

An Hour of Signs

Harry Garuba

Jamal Mahjoub, *IN THE HOUR OF SIGNS*, Heinemann, Oxford, 1996, 252 pp.

On the many occasions in later years when the Khalifa Abdullahi al Ta'aishi was asked to describe the circumstances under which, in the very regions where he himself would eventually be hunted down and killed, he had first encountered the man known as the Mahdi, he always told the same story. It happened like this:

Thus begins Jamal Mahjoub's latest novel, an epic tale of clashing creeds, of campaigns and conquests, of communities caught in the tidal currents of history; and individuals - pilgrims, prophets, soldiers and administrators - struggling to salvage some meaning from this vast canvass of chaos. Set in 19th century Sudan in an arid landscape of dust-clouds and desert heat, where nature seems almost as relentless in its demands as the historical forces which propel the combatants along in the savage drama of war and bloodletting, the novel pulsates with history, myth and a thick pall of superstition.

In the Hour of Signs sets an oral tone right from the first sentence of the prologue and the syntactical twists of the sentence itself signal the convolutions of narrative which the tale later unfurls. Beginning *in media res* like every epic worthy of the name, the novel focuses on an imperial moment in Sudanese history when a religious rebellion challenges the colonial hegemony of the Ottoman and British empires. A series of military campaigns ensue which surprisingly result in a string of initial victories for the Mahdi's forces. The colonial armies later regroup and in the final battles conquer the worn and weary warriors of the Mahdi's successors.

The Khalifa Abdullahi, the successor, may have told the same story of his first encounter with the Mahdi again and again, casting himself in the role of pilgrim and sojourner seeking after an eternal truth, but in this novel rippling with stories and signs, a multitude of other voices and perspectives is evoked to colour, and/or counter the basic outlines of this historical reconstruction of Mahdi Mohammed Ahmad's uprising. It is perhaps Al Hawi, the

scholar and searcher, who captures this plenitude of meanings, after listening to many tales about the Mahdi, with the simple statement: 'There are many stories in the world'. Thereafter he senses what it must have been like at the twilight of the birth of religion when local lore and superstition become so much part of the message that the unalloyed purity of 'truth' fades.

In the Hour of Signs is, of course, a title that tantalizes, echoing, as it does, the vocabulary of contemporary critical theory and setting off a trail of signifiers and significations, undecideability, slippages of meaning and aporias. But the signs of the title are only in-

directly textual. They refer, more immediately, to the physical signs inscribed in the skies and on the body of the Expected One: the stars and comets that herald his coming and 'the mole on his right cheek and the gap between the front teeth' which identify his difference and set him apart in this land teeming with mystics and seers.

Difference and interpretation stand at the centre of this narrative. Signs which belong to different orders of experience,

different discourses are brought together creating a semiotic spiral in which astrological and semiological signs exist in uneasy co-habitation and contestation. In this re-textualisation of the colonial encounter, different conceptions of history by different interpretive communities collide. Even though always implied, not much attention is given to the epistemic violence which has become the standard fare in intellectual discourses on the dialectics of tradition and modernity in relation to Africa. It is as if the discourse of Islam in Africa does not actively partake of this but



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belongs to a different order of contesting creeds.

All said however, these grand themes merely act as a backdrop to the more interesting delineation of the personal thoughts and actions of the leading characters in the novel. It is a pity that not much attention is given to detailing the circumstances of the personal life of the Mahdi and a few other characters, but in the instances where this is done, truly human stories emerge. The personal aspirations and frustrations of the characters, the moments of doubt and despair, and their suffering are revealed.

The soldiers of the vagrant Ninth Company of the Khedive's irregular calvary are seen from their human and monstrous sides; the Khalifa's manipulation of power to his advantage exposes his primitive, megalomaniac instincts, Nejumi, the brilliant general, continues the battle even when he knows that all is lost, trusting simply in the unshakeable faith of going to heaven when he dies. The fated generals, Williams Hicks and Charles Gordon, are swept into the cauldron of the war while Captain Hamilton Ellesworth goes through a scorching experience from which he never recovers. The liberal journalist Sherwood Louth is taken prisoner of war and experiences firsthand the many horrors of war which his lackadaisical nature and intellectual cynicism had not prepared him for.

Within this bristling book of signs, it is the vagrant orphan of the irregular calvary, Kadaro, and Hawi, the itinerant scholar and seeker of truth, who are given a fitful glimpse into the nature and meaning of this profoundly disturbing historical experience. When Kadaro

is taken prisoner by the colonial army and he sees the engineers and engines and machine rails and 'the mountains of bale wire and fish-plates and spare broilers and machine tools and trolleys and a thousand other things whose purpose he could not even guess' he suddenly realises that the armies of the Khalifa, built on faith rather than tools and weapons, could never have withstood this force. 'And he understood them that the battle was not between men of different colours or faiths, but between two different ages.' He sums it all up by saying: 'This was a war between yesterday and tomorrow'.

In the end, Kadaro chooses tomorrow and becomes a railway stationmaster. Hawi, on the other hand, pairs up with Noon, the unusual girl who is some kind of spirit-child, once again choosing the mystical and metaphysical over the rational and scientific. But having seen so much, having been a participant in the Khalifa's brief reign when the new leader had inherited the obscene splendour and opulence of colonialism, he had also, without realising it, lost his faith. His final crucifixion on a telegraph pole for the sin of apostasy serves as a fitting conclusion to this tale. With Kadaro presiding over his hanging, the direction to tomorrow seems clearly stated.

This is the real lesson of this novel, a lesson that modern day Sudan can benefit from. Otherwise these signs may turn out to be mere delusions, detailing a historical tragedy about to repeat itself.

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Nigerian Book Publishing Index

THIS is the first edition of the Nigerian Books-in-print, a bold attempt by the Nigerian Publishers Association at giving a list of all published books in Nigeria as at December 1995.

With entries from some 65 local publishers, this index will be found a good reference material by students, booksellers, librarians and researchers on available books in Nigeria and how they can be obtained.

The Nigerian-Books-in-print is divided into four sec-

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Ranti Osunfowora, Evans Madu, Leo Osuji, Ramon Akinbode (compiled) NIGERIAN BOOKS IN PRINT, Nigerian Publishers Association, Ibadan, 1996, 456 pp.

tions. Sections are further subdivided into pre-primary, primary secondary, tertiary, research publications and general.

Entries are made under author's name or title. Each of the sections are arranged in a

single alphabetical order under subject according to the main entry. Word by word order is maintained in the arrangement of all the entries. Each entry is allocated a number. A total of five thousand, seven hundred and sev-

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