

THE 1889-90 FAMINE AND THE MAHDIYYA IN THE SUDAN: AN ATTEMPT TO IMPLEMENT THE PRINCIPLES OF AN ISLAMIC ECONOMY

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INTRODUCTION

During 1889-90 the Sudan experienced one of its most devastating famines. As the result of the combination of ecological, social as well as political factors, the 1889-90 famine caused great distress and havoc and decimated the population of the Nilotic Sudan after the Mahdist revolution of 1885. This Mahdist state ruled according to the principles of Islam as the outcome of a social and religious revolution.

The aim of Mahdī Muḥammad Aḥmad was to establish a 'true' Islamic state. However, economic and political problems overshadowed the new state. Fiscal and administrative reforms, which were undertaken to create a distinct Islamic economy, were not able to tackle the problems of the Mahdist state, namely of having insufficient revenue to pay off the army and to upkeep the functions of the administration. Yet, the biggest problem was the core idea of the Mahdiyya itself: The attempt to unite the whole Muslim world by promoting a Holy War and not merely to get rid of the Turkiyya, the Egyptian rule over the Sudan. The aim of Mahdī Muḥammad Aḥmad was more than that of reform or revival. He claimed a unique status for himself, being the Imām, the Successor of the Apostle of God and the Expected Mahdī.¹ Thus, Aḥmad asserted his headship of the community of true

¹ A recurrent pattern of Messianism, Milleniarism or the belief in an Expected Deliverer appears within Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities. Such movements or beliefs are usually designated as 'Mahdist' within Islamic communities, because as the title of the Expected Deliverer is that of the Mahdī. As Holt (1970: 22-24) suggests, the doctrinal statements of Mahdism contain four propositions: The Mahdī would be from the 'People of the Prophet's house'; he will be called the Mahdī; his functions will be to support the Faith, to manifest justice and to restore the unity of Islam; lastly, his manifestation will be one of the 'Signs of the Hour' and thus would be an eschatological event preceding the Doomsday.

The term Mahdī does not occur either in the Quran or in the authoritative *ḥadīth*-collections of Muslim and Bukhārī. However, in other traditions, although Mahdī does appear, they have been regarded by some Muslim authorities, such as Ibn Khaldūn, as being

Muslims, set out to restore the community of the Prophet Muḥammad and, by claiming to be the Mahdī, foreshadowed the end of the age (Holt & Daly 1988: 87). The unexpected death of the Mahdī during 1885, however, led to changes in the core ideology of the Mahdist state. Although Mahdī Muḥammad Aḥmad's successor, Khalīfat al-Mahdī Abdallāh ibn Muḥammad,² ruled over a nominally Mahdist state, he actually changed its character from a Muslim theocracy to a more 'worldly' one by creating a largely bureaucratic and authoritarian state with an elaborate and centralised administration.

The 1889-90 famine hit the Mahdist Sudan at a moment when it was undergoing a change from the Mahdist theocracy to the personal rule of the Khalīfa. However, despite the attempts to create an Islamic economy, for which one cornerstone was the ideal of social justice and state responsibility to provide relief to the poor and the needy, the government was unable to do so. Foreign as well as domestic critics of the Mahdiyya accused it of being the root cause of all the sufferings of the local people. Foreign observers, such as Rudolf Slatin and Josef Ohrwalder, unanimously declared that the overthrow of the Egyptian government by the Mahdī, and especially the harsh rule of his successor Khalīfat Abdallāh, were the cause of for the humanitarian catastrophe. The Mahdist state was alleged to be under the rule of a blood-thirsty and barbarous ruler, who exploited his subjects. However, later research has thoroughly revised the negative picture of the Mahdiyya and the Mahdist state. The internal social and economic problems of the Mahdist state have been highlighted as well as the external pressure it faced, being more or less cut off the rest of the world due to a British blockade. However, there are still open questions about the Mahdiyya and the Mahdist state. One question is about the establishment of an Islamic state with an Islamic economy, especially with regard to the Islamisation of the tax system through the introduction of Quranic taxes such as *zakāt*. This paper will focus on changes in taxation, the attempts to establish an Islamic economy and address the question whether the famine of 1889-90 has to be understood as a failure of Islamic state rule.³

of doubtful authority. Critical Muslim scholars usually reject the idea of a 'Mahdī' as false and unsupported by either the Quran or the Sunna. Nevertheless, the idea developed mainly through Shi'ite and Sufi influence into a popular belief. (Biobaku & al-Hajj 1980: 226.)

² The title *khalīfat al-mahdī* means 'the successor of the Mahdī'.

³ The paper is tentative, since I have not yet been able to undertake any research in archives in Britain or the Sudan.

THE IDEAL: SOCIAL JUSTICE AND RELIGIOUS PURITY

The question of what constitutes an Islamic state has been hotly debated among Muslim scholars over the past centuries. As such, the modern concept of the Islamic state is a new one, being the outcome of scholarly debate during the 20th century.⁴ However, as will be shown, the question of how to rule the community of the believers, the *umma*, and who should and could have the authority to rule, has been the main cause for dissent and friction since the murder of the third Caliph ‘Uthmān (644-656) and has overshadowed the history of Islam since then.⁵ There are also strong similarities between the doctrines of the orthodox *fuqahā*, scholars of religious law or Muslim literati, of the classical era up the 13th to 14th century AD and 20th-century writers. Both use a dichotomy of the present as a period of decadence and the past as a golden age. For both, the ideal was the constitution of Medina and the rule of the Prophet Muḥammad. Thus, the articulation of present-day Islamist writers of the ideal of an Islamic state may give us some analytical tools to study past events as well as providing the means to interpret the present.

THE QUESTION OF OBEDIENCE AND THE AUTHORITY TO RULE

One fundamental question in Islam has been that of government and the sources of political authority. Although the Prophet had laid out the principal components of how to rule the community of believers by becoming the head of the city state of Medina in 622 AD, the political structures remained a torso. Thus, Muḥammad was able to unite the conflicting interests of the Arab tribes under his personal spiritual

⁴ The concept of an Islamic state was constructed as an alternative to the failure of the various secular nation-states in the Middle East during the 20th century. It became the cornerstone of the argumentation of the various Islamists and other critical scholars, who rejected both the Western and the Socialist models. For example, Asad (1980: 1) pointed out that ‘a state inhabited predominantly or even entirely by Muslims is not necessarily synonymous with an “Islamic state”: it can become truly Islamic only by virtue of a conscious application of the sociopolitical tenets of Islam to the life of the nation, and by an incorporation of those tenets of Islam to the life of the nation, and by an incorporation of those tenets in the basic constitution of the country’. Thus, Asad and others have been able to label both the existing Muslim (nation) states as well as all the previous states within the Islamic world as not being true ‘Islamic states’: ‘There has never existed a truly Islamic state after the time of the Prophet and the Medina Caliphate... (because) they fully reflected the pristine teachings of both the Qur’ān and the Prophet’s Sunnah, and was yet unburdened by later-day theological accretions and speculations’ (Asad 1980: v-vi).

⁵ Zubaida (1993: 155), for example, notes that demands for the institution of a legitimate state as against an allegedly ungodly one have always been made historically in the name of an alternative prince, usually designated in terms of lineage, notably the Alid, or of a messianic Mahdī. However, for West Africa, as well as other peripheral regions of the Islamic world, one would also have to include the key role of the Muslim literati and Sufi leaders.

and political leadership. However, the division of power remained unsolved, especially that of succession and the right to political-cum-religious authority.

The central political concept in Islam is the *umma*, the community of the believers. Islam has not had any specific concept of the state since the state as such is only a tool for the application of the *sharīʿa*, the law of Allāh. Ideally, the *umma* is subject to the *sharīʿa*: To accept Islam is identical with submission to the *sharīʿa* and belonging to the *umma*. Further, the *umma* does not know any boundaries and has no fixed territory due to the basic division of the world in *dār al-islām*, the house of Islam, and *dār al-ḥarb*, the house of war. The *sharīʿa* obliges Muslims to enlarge the *dār al-islām* and to conquer and islamise the *dār al-ḥarb*, as the divine goal of Islam is to subjugate the whole humanity under the rule of Islam.⁶

According to Islam political rule is not sacred or divine. Neither the Prophet nor his successors ever claimed to be sacred rulers, instead emphasising that they ruled only according to the will of Allāh. The Quran and the *sharīʿa* were the manifestations of Allāh's will and no ruler was permitted to sidestep them or change their content. As the Prophet was perceived as the ideal ruler and interpreter of the will of Allāh, his *sunna*, the precedents based on the Prophet's acts or sayings, which were collected in *ḥadīth*-compilations, were to become a further cornerstone and source of inspiration and legal guidance for later scholars and rulers. Since all ultimate authority rests in Allāh as the sole ruler of the *umma* in combining spiritual and political rule, the Prophet and his successors, as Allāh's vice regents on earth, also combined both functions, namely both that of Imām, the religious head of the *umma*, and *amīr al-mu'minīn*, the political head of the *umma*. (Tibi 1996: 112.)

