Marc Gaborieau, *Le Mahdi incompris. Sayyid Ahmad Barelvi (1786-1831) et le millénarisme en Inde* (*The Misunderstood Mahdi, Sayyid Ahmad Barelvi, (1786-1831) and Millenarianism in India*)

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The life of Sayyid Ahmad Barelvi (1786-1931) was short, since he died in his jihadist attempt against the Sikhs at the age of forty-five. However, this Mahdi left behind him a puzzle to which Marc Gaborieau dedicated his energy for more than four decades before finally solving it. The work that Gaborieau, a director of studies at the EHESS, devoted to this illustrious figure in Indian history at the dawn of the colonial period is proof that painstaking scholarship always pays off in the end, as long as it is tackled with patience. The book’s first, but by no means only quality, is that it enables us to follow the progress of this long process of both historical and ethnographical research, which advanced not only through the comparison of contradictory sources but also scientific intuition. It
necessitated the invention of a specific ‘narrative form’, the only one capable of translating the complexity of the plot that Gaborieau has managed to unravel.

2 The plot is, indeed, very complex, given (1) the trajectory of Sayyid Ahmad, determined by his early training and socialisation but which evolved also with life’s uncertainties, (2) his hagiography, giving his life ‘consistency’, and (3) historiography, which often considers only one of his many facets. These three dimensions overlap and collide, sometimes head-on, and at other moments open up very fertile ground for reflection. Was Sayyid Ahmad a mystic, a soldier, a Sufi guide, a reformist or an imam in the holy war? Or did he incarnate all these personalities like so many avatars of a single religious figure? Is it possible to ‘understand’ him, in other words give meaning to his life, without taking into account the literature devoted to him by the colonial authorities, representing the vision of the dominant groups, or his hagiography, which, without necessarily illustrating that of the dominated groups, is connected to the quest for legitimacy of his surviving followers?

3 First of all, Gaborieau insists on the limits of any dichotomous method, and emphasises the absolute necessity for reading, in a critical perspective, all available sources, including colonial and hagiographic material. A religious practitioner, a ‘foreigner’ respected as a descendant of the Prophet, Sayyid Ahmad, who was initiated into soldiering as well as mysticism at an early age, was the product of a complex historical process, at the end of which a large part of India integrated the House of War (dar-al-harb). He was both an actor capable of improvised leadership and a man of the situation, transformed by social expectations into a guide of an armed movement. It is not possible to define his fight against the Sikhs as anti-colonial resistance (even though, in his eyes, it was seen as a prelude to an anti-British jihad), but it enabled his transformation into a mahdi, especially posthumously. Starting with a comparison—sometimes explicit, sometimes interwoven with the other two figures of Mahdism and/or anti-colonial resistance, Emir Abd el-Kader and Sheikh Chamil, but avoiding any anachronistic interpretation—Gaborieau shows to what extent the colonial context changed analytic categories within a minority Islam. But this change cannot be explained only by the military and administrative conquest of the subcontinent. At a time when the means of production and diffusion of knowledge was changing from manuscript to printing and from mystic and theological treatises (which still continued to be produced) to the press, which introduced a rhythmical temporality, the boundaries between traditional mysticism and religious reformism, practices of meditating on the master’s face and literalist austerity, became porous. From this time onwards, people were entirely in two worlds—and between two worlds—which were complementary but which also clashed, endowing each other with radicalism. The ‘old’ and the ‘new’ were registers moving in the same direction as providers of resources, including symbolic ones. We can thus see to what an extent the hagiography of Sayyid Ahmad put forward his illiteracy as a sign of his divine election, enabling him to accede to ilm ladunni (‘science inspired’ by God) and receive nisbat (‘connection’) between several traditions of brotherhood, while associating two lettered disciples, Ismā’īl Shahid and Abdu’l-Huyy, with him. The necessity of disposing of a hard core of disciples went hand in hand with proselytism and ‘preaching by example’, the harbingers of mass movements of a hitherto unknown kind. The diffusion of knowledge via Arabic and resorting to Urdu vernacular were part of the same movement and were sometimes the hallmark of the same men; the literalist approach to the Koran was strengthened at the same time as the diffusion of quasi-esoteric ideas announcing the end of the world.
The strength of Gaborieau’s work resides in this very capacity to use the tension between the man and his times as a heuristic clue and show how, without ever abandoning mysticism or denying the silsila (chain of the ancestors of a saint) linking him to his master Abdul Aziz, who initiated him into no less than three brotherhoods (naqshbandiyya, qadiriyya and chishiyya), Sayyid Ahmad slipped towards reformism. He was also the leader of a proselytising campaign and the guide of an impressive and highly visible pilgrimage in the form of an expedition to Mecca. His perception of the world as being divided into two sections, dar al-islam and dar al-harb, omitting dar al-sulh (House of Truce, the third ‘geopolitical’ category established by Muslim jurists between the 10th and 13th centuries), obliged him to follow the Prophet’s example and undertake the duty of hijra, consisting of retreating from a land that had ceased to be Muslim in hope of returning there via a military victory. His jihad in a mainly Sikh area (1824-1831), closely following the complete demilitarisation of India (1818), attracted numerous volunteers and promoted him to the rank of putative head of State, or even commander of the faithful (amiru’l mûminîn) ranking ‘above sultans’. But this military ‘effort’, as part of a ‘cosmic battle’ where humans were allying themselves with the ‘animals and plants’ on the same front in order to combat evil and enjoy the benefits of good, could not be changed into a victorious war. After turning into an ‘erratic’ march into Pashtun tribal areas where he wanted to impose the Law, Sayyid Ahmad’s jihad was annihilated by the Sikhs.

