: "They took him to the gallows' square, and he climbed up with firm steps and a lion heart. They lifted the cover [over his face] and there was a man smiling at fate. Peace on the nation that bore a man like Mahmud"<sup>76</sup>. The Muslim Brothers gathered in the gallows square shouted "God is great, God is great, Islam is the answer", as the elderly man, his head and body covered in a sack, fell through a gallows' trapdoor<sup>77</sup>. Abu Gurun's student dream of Taha (see page 157) had come true.

Taha dropped to his death: one of the journalists felt sick and left before a doctor examined his body. A helicopter lifted him off to a secret desert grave<sup>78</sup>. Some of the Muslim Brothers slaughtered sheep to celebrate, and many of Taha's followers were filled with a dismayed perplexity which they have yet to resolve. There were no prayers, shroud or washing for his apostate body, and he had died a death like Jesus', just as he had predicted during his retreat.

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<sup>75</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 17/11/1997

<sup>76</sup>Sa'd 1985

<sup>77</sup>ibid

<sup>78</sup>Miller 1996:12

# Chapter 17

## Aftermath

This chapter concludes the foregoing account of Taha's life by looking at events in the months after his execution, and then by assessing Taha's contribution to Sudan.

## Penitence

### Hoarding

Two days after Taha was executed, his four co-accused met in Kober prison to talk about the offer of recantation which had been added to their conviction for sedition. Some Republicans believe that Taha had told them not to follow him to the gallows. They decided to recant.

Observers of Sudan in 1985 often commented on how far events in Khartoum were divorced from the realities of life in the hinterland. While men like al-Kabbashi imagined themselves to be defending the true faith from the horrors of gnosticism, many ordinary Sudanese were thinking about food. Up to ten million people were affected by the drought in the country, half of them severely affected. Over a million people displaced by hunger converged on Khartoum. In the south, war and famine caused a level of human suffering which has never been properly recorded. Inter-tribal relationships on the borderlands between the south and north became disastrously bloody. In Darfur, people ransacked termite hoards for food. In Khartoum, however, merchants hoarded grain to speculate on prices. When the central bank realised what was happening, they ordered commercial banks to shorten credit lines for food stocks. The Islamic banks stepped in to offer the hoarding merchants the longer credit needed to make up to 400% annual returns on sorghum stocks<sup>1</sup>.

### Praise be to God

The four recanting Republicans wrote letters to Nimeiri declaring that they had "repented of all their words". This was not enough: they had to submit to interrogation from their appeal judges, a Muslim Brother minister and representatives of the religious affairs ministry. The televised session was opened by 'Abd al-Jabbar al-Mubarak a consultant to Faisal Islamic

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<sup>1</sup>EIU 1985 1

Bank, and anti-Republican polemicist. "God loves the penitent sinner" said al-Mubarak to Khalid Babikr<sup>2</sup>. He and his fellow convicts had to read a recantation:

I declare my repentance to God almighty and great, and my recantation of all my thoughts and opinions which I took from the infidel apostate, Mahmud Muhammad Taha, who deceived me with his thought and took me out of the confession of Islam, until God hanged him dead.<sup>3</sup>

'Abd al-Latif 'Umar, the water-seller who had learned to read through the movement, and who now worked as a sub-editor in a newspaper, could not say the words, and tried some casuistry about the five pillars of Islam being enough to return him to the faith. One judge told him that if he did not recant, he would be taken to the gallows directly. In the end, all four men read out the confession, twice. 'Abd al-Latif sobbed, and his prosecutors cried "praise be to God".

## Redemption

### Debating in the cell

The four hundred Republicans detained on the eve of Taha's execution were freed within a week. 'Umar Muhammad al-Tayyib, the security chief, was unhappy about the execution and feared Taha's supporters might resort to suicide attacks, although this was never considered by the detainees. Abdullahi An-Na'im, a well-connected Republican academic, was invited to discuss their release. Some Republicans believe that Taha had indicated that his fellow convicts should recant, and Abdullahi An-Na'im was allowed to discuss the matter with Sa'id Shayib, who was still at large, and who felt that there should be no more martyrdom. An-Na'im met Abu Gurun, 'Awad al-Jeed and Durriya Sulayman (a Muslim sister) and they negotiated a recantation which did not include references to infidels or apostates, but included an undertaking not to propagate Taha's views. The recantation was debated in the police cells, each holding 20 or 30 Republicans. All but four Republicans signed - many were persuaded that Taha wanted them to do so, and that they were disavowing their pride, that stopped them from recanting, rather than disavowing their beliefs<sup>4</sup>

### Was Taha a redeemer?

The Economist Intelligence Unit, which provides global financial analysis for the super-rich, wrote extensively about Taha's execution in its quarterly review. Its analysis suggests that Taha succeeded in his aim to "redeem the Sudanese people from the humiliation and

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<sup>2</sup>Transcript of recantation in al-Muti'i 1986:215

<sup>3</sup>Transcript of recantation in al-Muti'i 1986:222

<sup>4</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 8/11/1997

degradation that has come on them"<sup>5</sup>. The EIU suggested that the outcry over his death led to a decrease in *hadd* sentencing. In the 16 months before Taha's death, 70 people convicted of theft had hands amputated; in the four months after it, there were only two<sup>6</sup>. Four Ba'athists on the same sedition charges as Taha's got eighty lashes rather than death, even though their trial, under al-Kabbashi, had the same examination of the Islamic correctness of their ideology, rather than the facts of the case<sup>7</sup>. The execution led to a London meeting between the patrician parties and the SPLA which galvanised opposition to the May regime.

It is difficult to avoid the impression that Taha was speaking for many Sudanese when he wrote *hadha ... aw al-tufan*. Taha was in a unique position to articulate a widespread sense of dismay at Nimeiri's version of *shari'a*. His belief that he had a mission to explain the truth and even to redeem Sudan was not fanciful. The country was seized by a "paroxysm of remorse", and the professional syndicates who organised themselves to present letters of protest about his trial and execution went on to lead a successful popular uprising against Nimeiri in April that year<sup>8</sup>. The Americans, who had been shoring up Nimeiri's debts for several years, began to withdraw support, and many other governments condemned the execution. Nimeiri thought he was being wise in tyranny when he destroyed a weak opponent to demonstrate his power, but from beyond the grave, Taha destroyed him.

## Republican responses

Like many other commentators, Republicans make the connection between the execution and the fall of Nimeiri. When Nimeiri was replaced in April, they published *ma dha qal al-'alim 'an al-ustadh mahmud* ["What the world has said about *ustaz* Mahmud"], which reproduced reports from around the world. *Jeune Afrique*, with his picture on its glossy cover, called him an African Gandhi. Taha was given sympathetic write-ups in the pan-Arab press. One Egyptian Christian resigned from the Nile Valley parliament (an attempt at Egyptian-Sudanese unity) in protest<sup>9</sup>. The Arab Organisation for Human Rights adopted the anniversary of Taha's death as Arab human rights day.

Taha's conviction was overturned by the supreme court, in a suit raised by his lawyer daughter Asma Mahmud. She did not want any compensation, although the Mahdi family and even some Communists helped themselves to large reparations. But the Republicans decided not to revive their movement after the death. Sadig, a Republican who conducted a survey of

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<sup>5</sup>Ibrahim Yusuf papers

<sup>6</sup>EIU 1985 2

<sup>7</sup>Al-Kabbashi, 1986:114

<sup>8</sup>Khalid 1990:303

<sup>9</sup>RB, *ma dha qal al-'alim 'an al-ustadh mahmud*, nd:13

the movement two years after the execution found less than a third of respondents wanted to start again<sup>10</sup>. 44% of his interviewees had begun to doubt their Republican beliefs, while 40% said that the execution strengthened their belief in a man who had stood by his<sup>11</sup>.