The legal debate of late 20th-century Muslim scholars of what constitutes an Islamic state, as well as the debates during the so-called classical era on the roots of political authority and government, is of vital importance in the Muslim setting, due to the political consequences of the debate. One key question was that of political leadership: Who was to rule the *umma* after the death of the Prophet? However, as there were no rules of succession, the *umma* faced right from the beginning an built-in problem, namely: Who had the right to rule?, which was to cause friction among the Muslims and often led to civil wars. Another problem, which itself was a result of the open question of succession and leadership, was about rebellion and revolt against unjust rulers and tyrannies, namely about how could the Muslims overthrow an unjust Muslim ruler. The question of allegiance to an unjust Muslim

⁶ Nasr 1994: 29; Tibi 1996: 111. However, as Khuri (1990: 28-29) notes, the Islamic *umma* is a form of universal religious brotherhood, whereas *dār al-islām* is a political adaptation that may include non-Muslims as well. In addition, as emphasised by Arkoun (1994: 52-59), the *umma* is an ideal community as much as it is mythical. The notion of this ideal community is postulated and made possible by models and definitions of Quranic anthropology; it is given a historical existence by time after time constructing a mythical consciousness whenever there is a need for it, such as has been the case for contemporary Islamism and the (re-)politisation of Islam.

ruler was to be specially debated among Sunni scholars, who usually excluded the possibility of a rebellion against an unjust Muslim ruler. (Asad 1985: 35; al-Māwardī 1996: 26, 29-30, 34-35.)

The core argument for all scholars has been to underline the rift between the ideal concept and the political reality. The common argument among critical scholars, such as al-Ghazālī during the 12th century and Ibn Taimiyya during the 14th century, was that the rulers of their time were perceived as unjust and oppressive, failing to rule according to the rules of the Quran, the *sunna* of the Prophet Muḥammad and the *sharīʿa*. These scholars pointed out that political and administrative development in the Muslim world had become un-Islamic and called for a return to, or a revival of, the ideal society of the Prophet and the four Rightly Guided Caliphs. While Al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taimiyya were neither the first nor the last scholars to criticise the 'worldly affairs' of the rulers, later critics usually referred to these two scholars when they tried to establish their critique against Muslim rulers and governments of their own time.⁷

According to an Islamic interpretation, politics is always guided by the principles of religion and cannot be separated from religion. Because of the guiding principle of *tawḥīd*, referring the unity of God, all is under the authority of God and thus there can be no division between religious and political authority. No Muslim ruler can therefore claim the authority of a sovereign, since God is the sole source of authority. Therefore, according to the doctrines of Islam, the political ruler is only the executor of Allāh's will, not an independent actor, and he is, as such, responsible to God rather than to the believers. The members of the *umma* are tied to the ruler on basis of the Quran:

O ye who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you. If ye differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to Allah and his messenger, if ye do believe in Allah and the last day: That is best, and most suitable for final determination. (*The Quran* 4:59.)

A strictly legalistic interpretation of this sura excludes the possibility of opposing an unjust or tyrannical Muslim ruler. Muslim scholars, during the formative period of Islamic jurisprudence up until the 11th century, condemned any attempt to oppose an unjust Muslim ruler as disobedience (against the will of Allāh). Scholars such as Ibn Ḥanbal, and later Ibn Taimiyya, even stressed that disobedience was tantamount to anarchy and anarchy as such was a condition of unbelief. Thus, according to Ibn Ḥanbal, the founder of the most rigorous *madhhab*, one was obliged to obey an unjust or even sinful Muslim ruler and it was not allowed under any circumstances to rebel against him. (Tibi 1996: 120-121.)

However, the debates among the Muslim scholars on the question of justice and disobedience was due much to the various attempts to legitimise rebellions and

⁷ See further Islahi 1988 and al-Azmeh 1996 (especially Chapter 5).

in finding ways to articulate political and social tensions within the *umma*. Muslim scholars were painfully aware of the fact that the *umma* during the third Caliph had already become a fiction. The standpoint of the Sunni scholars, referred to earlier, was a result of the politico-religious critique from both Kharijites and Shi'ites as well as the thrust of Hellenistic philosophy during the 8th and 9th century AD and the change in political leadership of the Caliphate itself during the Abbasids. Sunni scholars had to explain and give their religio-legal backing to the shifts in political leadership of the Caliphate, such as the Abbasid rebellion and, later, the division of power within the Abbasid Caliphate. For both Kharijite and Shi'ite scholars, the question of leadership of the *umma* was more easily solved since they rejected both the Umayyad and Abbasid rulers as having been usurpers and thus not legitimate as rightful successors to the Caliphate.⁸ The situation during the 10th and 11th century AD became even more problematic when the Muslim world was ruled by three Caliphates,⁹ a situation which, according to orthodox legal interpretation, was impossible because there could only have been one Caliph at the time. (al-Māwardī 1996: 20-26; Tibi 1996: 160.)

The situation became even more complicated after the fall of Baghdad and the death of the last Abbasid Caliph in 1258. Although the Mamluk rulers of Egypt were able to invite a member of the Abbasid family to Cairo and established a 'shadow' Caliphate there, the Caliph had neither political nor spiritual power over the Mamluk rulers and had no right to express his own opinion. After the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517, the Caliphate was moved to Istanbul where the Ottoman Sultan 'occupied' the Caliphate. This Caliphate, however, was only fiction; according to a strict orthodox interpretation, it was impossible since the Caliph should have been both an Arab and a member of the Banū Quraish.

⁸ Both the Kharijites and the Shi'a were the articulators of protest as well as voice of the oppressed minorities within the *umma*. According to the Shi'a, none of the Caliphs after 'Alī, the fourth one, had the right to rule. Thus the Shi'a initially formed the political opposition against the Umayyads as well as the Abbasids, their former political allies. After the failure of political Shi'ism during the 8th century AD, the Imāms of the Shi'a denied the Abbasids' right to government. From that point onwards Shi'ism became closely linked with the ideology of community as opposed to state sovereignty. The Shi'a believe that the Imāms stayed aloof from government in order to safeguard the unity of Islam. There is also the belief that the last Imām of the Shi'a did not pass away but is absent. According to Shi'ite belief, during the absence of the hidden Imām injustice would govern the world, but with his return as the Mahdī, the 'rightly-guided' one, he would relieve the world of poverty, tyranny and oppression. Thus, concepts such as justice and equality as well as tyranny and oppression were used by Muslim sects and minorities as ideological and religious justifications for adapting or opposing Sunni-controlled governments. (Khuri 1990: 40-41.) However, these concepts were not only used and articulated by the non-Sunni population, especially when tied to popular religion and Sufism.

⁹ These were the Abbasid Caliphate in Bagdad, the Umayyad Caliphate in Cordoba and the Fatimid Caliphate in Cairo. The Fatimid Caliphate was a Shi'ite Caliphate, the two others were Sunni Caliphates.

THE IDEAL STATE AND THE REALITY

The ideal Islamic state was the Islamic community founded by Muḥammad in Medina. Within that community the state was but the plurality of its citizens unified by the faith and obedience to the commands of God. The army was but the citizenry in arms, and institutions such as the *shūrā*, the council, and the *bai‘a*, the collective oath of allegiance, were meant to ensure representative and responsible government. (Zubaida 1993: 44-45.)

However, although the ideal of the unity of state and *umma* remained the key concept and politico-religious idea within orthodox (Sunni) jurisprudence, the reality was the de facto division and distinction between state and society. The state consisted since the days of Umayyads of the ruling dynasty with their retainers, functionaries and professional soldiery. Models and procedures of government were drawn from pre-Islamic imperial traditions of Persia and Byzantium. The state became linked with the cities and Sunni Muslim literati and although it theoretically remained Islamic, the state was structurally separated from its subjects. (Zubaida 1993: 41-42.) Sunni jurisprudence, such as al-Māwardī's *al-Aḥkām al-Sultāniyya*, tried *ex post* to reconcile the reality with the ideal, thus, on the one hand, saving the Islamic character of the state by demanding that government and rule should not contradict with the *sharī‘a*, while, on the other hand, supporting the idea that there was to be no questioning of the authoritarian rule of any Muslim ruler, be he just or unjust. (Tibi 1996.)

The rift between the ideals of the Muslim scholars and the political reality had become too obvious by the 14th century, when Ibn Khaldūn wrote his *Muqaddima*. Compared to the earlier jurists, who tried to place the state within the legal-religious sphere, Ibn Khaldūn clearly recognised the distinction between *mulk*, kingship or secular authority, and the Caliphate. According to Ibn Khaldūn, *mulk*-rule should be based upon the use of political-military power and coercion whereas the ‘*ulamā*’ were to assume a subsidiary position within government. The rule of the Caliphate was to be based upon the application of religion and *sharī‘a*. However, Ibn Khaldūn's distinction between kingship and Caliphate (*Ibn Khaldūn*, pp. 200-206) was more than an *ex post* description, because it resulted in an analysis of the cyclical behaviour of the rise and fall of states, by emphasising that the Caliphate-rule had been replaced by *mulk*-rule as part of a specific political cycle.

