CHAPTER THREE

THE CHARISMATIC LEADER

The previous chapter treated the symbols, protocol, and ceremony that articulated the Mahdi’s claims to authority. These symbols of authority did, indeed, enunciate power, though in themselves they held little meaning without the figure who utilized these insignias of authority. The ruler who usually stood at the summit of the social hierarchy wielded these insignias to articulate his commanding authority. But all rulers do not necessarily wield effective authority. In some Asian societies, kingship consisted of pomp and circumstance rather than governance, while actual authority was exercised at local or regional levels. The Mahdīya, as I have shown, engaged in relatively little pomp and circumstance, yet everyone knew that the Mahdī wielded the effective authority of the movement and later the state.

This chapter analyzes the Mahdī as the locus of power and authority of the Mahdīya and explores the role that ceremonial played in buttressing his authority. I will begin with a discussion of Max Weber’s concept of charismatic authority and explore how and if the Mahdī fits this paradigm. Within this framework I argue that much of the Mahdī’s authority is a result of how he was perceived by his followers and those members of the general populace predisposed to his message. Many of the northern Sudanese apparently considered the Mahdī as the charismatic and spiritual heir of the indigenous Muslim holy men, who, according to Neil McHugh, were responsible for the Arabization and Islamization of much of the northern Sudan beginning in the sixteenth century and continuing well into the nineteenth century. I pursue this argument by treating the reasons why the activities of these holy men resonate in the collective memory of the Muslims of the northern Sudan. Finally, the chapter advances the notion that there was a connection between the Mahdī’s authority and the eschatological ideas

---

that had entered the upper Nile Valley via the western Sudan in the nineteenth century.

Charisma

The Mahdi’s authority was built upon what Weber refers to as a charismatic foundation—devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by that person. Arguably, Weber’s definition of charismatic authority can be applied to the Mahdi because his legitimacy as a leader and his claims to authority were a result of the personal trust he engendered in the people. The Mahdi’s legitimacy and claim to authority was not born of position or rank. He was at the top of a hierarchy that established all rank as relative and in some way contingent upon his authority. At the core of Weber’s argument is the question of how a leader’s followers and disciples perceive him; this determines the validity of his charisma. The ultimate judgment of the leader’s goodness or genuineness lies solely with his followers. The opinions of outsiders or non-communicants who have not succumbed to the leader’s charisma are irrelevant. Whatever the leader’s personal qualities or morality, the fact remains that these were acceptable to his followers and proved instrumental in convincing them of the truth of his message. An example of this point can be clearly seen in the observations of followers. After the fall of Khartoum, Bābikr Bedrī, an early follower of the Mahdiyya, observed that the Mahdi dismounted from a black horse with a decorated saddle and bridle and entered the public treasury of the Turkiyya. On seeing the gold and jewels, Bedrī noted that “the Mahdi, with whom be God’s peace, turned his back on it with the quickness of lightning and left.”

Bedrī is obviously struck by what he describes as the Mahdi’s disdain for worldly possessions, yet he also describes the latter mounting a black horse with a decorated saddle, both emblems of earthly might.

References:
4 Ibid.