Every Republican informant interviewed here says that Taha attracted them to his movement by communicating a sense of belovedness to them. (Sadig's sample found that 68% of informants cited Taha's "attractive personality" as a reason for joining)<sup>12</sup>. This virtuous individualism meant that Republicans often had sharply differing expectations of Taha. For some, he was the leader of a social movement that had become part of their life; for others, he vindicated their feminist or socialist ideas. Those with the highest expectations of Taha believed he was a Sufi master who might become a messiah. Taha's death brought out these differences.

### Sociable movement

Sadig's 1988 study of Republicans after the execution found less than a third wanting to revive the movement. Almost all (23 out of 25) proponents of revival cited the need to maintain social links, an indication of the group loyalty that Taha had built, and of the difficulty in returning from Republican to kinship networks. In Taha's successful social movement, people sang the same songs, celebrated Christmas and Muslim feasts, went on trips or missions together. Some lived a common life in busy religious houses, and many married each other. This friendly human bustle was silenced by the execution, and it was a loss to those Republicans who were attracted to the movement's warmth and companionship, rather than its legal or spiritual preoccupations. Some Republicans felt that Taha was the only thing that stopped them from becoming secularists, and when he died, some of them took the obvious step. Others ceased to identify themselves as Republicans and went back to mainstream social and religious life.

### Civil rights movement

Taha's inclusive and tolerant manner made space for people who were less than completely committed to his ideas. But many of his followers were deeply impressed by his reworking of *shari'a*, and saw his constitutional ideas as the main reason for joining up. For them, Taha was a murdered pacifist and a moral exemplar.

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<sup>10</sup>Sadig 1988:93

<sup>11</sup>ibid:94

<sup>12</sup>ibid:91

By accepting his fate in that manner, Ustadh Mahmoud demonstrate that belief and action can combine in the life of a human being into a single consistent pattern, even up to the ultimate test<sup>13</sup>.

For some of these civil and gender rights activists, Taha's death eventually worked as a tragic and forceful reminder that there was more work to be done. They became involved in the campaign led by professionals and unionists to protest the execution, a campaign that brought down Nimeiri in the end. Abdullahi An-Na'im, a law academic, was associated with that campaign, and he has subsequently written extensively on human rights in different cultures, developing Taha's distinction between Qur'anic ethics and *shari'a* law in the context of a wider debate about law and rights. The Republicans were all adopted as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International and their articulate commitment to human rights has contributed to international campaigns. Their works, often in English, analyse the ideas of modern exponents of the *shari'a* tradition with the same mixture of serenity and anger that was a feature of Republican writing all along.

## Jesus

Fatma Ibrahim, a Communist who was involved in protests before Taha's execution, recalls one Republican academic who refused to join her because he believed Taha would not die. Some Republicans were *waqtajis*, that is, they believed that Taha's candidacy for perfection was going to be successful. Their demonstration in the gallows square on the eighteenth of January was not against the execution, but against death itself. Nimeiri was trying to kill the messiah. Some Republicans lost their faith in Taha after the execution, but others began to draw parallels between Taha and Jesus, and build up the hope that the execution was not the end.

## *Shubbiha*

*Shubbiha* is a near-untranslatable Arabic word. It appears once in the Qur'an (4:157), in its story of the crucifixion of Jesus. Arberry translates it in a circumlocutory phrase:

Yet they did not slay him, neither crucified him, *only a likeness of that was shown* to them<sup>14</sup>

Most Muslims take this passage to mean that Jesus was not crucified, but snatched away to heaven, from where he will return. "The Return of Christ" in Sudan was an established Mahdist reference, it was also a Republican book. Certain anomalies in the execution brought some Republicans to believe that Taha had not been killed. Why did only one person, a doctor, see his corpse? Why was he flown away in a helicopter? Why was he buried in the desert?

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<sup>13</sup>An-Na'im in Taha, *Second Message* 1987:19

<sup>14</sup>Arberry 1982:95



Why did the post-Nimeiri search for the secret grave come up with nothing?<sup>15</sup> Ibrahim Yusuf gives a moving and messianic account of Taha's last days; Fatma Yusuf Guway makes explicit parallels:

There are seven similarities between the *ustaz* and Christ.

1. He said, a day will come when people will deny me, and his followers denied him
2. Barabbas is like Philip Ghaboush, the man of violence who was saved
3. A rich man was imprisoned with Christ, and the *ustaz* was imprisoned with a man who had factories, Khalil Osman
4. The *ustaz* was hanged, and then he was crucified for 20 minutes in Kober prison
5. *Ustaz* Mahmud was smiling when he went to the gallows, and Christ sighed "Why have you forsaken me"
6. The *ustaz* was taken away in a helicopter, just as Christ was lifted up
7. Nobody knows where the *ustaz* is buried.

He left a will where he said he would die the death of Christ ... But the *ustaz's* smile on the gallows was a higher thing than the sigh of Christ on the cross.<sup>16</sup>

For some Republicans, there is a hope that Taha will return, like the Muslim Jesus. Others look for him in the last third of the night, the insomniac prayer whose importance he emphasised. Although many Republicans have written about Taha's legal opinions, few have tried to write down this hope. Yasir Sharif makes some allusions:

I myself heard the *ustaz* say "I am not the perfect man but I hope to be". I now claim that the teacher, God sanctify his secret, took the place of the perfect worshipper in struggle, at ten o'clock on the eighteenth of January 1985, before the view of thousands, meeting God with a smile of contentment and joy, in spite of his fettered limbs. Peace be upon him, among the immortal!<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 17/11/1997

<sup>16</sup>Interview with Fatma Yusuf Guway, 5/12/1997.

<sup>17</sup>al-Sharif 1996 :14

# Conclusion

The introduction to this thesis offered to assess Taha's political and religious success, to explain Taha's life as a legal reformer, and to relate that to Sudan's complex legal systems, and wider evidence of Sudan's diversity.

## Winners

### Muslim Brothers lose

In January 1985, for the first time in 12 years, the Muslim Brothers lost elections for control of Khartoum university students' union<sup>18</sup>. In March, Nimeiri rounded up two hundred leading Muslim Brothers, blaming them for the country's ills. Abu Gurun, the Sufi hard-man, was retained in government. Nimeiri left the country for medical treatment a few weeks later, and urban demonstrators, led by the committee for Taha's defence, thronged the streets. 'Abd al-Rahman Suwar al-Dahab, a general related by marriage to the Mirghani family, took over in April to prevent further bloodshed.

### Muslim Brothers win

A chain of events led from the gallows to the fall of Nimeiri. But although Taha may have redeemed his people from Nimeiri, the Republicans were not the winners. Suwar al-Dahab did not repeal the September laws, and his cabinet included at least one acknowledged Muslim Brother, Bashir Haj al-Tom. The SPLA decided not to deal with the regime, and the Muslim Brothers called again for a military solution to the south. There, a malign combination of militia rivalry, speculation on grain, and government connivance led to famines that broke world records of misery<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, the Muslim Brothers, now called the National Islamic Front (NIF) won 51 seats in parliamentary elections the next year, on 18% of the vote. The imprisonment of their leadership helped distance them from Nimeiri; some also distanced themselves from Taha's execution<sup>20</sup>. Although a minority, they dominated the flailing parliamentary regime and were openly active in the army. In 1989 they took control of the country in a military coup.

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<sup>18</sup>EIU 1985 2

<sup>19</sup>De Waal in Daly and Sikainga 1993:156

<sup>20</sup>El-Affendi 1991:128

## Taha's political failure

Although Taha beat Nimeiri, the Muslim Brothers won in the end. The reasons for this are complex. First, Taha's utopian Islam had none of the political astuteness of the Muslim Brothers, with their soldier and banker friends. Karsani suggests that the Republican movement collapsed because it was a group of intellectuals wrapped up in the person of Taha<sup>21</sup>. This may be true, but another reason for the movement's inability to survive Taha's death was that the man himself chose a strategy that did not include political success among its aims. Taha wanted to educate people to freedom and he believed that purpose was best served by perfecting his self-expression in Republican dialogue. The Muslim Brothers and the Communists before them attained power within a generation of their founding because of their tactical use of the military and their engagement with economic life in Sudan. Taha renounced those tactics early in his life.