The idea of an ideal Islamic state in the political history of Islam has been used as a key element in the critique of the given state of affairs in anyone society. The ideal Islamic state, however, is as much of a mystification as that of the ideal community, the *umma*. This mystification was apparent during the period of the Caliphate of Medina up until the rule of the fourth Caliph ‘Alī. This period, known as the golden or true Islamic era, was one when the state and community were

regarded as the same, when religious and political rule were unified in one person and when the rulers ruled according to the Quran and the Sunna – or according to their spirit since the Quran and the Sunna had yet to be written down. (See, for example, *al-Suyūṭī*.)

However, as had become painfully evident for the Muslims one century after the death of the Prophet, neither the Caliphate nor the *umma* had remained unified or even came close to the religious-political intentions and revelations of the Prophet. On both political and religious grounds, the *umma* was split between different sects. The reality, which Ibn Khaldūn had described as *mulk*-rule, had little in common with the political-religious ideals which were pointed by the Muslim literati and jurists, the ‘*ulamā*’, or the advocates of popular Islam, such as Sufism within Sunni Islam.

MAHDISM, THE CRITIQUE OF REALITY AND IDEA OF AN IDEAL STATE

The historical origins of Mahdism lay in the civil war that followed the death of the third Caliph ‘Uthmān and the various, especially Shi‘ite, rebellions against the Umayyad Caliphate. Mahdism soon became connected with Shi‘ism, especially the Fatimid Caliphate in North Africa.¹⁰ Since the 11th century AD, Sufism or Sunni mysticism, which had ideological links with Shi‘ism, generated much Mahdist speculation. Sufi preachers and teachers spread the notion of the Mahdī within the Sunni communities.¹¹ However, the Mahdī, for the Sunnis, is simply a reformer who will restore the Faith to its ‘original purity’ of the early times of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs. (Biobaku & al-Hajj 1980: 227.)

Mahdism as a general concept was connected with political dissent and a possible claim of rebellion but as long as it was limited to the Shi‘a, Sunni rulers had little to fear. By the 11th century AD, however, Mahdism had reached the political-religious vocabulary of Sunni scholars and those critical of the ruling establishment. Although the movement of Ibn Tūmart (d. 1128), referred to as ‘the Almohads’, was the most successful Mahdistic movement politically, Mahdism gained widespread importance through its connection to Sufi teaching. It was a common idea among Sunni popular Islam that at times of crisis in the Islamic world a Mahdī would appear, claiming a divine sanction to overthrow the old order and set up a new theocracy – the ideal Islamic state. The appearance of a Mahdī was therefore a dangerous symptom of revolt to an established government. (Holt & Daly 1988: 88.)

¹⁰ On early Mahdism and the Fatimid cause, see Halm 1991.

¹¹ Holt 1970: 26-31. The main point of difference between Shi‘as and Sunnis over the idea of the Imām is that among the former it is an article of faith, while among the latter it is little more than a popular notion. According to the Shi‘ite concept, the Mahdī is equated with the ‘hidden Imām’ who is absolute and infallible and whose return is awaited to restore the leadership of the Muslim Community to the *ahl al-bait* (the Prophet’s house).

However, the key idea of Mahdism was not to reform society but to revive the ideal of the ideal community. Mahdism was to be closely linked up to explanations of the state of the Muslim world after the collapse of the Caliphate and the lost unity of the *umma*. Muslim scholars found the Mahdist idea as a solution for explaining the development of the *umma* from an ideal community during the Medina Caliphate to the rule of kings and emirs, the division among the Muslims and the political, social and economic crisis within the *dār al-islām*. As it was relatively easy for a scholar to depict any Muslim ruler as one who was unjust or even a tyrant, Mahdism could be used to stir rebellion and give it a divine cause. (Willis 1967: 395-398.)

Mahdist expectations were very common among the Muslim population at the turn of the Muslim centuries. Thus, the militant reform movements of Uthman dan Fodio in Hausaland at the close of the 18th century, as well as that of Muḥammad Aḥmad in the Nilotic Sudan a century later, were connected with both visions of 'the end of the times' and strongly existing Mahdistic expectations. Research has shown that there were strong connections between the 'Niger and the Nile'; the *jihād* in Hausaland, as well as those in Massina and in Senegal, are considered to be preludes to the advent of the Mahdī in the Nilotic Sudan.¹²

In general, *jihād* according to Mahdist theory, was the method of an armed struggle whereby a perfect social order ought to be brought into being. Mahdist movements were committed to the idea of a perfect Islamic state. The 'Signs of the Hour', together with the concept of crisis, such as natural disasters, civil war, upheavals and moral as well as social disorder and degradation, during the period preceding the 'end of time' were preconditions for the arrival of a Mahdī. The distinctive characteristic of a Mahdī and his rule is that he is the divinely guided person, who is in direct communication with God or the Prophet and who stands above the *sharīʿa* and its application according to the established schools of Islamic law. (Hodgkin 1977: 307-308.)

ISLAMIC ECONOMICS WITHIN THE IDEAL STATE

As mentioned above, there is a general agreement among late 20th-century Muslim economists that the precondition for an Islamic economy is the model of an ideal Islamic state, based upon the Medina Caliphate or the era of the combination between state and community. The Mahdiyya in the Nilotic Sudan can be understood to have been an attempt to establish such an ideal state. The aim of Mahdī Muḥammad Aḥmad was to restore the conditions of the community of the Prophet.

¹² Biobaku & al-Hajj 1980; Hunwick et al. 1997. An overview of the course of Islam in the Sudan with special emphasis on the connections between Sufism and Mahdism is presented by O'Fahey (1993) and Mahmoud (1997).

However, it is not enough to find some similarities between the intentions of the Mahdī and those of 20th-century Muslim scholars to strengthen my hypothesis that the Mahdist state also intended to thoroughly reform the economy and the fiscal basis of the state, namely to islamise the economy. Rather, the argument has to be built on an analogy, because it is not possible to make a direct comparison between the late 19th century, with its formulas of proto-Islamic economics, and the 20th century with its would-be models of Islamic economics.¹³

In general, according to the ideas of Islamic economics, the state is to have an active role in the economy. Although there is no agreement among present Muslim economists on whether state intervention in the economy should be limited or not, there is a fundamental understanding among all of the writers about the responsibility of the state for the social welfare of all people. The emphasis on state responsibility within the social welfare sphere is not surprising, and gives an opening to address pre-20th-century attempts to create the ideal state as well as the Islamisation of the economy.

Islamic economics as such is a rejection of both pure laissez-faire capitalism and socialism. According to Naqvi (1994: 79-80), the modern western welfare state doctrine would be, if it were based on Islamic principles, the equivalent of an Islamic economy. Pfeifer (1997: 157-159) identifies three main principles of Islamic economics. First, Islamic economics locates the individual in an Islamic context. However, this *homo islamicus* is contrary to the Western *homo economicus* under the moral supervision of the *umma*. The aims of this 'individual' are both directed towards the maximisation of individual material utility as well as serving the others and the Muslim community. The second principle concerns the prohibition on the payment or taking of interest on money loaned together with the prohibitions against speculation and wasteful consumption. The third principle concerns the question of *zakāt* and that of Islamic inheritance laws.

I will concentrate on *zakāt*¹⁴ because it has been the most obvious sign of an Islamisation of politics and economy. Whereas the question of *riba*, interest, and the

¹³ According to Karen Pfeifer (1997: 155), Islamic economics is a set of ideas evolving in the last decades of the 20th century to explain and address the economic problems faced by the citizens of predominantly Muslim countries. Its aims to recapture the original moral and political authority of the anticolonial movements that gave rise to state capitalism, but without the latter's domineering centralism and bureaucratic rigidities. It aims to provide scope for individual economic initiative and markets, just as proponents of economic liberalisation do, but without the callous disregard for the evils of markets associated with unfettered capitalist systems in the West, such as extreme poverty and wealth. Although Pfeifer's 'narrow' definition of Islamic economics does not include pre-20th-century attempts to reformulate the economic setting within the Islamic world, it is not impossible to re-define and reformulate Pfeifer's observation and to include at least the various attempts during the 19th century throughout the Islamic world to achieve a reform of society or a revival of the ideal community.

¹⁴ *Zakāt* is usually translated as poor tax or obligatory alms. However, according to Islam *zakāt* is both a social tax as well as a religious duty. It literally means growth and increase

bank sector is a relatively new one, originating from the European colonial domination of the Islamic world, the question of *zakāt* as a dividing line between just and unjust rulers is as old as the *umma*. Already the third Caliph ‘Uthmān was accused by his critics of sidestepping the rules of *zakāt* and was killed by a member of the opposition.¹⁵ In later periods, the demand for a just taxation and a revival of the Islamic principles of taxation have been the core element of all militant reform movements throughout the Islamic world. Taking all principles together, the Mahdist state can be identified as having pursued Islamic economics.