Gaborieau’s work could have ended with the death of Sayyid Ahmad during this jihad; but the main part of the story occurs after his demise, qualified by some of his followers (and many others) as ghaiba (ghayba, ‘concealment’), giving rise for many years (1831-1872) to hopes of delivery conditional on his return. But how can we transform this man, a partisan of the ‘complete application of Divine Law’, hating the hubb-i ishqi (love for the master) which turns men away from the voice of the Prophet, into a mahdi, especially posthumously? Certainly, both his name (Ahmad) and his prophetic lineage made him eligible for the status of mahdi; but on the one hand we know Sunni Islam’s mistrust of Mahdism, and on the other, it is difficult to envisage the appearance of a Mahdi while the era of corruption, becoming that of the colonial Empire, continued without showing any signs of running out of steam but also without signs of a disastrous worsening of earthly life.

A study of the work of Ismâ’îl Shahid dating from 1827 enables Gaborieau to show that Sayyid Ahmad had been entrusted with a Messianic mission well before his death, not as the ultimate mahdi, a privilege reserved by tradition (or certain traditions) for Christ, but as a mahdi’l wast (mahdi al-wasat), i.e. the mahdi of the ‘middle times’, whose function was to put earthly life on the right track rather than announce its disappearance. As the ‘second-to-last’ mahdi, he was the Chosen, in other words, the Point of Reference in the earthly and cosmic genealogy that begins with Muhammad and meets its end (and its finality) in the future return of Christ.

Sayyid Ahmad’s end, which is not synonymous with martyrdom, ushered in a new period marked by a transition to violence, already including suicide-attacks, to speed up the process that was to lead to the end of his ‘concealment’. Gaborieau shows us to what an extent this Mahdist turning point, based on prophetic tradition but necessitating nevertheless the formulation of an entirely new doctrine, was made possible by meetings between Islam and a certain Christian eschatology, diffused as a result of colonial expansion. The study also opens up new comparative perspectives between the hopes of release taking shape in the ‘Holy Lands’, studied by Henri Laurens and Hans-Lukas Kieser,
and the Mahdism and/or resistance of Abd al-Qadir and Sheik Chamil, analysed by Moulud Haddad and Moshe Gammer. It also makes it possible to include in studies of temporality the variables of intermediate ‘rectification’ and ‘restoration’, satisfying the demand for release while at the same time excluding any apocalyptic scenario. Messianic actors could thus resort to reasonably sensible plans of action, even though their poor mastery of strategy could condemn them to failure, as was the case of Sayyid Ahmad’s ill-advised escapade.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE


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