Another reason for Taha's political failure was that his challenge to the Arab-Muslim state was too innovative. Taha was aware of the Muslim tradition of legal scepticism, and sensed that it could be modernised to provide an ethical framework for a comprehensive reworking of Islamic law. Taha was also aware that many Muslims of his generation were searching for this kind of ethical framework to replace the *shari'a* tradition, which blurs the distinction between ethics and positive law. Taha's critique of the Arab-Muslim state necessitated a critique of the *shari'a* tradition, which, it is argued, implies state, class divisions, and a complex machinery of punishment and control. Chapter 12's parallels between Taha's ideas and those of the Marxist and anarchist communist traditions were drawn with some trepidation, because "Marxist" is still used as a casual term of abuse by many Sudanese writers, even one as measured as Mahmoud (1998). Taha was not a dialectical materialist: his "communism" lies in his ability to challenge the state's mysterious claim to indispensability with his faith in the power of ordinary people to attain a virtuous self-expression. This challenge, it is claimed, has never been articulated before in Islamic terms, partly because of the overwhelming dominance of the legist tradition and its symbiotic relation with Muslim states.

## Diversity

### Between Damascus and Kashmir

The Muslim Brothers were the vanguard of a movement to free Sudan of multi-cultural complications. Their wealth and status were tied up with Islam and Arabism. Muslim Brothers

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<sup>21</sup> Al-Karsani in Brenner ed 1993

and their allies reworked a longstanding ideological theme: that Arabness and Middle Eastern, metropolitan forms of Islam were more prestigious than other religions and cultures on offer in Sudan, and that Arabised Muslims had first rights to control the wealth of the country, and that the use of a constructed Arab-Muslim past was an inescapable part of the state's legitimacy. At the recantation of Taha's co-accused, Hajj Nur gave a fascinating account of the Muslim Brothers' aspiration for a non-African Sudan:

Sudan is different from **neighbouring countries** because its people agree on one doctrine, the doctrine of *sunna*. They may differ in their sects and orders, but **all of them**, in their different sects and parties and groups agree on the doctrine which the prophet (peace be upon him) taught ... if we look at **neighbouring countries**, they have Shi'ites and Sunnis. Syria has Shi'ites and Sunnis. Iraq has Shi'ites and Sunnis, Iran, Pakistan, India - in all these countries Muslim groups are divided ... This division has even entered east and west Africa ... but **our country** has stayed free of this [division] until Republican doctrine came along [emphasis added]<sup>22</sup>.

Hajj Nur seems to be trying to shove Sudan somewhere between Damascus and Kashmir. No-one is an African in Sudan, and the country is full of men schooled in the books he reads. Hajj Nur's telling geographical and cultural solecism was not challenged by anyone in the small, oppressive, strobe-lit room in Kober. The Muslim Brother picture of Sudan had an appreciative audience.

## Sudan of the heart

"Sudan is placed in Africa in the place of the heart, and its shape is like a heart", said Taha in 1974<sup>23</sup>. Although a fluent interpreter of Middle Eastern traditions, and a gifted Arabic speaker, Taha often identified himself as African<sup>24</sup>. While the Muslim Brothers sought refuge in monocultural simplicity, Taha could live with different constituents of his own identity and those of Sudan too. His first publication called for economic development for the south, and his last called for political rights and peace for the south and for Christians:

It is not enough for a [non-Muslim] citizen today merely to enjoy freedom of worship. He is entitled to full rights with all other citizens. The rights of southern citizens in their country are not provided for in *Shari'a* but rather in Islam at the level of fundamental Qur'anic revelation.<sup>25</sup>

Taha could acknowledge the cultural complexity that Muslim Brothers denied. He could see that complexity resolved in a Sufi utopia, while their Islam would be used as a fast track to national unity or state consolidation. Hajj Nur's Sudan might have lain in some imaginary Persia, but Taha's Sudan lay between earth and heaven.

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<sup>22</sup>Hajj Nur, quoted in al-Muti'i 1986:248

<sup>23</sup>Taha, *al-din wa al tanmiya* 1974:19

<sup>24</sup>Howard 1988:87

<sup>25</sup>Taha, *Second Message* 1987:11

Like the Muslim Brothers and their allies, Taha was an Islamist; that is, he sought to extend the role of Islam in state and society. Although his version of Islam for the south was unrecognisably different from the war that some Muslim Brothers actively sought, he still believed that all Sudan's cultures, and all the world's cultures, had an Islamic vocation, that would they would discover through years of development. Francis Deng, a southern academic, ends a positive account of Taha's ideas with an equivocal summing-up:

the Republicans might have been more successful in promoting identification with Islam than the more coercive models that operated. Depending on whether such a tolerant process of assimilation into the Islamic mold would have been a good or bad thing for the South, the suppression of Taha's perspective meant that an opportunity to develop a more comprehensive, integrative sense of national identity was lost. Its failure, however, also helped preserve the identity of the South as a culturally and religiously diverse entity<sup>26</sup>.

Bona Malwal, a southern politician and friend of Taha's, admits that southerners would be obliged to dismiss him like any other missionary who tried to raise them to a "higher" culture or religion<sup>27</sup>.

This thesis has portrayed Taha as someone who accepted the differences in Sudanese society. For Taha, diversity was the base of a pyramid whose peak was unity. He did not accept that diversity was an end in itself, any more than *shari'a* was. Does this mean that Taha's ideas were another form of hegemonic discourse, like the other religious ideologies available in Sudan? Malwal and Deng certainly give that impression. Perhaps they are too quick to group Taha with other Islamists in Sudan. Other groups were prepared to sacrifice Sudanese diversity in order to promote the coherence of the state, and to win its wealth and power for a dominant or aspiring elite. Taha, in contrast, was prepared to sacrifice linguistic and cultural diversity to promote or even perfect individual self-expression. Taha engaged with Sudan's diversity in his 1955 work on the constitution, and then again in his Republican delegations that toured Sudan in the 1970s and early 1980s. Members of those delegations give widely differing evaluations of the experience 20 years later. All of them believed at the time that they were trying to coax Sudanese people into a new understanding of society and self, and all of them adapted their identities to some extent, in order to make themselves attractive to their interlocutors. However, some now wish that their efforts had aimed at mutual understanding rather than clear explanation.

Perhaps the opportunity for a more extensive Republican dialogue with Sudan might have come if political circumstances had not led to the confrontation with the exponents of the *shari'a* tradition. Sudan's drift towards *shari'a* alarmed the Republicans, who involved themselves in uncompromising and shrill attacks on Muslim Brothers and their allies,

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<sup>26</sup>Deng 1995:127

<sup>27</sup>Interview, Bona Malwal 19/8/1997

simultaneously seeking self-expression in disconcertingly mystical discourse that may have divorced them from the outside world. However, it would be unfair to define Taha by these drifts towards the private language of spirituality and the jargon of *shari'a* jurisprudence. The movement prized dialogue, its meetings were open to all and based on free discussion. Public encounters always had a propaganda motive, but the Republicans were living in times when their ideas were sharply contested and daily discussed. In a less febrile atmosphere, dialogue might have superseded propaganda.

This thesis has accepted some criticisms of Taha's hegemonic approach to ideology. But here, a possible anachronism must be noted. Taha wrote most of his works in the 1950s and 1960s, and the few decades that separate then from now also separate the modern and the post-modern. In Taha's day, "comprehensive ideology" was celebrated with more gusto than "diversity", and although Taha the Muslim thinker was always looking for total solutions, he was sincerely committed to the local and the personal. Sudan's diversity is now a popular theme of Sudanese intellectuals. Perhaps Taha's open mind, and his relentless polemic against the state system that could not live with his right to free expression, has led other Sudanese to accept some of his ideas (see below).