ZAKĀT AS THE BASIS OF A SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY

Zakāt is an obligation which constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam, together with the declaration of faith, prayer, fasting and the pilgrimage. Although *zakāt* is commonly defined as a form of charity, almsgiving, donation, or contribution, it differs from these activities mainly in that they are arbitrary, voluntary actions, known as *ṣadaqa*. *Zakāt*, due to it being an obligation sanctioned by the Quran and the Sunna, is a formal duty not subject to voluntary choice.

In the ideal Islamic society, *zakāt* is supposed to bridge the rift between rich and poor members of the Muslim community. *Zakāt*, as a religious tax, is thought to be the basis of taxation of Muslims. In theory, the members of the Muslim community were obliged only to pay *zakāt*, whereas non-Muslims who accept Muslim over-rule should pay *jizya*, capitation or poll tax, for their protection. However, the intention of *zakāt* is primary to purify in the eyes of God the possessions upon which it is assessed. Therefore, both the Quran and the *sharī‘a* are more concerned with the aspect of giving and collecting than the receiving of *zakāt*. To make things more complicated, there is a basic problem with regard to *zakāt* in the Quran and Muslim law. *Zakāt* is used synonymously with *ṣadaqa*. *Ṣadaqa* and not *zakāt* is used in the main verse for the disbursement of *zakāt*, in sura 9:60, although later Muslim scholars and lawyers refer to this sura as being the basis of *zakāt*. The problem gets even more complicated, since *zakāt*, and not *ṣadaqa*, is thought to be a religious tax, besides being a religious and moral duty, whose collection and disbursement should be performed and controlled by the head of the Muslim state. (See further Schacht 1934; Levy 1957.)

The aim here is not to present a thorough definition and overview of the 20th-century debate about what *zakāt* should and must be (See Weiss 1999). However, it

and, according to some, purity. It originally conveys the sense of a payment due on property in order to purify it and, hence, cause for it to be blessed and multiply. (Bashear 1993; see also Aghnides 1916: 203.) Thus, according to Islamic jurisprudence, *zakāt* is both a religious as well as a political obligation.

¹⁵ Sachau 1899. The opposition formed the core of the Kharijites.

should be emphasised that my understanding of the idea of *zakāt* and the 20th-century debate differs from that of Karen Pfeifer. Whereas she stresses the fact that *zakāt* is interpreted by contemporary Islamic economics as a voluntary tax on wealth administered through the mosques, and only critical Islamic economists would substitute the mosque-controlled network for the ineffective government welfare institutions (Pfeifer 1997: 158), my reading of the literature would suggest a much stronger emphasis should be placed upon the compulsory state tax or public responsibility to pay it.¹⁶ Thus, Mannan, for example, argues that 'the purpose behind all taxes in an Islamic state is one and the same, that is, motivated by the welfare of the people, no matter whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims' and that 'zakāt is the pivot and hub of the Islamic public finance. It covers moral, social and economic spheres'.¹⁷

Naqvi, on the other hand, states that an Islamic system would insist, at a given point in time, on maximising 'total' welfare, and not just 'marginal' welfare.¹⁸ Thus, following Naqvi's argument of the bias of Islamic economics towards social justice, an elaborate social security system based upon the *zakāt* must form an integral part of the policy package in an Islamic economy. (Naqvi 1981: 103-104.)

The 20th-century debate among Islamic economists about the basis of an Islamic welfare policy and the question of *zakāt* has its pre-20th-century counterparts. Islamic economists usually emphasise their 'new' interpretation of Islamic law, for example, when they demand that a strict revival of the Medina Caliphate is not possible but has to be implemented with the tools and understandings of modern society. However, the debate of Islamic economists is not new. Before the debate on the possibilities of an Islamic economy by the economists, the ideal Islamic state with its social-welfare-for-the-umma-principle had been debated and proposed by various Muslim literati. Whereas today's approach towards Islamic economics confines itself within the margins of economics, the traditional debate was developed

¹⁶ The question of the role of state intervention in the economy is highly debated among Islamic economists (Wilson 1998: 49-53). Thus Sadr (1980-83; 'Azīz 1992: 151) defines *zakāt* as a voluntary wealth tax which Muslims pay in recognition of their social responsibilities and opts for a limited role of state intervention. Siddiqi (1948: 8-9) again emphasises the primary role of state-administrated social justice where *zakāt* would be compulsory collected by the state and the state would also take over its redistribution. Chapra (1992: 223-224, 270-275), again, underlines that *zakāt* can only be of a temporary assistance and cannot be a substitute for a modern welfare system. He also rejects the idea of strong and active state intervention.

¹⁷ Mannan 1970: 273, 284. According to Mannan, *zakāt* is the community's share in produced wealth.

¹⁸ Naqvi 1981: 65. See also Naqvi 1994: 104-107. Naqvi's distinction between 'total' and 'marginal' welfare is based on his argument that an Islamic welfare system should give assistance to all members of the community, not only the needy. In fact, what he is describing is the distinction between a 'minimal' and 'maximal' welfare system. According to the 'minimal' welfare system only basic needs would be covered, whereas a 'maximal' or 'total' welfare system should aim at changing socioeconomic as well as sociopolitical structures.

within Islamic jurisprudence. With its strong emphasis on social justice and public responsibility of social welfare, Islamic jurisprudence does present a model of a pre-modern Islamic social welfare policy. This policy was to be centred upon the collection and distribution of *zakāt* as legal alms.¹⁹

According to the financial doctrines of the Muslim scholars, the revenue of an Islamic state was divided between religious and secular revenue. Religious revenue consisted of the *zakāt* and the tithe (*‘ushr*), whereas secular revenue consisted of the land tax (*kharāj*), the poll-tax on non-Muslim subjects (*jizya*), ‘the fifth’ of the spoils of war (*khums*), as well as the tax on non-Muslim traders and the estates of deceased persons. The distinction between religious and secular revenue was due to the different rules of state expenditure. Whereas religious revenue only could be spent according to the rules of the Quran, namely following sura 9:60,²⁰ the expenditure of secular revenue was not earmarked by the Quran or Muslim law.

Further, a distinction was made between the classes of revenue which accrue to the Muslim community or the Islamic state as distinct from the Public Treasury or *bait al-māl*. However, there is a disagreement between the various Muslim schools of law on what should constitute the Public Treasury. Four-fifths of the *fai’* revenue, that is *jizya* and *kharāj*, goes to the Public Treasury according to the Shafi‘ite doctrine, whereas, according to the Hanafite and Malikite doctrine, the entire *fai’* goes to the Public Treasury. One-fifth of the *fai’*, as well as one-fifth of the booty revenue, should be divided into three parts, namely the Prophet’s share, the share of the Prophet’s relatives and a trust fund for orphans, indigent and wayfarers that would be part of the Public Treasury. Of this part, the Prophet’s share would go to the Public Treasury, according to Malikite and Shafi‘ite doctrine, whereas it should be kept outside the Public Treasury, according to the Hanafite doctrine. More complicated was the state of *zakāt* and *‘ushr*. According to the Malikite doctrine, *zakāt*, on both apparent and non-apparent property,²¹ should be paid to state officials and thus would be part of the Public Treasury. However, according to Shafi‘ite doctrine, *zakāt* on non-apparent property was under no circumstances part of the Public Treasury while *zakāt* on apparent property might only be held as a trust and as such was not a part of the Public Treasury. (Aghnides 1916: 423-428.)

Despite the efforts of the various Islamic schools of law to establish a genuine theory of how to handle social and economic problems of the Muslim society, the outcome has been more or less confusing. One fundamental problem has been that the aim of the Muslim scholars was not the non-divine/secular society of the real

¹⁹ See further the sections on *zakāt* in Ruxton 1916 and the thesis of Aghnides (1916).

²⁰ Sura 9:60: ‘Alms are for the poor and the needy, and those employed to administer the (funds); for those whose hearts have been (recently) reconciled (to truth); for those in bondage and in debt; in the cause of Allah; and for the wayfarer.’

²¹ In general, apparent property consists of animals and crops whereas non-apparent property consists of personal wealth and articles of trade. However, the various Muslim schools of law disagree among themselves on this distinction (Aghnides 1916: 296-301).

world but was directed at speculation about the possibilities and outlines of a divine order. The fiscal and economic realities in Muslim societies were hardly mentioned. However, the legal speculation and outlines of Islamic taxation, together with the claimed responsibilities of an Islamic state, were used by leaders of revivalist and reformist movements in their critique of the state of affairs in Muslim societies and call for an overthrow of 'unjust' rulers. The question of the just and legal collection of *zakāt* was especially used by the critics of unpopular Muslim ruler. Taxation was condemned as non-Islamic and a return to early Islam was propounded, and if articulated within the Mahdist case, a true Islamic state was painted as the counter-factual cause for the critique of an unjust ruler.

TAXATION IN THE MAHDIST STATE

The Mahdiyya was a millenarian movement envisaging the revival of Islam at the end of the time. Its goal was the restoration of the Medina Caliphate. Following the example of the Prophet Muḥammad, the movement started with the preachings of the Mahdī, his *hijra*, or flight, from the island of Aba to the hills in Kordofan and eventually took the form of a *jihād*, holy war, against the Turkiyya, the Turko-Egyptian occupation, which ended with the conquest of Khartoum, the regional capital of the Nilotic Sudan. The Mahdiyya presented itself to the rulers and commoners of the Western Sudan not only as a religious message but also as a new Islamic regime. (Kapteijns 1985a: 73.)

