

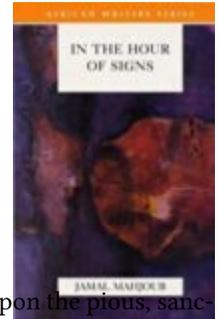
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jamal Mahjoub. *In the Hour of Signs*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1996. 252 pp. \$13.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-435-90922-2.

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This novel of ideas probes “that mystery of mysteries, religion” (p. 101). The protagonist is Hawi (“Lover,” in the spiritual sense), a late nineteenth-century Seeker who fled his home in the Sudan as a young man after narrowly escaping hanging for apostasy; his error was the conviction that he could discern “a second, hidden meaning concealed within holy scripture” (p. 17). (While similar perceptions are by no means uncommon, historically, within the mystical tradition of Islam, in the contemporary Sudanese context this reference cannot fail to evoke resonances to Ustadh Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, author of a controversial work entitled *The Second Message of Islam* who was hanged for apostasy in Khartoum on 18 January 1985.)

Hawi has spent his years of exile wallowing in morally dubious European venues such as Venice; happily, we are assured, he has not been seduced, and returns to his homeland a virgin just in time to join the Sudanese Mahdia. Hawi deplores the violence and human cost of the great revolt, but becomes an intimate advisor to the Khalifa 'Abdullahi. He survives the battle before Omdurman that brings down the Mahdist state, only to be lynched by a mob when he begins again, after so many years, to preach his unconventional message—the content of which however is not mentioned. What the author actually may have to say about religion, if anything, thus remains unknown, beyond the modestly startling theological claim that dead Muslims go to that painfully Christian province of the Hereafter, Purgatory (p. 187). Whether coyness will preserve the author from the fate of Salman Rushdie, should some True Believer take a serious dislike to anything he says, remains to be seen.

All the ills of the northern Sudan are imported alien

faults inflicted by vicious outsiders upon the pious, sanctimonious native virgins personified by Hawi. Drunkenness, filth and betrayal are European (eg pp. 42-52). The typical slut (p. 87) is Yemeni (unless she is Syrian), while the mistress of whores (p. 89) is said to be Ethiopian—though her missing teeth and distinctive speech sound suspiciously South Sudanese. A more typical South Sudanese vice is criminality (p. 27), while Ottoman Asiatics are lazy, lust after sweetmeats, and reek of uncontrollable flatulence and body odor (pp. 39, 176). The Khalifa 'Abdullahi's excesses may be attributed to his remote and humble Chadian origins. Among the evil Others who must be exorcised are the northern Sudan's own historical forefathers; thus one of the novel's less savory characters rejoices in the Nubian name of Kadaro (“Pig”), and he whiles away his spare moments between atrocities smoking *kamanga*, literally “shirt,” but in this case meaning “hashish” in Nubian slang.

The present work will inevitably be compared to a previous gifted novelization of the Sudanese Mahdia, Arnold Hoellriegel's *Die Derwischtrummel: Das Leben des Erwarteten Mahdi* (Berlin: Wegweiser Verlag, 1931). Where Hoellriegel attempted to write within the discipline of a universe of facts, Mahjoub allows himself considerable postmodernist literary license. In his Sudan of Magical Realism arthropods have backbones (p. 228), Dar Fur lies east of Khartoum (p. 38), and Akasha is to be found in Dongola (p. 211), where the town of New Dongola stands on the east bank of the Nile (p. 186). El Obeid is already a metropolis of sorts in the eighteenth century (p. 67), and Sudanese scribes write not with cane pens but feather quills (p. 171).

On page 134, Kitchener leads not the reconquest, but the Gordon Relief Expedition, while on page 210,

in a flashback, the commander has become a figure called "Woolseley," otherwise unknown to history. In Mahjoub's Sudan one can reach Khartoum from Kordofan by travelling north down the Wadi al-Milk, in the midst of whose course through unsettled desert stands a great abandoned mansion, now a brothel but formerly either (p. 76) "the palace of a wealthy Maghribi leather merchant" or (p. 99) the residence of a Turkish pasha, somehow planted in the midst of "a nameless village" (p. 101). On page 115, the author knows that South Sudanese slave troops (*bazingers* or *jihadiyya*) are one thing and northern Sudanese irregulars (*bash-buzuq*) are something else; however, the more important irregulars have stereotypical slave names such as "Juma," and one specifically remembers being sold as a child to the commanding officer of the unit in which he has served ever since (p. 100). "Liase" (verb) is not a word today and certainly not in 1887 (p. 140). Some passages simply defy comprehension; granted that Gordon had some eccentricities, is it plausible that he would have said: "One has to understand this to understand that Mahomet was free of sin; indeed, they acknowledge that he erred. No Musselman will say that Jesus sinned" (p. 135). How was that again,

please?

Particularly annoying are the MULES, which in Mahjoub's Sudan strangely outnumber donkeys by many orders of magnitude; these are unwelcomely ubiquitous, like sheep enumerated to induce sleep. No page lacks its mule; riding mules are everywhere ridden, traction mules draw, pack mules carry baggage. All, on occasion, are eaten by famished humans and once a British journalist (identified as a Socialist whose benighted social background apparently does not encompass equestrian skills) may be seen to ride his pack mule (p. 103). In fact, just as Sudanese lions manifest themselves in prides, Sudanese sheep in flocks and Sudanese camels in herds, in this book mules, like hounds or wolves, come in packs; a "pack of mules" may be found on page 66. This reviewer feels that the author, and his terminally somnolent editor, should be "woken up" (p. 186).

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