## Legal reformer

### Reworked *shari'a*

Taha's writings on *shari'a* are intense and sometimes impenetrably mystical, but this thesis suggests that his criticisms of the *shari'a* tradition were unprecedented and far-reaching. *Shari'a* laws were derived from ancient texts, and they were incorporated into a legal system that stressed their immutability for ideological reasons. Although Muslims and their subjects worked out ways of extracting concessions from the *shari'a* edifice, they were never able to challenge the laws explicitly. Taha was able to mount that challenge using an ethical legal scepticism that drew heavily on the Sufi tradition. Unlike previous Sufis, who challenged the ideological and theological trappings of *shari'a*, Taha challenged the laws themselves, using Muslim sources to construct a new set of laws and rights, that would lead to a utopia.

### Patrician fudge

Taha chose to pay attention to abrogation, a theory that had important implications for a country where *shari'a* was a contested part of the idiom of the state. However, the abrasive



novelty of his teaching was too great for it to gain wide acceptance. Too Islamic for the secularists, and too heterodox for the Muslims, is Abdelwahab El-Affendi's judgement<sup>28</sup>. In late 1990s Sudan, Taha's questions are still alive, although his answers receive little attention. Taha tried to invest in methodological cast-iron rather than political viability. A politically viable solution to the problem of *shari'a* discriminations against women and non-Muslims in a multi-religious, dysfunctional state, would probably have to come from the Muslim establishment. Their private reluctance about the *shari'a* state in the 1960s was discussed on page 146: nowadays, Sudan's patricians live in Cairo and Asmara, and try to rework *shari'a* for the sake of their military alliance with the SPLA, which argues for a state where secularism replaces *shari'a* and ethnic imbalances are replaced by regional authority. Sadig al-Mahdi has written tracts that deny the modern validity of *jihād* and propose greater political participation for women<sup>29</sup>.

Sudan's patricians enigmatically committed themselves to "the non-use of religion in politics" in 1994<sup>30</sup>. In 1991, the NIF-dominated regime introduced a version of *shari'a* for Sudan; but even the NIF accept the validity of Taha's questions (see page 164). In 1998, a new constitution guaranteed equality for people of different genders and religions, and a constitutional ban on slavery, although these guarantees are incompatible with *shari'a*. "Taha could have written it himself", says Mudawi Turabi<sup>31</sup>. Perhaps this patrician or Muslim Brother fudge is more palatable to Sudanese public opinion than Taha's wholesale reconstruction of the *shari'a* system. Abdullahi An-Na'im accepts that other actors have more politically viable legislative proposals than did Taha, but that their methodological evasions leave them vulnerable to attack from more radical exponents of the *shari'a* tradition. The Republican task, he says, was not to create a political constituency that would accept their ideas, but to get those ideas straight.

The difficulty with Sadig fudging is that it is subject to challenge and when challenged it will regress, if you don't have the methodological foundations. [Hasan al-] Turabi and Sadig [al-Mahdi] have similar ideas [to those of Taha]. Republicans would say that people like Sadig and Turabi are just dishonest because they know that their premise does not give the conclusion they claim. Sadig and Turabi would say, "but it is immaterial because the people we are dealing with are not interested in the consistency of our reasoning ... [The Republicans on one hand and Sadig and Turabi on the other represent] two approaches. It's better and proper for someone like the Republicans to do what they do and for others to do what they do [best]"<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Interview, Abdelwahab El-Affendi 31/3/1998

<sup>29</sup> al-Mahdi 1992b

<sup>30</sup> *Africa Confidential* 3/2/1995

<sup>31</sup> Interview, Mudawi Turabi 28/3/1998

<sup>32</sup> Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im 11/11/1997

## Ustaz Mahmud

Most of the people who were interviewed for this thesis were asked how they might write a biography of Taha. Many of them were friends or followers, and wanted to stress their loyalty and admiration for him. Some wanted to emphasise his stand for women's rights, others wanted to explain his spirituality. Many people would like to place Taha in Sudan's informal canon of saints, or a great tradition of Muslim or Sudanese thinkers. One informant said that although there was a time in his life when he wanted nothing more than to get on television and talk and talk about Taha to everyone, he now felt that his devotion to the man was better expressed by reading his works devoutly, and looking in them for signs to explain his life and the world.

The main preoccupation of this thesis has been to show that Taha was a Sudanese man who had a particularly wide range of sympathies and experiences. His family was descended from one of the first Muslim leaders in Sudan, he lived as a farmer and an *effendi*, was an orphan and a father, participated in some of Sudan's huge migrations, lived in towns and hamlets, travelled around much of the Nile valley, made money and gave it all away (twice) and built up a large body of devoted supporters. Taha's mystical imagination sometimes drew him away from ordinary life, at other times he hurled his Sufi hopes and songs at the Sudanese people and then listened patiently for a response. His decision to publicise his aspirations for the highest spiritual station probably meant that he received the response he was listening for. He saw the gallows as a test of his ability to worship God without fear of death or any human being.

Sudanese flatterers of authority are often reminded mockingly that they have begun to fear people, and do not fear God. Fearing God alone is a popular virtue for Sudanese Muslims, and a large number of them came to admire Taha's reckless fear. For him, the gallows may have been a test of his gigantic spiritual aspiration as well - perhaps God would vindicate him, perhaps he would be transformed. He probably went to his death hoping to be the perfect man, but not believing it. He only believed it was yet another attempt at perfection:

Taha would say, "it's like a golf ball, you can hit it as many times as you like, but it only scores if it falls into the hole. If he is a candidate, it is proved by his success, or disproved by his failure"<sup>33</sup>.

Taha certainly has a place in Sudanese and Muslim tradition, which he earned by his devoutness, his recklessness, and his intellectual and spiritual curiosity, and his gruellingly polemical approach to opponents. Taha's utopianism is probably worthy of more respect than

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<sup>33</sup>Interview, Abdullahi An-Na'im, 17/11/1997

common-sense dictates. It was evidence of a readiness to rethink Sudan's problems from scratch, and articulated a widespread uneasiness about the legal fetishism of 1980s Sudan.

However, I would find it hard to place Taha in a great tradition or a canon of saints. I have tried to avoid the temptation to explain Taha in terms of textual tradition. Instead I have tried to relate him to place and time, the ephemeral, eclectic and profound present where he tried to live.

The most compelling remnant of his personality that I encountered in interviews with followers and acquaintances was his ability to see the significance of the person in front of him, and communicate that significance to that person graciously and attentively. Taha may have a claim to intellectual immortality for his unprecedented reworking of *shari'a*, and he may have his claim to sainthood through his death. It would be no dishonour to Taha to say, however, that he was one of over a million Sudanese who have died over the past 15 years because state, culture, economic power, and religion have not been working right. Probably some of them confused Sudan with utopia, and probably many of them, like Taha, hoped all their lives for a perfect ending. Taha was different because he spent so much time, and gave so much of himself, trying to find an answer to Sudan's big questions, but it would be almost quoting the man to say that he, like every one of those people, was an end in himself.

# Appendix 1

## Constitution of the Republican Party, 1945<sup>1</sup>

- Name: The Republican Party
- Principal: Total withdrawal [of British forces]
- Aims:
- a. Setting up a free, Republican, democratic, Sudanese government which maintains the present geographical borders of Sudan
  - b. National unity
  - c. Promotion of the individual and concern for the worker and the peasant
  - d. Fighting illiteracy
  - e. Propaganda for Sudan
  - f. Deepening relations with Arab and neighbouring countries
- Membership:
- 1. Open to all Sudanese over 18 years of age
  - 2. Open to all citizens born in Sudan, or continuously resident for over ten years
- Party funds: To be used for the aims for which the party has been created

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<sup>1</sup>In RB, *al-sifr al-awwal* 1976:29

## Appendix 2

### Political groups mentioned in this thesis

Many Sudanese political groups have complex relationships with religious or military organisations and other special interests, and this table tries to classify those relationships. Political parties frequently change their names, and the first column indicates these name changes. Some of these changes were purely cosmetic; others involved restructuring or political re-orientation, but entries grouping parties of different names represent at least some broad continuities.