The establishment of an Islamic state also resulted in the Islamisation of the economy. Taxation was reorganised according to the principles of the *sharī'a*, which meant the introduction of Quranic taxes such as *zakāt*, *'ushr* and *zakāt al-fīṭr*. Pre-Mahdiyya taxation was condemned as un-Islamic. The introduction of Islamic taxation was to be the trademark of the new regime. It was the sign of the establishment of a true Islamic state and had been used by several previous Islamic militant reform movements. At first, the supporters of the Mahdī, who had made the *hijra* with him to Qadīr during 1881, was nothing more than a predatory community, dependent for their continued existence on what they could take from their enemies. However, with the victories of the *anṣār* over the Egyptian forces and the conquest of Kordofan, their situation changed. After the fall of El Obeid during 1883, if not earlier, the Mahdī had set up the basis of a fiscal system. A treasury, the *bait al-māl*, was set up, which derived its income from the 'fifth' (*khums*), as well as from *zakāt* and *'ushr*. Both taxes, *khums* and *zakāt / 'ushr*, were administered according to the rules of the *sharī'a*. Other revenues came from fines charged on smoking tobacco or drinking wine. (Holt 1970: 125-126; Slatin 1896: 221; see also Mahmoud 1997: 176.)

It seems as if the Mahdī was following a Hanafi distinction between *zakāt* and *‘ushr* since he clearly stressed the difference between the two taxes. In one of his orders, the Mahdī stated that ‘let all the brethren levy the tithe and the *zakāh* and the booty for the Treasury’.²² Thus, *zakāt* (or *zakāh*) was only levied on animals, but, according to the *sharī‘a*, could also be levied on gold, silver and articles of trade, whereas *‘ushr* (the tithe) was levied on grain.

The position of *zakāt* prior to the Mahdiyya in the Sudan is unclear. According to J. A. Reid (1930: 172), the Muslims in the White Nile province had given a free offering, named *zakā*, for the support of the poor and needy. *Zakā*, however, was not a direct government tax. Another text from Kordofan mentions *zakā* as ‘a due of charitable gifts of grain at the end of the Ramadan fast’, but is unclear which period, pre-Mahdiyya or Mahdiyya, it refers to. (*Two texts*, p. 122.) Neil McHugh notes that the common term used in 17th-century documents for granting of land, slaves, and other property to holy men in Sinnār was *ṣadaqa*.²³ However, Muhammad Mahmoud (1997: 166) notes that some *shaikhs* could receive *zakāt* and could dispose freely of it. In any case, it seems as if *zakāt* or *zakā* was prior to the Mahdiyya was neither perceived as a public duty or as a government tax.

The Mahdī also defined the duties of the Treasury. Following the Quran and the *sharī‘a*, he stated that the incomes of the Treasury should be distributed to the weak, the poor and the party of God, the warriors. Also with regard to tax collection, the Mahdī followed the *sharī‘a* by commanding that if anyone refuses to pay the *zakāt*, the collectors would have the right to take what was due even by force.²⁴

After the death of the Mahdī in 1885, Khalīfat al-Mahdī Abdallāh took over as his successor. The Khalīfa’s dual task was to consolidate the gains of the Mahdist revolution by building an Islamic state and of waging the universal *jihād* beyond the borders of the Sudan. Thus, in theory, he could not sidestep the ideals and the teachings of the Mahdī. In practice, however, he soon faced the problems of having insufficient revenue to pay off the army and to upkeep the functions of the adminis-

²² Translated in Holt 1970: 127. According to the Hanafite doctrine on *zakāt*, there is a difference between *zakāt* and *‘ushr*. While *zakāt* is an act of worship pure and simple, *‘ushr* is primarily a financial charge although it is a part of worship. However, the difference between the two taxes was practically limited to the political and financial field, such as the state’s right of collection (Aghnides 1916: 283-284). It has also to be emphasised that both *zakāt* (on animals) and *‘ushr* (tithe) are grouped under the headline of religious taxes. In another text, the Mahdī refers to *zakāt* on camels, cattle, sheep and goats, on one hand, and to *zakāt* on grain, on the other hand, (translated in Holt 1970: 127), thus contradicting a supposed division of *zakāt* and *‘ushr* by the Mahdī.

²³ McHugh 1994: 91. McHugh argues that the use of the term *ṣadaqa* might have been preferred because it is a less specific and legalistic term and might have been more easily accommodated to the customary law of Sinnār and to the estate system correlated to the sociopolitical order.

²⁴ Holt 1970: 127. On the collection by force, see further Aghnides 1916: 302-303.

tration. Therefore, he had to enlarge both the basis of taxation as well as to establish a more efficient administrative system.

During its latter years, the Khalīfa's rule was marked by an increasing complexity of the fiscal system. Apart from the original Public Treasury, the *bait māl al-ʿumūm*, which had been functioning since its establishment by the Mahdī, the Khalīfa established two new treasuries, the *bait māl al-mulāzimīyya* or the Treasury of the bodyguard, and the *bait māl khums al-khalīfa wa-l-faiʿ* or the Treasury of the Khalīfa's Fifth and Domain-land. Both special treasuries seem to have been established after 1892. Besides these three treasuries, there was also a special Treasury of the War Department and another one for the market police in Omdurman. (Holt 1970: 257-259; Slatin 1896: 495-498.)

The revenues of the Public Treasury consisted, as before, of *zakāt*, *ʿushr* and *fiṭr*. *ʿUshr* was collected in kind as ten percent of the quantity of the harvest.²⁵ However, *ʿushr* was also levied on the grain which was brought to the grain harbour in Omdurman.²⁶ *Zakāt* was levied on both 'apparent property', mainly animals and 'non-apparent property', mainly personal wealth and property as well as articles of trade. In both cases the rate of *zakāt* was only 2 1/2 per cent of their total value,²⁷ which, in case of the 'apparent property', is surprising since Islamic law had permitted a much higher tax rate. However, it is unclear whether the *zakāt* was paid in kind, as would have been the case for 'apparent' goods, or in cash, as was possible for 'non-apparent property'.²⁸ The *fiṭr* or *zakāt al-fiṭr* was a poll-tax and was paid in grain or in money at the end of the Ramadan. In all, according to Holt, a large part of the revenue of the Public Treasury was in grain, the amount of cash received being comparatively small but his statement needs some clarifications with regards to the consideration in view of the above history of taxation.²⁹

²⁵ This tax was also known under the name *zakāt al-ʿaish* or *zakāt al-ḥubūb*, which, according to Reid, was an *ʿushr* tax on grain crops producing 1600 *raṭls* or more (Lyll 1921: 199; Reid 1930: 171).

²⁶ Although this is an interesting piece of information provided by Slatin (1896: 495), its validity is unclear bearing in mind Holt's criticism of Slatin's book. In any case, grain was in this case not treated as a non-apparent property, which would only have been taxed by two and a half per cent according to Islamic law, but as apparent property. Again, in this case, there are some inconsistencies between the various schools of Islamic law, but perhaps again the Hanafī argument was followed which includes in apparent property also 'such non-apparent property as has become apparent'. (See further, Aghnides 1916: 296-301.) Also, I do not agree with Holt (1970: 259) in his technical use of the term *zakāh* when he refers to *ʿushr*/tithe, as they were and are treated as two separate (religious) taxes.

²⁷ According to Lyall (1921: 199), the '*zakāt el nugud*' was a tax of five per cent of money, or the value of gold and silver ornaments.

²⁸ According to Reid, *zakāt al-māl* was a capital levy on animal wealth (Lyll 1921: 199; Reid 1930: 171). In addition to the *zakāt al-māl*, there was a *zakāt al-ʿaish al-bāb*, a levy for the Khalīfa and his followers, but it is unclear to which of the Treasuries it was sent. Lyll's and Reid's information is based on the situation in the White Nile Province.

²⁹ Slatin 1896: 495-496. Other sources of revenue of the Public Treasury were the confiscation of offenders' goods, through payments by gum and sesame merchants as well as one-third of

As a result of the establishment of both the Special Treasuries as well as Provincial Treasuries, the Public Treasury in Omdurman controlled only the districts bordering on the right bank of the Blue Nile and the left bank of the White Nile. Every other province had its own Public Treasury to which the subjects of the Mahdist state had to pay the Islamic due of *fiṭra* (*fiṭr*) and *zakāt*, which were collected by the local authorities in cooperation with tax collectors from the central government.³⁰ The inhabitants of the districts between the Blue and the White Nile, the Gezira, paid neither *zakāt* nor *fiṭra* to the Public Treasury. Instead they paid a lump sum annually to the Treasury of the bodyguard.³¹ The revenue of the Khalīfa's Privy Treasury consisted of the *khums*, the Fifth of the goods and money taken as booty in war or from rebellious tribes as well as the income from the domain land or *fai'*.³² The Privy Treasury also owned a large number of boats, which at several times had been confiscated and had thereafter been leased out. Also, the Privy Treasury received the income from customs dues on goods coming from Suakin via Berber to Omdurman, part of the balance of provincial treasuries, and all slaves coming from the provinces.³³

Whereas the fiscal system during the reign of the Khalīfa became more sophisticated and advanced, so too was the change in expenditure since the period of 'primitive' Islamic government of the Mahdī. The Treasury of the Mahdī knew only of three posts of expenditure, consisting of the army, the poor and the needy. The various Treasuries of the Khalīfa paid both the salaried staff of the civil administration as well as the various troops of the army and the Khalīfa's body-

the gum merchants' stock in gum. There was also revenue from a boat-tax and a ferry farm and occasionally the Fifth from booty.

