CHAPTER FIVE

THE CREATION OF AN ISLAMIC STATE

The previous chapter argued that Khalīfa ʿAbdallāhi articulated claims to authority by establishing a mythic concordance between himself and the first of the rightly-guided caliphs, Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, and the Mahdī as well. This concordance manipulated collective symbols of authority to create a myth of the Khalīfa’s authority in which the hierarchy of the Mahdiyya was symbolically enacted with the Khalīfa as the locus of all power. This chapter explores, within the context of the growth of the Mahdist state, how the ruling elites of the Mahdiyya ordered and organized society as authoritative and God-given. In addition, it analyzes how ceremonies informed the establishment of the state and how the elite manipulated ceremonies to bolster the legitimacy of state policy by creating a mythic concordance between the Mahdist state and the nascent Muslim community in Medina. The Mahdists, in participating in ceremonies, were essentially erecting a symbolic barrier between the old tyranny and a new beginning.¹

At the political center of any complex society there are symbolic forms that articulate the fact that it is, indeed, governing the people. Even if governing elites are chosen in a democratic fashion and are divided among themselves, their actions will be ordered and their existence justified by a collection of stories, ceremonies, and insignia that have either been inherited, or, in the context of revolutionary situations, invented. It is these symbols and ceremonies that present an aura of importance and are somehow connected with the way the world is ordered.²

The Mahdī eschewed great ceremonial displays during the period he led the Mahdiyya, but after his death the Khalīfa developed what Geertz has termed a “symbolic character of domination” to affirm the legitimacy of the Mahdist state.³ This symbolic character of domination

¹ Connerton, How Societies Remember, 7.
³ Ibid.
was explicitly manifest in the performance of rituals and ceremonies under the Khalīfa’s reign. A change in attitude to ceremonies and ostentation was noticeable almost immediately upon his accession. The Khalīfa had to win legitimacy not only for himself, but for the Mahdist state as well. Logically, a rite revoking an old institution must call into question the other rites that previously confirmed that institution.4

For example, during the ceremony celebrating ʿĪd al-ʾAḍḥā, the Khalīfa held up a certain Shaykh Khalīl from Egypt as an example of the past regime. Ohrwalder relates that Shaykh Khalīl had come to the Sudan sometime in 1888 to encourage the people to abandon the Mahdiyya and return to the orthodox faith. This shaykh was ultimately captured, imprisoned, and kept confined to the outskirts of Omdurman for several months.

The Khalīfa brought Khalil here to show him how immense was his power and authority, and just before the parade was concluded Abdullahi and all the cavalry galloped up to him, surrounded him, and asked whether he would not rather stay in the shadow of the Mahdi’s dome than return to Egypt. Khalil, who had now been for upwards of five months in confinement, and thinking that he should never be allowed to leave, and thinking that he should never be allowed to return and report to the [Turco-Egyptian] Government all he had seen, replied diplomatically that having once been in the light he had no wish to return to darkness. This reply delighted the Khalīfa, who ordered him to be set free and at prayers in the mosque on that day he sat in the center of the long line of Ansar just behind the Khalīfa.5

The decision of the Khalīfa to denounce the Turkiyya at the ʿĪd celebration was not arbitrary. The ceremony had the twofold purpose of affirming the religious legitimacy of the Mahdist state and denouncing the Turkiyya, which was represented symbolically by Shaykh Khalīl.

Much has been written concerning the administration of the Mahdist state, an administration, which, according to Rudolf Slatin, was despotic and arbitrary in nature. As a ruler, Slatin describes the Khalīfa as a man “given to vanity and cowardice.”6 Slatin contends that the Khalīfa’s policies were devised to enable him to hold the reins of power firmly. He adds that the Khalīfa relied heavily on his kinsmen, who were appointed to administrative posts despite their incompetence. These

4 Connerton, How Societies Remember, 9.
5 Ohrwalder, Ten Years’ Captivity, 374.
6 Slatin, Fire and Sword, 308–12.