Organisation's names and date of foundation	Geographical constituency	Social constituency	Religious grouping	Electoral or political success	Ideology
White Flag League (1923)	Urban	Former slaves, junior military and civil officials, <i>effendis</i> ,	none	Raised mutiny against the British 1924	Union with Egypt, some leaders promoted Sudanese nationalism
Graduates General Congress (1938)	Urban	School graduates	none	Acted as an educated pressure group. Its members went on to found most of Sudan's competing parties	Divided into factions supporting rival patricians and engaging with rival colonial powers
Umma (1945)	Western Sudan, urban areas	Northerners, Westerners, agricultural capitalists, rural and urban leaderships	Mahdi family, Ansar sect	Dominated nationalist movement, led parliamentary regimes in 1950s, 1960s and 1980s	Sudanese independence, anti-Egyptian, maintenance of patrimonial system
Ashigga' (1945) National Unionist Party* (1952) People's Democratic Party (1956) Democratic Unionist Party (1967)  *The NUP's alliance with the Khatmiya ended in 1956, when the PDP was created to represent Khatmiya interests. In 1967, the two parties merged to form the DUP	Northern Nile valley, eastern Sudan	Northerners, commercial capitalists, rural and urban leaderships.	Mirghani family, Khatmiya <i>tariga</i>	Dominated nationalist movement, led parliamentary regimes in 1950s. Its mother sect, the Khatmiya had strong links with the military regime from 1958-1964, ruling coalition member in 1960s and 1980s	Union with Egypt (until 1955), maintenance of patrimonial system
Republican Party (1945) Republican Brothers (1969)	Urban areas	Intelligentsia	none	Small urban movement, 1940s to 1980s	Independent Sudan, utopian Sufi democratic socialism

Organisation's names and date of foundation	Geographical constituency	Social constituency	Religious grouping	Electoral or political success	Ideology
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Sudanese Movement for National Liberation (1946) Anti-Imperialist Front (1952) Sudanese Communist Party (1964) Socialist Party (1966)	Urban areas of the northern Nile valley, rural areas with a concentration of wage labour	Intelligentsia, trade unionists, urban groups	none	Minor parliamentary party in 1950s and 1960s, major ally of military regime 1969-1971	Marxist-Leninist. The party affirmed the importance of religious practice in Sudan
Islamic Liberation Movement (1948) Muslim Brothers (1954) Islamic Charter Front (1964) National Islamic Front (1985)	Urban areas of the northern Nile valley	Intelligentsia, subsequently co-opting junior urban elites and other aspiring groups	Muslim Brotherhood	Successful minor parliamentary party in 1960s; major ally of military regime 1977-1985, minor parliamentary party in 1980s	Replacing patrimonial system with new urban intellectual leadership, radical exponents of the <i>shari'a</i> tradition
Black Bloc (1948)	Urban areas	Arabised and Islamised southerners resident in urban areas, former slaves	none	Minor parliamentary party 1952,	Sudanese independence, anti-racist, social development
Republican Socialist Party (1951)	Rural and urban	Tribal elites and some <i>effendis</i>	none	Won three seats in 1953 elections, then was swallowed up by the Umma party	Possibly founded by British in the hope of detaching tribal leaders from the Umma party
Nuba Mountains Union (1954) Sudan Nationalist Party (1985)	Nuba mountains, Nuba people in urban areas	Nuba people	none	Minor parliamentary party, 1960s and 1980s	Anti-racist, regional development
Beja groups (1950s) Beja Congress (1964)	Eastern Sudan	Beja people	none	Minor parliamentary party 1960s	Regional development
Suni (1950s or 1960s)	Darfur	Rank and file soldiers from western ethnic groups	none	Opposed northern <i>jallaba</i> domination of Darfur	Regional development
Darfur Development Front (1964)	Darfur	Educated members of western ethnic groups	none	Rural development movement co-opted by Umma 1960s	Regional development
Ba'ath (1960s)	Urban areas	Intelligentsia	none	Small urban movement 1960s to 1980s	Arab socialist
Nasserists (1960s)	Urban areas	Intelligentsia	none	Small urban movement 1960s and 1970s	Arab nationalist
Anyanya (1963) [political wing: Southern Sudan Liberation Movement 1970]	South Sudan	Equatoria Corps former soldiers, eventually incorporating local militias	none	Military opponents of the Sudanese state, succeeded in uniting many southern forces and concluding a peace deal with the state in 1972	Southern self-determination

Organisation's names and date of foundation	Geographical constituency	Social constituency	Religious grouping	Electoral or political success	Ideology
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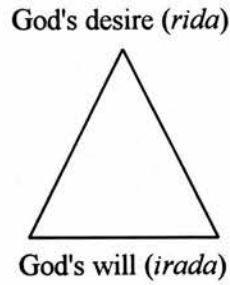


Sudan People's Liberation Army 1983 [political wing Sudan People's Liberation Movement 1983]	South Sudan	Army mutineers gaining support of tribal groups	none	Military opponents of the Sudanese state, who violently reconfigured ethnic relations in the South and continue to control large territories	Decentralised, secular Sudan, right of self-determination for all Sudanese groups
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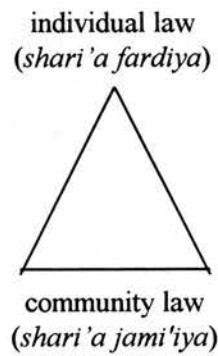
# Appendix 3

## Taha's pyramids

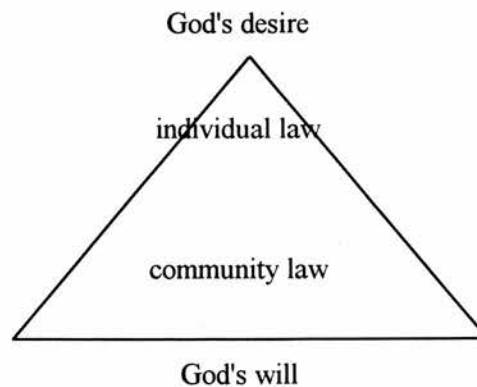
### 1. Pyramid of God's creative will or decree (*al-amr al-takwini*)<sup>1</sup>



### 2. Pyramid of God's law or legislative decree (*al-amr al-tashri'i*)<sup>2</sup>



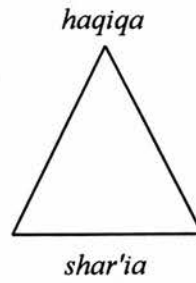
### 3. Relationship of pyramids 2 and 3



<sup>1</sup>Taha, *Second Message*, 1987: 91f

<sup>2</sup>ibid: 92

#### 4. Pyramid of law and reality<sup>3</sup>



#### 5. Pyramid of law [and morality]<sup>4</sup>



#### 6. Pyramid of creation<sup>5</sup>

realm of knowledge  
(*alim al malkut*=esoteric world=individual law  
=realm of meanings and oneness=*haqiqa*)



(*alim al-mulk*=exoteric world=corporeal world  
of multiplicity)

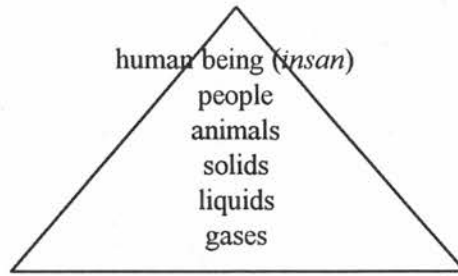
#### 7. Pyramid of the kingdom

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<sup>3</sup>ibid

<sup>4</sup>Taha *tatwir*, 1979: 72

<sup>5</sup>Taha, *Second Message*, 1987: 93



# Appendix 4

## Text of the last Republican pamphlet

This text, *hadha aw al-tufan*, appears as translated by An-Na'im in his translator's introduction to Taha's "Second Message of Islam"

In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful

### Either this or the flood

And guard against a turmoil that will not befall the unfair ones alone, and know that God is severe in punishment (Qur'an, chapter 8, verse 25)

We, the Republicans, have dedicated our lives to the promotion and protection of two honourable objectives, namely, Islam and the Sudan. To this end we have propagated Islam at the scientific level as capable of resolving the problems of modern life. We have also sought to safeguard the superior moral values and original ethics conferred by God upon this people [the Sudanese], thereby making them the appropriate transmitters of Islam to the whole of modern humanity, which has no salvation nor dignity except through this religion [Islam].