30 Kapteijns 1985a: 77. Holt (1970: 244-245) makes a distinction between metropolitan and military provinces. The military provinces, such as Dongola, the 'Suakin Frontier province', the 'Abyssinian Frontier province', Darfur as well as Kordofan and Berber, had their provincial treasuries for the maintenance of the local armed forces. The military provinces shielded the metropolitan provinces, which had neither separate standing armies nor military governments.

31 Slatin 1896: 496. The incomes of the Bodyguard Treasury varied. According to Slatin, the revenue of the Bodyguard Treasury consisted of 120,000 dollars, 100,000 *irdabb* millet and 100,000 pieces of cotton textiles, all from the Gezira. Tame (1934: 213), on the other hand, mentions that Wakīl Ibrāhīm Wad al-Basīr had to collect and hand over 200,000 *irdabb* of durra and 1000 rolls of cotton yearly as 'assistance of the faith'. The *irdabb* was a measure of capacity of about 200 litres.

32 The domain land included the whole of Dongola province and all the islands and estates which had formerly belonged to the Khedive.

33 Slatin 1896: 497; Holt 1970: 259. According to Rosignoli (1967: 46), the Khalīfa's Treasury took a tenth of all taxes from all of the local treasuries. According to an Islamic interpretation, there would be nothing wrong with such a transfer. In theory, then, the Khalīfa's Treasury was receiving a kind of *zakāt* from the rest of the country. However, from Dongola province the Privy Treasury was receiving all profits, which, in fact, would make Dongola the domain of the Khalīfa.

guard. The bulk of the expenditure of the Public Treasury was on military purposes and salaries or pensions of the employees in the civil sector. All of the incomes of the Bodyguard Treasury went to the upkeep of these forces, mainly salary and food. The same was true for the incomes of the War Department Treasury, whereas the expenditures of the Khalīfa and his household were made by the Privy Treasury. Administrative and military expenditure absorbed the overwhelming bulk of all incomes of the Treasuries; only a minor part of the Public Treasury was spent on the poor and the needy. (Slatin 1896: 496; Holt 1970: 260.)

CRISIS: THE FAMINE OF 1889-90

During the late 1880s the Mahdist state faced a series of political and military difficulties. First, the Khalīfa had to quell the internal opposition against his rule. After solving the succession crisis that overshadowed the first year of his rule in 1886, the Khalīfa reopened the *jihād*. During the following years, his armies pushed ahead in three regions, in the west against Darfur, in the Ethiopian marches and towards the Egyptian frontier. In Darfur the vassal of the Khalīfa tried to restore the Fur Sultanate. Darfur had been under Mahdist administration only between 1884 and 1886. Between 1887 and 1889 the army of the Khalīfa suppressed a revolt in Darfur.³⁴ During 1887 and 1889, the Mahdist army tried to invade Ethiopia, but although some campaigns were successful, the outcome was only that Ethiopia fell into anarchy whereas the Mahdiyya was unable to push its border further into Ethiopia.³⁵ Also, within the third theatre of war, at the Egyptian border, the army of the Khalīfa gained little success and after the crushing defeat of the Mahdist army by the Anglo-Egyptian army at the battle of Tushki in August 1889, the Khalīfa's offensive was halted.

In an attempt to strengthen his position in the metropolitan region, the Khalīfa had ordered the enforced migration of his own tribe, the Ta'aisha, and their

³⁴ The uprising in Darfur was caused by the harsh rule of the Mahdiyya. As a consequence, the whole region was devastated by the armies of the Khalīfa (Holt & Daly 1988: 102; Kapteijns 1985a; 1985b). Further, Darfur was hit by a drought and rinderpest during 1888 or 1889. This pitiful state of condition was vividly described in a text by Ali Dinar, the last Sultan of Darfur: 'When ruin came on Darfur, we were scattered all over the place, among trees, hills and rough places. We were homeless, hungry and naked. Even our "Sultan" was no better than any of his followers... All were so poverty-stricken that no one even possessed a hen.' (*Ali Dinar*, p. 114)

³⁵ Sanderson 1969: 17-26. Local border clashes had occurred since 1885, but the actual declaration of war of the Khalīfa against the Ethiopian king Yohannes was announced during January 1888. The decisive battle was fought at al-Qallābāt on 9 March 1889, where Yohannes lost his life and the Ethiopians had to retreat. However, the Mahdists also had heavy losses and were not eager to continue. The anarchy in Ethiopia was in part due to the succession crisis after Yohannes, but mainly to the impact of the combination of drought, famine and rinderpest which ravaged the country between 1888 and 1892. A third factor, which contributed to the tense situation in Ethiopia, was the aggressive Italian policy towards the country.

Baqqara neighbours from their homelands in Darfur to Omdurman. According to Holt and Daly, the decision of the Khalifa was twofold. Firstly, it was the continuation of a policy that the Mahdī had started, namely that of attaching the nomads closely and permanently to the regime and turning them from casual raiders into a standing tribal and reliable army. Secondly, the decision was connected with the pacification of Darfur after the rebellion. The migration of the Ta'aisha and the Baqqara started during March 1888 and they reached Omdurman during the early months of 1889. However, their enforced migration coincided with the bad harvest of 1889, which affected almost the whole of the Mahdist Sudan. On their way through Kordofan, the migrating Ta'aisha and Baqqara depleted the corn-supplies of the province as they made their way to the Nile. Once arrived in Omdurman, they were a privileged élite, who had to be fed at all costs. (Holt & Daly 1988: 106.)

In retrospect, the displacement of the Ta'aisha and Baqqara was untimely. The Nilotic Sudan had been hit by a drought during 1888, rains were scarce and the harvest was poor. The following year was even worse, with less rain and a total failure of the harvest. (Ohrwalder 1892: 204; Slatin 1896: 416.) Famine was soon felt throughout the country, although its impact was initially rather uneven.³⁶ Some regions, such as the Suakin Frontier region, for example, managed to survive due to the availability of grain from Suakin, which was held by Anglo-Egyptian forces and was the only port with trade connections to the Mahdist state. At a local level, the grain trade from Suakin had some effect but not much more. As the region was a military frontier region that time after time saw Mahdist as well as Anglo-Egyptian incursions and counterattacks, the combination of insecurity and famine during 1889 caused resentment among the local population.³⁷ However, during August 1890, in the midst of the continuing famine, the port was closed by the acting Governor-General, Lord Kitchener. Kitchener's reason for stopping the grain trade was that it would feed the enemy, who was at that time was besieging Suakin. (Holt 1970: 190-191.) A similar picture of the pitiful state of affairs was reported in Kassala: 'The whole country seemed exhausted with the constant turmoil of war; a plague of locusts added to the general distress, and grim famine spread over the land'. (Wingate 1891: 455.) None of the provinces had escaped either the drought or the famine. According to Ohrwalder, Kassala and al-Qallābāt had been the hardest affected areas. Death accompanied the famine everywhere; whole villages were

³⁶ According to Slatin (1896: 419), the Western part of Darfur did not feel the pinch of the famine at all, mostly owing to the facts that this region had not been subdued by the Mahdist forces and that their chiefs had strictly forbidden any sale of grain to grain traders from the Mahdist state.

³⁷ This was, at least the opinion of Wingate (1891: 452-454): 'The year 1889 closed, therefore, in this district with a marked change in the relations with the surrounding tribes; active hostilities were temporarily suspended, trade had to some extent revived, though it perforce gravitated into the hands of the ruling power at Tokar, and still left the tribes, already weakened by constant warfare, in a state of considerable destitution.'

said to have lost all of their inhabitants in the Nile valley, stretching from Omdurman to Berber. (Ohrwalder 1892: 208; Slatin 1896: 418-419.)