The September 1983 laws [that is, the series of enactments purporting to impose *Shari'a* law in the Sudan] have distorted Islam in the eyes of intelligent members of our people and in the eyes of the world, and degraded the reputation of our country. These laws violate *Shari'a* and violate religion itself. They permit, for example, the amputation of the hand of one who steals public property, although according to *Shari'a*, the appropriate penalty is the discretionary punishment (*ta'zir*), and not the specific (*hadd*) penalty for theft, because of the doubt (*shubha*) raised by the participation of the accused in the ownership of such [public] property. These unfair laws have added imprisonment and fine to the specified (*hadd*) penalties in contravention of the provisions of *Shari'a* and their rationale. They have also humiliated and insulted the people [of this country] who have seen nothing of these laws except the sword and the whip, although they are a people worthy of all due respect and reverence. Moreover, the enforcement of the specified penalties [*hudod* and *qassas*] presupposes a degree of individual education and social justice which are lacking today.

These laws have jeopardized the unity of the country and divided the people in the north and south [of the country] by provoking religious sensitivity, which is one of the fundamental factors that has aggravated the southern problem [that is, conflict and civil war in the non-Muslim southern part of the country]. It is futile for anyone to claim that a Christian person is not adversely affected by the implementation of *Shari'a*. A Muslim under *Shari'a* is the guardian of a non-Muslim in accordance with the "verse of the sword" and the "verse of *jiziah*" [respectively calling the Muslims to use arms to spread Islam, and for the imposition of a humiliating poll tax on the subjugated Christians and Jews - verses 5 and 29 of chapter 9 of the Qur'an]. They do not have equal rights. It is not enough for a citizen today merely to enjoy freedom of worship. He is entitled to the full rights of a citizen in total equality with all other citizens. The rights of southern citizens in their country are not provided for in *Shari'a* but

rather in Islam at the level of fundamental Qur'anic revelation, that is, the level of *Sunnah*. We therefore call for the following:

1. The repeal of the September 1983 laws because they distort Islam, humiliate the people, and jeopardize national unity.
2. The halting of bloodshed in the south and the implementation of a peaceful political solution instead of a military solution [to the civil war in the southern part of the country]. This is the national duty of the government as well as the armed southerners. There must be the brave admission that the South has a genuine problem and the serious attempt to resolve it.
3. We call for the provision of full opportunities for the enlightenment and education of this [Sudanese] people so as to revive Islam at the level of *Sunnah* [the fundamental Qur'an]. Our times call for *Sunnah* not *Shari'a*. The Prophet, peace be upon him, said: "Islam is a stranger, and it shall return a stranger in the same way it started ... Blessed are the strangers ... They [his companions] said: Who are the strangers, Oh, Messenger of God? He [the Prophet] replied: Those who revive my *Sunnah* after it has been abandoned."

This level of Islamic revival shall achieve pride and dignity for the people. In this level too, lies the systematic solution for the southern problem as well as the northern problem [that is, the socio-economic and political problems of the northern part of the country]. Religious fanaticism and backward religious ideology can achieve nothing except for this [Sudanese] people except upheaval and civil war.

Here is our genuine and honest advice. We offer it on the occasion of the Christmas and Independence Day [December 25 and January 1, which is Sudan's Independence Day], and may God expedite its acceptance and safeguard this country against upheaval and preserve its independence, unity and security.

The Republicans  
Omdurman

25th December 1984  
2 Rabi' al-Thani 1405



## Glossary of Arabic terms

Aliab	A Dinka group
'alim	A legist, or an authorised teacher of the <i>shari'a</i> tradition, or a learned man. The word is the singular of <i>ulema</i> (' <i>ulama'</i> ).
<i>al-amr al-takwini</i>	The decree of creation, which Taha explained as an example of God's irresistible will ordering all things into existence
<i>al-amr al-tashri'i</i>	The decree of legislation, which Taha explained as an example of God's perfect desire, inviting people into his rules for perfection
<i>angareb</i>	A simple bed made of wood and strung with rope, the basic item of furniture in a house in northern Sudan.
<i>ansar</i>	Supporters or followers. The word refers to the supporters of the prophet Muhammad, but was taken up by the Mahdi to refer to his followers, and subsequently became the name of the Mahdist sect.
<i>'aqidat al-ta'addud</i>	Polytheism, a respectful term for a set of beliefs usually denigrated by the Arabic language
<i>'aragi damuriya</i>	A loose knee-length robe of cheap cotton cloth, the basic item of male clothing in Sudan.
'Arakiyin	A small, localised Sufi <i>tariga</i> based at Abu Haraz on the Blue Nile, one of the oldest <i>tarigas</i> in Sudan
<i>asala</i>	Authenticity. Taha takes this word to mean self-realisation, or finding the real self.
<i>asil</i>	An authentic person, someone with <i>asala</i>
<i>atyam</i>	Arabic broken plural of the English word "team".
<i>a'udhu billahi</i>	"I seek refuge in God" – an Arabic phrase used to ward off evil.
'awwam	Common people, the mass at the bottom of Sufi and class hierarchies.
Azande	An eighteenth and nineteenth century state and the name of a people group based on the Congo-Nile watershed.
Azhar	An ancient university in Cairo which is one of the central institutions of the <i>shari'a</i> tradition.
Badrab	A Sufi family which leads a small, localised <i>tariga</i> based at Umm Dubban in the Butana
Baggara	Cattle nomads based on the northern bank of the Bahr al-Arab, the river which divides north and south Sudan west of the Nile
Bairam	A Muslim festival. The great Bairam is the same as the ' <i>id al-adha</i>
<i>baraka</i>	Blessing, often seen as a miraculous power vested in a holy person or his or her descendants
<i>bashar</i>	Flesh, people. Taha uses this term to describe humanity as it is rather than as he thinks it should be.
<i>bayt al-akhwan</i>	The brothers' house. Used to describe Republican religious houses in urban Sudan
<i>bayt al-'azaba</i>	A bachelors' house. Used to describe the homes of unmarried migrants in urban Sudan.
Berberine	A British term for tribes of the far north of Sudan, such as the Ja'alis
Bilaylab	A clan of Taha's Rikabiya tribe, descended from Hasan wad Bilayl
<i>burhan al-fikra</i>	The proof of the ideology, an epithet Taha applied to one of the Republican sisters.

<i>darraj</i>	someone who assists a disabled person with their mobility problems
<i>darwish</i>	Dervish, a Sufi mendicant
<i>da'wa</i>	Call, an Islamic term for religious propaganda or mission
<i>daym</i>	Urban quarter. Khartoum <i>dayms</i> were considered to be slums
Dinka (Jieng)	A group of semi-pastoralist cattle herders, the largest tribal affiliation in Sudan.
<i>du'a al-islam</i>	Those who call for Islam; Islamic propagandists. Taha uses the term to describe Islamists
<i>effendi</i>	In the early part of this century, the word was used to describe a person with a secular education who wore European or Egyptian clothes to his white-collar job.
<i>effendiya</i>	The <i>effendis</i> as a social grouping
<i>faki / feki</i>	A Sudanese word related to <i>faqih</i> (legist) with the anomalous plural <i>fugara</i> , relating to <i>faqir</i> (a poor man or a Sufi)
<i>fatwa</i>	A legal opinion from a senior <i>shari'a</i> legist
Fertit	Social groups from western Bahr al-Ghazal, the slave catchment area for slavers in Darfur. These groups often lived in communities without chiefs, and gradually adopted common ethnic identity.
<i>fiqh</i>	<i>Shari'a</i> jurisprudence
<i>ful</i>	Fava beans, an Egyptian staple widely used in northern Sudan.
<i>hadd</i>	A punishment stipulated by the Qur'an for an offence specified by the Qur'an. The punishments - stoning, flogging, crucifixion and amputation - are considered to be rights assigned to God, not man, and there is no pardon for a <i>hadd</i> offence.
<i>hadith</i>	A record of what the prophet Muhammad said, did or tacitly approved.
<i>haqiqa</i>	Ultimate reality, a term frequently used by Sufis
<i>hijra</i>	Migration, especially the migration of the prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina
Hindiya	A large, centralising <i>tariga</i> based near Khartoum
<i>hiyal</i>	A legal loophole, a feature of <i>shari'a</i> commercial law whereby Muslims can evade the prohibition on usury. For example, a merchant may buy a worthless item from another at one hundred pounds and then sell it back at one hundred and fifty, payable in twelve months. The first merchant has thus concluded a loan at 50% interest which technically does not break the law.
<i>hizb,</i>	Party, the Republican party
<i>al-hizb al-jumhuri</i>	
<i>hudud</i>	Plural of hadd
<i>'id al-adha</i>	The feast of sacrifices or great Bairam, which commemorates the patriarch Abraham's sacrifice of his son.
<i>ifta'</i>	The act of producing a <i>fatwa</i> ; the name of the state council for <i>fatwas</i>
<i>ijtihad</i>	Independent legal reasoning based on Muslim source texts.
<i>'ilm</i>	Knowledge, science or mysticism.
<i>'ilmiya</i>	Mysticality, or the esoteric quality that Taha finds in exoteric things.
<i>in sha' allah</i>	If God wills
<i>insan</i>	A human being. Taha uses the term to describe humanity as it should be.

<i>al-insan al-kamil</i>	The perfect man, or the person who perfects his or herself through a process of failure, forgiveness and success. This person then perfectly expresses God's presence to others. The figure is associated with the prophet Muhammad and other high spiritual ranks.
<i>inshad</i>	Song, often used to describe popular song.
<i>irada</i>	Will, used by Taha to describe God's irresistible will.
<i>al-islam al-'amm</i>	General Islam, one of Taha 's terms for lower, concessive Islam of the first message
<i>al-islam al-khass</i>	Special Islam, one of Taha's terms for the higher ethical Islam of the second message
Ja'ali	Sedentary Arabised Muslims based on the Nile banks north of Khartoum. They were greatly affected by Turkiya migrations and many of them became migrant traders, or <i>jallaba</i> .
<i>jahiliya</i>	The period of barbarous ignorance before the time of the prophet Muhammad. Many Muslim reformers, including Taha, refer to a new <i>jahiliya</i> , meaning an age when Muslims do not meet the reformers' standards of religious knowledge
<i>jallaba</i>	Migrant traders, mainly from the northern Nile valley. Many were forced to leave their homes during the Turkiya, and take up petty trade or slaving. In contemporary Sudan, the term is used to describe rich merchants from the Arabised centre of Sudan who often dominate commerce in marginal areas.
<i>jallabiya</i>	An elegant robe that reaches to the ankles. Until the twentieth century, <i>jallabiyas</i> were considered an Egyptian form of dress.
<i>jihad</i>	Warfare for the faith; war legitimated by religious ideology. <i>Jihad</i> is also used to describe the spiritual struggles of the believer.
<i>jumhuri</i>	Republican, relating to the rule of the public or the masses
Kababish	Camel nomads of northern Kordofan.
<i>kafa'a</i>	Parity; in <i>shari'a</i> , a principle that states that spouses should belong to similar social classes.
<i>kafir</i>	An infidel or apostate. A <i>kafir</i> has only a qualified right to life under <i>shari'a</i> .
<i>khawass</i>	The elect or elite, used to describe social and spiritual hierarchies.
<i>khalifa</i>	A successor, a caliph, one of the prophet's or the Mahdi's successors
<i>khalwa</i>	A retreat for a mystic. In Sudan, these retreats became community centres.
<i>khatim al-muna</i>	The ring of desire, similar to Aladdin's lamp and associated with king Solomon of ancient Israel
Khatmiya	One of the largest <i>tarigas</i> in Sudan and the most successful centralising religious organisation of the nineteenth century
khedive	A title used by Egyptian rulers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
<i>kisra</i>	A large, thin sorghum pancake
<i>kufr</i>	Unbelief
<i>lisan al-hal</i>	The voice or tongue of the spiritual condition, communicating spirituality
<i>maddah</i>	A hymn singer. Urban <i>maddahs</i> are often religious mendicants.
<i>madih</i>	A hymn in praise of the prophet Muhammad

<i>al-ma'had al-'ilmi</i>	The religious institute, later Omdurman Islamic University. It was the main teaching institution of the <i>shari'a</i> tradition in Sudan, and had branches around the country.
<i>mahakim milliyya</i>	Confessional courts, an Ottoman term for courts dealing with family status for non-Muslim groups
Majdhubiya	A <i>tariga</i> based at El Damer in northern Sudan
Majadhib	Collective name for the Majdhub family
<i>malamati</i>	A Sufi school of blame; a Sufi who deliberately commits sins in order to gain the censure of the world and thereby rely more heavily on God.
<i>marissa</i>	Sorghum beer, in some areas a principle source of nutrition.
<i>al-maqam al-mahmud</i>	The laudable station (Qur'an ), a place from which a person is able to address God directly. For many Muslims, this is taken to refer to the prophet Muhammad, who will intercede for humanity or for Muslims on the day of judgement from his laudable station. Taha, and other Sufis, saw it as a station which other mortals could reach.
<i>masid</i>	A religious centre
<i>merkaz</i>	Local administrative centre
<i>mi'raj</i>	The prophet Muhammad's night journey to heaven, celebrated by Sufis.
<i>mufti</i>	Senior <i>shari'a</i> legist, author of <i>fatwas</i>
<i>mulah</i>	A stew, often made of dried fermented okra, the simplest Sudanese hot meal
<i>mu'amalat</i>	Transactions; a division of <i>shari'a</i> dealing with commerce and family status. From a body of legislation covering most aspects of life, <i>shari'a</i> courts enforce only <i>mu'amalat</i> and the law of punishment, <i>hudud</i> .
<i>murid</i>	A Sufi aspirant
<i>mustawtan</i>	Sudanese of Levantine or Egyptian origin
<i>nabi'</i>	Prophet, a title of Muhammad and prophets who preceded him.
<i>nazir / nazir khatt</i>	Village headman or chief of an administrative division ( <i>khatt</i> )
Nuba	Linguistically and culturally related inhabitants of the Nuba mountains in Kordofan, whose culture has been little affected by Arabic or Islam
Nubian	Partially Arabised sedentary Nile cultivators who live on the border between Egypt and Sudan
<i>qadi</i> (grand <i>qadi</i> )	Judge: the grand <i>qadi</i> is the senior <i>shari'a</i> judge in Sudan
<i>qanun wad'i</i>	Positive law, law drawn from established sources and enforced by authority.
<i>qasas</i>	Requital, the <i>shari'a</i> law of the talion
<i>qutbaniya</i>	A term used by some Sufis to describe the highest spiritual status of <i>qutb</i> , or spiritual pole
<i>rasul</i>	Apostle or messenger, a title of Muhammad
<i>rida</i>	Desire, taken by Taha to mean God's preference for humanity, as distinguished from his irresistible will, <i>irada</i> .
Rikabiya	Taha's tribe, which traced its ancestry to the prophet Muhammad
Sadigab	Sufi <i>tariga</i> set up by Muhammad 'Abd al-Sadig, and the name of a clan of the Rikabiya tribe descended from him.
<i>sayyid / Sayed</i>	Title of a descendant of the prophet Muhammad