At least in Kordofan, and indirectly also elsewhere, the displacement of the Ta'aisha and Baqqara aggravated the effects of the famine. In Omdurman, the displaced tribes were supplied with grain at preferential prices. But an even bigger problem for the Khalifa was the provisioning of his three great armies, stationed in Darfur, in al-Qallābāt and in Dongola (before the Tushki catastrophe), since they were unproductively consuming the diminishing supplies of corn. One reason for the catastrophe at Tushki was the decision to strike into Egypt with an unprovisioned and ill-armed army, moving through a region that was known to be hit by drought and famine.³⁸ Also the other armies, including one which tried to harass the Anglo-Egyptian forces in Suakin and the other stationed in al-Qallābāt, were in severe want by the end of 1888. The commander in al-Qallābāt even tried to control the sale of grain and forbade all grain trade except in two controlled market places. However, as the Khalifa needed all grain he could get for his armed forces in Omdurman, he overruled the ban on grain trade by the commander. Instead, the commissioners of the Public Treasury were authorised to issue licences for the purchase of grain and the sale of grain to licensed traders was to be allowed to proceed. (Holt 1970: 193; Slatin 1896: 418-419.)

The situation in Omdurman, and to an unknown extent in the provinces, was aggravated by the influx of distressed provincials who fled from the famine in their villages only to starve in the capital:

In all of the Sudan where famine also reigned, rumours spread that grain was to be found in abundance in the Khalifa's town. Famished hordes came daily from Berber, Kassala, Gallabat and Karkoj. They were attracted by the hope of being able to break their fast. Instead they merely increased the number of corpses to be found on the street. Thefts were very common and the guards could not stop them. What a hellish life during this time.³⁹

Due to the bad harvest, grain became expensive. One *irdabb* of durra (sorghum) rose from 60 to 250 lire during the famine, when it could actually be sold in some markets.⁴⁰ The influx of famine refugees, as well as the buying power of the rich members of the society, who were able to buy grain at famine prices, further

³⁸ Rosignoli/Rehfishch (1967: 37) suggests that the expedition against Egypt had a double purpose. One was to maintain the prestige of the Mahdist mission. Another was to distract the attention of the people from the famine. Also, the expedition provided an opportunity for the starving army to pillage the provisions of the enemy.

³⁹ Rosignoli/Rehfishch 1967: 43. Similar accounts are to be found in Ohrwalder 1892: 205-206 and Slatin 1896: 416.

⁴⁰ Rosignoli/Rehfishch 1967: 43. Rosignoli's statement is problematic, since the price of grain was said to have risen in Omdurman to about 40 to 60 Thaler (dollar) according to Slatin (1896: 416), whereas the price of grain in one of the hardest hit regions, namely al-Qallābāt and Kassala, was said to have reached 250 Thaler (dollars) by Ohrwalder (1892: 208).

added to the increase in the grain price. Thus, without government intervention, there would be no quick solution for the problem. In theory, an Islamic state had the responsibility to do its utmost to provide help to the poor and needy.⁴¹ In practice, however, as will be shown below, the Mahdist state had few opportunities to provide relief that was organised and paid through the Public Treasury.

It is not known whether the Public Treasury organised public famine relief in the capital or elsewhere. Grain was shipped from the southern regions, especially from Fashoda, to the capital, but it is not known who ordered or paid it. It seems, however, that the Public Treasury in Omdurman had received little grain and money due to the bad harvest during 1888. All that was available had to be used for the troops as well as for the Ta'aisha and the Baqqara. (Ohrwalder 1892: 204-209; Slatin 1896: 420; Neufeld, s.a.: 116-123; Holt 1970: 193.)

Another fact, which does point towards an empty Treasury and Public Granary, that in theory was filled with Treasury/State grain, was that the Khalīfa had ordered his agents to buy grain in the Gezira and to collect any *zakāt*-claims from the peasants (Slatin 1896: 416). Before the reorganisation of the Treasury after 1892, the Public Treasury was undivided and the taxation consisted of *zakāt* on animals, grain and personal wealth as well as the *fiṭra*.⁴² However, as *zakāt* was levied on the harvest and not the land from where it was taken, a poor harvest usually meant a small amount of revenue in grain. Rosignoli argued that one of the reasons for the depleted grain stores of the Public Treasury was the neglect of agriculture throughout the Mahdist state. This neglect, however, was pictured by the European eyewitnesses as being solely due to the Mahdī's promise of equality for all and the right of everyone to live off the Public Treasury. (Rosignoli/Rehfishch 1967: 42.) According to the eyewitness accounts of Ohrwalder, Slatin and Rosignoli, as well as Holt's history, the Khalīfa did almost nothing to either prevent the famine or implement any public famine relief. The famine was perceived by the European eyewitness as a punishment, a consequence and a proof of the misrule if not despotism of the Khalīfa and his followers. For the Europeans, the Khalīfa was the antithesis of a just and benevolent ruler, failing to provide even sympathy for his starving subjects.

⁴¹ The key statement on the question of state responsibility during a famine is to be found in al-Ghazālī's writings: 'If a certain Muslim group is afflicted with drought and famine, it is the duty of the rich Muslims to succour them and to relieve their hunger. It is a religious duty rather than a matter of loaning, to provide adequacy of living. The poor to the rich are the latter's dependants and children. None is allowed to bind his kin with a loan against what is spend on this kin.' (al-Ghazālī in Gusau 1993: 133.)

⁴² Rosignoli/Rehfishch 1967: 36, 38. Apart from these two taxes, the Khalīfa had added occasional levies (which were highly criticised by Rosignoli as well as the other Europeans, although they undoubtedly had no insight into the financial state of affairs of the Mahdist state and were not aware about the fact that a Muslim ruler is not forbidden to levy additional taxes if there is need for it). One such additional levy, for example, was when all subjects had to pay a tax after the tomb of the Mahdī had been erected.

THE PROBLEMS OF ESTABLISHING AN ISLAMIC ECONOMY

There is little doubt that the Mahdī tried to establish an Islamic state with a fiscal system based on the ideals of the community of the Prophet and the Rightful Caliphs. There is also little doubt that the Khalīfa tried to strengthen his Islamic state. The crucial question was the fate of the Public Treasury. The main reason for the reform of the fiscal system was the result of the fact that the Mahdiyya was not able to develop its Islamic state to become more than a war economy. Sanderson's (1969: 28) expression of 'Mahdism in one country' catches the core of the change in policy from the Mahdī to the Khalīfa. Whereas the Mahdī tried to export his mission to the rest of the Muslim world, with his goal aiming to unite it under the banner of Mahdism, the Khalīfa changed this policy after the military setbacks of 1889. Instead of a 'world mission', emphasis was put upon developing and strengthening the existing Mahdist state.

However, there was a basic problem with the Mahdist ideal which the Khalīfa never was able to change. In as much as the Mahdiyya was a social movement, it was above all a religious movement. The ideal of the Mahdī was one of the simple, pious warrior-scholar, an ideal which combined both Sufi conceptions as well as popular expectations of the nearby forthcoming end of the world. People were urged to pray and to fast (Ohrwalder 1892: 13-14), luxury was condemned and festive spending was outlawed. (Holt 1970.)

One far-reaching consequence of the Mahdiyya was the depletion of agriculture in the Sudan. Holt's historical account of as well as the 19th-century European eyewitness' picture of the collapse of agriculture makes depressing reading. Although Holt accuses the Khalīfa for having neglected the agricultural sector, the European eyewitnesses put the blame for the neglect of agriculture upon the mentality of the Mahdists. Agriculture had been exploited by the Mahdist state to support a bloated military establishment to the extent that the economy of the Mahdist state can be described as a war economy. What the tax-collectors spared was liable to seizure by ill-disciplined and starving soldiers. By failing to protect the cultivators, the Khalīfa seriously impaired the prosperity of his own realm. (Holt 1970: 254-255.)

Yet, the Khalīfa often tried to emphasise the importance of agriculture. Thus, after the devastating drought and famine years of 1889 and 1890, he encouraged a revival of agriculture. Twice, during 1890 and 1891, the Khalīfa stressed the importance of improving land cultivation to the assembled officers at the *ʿid al-adhā* (Holt 1970: 197). Yet, whereas agriculture received at least some attention, trade was more or less neglected. The neglect of trade was the result of the Mahdist mentality, especially the religious enthusiasm of the Khalīfa. As Holt argues, the Khalīfa considered the outside world as *dār al-ḥarb*, an arena with which his

relations could only be those of raiding and war. Thus, in a proclamation of 1886-87, he told Egyptian merchants that 'the region from which you now come is under the government of the unbelievers and it is not right that there should be a connection between its people and the people of a country under the government of the Mahdiyya'. (Holt 1970: 255-256.)

The attitude of the Mahdist state towards trade, particularly the merchants, has been shown by both Holt and the European eyewitnesses, to have been negative since the state attempted to control all transactions. While often putting key export products, such as ivory and gum, under government monopoly, merchants and their trade activity were heavier taxed than agricultural producers. A merchant who travelled from Suakin to Omdurman paid customs dues together with separate taxes in all urban settlements through which s/he passed. Further, the merchant had to pay a tax on the plot s/he was allocated in the market as well as a graduated tax on his or her income. Furthermore, the forced prepayments of taxes or loans that were made in the name of the Treasury, usually were not paid back or were forgotten. (Rosignoli/Rehfishch 1967: 60-61; Ahmed 1974: 26.)