<i>shari'a</i>	Laws derived from the Qur'an and <i>sunna</i> ; social, educational and political institutions derived from those laws.
<i>shari'a fardiya</i>	Individual <i>shari'a</i> , used by Taha to denote laws which aim to facilitate self-expression
<i>shari'a jami'iya</i>	Collective <i>shari'a</i> , used by Taha to denote rudimentary laws that provide social justice at the expense of individual freedom
Shaygiya/Shaygi	A sedentary, Arabised Muslim tribe based in the far north of Sudan.
<i>shaykh</i> / sheikh	Religious or tribal leader
<i>shayl</i>	A system of agricultural credit forbidden by <i>shari'a</i> whereby the cultivator sells an unharvested crop at heavy discount.
<i>shilayl</i>	A game where small children hunt for a scrap of bone thrown in the air
<i>shillukh</i>	Facial scarifications denoting tribal or religious affiliation
<i>shirk</i>	An anathematising Qur'anic term for polytheism
Shukriya	Camel nomads or semi-nomads of the Butana, the dominant tribe of the region. Their leading family, the Abu Sinns, had wide influence in the Anglo-Egyptian condominium
Sinnab	Collective name for the Abu Sinn family
<i>sudani</i>	Sudanese, a word that described non-Arabised groups, often former slaves, in the north of Sudan. It was eventually taken to denote Sudanese nationality
<i>sura</i>	A chapter of the Qur'an
<i>sunna</i>	The way of the prophet Muhammad; all that he said, did or tacitly approved. <i>Sunna</i> is recorded as <i>hadith</i> . Taha believed that Muhammad's own practice was a higher Islam, contrasted to the lower Islam of <i>shari'a</i>
Ta'aysha	One of the Baggara groups of Darfur
<i>tabikh</i>	A meat, onion and vegetable stew associated with Egyptian cuisine
<i>takfir</i>	The act of declaring an opponent an infidel, and by extension an outlaw.
<i>taqlid</i>	Tradition, <i>shari'a</i> structures based on tradition rather than independent engagement with legal sources
<i>tariq</i>	Way, especially a mystical way to God
<i>tariqa</i> / <i>tariqa</i>	Way, a mystical way to God. In many countries, <i>tarigas</i> institutionalised a spiritual method and they became religious "orders" or organisations
<i>tawhid</i>	The belief in one God or the oneness of all things
Tijaniya	A Sufi <i>tariqa</i> from West Africa which came to western Sudan in the nineteenth century
<i>tob</i>	A wrap; either an elegant, sari-like wrap for women or a plain one for men
<i>umma</i>	Can be used to mean the world-wide Muslim community, or a Muslim nation, adopted as Mahdist party name.
' <i>ulama</i> '/ulema	<i>Shari'a</i> legist, especially in reference to a bureaucratized urban class racism
' <i>unsuriya</i>	
<i>ustaz</i>	A respectful term for a teacher or a professional in Sudan
<i>wad al-balad</i>	Son of the country, especially one from the riverain societies of the northern Nile valley
Wahhabi	A rigorist Arabian form of Islam
<i>wali</i>	a departed Sufi saint, a departed <i>shaykh</i> noted for piety

<i>waqtajiya</i>	A group of Republicans who stressed Taha's spiritual claims and waited for the <i>waqt</i> , or time of his transformation.
<i>wasil</i>	Someone who has arrived at a personal encounter with God
<i>weikab</i>	A potash made of charred sorghum stalks and sometimes associated with night blindness
<i>wusul</i>	The state of a <i>wasil</i>
<i>zakat</i>	Qur'anic alms tax of 2½ on capital
<i>Zar</i>	A set of beliefs and practices invoking benign or flamboyant spirits to possess the devotee, often associated with Sudanese women and other marginal groups
<i>zariba</i>	Slave raiding stations set up in southern Sudan in the nineteenth century.
<i>zikr</i>	Remembrance or invocation of the name of God; for Sufis, <i>zikr</i> is a communal and sometimes ecstatic performance.



## Acronyms

DC	district commissioner
DUP	Democratic Unionist party
EIU	Economist Intelligence Unit
GGC	Graduates' General Congress
GMC	Gordon Memorial College
ILM	Islamic Liberation Movement
IMF	International Monetary Fund
£E	Egyptian pound
£S	Sudanese pound
MP	member of parliament
NA	Native Administration
NIF	National Islamic Front
NUP	National Unionist party
PDP	People's Democratic party
PRO	Public Record Office
RB	Republican Brotherhood
SAD	Sudan Archive, Durham
SPIS	Sudan Political Intelligence Summary
SMNL	Sudanese Movement for National Liberation
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SSO	State Security Organ
SSU	Sudan Socialist Union
SWU	Sudan Women's Union
WFL	White Flag League

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2. 'Abd al-Rahman 'Ali al-Shaykh, Republican from Rufa'a related to Taha, 17/6/1997
3. Abdullahi An-Na'im, Republican, 8/11/1997, 10/11/1997, 11/11/1997, 17/11/1997
4. Abdelwahab El Affendi, academic with links to the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood, 31/3/1998
5. Ahmed Omer, son of Taha's mother's friend, 3/12/1997
6. Ali Lutfi, Taha's wife's brother, 5/12/1997
7. Amna Muhammad Lutfi, widow of Taha, 28/11/1997, 29/11/1997, 30/11/1997
8. Asma Mahmud, daughter of Taha, 28/11/1997, 29/11/1997, 30/11/1997
9. Awatif 'Abd al-Gadir, Republican, 25/11/1997
10. Al-Baqir Al-Afif Mukhtar, Republican, 11/2/1997, 17/6/1997
11. Bona Malwal, journalist and former minister from south Sudan, 19/8/1997
12. Fatma Ahmad Ibrahim, Former Communist MP and leader of Sudan Women's Union, 21/8/1997
13. Fatma Yusuf Gway, Republican from Rufa'a, 6/12/1997
14. Ibrahim Yusuf, Republican expelled for his opinions from the Omdurman religious institute, 13/6/1997
15. Khalid Muhammad al-Hassan Muhammad Khayr, Republican and son of founding member, 23/11/1997, 24/11/1997
16. Mudawi Turabi, journalist, 28/3/1998
17. Mahmud Amin Siddiq, Republican, son of founding member, 4/12/1997
18. Mona Zanoon Gubara, Republican, daughter of founding member, 10/2/1997, 12/7/1998
19. Muhammad Abdel Khalig, writer, 18/6/1997
20. Muhammad Ali Malik, Republican from Heglig, 6/12/1997, 8/12/1997
21. Muhammad al-Fatih 'Abd al-Wahhab, Republican, 17/6/1997
22. El Nur Hamad, Republican, 29/11/1997
23. Omer el-Garrai, Republican, 25/11/1997
24. Saadia Izz al-Din 'Ali Malik, daughter of party member, 23/11/1997
25. Sayyida Muhammad Lutfi, Taha's wife's sister, 17/6/1997
26. Steve Howard, Republican, 23/11/1997
27. Eltayeb Hassan, Republican, 12/2/1997
28. Yusuf Hasan, secretary for public relations, office of the Ansar sect, 14/6/1997
29. Yusuf Lutfi, Taha's wife's brother, 3/12/1997

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