However, in spite of the Khalifa's animosity and occasional interruptions and obstacles, trade with the neighbouring countries never came to a standstill. Hassan Aziz Ahmed, who has studied the trade via Suakin, has been able to show that a change in policy occurred during the famine of 1889-90.⁴³ Due to the famine, the Khalifa seemed to have urged the merchants to reopen the trade with Suakin as a way to obtain grain, which was one of the few commodities that was imported to the port. According to Ahmed (1974: 20-21, 25), when trade was declared open by the Khalifa, there was a remarkable increase in the export of gum, ivory and henna.

Evidence suggests that the 1888-91 famine had a profound effect on the economy of the Mahdist state. Drought, plague, warfare and locust invasions all had a negative, if not disastrous, impact on agriculture and trade. However, the main reason for the breakdown of agriculture was not the combination of Mahdist mentality and lack of rains but the cattle plague. Not much is known about its spread and effect in the Nilotic Sudan, but some of the letters that were sent from the local governors to the Khalifa tell the grim story:

Most of the area (of Dongola) depends on the sāqiya cultivation, which cannot function without cows. And now there is a disease which kills all the cattle. All the sāqiyas have stopped. Therefore, if you agree, please allow some cows to be sent to this area and sold to the people...⁴⁴

⁴³ In general, the trade of the Sudan was paralysed from 1884 to 1896 both as a result of the spread of the Mahdists' influence and the military operations as well as the British blockade of the various trade routes which more or less cut the Sudan off the trade with Egypt and the rest of the world. For example, all goods that were shipped to Suakin were meant for the local market and the Anglo-Egyptian garrison. Thus, the export trade of the Sudan almost collapsed during the first years of the Mahdist rule (Ahmed 1974: 24).

Kjell Hødnebo has shown that the rise in the level of the Nile during 1890 did not help in restoring agriculture along the river. This failure in production resulted in an insurrection in October 1891 against the Khalīfa and the Baqqara, which after much bloodshed was quelled:

The desperate situation for the Khalifa's administration forced them [= the Mahdist administration] to threaten the people to pay taxes, even where there was nothing to tax, with the tragic result that the Khalifa's local support dwindled. (Hødnebo 1994: 173-174.)

However, the economic basis of the Mahdist state was already weak at the beginning of the reign of the Khalīfa. His policy could neither identify nor solve the basic fiscal as well as economic problems of the state. The Mahdist state was in a sense caught by its own rhetoric, which Rosignoli had clearly noted at the time:

The promise of equality and equal distribution of wealth had intoxicated the masses and they gave themselves heart and soul to the Mahdi. The Bayt al-Mal, repository of wealth and distributor of the same, reflected the socialist aspect of the Mahdi state. It centralised wealth and redistributed it. Individual initiative already inhibited by the climate of the Sudan and religion of the people lost its only appeal when the Bayt al-Mal began to give to all indiscriminately. (Rosignoli/Rehfishch 1967: 59-61.)

In theory, the Public Treasury had the obligation to give support to the poor and needy and to organise famine relief. As has been pointed out by Reid (1930: 172), the Mahdists converted *zakā* (*zakāt*), originally a free offering by good Muslims for the support of the poor and needy, into a direct Government tax imposed and exacted by the full authority of the Khalīfa. However, the change in the *zakāt* was the public manifestation of the rule of the Mahdī and the Khalīfa as Muslim rulers in an Islamic state. This state was the manifestation of the community of believers and was believed to establish the same kind of just rule as that was supposed to have prevailed under the rule of the Prophet Muḥammad and his four first Caliphs.

In practice, however, the Khalīfa and his administration failed to provide any famine relief. By 1889, the Treasury was bereft of *zakāt* grain. It is even likely that the amount of *zakāt* paid by the taxpayers dwindled during the 1880s due to the Mahdistic mentality – why get rich when the goal was a life in poverty? Besides, the Khalīfa had started to strengthen and develop the administration of the state during the 1880s. At the same time, he had to follow the Mahdist call for *jihād*, which demanded the supply of three large unproductive armies plus the garrisons in the military provinces. There was too a need to enlarge the tax basis as the Quranic taxes were not able to meet the cost of the administration and the military. However, the Khalīfa had little if any room to manoeuvre. Neither Islam nor the Mahdist faith could give him the fiscal tools to modernise government while the Mahdist state was

⁴⁴ Letter from Yūnnus al-Dikaim to the Khalīfa [23-26 December 1889], translated in Hødnebo 1994: 173.

perceived as a threat to its enemies, especially Egypt and Britain. Thus, from its beginning the Mahdist revolution faced a structural problem which it could not solve.

CONCLUSIONS

The development of the Mahdiyya during the reign of the Khalīfa reveals several problems that were common for a government that tried to realise an ideal society. Since the Mahdist movement was supported by the local population due to the preachings and teachings of the Mahdī, he was able to criticise the incumbent ruling state through the medium of Islam, the only possible way in the Muslim world. Popular rebellions in Muslim states against Muslim rulers and governments, such as that of Egypt and the Egyptian rule over the Sudan, were not possible as long as these rebellions did not have a religious-cum-political goal, that of condemning the present ruler as unjust and, even more effectively, of being a unbeliever or non-Muslim. Thus, since the ruler embodied the state, a non-Muslim ruler was equivalent to that of a non-Muslim state. Therefore, it was the task of the true believers to restore Islam and to establish an Islamic state which was be ruled according to Islamic law and the Sunna of the Prophet.

The Mahdī rebellion as well as the Mahdist state were legitimised through Islam and the Mahdī ideal. By pronouncing himself as the 'Expected Mahdī', Muḥammad Aḥmad declared at the same time that the old regime was corrupt and that he had divine sanction to overthrow the old order and to establish a true Islamic state. The ideal was the revival of the *umma* of the Prophet in Medina. This community was said to have been the just society incorporated on earth. The ideal of social justice was to be realised according to how the Prophet and his followers, the four Rightly Guided Caliphs, ruled according to the ideals and law of Islam. One key concept was just and lawful taxation, both for the Prophet as well as for the Mahdī. Thus, the Muslims in an Islamic state could only be taxed according to the rules of Islam and not on any secular fiscal basis. Thus, a just system of taxation accompanied the implementation of Islamic economics in the Mahdist Sudan especially when recreating the *zakāt*. It is therefore not surprising that the Mahdī put heavy emphasise on a reorganisation of taxation in the Sudan. *Zakāt* became the backbone of the Mahdist economy as the main source state revenue and was supposed to be obtained according to Islamic rules. In theory, *zakāt* could not be used by the state for the army or the court, but in practice the Mahdī and his successor, the Khalīfa, stretched the definition of the recipients of *zakāt* to also include the warriors of a *jihād*. Thus, after beginning to implement Islamic economics in the Mahdist state, *zakāt* was not recreated in the ideal way but rather according to the immediate needs of the Islamic state, namely to upkeep and provide provisions for the armies.

Mahdī Muḥammad Aḥmad attempted to establish an ideal community and an Islamic state in the Sudan. His aim was also to rule the state and administer its economy according to Islam, but he died shortly after the conquest of Khartoum in 1885 and was never able to consolidate his state. Nor did Aḥmad have the time to work out an effective system of fiscal administration and formulate a concrete economic policy. The task of consolidation and state-building fell on the successor of the Mahdī, Khalīfat al-Mahdī Abdallāh. Although the Khalīfa tried to establish a pre-modern form of an Islamic economy, and to work for the cause of the Islamic state, these attempts proved to be futile. The problems of the Islamic state and the Islamic economy became evident during the famine of 1889-90 when the state failed to provide any help to the poor and needy.

The failure and non-existence of public famine relief was, in retrospect, the turning point of the case for the Islamic state. However, the main reason for the problems of the Mahdist state were due to the war economy it had forced itself to maintain. The demand for a general *jihād* resulted in the militarisation of the Mahdist state, which eventually proved that it did not have the means for both providing provisions for the army and keeping its obligations towards those people who, according to the Quran and the ideal of the Islamic/Mahdistic state, had a right to receive a share from the Public Treasury.

Another problem, which became evident during the famine, was that *zakāt* was insufficient for the funding of an even rudimentary social welfare system. The rules of *zakāt* stipulated that *zakāt* grain, for example, could not be spent outside the region where it was collected except during emergencies. Although the famine was one such an extreme situation, the Mahdist state did not have the means at hand to organise a large transport and distributive network. On the other hand, this problem was not a particular one of the Islamic state and a social welfare system based upon *zakāt*. Rather the problem of organising famine relief was faced by any premodern state and society, because it was difficult if not impossible to overcome the barriers of distance. The Mahdiyya was capable of organising the transport of grain from the southern provinces to Omdurman only along the Nile.

Many of the arguments that have been presented in this paper are tentative and need further clarification. In particular, the question of the fate of the Islamic state after 1891 is somewhat unclear insofar as there could be connections between the tax reforms and the division of the Treasury after 1892, the famine and the rebellion against the Khalīfa. Further, another question is whether the Mahdist state during the latter part of the Khalīfa's reign can be regarded as an Islamic state. Neither the actions of the government during the famine nor the 1892 reforms support the argument that the Khalīfa's state was an Islamic state.

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